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Socio-environmental conflicts as social cohesion thermometers: a case study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between social cohesion and Latin American socio-environmental conflicts. A case study was carried out about the largest socio-environmental conflict in El Bolsón, Patagonia Argentina, where part of the population has been rejecting a real estate development project on Perito Moreno Mountain, a protected area which is the headwater basin. By means of a theory triangulation, the representations and practices of the parties involved were investigated, through document analysis (press media, technical reports from the companies, and government organizations involved), in-depth interviews with key informants, and participant observation. In conclusion, this socio-environmental conflict acted as a thermometer to measure social cohesion: on the one hand, exposing its weaknesses at the level of the community as a whole, and on the other hand, uncovering its strengths in the group that rejects this project.

KEYWORDS

Post-development; Latin America; tourism; Patagonia; STS

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Post-desenvolvimento; América Latina; turismo; Patagônia; Estudos CTS



PALABRAS CLAVE

post-desarrollo; América Latina; turismo; Patagonia; Estudios CTS

Conflitos socioambientais como termômetros de coesão social: um estudo de caso

ABSTRATO

Este artigo explora a relação entre a coesão social e os conflitos socioambientais latino-americanos. Um estudo de caso foi realizado sobre o maior conflito socioambiental em El Bolsón, na Patagônia Argentina, onde parte da população vem rejeitando um projeto de desenvolvimento imobiliário na Serra Perito Moreno, uma área protegida que é uma bacia de cabeceira. Por meio de uma triangulação teórica, as representações e práticas das partes envolvidas foram investigadas, por meio de análise documental (mídia impressa, relatórios técnicos das empresas e órgãos governamentais envolvidos), entrevistas em profundidade com informantes-chave e observação participante. Em conclusão, esse conflito socioambiental atuou como um termômetro para mensurar a coesão social: por um lado, expondo suas fragilidades no nível da comunidade como um todo e, por outro lado, descobrindo suas forças no grupo que rejeita este projeto.

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Conflictos socioambientales como termómetros de la cohesión social: un estudio de caso

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la relación entre la cohesión social y los conflictos socio-ambientales. Se llevó a cabo un estudio de caso acerca del conflicto socioambiental más importante de El Bolsón, Patagonia Argentina, donde parte de la población ha estado rechazando un desarrollo inmobiliario en el cerro Perito Moreno, un área protegida que es cabecera de cuenca. Mediante una triangulación teórica, se investigaron las representaciones y prácticas de las partes involucradas a través del análisis de documentos (medios de prensa, informes técnicos de las empresas y organismos gubernamentales involucrados), entrevistas a profundidad a informantes clave y observación participante. En conclusión, este conflicto socioambiental actuó como un termómetro que midió la cohesión social: por un lado, exponiendo su fragilidad a nivel de la comunidad como una entidad, y por otro lado, descubriendo sus fortalezas en el grupo que rechaza este proyecto.

1. Introduction

This article aims to delve into the relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social cohesion, proposing that these conflicts can be seen as thermometers of social cohesion in the sense that they expose details of its state. First, this is because these conflicts usually test the willingness of individuals at all the levels of society to collaborate so to reach a common goal. Moreover, the community's sense of belonging, social gaps and institutions, all important factors in evaluating social cohesion, can be seen at work by analyzing the representations and practices of the parties involved in a socio-environmental conflict.

This research is based on a case study. In the town of El Bolsón, in the Argentinean Patagonia, a socio-environmental conflict has been developing since 2010. It revolves around the development of a ski village, the same size as the town, in a surrounding mountain (Perito Moreno) which is the town's headwater basin. The promoters of this project claim that it will bring socio-economic benefits to the whole community, whereas the resistance considers it a threat to the environment as well as the society and the economy.

[Section 2](#) contains the theoretical framework behind socio-environmental conflicts and social cohesion that allowed interpreting the representations and practices of the parties involved. Theory triangulation was used by adopting multiple perspectives about the features of socio-environmental conflicts (Bauer 1995; Guha and Martínez Alier 1997; Folchi 2001; Leff 2001; Sabatini and Sepúlveda 2002; Escobar 2005; Alimonda 2007; Gudynas 2009; Galafassi 2010; Svampa 2012), social cohesion (Jeannotte et al. 2002; Reitz et al. 2009), and worldviews (Nudler et al. 2009), including the ones related to tourism developments (Dimitriu 2002). [Section 3](#) describes the methodology followed in this case study. [Section 4](#) discusses the results of this investigation, which showed low social cohesion between the different groups of the community studied, but high social cohesion within the group that was opposed to the proposed ski village development. Finally, the paper concludes in [Section 5](#).

