Science, religion and worldview in the protection and construction of social and cultural rights in Southern Chile

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Latin America’s record in human rights is bleak. Good news is rare, and it ought to be celebrated. When such rare good news reports that local interests have prevailed over powerful corporations, close attention must be paid to the reported events. Such is the case of the coastal town of Mehuín, southern Chile, where the locals - after a two-year mobilization - prevailed against the most powerful private company in the country (Araya 2001, Guerra and Skewes 2002, Rendón 1998). In 1996 a proposal to build a pipeline for the purpose of discharging industrial waste and by-products brought together coastal peoples and villages to study and, finally, oppose the project. They were successful Two years later, Compañía Celulosa Arauco (CELCO) withdrew its plans, allowing what the people claimed first: their right to carry on with their cultures.

Picture 1: Coastal Town of Mehuín

Mehuín is the major coastal town in the Maiquillahue Bay. Local fishermen, native Mapuche Lafkenche (or coastal mapuche), and small tourist entrepreneurs coexist along the seashore (Rojas and Sáez 1999). The proposed pipeline would have run twenty miles away from the plant, along the Lingue River, to end in the Maiquillahue bay. The construction of the plant and its pipeline, known as the Valdivia Project, respond to a growing international market for pulp in the paper industry. CELCO (www.arauco.cl) belongs to the largest privately owned company in Chile, COPEC, an oil company. CELCO’s consolidated sales represent five per cent of Chilean domestic production (www.copec.cl). Sixty eight per cent of the $6,432 million of COPEC's consolidated assets are part of their forest ventures, including control over nearly seventy per cent of the Chilean kraft pulp used for newspaper production.

Conceived in 1989, the new cellulose plant, or Valdivia Project, is CELCO’s main current investment. Still under construction, the plant aims to produce 600,000 metric tons of whitened kraft pulp. Over one thousand million dollars are being invested in the Valdivia Project. This project occupies 100 acres of farmland in San José de la Marquina. The plant will demand, on yearly basis, 5000 acres of tree plantation, while using 950 liters of water per second for the fiber whitening, and would be discharging a similar amount of industrial liquid residues and by-products, after tertiary treatment, into de River Cruces, a Sanctuary of Nature. Thus, the company was defeated in discharging its pulp mill wastes in the bay, and therefore developed a plan to discharge the wastes and by-products in the river. Such was the decision made by CELCO after its Mehuín’s defeat.

Picture 2: Cellulose plant under construction

Upon learning about the projected pipeline, the locals organized the Defense Committee of Mehuín. In positioning themselves in the conflict, they learned that the projected pipeline could be brought to an end if they stopped CELCO’s environmental impact assessment studies: without such information no governmental approval could be obtained for the construction. The major component of this assessment was the information about the bay's capacity for dispersing the pollutants. Most of the local
organizing efforts were devoted to limiting access of CELCO’s technicians and functionaries to the bay. CELCO unsuccessfully tried to carry on such studies; they even rented a ship to take samples. By placing all the fishing boats at the mouth of the bay, the locals stopped the ship from entering. At the end, CELCO had no chance of completing the required studies. As a result, they changed their original plans

Picture 3: Mehuin’s "naval combat" (Headlines of El Diario Austral de Valdivia, January 13, 1998)2

The conflict of Mehuín, as it came to be known, is instructive in several aspects. It sheds lights upon failures in the communication between the state, the people, the university and the private sector. It is also a case study for grassroots activism, and it challenges Chilean environmental laws, questioning the law's real power for protecting nature and the people (Sepúlveda 2000a, 2000b). The conflict reveals the strength and intelligence on the side of Mehuín's residents who no matter what confronted and effectively transformed the destiny that the company had created for them and that most viewed virtually incontrovertible.

Funded by the Chilean National Fund for Science and Technology (F1030324) and by our university (DID200289), we are researching one aspect of this conflict: the relation between scientific and practical knowledge, religious systems of belief, and ideology. Two notable features of this struggle captured our attention: first, the use of scientific language by the locals, and, second, the presence, among the movement's leaders, of Pentecostal Christians who rarely challenge the established order. It's not the case to elaborate our finds. Suffice is to say that we can draw from our study important conclusions concerning the protection of people's rights at a local level, and the role that scientists play in such protection.

The conflict, as we see it, was a struggle between competing parties who aimed to impose their definitions on the construction of the local environment. Because CELCO threatened the local cultures that depended on the ocean for keeping their trades, the community resisted the projected pipeline. The locals based their struggle in the mobilization of three major resources: organization, knowledge and faith. Their organization was informed by some practical rules, devised during the conflict, and that proved decisive in the conflict. These rules included: (i) The precedence that the locals took over the extra-local agents, (ii) The surveillance of the leaders by the community, and (iii) The practical knowledge brought into the struggle's critical events. They never accepted visitors to impose their views nor did they tolerate private meetings with the company: everything had to be dealt in open places, under the public gaze. Likewise, their local knowledge of was crucial for stopping the company's ship when trying to obtain the required samples.

