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# How sovereignty claims and "negative" emotions influence the process of subject-making: Evidence from a case of conflict over tree plantations from Southern Chile

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts over tree plantations in the global South challenge the image of sustainability and efficiency that some states and forestry companies construct for themselves and forestry extractivism. Research on the power dynamics of tree plantations has up to now focused on conflictive interactions between states, private capital and local populations, overlooking the role of more subtle power dynamics. To expand those analyses, we focus on the role of subjectivities in conflicts, and examine how state, capital and local populations interact in the process of subject formation. We analyse the historical and contemporary development of forestry extractivism in Southern Chile, specifically in and around indigenous Mapuche territories. Our analysis shows that commercial forestry advances via securing land control through disciplinary interventions whose aim is to create subjects that can help secure capital accumulation and extractivism. Nevertheless, individuals and communities get in the way of this project as they mobilise sovereignty claims that permit them to exercise control over the process of their own subject-formation. Importantly, our analysis highlights the emotional dimension of the process of formation of political subjects, especially via the expression of "negative" emotions such as anger and sorrow, which we find to be crucial resources that help indigenous Mapuche communities to maintain resistance. We conclude that side by side with capital accumulation and subjectivity-formation processes, political ecologists should consider more the emotional experiences that facilitate or hinder everyday environmental struggles.

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## 1. Introduction

Walking between large extensions of pine and eucalyptus plantations in Southern Chile, one cannot but be overwhelmed by the apparent success of the forestry extractivist project. Today, tree plantations cover almost three million hectares in Central and Southern Chile (CONAF, 2011), guaranteeing an efficient production of forest raw materials at high growth rates to supply national and international markets (Cossalter and Pye-smith, 2003). However, the more vulnerable face of this model reveals itself every summer, when thousands of fires affect forestry company plots. Fire, like other socio-ecological constraints (water availability, soil fertility, etc.) endangers the order and efficiency upon which forestry extraction rests. But, less visibly, fires also imply that the neighbours of corporate plots – that is, rural, semi-rural, peasant and indigenous communities surrounded by extensive, capital productive and flammable tree plantations – become key actors in managing the efficiency-vulnerability equilibrium of tree plantations.

Power dynamics related to tree plantations have been studied as conflicts between states, private capital and local populations. Smallholders tend to play a leading role in those conflicts that result from plantations' large-scale land occupation, which implies power concentration, displacements and adverse impacts on local livelihoods (Carrere and Lohmann, 1996; Gerber, 2011). While

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some analysts acknowledge the broad repertoire of practices of resistance, depending on the political and socio-cultural contexts where those struggles take place (Peluso, 1992; Scott, 1985), conflicts around tree plantations are usually defined as "*physical* mobilisations coming from neighbouring populations and targeted at the perceived negative effects of the plantation" (Gerber, 2011: 166, our emphasis). The emphasis on the "physical" is consistent with a prevailing tendency in political ecology to study how ecological distribution conflicts develop in public arenas (Martínez-Alier, 2002) overlooking what happens in "subjective spheres". Such focus misses how resistance is experienced on a day-to-day basis conjointly in bodies, minds and emotions, and how oppositional reactions blur with consent and negotiation tactics, thus providing a "fairly standard script" about "how people actually respond, change their behaviors, or alter the landscape" (Robbins, 2012: 208–210).

Subjectivation, or subject-making processes, can take place in the course of tree plantation conflicts. Lots of ink has been spilled to discuss whether subjects exist as separate entities and the limits of their capacity to have agency (Foucault, 1979; Butler, 1997; Allen, 2002; Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992). Here, we do not delve into depth on that issue but take as a starting point that processes to form subjects, specifically individual citizens with a compliant relationship to authority do exist. We use a fairly basic notion of subjectivation or subject-making as the political process of forming (or constructing) individual and collective subjectivities. By political, we mean processes in which diverse mechanisms of power and authority (e.g. agenda-setting, governmentality, violence, etc.) and how responses to those mechanisms operate. Focussing on how exactly subject-making develops is important for understanding not only how people are continuously formed by and brought into relations of power (Foucault, 1979; Lemke, 2001), but also how they reflect, act and embody resistance (Butler, 1997; Rancière, 1992). Contributions in Geoforum have explored this gap by analysing how subjectivities and emotions are arenas of socio-ecological struggles together with "physical" landscapes (Nightingale, 2011a; Singh, 2013; Sultana, 2011), especially through the lens of feminist political ecology (Elmhirst, 2011). However, the study of environmental subjects in the context of conflict – especially conflicts related to forestry extractivism – instead of conservation governance (Agrawal, 2005; Singh, 2013), is still underdeveloped.