2. The relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social cohesion

Socio-environmental conflicts have been growing in number in the last decades. According to Bauer (1995), whenever an innovation is introduced, some will be benefited while some others will have to suffer the unwanted consequences and the entailed environmental and social risks of it. Therefore, they will resist it. The same is true when an innovation entails the access, appropriation, and distribution of natural resources for some, excluding others. This vision is shared by many scholars (e.g., Guha and Martínez Alier 1997; Sabatini and Sepúlveda 2002; Escobar 2005), including Alimonda (2007). He explains that in Latin American socio-environmental conflicts, the communities usually try to keep their access to natural resources and environmental services, which are threatened by the innovations proposed by the capitalist system:

If the transformation of human beings and nature into fictional goods is decisive in the origins of capitalism, struggles against these commodification processes acquire a transcendental dimension. It is no longer about resistances on behalf of negating progress, as the hegemony of liberal enlightenment or of standardized Marxism pretended. It is possible to read them now as ways of resistance based on the defense of traditional forms of social organization for the use and disposal of human and natural resources, in the face of the commodification onslaught. (Alimonda 2007, 81)

As Svampa (2012) states, socio-environmental conflicts are related to the access and control of natural resources, where different actors with different interests and values are confronted in a context of great power asymmetry, due to the realignment between the political and the economic powers. Diez and Domínguez de Nakayama (2012, 315) point out that this alignment usually takes the form of *faits accomplis*: companies acting faster than the institutions that should control them. As the authors explain, this *modus operandi* “happens quite frequently in our country [Argentina] to the detriment of the environmental and social principles that gave origin to the limitations established for the development of new business projects” (Diez and Domínguez de Nakayama 2012).

Galafassi (2010) explains other details of this realignment, connected with the construction of hegemony from the political, juridical, and ideological dimensions. However, this hegemony is not totally effective, and these conflicts bring to light opposing conceptions about nature, development, and even democracy. These should be understood as abstract dialectical binomials that are manifested in diverse levels in the reality by the different subjects.

As regards the conceptions of nature, Sabatini and Sepúlveda (2002) classify them broadly in “nature as an economic space” and “nature as a vital space.” The first, which is a human-centered world-view already present in Genesis (1:26)¹ and exacerbated in capitalism, implies that nature can be perceived as an economic resource to be exploited for any benefit of human beings. So, it objectifies and commodifies nature, in order to get immediate benefits, considering its cost an externalization. In contrast, nature can be perceived as a vital space, that is to say, a place where life unfolds and in which human beings

¹Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

are just a part and have to take only what is necessary for their subsistence. This conception is also present in indigenous cultures, for example, the Mapuche community in the area studied.

The different conceptions of nature will have impacts on the notion of development. If nature is a resource to be traded, development can entail an environmental cost, which in the extreme, is the hegemonic view of development, linked to extractivism. As Svampa (2012) explains, although exploitation and extraction of natural resources have been present in Latin America since a long time ago, the conditions that emerged from the change from the Washington consensus to the Beijing consensus² have deepened these, either overexploiting territory already exploited or expanding the frontier towards places that are considered “empty” or “unexploited.” Extractivism continues to be one of the cornerstones of development, despite the deep political changes in Latin America towards the left, as Gudynas (2009, 190) pointed out in his “Ten urgent theses about the new extractivism.” Under the name of inclusive development, extractivism is seen as the necessary evil to fight poverty and unemployment, increase the grass-roots purchasing power, and allow people to gain access to more goods or services.

Although this is the hegemonic view of development, other possibilities of (post)development emerge, as Escobar (2005) explains, focused on a local scale and related to the objectives and dreams of each community. For example, if nature is conceived as vital, development will involve the well-being of the communities in their habitats, not at the expense of them. In this alternative way of conceiving development, two groups merge creating a synergy. On the one hand, as Svampa (2012) explains, there are indigenous or peasants’ groups who want to take care of the territory inherited. Folchi (2001, 91) also points out this characteristic, explaining that in socio-environmental conflicts the historical stability between the community and its habitat is put at risk. On the other hand, there are new, usually urban, groups that have chosen this territory to inhabit or protect it from a distance, with the help of social media. As Leff summarizes (2001, 28), in these cases sustainability principles are taking root, building new productivity rationales based on cultural values and meanings, nature’s potential, and science and technology appropriation.

