

The tragedy of development: disputes over natural resources in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the problem of development based on the production of natural resources which in recent years has increased substantially in Latin America. This is a trend which includes the case of Argentina where large petroleum, mining and agribusiness corporations have become some of the main economic actors of the country. What are the consequences of this type of “development” when the main objectives of these corporations is to exploit these natural resources which on the whole were preserved in our countries of the “periphery” while they were depredated in the countries of the “centre”? More than 80% of the natural resources available at present in the world for the future of humanity are localized in territories pertaining to peasant and indigenous communities and, in large measure, in Latin America. In this paper several case studies are considered: the expansion of mining, forestry related to the paper pulp industry and agribusiness. The conditions in which these activities are expanded and the resistances and disputes developed by the populations that tend for the care of nature and the environment are considered. Finally, some reflexions in which a critique of the concept of development based on techno-science and the activities of these large corporations as some of their fundamental supports is presented.

Key words: Natural resources – Social Movements – critique of development - Territories in dispute

The title of this article, borrows from Marshall Berman’s concept “the tragedy of development”¹, a critical stance in a blind drive towards the domination and appropriation of nature. Such a notion of development is based on a project in which technical change is disconnected from the needs of the majority of the population and devised for the only purpose of making a profit and achieving social control. The idea of development whose different meanings were assigned to it by the hegemonic capitalist countries, has gathered abundant criticism. In one of the most interesting books that criticize this concept, Gustavo Esteva mentions that “the metaphor of development granted global hegemony to a purely occidental genealogy of history, depriving peoples of different cultures the opportunity to define the forms of their social life” (2001: 69). According to Esteva, critical theories from Europe fell into the trap of depicting development in the original meanings of this concept. Thus development was depicted as a historical process evolving under the same necessary conditions as natural laws.

¹ Marshall Berman, “El Fausto de Goethe: la tragedia del desarrollo” (cited by Paula Sibilia, 2005).

Most Latin American thinkers did not question this notion in their critical work, being also trapped and dazzled by the myth of capitalist development.

For many social movements in the world, particularly in Latin America, the promise of development has shown to have caused much damage to regions and populations whose living conditions have worsened after the ‘modernization’ scheme was put into effect. On the other hand, that after breaking with this myth, they could take the matter into their own hands, either by going back to agroecology or installing it, and performing economic activities based on their own cultures, with innovative initiatives often underlined by a high-tech complexity.

This article deals with issues related to mining, forestry, pulp paper mills, as well as with agribusiness in Argentina. It reflects on the formation of social actors that struggle with corporations over natural resources bringing these issues to the public agenda. The last item includes some considerations concerning economic models, technoscience, and the connections between both these elements and the possibilities for expansion of democratization processes in society.

Novel conceptualizations that have abounded in recent years propose ‘knowledge starting from the South’ (Santos, 2006), from border epistemologies (Gerboguel, 2006), or from colonized people’s awareness of knowledge and power (Lander, 2000, Quijano, 2000). They aim at addressing the profound crisis affecting the epistemological paradigms of our times and to think these matters out from the perspective of the experimental fields constructed by social movements (Santos, 2000). The task of acquiring knowledge from such suggestive conceptualizations also involves a radical criticism of the old modernization and developmentalist views (Sachs, 2001, Santos, 2000) This work explores this new ‘development’ –based on the devastation of natural resources –and, the opposition of social movements based on these new perspectives and thoughts.

The disputes

In the late 20th Century, significant disputes have taken place in Argentina as well as in the rest of Latin America involving natural resources. This has been a constant since the more advanced and transnational capital has begun to consider natural goods as the basic of their valorization processes. In the past twenty years a new appropriation process of nature has become one of the main forms for the valorization of capital. In this context “development” implies domination over natural resources, in particular, over water, land, and biological diversity.

Territories are disputed in economic terms within a plan of world political domination. According to Ana Esther Ceceña, the “national other” loses its voice to become embodied as part of one only territory under dispute (Ceceña, 2004). In this paper we point out that in the cases of Argentina and Uruguay, the National State makes its contribution to these processes by passing laws and setting rules that facilitate new forms of investment, i.e. privatization laws, patent rights, permits for the use of transgenic seeds, etcétera.

In other words, territories that used to be in the hands of private capital within the borders of a nation –that is, factories, arable land, financial niches, etc. –have become part of a new worldwide territorial configuration. Thus territoriality is a process, involving spaces that are currently being constructed and disputed, and that is tearing up and reshaping geographies. It should be noted that the nation-state has changed its status as a regulator mediating private capital, to become a facilitator for change, thus generating, for example, new juridical norms and acquiescing to those created in transnational arenas such as the CIADI².

