

Socio-ecological inequalities and environmental suffering in the “Polimetales” conflict in Arica

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Abstract: This article explores the cultural construction of socio-ecological inequalities, recovering the concept of environmental suffering for the analysis of a territory with high environmental degradation: the “Polimetales” case located in the city of Arica, Chile, studied through an ethnographic methodology during 2013, 2014 and 2015. The paper attempts to establish the ways in which the subjects involved in these territories experience this environmental suffering, interpret socio-environmental unequal relationships and try to modify them. By means of this analysis, the article focus on the dynamics of conflict about inequalities.

Key words: socio-ecological inequalities, environmental suffering, Arica, Chile, conflict.

Resumen: Este artículo indaga en la construcción cultural de las desigualdades socioecológicas, recuperando el concepto de sufrimiento ambiental para el análisis de un territorio de alta degradación ambiental: el caso “Polimetales”, ubicado en la ciudad de Arica, estudiado a través de una metodología etnográfica durante los años 2013, 2014 y 2015. Se busca establecer las formas mediante las cuales los sujetos involucrados en estos territorios padecen dicho sufrimiento ambiental, interpretan las relaciones de desigualdad socioambiental en las que se encuentran, intentan modificarlas o muchas veces las reproducen. Con este análisis, el artículo reflexiona sobre las dinámicas de conflicto en torno a las desigualdades.

Palabras clave: desigualdades socioecológicas, sufrimiento ambiental, Chile, Arica, conflicto.

Introduction¹

Scarce is the research on inequality produced in recent decades from a qualitative perspective and on those sociocultural dimensions associated; it seems as though, nowadays Latin America's social sciences have forgotten that uneven societies structure individuals' quotidian experience and perceptions, which articulate in complex cultural and institutional networks (Tilly, 2000; Reygadas, 2004; 2008a; 2008b).

This article intends to be a contribution to this perspective, focusing on aspects related to the cultural construction of inequality in contemporary societies, specifically in Chilean Society.

For an analysis from this standpoint, the article enquires on the cultural construction of one of the phenomena that has been scantily developed in research on equality in recent decades, however it is somehow always present in the reflection from the field of geography or political economy (Harvey, 1996; Smith, 2008; Müller and Clayton, 2013): *socioecological inequalities*.

Retaking some contributions from this tradition, we start from the hypothesis that as with other socially appreciated goods, in uneven societies living an environment free from pollution is also a good with uneven distribution. The most influential variables for subjects to be at risk of exposition to an environmentally degraded territory with heavy pollution are the same as the ones that determine their position regarding access to other goods: ethnic/racial, class, gender and territorial belonging, to name the most relevant for the Chilean case.

This has been considered by those who have worked with the concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice as of the 1970's decade (Bullard, 1990; 1999; 2005; Dosbon, 1998; Pezullo, 2001; Checker, 2005; Cole, 2005; Harvey, 1996; Smith, 2008; Müller and Clayton, 2013) and has also been pointed out for the Latin American case in the last decade (Guimarães, 2012; Auyero and Swistún, 2008; Vázquez and Salgado, 2009; Castillo, 2015).

In the Chilean case this becomes noticeable if we analyze the composition of some economic activities in socioeconomic terms: looking no further, in the City of Santiago the communes where the main industrial activities concentrate are those in which the percentage of population belonging to occupational groups at the base of the social stratification surpasses 50%.

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Such is the case of Renca with 66.2%, Cerro Navia with 71.4%, Cerrillos with 61.1% and Pudahuel with 57.3%, to name the most relevant industrial pole and with the largest number of problems from negative externalities for the neighbors.² Paraphrasing Auyero (2008), it is possible to state that vulnerable individuals not only have problems related to incomes or uneven labor conditions, but are also exposed to greater environmental risks and diseases derived from these than other people in conditions with better privileges.

The effects of pollution and environmental degradation are aggravated under such circumstances, since exposure to toxics is another element in the context of general vulnerability that hampers the action/reaction/protection processes of the subjects, generating quite specific situations of social suffering, uncertainty and crisis contexts which often reproduce the relation of domination present at the territory.

To analyze this phenomenon at sociocultural level, the article recovers the concept of environmental suffering used by Auyero and Swintún (2008) in the analysis of the case of “Inflamable” [inflammable] in Argentina. In such study, the authors put forward the notion of environmental suffering as a concept that encompasses the *experience of living in a toxic context* and that surpasses the mere biological effects. This way, they incorporate the elements that configure the inequality positions, directly related to the toxic exposure which the individuals experience, the slowness in solutions and the scant public visibility of the conflict.

With this notion, Auyero and Swintún (2008) distinguish there is an invisible violence that imposes on those exposed to toxic contexts: not only because there is a series of variables that determine that they live in these territories and are exposed, but also because such variables influence on new forms of victimization in the context of exposure, such as mistreatments in health care systems, invisibility of demands in the public space, deficient solutions for the pollution problem, relocations not mutually agreed, to name some of the most common, which will be revised further in the text.