However, due to the asymmetry of power already mentioned, these post-development views are confronted by the hegemonic idea of progress, which possesses the ideological, juridical, and political framework in its favor. This clash is usually materialized in socio-environmental conflicts, and would seem to deter social cohesion. Such cohesion, according to Jeannotte et al. (2002, 3), is based on the willingness of individuals to cooperate and work together at all levels of society to achieve collective goals. Reitz et al. (2009, 20–21) enlarge on the characteristics of social cohesion, including the relationships between individuals and institutions:

Social integration refers to the extent to which individuals become vested in the core institutions of a society, participate in those institutions, and experience a sense of satisfaction. Individual commitments or attachments are reflected in various ways: a sense that one is fairly treated, that one’s contributions to society are recognized and appreciated, or that one’s

²Briefly, the Washington consensus is based on financial economy whereas the Beijing consensus is an economy based on the extraction of raw material at a large scale. For more information on this topic, see Jilberto and Hogenboom (2010).

well-being is dependent on the well-being of others. They are reflected in actual participation in society: in a sense of belonging to, and being a full participant in, society. (Reitz et al. 2009, 21)

Therefore, at first sight, socio-environmental conflicts, with different groups aiming at different goals related to their perceptions of nature and development, can be seen as a deterrent to social cohesion. Moreover, the usual power asymmetry would also impinge on it. However, the development of these conflicts usually uncovers high social cohesion within the group that resists, showing heterogeneous individuals cooperating to achieve a collective goal, despite their disadvantages in regard to power, which sometimes even exclude them from the institutional channels that in theory would foster social cohesion. Reitz et al. (2009) highlight that conflict does not necessarily deter social cohesion but can rather improve it:

[...] conflict in itself does not necessarily detract from cohesion but in fact since conflict may help solve inter-group problems, it may be an essential part of social life in a cohesive society. [...] In many instances, conflicts may be necessary for the success of a cohesive society, helping to resolve issues and paving the way for greater unity. (Reitz et al. 2009, 20–21)

The ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) or CEPAL (in Spanish) (2007) also points out that socio-environmental conflicts can boost the processes of social inclusion (or exclusion), as they can generate a transformation in the mechanisms and institutions created for its distribution. They state that some conflicts result in the promotion of dialogue, power sharing, and increase of democracy, as well as in changes in the ways in which human beings relate to nature and society. On the same lines, Bauer's (1995) and Vara's (2007) investigations show that resistance to innovation acts as a filter, evaluating and improving the proposed innovation, and adding new dimensions of analysis to a usually economically biased view. Similarly, Merlinsky (2013) points out that three dimensions can be unveiled thanks to socio-environmental conflicts: territorial, juridical, and institutional. First, the territory that is disputed in a socio-environmental conflict is usually revalued, increasing its importance for all parties involved, although these appreciations usually clash. From the juridical viewpoint, they can expose flaws in the legal framework (which sometimes does not even consider the topics involved in socio-environmental conflicts) or in the enforcement of the current legislation. As regards the institutional dimension, they usually test the existing channels of representation and participation. As Bauer (1995) summarizes

Resistance affects socio-technical activity like acute pain affects individual processes: it is a signal that something is going wrong; it reallocates attention and enhances self-awareness; it evaluates ongoing activity; and it alters this activity in various ways to secure a sustainable future. (Bauer 1995, 3)

That is why it is hypothesized in this paper that socio-environmental conflicts could be seen as thermometers for measuring "social cohesion's health." As they unveil different groups with different interests and perceptions related to nature and development among others, they put social cohesion to the test. Thus, at first sight, the flaws of social cohesion are exposed. However, by analyzing the group that resists, it is possible to see a heterogeneous group collaborating to achieve a shared goal, in spite of the power asymmetry with its opposing group. This shows high social cohesion in one group of society, which can also bring to light the unseen dimensions that can improve

the innovation resisted. Thus we can see that socio-environmental conflicts have a territorial, juridical, and institutional productivity.

2.1. Some tools to analyze socio-environmental conflicts

In order to investigate the representations of the parties involved, the Controversial Spaces model (Nudler et al. 2009) was used. This enabled exploring the cosmovisions of the parties, taking into account the dimensions that are relevant when analyzing socio-environmental conflicts, related to nature and development, with their common ground and their disagreements. It also allowed noticing the evolution of the conflict throughout time.