² Centro Internacional de Arreglo de Diferencias Relativas a Inversiones. [International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes]

The Case of Argentina

Argentina is the Latin American country with a one of the highest territorial and natural resource exposition to privatization and appropriation processes engineered by large transnational capital. She is the fourth petroleum producer of Latin America. Nevertheless by privatizing her petroleum and handing it over to foreign companies, Argentina has mortgaged all possibilities for pursuing an autonomous policy. Another paradigmatic example can be found in the privatization of drinking water (see Giarracca and Del Pozo, 2004). To this we may add legislation that favors the establishment of mining, with large companies that besides ripping apart the territory and depriving neighboring populations of water and other resources provides very slight incomes to the country as a whole. This is an activity that ends up being subsidized by the State just because their exports go through Patagonian ports. What is happening to arable land, shrub lands, and *yungas* is an additional indicator of the fact that Argentina is highly exposed to the large economic players of the world.

Different segments of the population are denouncing and taking action so as to put an end to such an outrageous situation. The inhabitants of small cities or towns from the interior, as well as peasants, and indigenous communities are organizing themselves, gathering information, and getting in touch with similar organizations in other countries in an attempt to stop these new investors. It is a long, unequal battle, for they have to confront large capital in the global economic world: the huge Canadian and Australian mining companies, the French transnational corporations that, with a few exceptions, have taken over management of water around the world, the large soy investors accompanied by Monsanto and Sygenta, and the powerful pulp mills, such as the Spanish Ence and Finnish Botnia .

1) Rejection of mining

The macro-institutional context

With a territory of 2,700,000 km² Argentina is considerably rich in mineral resources, 75 per cent of which remain unexploited. This attracts investors as can indeed be read from advertisements in official Internet sites. The main mining areas are located in the Andes, along a mountain range of more than 4,500 km. A paper issued by the Ministry of the Economy and published in the Internet recommends investments in mining, arguing that, according to a 1999 CEPAL survey based on information provided by the Colorado Mining School (EEUU), out of 24 countries studied, Argentina provides the second highest domestic rate of return for a model gold project, and the third for a model copper project. The Ministry of the Economy supplemented this data by volunteering information on the convenience of Argentina's low cost labor, public services, and utilities.

During the neo-liberal Menem administration, the Law of Investments in Mining No.24.196/93, attracted about significant investments³ as the number of mining companies increased⁴. According to

³ The inflow of foreign investment went mainly to the exploration and exploitation of metal minerals. Among the outstanding undertakings mention can be made of Bajo La Alumbraera and Salar del Hombre Muerto (Catamarca), Mina Aguilar (Jujuy), Cerro Vanguardia (Santa Cruz) and Veladero (San Juan, (Barrick Gold Corp., Homestake), all of them now functioning. Among the ambitious projects that have not entered the exploitation stage we may mention Agua Rica (Catamarca), Cordón de Esquel (Chubut), Pascua-Lama and Pachón (San Juan), Pirquitas (Jujuy) and Potasio Río Colorado (Mendoza). There are many other mining undertakings, some already being exploited and others at the exploration or prospecting stage (see Ministry of the Economy).

⁴ The main mining companies operating in Argentina are: Bajo La Alumbraera (Xstrata, Wheaton River Minerals Ltd., Northern Orion Resources Inc.), Salar del Hombre Muerto (FMC Lithium Corp.), Mina Aguilar (Compañía Minera Aguilar S.A.), Cerro Vanguardia (Anglogold), Agua Rica (Northern Orion Resources Inc.), Farallón Negro (YMAD), Pirquitas (Silver Standard), Pascua-Lama (Barrick Gold Corp.), Pachón (Noranda), Manantial Espejo (Silver Standard, Pan American Silver Corp.), Andacollo (Andacollo Gold), Veta Martha

a report of CEPAL in the early 90s there were seven mining companies in the country, whereas at present the number has soared to fifty-five foreign companies and a few local ones. This could be expected since the above mentioned law provides an unprecedented beneficial legal framework never subscribed before by a sovereign State. Under its provisions, foreign companies are fully entitled to obtain domestic credit, to transfer abroad realized profits, and repatriate their investments, besides mining all minerals, including nuclear matter, without any restrictions whatsoever. In addition, these companies are entitled to the following incentives, as established by the mining investment regime:

- Double deduction of exploitation expenses. In order to establish their due income tax payments, companies may deduct the total amount invested when determining the feasibility of the project.
- Reimbursement of VAT on exploration activities. Law 25.429 included reimbursement of VAT fiscal credit stemming from investments in exploration twelve months after the expenses were incurred.
- Exemption from tariffs/customs duties. Registered mining companies are exempted from paying import duties on capital goods, special equipment, or components of such goods. Mining servicing companies enjoy equal benefits.
- Tax exemptions and deductions. Profit derived from mines and mining rights devoted to construct company capital do not pay income tax.
- Exemption from Minimum Expected Profit (Assets). Capitalization of mining reserves valuation: following approval, they can be capitalized to a maximum of 50 per cent.
- VAT advanced reimbursement and financing. In the case of new projects or of a substantial increase in production capacity, the companies will obtain VAT reimbursement or financing for the following transactions: permanent import or purchase of new capital goods and investment in infrastructure applied to production.
- Tax exemption on mining property. No mining property, products, premises, machinery, workshops, or vehicles will be taxed.
- Provincial and municipal taxes. In the Federal Mining Agreement (Law 24.228), the provinces agreed to lift all municipal taxes, rates, and documentary stamp taxes that might encumber mining activities in the provinces.
- Royalties. Of the twenty-three provinces of Argentina, only seven collect royalties. Some provinces have adopted new royalty schemes, in which the amounts paid decrease as the value added of the mineral inside the province increases.

