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**Ecological Modernization as Dispositive for Spatio-Temporal
Restructuration. The Case of Environmental Pollution in
Chañaral**

Author(s)

*Fernando, Campos-Medina, Universidad de La Frontera, Chile,
fcamposmedina@gmail.com*

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Ecological Modernization as Dispositive for Spatio-Temporal Restructuration. The Chilean Case between the 1990-2010

Fernando Campos-Medina
Núcleo Científico Tecnológico en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades.
Universidad de La Frontera, Chile

Corresponding author:
Avenida Francisco Salazar 01145, Temuco, 4811230, Chile.
Email: fcamposmedina@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Based on a political event in Chile and using the discourse analysis perspective, this essay discusses how environmental public policy intends to perform the temporal dimension of socio-ecological conflicts. The paper review Ricardo Lagos short “splashdown” in Chañaral beach as an official proof that water, in one of the most polluted coastal areas in the country, was effectively decontaminated. By doing so, I tackle the lack of attention given to the imposition of spatio-temporal structures to understand social reality by official discourses. In other words, I highlight the cognitive dimension of public policy, which (re)creates the frameworks in which people understand daily life. Outcomes reveal one paradox of pollution: people live exposed years, decades and even centuries to toxic pollution while authorities make from pollution, its effects, and solutions, just an event. Disregarding how uneven and long-lasting forms of territorial development, by a cumulative effect, affects local communities.

Spatio-temporal restructuring, a plausible research object in environmental public policy?

It is the year 2017 and less than 48 hours after the Brazilian beef scandal was discovered, Brazilian President Michel Temer invites many international diplomats to a famous “churrasquería” (steakhouse) in Brasilia. The waiters walk with the swords on which the meat is grilled. The president eats the famous Brazilian cut of meat "picanha" with his guests. As the saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words". The message is clear; the problem is an isolated case. Brazilian meat is in perfect condition, no alarms are needed, it is not necessary to ban exports from Brazil.

The strategy of the Brazilian president is nothing new. In 1990 UK agriculture minister John Gummer exhibited his 4-year-old daughter Cordelia eating a local beef burger. At that time, the problem was the world's lack of confidence in the UK's meat due to the mad cow disease.

In both cases the message of politicians is the same: our products are safe. The effect sought is also similar: we can consume as before we detected the problems. In other words, a political message that seeks to create a fictitious space-time in which things can remain as before. This, even when we all may agree, without difficulty, that things are, by no means, as they used to be.

This spatial-temporal construction (Rosa 2005) promoted by the authorities - at best, simply performative, in the worst, openly manipulative - is what I propose as a central feature of environmental policy. In another formulation, this brief article proposes that the modernization of environmental institutions (Pizarro 2007; Olivares 2010) in extractive countries has occurred through the construction of these space-temporalities that propose, "unfear" and "interested" interpretations of socio-environmental reality.

The Chilean President and Chañaral's pollution; A form to make environmental policy?

It is the year 2003 in Chile and the former president, Ricardo Lagos, perform very similar to his colleagues in the United Kingdom and in Brazil. As if he would get ahead of time, President Lagos, who four years later would be designated as United Nations Special Ambassador for Climate Change, arrives in the Bay of Chañaral in the Atacama Region. With a short appearance, but recorded by all medias, he fulfills a promise made to the community. The president will bathe in the Bay of Chañaral to demonstrate to all the community that the water has been decontaminated and there is no danger.



President of Chile Ricardo Lagos (source: Chañaral al día: 2003)

At this point it is important to remember some history. Chañaral as a city arises connected to mining activity, first gold and then copper. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the city lived its splendor when a melting point and a port were built in its Bay for exporting the metals obtained from the Atacama Desert. In the second half of the 20th century, it was considered one of the most polluted bays on the planet. The US Company “Andes Cooper” has poured its tailings there since 1938 and the National Copper Corporation of Chile, CODELCO, has done so since the 1970s. Although there are no new discharges today, it is estimated that more than 350 million tons of mining waste reached the Pacific Ocean close to the city.

Chañaral concentrated for decades the toxic wastes of the mining activity in the region. Unlike its neighboring towns, “Bahía Inglesa” in the south and “Pan de Azúcar National Park” on the north, Chañaral is not a tourist destination; it is not a beach for rest, nor a reserve for the protection of nature. Chañaral, on the contrary, is the disadvantaged area of the region, but at the same time, an essential gear for the mining industry that externalizes and at the same time unfairly distributes its undesirable effects on the territory.