As the case studied revolves around a tourist development, different perceptions of such developments (Dimitriu 2002) were used in order to enlarge on the cosmovisions of the parties involved: “tourism development integrated to the global market” and “independent tourism development.” The first one is oriented to the hegemonic consumption trends and exchange value, offering tourists standard enclaves regardless of the identity of the space involved. This type of tourist activity usually brings immediate benefits to big investors and supposedly to the rest of society through the “trickledown effect.” It is grounded in the conception of nature as an economic space, with the inherent contradiction of exploiting the very natural landscape that would lose value if spoiled. In contrast, independent tourism development offers the cultural and natural resources already existing as tourist attractions, keeping this business on a small scale and as a complement of other economic activities, as it acknowledges the fluctuating nature of tourism. This type of tourism activity exemplifies one possibility of post-development, with the communities deciding what objectives they want to achieve, and how and to what extent they want to grow.

To sum up, the controversial spaces model allowed integrating different categories of analysis so as to explore the worldviews of the parties involved, synchronically and diachronically. Apart from the typical categories of nature and development relevant in social-environmental conflicts in general, different perceptions about tourism developments were included, taking into account the special features of the case studied in this investigation.

3. Methodology

This article builds on the results of an earlier study that analyzed the representations and practices of the parties involved in a socio-environmental conflict generated in El Bolsón, by a large-scale real estate development project surrounding Perito Moreno ski-center. In this part of the project,³ a case study was carried out using qualitative methods. Documents were analyzed (press media and technical reports from the governmental organisms involved and the companies), 17 in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants (laypeople, and experts from the parties), and data was also collected through participant observation. The study investigated the period extending from April 2010 (when the company bought the lands for the development) to December 2013

³Available at: http://editorial.unrn.edu.ar/media/data/llosa_desarrollos_unrn.pdf.



Figure 1. Perito Moreno mountain aerial view. Source: Photo by Bondel, 2011.

(when the judge dictated the prosecution of the authorities involved in the land allocation).

In December 2013, this conflict entered a latent period, which ended in November 2016 (when the company presented a modification of the previous project). Thus, the socio-environmental conflict about the ski village in Perito Moreno mountain resurfaced and lasted until February 2017, with a “not to innovate” slogan that stopped the project again and brought the conflict to another latent period. This last period has been investigated following the same methodology as part of the research project: “Nature, culture and landscape of the parallel 42 Andean Shire. Approximations and contributions to regional self-sustaining development.”⁴

4. The case study: the socio-environmental conflict around the Perito Moreno development.

4.1. Low social cohesion between different groups of the community of El Bolsón

The socio-environmental conflict around the Perito Moreno development started in 2010. Laderas Ltd. presented a project to develop Perito Moreno ski-center (Figure 1), located 25 km away from El Bolsón town, and currently composed of a mountain shelter, a café, and a ski-lift. This project proposed to enlarge the ski tracks and the ski-lifts and to create a shopping area of 122 hectares, which is in line with the laws related to the concession agreement of the ski-center.⁵ As the company considered that this improvement in the ski-center was not economically sustainable, it added the unnegotiable condition of building a private real estate development as large as El Bolsón. This was not in line with the mentioned laws but it was endorsed by Mayor Romera (2007–2011), who eventually got this project confirmed through the municipal by-law (086/11). This endorsement

⁴UNRN 40-B-747-368/16.

⁵Laws 3558/00 and 4335/08.

triggered a series of acquired rights that included the approval of the project by the competent organism (CODEMA: Ecology and Environment Council) on 11/11/11, despite the reluctances expressed by laypeople and experts.

Here, the asymmetry of power typical of socio-environmental conflicts can be seen. Such asymmetries influence hegemony construction: from the political dimension (Galafassi 2010), with officers who endorsed, managed, and promoted this project; and from the juridical dimension avoiding the existing laws that restrain these types of developments.⁶ Regarding the ideological dimension, the company, as well as the politicians involved, highlighted arguments that justify and legitimize these innovations. Especially important was the possibility for El Bolsón to have a winter season, and thus to increase the existing job opportunities, in line with the inclusive development discourses. This can be seen in the mayor's speech:

[This project] will also generate jobs and development. [...] We need to look for developments so that we can count with a high quality tourism development which will be useful to enlarge the high season. We are a southern city and we live off summer; we must also live off winter and snow, otherwise, we aren't intelligent.⁷

As shown in the previous extract, perceptions related to "tourism development integrated to the global market" were also manifested. They emphasized the need to change the current town profile to one more attractive to tourists wanting better quality service, as this extract from a report on the social, economic, and tourist impact of the project also shows:

These tourism activities in Perito Moreno Mountain mean a new style, new profiles and activities. If developed in an organized way, they will be a milestone, a boost and quality improvement of the tourism on offer in the zone. The businesslike style, on the other hand, introduces new criteria, associated with the service quality, hygiene and employment standards, staff training, customer service and connections with the markets. (Kolb, Merino, and Monasterio 2012, 58)⁸