This way, we use the concept for the analysis of a highly degraded environmental territory: the case of “Polimetales”, located in the city of

2 The approach to data from the 2006 Survey of National Socioeconomic Characterization (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, Gobierno de Chile, 2006) was class analysis, based on E. O. Wright (1985; 2009), from this schema and supported on the large groups of CIOU code, class segments were established. From these, Greater Santiago communes were classified according to the proportion of employed household heads that belonged to various class categories, considering the relative weight these strata had in the total population.

Arica,³ studied over 2013, 2014 and 2015. It is intended to establish the forms by means of which the individuals in these territories experience environmental suffering, interpret the socioenvironmental inequalities which they experience, try to modify them or frequently reproduce them. Here, the individuals are continually challenged by visible environmental degradation—and invisible in the case of silent effects, of which the inhabitants are suspicious—and produce stories with a “Grammar of Inequality” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002) which orients them.

To analyze this process, we use the contributions from theoretical approaches recently developed for this topic (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002; Boltanski *et al.*, 2006; Thévenot *et al.*, 2011), which retake the need to observe the cultural dimension of inequalities and the individuals’ role in its transformation. For these authors, redistributive policies do not have a proper effect, but are capable of modifying the persistent cultural patterns, which permeate the everydayness of individuals and which structure mechanisms of inequality reproduction, a fact that has also been pointed out in the last decade for the Latin American case, incipiently nevertheless (Gootenberg and Reygadas, 2010; Castillo and Maldonado, 2015).

Among the theoretical elements to consider in these approaches, it is worth mentioning the active role of the subject in the transformation of such structures from permanent criticism and the role of conflict in these processes, in which the modifications observed in the discourses and significances that articulate criticism and boost unrest in contemporary societies are key.

In these terms, it is central the analysis of stories that subjects produce in these positions of extreme vulnerability and which are at the core of the conflict dynamics on inequalities, since the emergence of the discomfort, claim, conflict regarding the notions of risk and pollution requires a complex process by means of which individuals transform what they deem “normal” or “unfair”, also the perceptions and expectations on the environment, “quality of life”, “clean” and “dirty” are modified.

The emergence of unrest in these contexts is linked to processes of meaning construction, on the one side; and to process of constitution and recognition of the “polluted” subject, on the other. This last process is particularly interesting as it gradually transforms subjectivities in the framework of conflict, fostering empowerment processes and new identity articulations.

³ The city of Arica is in the north of Chile, at the border zone with Peru and Bolivia.

Such process also has a highly violent dimension, since communities have to fight for the legitimacy of their pain and the importance of reparation before the other who frequently denies them: in this transit, the effects on the body are scrutinized, the most private spaces are exposed and collective places are turned into examples of the damage done.

The accomplishment of the recognition of the “polluted subject” leaves painful footsteps; this accomplishment links individual and familial biographies to the idea of damage and sickness; at the same time, individuals have to put up with the stigmatization of living in such places, commonly added to the one they experience from being vulnerable population.

In view of accounting for these processes, we present the results of the analysis of the conflict due to the pollution produced by polimetales in peripheral neighborhoods in the borer city of Arica, located in northern Chile. We resorted to the ethnographic method (Baztan, 1997), emphasizing documentation of aspects related to the everydayness of the toxic experience.

Over the three years of the study, we applied techniques such as semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, documental and press analysis, among others. As for the interviews, forty interviews with key informers were held; they were segmented as follows: *a)* leaders of social and territorial organizations; *b)* related political-administrative authorities; *c)* public functionaries in contact with the population (health care, education and community direction); *d)* experts / advocates and NGO’s.

Also thirteen court cases, abundant photographic and documental material, and local and national press articles have been gathered. Part of these materials were obtained by a team of the present research; others have been supplied by the affected over the course of the research period. The importance of the collaboration of the inhabitants of the territories in conflict speaks of an immense need to become visible in the public sphere, in view of finding some reparation, so far not administered.

Given the large information volume, materials were examined through bottom-up analysis content, assisted by Nvivo qualitative analysis software. We now expose the preliminary results of the present case study with a lengthy history, reason why they are exposed in a systematic and organized manner in function of certain milestones that integrate the distinct empirical evidence gathered, allowing understanding the transformations which have operated on the “grammar of inequality” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) in the case and their relation with certain dynamics of the conflict in the territory.

Arica; the case of “Polimetales” and the search for recognition

The analyzed case is located in the populations of Cerro Chuño, Los Industriales I, II, III, and IV in the outskirts of the border city of Arica. This territory reports pollution by multiple heavy metals —lead and arsenic, mainly— in zones inhabited by poor and vulnerable population. The first actions of the case took place early in the 1990’s decade, and at present, almost thirty years later, the conflict remains, experiencing growing judicialization as of 2014.

The presence of metals comes from the utilization of the zone as a place to collect waste with heavy contents of lead and arsenic from Sweden that entered the country between 1984 and 1985 through the company *Procesadora de Metales Ltda.* [Processor of Metals Ltd.] (Promel), in the shape of materials to extract metals such as gold and silver. These materials’ entering —mentioned a number of times through official channels— had as an objective to process these wastes as a productive activity in charge of such Chilean enterprise.