In other words, the legal framework for mining is so permissive and favors foreign investment in such a way that one cannot but understand the enormous influx of foreign capital that has flooded the country over the last few years. As we mention above, the State not only does not regulate but facilitates depleting mineral resources in Argentina.

“No to the mines”: the protesters

The main players here are the ‘self-convened residents’ (vecinos autoconvocados), people whose home towns and environment are being affected by the exploitation of the mines. They dwell in ‘medium-sized’ cities (about 50,000 inhabitants each), and have different migratory and ethnic origins –you will find people from European, aboriginal, ‘criollo’ descent, and others. These cities are inhabited by professionals with a level of education that enables them to gather and classify information on mining as well as aboriginal communities who try to articulate their own knowledge and meanings of the problem with that of the (“asambleístas”) activist protesters.

(Coeur Dálene), Potasio Río Colorado (Río Tinto), Borax Argentina (Borax Argentina), Arizaro/Lindero (Mansfield Minera S.A., Río Tinto) [Source: Mining Secretariat]. A public officer working in the present administration confided to me the existence of about 500 mining projects under way and 250 at an advanced exploration stages.

While first foreign investment and exploitation of the new era was carried out in Catamarca under the name of Bajo La Alumbra, the first forceful collective protest took place in Esquel, Chubut, toward the end of 2002. It took place in the nation wide scenario that was a sequel to the protests of December 19 and 20, 2001 (see Giarracca and Teubal, 2004)⁵. The form of organization chosen in Esquel was the assembly following the model of the struggles fought in the capital.

Thus, the initial drive that would later give rise to the rejection of other megaprojects in various Andean regions began in the city of Esquel in the south. During the ‘protest cycle’ between 2003 and 2007, Catamarca joined the dispute and the countrywide movement through an organization of her own. A resident of Andalgalá (Catamarca), who is thinking of selling his house due to the pollution in the area, declared to a provincial newspaper: “Ten years ago, I welcomed La Alumbra as a sign of advancement. All of us were happy with this company. But it proved to be my worst mistake. The whole thing was a lie. Far from providing job opportunities, they brought along more poverty and polluted everything. They are literally killing us”. (Andalgalá, Catamarca, 12/21/05).

In this small town located in Northwestern Argentina, the confrontation involves two parties; on the one hand the gold mining companies Swiss Xstrata, Canadian Goldcorp and Northern Orion, and, on the other, an assembly composed of pensioners, teachers, professionals, and housewives who spend their leisure time learning formulas or surveying the Internet for experiences similar to theirs, in a relentless effort to reject this mining undertaking.

In 2006, Andalgalá staged a number of protests and complaints, besides having organized a referendum when word got round that a new investment project was in the making. That same year, breakage of a pipeline contaminated the waters of the nearby river.

Still, Esquel was the starting point for civil society’s setting limits on extractive activities. In 2003, the city’s self-convened assembly succeeded in thwarting Meridian Gold Inc.’s project, an open-sky, cyanide-based operation. Open-pit/open-sky mining was banned in Vallenar (Chile), Tambogrande (Peru), Cantón Cotacachi (Ecuador), San Luis de Potosí (Mexico), Montana (EEUU), San Marcos (Guatemala), and Valle de Siria (Honduras) among other places. As a consequence in 2002 in the province of Río Negro a network of assemblies that were emulated all over the country was started, thus giving rise to a nation wide network of assemblies that established a link with similar movements in other countries.

Due to the good work of the assemblies gathered in the localities of Epuyén, Lago Puelo, Bariloche, Jacobacci, El Maitén, Maquinchao, the governor of the Southern province of Río Negro prohibited gold mining based on cyanide or mercury, and the ‘self-convened residents’ demanded that a law be passed without delay in order to check this or any other mining methods using water mixed with toxic chemicals and to permanently revoke authorization for further prospecting. Both measures sought to put an end to the environmental hazards caused by ongoing and future exploration.

2) The dispute over the land

Scenarios

In Argentina, agriculture comprises 63 per cent of total mainland territory. It includes a region known for the fertility of its productive plains, the Pampa, and other regions with great soil diversity, productive possibilities, and biodiversity.

⁵ Norma Giarracca y Miguel Teubal. “‘Que se vayan todos’: Neoliberal collapse and social protest in Argentina”, en J. Demmers, A. E. Fernández Gilberto, y B. Hogenboom (editores). *Good Governance in the Era of Global Neoliberalism. Conflict and Depoliticisation in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa*. Londres y Nueva York, Routledge, 2004.

