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Direct Democracy in an Environmental Movement: Argentine *Asambleas* in the Uruguay River Pulp Mill Controversy

Estamos dispuestos a aceptar que el dulce de leche sea un invento uruguayo. Que Natalia Oreiro es la mujer más sexy del Río de La Plata. Que Osvaldo Laport es un potro. Que China Zorrilla se merece un Oscar... Pero, por favor, no nos pidan que aceptemos el terrorismo ambiental de Botnia.¹

Abstract

In Argentina, the resistance to the Fray Bentos pulp mills is organized through face-to-face democracies. This article examines how the asamblea-type organization model affects the movement. It introduces two face-to-face democracies, the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú and Asamblea de San Telmo, their approaches to the issue, their networking strategies, and their ways of working. It concludes that the asamblea structure has contributed to wide participation and empowerment within the movement, but sometimes at the cost of external empowerment.

The small town of Gualeguaychú is pronouncedly apolitical compared to highly politicized Buenos Aires. Gualeguaychú streets have no signs of street occupations or non-electoral political graffiti; one does not hear drumming announcing that a demonstration is approaching; there is nothing of that everyday politics so typical for Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, there is one political issue that is visible everywhere in Gualeguaychú. Stickers on cars and restaurant doors denounce the pulp mills on the other side of the Uruguay River and express support for a healthy and clean environment (*no a la papeleras, si a la vida*); many shops distribute leaflets informing about the dangers involved in pulp production. This article probes how this local movement is organized.

Gualeguaychú is not the only place where there is resistance to Fray Bentos pulp mills nor is it the only place where the organizational form of this opposition is *asamblea*. Many cities on both the Argentine and Uruguay side of the Uruguay River have organized their resistance

¹ A leaflet by Asamblea de San Telmo according to *Clarín*, Jan 13, 2007.

through *asambleas*. The opposition to pulp mill construction is not limited to the banks of the Uruguay River. With its lengthy road blocks the Gualaguaychú citizen movement has succeeded in attracting media attention and making the pulp mill (*papelera*) controversy a national issue in Argentina. The Gualaguaychú movement receives support from NGOs and other social organizations around the country, including many not concentrating on environmental issues. One non-local organization sharing the *asamblea* structure with the Gualaguaychú movement is Asamblea de San Telmo, the first organization to block the Buenos Aires ferry terminal for ships to Uruguay and the organizer of many demonstrations outside of the Finnish Embassy in Argentina.

I have done research on face-to-face democracies for years now. I have examined them theoretically² and observed their work on three continents. Argentina is a productive place to study how face-to-face democracies work because it has so many of them and can even be said to have a culture of *asambleas*. In this article, I examine the *asamblea* as a form of political organization in the Uruguay River pulp mill conflict. Fieldwork for this research, consisting of participatory observation of *asamblea* meetings and interviews with *asambleistas*, was done in summer 2006.

Face-to-face democracies

The *asamblea* is one type of face-to-face democracy or unitary democracy,³ to borrow the term coined by Jane Mansbridge.⁴ Unitary democracies are forums where citizens gather to discuss common affairs, in contrast to representative democracies in which people do not represent themselves but elect their representatives. Often face-to-face democracies are direct democracies, but not always. Both *asambleas* studied in this article are direct democracies in which participants have the power to decide the issues by themselves,⁵ but this is not true with some other Argentine *asambleas*. *Asamblea* is a typical decision-making structure for *piquetero* organizations representing the unemployed and the poor, but most of these organizations are hierarchical and some are organized by a political party and respect its leadership.⁶ *Piquetero* organizations have solved the problem of linking necessarily local participatory meetings with a national organization in various ways, some of them subjecting discussion in local *asambleas* to the party line or the national-level organization, but in other organizations, suborganizations have much discretion and independence or capability to colonize the voice of the party.⁷ Other non-direct face-to-face democracies are found among representatives. In Argentina, many social organizations coordinate their demands and activities with other organizations in *asambleas*. Because of their hierarchical relation to grassroots organizations, these forums are not direct democracies, although they are face-to-face democracies.

Recent Argentine history has seen a birth of various kinds of unitary democracies. In Argentina, they are called *asambleas*. *Piqueteros* experimented with *asambleas* already in the

² Salmenkari 2006.

³ Earlier the term "participatory democracy" was synonymous with unitary democracy, but nowadays the term is increasingly used in representative situations as well.

⁴ Mansbridge 1983.

⁵ The Gualaguaychú Asamblea is a member of the regional *asamblea* and Asamblea de San Telmo belongs to Asambleas del Pueblo but in both cases these are organizations for coordination and cooperation without hierarchical authority over individual *asambleas* under their umbrella.

⁶ For one example of how *piqueteros* have organized representation on different organizational levels, see Carlos Barral, "Hablan las organizaciones sociales: MTD Anibal Verón", *Segundo Enfoque*, Jan 2005.

⁷ Rodríguez Blanco 2006, pp. 324-5; Delamata 2004.

1990s, as *asambleas* reflected their ideals of self-determination, solidarity and comradeship.⁸ The real surge of *asambleas* came with the collapse of the President de la Rúa government in December 2001 when neighborhoods began to establish *asambleas* to organize services that the government was unable to provide when the economic disaster, bringing with it freezing of bank savings and unemployment, made even subsistence difficult. Neighborhood *asambleas* began to discuss political issues, plan political actions, and organize social services and cultural events. People disillusioned with their elected politicians sought a political alternative "questioning representation but not the democratic system"⁹ itself. They sought voluntary association, political inclusion and self-government by the people.¹⁰ Because of their horizontal, self-organizing character, *asambleas* have "territorial specificity and situationist form"¹¹ and thus "resist homogenization"¹².

In Argentina, neighborhoods, *piqueteros*, worker-run enterprises, even rock musicians¹³ have their own *asambleas*. The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú is by no means the only environmental *asamblea*. Some other cities by the Uruguay River have their own *asambleas* to oppose pulp mill construction in Uruguay. On the Argentine side, Colón hosts another vocal *asamblea* that has attracted media attention with its blockages of the bridge near Colón leading to Uruguay, and the towns of Concórdia and Concepción de Uruguay have their own *asambleas*. Some other *asambleas* work against mining companies or industrial contamination.

Argentina is by no means unique in organizing resistance through face-to-face democracies. For example, East Asia has a tradition of community meetings and neighborhood associations and, consequently, resistance to Narita Airport¹⁴ construction in Japan and resistance to US base expansion by the villages Daechuri and Doduri in Korea was organized through village meetings.

