A bridge that disconnects – On shared and divided socio-spatialities in the pulp mill conflict between Uruguay and Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on communication failures fuelling a cross-border conflict over the construction of a pulp mill in Fray Bentos, Uruguay, on the banks of a shared river, and over the Argentinian anti-mill activists' protest that blocked a bridge connecting the two countries. The analysis, grounded on thematic interviews and surveys on both sides of the border, identifies some of the critical events of mis- and non-communication that deepened the disagreement between the neighbors. Likewise, it examines the extent to which the dispute has changed popular imageries of the neighboring nation and provided ground for the reproduction of negative stereotypes and defensive nationalisms. The case study offers an example of unruly amplification of decisive acts of neglect and provocations in an international interface setting, and thus provides conceptual tools for socio-environmental conflict researchers concerned with dissociations and non-linkages in contemporary globalization.

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1. Introduction

In this article we will discuss the ways in which a transnational industrial forestry firm that, by definition, recognizes no borders, has fortified the frontier between two sister nations, Uruguay and Argentina. We will show how its pulp mill investment in Fray Bentos gave birth to demands for national sovereignty and evoked sentiments of patriotism on both sides of Río Uruguay, which forms the boundary between the two South American nations.

The conflict over the mill's location decision started through differences in the locally perceived impacts of the project and grew into a major diplomatic rift litigated in Mercosur and the International Court of Justice[1]. While most residents of Fray Bentos welcomed the investment for the much-needed jobs it would provide, as the project began to materialize and construction work got under way in the summer of 2005 (Alvarado, 2007: 75–76), it engendered controversy and an unprecedented wave of protests across the river in the closest Argentinian town of Gualeguaychú, where concerns over pollution and its impact on

local livelihoods (especially tourism and agriculture) reigned. Protests against the mill blocked access to a cross-border bridge from November 2006 to June 2010 and the bridge that disconnected the neighboring communities soon came to symbolize the whole conflict: the diplomatic impasse, the growing distance between the two nations, and the different readings of the situation which failed to relate with one another. The wide spread media coverage that the conflict attained in both countries did little to defuse tensions. Quite the contrary, it seemed to feed a vicious circle of miscommunication which became characteristic of the conflict. The very catchphrase of the Argentinian protest movement, "*No a las* papeleras, *sí a la vida*" ("No to *paper* factories, yes to life") well describes the diffusion of disinformation, rumors, miscommunication and misunderstandings in a conflict over the construction of a *pulp* mill.[2]

It is exactly this miscommunication often accompanied by tracts of non-communication that we will now concentrate on by analyzing 45 thematic, semi-structured interviews conducted in the latter half of April and the beginning of May 2007 in the epicenter of the conflict, Fray Bentos (22 interviews) and Gualeguaychú (23 interviews). We will likewise sketch a picture of the extent of the conflict on a national scale through an analysis of an additional set of 100 face-to-face questionnaire surveys, 50 from each capital city.

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[1] The Argentinian government filed a complaint against Uruguay with the International Court of Justice, claiming that by unilaterally authorizing the construction of Botnia's pulp mill, Uruguay breached the Bilateral Treaty of the Uruguay River (1975), which obliges both countries to inform and consult the counterpart on all issues relating to the shared watercourse. Uruguay, in turn, appealed to the Mercosur Arbitration Court accusing Argentina of violating the Treaty of Asunción as regards the principle of free circulation of goods and services, hindered by blockades on bi-national bridges.

[2] Originally two companies had decided to construct a pulp mill near Fray Bentos, Ence from Spain and the Finnish Botnia. Although it was the former that first arrived in Fray Bentos, it announced its plans to relocate its plant to Punta Pereyra, on the river Plate, in December 2006. The reasons for the relocation were said to be logistic (Ence, 2016)

The interviews (31 open questions) and surveys (15 fixed-response questions supplemented with open-ended questions) were aimed at mapping the interviewees' ideas on democracy, globalization and its effects on local and national politics as well as the neighboring country and its citizens, all in relation to the border conflict between the two countries. We used content analysis to develop an understanding of the popular readings of the dispute and to identify critical events and processes of miscommunication that aggravated it. The direct quotations from interview transcripts and surveys inserted in the text are meant to exemplify these positions and processes on both riverbanks and in both capitals. The surveys conducted in Buenos Aires were carried out in late October 2007, just before the country's presidential elections (held on the 28th of October), and in Montevideo in mid-November of the same year, when the much-disputed pulp mill began to operate.[3]

2. Shared and divided spaces

Friday, November 9th, 2007: There's an unexpectedly large crowd on the international bridge Libertador General San Martín that has been closed for nearly an entire year, separating Uruguay from Argentina. It is rumored that the Botnia S.A. pulp mill on the Uruguayan shore of the border river, Río Uruguay, is already functioning and the media has found a box seat to follow the day's thriller. The highest chimney has begun to exhale steam; the one beside it blows smoke.

Twenty-seven kilometers away, in the Argentinian town of Gualeguaychú, the home of the social movement opposing the construction of the factory, people are following a live transmission sent from the bridge with disbelief. Titles pass on the television screen, backed by brisk marching music: "Uruguay closed the Argentinian frontier! Botnia's airspace declared a military area! Argentinian investments frozen in Uruguay!" After months of growing political tension the conflict seems to be rapidly escalating to alarming heights. Anyone following the news can almost hear sirens wailing and see tanks patrolling the frontier.