Argentina's agrarian social structure is quite heterogeneous. In the 20th Century, the large agricultural and cattle-raising "estancias" coexisted with small and medium-sized farms. Unlike other Latin American countries, Argentina's small and medium-sized farms including those run by peasants amounted to 78 per cent of all farm units. This was possible thanks to a number of institutional agreements that kept negotiations going between the economic actors and the State, the latter being represented by institutions created after the 1930 crisis, such as the National Grains Board [Junta Nacional de Granos], National Meat Board [Junta Nacional de Carnes], National Sugar Board [Dirección Nacional del Azúcar], and the Yerba Maté Board, among others. In 1991, the decree of economic deregulation of Menem – Cavallo destroyed this coexistence (see Teubal and Rodríguez, 2002). The Neo-liberal policy of the then President and his Minister of the Economy paved the way for large - scale production, a demand of large economic actors who considered this necessary to increase profits and agrarian rents from the vast expanses of our exceptionally fertile lands.

The dispute over the land began in the mid-90s due to a significant change in the agrarian model. It coincided with the expansion of soy, but it also had to do with a change in the logic of production, i.e., it affected the role of the land, of the productive sector, of the financial sector, etc. The new 'agribusiness' model failed to take into account the coexistence of large farms with peasant and aboriginal communities. Land as a whole was absorbed into the capitalist valorization process and ended up as a mere commodity. Land was cleared without qualms, and *yungas* and other territories which ensured an ecological balance were eliminated to give way to new investments. According to data provided by Greenpeace –Argentina, deforestation increased exponentially reaching at present about 250,000 hectares per year. This economic behavior is not exclusive of new investors, since the old sugar mills and other long-established agro-industries adopted the same logic. Thus, the dispute over the land is held throughout the country.

In sum, a whole package of public policy was originated in the deregulation decree, but also included a number of instruments used by the State in order to promote one particular mode of production rather than other ones. In this context, peasants and aboriginal communities are dealt with in the same way as the urban unemployed. They have been assigned to assistential programs while it is hoped that they will definitely give up the land.

The subjects involved in the protests: peasants and aboriginal communities

During the first part of the process herein described, the large economic actors overlooked the peasants, in the first place, because the latter did not occupy the best soils, which mattered the most and, secondly, because they never thought they might stage an organized resistance. As a matter of fact, in the 90s large economic actors had to face the stubbornness of sectors of the population that had lived on the land for decades, producing food for both their self- subsistence and the market, and therefore totally reluctant to leave or 'give away' their place. Most peasants do not have titles that prove their ownership of the land, either because they are entitled to it after having inhabited it for over twenty years or because they have inherited it.

When the 'new' agents, such as soy producers, decide to take over peasant land, they resort to a variety of strategies, including eviction with violence. They are aided by provincial judicial systems bound to the local ruling classes which are very much under the influence of these 'new powers'. The actors that play their part in this process are the evicting businessmen, the peasants or aboriginal communities, and a judiciary implicitly or explicitly under suspicion, as was the case with Santiago del Estero (see Barbeta, 2005).

Quite often, the sale of land appears to be voluntary. Nevertheless it is the consequence of cornering practices which, unlike evictions, are not ostensibly violent, so the producers' 'disappearance' is viewed as a form of 'silent exclusion'. The peasantry resisted these evictions induced by the 'new agriculture' by organizing themselves, creating organizations that initially were very incipient but which have become much stronger and which have been integrated into the National Peasant and

Aboriginal Movement [Movimiento Nacional Campesino e Indígena], which includes provincial and regional movements that are rapidly being expanded.

In recent years, the *kolla*, *mapuche*, *wichí*, *toba*, and *ava guaraní* communities have actively resisted eviction not giving up their struggle to legalize their ownership of the land. Despite their efforts, they have often been violently evicted. Our country's legal framework acknowledges the right of aboriginal peoples to inhabit the lands of their ancestors and to live in accordance with their old culture and customs; however, the enforcement of the law is never made. In other words, in spite of the Aboriginal Law [Ley Indígena 23.302], and of the Article 75 Section 17 of the National Constitution and in accordance with all international treaties and covenants with constitutional force, such as Covenant 169 of ILO, aboriginal demands remain unanswered and the communities become ever more uncertain about obtaining their due title to the land.

It is precisely because large companies are disputing the land and its riches that the rightful aboriginal demands are not fulfilled. These are ongoing processes and it does not seem likely that they will stop, due to a juridical legality which though to a large extent socially delegitimized, is extremely difficult to overturn.

In brief, aboriginal communities need to fight for their rights which are supported by national and international legislation to which the Argentinean State is committed. Yet it does not honor this legislation, a fact which brings the State to the brink of an policy of 'ethnocide'. The human rights policies that have given this administration a worldwide positive image is not extended with regards to the social rights of the aboriginal communities' or the peasants' twenty-year ownership rights, included in the 19th Century Civil Code. The final chapter (dedicated to aboriginal populations) in the latest yearly report on human rights produced by the Center for Legal and Social Studies [Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales] is more than eloquent on this issue.