However, the findings of the first judicial actions started by those affected have shown that the European partners of Promel would have openly declared their intention to establish a trade agreement to suppress toxic waste not permitted in Sweden and that they would not have been in conditions to be part of a new productive chain.

These elements are still disputed by a number of actors: the different versions in this respect are symptomatic of the generalized confusion and uncertainty about it. What we do know is that almost four years after entering the residues, Promel facilities closed down and were dismantled with no further explanation, dismissing workers and disarming the plant.

After the closure in the 1990’s, in the space polluted by Promel’s activities there were processes of self-construction and “occupation of lands”. Largely, it was utilized by the Regional Government and the Ministry of Housing to build houses destined for the vulnerable and poor population, assigned via the system of subsidy for social housing. Additionally, in the whereabouts of the residential zone of Cerro Chuño, the municipal landfill was established; it is still in use nowadays.

These houses were inhabited by the population for short time before symptoms of lead and arsenic poisoning began to appear;⁴ such situation was

⁴ Among these one finds: allergies, headaches, advanced pregnancy miscarriages, malformations in fetuses and newborns, problems in joints and bones, problems to concentrate and in the functions of soft tissues.

unsuccessfully denounced by several local actors for almost a decade. Over this process and in spite of certain precautionary measures by the Ministerial Regional Health Care Service (Servicio Regional Ministerial de Salud, SEREMI) in 1997, the construction and allotment of new social housing took place.

After twenty years of conflict, in 2009, for the first time there was official recognition of the graveness of the situation in the main document of the Master Plan for Intervention in Zones with presence of Polimetales in Arica (henceforward “Master Plan”).

This Master Plan, in addition to recognize the problem, indicated a series of measures to intervene in the territory. In 2012, after an intense conflict, the “Master Plan” became a law and came into force in 2013.⁵ In this process, the bill experienced numerous modifications and the final version was not approved by the organizations involved, which nowadays still call for the implementation of the “Master Plan” originally agreed with the authority back then, the Minister of Health, Michelle Bachelet.

When the present article was produced, there were intense debates in the zone about the reparation policies and their execution. Despite the length and complexity of this conflict, one can notice several referential milestones that fostered concrete actions of the neighbors which modified the perception of everydayness and modelled the toxic experience.

In each of them, one distinguishes the differences in public visibility and the dynamics of domination, power and conflict between the actors of the territory, marked by the effected population’s extreme vulnerability condition. This case allows us to clearly observe the relation between the toxic experience, the uneven positions of the affected before the actors and the perception of conflict, which changes over time from elements such as the voices of the experts, institutions and the media, to name the most relevant.

This enables us to reflect also on the invisibility of certain population sectors in the sphere of our democracies and on the need to generate scenarios for equality that enable these sectors to be “seen and heard” in the context of public debate, retaking the meaning of public space proposed by Arendt (Castillo, 2013).

5 Among the measures considered in the law, we find: the incorporation of the affected into a health care plan, university scholarships and a monthly monetary support for everyone who demonstrated “exposure”. Also, the territories to relocate according to the Master Plan were modified. For further details see, Law no. 20.590, *Programa de Intervención en Zonas con Presencia de Polimetales in the Community of Arica*.

Medicine and power; being sick to be “visible”

After briefly inhabiting the houses, the affected population exhibits a series of physical symptoms, whose relation with the toxic waste issue is completely ignored both by the population and Health Care personnel. The issue is triggered when neighbor associations —encouraged by territorial and municipal agents—, the Office for the Environment and the Secretary of Municipality Planning (SECPLAN) and environmental NGO’s undertake a first diagnosis to generally identify the population’s problems associated to poverty and vulnerability.

This results of this diagnosis indicted a “mound” located at the center of the inhabited perimeter and it triggers NGO’s and environmentalists’ alarms, which take independent samples of the ground and dust in the ceilings, with positive results for heavy contents of lead. After denouncing this situation, local and regional authorities had no reaction whatsoever.

Over this period, the inhabitants resorted to the territorial health care centers to be sent back their houses with prescriptions oriented to control the symptoms with no further enquiry. On many an occasion, the interviewees state that their suspicions in the children’s diseases were disavowed, alluding poor caretaking, lack of hygiene or negligence.

In these testimonies one notices the violence imposed upon an “invisible” in the eyes of the municipal functionary in their pain and minimal private space. As verified in the following quotation, in these initial treatments, functionaries interpreted and acted considering a dangerous association of poverty, soiling, disease and negligence, which hindered timely attention at first:

Children went to play there and welts started to appear, they looked as scabies, obviously they started to have reactions and the children were taken to the doctor; doctors said children had the scabies and it was because we were slob (Territorial leader, woman, March 2014).

Despite the complaints of neighbor associations and related NGO’s —still scant in number—, no further actions were taken, nor was the allotment of housing stopped. Neighbors —except for the leaders linked to networks and organizations outside the territory— were not informed of the occurrences, dismissed the claims and their importance. So far there were no “proofs” of anything, despite the samples of soils and dust of NGO’s; one of the fundamental elements that influenced overlooking the problem among the neighbors was the constant denial in the health care centers the population resorted to.