The day before Santiago de Chile had witnessed the last, rather reluctant and incredulous, attempt at conciliation between the two heads of state, Argentina's president, Néstor Kirchner, and his Uruguayan counterpart, Tabaré Vázquez. As had happened so many times before in the course of the conflict, the meeting only served to aggravate the situation: Kirchner gave his support to the anti-Botnia movement and Vázquez gave the much-disputed Botnia pulp mill permission to operate.

On November 10th the bridge is a stage for another media event: a demonstration against Botnia. Against all odds, people have not taken up arms: they have brought along their picnic chairs, their mate and biscuits and sunshades, in addition to the Argentinian flags, signs and the chant "¡No a la papelera!" Smoke billows from the factory – is it working or are they still testing? – while families stroll up and down the bridge in the most peaceful of demonstrations. The atmosphere peaks when the crowd spontaneously starts singing the national anthem of Argentina.

The following Monday the media is still on call on the otherwise empty bridge. By now it is known that they are not testing any more – the pulp mill is actually working.[4]

The pulp mill disagreement between Uruguay and Argentina is a marked example of a cross-border conflict that gained strength from a succession of miscommunications. It was characterized by occasional chains of disinformation and by a series of misunderstandings which at times developed into events of non-communication (Kröger, 2007; Palermo and Reboratti, 2007; Pakkasvirta, 2008a, 2008b).

Disconnect and disagreement are seen in this article as constitutive aspects of cross-border (non-)communication. We argue that these cross-border tensions are critical socio-spatial events or episodes, whereby what is shared within communities constitutes that which divides them. Sharing, counterintuitively, tends to be accompanied by divisions. In other words, events of incoherence, impairment or non-resonance are, in our view, made of elements that are disagreed upon or not communicated. (See e.g., Bateson and Bateson, 1987; Ketola et al., 2002; Atkinson, 2009; González, 2009; Sawatzky, 2013; Kröger, 2013).

We will therefore pay attention to those community-specific aspects of human co-existence, or practices of sharing, which produce the conditions of miscommunication that sometimes turn into events of non-communication and become practices of dividing. We will identify communal particularities that stimulate non-resonance at the cultural interfaces during periods of tension. Individual signs and episodes of cross-border mismatch can then be read as expressions of values and premises that do not communicate; that belong only to one of the parties. We thus argue that particular implicit aspects of lived histories of communities become articulated at the interfaces during events of dissonance (Lehtinen, 2008, 2011).

This type of research orientation focuses on the agonistic encoding and decoding of confrontational representations and narrations in conflict settings (see Burgess, 1990; Rannila and Loivaranta, 2015; Sarkki and Heikkinen, 2015). This approach is, in general, critical of those currently-popular conflict analyses where the existence of divergences is regarded as the result of poor collaboration to be cured by increasing inclusive elements at the interfaces (Compass, 2010; Raitio and Saarikoski, 2012; Zachrisson and Lindahl, 2013; Katila et al., 2014). Our approach, instead, focuses on the emotional components or moral edges that accentuate the dissenting positions and thus increase the inability of actors to understand and communicate with one another (Kröger and Nylund, 2012; Buijs and Lawrence, 2013; Sandström et al., 2013). In addition, while emphasizing the role of confrontational representations, we glean from the interviews the mechanisms of social framing that tend to vary from community to community but also with differences in scale, such as national versus international contexts (Sadath et al., 2013; Burns et al., 2016). For us, social framing emerges, for example, in protest articulations and media representations that become encoded and decoded according to (more or less explicit) interpretative models, metaphors or prioritized schemes (Goffman, 1974; Raitio, 2008), and therefore potentially feeds sensationalism and antagonistic ideas.

To summarize, we look towards emotional accounts and social framings feeding non-communication but still keep in mind the weaknesses of the planning procedure, specifically the critical events of poor collaboration linked to the construction of the Fray Bentos mill (Kröger, 2007; Pakkasvirta, 2008b). Hence, our analysis includes those practices of dividing, or fundamentals of non-communication, that cannot be remedied by simply adding "partnership" and "inclusiveness" to the agenda. We argue that conflicts as a rule contain incompatible and conflicting elements that cannot be forcibly compressed under universal conditions of communicative sharing. Communal particularities of sharing cannot easily be extended across cultural borders and often, as is witnessed here, it would be productive to listen carefully and appreciate the dissociations and so learn not to ignore the affective dynamics of the underlying divisions.

Accordingly, this article presents a bi-layered analysis that identifies the elements of mismatch at the interface as well as the sources of dissociation that feed mis- and non-communication. The analysis identifies those formulations within the interview material that address the most critical linkages inwards (shared socio-spatialities) and outwards (divided socio-spatialities).

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[3] The interviews and surveys were all made in public spaces – parks, squares, streets – or in semi-public spaces: cafés, bars and terraces. In the two capital cities we chose to conduct the surveys in neighborhoods that hold, in socio-economical terms, different positions in the city fabric (Barrio Once, Congreso/Plaza de Mayo and Palermo in Buenos Aires; in Montevideo Ciudad Vieja, Avenida 9 de Julio and La Rambla). The interviewees were randomly selected. We thank our colleague Johanna Pohjola for conducting the interviews in Fray Bentos and Gualeguaychú. The first author conducted the surveys in the capitals.

[4] Personal observations and notes from the bridge and its surroundings.