3) Caring for the Uruguay River: the protest against the paper mills

Investment scenarios in forestation and paper mills

In 2003, the Uruguayan administration of President Julio Batlle promoted the establishment of two paper mills and a river port, on the Uruguay River following previous forestation developments in the country. This was denounced by Uruguayan and Argentinean environmental organizations that pointed out that the project was flawed by procedural errors from the start. For example, no environmental studies had been made, and no consultations were held with Argentina, thus failing to comply with pre-established treaties. When the Tabaré Vázquez administration decided to continue this project in 2005, a binational organization composed of members from diverse sectors emerged opposing an initiative that could cause an ecological disaster in the Uruguay River.

The companies involved are the Spanish Ence and Finnish Matse Botnia. According to the Uruguayan scholar Raúl Zibechi the total production, of these two companies is to be greater than that of eleven Argentine paper mills operating at present. While Uruguay fulfills its demand for paper with the production of two small paper mills located in Juan Lacaze and Mercedes, the new ventures will export totally its production contributing to meet the substantial needs of Northern countries. Zibechi referred to an address by Alan Greenspan to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 7, 2006, in which he maintains that ethanol was a byproduct of cellulose that might lead the country off its oil dependence. In other words, the new role cellulose might have been a mighty stimulus to encourage 'paper pulp basins' in the Southern Cone (Zibechi, 2006).

The Spanish company Ence, which eventually withdrew from Fray Bentos, had set foot in Uruguay in 1989. This company established logistic terminal involving the forestation of over 62,000 hectares. The firm has announced that it will invest 600 million dollars in a eucalyptus cellulose plant near Fray Bentos, 60 km. from the Argentine city of Gualeguaychú. Uruguayan civilian governments,

were encouraged by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, to strengthen this forestry model in their territory with a view to providing for the international paper industry. At the time when the Forestry Promotion Law was passed, a most appealing international market could be visualized.

About 34 per cent of Uruguayan soil is fit for forestry, whereas the remaining 66 per cent is agricultural and cattle-raising land. A little over 10 per cent of forest land remains available for production purposes. Moreover, in recent years a powerful concentration process took place with small and medium forestry investors selling their lands to large foreign companies.

According to the Forestry Bureau of the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture, and Fisheries, the Uruguayan government has subsidized the development of 625,000 hectares of forest land in 2002. For a long time now the government has been subsidizing forestry, issuing a number of decrees and resolutions to this end. A paper by the UITA (International Union of Food Workers) states: “nowadays, a site declared as a priority forest land is entitled to be subsidized and to further benefits granted by the State: 50 per cent of the estimated forestation cost, preferential credits (Libor rate of interest plus 2 per cent) from the Banco República for an amount covering up to a hundred per cent of forestation costs with a ten-year grace period for both capital and interest, exemption from national and municipal taxes, including those not yet existing at the moment, and strong support for infrastructure works (railroad networks, bridges, and ports [...]) According to a study conducted by economist Joaquín Etchevers, a member of GAP (Parliamentary Support Group for the *Frente Amplio*, between 1988 and 2000), the State contributed with a direct subsidy of 69.4 million dollars for forestry undertakings, in addition to a 55.8 million in tax exemption, 55 million in soft loans, and 234.1 million in works related to the sector. “A total of 414.3 million dollars that has been increasing year by year until reaching a sum well beyond 500 million dollars” (Falco, 2006).

This activity does not create job opportunities, since the sector only employs 1.88 per cent of rural workers. Forestry production has a very limited scope, hence the strategy of turning Uruguay into a land of forests ‘with paper mills’. The integration of both activities appears to be feasible, above all because the country lacks economic projects other than agribusiness, to which our neighbors can also aspire.

The sector is entirely dominated by four transnational companies: the conflictive Botnia and Ence; Finnish and Swedish funded Stora Enso, a newcomer to Uruguay, and the US Weyer Haeuser. The Stora Enso project approved in 2005 includes forestation and the installation of a cellulose plant in the heart of the country, on the banks of the Río Negro. Weyer Haeuser is negotiating the construction of at least five wood processing plants in the Northern departments of Rivera, Tacuarembó and Paysandú. The one in Tacuarembó is in its final stage, and the construction of a related cellulose plant on the Río Negro has not been discarded.⁶

Contamination resulting from these undertakings is being constantly denounced all over the world. The most significant literature on this matter has been produced by Uruguayan professionals and environmentalists. It was precisely the Uruguayan Ricardo Carrere, Secretary to the World Rainforest Movement and a frequent visitor to Buenos Aires, who declared to journalists that size is one of the most dangerous features of these paper mills. “We are talking of huge mills meant to process a total of a million and a half tons. The issue is that they all use chemicals”. Carrere emphatically denies the existence of new, non-contaminating techniques: “Last year, Sweden carried out a survey in the Baltic Sea. While in 1993 cellulose plants substituted chlorine dioxide for chlorine, the levels of dioxins (known to be carcinogenic and depressors of the immune system) were expected to have dropped. In fact, what they found was that they had risen.” (*Página/12*, 2/5/2006).