The two *asambleas* in this study

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú (*la Asamblea Ciudadana Ambiental de Gualeguaychú*) is a city-wide, single-issue movement. The Gualeguaychú movement began in around 2003 when a small group of locals concerned about the plans to build pulp mills on the other bank of Uruguay River began to attract wider support in Gualeguaychú. The Gualeguaychú Asamblea has about 3000-4000 members. The Asamblea became nationally, and later internationally, known for its blockades of the bridge crossing the Uruguay River serving as a border between Argentina and Uruguay. *Asambleistas*, like Gualeguaychú inhabitants in general, mainly belong to the middle class.

Asamblea de San Telmo came into being in the days after the government of de la Rúa had collapsed in December 2001. AST was born as an ordinary neighborhood *asamblea* that

⁸ Ouviña 2002. See also Camarero et al. 1998 about local *asambleas* adopted to solve conflicts in which early *piquetero* movements play one part.

⁹ Bloj 2004, p. 142.

¹⁰ See e.g. Bloj 2004, Rodríguez Blanco 2006, pp. 330-336. These ideals are present in the Gualeguaychú Asamblea as well. According to an *asambleista*, "*La horizontalidad no es otra cosa que la democracia directa. Nadie se siente con la posibilidad de imponer una decisión. Se hacen propuestas, se respeta la voluntad de la mayoría y se sigue adelante.*" Cited in "La marcha más grande de la historia" in *La Vaca*, Apr 25, 2006, in <http://lavaca.org/seccion/actualidad/1/1351.shtml>

¹¹ Dinerstein 2003, p. 195.

¹² Fernández 2004, p. 106.

¹³ Their webpage is http://www.fotolog.com/asambleas_rock/

¹⁴ Apter and Sawa 1984.

originally gathered in a plaza in the district of San Telmo, but it developed into quite another kind of organization according to its leader's vision. Now it is a social aid organization, political party, recreational club, and protest organization which makes decisions in *asamblea*. It acts politically in various neighborhood issues like evictions, it pressures the city government in social policy making, but it is active also in some national and international issues, of which the Uruguay River pulp mills are only one example. Simultaneously it feeds the poor in its soup kitchen, gives tango lessons, organizes cultural events, and helps the immigrant population with the bureaucracy to get legal status in Argentina. It no longer even tries to represent a balanced voice of everyone in the neighborhood, but advocates Marxist ideology and sides with the poor population. "Yes, we have also our enemies", a leading member¹⁵ says, and tells how some criticize them for helping "the blacks" because they welcome immigrants from other South American countries. AST membership numbers in hundreds.

Movement histories and repertoires

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú does not link itself to the history of the 2001 uprising, but sees *asamblea* to be a traditional Argentine organizational form. It emphasizes its local roots and sees itself continuing the independent-minded history of the province of Entre Ríos. *Asambleistas* understand that their resistance emerges from the general environmental awareness in Gualeguaychú. Its protest repertoire emphasizes its local character as well. Gualeguaychú is known for its carnivals, and it has integrated environmentalist messages in its carnival program and its *asamblea* has taken carnival dancers with it to demonstrate in Buenos Aires.¹⁶

To me, demonstrations by Asamblea de San Telmo look basically like any *piquetero* demonstration, or like the photographs I have seen of leftist demonstrations in Argentina of the early 1970s, showing the historical continuity of this repertoire. In protests, they carry banderols identifying group affiliation, and street occupations, drumming, graffiti, and safety guards wearing vests are present. This is only natural since AST belongs to this leftist tradition and demonstrates with other organizations. Its leaders are very aware of the movement history they belong to. AST continues to use the slogan *que se vayan todos* (throw them all out) that symbolizes the mushrooming of *asambleas* after the collapse of the de la Rúa government led to a governmental vacuum that *asambleas* soon started to fill. However, AST understands that the movement tradition it belongs to has roots far before 2001. I heard several remarks by AST leaders linking the present movement with the leftist tradition preceding the military dictatorship.¹⁷ In addition to the leftist repertoire, AST emphasizes its message with visual shows like a play with the Death and coffins or a demonstration of dirty water contaminating originally pure water.

Environmental vision

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú is a defensive movement opposing a particular environmental threat in its vicinity. As a coordinator put it to me, "We oppose only this pulp mill, not all pulp mills". In other words, it is concerned about local environmental

¹⁵ Interviewee 6.

¹⁶ "Papeleras: los ambientalistas de Gualeguaychú llevaron su reclamo a Plaza de Mayo", *Clarín*, Dec 12, 2006.

¹⁷ Interviewees 4 and 6.

problems only. This approach is problematic for environmental NGOs working with the Gualeguaychú Asamblea. As Greenpeace Argentina notes, "They are satisfied if the pulp mill is moved somewhere else, but that is not enough for me." Instead, Greenpeace recognizes the need for industrial development, but wants to create environmental standards to regulate industrial production.

For the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, the pulp mill issue is a livelihood issue on the one hand, and a health issue on the other. Tourism attracted by its carnivals and recreational opportunities is one of the main factors in the economy of Gualeguaychú. Understandably its citizens are concerned about the impact of the presence of pulp mills on the tourist image of the town and on particular tourist activities such as fishing and boating. Residents also fear that they no longer will have drinkable water and non-polluted air. They anticipate that pollution will cause health hazards.

Asamblea de San Telmo is concerned about environmental degradation as such. In summer 2006 it arranged a documentary film event and a concert to introduce environmental problems, of which the Uruguay River pulp mill was only one case along with mining and pollution cases. For AST, environmental issues also relate to its wider ideological agenda. Its leader sees the grave environmental situation in the world to be a direct consequence of capitalist greed and believes that capitalism will eventually destroy itself, and probably civilization as we know it, when oil runs out.¹⁸

There is a third dimension of environmental problems in Argentine popular movements, and that is social. To explain why many *piquetero* organizations have supported the Gualeguaychú movement, it is important to understand that in Argentina environmental problems are often directly related to poverty. It is the poor who have no chance to move out of contaminated areas and no money for adequate health care if they contract a disease caused by contamination. Various pollution victim movements have links with *piqueteros* and are invited to voice their concerns at *piquetero* events. I witnessed this in a large demonstration organized by *piquetero* organizations MTD¹⁹ Aníbal Verón and CCC²⁰ on July 20, 2006, in Plaza de Mayo. It presented a grim view of how poverty is related to malnutrition, lack of education, unavailable health care, and unhealthy environment. One speaker was a representative of Vecinos Autoconvocados por el cierre del Ceamse who blamed pollution for 230 deaths in the neighborhood.

