



# Neoliberalization of forestry discourses in Chile

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## ABSTRACT

Chile is a well-studied case of how neoliberal institutions have affected the use of natural resources. However, only few studies have focused on how neoliberalization has influenced the social constructions of natural resources policy. This study aims to understand how forest policy has a contested meaning among different stakeholders. This study identifies five discourses among the stakeholders who were involved in the congressional discussion of the Native Forest Law (NFL). The main difference among the discourses is whether the target of the NFL should be the individual or should it be some collective entity. The property rights discourse, articulated by the forest industry, embraced free-market ideals. The “abandoned forest” discourse, articulated by government officials, made interesting parallels between the situation of the forests and the specific political conditions of Chile after Pinochet’s dictatorship. The environmentalist discourse advocated for conservation through regulation, while the “local development” discourse, articulated by some NGOs, embraced egalitarian ideals. The peasant discourse, uttered by organizations that have the closest contact with native forest, uttered ambivalent identities. Given that the Constitution of Chile only acknowledges individuals’ rights, peasants’ organizations only get to claim political power when they articulate themselves as individual owners. In this way, the neoliberal reforms are influencing the construction of subjectivities in the Chilean forestry discourses.

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## 1. Introduction

Neoliberalism has become the hegemonic way of thinking about environmental governance (Humphreys, 2009). Neoliberalism is an ideology that claims that every aspect of society should be governed by the free market, while the role of the state is solely to enforce property rights and mediate conflicts among individuals (Humphreys, 2009). Markets are composed of individuals who own or want to own property. Following the logic of the neoliberal society, the owner becomes the principal subject of governance. As the owner becomes the principal subject of governance, it will dispute any other subjective construction of agency and forest governance.

Nonetheless neoliberalism is not a consistent set of institutions, ideas and discourses. Brenner et al. (2010) argue that neoliberalism is not a unique, monolithic, model replicated in the same way everywhere. Rather, it has operated in different ways in different contexts, according to the historical situation, institutional arrangements, and cultural constraints producing different results (Brenner et al., 2010; Castree, 2008). There is no single neoliberalism, but a contextual process of variegation in which the meaning of nature and policy is contested. Although the concept of neoliberalization has become questioned in the academic literature, rather than providing a final delimitation of

what neoliberalism is, this study aims to investigate two questions: 1) how neoliberalism has influenced subjectivities by understanding how discourses are uttered among historically situated subjects, and 2) how the *owner* is constructed vis-à-vis forest governance.

Chile is a remarkable case for this endeavor. Between the seventies and nineties Chilean society has gone through a large part of the spectrum of political ideologies; from democratic socialism in the early seventies towards one of the “purest” forms of neoliberalism. The implementation of neoliberal reforms in Chile has been thoroughly studied and debated during the past three decades. Today it is well established that neoliberal reforms in Chile have resulted in a tight economic dependency on natural resources, such as fisheries, water, tree plantations and copper mining (Bauer, 1997; Clapp, 1998a; Galaz, 2004; Liverman and Vilas, 2006; Tecklin et al., 2011). In Latin America, Liverman and Vilas (2006) conducted an extensive analysis of natural resources and neoliberal reforms in several countries. Taylor and Zabin (2000) and McAfee and Shapiro (2010), focused on the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Mexico, while Burns and Giessen (2015) studied the mechanism by which neoliberal reforms have been implemented in the forestry bureaucracy in Argentina. However, only few studies have focused on the effects that legal and economic reforms have had on the way that situated subjects construct their relationship with the “environment” and how that influences their political claims. For example, in “developing countries” only two studies have focused on the process of subjectivation (Winkel, 2012). The present study is a contribution to this emerging and important topic. Moreover, Chile has been a key case

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in the history of neoliberalizations because it was the first country in the world to implement neoliberal reforms (Harvey, 2009), and this process was carried out in a context of tight military repression which made resistance almost impossible. I argue that if any aspects of subjectivity have been influenced by neoliberalism, those signs should be clearly visible in Chile.

The aim here is to go beyond current understandings of how neoliberalization has changed the economic structure or institutions and to see how neoliberalization is exercised by the governed. Following Read (2009), neoliberalism, as a modern project is not only sustained by the transformation of the mode of production, but by the mode of subjection, thus a new production of subjectivity. The postulate is that a nuanced comprehension of the influence of neoliberalization on discourses uttered by situated subjects can help understand how neoliberalization is becoming the dominant paradigm in contemporary forestry policy on the ground.

### 1.1. Context of the native forest debate

In Chile the economic transformations conducted by the Pinochet military junta during the 1970s fostered a vigorous forestry sector based on non-native tree farms (Cubbage et al., 2007; Gonzáles, 2008). Since 1975 non-native tree cover expanded rapidly. In 1973, Chile had approximately 330,000 ha of forestry plantations; by 2012 it has nearly 2.3 million ha (Camus, 2006; Infor, 2011). Chile not only has increased the afforested area, it has also developed one of the most vigorous forestry sectors worldwide by increasing forestry exports more than a thousand-fold. In 1976, the forestry sector exported US\$36.4 million, by 2010 it exported US\$4954 million (Infor, 2011). The Chilean forestry sector is almost entirely based on large non-native tree farms that are clear-cut every 10 to 20 years, providing one of the highest internal rate of returns in the world (Sedjo, 2001). Today Chile's afforestation results are often seen as an example for developing countries.