The company also showed that it assumed the conception of nature as an economic space, with the natural landscape as a resource for competitive advantages that is worth protecting for ensuring business. For example, in their description of the golf course, they explained the importance of preserving the natural landscape, considering it an added value: "The main attraction for the game will be the panoramic views and the pristine condition of the surrounding and the landscape, which will be, accordingly, looked after in all possible aspects."⁹

⁶Law 279/61 that rules fiscal land acquisition, purchase and sale; Law 4335/08 that rules Perito Moreno ski-center development, stating a concession agreement instead of a private real estate development; and Law 3226/99 that rules the procedure of environmental impact studies.

⁷Available at: <http://www.noticiasdelbolson.com.ar/2015/10/bruno-pogliano-en-mi-gestion-se.html> "[...] porque es algo que también generará empleo, trabajo y desarrollo [...] se debe buscar el desarrollo para contar con un emprendimiento turístico de calidad que le sirva a la comunidad para romper con la estacionalidad." Somos una ciudad sureña, y vivimos del verano; también debemos "vivir del invierno y de la nieve," porque si no, no somos inteligentes

⁸"Estas actividades de turismo de invierno en el Cerro Perito Moreno, significan un nuevo estilo, nuevos perfiles y actividades. Si se desarrollan organizadamente, significarán un punto de inflexión, impulso y elevación de la calidad de la oferta turística de la zona. El estilo empresario, por otra parte, introduce nuevos criterios, asociados a la calidad del servicio, las previsiones de higiene y seguridad en el trabajo, la capacitación del personal, atención al cliente, y relación con los mercados."

⁹Noticias Del Bolsón (November 7 2012) Proyecto 2020. Available at: <http://www.noticiasdelbolson.com.ar/2012/11/laderas-presento-un-nuevo-proyecto.html>: "El atractivo principal para el juego serán las vistas panorámicas y la condición prístina del entorno y el paisaje, que serán, por ende, cuidados en todos los aspectos posibles."

However, hegemony construction was not effective enough to generate the desired consensus. Faced with the proposal to develop Perito Moreno ski village, different positions arose, which manifested in a huge array of different commitments between two opposing extremes. Those who argued that this project would benefit tourism activity without neglecting the environment were named “promoters.” Those who argued that the environmental damage would be greater than the benefits that this project could bring were named “resistance.” However, in the case studied, the parties expressed a wide range of nuanced assumptions between the opposing stances about the project and the binomial categories of nature, development, and tourism.

A disagreement could be observed about the perception of tourism development. As it has been mentioned, the promoters supported the idea of tourism developments integrated into the global market. In contrast, the resistance manifested the cosmivision of “independent tourism development,” as can be seen in this fragment from an open letter¹⁰:

Our visitors choose the tranquility and environment that surround us, and enjoy only for some days the place where we live all the year round. Here, nature can still be contemplated in its true state, and activities that ended generations ago in the big cities can still be done here. This is an environmental and social asset, and it is our duty and right to protect it.

In the above excerpt, nature is seen as a resource to achieve a competitive advantage for tourists, which could be considered part of the common ground shared with the promoters. However, they also conceive it as a vital space, as this can be seen at the end of the fragment above and also in the next one. The next extract also shows the synergy between inhabitants who have inherited the territory and those who have chosen it (as Svampa points out), both of them fearing that this project would break the historical stability between the community and its habitat (as Folchi 2001 explains).

We, who were born or have chosen to live in Mallín Ahogado [a surrounding rural area], want our current lifestyle to be respected. We are farmers, we grow animals, we have fruit tree plantations, we work with wood, we gather mushrooms and rosehips; we are artisans, teachers, carpenters, masons. We live in nature and take the legacy that has characterized Mallín and its people since generations ago.¹¹

Thus, valuing the natural landscape seemed part of the common ground, as the resistance also explained its key importance in tourism. However, the conceptions behind each are different, with the resistance emphasizing its conception of nature as a vital space:

[...] without nature there is no landscape. Without landscape it is not possible to develop tourism. Tourism without the nature that it depends on dies; but, before that, our quality of life and rurality die, and with it, our identity.¹²

¹⁰Open letter written by neighbors from Mallín Ahogado (neighborhood in Perito Moreno Mountain), August 2 2011. Seen in record 052762:322-323. “Nuestros visitantes eligen la tranquilidad y el entorno que nos rodea, donde vienen y disfrutan solo unos días del lugar donde nosotros vivimos todo el año. Es aquí donde todavía se puede contemplar la naturaleza en estado puro y realizar actividades que en las grandes ciudades se dejaron de hacer hace generaciones. Este es un bien ambiental y social que tiene la comunidad toda y es nuestro deber y derecho protegerlo.”