Asambleas and the state

The two *asambleas* in this study have dissimilar relationships to the state and political leaders. The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú has a close, and according to its members unproblematic, relationship with the city government.²¹ Some *asamblea* members work in local government.²² The Gualeguaychú Asamblea has an office in the cultural center and holds *asamblea* meetings in the city theater. The city government shoulders many costs of using these public buildings. Obviously, the local government shares the environmental movement's assessment of the threat the nearby pulp mills on the Uruguay side of the border

¹⁸ Interviewee 4.

¹⁹ Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados.

²⁰ Corriente Clasista y Combativa.

²¹ Interviewee 1.

²² De Bruijn 2007, p. 115.

pose to the tourism-driven economy of Gualeguaychú. It helps maintenance of good relations with the local government that the Gualeguaychú Asamblea forbids talking about politics in its meetings. More importantly, prohibition of political talk is a precaution against cooptation of its cause by politicians.²³ This is not an unfounded concern, since some neighborhood *asambleas* in Buenos Aires are now dominated by a politician.²⁴

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú emphasizes its independence from the government, and this independence has made it possible to pressure the governments of Argentina and Uruguay with actions like blocking the bridge between the two countries. However, this does not mean that the Gualeguaychú Asamblea rejects all politicians who want to use it as an a forum. Politicians with authority seem to be welcome. This is understandable, because the Gualeguaychú Asamblea can benefit from their authority and probably sees it less likely that officeholders go to the Asamblea to promote themselves. President Nestor Kirchner and Environmental Secretary Romina Picolotti have appeared in front of the Asamblea, and the governor of Entre Rios province, Jorge Busti, turned to the Asamblea several times, both on his own initiative and as the messenger for President Kirchner, to dissuade it from taking disruptive actions.²⁵ The Gualeguaychú Asamblea has also demanded, and received, audiences with President Kirchner.²⁶

Ideologically speaking, Asamblea de San Telmo puts very little hope in the existing political elite or even the present political system. Its leaders' Marxist conviction makes it believe that the poor it represents will have adequate opportunities only when capitalist order is overthrown. Still, AST does not work outside the system. It receives certain resources from the state. It distributes food aid coming from the government of Buenos Aires.²⁷ The city government has contributed to its cultural events, for example, the environmental film event AST held in July 2006 in a municipal cultural center. Asamblea de San Telmo pressures the government to act by means of various demonstrations, many of them concentrating on social issues like housing policy, but also on ideological issues like supporting worker-run enterprises or condemning Israeli air attacks on Lebanon in 2006. It also competes for power to influence the political system from within. Partido de las Asambleas organized by AST with some other *asambleas* and putting many AST activists on its lists takes part in elections on all levels. That is, Asamblea de San Telmo is openly political, but on its own terms.

Networking

When it comes to networking within the movement, *asamblea* structure is naturally efficient. *Asamblea* meetings provide a good arena to inform everyone present and keep costs of information distribution low. They also provide a network that can be used to contact people. When needed, the Gualeguaychú *asamblea* can activate its networks by phone and e-mail.²⁸ In 12 July 2006, I saw how the Gualeguaychú movement succeeded in attracting perhaps 200 persons and several journalists to an *asamblea* meeting that its leaders had not even known was taking place the day before. Even more impressive numbers have come to demonstrate

²³ Interviewee 1.

²⁴ Personal communication. See also Fernández 2004, pp. 112-114.

²⁵ "Los ambientalistas siguen con los cortes, pero prometen estudiar una suspensión", *Clarín*, Jan 30, 2006, and "Papeleras: ante la posibilidad de nuevos cortes, Busti advierte que la metodología 'está saturada'", *Clarín*, Oct 16, 2006.

²⁶ "La Asamblea Ambiental le pedirá a Kirchner que venga a Gualeguaychú", posted on the Gualeguaychú Asamblea webpage on Oct 3, 2007, <http://www.noalapelera.com.ar/portal/>

²⁷ In Argentina, social organizations distribute the state food aid. See e.g. Lodola 2003.

²⁸ Interviewees 1, 3.

after an announcement on local radio or even without any formal advertisement at all.²⁹ Obviously, *asambleistas* use their informal networks to inform family members, colleagues, neighbors and other people they know, even in other regions in this particular case.

Asambleas are also arenas where new networks are built, informally or formally. Within *asambleas*, participants make new friends and find people with whom they share same interests or want to exchange information. More formally, there are certain groups within the *asamblea* that formally meet outside of *asamblea* meetings as well. These include the youth section of the Gualeguaychú Asamblea (*la Asamblea Juvenil Ambiental*), but also the movement leadership. The Gualeguaychú Asamblea provides an arena to introduce their plans, seek wider legitimization for them, and link their activities to the overall movement.³⁰

When it comes to internal networking, Asamblea de San Telmo does not differ much from the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, but external networking strategies in these two organizations are widely different. In my interviews in July 2006, the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú showed little interest in networking. It did not maintain contacts with NGOs or other organizations, but expected them to come to the Gualeguaychú Asamblea to introduce their viewpoints.³¹ In other words, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea does not network but provides a forum for different individuals and organizations to discuss matters related to Fray Bentos pulp mills. I assume that although the Gualeguaychú Asamblea did little networking as an organization, its individual members used their networks for the movement. For example, exchanges between different *asambleas* by the Uruguay River probably relied on communications between individuals active in different organizations until the establishment of Asamblea Regional.

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú has been successful in becoming the forum through which other organizations work with the issue. This includes even the state institutions. I myself witnessed Environmental Secretary Romina Picolotti's visit to the Asamblea on July 22, 2006, to inform *asambleistas* about the latest developments in the International Court of Justice at The Hague and about other negotiations between the Argentine state and international actors. The highest-level state representative visiting the Gualeguaychú Asamblea was President Kirchner. Likewise, many non-governmental organizations have presented their views in the Asamblea. For example, Greenpeace Argentina maintains that it is important to work with the Gualeguaychú Asamblea because Greenpeace should work in cooperation with locals who initiated the movement and because it should know what is going on there. However, working through Gualeguaychú Asamblea is by no means easy for NGOs. Greenpeace laments that it is difficult for outsiders to distinguish the Greenpeace standpoint and actions from those of the Asamblea. Therefore, the public believes that Greenpeace takes a radical stand, while the Gualeguaychú Asamblea sees its position as conservative.

The networking strategy of the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú differs widely from another early environmental *asamblea*, Asambleas de Vecinos Autoconvocados por el No A La Mina that says it started its webpage³² "as an information channel with other *asambleas* and organizations in similar struggles". This webpage publishes information from

²⁹ Interviewees 1, 3.

³⁰ Both the secretary and a coordinator of the Gualeguaychú Asamblea that I interviewed emphasized the need to link leadership and democratic decision making in the Asamblea. My colleague Markus Kröger witnessed how the youth section reports to the Asamblea.

