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Coal mining on pastureland in Southern Chile; challenging recognition and participation as guarantees for environmental justice

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ABSTRACT

Coal mining in Chile has grown significantly from virtually nonexistent in the late 1990s to become a profitable business in 2014. This paper explores the consequences of such revival from a post-political environmental justice perspective, through the case of a coal-mining project on *Isla Riesco*, located in the Chilean Patagonia. The project *Mina Invierno* has met the necessary legal requirements and obtained the required environmental permits to become operational. Nonetheless, island residents are opposed to the project, and especially families engaged in sheep ranching, which is one of the oldest and most significant production activities in the area. By analyzing the conflict between coal mining and ranching on *Isla Riesco*, this article challenges the so far conceptualization of recognition and participation as dimensions of environmental justice, since our results reveal that what is excluded in this case are not only people but ideas, even if these come from non-marginalized actors. This finding contributes to environmental justice literature by proposing that the study of environmental conflicts, analyzed from a post-political viewpoint, should also focus on the challenges that communities face in order to rebut the prevailing consensuses that sustain their situation.

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1. Introduction

During 2011, several demonstrations took place from the southernmost parts of Chile to the capital of Santiago, supporting the small island of *Isla Riesco* in the Region of *Magallanes*, with a population of about 100 permanent residents. Participants protested against the national Environmental Impact Assessment System's (SEA¹ for its Spanish acronym) approval of the construction of an open-pit coalmine, destined to extract 240 million tons of coal within the next 20 years. Interestingly, the protesters were opposed to the mine since it would introduce a way of living, which they disapproved of for their land, and to the structure of a decision-making process that left them out.

As for the public opinion, the state officials claim that the construction of the coalmine in the remote island of *Isla Riesco* came as a response to the country's need for nationally produced electricity. Chile's high dependency on fossil fuel imports and its inability to meet the growing energy needs from the copper mining industry, inevitably led to the exploitation of the low calorific value

(sub-bituminous) coal reserves of the island, where deposits are estimated to reach 630 million tons (CNE, 2008: 69).

The ranchers of *Isla Riesco* opposed the project by declaring their dedication to the land and by reclaiming their right to engage in the economic activities that they had participated in for generations, which they feared would be threatened by the environmental impact of the coalmine. In its defense, the mining company claimed that coal extraction is a necessary economic activity for the development of the country and that the mine would not harm the island's environmental conditions. It is in this context that the SEA system became the main venue of an ongoing conflict between the large Chilean companies COPEC and Ultramar (involved in energy production, maritime transport, and natural resource extraction) and the island's residents, until then dedicated to sheep ranching and tourist activities.

The project was finally authorized, despite the fact that the Chilean SEA comprised of a public participation and enquiry process, where the island residents made numerous legitimate and well-founded claims and observations on its impacts.

In this paper we analyze the *Mina Invierno* case, from an environmental justice perspective that goes beyond the traditional distributive issue view (Martin et al., 2014; Martínez-Alier, 2014; Mehta et al., 2014; Movik, 2014; Pearce and Kingham, 2008). Focusing on the procedural component of justice and its two

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¹ Servicio de Evaluación Ambiental: Environmental Assessment System.



Fig. 1. Isla Riesco Map. Source: Authors.

under-examined constitutive elements, namely participation and recognition (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield, 2013; Hillman, 2006; Holifield, 2012; Schlosberg, 2004), we challenge the idea that recognition and participation guarantee environmental justice because what is excluded are not only people but ideas, even if these come from non-marginalized actors. Along this line, and in order to support our argument, we use concepts from literature on post-politics,² which help us comprehend the political setting in which the SEA decision-making process was made.

We argue that the *Mina Invierno* case comes as evidence that the 'consensus' that the SEA decision implies, is conditioned by the post-political context in which it takes place; thus many concepts and discourses, such as economic development and the need for resource extraction, are taken for granted, conditioning the results of SEA and restricting the content of debate possible within the public participation process. The evidence we use to describe this post-political moment, are three consensuses that characterize the Chilean sociopolitical scene; these are, the mining privilege over other activities, the perennial faith in fossil fuel economies as an opportunity for development in the *Magallanes* Region, and the national need for more energy.

In order to analyze the *Mina Invierno* case, we studied in depth its public participation process. By focusing on the observations that affected communities, civil society groups and citizens made on the project's environmental impact assessment report, we

contrasted them with the company's direct responses and the SEA's consideration. In this fashion, we interpret and assess the process' real chance for public participation and the residents' recognition as actors who have a say on the SEA's decision.

In what follows, we revise the historical context of *Isla Riesco*, shedding light on the wider *Magallanes*' region identity; we then present the theoretical framework that we used in order to interpret the *Mina Invierno* case from an environmental justice perspective within a post-political context. In continuation, we present and critically analyze the Chilean economic model and the country's energy and environmental policies, from the same theoretical angle. We continue by providing evidence from the project's SEA participation process' results and conclude with our study's main conclusions.

2. Ranching as a lifestyle on *Isla Riesco*

Isla Riesco is located in the Chilean region of *Magallanes* (Fig. 1). The island has a surface area of approximately 500 km² (three times the size of Easter Island). Half of the island is composed of public property that is uninhabited. The island is characterized by a mountainous landscape with numerous glaciers and native forests, and the landmass forms part of the Alacalufes National Reserve. The remaining inhabited part of the island is relatively flat, covered in peat lands and pastures, and divided into 30 small- to medium-sized ranches that sustain fewer than 100 residents. In addition to the livestock industry, a number of tourist attractions are found on the island: landscape contemplation, bird watching, whale watching, nesting of condors, as well as the two

² Understood as a political formation that "prevents politicization, rejects ideological divisions and aims to prevent conflict through "democratic" inclusion" (Swyngedouw, 2009).

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