¹¹Open letter written by neighbors from Mallín Ahogado and El Bolsón (July 2 2011). Seen in record n°052762:320. “Los que hemos nacido o hemos elegido vivir en Mallín Ahogado, queremos que se respete nuestra forma de vida actual. Somos agricultores, criamos animales, tenemos plantaciones de frutales, fruta fina, trabajamos con la leña, recolectamos hongos, mosqueta, somos artesanos, maestros, carpinteros, albañiles, vivimos en la naturaleza y tomamos el legado que desde hace generaciones fue construyendo a Mallín y su gente.”

¹²Prensa del pueblo (May 17 2013) “El turismo que deseamos vs. El lugar que deseamos.” Available at: <http://prensadelpueblo.blogspot.com.ar/2013/05/opinion-el-turismo-que-deseamos-vs-el.html#more>. “(...) sin naturaleza no

Likewise, both parties claimed to be in favor of a sustainable development in Perito Moreno Mountain, but they attributed different meanings to this concept, related to their different conceptions of nature, development, and tourism. This difference made the promoters accept a scale and an environmental cost that the resistance considered too high. Once again, what seemed to be part of the promoters' and resistance's common ground turned out to be part of the disagreements.

Here, as Bauer (1995) and Vara (2007) state, resistance acted as a filter, evaluating and improving the proposed innovation. In November 2012, the company designed a new project (named Proyecto 2020¹³) with a smaller environmental impact and a better quality marketing campaign in order to reach a consensus. However, it was unsuccessful, among other reasons, because the first footnote of the project stated:

Laderas reserves the acquired rights resulting from the approvals by municipal and provincial authorities in all respects related to the so-called "Perito Moreno mountain integral development project" (original version-2011).

This project (2020) does not resign any of these rights.¹⁴

The same situation happened in November 2016, when the new Mayor (Bruno Pogliano) accepted a new and smaller version of this project that again reserved the acquired rights resulting from the approval of the first project, being, in fact, a proposal to implement the same project in different phases. Hegemony production and the realignment between the political and economic powers could be seen at work again.

However, the resistance continued increasing, especially when the resistors discovered further details of the project. The heterogeneity of this group that rejected the real estate development in Perito Moreno Mountain included indigenous communities, peasants, migrants, and a huge array of professionals and academics. All of them, according to their different backgrounds and expertise, contributed to generate and share knowledge about the implications of the project presented by the company. Paradoxically, new knowledge helped to safeguard the historical stability between the community and its habitat.

Using this socio-environmental conflict as a thermometer for social cohesion, many challenges to the social cohesion of the town arose. Two groups, which were named promoters and resistance, aimed at different goals, related to their different perceptions of nature, development, and desirable tourism development. Although both parties sometimes seemed to share a common ground as regards developing Perito Moreno Mountain in a sustainable way and taking care of the landscape, it became clear that even when using the same wording they wanted to convey different meanings. Moreover, the promoters aligned with the political and economic power, whereas the resistance, despite their much larger size, did not have corporate power.

hay paisaje. Sin paisaje no es posible que se desarrolle el turismo. El turismo sin la naturaleza que nos caracteriza muere, pero antes muere nuestra calidad de vida y muere la ruralidad y con ella nuestra identidad."

¹³Available at: <http://www.noticiasdelbolson.com.ar/2012/11/laderas-presento-un-nuevo-proyecto.html>.

¹⁴Proyecto 2020: <http://www.noticiasdelbolson.com.ar/2012/11/laderas-presento-un-nuevo-proyecto.html>. "El Grupo Laderas se reserva los derechos adquiridos resultantes de las aprobaciones logradas ante autoridades municipales y provinciales en todo lo que respecta al llamado «Proyecto de Desarrollo Integral del Cerro Perito Moreno» (versión original-2011). El presente proyecto (2020), no implica renuncia alguna sobre estos derechos."

4.2. High social cohesion within the resistance

While there was low social cohesion between the promoters and the resistance, the practices of the resistance showed high social cohesion within this heterogeneous group. Sharing similar conceptions of nature, development, and tourism, they gathered against the risk that the ski village would pose to their historical stability with their habitat. Despite the great asymmetry of power due to the alignment of the economic and political powers, they developed ways to delay its implementation, growing in numbers throughout time.