³¹ Interviewee 3.

³² <http://www.noalamina.org/>

around the country and provides links to other movements, Gualeguaychú Asamblea included. During the year since my interviews, Gualeguaychú Asamblea has also adopted more cooperative strategy. It has sent its representatives to Buenos Aires to protest with Asamblea de San Telmo and other metropolitan organizations.³³ Now the Gualeguaychú Asamblea cooperates with Asamblea de San Telmo and the two organize common or coordinated actions, including their demonstrating together in Montevideo and in front of the Finnish Embassy in Buenos Aires.³⁴ Now the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú cooperates more closely with other environmental protest movements as well. In January 2007, Gualeguaychú hosted a meeting at the road block for various environmental movements from Argentina and abroad, including anti-mining and pollution victim movements.³⁵ The latest development is the initiation of the regional *asamblea* to coordinate anti-*papeleras* activities on both banks along the Uruguay River.³⁶

In contrast to the united environmental movement in Gualeguaychú, Asamblea de San Telmo works in the environment of Buenos Aires where a plurality, even a cacophony, of political voices is the reality. In the capital, no organization can enjoy the status of being the example for others to learn from, which is the self-image the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú has of itself.³⁷ Therefore, Buenos Aires has a tradition of networking between organizations. Although the metropolitan scene is characterized by organizational fragmentation beneficial for maintaining the authenticity of organizational voice, there are active attempts to build alliances and umbrella organizations and to arrange seminars and venues bringing several organizations together. As a result, personal and institutional relationships are easy to activate for networking purposes. My own observations reveal that there are ideological, issue-based, interest-based, and network-based reasons for participating in common action.

Considering its metropolitan background, it is not surprising that Asamblea de San Telmo belongs to various networks. AST itself manages one network, that of Asambleas del Pueblo, linking some neighborhood *asambleas*. AST takes the banners of Asambleas del Pueblo to all demonstrations it goes to, and it has invited other neighborhood *asambleas*, some not belonging to Asambleas del Pueblo, to anti-Botnia demonstrations. In addition, AST has lent its other inter-organizational networks for the anti-*papeleras* movement.³⁸ On the basis of media reportages of anti-*papeleras* demonstrations AST has taken part in, it is easy to recognize some networks. One of the earliest anti-*papeleras* demonstrations by AST in February 2006 shows banners of worker-run Hotel Bauen. Along with his ideology supporting workers' ownership, Rubén Saboulard has friends in Hotel Bauen.³⁹ While I was doing my fieldwork, AST demonstrated for Hotel Bauen when its autonomy was threatened. The presence of Partido Obrero and its *piquetero* wing Polo Obrero in later anti-*papeleras* demonstrations is not surprising because Partido Obrero has the most efficient demonstration machine in Buenos Aires, allowing it to take part in more than one demonstration a day and organize several big demonstrations within one week. It thus can take part in any

³³ "Al final, la protesta de los ambientalistas frente a Buquebus terminó en un fracaso" *Clarín*, Jan 13, 2007

³⁴ "Jornada de protesta contra Botnia frente a la Embajada de Finlandia", posted on the Gualeguaychú Asamblea webpage on Jan 25, 2007; "Otro candombe por las papeleras", *Página/12*, Feb 6, 2007.

³⁵ Marta Dillon, Un corte con apoyo juvenil, *Página/12*, 15-Ene-2007

³⁶ "Asamblea Regional - Comunicado de la primera reunión" posted on the webpage of Asamblea Ciudadana Ambiental Colón on Oct 7 2007, <http://www.asambleacolón.com.ar/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=343>

³⁷ Interviewee 1.

³⁸ See one example of inter-organizational coordination by AST in Juan Pablo Morales, "Los piqueteros se sumarán a la protesta contra las papeleras", *La Nación*, Jan 10, 2007.

³⁹ Personal communication.

demonstration it identifies with, but it also has a history of demonstrating with AST.⁴⁰ During my fieldwork, AST and Partido Obrero were the main organizers of a demonstration for legalizing squatting, other participating organizations including housing cooperatives and MST⁴¹. MST banners are a common sight in metropolitan anti-*papeleras* demonstrations. Partido Obrero has a strategic alliance with FUBA⁴² and has taken it to anti-*papeleras* demonstrations too. Although I have not seen CCC demonstrating with AST, cooperation among different groups of *piqueteros duros*, in which Polo Obrero and CCC both belong to, is common.

The cooperation of the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú with Asamblea de San Telmo and other politicized organizations of the left is interesting, especially considering the Gualeguaychú Asamblea decision to stay outside party politics.⁴³ One explanation for this cooperation is a common objective:⁴⁴ preventing the installation of the pulp mills. Another is that the initiative for cooperation comes from Asamblea de San Telmo, not from the Gualeguaychú Asamblea.⁴⁵ Further, all of these leftist organizations are genuine civil society organizations, and many of them are *asambleas* or use *asambleas* in their intra-organizational decision making. Finally, organizations having a party wing do not compete electorally for votes in Gualeguaychú, at least not in any serious sense. Nevertheless, this cooperation is not unproblematic to the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, as is shown from its demand to refrain from displaying party symbols,⁴⁶ a prohibition that not all groups accustomed to metropolitan group-centered protest culture obey.⁴⁷

The social class differentiates the middle class *asamblea* from Gualeguaychú from metropolitan organizations of the poor. The class tension is accentuated mainly in identity questions: the Gualeguaychú Asamblea vehemently denies that they are *piqueteros*,⁴⁸ regardless of its using *piquetero* tactics of road blockages, partly because it sees itself using peaceful tactics only. Nevertheless, it cooperates with *piqueteros* to find support in the capital. Interestingly, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea has relatively little cooperation with other middle class organizations, such as NGOs⁴⁹, with the exception of the NGO of Environmental Secretary Romina Picolotti, CEDHA⁵⁰. The Gualeguaychú Asamblea has taken some common actions with Greenpeace,⁵¹ but in my interviews *asambleistas* emphasized that Greenpeace takes its own actions.⁵² The NGOs Sanne de Bruijn interviewed see that NGOs regularly took part in *asamblea* meetings and provided information for the movement until

⁴⁰ The Trotskyist ideology shared by Partido Obrero and Rubén Saboulard might play a part here.

⁴¹ Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores.

⁴² Federación Universitaria de Buenos Aires.

⁴³ Other political parties or party-related organizations participating in metropolitan demonstrations with the Gualeguaychú Asamblea include Partido Obrero and CCC, the *piquetero* organization under Partido Comunista Revolucionario.