The first referential milestone that modified this perception —for authorities and inhabitants— was the formal declaration of heavy metal poisoning by means of medical trials to the exposed population, which took place after a series of actions by neighbors and NGO’s. It was undertaken in 1998, when relevant health care organisms were forced to carry out blood tests.

The results showed that blood lead and urine inorganic arsenic levels surpassed the reference by World Health Organization (2012), mainly in children⁶ and ordered to move the “Mound” of residues to the zone of Quebrada Encantada, less than 5 kilometers away from the inhabited space. Before decreeing this measure however, “blood sample taking” was smeared by the ill-advised actions of health care organizations, which —as an open secret that the population refers— adulterated a part of the samples and lost another, unleashing the leaders’ fury and the people’s mistrust. The organizations (Association of neighbors in the affected zones and 14 leaders) publicly denounced this situation in the press and the authorities apologized.

The ratification, by means of tests, of pollution levels, as well as their deviation and adulteration became key for the inhabitants’ perception and the subsequent actions taken by the organizations. Before this measurement took place, the actual pollution in the zone was still a non-established or “credible” topic. The ratification of high metal levels added to the growing certainty that if authorities acted in a scanty transparent manner was because “there was something” or “they did so because of something”.

Contrasting with the expected effect, the behavior of health care organisms cast doubts and established a relationship in terms of perception —verifiable or not— between the population and a series of physical and psychological symptoms they saw in their own bodies and their families’.

This way, the “sampling” modified once and for all the inhabitants’ perception of their environment, household and common space. The places that used to be playgrounds turned into forbidden spaces and the dust was continuously cleaned. At this point, people started to experience the suffering implied by not certainly knowing the effects toxic wastes had on their health, to feel vulnerable because of the abusive action of authority and to feel fear of losing their investments in improving their much-needed houses.

This suffering, as documented by Auyero and Swistún (2008) for the case of “Inflamable”, is closely linked to uncertainty and the levels of *uneven and contradictory information* which the inhabitants of the polluted zones are exposed to, which is stressed by the vulnerability from the variables before

6 WHO reference levels are a maximal of 10 µg/l and 25 µg/dl for lead and arsenic, respectively. For further information, see: <http://www.who.int/topics/arsenic/es/>

the exposure. These previous variables make the inhabitants, in Chaterjee's (2008) terms, "objects of public policy", depositaries of a State's action that keeps them permanently waiting and which manages key information to understand their own experience and surroundings.

This way, expert knowledge becomes central as an element that shapes the inhabitants' toxic experience, and at once it legitimizes their demand in the public space: those actors' voices become relevant only if there is institutionality which by means of medical tests ratifies their veracity and relevance.

In this regard, the leaders of the zone established two toxicologists as one of the referential axes key in the process; they collaborated with the Associations of neighbors in the affected zones, and not only did they produce reports to endorse the denounces, but also "they explained what was happening to us", making use of the power as experts they had to shape and build the experience of a body that hurts, but which does not have words to refer such experience. From the diagnosis the possibility for the inhabitants to denounce, and over time, to be recognized as "victims" emerged.

Even if the importance of medical evidence in the interpretation of the proper experience helps generate the "claim", it produces a problematizing effect inside communities. Being the medical test positive, one of the milestones that sets the possibility of speaking in the inhabitants tends to grow in an element that divides the population as "deserving victims" and "people that take advantage". Hence, the former are those with high contents of arsenic and lead; while the people who does not have such levels are considered "opportunistic", looking for state benefits.

This division is troublesome, because the effects of wastes are rather heterogeneous in their distribution over the territory, even over people exposed for the same length of time and in the same quadrant.⁷ Moreover, it hinders observing the transversal condition of vulnerability that has lead the inhabitants to be exposed to potentially harmful pollution levels. Thus, in a paradoxical manner, the Associations of neighbors in the affected zones and the families are still waiting to be heard and obtain some sort of reparation or "visibility".

⁷ According to observations in the analyzed cases, by and large, the effects "verifiable" by blood tests are not homogeneously distributed among the population exposed to similar pollution levels, since the effect of the polluting agents interacts with other elements such as age, alimentation, gender, predisposition for some illnesses, for example. This way, frequently results surprise the neighbors and produce greater speculation as they do not appear homogeneously or as they do not aggravate over time, which is considered by toxicology difficult to predict or related to a direct-causality model.

The ratification, by means of tests, of the pollution in the zone was a key element that activated such Associations and stirred the early actions, both organizational and judicial. In this project, distinguishable is the role of the territorial leader Lombardo Molina and those known as the “Fourteen leaders of the lead” [Catorce dirigentes del plomo], who devoted long time to build networks and make the conflict visible at national level.

With these actions, the problem gained certain notoriety, however no goals at central-government level were set at that moment but much later. As previously stated, the ratification of the tests decisively influenced the relocation of the most visible part of the toxic wastes to Quebrada Encantada. However, the relocation was made without technical advice and the suspended dust, aggravated by the desert environment, increased the dissemination of wastes.

