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**The Narrative Construction of Environmental Realities: The
Opposing Discourses About Chilean Ecological Modernization**

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**The Narrative Construction of Environmental Realities: The Opposing
Discourses About Chilean Ecological Modernization**

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Abstract

This essay introduces a discursive analysis on socio-environmental conflicts. What sets this approach apart from other research is its reconstruction of different actor orientations in a temporal framework. The reconstruction has been made through the analysis of media coverage on the conflict due to “El Mauro” tailing dam belonging to Antofagasta Minerals Company and Los Caimanes local community. I examine three moments in this socio-environmental conflict, beginning, climax, and resolution; thus, between the year 2010 and 2016. I argue that by exposing the action’s orientation observes in the action and discourses of the mining company is possible to highlight some tensions in contemporary environmental policy in extractives economies.

Introduction

This essay offers a framework for analyzing social discourses regarding modernization of the environmental institution on the basis of the notion of socio-ecological conflict. The re-emergence of this type of conflict in the last years in Chile evidences a conflictive way of understanding and an adverse form for rendering the so-called ecological crisis. Reconstructing the positions of different actors in the field of environmental politics is expected to emphasize: i) contradictory interpretations of ecological modernization, ii) - derived from the previous- selective orientations for action regulation in each group, and iii) specific spatio-temporal frameworks for constraining / allowing social action.

The narrative approach to socio-ecological conflicts highlights the controversial condition of the society-nature relationship through time and allows an account on the role played by different actors. Political actors –government official- are approached in their understanding of ecological modernization as institutional improvement. Academic actors reset the tensions between the regulation and the intensification of socio-ecological conflict produced by the environmental institution transformation. The civil society and local authorities stress ecological modernization as an engine for nature's subjugation and commodification, while local community sheds light on the social conflicts provoked by exponential growth of the extractive industries.

I will argue that the discourse, in which ecological modernization is rendered, as a final stage of institutional improvement, obscures controversial reorganization of actions and roles taking place in the environmental scene. The central argument proposes that the clash between different organizations of time and space among social groups offers a good perspective to account for the socio-ecological conflict. A spatio-temporal restructuration analysis asks which interpretations, actions, and dispositives are produced by specific spatio-temporal regimes, rather than to deem them as stable or given before hand.

Environmental institution's transformation in Chile

The last two decades in Chile have been characterized by a profound transformation in the environmental institution (Guzmán, 2005; Pizarro, 2007; Olivares 2010; Guiloff, 2011). In this context two moments appear prominent: i) The implementation of the National Commission of Environment and the Environmental Impact Assessment in 1994 and, ii) The creation of the Environment Ministry, the Superintendence of Environment and the Environmental Courts in 2010. Thus, the novel Chilean ecological institution becomes part of a modernization rhetoric with basis in i) institutional improvements, ii) concentration of function, iii) transversality in policies, and iv) increasing efficiency (Tello 2011).

Our analysis criticizes the representation of this transformation solely as institutional improvement (Martínez & Díaz 1996, Olavarría 2003) and offers the alternative hypothesis of a growing process of de-politicization of the society-nature relationship as the core of Chilean ecological modernization (Campos & Larenas 2012). In doing so, the

argument distinguishes between a passive and active process of de-politicization. The former is understood as the discursive framing of the ecological crisis under the concept of sustainability, which in Chile has only been related to pollution control and the rational extraction of resources. The latter shows how the current interpretation of ecological crisis actively excludes alternative interpretations of the socio-environmental problem, particularly, those related to social and human consequences of mega-projects deployed in non-urbanized areas of the country.

It is particularly relevant for this research to explore the process and mechanism by which government authorities as well as the mass media render the claims made by civil society and different social movements. All these social groups seek to broaden the interpretation of socio-ecological conflict (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Benford & Snow, 2000; Barton & Roman 2012), especially related to four topics: i) the intention to limit the excessive copper exploitation in the Atacama Desert (Figueroa & Calfucura, 2004; Hughes, 2013; Julian 2014); ii) the social opposition to mega hydroelectric plants in Chilean Patagonia (Pearson, 2013; Merino & Bello, 2014; Schaeffer, 20015); iii) the social and environmental consequence of salmon production in the Chiloe Archipelago (Barton, 1997; Fløysand et al 2010; Julian, 2013); and iv) the land conflict produced chiefly by the forest industry against the Mapuche population in the south-central part of the country (Aylwin, 2000; Montalba & Carrasco, 2003; Seguel, 2006, Solórzano, 2011) In each of these four situations, I claim that sustainable measures, as they have been implemented in Chile, are not only ineffective to manage the emerging socio-ecological conflicts, we further argue that it might even help to reinforce them (Campos-Medina, 2015). Despite this fact, authorities have stabilized a narrative that rejects the very existence of socio-ecological conflicts and reduces the accountability of extractive industries and the mega-projects on them (Altieri & Rojas, 1999).

The research focuses on the first conflict, which is provoked by copper mining industry in the Atacama Desert. As case study, we investigated on the conflict that confronts the mega copper mine “Los Pelambres” and the small community of “Caimanes”, located in the mountain area at the province of “Los Vilos”, in the north of Chile. Nowadays, this conflict seems to be solved with an “out of court settlement”. Thus it allows us to develop a media analysis through which it is possible to observe actions as causes or effects of previous events.