In this paper, we use fire as an entry point to examine the way in which private forestry companies and the state frame their relationships with people who live at the margins of tree plantations in Southern Chile. Focusing on fire prevention technologies, we examine how these try to establish discipline through transforming locals into "good neighbours" in order to ensure land control, minimise conflict and protect the capital accumulation process that occurs through forestry extraction. We also look at how individuals and communities get in the way of this project and in doing so engage with processes of political subjectivation, and the relevance of "negative" emotions in this process.

In political ecology, forests have been analysed separately as either stages for conflict or as settings where processes of subject-formation take place, as we explain in Section 2; this disconnection between those two literatures is the conceptual motivation for our paper. Section 3 describes our methods and case study site. Sections 4 and 5 identify the key strategies used by state and private companies in Chile for "accumulating through disciplining", and we use fire control as an example to illustrate how those strategies operate. Sections 6 and 7 analyse local reactions to this project. Section 8 discusses our findings, and concludes, with reference to forestry conflicts, subjectivity and emotional geographies literatures.

## 2. Into the woods: land control, conflict and subjectivities

Tree plantations are forests designed by humans for the sake of profitability and efficiency maximisation, monocultures for the production of raw materials at high growth rates, organised to supply wood, charcoal, logs and pulp to markets (Carrere and Lohmann, 1996; Pryor, 1982). Property concentration is a key institution of power in relation to tree plantations (Gerber and Veuthey, 2010), since it facilitates the dispossession of local populations and the realisation of a capitalist-oriented economic potential of resources via credits, subsidies, industrialisation and proletarianisation of labour (Bull et al., 2006). As happens with many forestry projects (Scott, 1985; Vandergeest and Peluso, 2006), knowledge, values and discourses are also crucial in ensuring and protecting tree plantation projects: "green washing" of forestry activities like the Forest Stewardship Council (Bloomfield, 2012) and the criminalisation and violence towards protest against forestry (Gerber, 2011) have been reported as land control mechanisms used to establish and expand monoculture forestry activities.

The operation of those power mechanisms transforms suburban, peasant and indigenous communities' territories into industrial, extractivist landscapes (Bridge and McManus, 2000). Processes of land control also occur via subject-formation, whereby institutions of state and capital and NGOs deploy disciplinary systems through de-centralised forest governance (Agrawal, 2005), property enclosure (Malhi, 2011), or by defining what knowledge and behaviour is appropriate for environmental conservation (Bryant, 2002). Control of land and subjectivities takes place when technologies of state or market power transform into "technologies of the self" (Lemke, 2001). One such technology is "individual responsabilisation" through which subjects themselves incorporate and assume the individual responsibility of implementing disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1979; Agrawal, 2005; Coaffee, 2013) by internalising hegemonic logics through acting and thinking as forest stewards, peaceful indigenous subjects or by abandoning customary forms of organising livelihoods that hinder commercialised forestry. The focus on individual responsibility empties the political and power relationships of forest governance, shifting attention from broader processes of dispossession to concrete individuals or groups as responsible for causing environmental degradation (González-Hidalgo et al., 2014). For example, Du Monceau (2008) shows how tree plantations in Chile transform subjects by creating an "extractive mentality", which is adopted by some peasant and indigenous communities who become small land holding forestry entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, disciplinary tactics are not always successful: conflict emerges when locals refuse to accept what is expected from them and express disapproval to elite, state or colonial policies, cultures and ideologies over their livelihoods (Scott, 1985; Peluso, 1992). In his review of tree plantation conflicts, Gerber (2011) explains how those conflicts are expressed by means of lawsuits and demonstrations, side-by-side with "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985) which can include arson attacks, stealing company property, material damages and blockades to the industrial forestry activity. However, when considering subject formation, this rupture (Rancière, 2001) or counter-conduct[1] (Cadman, 2010) is not automatic, spontaneous or easy. It demands that local communities go through a process of both political de-subjectivation of the imposed social order, and re-subjectivation in order to resist the others' "givenness of place" both in terms of identity and spatial relations (Dikeç, 2012). This process of political subjectivation can take place through collective processes of expression of dissent and the "reconfiguration of the field of experience" (Rancière,

[1] In Foucauldian terms.

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