⁶ Argentina cannot be said to have lagged behind: it boasts of eleven highly contaminating plants. Things are not too different in Brazil; we all know about the struggles of the “Sin Tierra” against the ‘green deserts’, i.e., forestation.

On the other hand, a recent report submitted by the Universidad de La República scientists after a thorough study of the environment presented conclusive results. The effects of forestation on the ecosystemic services offered by natural pasture lands are alarming, as are the effects of liquid effluents pouring out of the cellulose plants. One of the conclusions set forth in the document is that, in order to provide enough raw materials for the functioning of the two cellulose plants under construction it is necessary to increase the area to be forested by 40 per cent relative to the existing area, which is already in excess of 700,000 hectares.

Another alarming issue is the amount of water consumed by both plants for their normal operations. The report suggests that “the functioning of the plants requires high water consumption both for the generation of raw materials (extensive monocultures) and to turn them into finished products (cellulose)”. On the whole, these plants are reckoned to consume 140,000 m³ of water per day.

The actors: environmental associations and the Gualeguaychú Assembly

If we were to set a starting point for the protest, we might say that it “dawned” on April 30, 2005 when it massively came out into the open. In fact, on that Saturday, Argentineans and Uruguayans staged “the largest environmental protest in history” (*Página/12*, 5/2/2005). The meeting place was Gualeguaychú, but protesters came over from Paraná, Victoria, Colón, Concepción del Uruguay, and Buenos Aires. About forty thousand people blocked the international bridge connecting Fray Bentos with Gualeguaychú, a city in the province of Entre Ríos known for its Carnival celebrations. The meeting point was the site destined for these celebrations the “corsódromo”, and from there the crowd used assorted transportation to travel over forty kilometers and then walked four kilometers farther until they reached the highest point on the bridge. There Argentineans and Uruguayans exchanged national flags and brotherly embraces.

The conflict had been brewing for a long time, and the actors of the protest had been taking systematic action since 2003 at the very least. It should be noted that the Northwestern province of Entre Ríos enjoys a long tradition in environmentalist movements focused on the care of its rivers.

Several members of the Gualeguaychú assembly acknowledge, as their most important precedent, the Red de Asociaciones Socioambientales de Uruguay y Argentina, [Uruguayan and Argentine Social and Environmental Associations Network] known simply as “La Red” [the Network]. Argentina is represented by the Paraná Ecologists Forum (M’Biguá de Paraná), which serves as a connection between Uruguay and Entre Ríos, while Uruguay’s main reference organization is Guayubira, led by Ricardo Carrere. That same year, Spanish corporation Ence introduced itself to the public, and the Uruguayan political party *Frente Amplio* predicted its electoral triumph. In a public hearing held in Fray Bentos in 2003, Uruguayan organizations were in charge of revising a report on the paper mills produced by the Uruguay’s National Office of Environmental Resources [Dirección Nacional del Medio Ambiente (DINAMA)]. That is to say, during the early stages, environmental organizations of both countries were jointly involved in these initiatives, and when Uruguayan organizations stepped onto the arena, they maintained their autonomy with regards to the State.

In the meantime, environmental organizations based in Gualeguaychú, Argentina, launched an information and diffusion campaign which engaged various sectors, such as local political groups, regional economic groups, and ecological movements. These groups had different interests in the matter: tourism, the possibility of including the environmental issue in the year’s electoral campaigns, contamination, etc. The meetings to inform the public, were mostly held in primary and secondary schools, and were attended by about four hundred people. But on October 3, 2003, about 1,500 people, following the call of Uruguayan and Argentinean associations, blocked the bridge connecting Gualeguaychú and Fray Bentos, with the subsequent creation of a non-governmental organization that went under the name of Vecinos autoconvocados [Self-convened neighbors].

In 2004, the Vecinos Autoconvocados contacted organizations based in other countries, chiefly in Chile and Spain, which were facing similar situations concerning paper mills and the resulting environmental damage.

In both countries, public opinion became more familiar with the events that took place as from April 2005 onwards up to the present. After the important march of April 30, there were new roadblocks and diplomatic negotiations began. The World Bank was requested to take action. It did so by appointing an ombudsman to arrange meetings with the conflicting parties. However, after several months the negotiator established the conditions for a credit approval on the part of the World Bank's International Finance Corporation. In other words, three developments in just a couple of months: the issue became installed in the public arena, pressure was exerted on the government to start diplomatic action, and it became evident, thanks to the reports submitted about environmental conditions, that such undertakings should definitely not enjoy funding.