In spite of recognizing the dangerousness of the situation, the inhabitants remained in the zone; in the face of scarce precautionary measures, neighbor associations performed “acampadas” (permanent demonstrations occupying a public space) in the city square, walks and manifestations that little by little transformed their subjectivities into this idea of “victim”, “affected” or “polluted” subject.

The media; being on “TV” to be “visible”

It is possible to notice a similar phenomenon regarding the uneven visibility levels in relation to the second referential milestone: the intervention of the television program Contacto, which presents reportages and complaints, broadcast in 2002 by open television Canal 13 [Channel 13].

The journalists of this renowned program took interest in the story of the “catorce dirigentes del plomo”, who had recently visited Santiago to denounce their problem to the President with meager results. The journalists noticed the scant publicness of the conflict and enquired the basic information; neighbor associations gave them a file produced by the very inhabitants, which not only contained documents, medical tests and a cadaster of the affected population, but also the records of the Office for the Environment, which had been given to these women.

Although the social leaders had utilized those data to press multiple charges, thus far the problem remained with no other intervention than the relocation of wastes to Quebrada Encantada. For their part, the organizations linked to this situation’s claims carried on intending to introduce the idea that “something was not right” in the population, with mixed results.

With the same information gathered by the leaders and in situ interviews, the journalists produced an item entitled “Contaminados” [Polluted] which was broadcast in prime time. Such broadcast was decisive for the intervention of the authority and for the neighbors to acquire deeper knowledge about their situation.

The leaders recall that after years of asking for meetings with no success, a week after the program, *Contacto*, central authorities visited the zone and established concrete action plans in this respect. This way, the “Master Plan” is the fruit of the controversy generated by such program. This is the moment when subjects became actually “visible” for the various political actors at national level.

When children arrived from *Contacto*, we told them: “I don’t know what you want, we have this” and threw it on a table in Bety’s house, we had some boxes, banana boxes full of odds and ends, papers. They were astonished, they said: “you have everything here”, “you have everything”, these were the literal words. They had all our information, they checked point by point, they settle there in the population. And started to research, oh well... I think you watched the program and noticed it was a harsh testimony (territorial leader, woman, March, 2014).

Even if from this event a period of great accomplishments began for the Associations of neighbors in terms of exposing their demands, the program’s media impact also triggered an adverse and unexpected effect: the stigmatization of the population and the Arica inhabitants’ reactions to this. The broadcast images intended to increase the impact, exacerbating the representation of a marginal and degraded zone, full of sick people and trash, with high levels of delinquency, which had direct repercussions in the treatment the inhabitants started to receive from individuals who did not belong to the community.

By showing a territory almost unknown for some, not only did the problem become public, but also the extended association between poverty, sickness and marginalization of the population in such territories.

Virtually, I wanted to get the stigma of Polimetales off me, because the stigma of Polimetales here in Arica is like “the polimetales are the old needy shrews, they are the poor old women, the oldest in the population, Los Industriales, Cerro Chuño”, I mean the poorest in the poorest is Polimetales, and on top they are polluted and more so they are sick, it’s like a mangy dog that nobody wants (territorial leader, woman, June 2014).

On the other side, the broadcasting of *Contacto* and its media impact on the locality also unleashed competence inside the organizations that had mobilized on the disclosing of the events. Public imagination divided the voices and set up a competition for the “political capital” implied in being

leaders in a sector, which in spite of being marginalized was numerous in terms of electoral register.

Alliances, negotiations and interviews divided the organizations and produced rivalries still present nowadays in the territory and showed the affected populations’ diverse characteristics, regardless of their shared condition of vulnerability. The interviewees explicitly indicated that from that moment on the claiming nature was lost and the spokespeople were linked to broader-scope political projects, which in some specific cases had positive effects in terms of public visibility, but also generated political clientelism in others.

Legal system in the configuration of the toxic experience

The third milestone also refers to the recognition of the territory and its influence in the transformation of the toxic experience of the inhabitants by a third party. This refers to the possibility of the legal system to impact on the subjectivities and reproduce uneven positions, as it is an institution that conjugates the power relation crystalized between State and vulnerable population in terms of treatment, with that related to specific experience and knowledge: command of law, its processes and associated jargon.

A group of families, led by Lombardo Molina, started judicial actions against the State, Promel and its Swede partners in 1997. After a lengthy process, the Supreme Court ruled that the Swedish company, owner of the toxic wastes buried in the zone, had to repay the victims, in addition to take charge of a series of mitigation measures. Thus, it was ordered to indemnify 356 people with \$2.848 million CLP (eight million per person) due to the responsibility of the Regional Health Care Service, which on behalf of the Chilean State, had to take the necessary precautions.

This reparation was only allotted to those who were part of the demand, this way not all the affected inhabitants received the necessary compensation, which divided the community even deeper: in the year 2009 most of the indemnified population remained there.