Scientific knowledge turned out to be one of the key ingredients in the defense of the bay. First, it helped them to understand the pollution brought by pulp mills. Second, they use scientific language as a discourse that they deployed for convincing public authorities about their legitimate claims. Third, residents used the acquired scientific knowledge to ridicule CELCO’s propaganda. Finally, they learned about their environment, becoming more sensitive towards its protection, and prone to counterattack any harmful intervention, as it happened last year when San José de la Mariquina's mayor tried to install a garbage dump nearby.

The case is eloquent in highlighting the role that scientific knowledge has not only in the defense, but in the construction of local rights. Interestingly enough, what most offended the locals was the lack of support from the university that had a maritime laboratory in Mehuín. After twenty years of helping the scientists, they didn't receive support and aid from them. "Even if they didn't support us, they could
have provided us with the information that we needed," Teresa Castro, one of their leaders, complains. However, beyond these complaints, what is certain is that scientists never took seriously into consideration that they worked surrounded by people within a local community, that the locals were appropriating scientific knowledge for their own purposes, and that the university scientists had created in them, without knowing it, the capacity to use science for the defense of their rights.

The appropriation of scientific knowledge not only facilitated the locals immediate purposes in the struggle, but created the basis for future developments as, for example, shellfish cultivation. In so doing, the community gained a new understanding of their environment, and more solid basis for the assertion of their rights.

The acquisition of new knowledge did not erase or replace the existing cultures; it did transform them. Such learning was built upon local cosmologies and ideologies that infuse meaning in local actors' practice (Guerra and Skewes op.cit.). Knowing about the power of faith, each worldview was incorporated by the Defense Committee in its defense of the bay. "We can only ask His Highest to illuminate our Committee for the success of this noble cause", was the statement read by one of the Committee's members when visited, on November 25, 1996, by the Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior. For the native lafkenche, the pipeline threatened nature as the source of their language and knowledge; for the Pentecostals the mandate of God to protect nature was challenged by this fatidic pipeline, as they called it; town dwellers and farmers understood that what is in nature cannot be spoiled by humans. In public pronouncements, the committee synthesized these worldviews, encouraging the different parties to share their commitment, while maintaining their deeper differences.

Picture 4: The visit of the Rainbow Warrior

The conflict of Mehuín is instructive: CELCO realized that profits could no longer be made independently of the environment and human rights, while the community understood that, from the breaking point represented by the projected pipeline, their cultures could not longer be what they used to be. They learned about the ecology and the complexities of their environment, issues ignored in the past.

After five years, the Defense Committee met for the first time, answering to our invitation. On November 15, 2003, we met in the Fishermen Union. Our goal was to inform them about the progress of our research, and to ask them for their advise in the use of the information that we have gathered. Ours might be the largest archive concerning an environmental conflict in Chile: we have the complete news coverage of the events, the Committee's communications, pamphlets, and bulletins, the official reports, photos and testimonies of the key players. We believe, we told them, that such an archive deserves a place in the community.

The meeting went not without emotions. In spite of their success, the Committee members were ambivalent towards their participation in the conflict. Aside from the satisfaction of a successful end, they suffered the stress of their struggle: misunderstandings, personal differences, and lack of communication distanced them from each other. Indeed, there was no closure for celebrating the victory. The meeting turned to be an important event. And it provided us with some guidance: we decided to print two copies of our archive to be placed in the union and library of the local school. We also agreed to organize a public ceremony for this purpose, and shared more ambitious projects as co-authoring a book about the conflict. We felt that our duty was to contribute to preserve the memory of the conflict of Mehuín as an important piece in the regional history.
The people of Mehuín, in a different sense, gave the country a lesson on dignity. They resisted the idea of being described as "poor" or "needy." They didn't yield to CELCO's tempting offers (training, support, money) or accepted external coaching. Instead, they struggled for their independence. Whenever needed, they searched for information, but they didn't surrender their deciding power.

Mehuín's conflict leaves the certainty that local knowledge is by no means sufficient to defend a lifestyle; that cultures, to persevere, must change, and that one source of change is scientific knowledge. However, the community also stresses that the meaning of such knowledge is not in science, but it is rooted in people's identity, and that it becomes plentiful when it translates into social and cultural rights.

References Cited


Notes

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The headline reads: "Naval skirmish in Mehuin: First Round for the Fishermen. CELCO's towboat returned to Corral chased by one hundred boats. 'The Navy had a wrong impression of the events', the Provincial Governor said." El Diario Austral de Valdivia gave us permission for reproducing their coverage of the conflict.