⁴⁴ See e.g. "Gualeguaychú colocara la piedra fundamental de un refugio para quedarse en la ruta", the Gualeguaychú Asamblea webpage www.noalapelera.com.ar/portal/ 22 de enero de 2007

⁴⁵ AST even visited Gualeguaychú to establish contacts (Interviewee 6).

⁴⁶ Isidoro Gilbert, "Justicia argentina, alerta ante acción de piqueteros en la terminal de Buquebus", *La Republica*, Jan 11, 2007.

⁴⁷ "Masivo reclamo ambientalista en la Plaza de Mayo", *La Nacion*, Dec 12, 2006.

⁴⁸ Especially Uruguayan politicians and press refer to them as "*los piqueteros de Gualeguaychú*" or with similar expressions. See, e.g., Lissardy, Zelmara, "Uruguay se queja de que hay incertidumbre", *Clarín*, March 30, 2006. See also Matías Villar, "Gualeguaychú, el pueblo piquetero", *Prensa Obrera*, Jan 5, 2006, showing that *piqueteros* themselves identify with the Gualeguaychú Asamblea because of its *piquetero*-like repertoire: roadblocks and *asamblea*.

⁴⁹ I use the term NGO differently from the Gualeguaychú Asamblea which, correctly, sees itself as a non-governmental organization. However, I differentiate between traditional associations such as NGOs and social movements like the Gualeguaychú Asamblea.

⁵⁰ Centro de Derechos Humanos y Ambiente. It is the only other organization to which the Gualeguaychú Asamblea webpage provides a link

⁵¹ "Papeleras: sigue el bloqueo de camiones en el Puente Colón-Paysandú", *Clarín*, Jan 23, 2006.

⁵² Interviewee 1.

the Asamblea formally organized itself in 2005, after which it started to work independently without coordination with NGOs.⁵³ This leads me to assume that *asamblea* as a popular movement organization with a democratic decision-making structure does not communicate on an equal level with smaller and more professional NGOs without a social base. Other popular movement organizations like *asambleas* and *piqueteros* might seem more similar. Moreover, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea originally needed information about the environmental effects of pulp production and NGOs are competent for producing it, but now it looks for assistance in mobilization and can receive it from popular movement organizations. In addition, its agenda might make the Gualeguaychú Asamblea identify less with NGOs and more with other popular movements.

The list⁵⁴ of organizations taking part in Asamblea Regional is not centered only on environmental concerns, but livelihood issues are visibly present. Along with environmental *asambleas* from various cities on the both sides of the Uruguay River, organizations of producers and workers impacted are present, and so are some NGOs and *piquetero*⁵⁵ organizations. This selection of partners reveals that, although many environmentalists criticize the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú for being a not-in-my-backyard movement disinterested in environmental effects, if the Botnia pulp mill is relocated, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea could criticize environmental NGOs for their narrowly environmental concerns. The Gualeguaychú movement resists the social effects of pulp production, such as impacts on the local economy and livelihood, from which environmental and health effects cannot be separated. In social issues, *piqueteros* and trade unions have a stronger base than environmental NGOs have.

Democratic decision making and equality

One common claim by Western political theorists is that due to limited time it is impossible for everyone to speak in direct democracies, meaning that in reality only few will be heard.⁵⁶ Supporters of unitary democracy answer that it is not important that every person speaks, but that all various viewpoints are articulated.⁵⁷ Still, making sure that all relevant opinions are voiced and that their representativeness is measured is a challenge that each unitary democracy needs to address.⁵⁸ It seriously undermines the democratic character of the process if some opinions remain unexpressed or if decisions are unrepresentative. Since in a meeting itself only a minority usually has a chance to speak, it is indeed possible that the discussion does not represent accurately the majority view. Individual unitary democracies have tried to solve this problem in various ways. For example, Finnish squatters use hand signs to register whether they support or oppose what is being said. Adequate representation is important for unitary democracies because, as Jane Mansbridge found, disgruntled members may boycott implementation, or even leave, to register their dissatisfaction.⁵⁹ That is, they use the exit option, sometimes even instead of the voice option.⁶⁰ Mansbridge shows that it is not

⁵³ de Bruijn 2007, pp. 102-103.

⁵⁴ "El 26, la Asamblea Regional Argentina-Uruguay. Cacerolas y asambleas " *La Vaca*, Oct 23, 2007, in <http://lavaca.org/seccion/actualidad/1/1626.shtml>; "Asamblea Regional Argentina-Uruguay. Por nuestros ríos, por nuestras tierras, por nuestro futuro" *La Fogata*, Oct 4, 2007, in <http://www.lafogata.org/07arg/arg10/arg.4.1.htm>

⁵⁵ Frente Popular Darío Santillán and MTD Solano.

⁵⁶ E.g. Dahl 1989, pp. 227–228.

⁵⁷ Christiano 1996, pp. 91–93.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Bohman 1997, pp. 332–333; Mansbridge 1983, pp. 251, 274.

⁵⁹ Mansbridge 1983, pp. 143, 230, 262–263.

⁶⁰ Marshall 1984.

psychologically easy to disagree publicly and therefore some avoid speaking out.⁶¹ Ana María Fernández finds that often *asamblea* meetings are not pleasant occasions because of tensions and confrontations.⁶² Many *asambleas* have stopped functioning because of internal disputes or domination by particular interests.⁶³ Both *asambleas* in my study do much to create a cordial atmosphere: there is much kissing⁶⁴ and joking. In this way, *asambleistas* emphasize their good relations and intentions and show that possible political disagreements are by no means personal.

To tackle the problem of representation, the Environmental Asamblea of Gualaguaychú uses voting. Voting not only measures which opinions have backing among *asambleistas*, but it distributes power more equally. The *asamblea* is the vehicle that makes decisions the movement takes democratic when some power in the movement naturally concentrates in its leaders.⁶⁵ That is, voting ensures that the leaders' plans represent the majority will. My interviewees told me that the *asamblea* either votes or makes consensual decisions,⁶⁶ leading me to assume that issues not receiving any objections in a meeting can be passed without voting. Nevertheless, television news has shown that even unanimous decisions have been passed by vote.