The differenced reparation divided the community further, even though it set a key precedent to ratify the situation before the eyes of the incredulous inhabitants. Many of them refer it was that moment when they joined the protest movement, on the idea that “if the Swedes paid, that’s because of something”. The wastes’ dangerousness only becomes real for some, when an external, legitimate, powerful entity willing to recognize and repair even though minimally the affected.

In 2007, the demand of Polimetales came out, three hundred and eighty something people won, I don't remember the exact number now. But the demand included a thousand and something people, it was the demand of 1998. Then when this demand came out, I have to accept, I said: "hey, why certain people won? There has to be harm" (territorial leader, woman, June 2014).

Once the first victory was attained, legal initiatives proliferated in the territory. Many of the interviewees barely remember how many demands they have signed, addressing who and what for. The role of "lawyers" in this context becomes a central figure in the strengthening of the inhabitants' experience of vulnerability and uncertainty: lawyers "appear" and "disappear" from the territory, many of them do not come back nor answer the phone calls of organization leaders.

Also in a dynamic centered on the power of expert knowledge, many of the inhabitants were involved in almost 13 collective demands that, according to enquires in the tribunals, had been dropped by the lawyer as there were mistakes made by the same professional. In spite of this abandonment for more than seven years, the lawyer never reported to the people involved about such actions nor answered their calls.

It is so that over the first phase of this research carried out in 2014, the subjects' stories refer to "still" valid causes and are waiting for results with great expectations. Over the stay on the field in January 2015, some people involved had just been notified by a new lawyer in charge that their cases were archived and that many of them, because of pressing charges previously, were not able to take new actions due to the prescription of certain crimes. The sensation of the interviewees was bitterness and resignation about the situation after almost ten years waiting.

This way, the judicial element became a key point for the articulation of the axis organizations of the conflict and to search for reparation. According to the stories of actors and over the ethnographic work, it was verified that a large part of the leaders' managements were articulated around the generation of these demands and the later localization of lawyers to obtain information about the results.

In this process, the "political capital" of social leaders was at stake in the face of other considered almost a "superior", who cannot be directly addressed: the lawyer. The leader was asked to be the mediator —"explain in simple English"⁸— between the lawyer and the community to report accurately and in every-day terms what occurred in the legal sphere, what documents and papers were needed, among other things.

8 Colloquial expression in Spanish that refers to explain things in plain and simple terms: *explicar con peras y manzanas*.

If leaders were not able to report, neighbors considered they were not “efficient”, “hid things” or were not capable to reach the lawyers. Because of this, large part of the present discredit of some leaders —in short those known as “catorce dirigentes del plomo”— is associated to the disclosing of the demands which were never concluded and which were managed by these people at territorial level, in spite they never had any actual capacity to pressure the lawyer who abandoned the cases.

This way, one of the unexpected effects, certainly negative, on the importance given to judicialization as a mechanism to access reparation has been the discredit of collective action for accomplishing common goals. The scant success of the judicial actions undertaken by neighbor associations, added to uncertainty and contradictory information on the demands pursued and the results, made the inhabitants have the impression that their permanence in the associations not only had been useless, but also detrimental.

This way, after the peak of the conflict in previous years, nowadays the inhabitants are in a phase of despondency and/or individual actions, and also extremely mistrustful of territorial organizations. This fact was reinforced when by the end of 2014, the Supreme Court admitted a demand individually pressed by a family and ruled that the Local Health Care Service indemnified four people.

The beneficiaries of this verdict are a paradigmatic case of a beneficious individual solution that increase the resentment of those who invested time on collective actions: those neighbors did not have any close relationship with anyone in the territory, they never wanted to involve in the organizations or in the protest actions and hired a lawyer on their own to take their case. Instead of waiting for the eradication measures, they resorted to the Housing Service so that it swapped the house in the polluted zone for another in a rural zone nearby Arica.

The media visibility of the ruling favorable to this family heavily hit neighbor associations that, over the same period, had been waiting for almost ten years the resolution of their cases and had just learnt these were abandoned. The immediate effect was the large amount of individual cases sent to the successful lawyer in less than two months, including those of emblematic territorial leaders.

As for the very case of the 1997 demand, which confirmed the perception that “there was something wrong”, the reparation did not have the effect expected by those who received it: many of the beneficiaries spent their resources extending or improving their houses in polluted places, which

gives an account of the poor notion of the dangerousness of the pollution in the area, or as some of the affected referred, the amount did not afford moving, as it was not enough to change their place of residence.

We notice that the judiciary also has great importance in the toxic experience and the inhabitants' suffering. On the one side, they are at a situation of uneven knowledge regarding that "other" lawyer that monopolizes the possibility of receiving compensation; and the other, when this reparation is obtained, not only puts a price on the suffering—which frequently does not match the inflicted harm that has to be observed in the long term—, but also sets processes into motion that generate new forms of victimization of the population due to its condition of vulnerability.

