



Production of absence through media representation: A case study on legitimacy and deliberation of a pulp mill dispute in southern Chile



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ABSTRACT

Deliberation is increasingly promoted as a means for producing legitimate decisions in a wide variety of public and private governance schemes. Through a case study of a disputed pulp mill in Chile, the study challenges that assumption by examining what the media representation reveals in terms of how legitimacy is constructed in the public sphere. The study asks how were the demands of marginalised stakeholders presented and contested in media texts over time and how this representation contributed to the legitimization process of the mill in the public sphere. Through a decolonial analysis of the newspaper texts, the study finds that the media representations preconditioned how legitimacy was constructed through deliberation, producing an absence of those who did not support the project. Not only does this type of exclusion affect the stakeholder willingness to participate but the legitimacy of the governance schemes itself is at risk when stakeholders chose to defend their demands in its exteriority. The study concludes that to overcome the challenge of exclusion in the public discourses, the focus of public participation need to change from an abstract rational argument driven debate toward an engaged dialogue on subsistence and co-existence in a world where all living beings are interconnected and valid contributors to the debate.

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Introduction

Public participation, or stakeholder dialogue, is currently promoted as a desirable activity that produces outcomes that are perceived to be legitimate and tailored to the needs of all affected parties (Appelstrand, 2002). However, the process of producing legitimate decision outcomes through governance is far from straightforward. Previous research on resource conflicts between multinational corporations and local communities suggests that stakeholder participation does not provide marginalized locals with the opportunity to voice their concerns within the system itself (Walter and Martinez-Alier, 2011; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Suryanata and Umemoto, 2004). Research in the forestry sector also indicates that communities adversely affected by the expansion of the pulp industry in South America have been unable to make their voices heard through the official channels of governance schemes; rather, they have done so through concentrated contentious strategies and by communicating their message in national, conservative mass media (Kröger, 2011, 2013).

Members of the mass media have been argued to function as 'information gatekeepers' that drive public discourses in certain

directions (Hansen, 2000; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). Various stakeholders' access to media coverage and how their claims are portrayed by the media will also have a profound impact on how legitimate the broader public perceives their claims to be (Hansen, 2000; Miller and Parnell Riechert, 2003). This access will influence whether the claims made by certain marginalized groups are perceived to be rational and valid in the debate or whether these groups can legitimately participate in the act of deliberation, producing reasonable, well-informed opinions (Chambers, 2003). The media are, in this respect, central to the debate on participation and its relationship with legitimate decision outcomes. Yet, studies on precisely how public discourses contribute to the legitimization processes of various governance schemes remain scarce (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006).

This paper examines what media representation reveals with respect to how legitimacy is constructed in the public sphere during the approval stage of the construction of a pulp mill in southern Chile. It also follows developments in the months following the beginning of mill operations, when the mill was accused of causing the deaths of thousands of swans in a nearby sanctuary. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) how were the demands of the stakeholders who opposed the planned pulp presented and contested in media texts before the approval of the mill and after the swan deaths?, and (2) how did this representation

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contribute to the legitimation process of the construction of the mill in the public sphere? The study adopts a decolonial perspective¹ to illustrate the limits of legitimacy building in the public sphere in places where colonial differences exist. The analysis is based on material published in local newspapers between 1995 and 2005 and expert interviews with stakeholders in two different locations who initially opposed the construction of the mill, in one location through engaging in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and in the other by defending their demands outside the system.

The findings reveal a systematic delegitimation, or production of absences, of those who did not champion progress, industrialization, and development in the public debate. Based on the findings, this study argues that the legitimacy of decision outcomes is not only an issue of how well governance schemes are designed to include marginalized voices but is also highly dependent on whose values and norms are considered rational and valid in society at large. The capacity to generate legitimate decision outcomes through governance may then be weakened if stakeholders elect to defend their demands outside the system itself. The paper concludes that to overcome issues of the production of absences, there is a need for a change in perspective from the current belief that legitimacy can be formed through abstract, rational arguments to a perspective of locally grounded legitimacy that focuses on how different communities can sustain their lives within the limits of their natural surroundings, where each community member is an interconnected component of the whole.