Voting is important for another reason too. It shows that a decision is passed and legitimate. One pathology in many unitary democracies is that after discussion it is difficult to know what the decision reached was.⁶⁷ In discussion, many options are put forward, but the meeting sometimes leaves open whether any of these was actually adopted. This situation leaves much power to implementers or to the leaders who summarize the group opinion.⁶⁸ Carolyn Stevens nevertheless argues that this type of decision making has merits because it makes it possible that everyone's opinion is taken into account, especially since not only opinions articulated publicly, but also those expressed in more informal situations afterwards, count. Complementing formal meetings with less confrontational informal communication is a way to avoid unpleasant expressions of division in formal situations. Aversion of confrontations helps in maintaining the motivation to continue participating when group membership is voluntary.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, neighborhood *asambleas* in Argentina have had difficulties in designing workable methods to achieve consensus and take decisions.⁷⁰ Evidence from a neighborhood *asamblea* in Buenos Aires shows that insistence on consensual decision making can undermine efficiency, and even democratic choice if the argument wins not because of the wide support it receives but because of the obstinacy of those advancing it.⁷¹ To overcome these problems, the Gualaguaychú Asamblea uses the vote regularly. By voting, the Gualaguaychú Asamblea improves the efficiency of its work and legitimizes its decisions.⁷² It is also quite common in unitary democracies that the same issues are brought repeatedly to the

61 Mansbridge 1983, pp. 60–63.; Salmenkari 2006, ch. 12; Warren 1996.

62 Fernández 2004, p. 108.

63 Campione and Rajland 2006, p. 323

64 Kisses on my cheek were also a way to initiate me to the group.

65 Interviewee 2.

66 Interviewee 1.

67 Chan 1998, Salmenkari 2006, p. 513.

68 Mansbridge 1983, p. 165, 169, 213; Richardson 1983, p. 86–87.

69 Stevens 1997, pp. 206–207, 215–227.

70 De Piero 2005, p. 191.

71 Kennedy and Tilly 2005. See also Rodríguez Blanco 2006. p. 330.

72 Interestingly, it was not inefficiency but the possible need for secret actions that made the Gualaguaychú Asamblea decree that in some cases some *asambleistas* can take actions which are not preapproved in *asamblea* although they will be subjected to a vote of confidence. Verónica Toller, Permitirán acciones no votadas por la Asamblea Ambiental, El Día de Gualaguaychú, May 15, 2007.

agenda,⁷³ but when this happens in the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, the Asamblea refers to decisions it has already voted for.⁷⁴

I don't know if Asamblea de San Telmo ever votes. I saw only consensual decision making there. Consensual decision making does not exclude the use of power, such as the power of interpretation, especially not when a charismatic leader like Rubén Saboulard is present. Not to dominate proceedings of the *asamblea*, he seldom takes the floor, but when he does he has influence, not only because of his prestige and captivating style of speech but also because some admirers second his comments. Still, AST tolerates even hot debates. To provide more space for its members' voice, AST does not rely on communication in meetings only, but its leaders are accessible for ordinary members during all kinds of activities, including meals in its soup kitchen, demonstrations, and educational events. My observations reveal that its *asamblea* meetings deal with issues, such as appeals for mutual help, easily communicated to agenda setters outside meetings. To provide more opportunities for members to express their opinions, AST consults its members. For example, after asking about members' needs, AST began to provide inexpensive dental care to its members.⁷⁵

Some kinds of inequalities are acceptable to unitary democracies. According to Jane Mansbridge, unitary democracy is feasible when participants believe that they have shared interests. To promote shared interests well, it makes sense to respect people who have expertise.⁷⁶ In the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú specialization is valued. Specialists have a particular role in the movement's media strategy,⁷⁷ and their viewpoints weigh in *asamblea* meetings.⁷⁸ Still, there are multiple ways for gaining status in the Gualeguaychú Asamblea. Ordinary members can gain esteem through activism, as I found when the *asamblea* secretary proudly introduced me as a woman who had spent the full 45 days on the road blockade.

Asamblea de San Telmo has its own inequalities too. It is led by an educated group of people while the majority of its members are poor and less educated. Still, AST puts much effort into equalizing power. Its meetings have a rotating chairmanship, preventing any of the leaders from dominating meetings. Simultaneously, it puts effort into educating its members. For example, it organized environmental education and a film screening for its members when it began to work with environmental issues. I could assess that this education had an effect in both informing and arousing interest: Ordinary *asamblea* members demanded more attention to environmental problems in *asamblea* discussions, and some even engaged in informed debate with me about Fray Bentos pulp factories, mastering even technical details. The line between the more and less educated members in the AST is also blurred due to constant and friendly interactions during daily activities.

The setting for debates in Asamblea de San Telmo is equalizing. While the Gualeguaychú Asamblea convenes in a theatre and this setting naturally separates chairmen and specialists speaking on the stage and ordinary members seating in the auditorium, in AST meetings speakers appear in the center of the floor and are surrounded by *asambleistas* sitting on the

⁷³ Mansbridge 1983, p. 166. I have seen the same happen in a Finnish squat with a rule a majority feels strongly about and the minority is not willing to obey.

⁷⁴ I am indebted to Markus Kröger for sharing with me his observations in the Gualeguaychú Asamblea.

⁷⁵ Interviewee 6.

⁷⁶ Mansbridge 1983, p. 88.

⁷⁷ Interviewee 3.

⁷⁸ I rely on Markus Kröger's observation here.

same level. To lower thresholds for participation, AST permits women to bring their children and is willing to tolerate any small disturbances this causes.

Inclusion and exclusions

One rationale for unitary democracy is popular inclusion in decision making. The Gualeguaychú movement sees that the city as a whole participates in the movement, and a colleague⁷⁹ positively notes the variety of social groups present in the *asamblea*, including groups like businessmen that according to him seldom take part in environmental movements elsewhere in Latin America. Sanne de Bruijn found that wide social inclusiveness makes the Gualeguaychú Asambleas voice more influential, because it speaks in the name of the whole community, not just of a certain stratum. It has been useful for networking and raising funds as well.⁸⁰ However, it is typical of many unitary democracies, the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú included, that they provide a forum for people sharing a certain common interest or aim. Therefore, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea even with its wide social inclusion and 3000-4000⁸¹ members does not reveal whether or not there are any opponents of the movement in the Gualeguaychú community, since the Asamblea is not a forum in which opponents would take part. That is, the Asamblea, or unitary democracies in general, can be very representative for its members' views and interests, but does not record outsiders' views.