Copper mining and the struggle for water and energy in the Atacama Desert

From an historical perspective, the mining activity has typically developed a type of society-nature relationship that has been marked by conflicts. From the beginning of the industrial revolution in Europe, references to coal extraction show a pervasive and negative image of environmental pollution and extremely poor working conditions. Furthermore, the XX century saw an increase in cultural expressions — such as literature, cinema, music— that portrayed devastating human conditions associated with the mining activity in every corner of the world (Hoffmann, 1946; Donoso, 1997; Zola, 2012;).

At the beginning of the new millennium, this representation has been addressed and the improvement of working conditions seems to be a central element of concern for the mining industry. In a similar fashion, waste treatment and the efficient use of water and energy are presented as major industrial achievements. Improvements in working conditions and environmental performance are connected with the rising of corporate social responsibility in the mining sector (CSR) (Prayogo, 2013a, 2013b). This strong connection among industrial improvement, CSR, and of course good salaries, hinders the possibilities to criticize a model of industrial development that seems to show substantial achievements in terms of sustainability.

Nevertheless, the revision of the media coverage of socio-ecological conflicts shows that large copper firms are far from achieving sustainability; this situation is exacerbated when analyzed at the regional level (Rehner et al, 2014). We sustain that the negative effects of large mining projects on local territories and communities are intrinsic to industrial expansion.

My argument proposes that *sustainability* is, above all, an image portrayed by the industry through a set of discourses on efficiency and, to a lesser extent, a congruent group of material practices with positive impacts at the local level. The analysis of media reports shows that sustainability only emerges when courts rule against mining companies or when there are unfavorable economic scenarios that require technological improvements. Therefore, sustainability is by no means a characteristic form of relationship among mining industries, the local environment, and the local communities. In this context, *sustainability measures* are not anticipatory but reactive.

In the following tables, we organize a set of written information released by the media that describes the socio-ecological conflict between “Los Pelambres” copper mine and the local community of “Caimanes”. The conflict was due to the construction of a tailings dam called “El Mauro”, which affects the community as it disrupts the natural flow of water to the town and also contaminates the low amount of available water. Constructed in 2003, this tailings dam is 8km long and 250m high and its function is to deposit more than 2,000 tons of toxic mining waste. For the community, this construction represents a serious risk for the towns built below the mine as they may be affected by a potential structural collapse. According to technical specification, the structure was made to withstand magnitude 7.5 earthquakes; nonetheless, on February 27th 2010, Chile was hit by an 8.8 earthquake. The mining firm claims that this dam was built in compliance with Chilean environmental rules by following the highest technical standards. Therefore, this dam poses no threat to the community.

The analyze will systematize information released by the media, which is associated with the different phases in which we organize the socio-ecological conflict: i) the beginning, ii) the climax, and iii) the resolution. These pieces of news were released mainly by “El Mercurio”, one of the most relevant journals in Chile, and “emol”, its online version. Looking into this journal, we were allowed to describe the role played by the company and the government in this conflict; however, we were not able to describe the role and claims of the local community. To fill this gap, we review other local medias as “Kaos en

la Red” and national medias as “Radio Universidad de Chile” and “Radio Cooperativa”. These medias are considered by the public opinion as critical and valid sources of information.

We collected, followed, and analyzed more than 40 pieces of news. To better illustrate our argument in this paper, we selected 20 media releases without repetition. As we mentioned above, these pieces of news were divided into three phases in order to explain the evolution of this socio-ecological conflict. Here, temporality is not only a chronological description of events but also a possibility to describe the causes and effects of this conflict. In other words, temporality is the vehicle that allows us to recreate the orientations for actions in the different actors involved in a news event.

Main ideas for the analysis and discussion



The analysis seeks to describe and interpret the main actors’ orientations during the 10-15 years that the conflict lasted. For the analysis we only consider events during the last 7 years.

Conflict beginning:

1. During the first 5-10 years of the conflict, the company did not incorporate any of the allegations from local community, political representatives at the region level or even the call made by the Catholic Church to discuss the issue.
2. The central government showed no interest in generating or support spaces for dialogue between civil society and the company
3. Even when the existing socio-environmental conflict is for water, the company has a sustainability strategy, for around 5-10 years, focused exclusively on energy issues.

Conflict Climax:

1. After the unfavorable result to the company, that means to demolish the wall of the dam, the central government calls to a table of dialog.
2. The demand of the community to stop the operations of the company and to respect the judicial decision is indicated by mass medias as an irrational acts or even vandal.

Resolution:

1. The company offers financial compensation
2. The company develops water desalination's project, which must be implemented together with a project to improve the overall efficiency of the mineral in terms of exploitation
3. Compensation for the community does not represent a significant percentage of the investment the company will make on site.

Main questions for the discussion

Describing a socio-environmental conflict over time allows us to observe situations that are non-intuitive. For the discussion I want to raise at least 3 questions.

How we explain the resistance of the extractive industries to incorporate the demands of local communities with respect to their operation. In this line, how we understand that sustainability strategies are disconnected from local problems –e.g. water - and connected to other foreign issues –e-g. energy-

How we understand the role of central governments. Are they truly promoters of extractivism and under this orientation, they are willing to confront local communities, civil society, and political representatives at the local and regional level

Compensation strategies and measures to reduce environmental and social impact are part of a sustainable way to deal with local space or are they just triggered by economic interests. How it operates regulation and incentives in diverse extractive industries.

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