Between 2010 and 2013, part of the resistance constituted the Asamblea en Defensa del Agua y de la Tierra (ADAT, Assembly in Defense of Water and Land). They made use of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to spread their opinions, arguments, and open letters, developing blogs¹⁵ and by Facebook, and also getting media coverage, especially in the local press, radio, and television. Throughout the different phases of the conflict, they achieved allegiances from different organizations (including Greenpeace) and even managed to co-opt some members of the executive and legislative power groups. Demonstrations were a key factor that showed the size of this group that rejected this project, as did their signatures collection.

Moreover, they brought the case to the judicial arena, filing two legal charges. The first one, focused on the irregularities in the acquisition of the land for the project,¹⁶ accomplished *Litis* registration¹⁷ on April 16 2012 and the prosecution of the officers involved in the purchase and sale of the lands of the project on December 13 2013. The second statement focused on the breach of the legal procedure of environmental impact studies evaluation.¹⁸ It accomplished, among other things, an order not to innovate on September 5 2012. Although they managed to stop the implementation of this project, the conflict could not be solved in the judicial arena.

In the case studied, the strategies that the resistance implemented intertwined and fed back to resistance resources. For example, demonstrations, allegiances, and legal statements generated more media coverage. By the same token, media coverage generated a bigger number of allegiances and contributed to increasing the number of demonstrators and signatures collected. Some strategies interacted with representative democracy. For example, the May 26 2013 demonstration (Figure 2) succeeded in dissuading Mayor Ricardo García (2011–2015) from signing the settlement act that guaranteed the urban development.

Three years later (November 15 2016), the conflict resurfaced as the new Mayor (Bruno Pogliano, 2015–2019) made an extrajudicial settlement with the company, in order to implement the same project but starting with a smaller phase. This event generated the resurging of a more multitudinous and more organized resistance. In this new period, which finished in February 2017, there were five demonstrations to reject the project. Three of them (the ones of December 17 2016, January 7 2017, and February 11 2017) were the biggest demonstrations in El Bolsón's history, with

¹⁵Promoters' blog: <http://desarrollosustentabledelperitomoreno.blogspot.com.ar/>. Resistance's blog: <http://asambleaendefensadelaguaylatierra.blogspot.com.ar/>.

¹⁶"Saiz Miguel y otros s/fraude en perjuicio de la administración pública (venta irregular tierras cerro Perito Moreno)."

¹⁷Precautionary measure that informs prospects that the asset is litigious.

¹⁸"Ronco, Jorge Fabián y otros s/mandamus."



Figure 2. May 26 2013 demonstration (the photo shows Mayor García framed in blue). Source: La Negra radio.¹⁹

5000, 10,000, and 11,000 people, respectively, in a town of 19,009 inhabitants according to the last census. The resistance grew as it absorbed artisans local producers and professionals from El Bolsón, citizens from neighboring towns, members of the Mapuche indigenous population, and even tourists, who shared to some extent the cosmovisions of nature as a vital space and commitment to independent tourism developments.

Although a non-binding public hearing was carried out on December 2 2016, and 90% of the citizens that participated explained their disapproval of this project, the company and the municipal government continued with the procedures to implement it, making use of the *faits accomplis* policy again and resorting to a misinterpretation of the October 13 2015 legal sentence to legitimize their actions. As a consequence, the resistance continued with different strategies to make their voices heard, despite feeling that their contributions were not appreciated through the institutional channel of the public hearing. Apart from the demonstrations mentioned, on December 16 2016 a sit-in was improvised in a park in the center of the town, right after the Legislative power had approved this new version of the project in an extraordinary session. The site of the sit-in became a meeting place where all neighbors could receive information, take part in open assemblies, express their suggestions and enjoy free concerts, open lectures, and other cultural activities.

This time, information was spread not only throughout the ICTs but also at an information stand at the site of the sit-in, and with volunteers going door-to-door to inform neighbors about the socio-environmental risks of the project. Media coverage also

¹⁹Taken from: <http://asambleaendefensadelaguaylatierra.blogspot.com.ar/2013/05/el-otro-intendente-del-bolson.html>.

helped to spread the news, as the conflict reached the media agenda, especially on a national scale.

The legal statements went on their course, and new ones were filed, including a writ of Amparo on January 9 2017, accompanied by 5000 signatures, which demanded that the real estate development be stopped for breaching the laws related to the ski-center concession agreement and for the environmental damage it would cause. The next week, the judges issued a temporary injunction that repeated the order not to innovate that had been breached by the company. The mayor appealed against this injunction on February 1 2017, showing once again his level of involvement with the company.