Well-functioning unitary democracies all over the world highlight shared aims and avoid emphasizing identities that could divide the group. As Jane Mansbridge has found, unitary democracy is based on the assumption of a common interest among the participants.⁸² Too much division within the group would be fatal for an *asamblea* because their "continuation does not depend on formal rules but on the commitment of the *asambleistas*"⁸³. To secure that at least some basic aims are shared, many unitary democracies take place among an in some ways homogenous populace. For example, the public that met in a Greek agora or Roman forum was "carefully selected and homogenous in composition"⁸⁴ and consisted only of free (and propertied) men having citizenship. Likewise, many contemporary unitary democracies are limited geographically or are membership-based.⁸⁵ The other strategy is to avoid displaying heterogeneous identities irrelevant to the issue. Because unitary politics aims at cooperation, to be effective, face-to-face politics usually refrains from emphasizing partisan divides within the group. Face-to-face politics in such diverse settings as Israeli kibbuzim, US neighborhood assemblies and Japanese PTAs and grassroots NGOs either formally or informally keep partisan politics out.⁸⁶ Or rather, as I found in Argentina, where many participatory democracies are openly politicized, well-functioning unitary democracies either avoid discussion of partisan politics or they exclude people not sharing the basic group values from participating, although they may welcome ideologically neutral participation. Unitary democracies limiting democratic participation to those sharing the basic group values can be

⁷⁹ Markus Kröger.

⁸⁰ De Bruijn 2007, pp. 92, 111-112.

⁸¹ Interviewee 1.

⁸² Mansbridge 1983.

⁸³ Dinerstein 2003, p. 197.

⁸⁴ Mitchell 2003, p. 132.

⁸⁵ For example, Daechuri village in Korea carefully distinguished between the villagers' meeting and the meeting for activists who had come to the village to defend it (my interview with an activist). This strategy was successful in maintaining villagers' control over the movement and negotiations with the state. In contrast, the Narita movement in Japan allowed activists living in the villages to participate in decision making, permitting the control over the movement to shift increasingly to radical leftist groups (Apter and Sawa 1984).

⁸⁶ Avrahami 2004, Berry et al. 1993, pp. 50-51, 60, Le Blanc 1999, pp. 70-71.

found in other countries too. Many intentional communities favor face-to-face democracy but choose their members.⁸⁷

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú permits anyone's participation. Even tourists have taken part in meetings.⁸⁸ There are two groups, though, that are excluded from speaking. Journalists are welcome to report *asamblea* meetings but not to exert any influence there.⁸⁹ In addition, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea forbids talk about party politics.⁹⁰ The Gualeguaychú Asamblea also implements this rule and throws out politicians using the Asamblea to advance their political careers.⁹¹ Still, the Gualeguaychú Asamblea is exceptionally open for anyone wanting to participate. Therefore, it is not surprising that it has taken other measures to guarantee that it is possible to reach agreement in reasonable time. Instead of participation, it limits discussion. The Gualeguaychú Asamblea frames the issue so that all participants share one final aim. To prevent internal splits within the movement, it has chosen that its aim is *no a la papeleras* (no to the pulp factories). The shared object makes it possible to deal with various themes within the issue without conflicts or division within the movement.⁹² In fact, it thus limits discussion to measures only.

Instead of limiting discussion, Asamblea de San Telmo excludes those not sharing its basic values from participating. However, it welcomes ideologically neutral participation and does not require that everyone shares its leaders' Marxist values. My interviewee⁹³ emphasized that "fascists", people who despise immigrants and the poor, are not welcome. This kind of exclusion is understandable in an organization which works mainly with the poor, many of whom are immigrants.

Like the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, Asamblea de San Telmo provides an arena for different social groups to meet in fruitful ways. The members of AST are either ideologically committed intellectuals or (at least originally) apolitical poor people. Comprehensive political vision contributes to the sustainability of the activities and mutual help networks, while the presence of the poor majority keeps AST work rooted in actual social problems. In AST, as in many *piquetero* organizations, its role as a social service provider helps the maintenance of active participation. As receivers of social aid through AST, the majority of members have material incentives to participate regularly, and this means that the apolitical majority continues to participate balancing possible tendencies for ideological domination by the leaders or mere self-interested participation by the members.

***Asambleas* and an environmental movement**

After introducing the two *asambleas*, their approaches to the issue and their ways of working, it is time to evaluate how the *asamblea*-type organization model affects the movement opposing the pulp mills in Fray Bentos.

Asamblea-type decision making surely contributes to internal empowerment, but sometimes at the cost of external empowerment. The very same regulations that make face-to-face

⁸⁷ E.g., Cock 2001.

⁸⁸ Interviewee 3.

⁸⁹ Interviewee 3.

⁹⁰ Interviewee 1.

⁹¹ An observation by Markus Kröger.

⁹² Interviewee 2.

⁹³ 5.

democracy work well might make it more difficult to work with external forces. The Environmental Asamblea of Gualaguaychú has decided to keep out of party politics and to limit its aims to the relocation of the pulp mill, both good measures to maintain internal unity. However, this means that its own rules prevent negotiations with political parties or with Botnia. This situation leaves the Gualaguaychú Asamblea dependent on the political leaders of Argentina and Uruguay without having a say in the process.

It is worth examining whether unitary democracy can be a feasible communal organization in developmental issues in which communities often have strong incentives not to shoulder negative consequences of modernization, such as pollution. The evidence from the USA tells that they are. Developers there relate that they like working with cities having a system of neighborhood assemblies because the time they lose in introducing the idea to the community and persuading it to accept the plan is easily gained back after the community has accepted the construction plan. No unexpected delays, such as trials, will emerge, unlike in cities where citizens can try to obstruct the plan only after the decision is made.⁹⁴ However, Botnia never tried to go through the community persuasion process in Gualaguaychú and introduce its plans in its *asamblea*, and unlike Ence it did not even show goodwill and stop construction for 90 days when the presidents of Uruguay and Argentina had succeeded in negotiating a neutral period for negotiations. Therefore it is suffering from delays now (October 2007) when the pulp mill is ready to be opened. Moreover, the Botnia plant is and will remain illegitimate in the eyes of residents of Gualaguaychú. "*Botnia jamás tendrá la licencia social del pueblo de Gualaguaychú*", as the movement webpage puts it.⁹⁵

Considering that the Botnia pulp mills are located in Uruguay and the workplaces and other economic incentives they produce are in Fray Bentos, perhaps an opportunity for a compromise was never there. Since the pulp mill brings no benefits to the Gualaguaychú community, it has been united in its opposition to the mills, unlike the city of Fray Bentos that has seen mobilizations and countermobilizations for and against the pulp mills. Nevertheless, there was an option of negotiating about technological details, but neither side took this step. The Environmental Asamblea of Gualaguaychú is not ready for negotiations with Botnia about technology. Its rules for preserving internal unity prevent discussion on anything other than relocation of the pulp plant. Although Botnia has paid attention to hiring local labor and adopting environmental technical solutions, it has failed to communicate this to the Argentines. Even worse, some, like Rubén Saboulard of AST, do not deny this but simply say that these were "seductions" to make people in Uruguay accept the plant. It is hard to dispute this conclusion, since after the construction is finished, the pulp mill will employ only 300 people.