Theoretical framework

Legitimacy, deliberation and public participation

To define what is meant by legitimacy in this study, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by deliberation. Deliberation presupposes that anyone can engage in free and reasoned dialogue to identify common solutions to conflicts and disagreements regarding collective problems (Habermas, 2005 [1996]; Olson, 2011; Young, 2001). In the words of Chambers (2003, p. 309), this includes “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants.” He continues: “Although consensus need not be the ultimate aim of deliberation, and participants are expected to pursue their interests, an overarching interest in the legitimacy of outcomes (understood as justification to all affected) ideally characterizes deliberation.” (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). Two interrelated themes concerning legitimacy can be derived from this: *what is a legitimate decision outcome and how this decision came into being through open debates involving all parties*. Thus, the claims advanced by each stakeholder (proponents, governmental representatives, the public) during the deliberation process should, in principle, be open to change for the decision outcome to be considered legitimate by all affected parties (Parkins and Mitchell, 2005; Reed, 2008).

This raises questions such as whether *all affected parties are equally welcomed in the debate* and whether their *knowledge claims* are regarded as legitimate when a decision is made. Stakeholder

legitimacy can thus be understood as the “right to participate” and the “acceptance” of stakeholders’ worldviews/knowledge claims as valid and rational in the debate. If the deliberation process itself does not permit the inclusion of all values and knowledge claims, those whose claims were excluded during the deliberation phase may not accept the final decision as either legitimate or justified. Thus, in this paper, the legitimacy of decision outcomes and the legitimacy of stakeholder claims are considered inherently linked.

Public participation has been argued to enhance the legitimacy of investments by offering affected locals the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process (Wood, 2003). Public participation is a term that is widely used and, as such, has also been defined in various ways, for example: as “situations where citizens come together and communicate with each other about matters of public concern” (Parkins and Mitchell, 2005 p. 529); “a categorical term for citizen power” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217); “the expectation that citizens have a voice in policy choices” (Bishop and Davis, 2002, p. 1); and “a process where individuals, groups and organizations choose to take an active role in making decisions that affect them” (Reed, 2008, p. 2418). Regarding how the public relates to the EIA processes of public participation, O’Faircheallaigh (2010) argues that the process includes “any form of interaction between government and corporate actors and the public that occurs as part of EIA processes” (p. 20). As a legally required process in government decisions, however, in which the EIA process serves as one of the most studied examples, public participation often refers to the formalistic and one-way communication from members of the public to the decision-making body in the form of public hearings, reviews, and written comments on proposed projects (Innes and Booher, 2004). While acknowledging that public participation does not occur in a vacuum in meeting rooms, separated from broader societal discourses, this type of formalistic, one-way communication is also how public participation is understood in this study. However, despite its importance to the debate, how legitimacy is created through public participation remains largely unexamined in the natural resource management literature (Parkins and Mitchell, 2005).

Research on public participation in this field often concludes that the quality of, and satisfaction with, decision outcomes is likely to be greater if the public is allowed to participate in the decision-making process (Appelstrand, 2002; Arnstein, 1969; de Stefano, 2010; Hartley and Wood, 2005; Healy, 2009; Parkins and Mitchell, 2005; Reed, 2008). Appelstrand (2002) notes that one key factor determining what constitutes a legitimate decision is whether or not it is accepted among those whom the outcome will affect. Thus, a key question regarding legitimacy creation is how the affected stakeholders are engaged in the process itself. The greater the influence that citizens have in the decision-making process, or the greater the level of citizen power, the more democratically legitimate the decisions are assumed to be; consequentially, the more they are assumed to achieve greater public acceptance (for different categorizations of the level of citizen control, see Arnstein, 1969; Bishop and Davis, 2002). In the case of EIAs, as Wood (2003) notes, different levels of citizen control can be identified in the various EIA systems, depending on the time, place, and other circumstances. This focus on the extent of citizen control nevertheless fails to consider how certain outcomes are favored by the dominant perceptions of what is right and wrong in the public sphere and how such perceptions may be influenced by how the mass media portrays certain subjects, thereby also excluding certain voices from the debate.

How well different stakeholders and their claims are represented within public participation itself has been a concern among scholars interested in improving the outcomes of participative governance systems. Studies often argue that low representation of

¹ In contrast to Eurocentric epistemologies that assume a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view and in which European culture is implicitly considered pre-eminent, the decolonial perspective stresses that all subjects speak from a particular location in the power structures (modern/colonial) in different (local) geopolitical contexts (Mignolo, 2000). Decolonial studies advance the hidden perspective of those on the colonial side of the modern/colonial divide (Mignolo, 2011).

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