At this stage, the Assembly gathered initiatives and managed to be received by the President of Argentina. In the mean time Uruguayan organizations slipped into the background. One possible explanation for their retreat may lie in the fact that the *Frente Amplio*, which they undividedly supported, won the elections. To most Uruguayans, this was a long-awaited triumph, and the prevailing thought was that the new government deserved a period without opposition.

In October 2005, the presidential website of the República Oriental del Uruguay showed that 58 per cent of Uruguayans opposed the installation of the paper mills in question because of environmental hazards. This spirit of civil awareness and of respect for the environment had not yet been affected by propaganda based on a strengthening of national identity which raises its head from time to time, reviving the idea of a small country bullied by a powerful neighbor. There were also practical reasons in this scenario: trade unions, whose general meetings had voted against the paper mills, suddenly decided to reverse their previous decision –even though this entailed a violation of internal regulations –because a considerable number of members of the two main unions, including many of their leaders (metallurgist and construction workers) were in fact employed by the paper mills (Zibechi, 2006).

It could be said that at the beginning of the summer of 2005-2006 the Gualeguaychú Assembly had the opportunity to change the logic of its mode of protest. While so far they had relied on the logic of numbers, by gathering thousands of people in demonstrations and roadblocks, the coming of the summer provided the chance of causing 'material damage'. Circulation between Argentina and Uruguay increases exponentially during the summer months, since many middle and upper class Argentineans choose vacationing in the Uruguayan sea resorts. Although there are no official calculations of the income supplied by Argentine tourists, it is common knowledge that it provides a substantial income to the economy of the neighboring country. The strategy of impeding access by land had strong repercussions in Uruguay, which suffered its economic consequences, though the Uruguayan Government also took advantage of the damage caused by these measures to strengthen its propaganda against the Entre Ríos protests. At different times, other Entre Ríos cities joined in the protest, which derived in further bridge blockades. Thus, by the summer of 2006, a most interesting situation had developed due to the accumulated effects of the population's perseverance, the support it gathered, and the installment of the environmental issue in Argentine society.

Diplomatic efforts increased until there arose the possibility of filing a complaint at The Hague International Court, which first ruled against Argentina and then returned a second verdict that favored the Assembly. Still, the issue is here to stay, and the chances of its being reversed are slim. It would also seem as if, very slowly indeed, the Uruguayan population is its silence, something that can be inferred from demonstrations carried out in downtown Montevideo against the pulp-forestation model chosen by the government to boost the national economy.

The Assembly's activity did not slacken its pace: the claims and protests continued throughout the year. There were celebrations when Ence decided to abandon Fray Bentos, and in December 2006 a

large demonstration was held at Plaza de Mayo, with the support of many other organizations engaged in the environmental struggle.

In the summer of 2007, the Gualeguaychú protesters sought consensus from the rest of the population so as to further legitimize their endeavors. To this purpose, they resorted to new strategies and joined activities staged by other environmental assemblies and social organizations.

Divided opinions were expressed in Colón, Entre Ríos: a group of merchants whose business was negatively affected by the blockade of General Artigas international bridge attempted to lift the blockage by force.

Also in the summer of 2007, Buenos Aires assembly members and leftist militants staged an original supportive protest across from the Finnish Embassy. On the ground, they installed two canvas swimming pools, one filled with clean water and the other with dirty water, as an allusion to the expected contamination of the Uruguay River. The protesters intended to involve the Finnish state in the issue. When Botnia began operations in November of that year, the protesters boiled large amounts of cauliflowers in front of the Uruguayan Embassy, so that those inside the building and nearby neighbors could sample what contamination is about: the unbearable stink given off by the plant. As to The Hague's final ruling, there is nothing left to do but to wait.

Final reflections: the tragedy of development

The Union of Citizen Assemblies (UAC, Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas) was created in 2006. Its demands include the right to the land ownership for peasants and aboriginal communities, cancellation of mining activities and of contaminating industries (paper mills), and rejection of agribusiness. We might wonder what aboriginal rights, the Gualeguaychú, Esquel, and Andalgalá Assemblies, and peasant organizations have in common? In Laclau's words (1996), what is the "empty significant" that can articulate these specific demands? In my view, the answer lies in how we are to confront material and cultural life; that is, what we used to call "the development model". The above mentioned associations reject a manner of organization that involves life, the economy, and a particular relation with natural goods. Many of them propose, through their own actions, a different kind of economic activity (see Giarracca and Wahren, 2005; Esteva, G. 2001). Their shared identity is constructed on the basis of a rejection of a 'model' that excludes them as citizens capable of choosing a "life policy" (Giddens, 1994).

In a declaration against large scale mining, the inhabitants of Catamarca state the following: "We believe that under no circumstances should 'progress' amount to the destruction of our habitat or of our holy places, the plundering of our natural resources or of our reserves of drinkable water, the contamination of our natural environment or a systematic and increased aggression to our fragile ecosystem" (August 2006, website www.noalamina.com)

These new social movements –or, at least, the new meanings acquired by actions taken by these populations –have to do with a new stage of capitalism, in which once again, natural resources are fundamental and are perceived to be in danger. The notion of 'territory' and the idea that processes of 'territorialization' defining the identities of the inhabitants of the land circulate both inside the movements and among the scholars that walk the same path.