A clear instance of this is the treatment of the recent cause won in the Supreme Court individually by Family Sanhueza, in which the unfortunate action of the judiciary instead of repairing has inflicted new forms of victimization on this family: after almost ten years of litigation because of the grave disease of its two small children, it was allotted a 10-million CLP compensation per family member⁹, but in the transcription of the formal ruling and the payment order, the functionaries made a mistake that reduced the payment to only ten million in total, with no possibility to appeal or contest the resolution in spite of being evidently an error in the transcription according to official documents. This information was delivered to the affected after heavy pressure on the tribunals looking for an explanation.

Together with ignoring what occurred, at the moment of writing this article the pursuant had tried to clarify the situation in almost every instance at municipal, state and national levels to clarify the situation unsuccessfully, spending most of his time in long waits in the offices of various functionaries who advised him to "accept what there is, because it's better than nothing".

The impotence before the reiterated abuse experienced emotionally hit this family hard, as the members told when visited during fieldwork, which indubitably was also one of the most emotionally intense moments for the researcher appointed to document their experience.¹⁰

9 USD=16 008 CLP on March 9th 2015.

10 In this respect, we have to especially thank Sanhueza family for receiving our team in their house and sharing extremely painful experiences with the strangers we were for them. We hope to contribute, at least minimally, to make their problem visible and that they can find reparation.

State intervention; public policy, reparation and re-victimization

As noticed, in each of the previous sections it is possible to distinguish possibilities for reparation and collective action, but also new forms to victimize the population. Both elements are also observed in the public policies implemented in the territory. The main were the measures of “Master Plan” and “Polimetales Law” [Ley de Polimetales], in force at moment. The problems in the implementation of such measures before the coming into force, mainly in the erratic and delegitimized action of institutional actors and the scarce technical expertise to deal with the complexity of the situation.

Before the creation of the document that originated “Plan Maestro”, the inhabitants of the territory already expressed their mistrust in the face of the action of some actors, who had tried to hide the situation over and over:

The authorities always told us we were not polluted, they always deceived us and conspired. That is the saddest, they conspired, they conspired with the University, the University changed our tests. It has a lot to do with their being poor people, in fact, it was hard for us to reach Santiago, we are two thousand kilometers away, the trip in bus was terrible, luckily sometimes we got some plane tickets. Being heard was the hardest struggle in life, I believe (territorial leader, women, June 2014).

Together with this lack of legitimacy, during several of the interventions of relevant authorities did not have sufficient technical advice to deal with a case so complex; as long as it did not make it to national headlines, an actual effort to set humanely and technically the necessary measures was not made.

In spite of the difficulty of establishing the affected territories due to the air dissemination of the wastes, the critical zones were determined —“The Polygon” [El Polígono] — on which intervention focused; this was a permanent source of conflict and uncertainty for the population, since the delimitation of critical zones included at first a rather smaller radius in relation to the request of neighbor associations and had to be modified on a number of occasions.

Many of the affected zones with emblematic territorial leaders were left outside “the polygon” at first, not knowing if they would receive help even if they were a few meters from the zone considered “dangerous”. According to 2002 Census data available at the moment of the “Master Plan” intervention, around 12 600 people lived in affected zones, occupying 3752 houses.

However, it was considered that the affected population was 5000 people and measures were applied from this number. These were insufficient and were implemented in a heterogeneous manner by sector. The people in charge of applying them pointed out that the heterogeneity of measures was

due to the requirements of these sectors and leaders of the organizations in each place when implementing the set of solutions established in “Master Plan”.

With these practices the atomization of organizations, division between neighbors were instilled, and what is worst, the technically necessary measures to protect the entire population were not taken. These measures contemplated the fast paving of the affected sectors to prevent airborne dissemination, deeper studies to acknowledge the extent of heavy metal presence and the “relocation of houses located in Sector F, which includes the following streets: Renato Rocca, Alejandro Azola, Capitán Avalos, Cerro Chuño, Calles 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 and Mario Ojeda, which comprised about 1880 houses”¹¹ (Programa Maestro, 2009: 26).

The implementation of a health plan that included the health care attention for those affected in the primary network and a system to accompany the education of children in schools in the polluted zones, as well as other measures, were proposed. Albeit, their setting into motion has produced a series of problems that have imposed new suffering to the subjects. The first one is tardiness: the beginning of claims can be dated back to the mid 1990’s, while “Master Plan” corresponds to 2009 and the law that decrees its implementation to 2012.

Considering that the enactment of the law was also accompanied by the elaboration of a “regulation” destined to define the operative aspects, the benefits and reparation policies established in the law started to be administrated as of 2013. They were prompt actions in terms of the state apparatus, nevertheless lengthy in relation to the population’s health.

Over this period, organizations split a number of times, neighbors with the possibility to leave simply abandoned their houses in the affected zone and these were occupied by new tenants, largely undocumented migrants, vagabonds or families in extreme poverty. The zones where damage had to be mitigated present little advancement: in some cases dust has been cleaned from the roofs and “plazas secas”¹² have been created. However, there has been scant progress in paving the streets and yards, where polluted ground can still be found, which the population is daily exposed to.

A second source of suffering by the reparatory policies comes from the relocation measures that were defined as critical by the law. As a first point, it is worth mentioning that they have been slow and ineffective, for a large part

11 These definitions changed in the context of the implementation of the law, including sectors not considered risky previously, motivated by the neighbors’ actions and claims.

