From matters of fact to places of concern? Energy, environmental movements and place-making in Chile and Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

As demand for energy is growing and resources become scarcer, energy increasingly becomes the site of heated controversies. In Latour's terms, energy turns from a "matter of fact" into a "matter of concern". In these energy controversies, environmental movements frequently play a central role, highlighting what is at stake in these developments. While these movements have often been studied, these studies rarely focus on the interaction between controversies, environmental movements, and place-making. In this article, we not only argue that energy is frequently turned from matter of fact into a matter of concern, but that this argument also extends to the notion of place. As such, energy controversies turn villages, cities, or regions themselves into "places of concern". The article delves deeper into the production of places of concern through two case studies of energy controversies around power plants: a proposed coal plant in Bo Nok, Thailand, and HidroAysen, a hydropower project in Chilean Patagonia. We specifically focus on the issues that were opened up for debate in both countries, and on the role of environmental movements in the production of these places. Our examples are based on fieldwork and interviews in these two areas, as well as media and document analysis. While the two cases are from two different countries, we nonetheless find surprising parallels between them. These insights are instrumental to link theoretical debates on controversies and place-making. Moreover, they provide empirical insights into the transformative and lasting effects of energy controversies on people and places.

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1. Introduction

In the past, most power plants would be implemented top-down, with little concern about the social and environmental impacts. Energy was an issue in which citizens had no say, as it was related to technical decisions made by experts. Energy was about scientific facts, experts, and technocrats. Moreover, it was located in the realm of science, not in the realms of culture or politics (Latour, 2004a). In short, energy was considered "a matter of fact" (Latour, 2004b). Greater environmental awareness, increased pressure on resources, environmental conflicts, and the waning legitimacy of political and scientific institutions, have increasingly turned energy into an issue that raises debate or leads to conflict. In other words, energy has become a "matter of concern" (Latour, 2004b). Such energy controversies, in which social movements often play an important role, have been studied in various ways. The majority of research in this field focuses on different

sources of energy, such as oil (Watts, 2004), nuclear power (Bickerstaff et al., 2008), hydropower (Moore et al., 2010), and wind energy (Jolivet and Heiskanen, 2010). Other research has concentrated on the siting of energy facilities, such as in rural areas (Couch and Kroll-Smith, 1994), urban settings (Evans et al., 1999), or related to the NIMBY[1] effect (Devine-Wright, 2005).

However, few studies have explicitly focused on such energy controversies in emerging economies; a group of countries often experiencing rapid and sustained economic growth requiring large amount of new energy infrastructure (Bradshaw, 2010). In this article, we delve deeper into the role of social movements in environmental controversies. We do so through a detailed analysis of two empirical case studies: Bo Nok, a proposed coal power plant in Thailand; and HidroAysen, a proposed hydroelectric project in Chilean Patagonia.

Chile and Thailand are usually depicted as "successful" countries in their respective regions. Both countries have been referred to as "economic miracle" and praised as successful examples of democratic transition and economic reform in their respective

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regions (Hojman, 1993; Jadresic and Zahler, 2000; Jansen, 2001; Perry and Leipziger, 1999).[2] Thailand is an upper-middle-income country in Southeast Asia. It is the second biggest economy and energy user after Indonesia. The country's electricity production largely depends on natural gas – with domestic supplies in the Gulf of Thailand – and it has limited access to other energy sources such as hydropower and coal (IEA, 2013). The strength of civil society and environmental movements has prevented or relocated some large-scale environmental damaging projects in the last few decades (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2014). Although recent years have been politically turbulent – with military coups in 2006 and 2014 – there is nonetheless more political and economic freedom in Thailand compared to other countries in the region.

Like Thailand in Southeast Asia, Chile is considered one of most prosperous countries in Latin America, leading various global rankings on human development, stability, low corruption, and competitiveness (Hojman, 1993; Jadresic and Zahler, 2000; Perry and Leipziger, 1999; The World Economic Forum, 2011; Transparency International, 2013). In 2010, Chile joined the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Bank classified the country as a "high-income" economy in 2013. There is also a flip side to the "Chilean miracle" (Collins, 1995; De la Barra, 2011; Leiva et al., 1994; Sunkel, 2005). The country ranks among the most unequal countries in the world (Quandl, 2014) and its prosperity largely depends on the exploitation of natural resources, which in turn requires large amounts of energy (Nem Singh, 2010). With a limited stock of fossil fuels, imported fuels, and large hydropower plants meet most of the national energy demand (Barton et al., 2012).