From 2010 to 2017, this conflict kept evolving, especially in the period 2016–2017, increasing social cohesion to reject this project, at the expense of decreasing the social cohesion of the community of El Bolsón as a whole. The resistance grew in size (as can be seen in the number of demonstrators and signatures collected), which enabled them to articulate more strategies. The assembly, the sit-in, and the door-to-door technique became effective ways to spread information and participate in the debate. These new citizens' participation mechanisms, although not institutional, allowed individuals to exchange their opinions, building knowledge and agreeing on how to take action.

All in all, despite being dormant for three years, the resistance enlarged its effectiveness, as was visible in the number of people that resisted, the variety and creativity of the actions taken, and how fast the second phase of this conflict evolved and stopped the project again. However, these mechanisms of participation have been mostly reactive to the company's *faits accomplis*, instead of transcending or preempting them. The interviewees belonging to the resistance argued that the most important reason for this dynamic was the time and to some extent also the money that it requires. Individuals made room in their busy agendas to take part in these activities, making an effort that was not easy to sustain in the long run.

Taking this socio-environmental conflict as a thermometer of social cohesion, by focusing on the group that resisted, much cohesion was manifested. In spite of the asymmetry of power, a highly heterogeneous group developed an array of strategies by collaborating to achieve a common goal that was grounded in their conceptions of nature, development, and tourism development. This contrasted with what would be expected by following Reitz et al.'s (2009) idea that to feel fairly treated, and that one's contributions to society are recognized and appreciated, influences social cohesion positively. Instead, this situation inspired the group to find other extra-institutional ways to make their voices heard. Although it was reactive to the promoters' moves, it was able to evolve, despite being dormant for three years.

5. Socio-environmental conflicts as social cohesion thermometers

This case of socio-environmental conflict was able to reveal the state of social cohesion in the community studied; that is to say, it acted like a thermometer of social cohesion. It showed that in the community of El Bolsón as a whole, social cohesion was low, with different groups aiming at different goals that answered to their different ways of perceiving nature, development, and tourism. However, in the group that resisted this project, social cohesion was high, with a heterogeneous group generating creative ways to achieve the goal they had in common, grounded in their shared conception of nature,

development, and tourism. This occurred despite the power asymmetry that hindered their participation in the existing institutional channels.

Agreeing with Merlinsky's (2013) idea of the territorial, juridical, and institutional productivity of socio-environmental conflicts, this case has also proved to be productive. Regarding its territorial productivity, the parties have revalued the space in question and renewed the social link they had with it, joining forces in order to reach an objective. Both parties gave new significance to Perito Moreno Mountain in their own way, considering its proper uses, and taking an active role towards the proposed innovation. These representations and practices manifested their sense of belonging to the disputed space and, for one of the parties, exposing the gap between the different groups involved, and thus, uncovering a weakness in the social cohesion of the society as a whole.

Regarding its juridical productivity, the case clarified that though the legal framework to treat this conflict exists, there must be practices to ensure the enforcement of the current legislation. Although the resistance claims are supported by the existing environmental law, the speed of the company's *faits accomplis* has overruled this law several times.

This case has also shown an institutional productivity, by testing the existing channels for representation and participation. Representative democracy has proved insufficient to express the stances of the community. It approved and legitimized a project that was resisted by an important part of the population, judging by the size of the demonstrations. This socio-environmental conflict has not succeeded in generating alternatives for citizens' participation in the institutional field. Moreover, it showed that some existing representation and participation channels (such as the public hearing) proved to be only quasi-participation mechanisms, as the participants' opinions were not taken into account. These factors usually entail low social cohesion that deters participation. But this case showed that it triggered other ways of participation, although not institutional ones, achieving high social cohesion all the same.

Despite the territorial, legal, and institutional productivity of this conflict, the biggest challenge is for the different parties to debate meaningfully, being equally legitimized. This situation turns more difficult taking into account their different conceptions that even attribute different meanings to the same concepts and the asymmetry of power.

Thus, this socio-environmental conflict has acted as a thermometer that showed the state of social cohesion: weak taking the whole community of El Bolsón as the unit of analysis but strong taking into account the group that resisted. On the one hand, analyzing the representations of the parties involved, regarding their conceptions of nature, development, and tourism helped to understand the underlying differences that accounted for their different goals. On the other hand, analyzing the representations and practices of the resistance helped to unveil the reasons of this group's high social cohesion.

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