It has often been maintained that, within the framework of modern ideas, Marxism installed a relation with nature in accordance with the basic postulates of the scientific revolution. However, it should be remembered that, regarding this and other issues, Marx's thoughts alternated between the values of his times and other much more advanced conceptions. His followers, whose ideas were clearly less complex than those of the master, imposed the notion that the development of productive forces in a socially 'undetermined' way, are blind to their consequences in the social and natural world. In the 20th Century, critical theory could have made a difference, by constructing a different relation with

nature and with the political and cultural aspects of economic activity, but a certain determinism spoils that opportunity.

For most of the 20th Century, a development model based on industrial production has prevailed. While this model showed a marked tendency for the internationalization of capital, it nevertheless respected certain limits established by the national states that played a significant regulatory and juridical role. We might venture to say that these industrialist models were underlined by a scientific development which, in agreement with Paula Sibilía, I would call ‘Promethean’, as it aimed towards bending nature through technology, placing its faith in the liberating role of knowledge insofar as it aspired to improve mankind’s living conditions (Sibilía, 2005: 45). Both capitalism and communism (particularly in the Soviet Union) promised, in their own particular terms, the same kind of ‘progress’: peace, food, health, and education for everyone, as the core sense of the pair comprising economic and scientific development. It is to be noted that in this context, national states valued petroleum, gas, mines, land, and water as geopolitical strategic resources, and either kept them as state property or exercised a close control over them. For example, when it came to the question of land, it was rare not to find restrictions on its sale to foreign populations. In the mid-70s the model underwent “a great transformation” (see Teubal and Rodríguez, 2002)

There is a vast literature on the special features acquired by the capitalist economy in this new stage of globalization, its connection with hegemonic power, political and military modes of generating hegemony, etc. (see Ana Esther Ceceña, 2004). Agrarian studies have also contributed to characterize the concentrating, extractive nature of this model, emphasizing the shift from agrofood and agroindustrial agriculture to agribusiness (see Giarracca and Teubal, 2006; Mançano Fernández, 2006). It remains to be added that the new model that operates at the international level aided by new legal, financial, and economic institutions have ultimately broken with what used to be the promises of modernization. The Third World is being devastated by starvation, poverty, and old and new diseases as the polarization of wealth reaches unprecedented levels. The whole process takes place amid endless wars with their concomitant high costs for the civilian population.

Some authors believe that the so-called ‘technoscience’ is in some way involved with these new developments. They speak of a ‘technoscientific’ conception that is becoming hegemonic throughout the world and which, unlike the ‘Promethean’ scientific myth of yore, now exhibits human aspirations that stand quite apart from the promises made by modernity. Paula Sibilía maintains that contemporary science conceals a technological program: the strengthening of a ‘Faustian’ tradition⁷. According to this author “in the Faustian perspective [...], scientific procedures do not aim to reach the truth or to know the intimate nature of things; instead, they propose a limited comprehension of the phenomena in order to predict and control: both these purposes are strictly technical. One can associate Faustian criteria to contemporary technoscience. We might go as far as to suggest the existence of some sort of affinity between the Faustian technique, with its drive to the unlimited appropriation of human and non-human nature, and capitalism, with its drive to the unlimited accumulation of capital. At present this project based on an endless technological race and its inextricable relations with globalized markets seems to be reaching its summit” (2005: 50).

Many authors agree that the new models do not intend to improve the living conditions of a majority of men and women, not even with a view to reaching some consensus that might enable governments to continue ruling. The search for consensus, which could have given rise to hegemonies and inclusive projects, was replaced by a feeling of resignation: “either this or something worse”, “there is no alternative” (Sibilía, 2005; Santos, 2000).

However, not everyone is reconciled to these ideas. Whole populations are struggling against them, while conceiving other ways of living in the very process of their struggles. Likewise –and this should be emphasized –scientists from all over the world oppose Faustian ways of generating

⁷ Sibilía remarks that ‘Promethean’ and ‘Faustian’ traditions have always coexisted, by way of tension and debate, inside the scientific system, with one or the other dominating the scenario at different times.

knowledge and, starting from scientific knowledge, seek other social and economic forms that will give due consideration to the problems posed by starvation, education, health, culture, and democratization.⁸

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⁸ During the public discussion of this work there was an interesting debate between social scientists and a representative of the exact sciences. I do not intend to pass judgement on ‘science as a whole’, since I myself am a scientist. My aim is to create a space for critical reflection so that science can achieve autonomy from the large economic corporations. Many research groups all over the world are working to bring science back into the realm of an emancipating thought, reinventing it, which makes the new different from the past. The liberty, autonomy, and self-reflection of scientific communities are the main ways to reach this goal.

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