Returning to political performance. It is December 30th of 2003 and the summer sun shines over Chañaral. President Lagos accompanied by the Regional Intendant Yasna Provoste, the Governor, Clara Ossandon and the Mayor of the city, Hector Volta, arrives at the beach. The president is without the accustomed security committee and walks relaxed with the intendant towards the sea. He wears a polo shirt and a bathing suit in blue tones. As he walks, he hands his shirt to the intendant and dives into the water. For a few minutes it captures the waves of the Pacific and returns to shore. In his eyes the trust. The message is clear: there is nothing to fear. The decontamination of the beach is a reality. His exact words were:

“This is the concrete way in which we understand how environment must be protected, how we should work in that direction. [I] said that I will come here before the end of this year and profit from my holidays I run away and I took a little bad in this nice beaches here and which are from all the Chileans” (Chañaral al día: 2003)¹

I want to reflect on the way of doing environmental policy that we observe in the performance of former president Lagos. In this action, for many just anecdotic, I want to emphasize a spatio-temporal restructuration that deserves careful attention. The space-temporality of a political event, evanescent, collides at least with two spatio-temporal

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uVxO03uVIA> on 22nd May 2017

forms long suffered by the territories and their populations. A couple of minutes of the dip of a politician does not risk suffering the consequences of sustained exposure for months, years and decades to high levels of toxic pollution that slowly and aggregate affect the health of people. The brief speech that confirms the decontamination of the beach does not confront a territorial policy that allows not only the deposit of pollutants in a place, but when this is no longer enough, it identifies them as "sacrificial areas", totally destroyed ecosystems for an unlimited deposit of contaminants.

Environmental institutions as powerful input for spatio-temporal restructuration

The territories that for decades concentrate environmental problems derived from extractive process are cleaned quickly. The decades of toxic's exposure of a whole population is symbolically solved by singular and ephemeral action. Thus, supposedly, restores the trust between authorities and local communities.

At the territorial level, public policy has not only used these spaces to deposit pollutants hoping that the regenerative capacity of nature will absorb them. The way of doing environmental policy -in extractivist countries- goes further, once exhausted the capacity for regeneration of nature and not knowing a limit there, policy label these places as "sacrificial areas" (*zonas de sacrificio*). This label allows authorities to make these ecosystems an unlimited deposit of pollution and waste, especially, for industrial activity.

As an argument, I propose that the sacrificial areas constructed by public policy should not be understood just as *single events* but, on the contrary, these territories have to be interpreted as *social processes* (Werlen 2010). In another formulation, sacrificial zones are not suddenly created; they have been built for decades. I will call the spatio-temporal framework *extended temporality* and *singularized spatiality*. This spatio-temporality, which frames and at the same time constructs the sacrificial areas, is the opposite of the spatio-temporality shown by the political performance as an event that offers a "quick plunge" as evidence of certainty.

At the level of people and their daily lives, pollution has become a constant company. It is decades of exposure to heavy metals pollution what causes harms to people's health. Increased recurrence of diseases is the fate of the inhabitants in the sacrifice areas as well as malformations is the possible inheritance given to their children. As is easy to see, damages to the health are not built as an unfortunate accident (Russi and Martínez Allier: 2003). On the contrary, they are the result of slow processes of degradation and deterioration in the territory. Its temporality is extended and its spatiality is constrained. The space-temporality of health problems in the population due to toxic pollution is, again, opposed to the space-temporality of an evanescent political performance.

With the above, I want to defend the need to think about the socio-ecological conflict produced by the extractive industries and the modernizing processes in extractive countries as a space-time shock. My goal is to unveil a subtle way of constructing social reality by means of the - not so evident - definition of space-time structures (Campos-Medina and Campos-Medina 2016, Campos-Medina and Campos-Medina n.d.). From

this perspective, the very modernization of environmental institutions -which is a reality all around the world and not only in developed economies- is one of the most powerful devices for re-structuring time and space in the contemporary world.

Consequences of the spatio-temporal restructuration promoted by the novel environmental institution

The exponential growth of extractive industries in extractivist-oriented economies is not possible without State support. In many cases, authoritarian regimes were the first promoters of extractivist deepening (Seda: 2014; Campos-Medina 2015). At present, it is democratic forms that continue to support extractivism as the only form of development possible for countries with economies based on the exploitation of commodities (Altieri and Rojas 1999). Local spaces pass into the background and often must be "sacrificed" for the general interest of the nation. Similarly, the nation understands as superfluous the desire of local communities to define alternative forms of economic and social development.

What is striking is that under the discourse of sustainability and in democratic societies the commodification of nature and the relegation of local communities is intensified. In this essay, we provide evidence that this would not be possible without a series of "devices" that allow public policy to restructure time and space. Thus I described the "political performance" in the form of "event" as the device that seeks to prove the non-existence of environmental pollution. This, ignoring that exposure to toxic wastes is a continuous and prolonged form of affectation in people and not an isolated event.

Heavy metal contamination has been, using the perspective of Bruno Latour (2007; 2017), an actant, a non-human form that persistently accompanies the inhabitants of the "sacrificial zones". This actant, and here we find a fertile space for future research, is not always a reality to which it is possible to oppose. Living persistently surrounded by pollution, suffering daily this actant, generates multiple feelings: Rage, fear, denial, resignation and in very particular conditions, courage and courage. The question of how local communities manage to congregate to collectively confront environmental problems is not superficial. Therefore, it is no less than the "political performance" as an event to point out that the socio-environmental problem produced by the contamination of toxic products has disappeared. It is possible that within a couple of years the greatest propensity for diseases or malformations in the community of Chañaral may disappear. This is the question that underpins research about how space-time devices are confronted.

The public policy we seek to build in a democratic society is one that considers the physical, psychological and environmental effects of constant exposure to toxic wastes. For this reason, swimming for 5 minutes in a supposedly (un) polluted sea is not a currency for the consequences of a pollution that has affected people for decades. Passing through generations that live surrounded by pollution.

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