The Environmental Asamblea of Gualaguaychú uses a very narrow set of repertoires. It blockades the bridge to Uruguay to attract media attention in order to influence public opinion and pressure politicians to act. The road blockade is a way to make a threat and to attract media attention,⁹⁶ but it is unsuitable for more nuanced communication and giving positive messages. Media attention and political allies are very unpredictable and unstable, as the Gualaguaychú Asamblea has already realized. President Kirchner's visit to Gualaguaychú in May 5, 2006, and the government's decision to take the case to the International Court of

⁹⁴ Berry et al. 1993, pp. 144–147, 208–212.

⁹⁵ <http://www.noalapapelera.com.ar/portal/>

⁹⁶ Sanne de Bruijn's (2007, pp. 96-97) interviews show that *asambleistas* see that they receive the government's attention only with the road blockages. This makes their persistence with highway blockages understandable. In March 2006, *asambleistas* expressed another logic too: they believe they can paralyze pulp mill construction work by road blockages. E.g. Verónica Toller, "Los asambleistas de Gualaguaychú votan mañana si levantan el corte", *Clarín*, March 19, 2006.

Justice in The Hague made the movement feel self-confident, but later it was left to appeal to the president to interfere or even to express disappointment and anger when the president no longer demanded the relocation of the plant in international arenas.⁹⁷ The Gualeguaychú Asamblea is very skillful at cooperating with the media and creating events and images worth broadcasting. Schoolchildren appealing for a livable future, carnival dancers promoting the movement aims, and even *asamblea* meetings showing united Gualeguaychú denouncing pulp mill construction look good in newspapers and television broadcasts. No wonder the Gualeguaychú Asamblea described its relationship with the media as "exceptional"⁹⁸. Nevertheless, it has not been able to avoid negative news. For example, when the *asambleas* of Gualeguaychú and Colón timed road blockages on October 12, 2006 to disturb holiday traffic, television and newspapers reported economic losses to the tourism industry and problems for reunions in binational families.⁹⁹ An environmentalist evaluated that blockage of the bridge to Uruguay was successful in making the media and politicians pay attention to the problem, but its continuation destroyed the positive image of the movement and complicated diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis.¹⁰⁰

Asamblea de San Telmo provides a good example of how an existing organization and its networks can be turned to serve an environmental movement. AST is a flexible organization ready to adopt activities that its members want to, whether it is dancing tango together or protesting against the US-dominated world order. It took the pulp mill issue on its agenda on its leaders' initiative, but used the *asamblea* to spread environmental awareness within the group. The way AST became active in the Fray Bentos pulp mill issue is thus somewhat different from that of many environmental organizations. According to a Greenpeace representative, in Argentina both politicians and NGOs are sensitive to public opinion. Many environmental NGOs that depend on donors and membership fees and must actively explain to their supporters why they take certain actions and not others. Therefore, many NGOs are pressured from below to act in a widely reported environmental issue like that of the Uruguay River pulp mills. In this situation, some environmental NGOs like CEDHA have started to work with river pollution and pulp mills, while others like Greenpeace that have already campaigned against pulp mill pollution have participated in the Gualeguaychú movement to advance its environmental goals.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This article has examined two face-to-face democracies, the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú and Asamblea de San Telmo. Many face-to-face democracies are short-lived, but both of these *asambleas* have succeeded in sustaining their activities. They have found ways to build internal cohesion and to control disagreements within the *asamblea* in ways that do not undermine their internal unity. However, internal empowerment in unitary democracies can mean a trade-off with external empowerment, especially if the solution to the problem lies outside the participating group, as it does in the Uruguay River pulp mill controversy. Nevertheless, the *asamblea* structure has proven to be a good means to spread environmental awareness and to utilize wide networks within a community for alliance building within and without the community. The *asamblea* structure has contributed to wide participation within

⁹⁷ E.g. Verónica Toller, "En Gualeguaychú critican duro a Kirchner y cortarían la ruta 14", *Clarín*, Sept 29, 2007.

⁹⁸ Interviewee 1.

⁹⁹ E.g. "El canciller de Uruguay advierte que los bloqueos de rutas traerán graves pérdidas económicas", *Clarín*, Oct 14, 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Interviewee 7.

¹⁰¹ Interviewee 7.

Gualeguaychú and mobilization of people originally involved in other sociopolitical issues in Asamblea de San Telmo for environmental action. Without this wide participation, the movement would not have attracted this much attention from the Argentine government and the media, meaning that the *asamblea* structure has been to some extent externally empowering too, although final decisions remain in the hands of actors whose interests in the issue are not solely environmental nor social. Botnia and the governments of Argentina and Uruguay put much weight on economic interests, legal constraints, and foreign policy, leaving the environmental movement vulnerable.

Asamblea as the organizational form for the environmental movement can partly explain the escalation of the pulp mill conflict. The escalation follows from the clash of two kinds of organization cultures. The culture of Botnia is engineerial. It seeks technical solutions and legal licenses. It measures its success in calculable units of time, money, emissions, and workplaces. It has been ready to discuss technical details with NGOs.¹⁰² However, NGOs are quite different kinds of organizations than *asambleas* are. Most NGOs have specialist-centered, some even quite hierarchical, organizational structures, which are not that different from other actors that economic enterprises are accustomed to cope with. However, *asambleas* need to emphasize horizontality, common sense, and social relations to function well. Technical data is not in itself sufficient to persuade *asambleistas*, but they need to be presented in the social environment of an *asamblea*. That is, not only what is being communicated, but also how, where, and to whom communicated is important. For too long, Botnia saw the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú as an outsider it did need to pay attention to, while to the Gualeguaychú Asamblea Botnia appeared disinterested in its concerns. In Argentine political culture, the people's voice is more credible and authoritative than that of the political and economic elites, making it possible for a citywide popular movement that can be mobilized through an *asamblea* (and that would not have been easy to mobilize by an NGO or an NGO alliance) to capture the public opinion and even foreign policy making in Argentina. This left Botnia and Finnish foreign policy in a situation neither had competence to cope with. What originally was only a technical and bureaucratic question for Botnia was always a political question for the Gualeguaychú Asamblea, which succeeded in politicizing the issue locally, nationally, and internationally.

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Interviewees

Interviewees for this article include a secretary (interviewee 1), a coordinator (2) and an *asambleista* (3) of the Environmental Asamblea of Gualeguaychú; the leader (4) and two coordinators (interviewees 5 and 6) from Asamblea de San Telmo; and an employee of Greenpeace Argentina (7).

102 Personal communication with a representative of Greenpeace Finland.

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