12 Recreational spaces fully covered in (sealed with) cement without grass nor dirt; the name literary means “dry squares”.

of the families that should have been relocated still remain in the affected zones; only part of Cerro Chuño has been benefitted by relocation.

As a second point, in the zone where this eradication measure has been effectively carried out, it has been made with differences in time and quality in the same sort of housing.¹³ This has produced conflicts and dissatisfaction, increasing the feeling that the State offers “take it or leave it” solutions and uncertainty in the cases of those who did not accept the first relocation conditions.

On the other side, relocating by stages has meant that those who left, abandoned housing with no running water nor electricity; these houses are nowadays occupied by homeless people, this increases the tension between neighbors, crime and neighborhood degradation.

During the writing process of this article, the second “wave” of relocations in Cerro Chuño was taking place and the families that were waiting for a solution late in 2015 —around 50 houses— feared for their security in an environment where there was no public transport, trade, where trash gathered at the corners and the majority of the houses, in spite of their closure, was illegally inhabited. All of this, discounting that the new houses allotted are a few kilometers away from the polluted “Polygon”.

Both in the case of the relocated population and those which are still waiting, there are constant tensions in relation to the housing offered as a solution by the Ministry of Housing which does not have similar characteristics to those the affected possessed, nor does it compensate the investments made on them, which is a third source of suffering.

Instead of adopting a stance that propitiated dialogue and the reparation to the affected —a criterion that should prevail in the responsibility of the State for the damage— housing was allotted according to the available budget and not in function of the needs and minimal demands of organizations and inhabitants. Small houses were changed by departments which neither have the same surface nor the advantages in terms of location as their original housing.

Because of this, the sensation of “losing the effort of so many years” and “starting from scratch” made some of them reject the relocation offer and preferred to remain in the affected zones. Otherwise, the location of new housing a few meters from “The Polygon” raised suspicion in the neighbors and remained in theirs, even if many of them sent their children to live somewhere else. All these elements have made the conflict remain valid, increasing the perception of abuse and vulnerability in the inhabitants.

13 Some have been given departments, others houses, depending on the availability of resources of the Ministry of Housing.

Conclusions

The case presented shows the conflictive processes of meaning construction on the experience of living in a degraded environment. This way, it is possible to witness how the construction of the stories that come from this context is closely linked to domination relationships that cross the territories and define who the authorized actors legitimized to speak, how and when, are.

The subjects produce their “grammar of inequality” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) out of these relation, in a constant game between victimization and meaning construction from the interstices in the choir of voices from the actors, which tell them how to interpret their own experiences. It is in these interstices where the affected gradually find their own voice, piecing together the available information creatively, thus establishing their own reference framework (Butler, 2010) to orient their action under the circumstances they are in.

Among these voices, one of the most important is the “expert’s”, who provides empirical and medical evidence capable of turning the subject into victim, shaping the body experience implied by living in a toxic context, and delivering tools to “understand what occurs”. The moment of the medical test is fundamental to fix the notion of damage, therefore, the idea of reparation and responsibility. After that initial moment, the process to obtain recognition leaves traces in the subjects and also depends on a number of actors who model these toxic experiences: the State, the press and the judiciary.

In such “recognition” processes, the subjects become involved in relationships from a position of extreme vulnerability, because of the intersection with other variables such as poverty and lack of social security, gender, participation levels and uneven public visibility. The Arica inhabitants involved in the case of Polimetales shall strive for such visibility from the place of those already invisible: the occupants of social housing, the inhabitants of the urban margins. This way, the experience of living in a degraded environment aggravates violence in the intersection of inequality axes that operate in the same territory marked by political and economic trends and actors whose scope greatly surpasses the inhabitants’ actions.

Finally, in the light of these cases, I would like to comment why it is important to introduce the socioecological dimension in the analyses of inequality and conflict. In the first place, the experience of socioecological inequality is relatively new in relation to other variables of persistent inequality that have structured our national stories. Although the struggle to access and

distribute the benefits of exploiting natural resources is lengthy, the visibility of the debate on the negative effects of these activities is not older than 30 years in the case of Chile. This way, it is indeed here where it is possible to witness the arming and disarming of mechanisms of legitimization/toleration and/or conflict on inequalities.

Secondly, socioecological inequalities are particularly violent for the subjects, as they generate visible effects and frequently impact in the short term on the individuals' biography and subjectivities, as they have consequences on their bodies, health and way to think the collective spaces. Because of this, it is especially relevant to document the qualitative aspects associated with these processes to understand what the experience of living in uneven societies beyond figures is like and understand that the ones who live in them nowadays are the protagonists of our democracies.

Finally, I would like to underscore that this is a phenomenon in expansion, linked to urban concentration and the renewed boom of extractivism in Latin America, which will stress in the next decade. In the context of these tendencies and given the levels of inequality in our societies, we cannot but expect a highly uneven distribution of risk levels and the increase of environmental suffering, with unknown effects on the communities in the long run, which require mechanisms of protection, regulation and intervention.

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