Yet, the quick Chilean forestry expansion did not come without detractors. Opponents of afforestation through monoclonal tree plantations questioned the rapid forestry expansion in social and environmental grounds. Opponents have characterized the model as highly reliant on state subsidies and the seizing of public institutions for private interest; as creating an industrial monopsony due to its highly concentrated pattern of land and facilities tenure; as being a poor provider of jobs and one of the main drivers of rural poverty and migration to urban centers (AIFBN, 2011). On environmental grounds, the forestry development has been accused of jeopardizing biodiversity and hydrological processes due to the management practices used (Frêne and Núñez-Ávila, 2010; Reyes and Nelson, 2014). Some plantations were done by replacing native forest with extensive monoclonal tree farms of non-native species (Echeverría et al., 2006; Lara et al., 1989). In summary, the Chilean afforestation model was very successful in establishing a competitive export sector, but without much consideration for the localities or the environment, which suggests that the voice of rural associations and associations of small landowners would be relevant for the development of a new forestry legislation.

In 1992, the Aylwin administration, the first democratic government after the Pinochet dictatorship, decided to create a new law to protect and manage the native forest. The original version of the Native Forest Bill included regulations for forest cuttings, subsidies for plantations and a ban on native forest replacement by non-native species (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2008). In only 21 months, the bill passed the House of Representatives, but then it took more than 14 years to become a law. The law, passed in 2008, has minor regulations and was meant to promote conservation only through a competitive fund for native species management. By 2011 there were only 231 applications, affecting 1179 ha of the 7.3 million ha available; this is a 0.016% of the area available for productive

management (CONAF, 2012; Informe País Estado del Medio Ambiente, Chile, 1999).

Arnold (2003) examined the first 10 years of congressional discussion and identified four relevant actors in the discussion of Chile's Native Forest Bill: the government, the National Wood Corporation (Corporación Nacional de la Madera, CORMA), the environmentalist coalition, and the United Peasant and Ethnic Movement of Chile (Movimiento Unitario Campesino y Etnias de Chile, MUCECH). The National Wood Corporation or CORMA is the forestry *gremio* (trade association). CORMA was established in 1952 by foresters and entrepreneurs with the aim of representing "their interest before the country and the authorities" (CORMA, 2010). Since its origins, CORMA has been linked to state and businessmen, as the case of former President Alessandri Rodríguez illustrates.<sup>1</sup> Compared to CORMA, the environmentalist actors do not have a long history.<sup>2</sup> Most of the environmental NGOs involved in the discussion bill were established in the late 1980s and early 1990s and were composed by local, national and international NGOs (Ulianova and Estenssoro, 2010). In addition to the *gremio* and the environmental groups, an actor who came later to the discussion, was the Chilean Unitarian Social Movement of Peasant and Ethnicities (Movimiento Unitario Campesino y Etnias de Chile MUCECH). MUCECH was established in 1987 as an advocate for peasants and indigenous groups. MUCECH claims to represent 1.2 million people owning 1 million ha of native forest, which is a third of the native forest in the hands of small and medium landowners (Leyton, 2009; MUCECH, 2010). In this context, it seems relevant to examine the discourses uttered by these organizations, as means to gain a better understanding of their core ideas and differences among actors. In this way, I also aim to explain the outcome of 16 years of congressional discussion, while responding to broader theoretical questions regarding how the owner becomes the main subject of a neoliberal governance of forest in Chile. This paper analyzes the discourses uttered by stakeholders that were involved in the discussion of the Native Forest Law (NFL).<sup>3</sup>

This paper is organized in the following way: (1) the theoretical approach; (2) the data sources and methods; (3) the discourses identified and a comparison of each discourse to the environmental discourse literature; and (4) the commonalities and differences among discourses. The final section of this study discusses the key points regarding neoliberalization and forestry policy in Chile.

## 2. Discursive approach to policy

The first question to ask is: "How is policy constructed and how can we account for the way that a given policy is co-produced within social contexts?" To answer this question this study applies a discursive approach to policy-making. In simple terms, discourses are shared world-views expressed through language in use. Human beings are not able to process and make sense of all the information from the environment. We filter, simplify, process, communicate and negotiate ideas through

<sup>1</sup> The case of Arturo Alessandri Rodríguez is a telling example of the multifaceted links between forest entrepreneurs and the Chilean state. From 1936 to his death, Alessandri was CEO of a key CORMA stakeholder, the Paper and Cardboard Manufacturing Company (Compañía Manufacturera de Papeles y Cartones, CMPC). Alessandri left CMPC direction twice; one of them when he became president of Chile in 1958 (Clavel et al., 1996). His legacy is such that CORMA holds his annual fair at the park with his name. In addition, Alessandri's sister was married to Arturo Matte Larraín; one of the founders of the CMPC. Matte was senator and Minister of economics in the forties and fifties.

<sup>2</sup> The only exception is the National Committee for Flora and Fauna Defense (CODEFF Comité Nacional Pro Defensa de la Fauna y Flora); it was established by Chilean and American conservation biologists in 1968.

<sup>3</sup> I did not include in my analysis the Mapuche communities. No organization representing specifically the interest of the Mapuche People was involved in the NFL discussion (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2008) despite the fact that the Mapuche people lives where most of the tree farms are located (Henríquez, 2008) and that the native forest has a profound signification in their culture and religion (Bacigalupo, 2007). For a deeper comprehension of the relationships between the Mapuche people and Chilean policies see Richards (2010, 2013) and Clapp (1998b).

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