Both Chile and Thailand have a tradition of increasingly vocal environmental movements (Bórquez, 2011; Forsyth, 2004; Missingham, 2003; Seguel, 2010). This has led to growing numbers of environmental and energy controversies, resulting in increased pressure on domestic resources. However, analyses that link environmental controversies and movements in countries located in Asia and Latin America are rare. The main objectives of this article are therefore (1) to analyse how environmental controversies influence the opening up of debates that question the separation between technological developments and political decision-making, and (2) how, in the contestation process, groups opposing these projects have produced the two places – Bo Nok and Chilean Patagonia – in specific ways.

While environmental issues and controversies in Asia and Latin America have received increasing attention in the last decades, they rarely focus on the interaction between energy controversies, social movements, and place-making. As Pierce et al. (2010) argued, place-making has been a neglected part of political theory. This calls for a stronger integration of network and place conceptualisations with political theorisation. In this article, we not only argue that energy is frequently turned from matter of fact into a matter of concern, but that this argument also extends to the notion of place. In other words, energy controversies turn villages, cities, or regions themselves into "places of concern".

Although the cases are situated within very different cultural contexts, both energy controversies developed under similar circumstances – as described above – and environmental movements have employed similar strategies. More than a comparison, however, this article must be understood as a starting point to further understand the role of places in environmental controversies and movements. What is striking about these case studies is that specific controversies over power plants had lasting effects beyond those specific debates – e.g. on energy politics and policies – and that in the process places were produced in specific ways.

Data was collected using several methods in the period 2010–2014. In Bo Nok, formal interviews, with prior consent, were conducted with 14 key stakeholders – including people in the movement, provincial government, and village leaders – and 22 people from four villages in the sub-district, to get a better understanding of the public opinion and livelihood context in the area. Homestays were arranged to create space for observation and informal talks. Sixteen additional interviews were held with NGOs, academics, and policy makers in Bangkok. The interviews were complemented with data from newspaper articles (retrieved through search engine Factiva), reports and books.

For the Chilean case, there were two main sources of data: fieldwork and secondary sources. Fieldwork was conducted in Chile for six months, from December 2012 to May 2013. A total of 34 interviews (14 in Aysen and 20 in Santiago) were conducted, all with prior consent. There were also several (unrecorded) informal conversations and a fieldtrip journal was kept. There was also participation in eight meetings (both public and private ones), four seminars, one rally, two mailing lists, and two cultural events, among other activities. Secondary sources included written media, audio-visual material, movement's websites, and academic publications.

The paper is structured in the following way. First, we introduce the notions of "matters of fact" and "matters of concern". Second, we turn to the literature on place and place-making to analyse the importance of place in environmental controversies and explain how these places themselves can turn into places of concern. We then offer an overview of the HidroAysen dam project and the *Patagonia Sin Represas* (Patagonia Without Dams, PWD) movement in Chile, and the Bo Nok Power Plant and the Bo Nok local conservation group in Thailand. The core empirical sections follow, starting by showing how these places turned into matters of concern and how they have been produced in specific ways by environmental movements. Subsequently, we identify the ways in which these places of concern have become key "allies" in the contestation process, as they are frequently visited and cited by (other) environmental movements. In the last two parts of the paper, we reflect on the cases and their implications for the study and practice of energy controversies, environmental movements, and place-making.

2. From "matters of fact" to "matters of concern"

When energy projects turn into public controversies, issues that were once stable or "black-boxed"[3] (Latour, 1999) may turn into "matters of concern" (Latour, 2004b):

> Whenever a network is deployed, a substance is transformed from an object into a thing, or to use my terms, from a matter of fact to a matter of concern.
>
> [Latour, 2011, p. 799]

We do not argue about sewage systems, vaccines, or airplanes as long as they work smoothly and undesired or unpredicted consequences remain unnoticed (see also Latour, 2007). Controversies transform these stable entities, these "matters of fact" – in our cases, power plants – and turn them into "matters of concern"; that is, controversial issues that raise discussion and debate. Latour (2011) uses the example of the NASA shuttle: a fixed object, ready to fly, until it dramatically exploded in 2003. After the accident, it became evident how NASA – and its complex organisational dynamics – actually allowed the shuttle to fly. Researchers

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[2] Note that there have also been plenty of critiques of the democratic and economic processes in these countries.

[3] Black-boxing can be defined as "the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become" (Baird, 2003).