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The many natures of water in Latin American neo-extractivist conflicts[4]

Thousands of diverse 'water protectors' representing different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds throughout the American continent are standing firm against the destruction of ecological systems carried out by extractive development projects. One recent example concerning indigenous peoples has been the mobilization carried out by the Hunkpapa Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota Native American people of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline project is a $3.8 billion investment to move 500,000 barrels of domestic crude oil a day through four U.S. states. If constructed, the Dakota pipeline would pass through sacred burial grounds as well as the Missouri river – the main water source for the Standing Rock Sioux population. David Archambault II, the tribal chairman, recently stated: 'The U.S has its laws, and pipelines know how

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to comply with all the laws, but just because something is legal, that does not make it right. And so, what we are trying to do is expose the wrongs and the flaws with the permitting process of pipelines (…) I think there are a lot of similarities between indigenous peoples (…) what is important to us is the earth, and it is the same for all indigenous people, *we protect the relatives that we have*, and those relatives are the plant life, the animal life, the water. *We don't think about them as resources*, we think of them as actual beings that are precious to us, and it's indigenous peoples who share that'.[5] In what follows, we would like to explore how water can '*not only',* to say it with Marisol de la Cadena´s (2015) words, be conceived of as a natural resource ready to be extracted, used, and transformed by and for human desire and consumer needs or capital profit. Strongly moved by David's words, in this article we will think about water as entailing ontological political conflict, namely, a 'conflict involving different assumptions about what exists' (Blaser 2013; 547). These conflicts are not new, and there are a lot of similarities between the Dakota Pipeline conflict involving the Standing Rock Sioux population and those involving indigenous peoples in Latin America. For example, the Huichol indigenous peoples in Mexico are struggling to protect their sacred territory of Wirikuta from mining extraction. Similarly, the Diaguita communities in the Andean mountains bordering Chile and Argentina, are demanding the halt of mining projects in glacier-fed river headwaters because it will destroy "Yacurmama or Mayumaman", that is to say the mother of water. Nevertheless, state institutions, transnational corporations, and many water experts hardly thought of them as entailing different politics of nature, and indigenous claims are generally dismissed as pertaining to "cultural beliefs", or "strategic slogans". Yet, what would happen if the actors just mentioned were trained in thinking that water is *not only* a natural resource, but it can also be, among other multiple options, a relative too?

In this article, we want to reflect upon a particular learning experience in which academics engaged in a dialogue about ontological politics with people outside

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https://www.facebook.com/IndigenousPeopleOfAmerica/videos/1298547666842450/?pnref=story

academic circles, a dialogue in which we experimented with the idea that water might be a resource, *but not only*.

The story we are about to reveal, took place last year, at the 7th annual International Course-Workshop on Water Justice in the city of Cali, Colombia[6]. The Course-Workshop is a ten-day, intensive programme that provides a space for opening up a dialogue about the impact of neo-extractivist practices in water conflicts and injustices in Latin America. It is based on critical pedagogies, such as "participatory action research" (PAR), a political and lived experience grounded on popular education that aims to move away from the binary, hierarchical, and exclusionary mentality of eurocentrism and capitalism (Fals Borda, 1996; Freire, 2001). In the context of environmental problems, PAR provides a way to comprehend human and non-human relationships, and to learn from the people whose knowledge is systematically made invisible or whose being in the world is denied existence (Santos, 2009). The aim is to enable participants to become active learners in the production and construction of knowledge, side by side with people who are confronting water related-injustices, as well as with course facilitators and teachers, who are equally subject to the same learning process (Freire, 2001).

The pedagogical approach of this course builds on the critique of intellectuals such as Gustavo Esteva, Vandana Shiva, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, all scholars proposing different ways to resist hegemonic discourses and practices of modern development. The course, thus, provides the opportunity for ecologists, activists, engineers, lawyers, anthropologists and other water professionals to critically engage in a reflexive exploration of their own relations with water conflicts and that of various epistemic communities, including academic, activist and popular knowledge. On the academic side, participants are introduced to different water approaches by scholars in various fields of study, such as political ecology, critical studies of law, cultural studies, social movement theory, science of technology studies, gender and development studies, conflict resolution and environmental justice. On the other side, activists play an important role in the course, because, as practitioners, they

[6] For more information about the course, please visit: www.justiciahidrica.org.

provide invaluable *know-how*. The programme, thus, offers a wider political ecology perspective about 'capitalism', neo-extractivist conflicts, resistance, and social movements, and, at the same time, focuses on exploring how it is that the 'the diversity of the world is infinite'; on how 'the world is made up of multiple worlds, multiple ontologies or reals that are far from being exhausted by the Eurocentric experience or reducible to its terms" (Escobar 2015: 15). Thus, the course opens the way to thinking about water beyond nature – culture divides.

Accordingly, one of the workshops during the course presented anthropological ideas arising from academic settings, ideas particularly related to the need to abandon '*culturalist*' approaches to understand differences within neo-extractivist conflicts. It invited students to develop ontological frameworks to analyse such conflicts. These frameworks invited the participants to abandon widespread multicultural ideas for which *the* world - one world- appears strongly defined by nature-culture divides. These multicultural realities are mostly organized upon the premise that there is one shared human nature upon which differences emerge as 'cultural differences'. From this perspective, water tends to be understood as a natural resource to which humans 'culturally' attribute different meanings. This multicultural grid for organizing realities through the distinction between natural resources and the cultural meanings attached to them, situates differences at the level of 'cultural beliefs' as an isomorphic and renewed version of what Whitehead (1920) has called the "bifurcation of nature", "the strange and fully modernist divide between primary and secondary qualities" (Latour 2004: 2). For the multicultural grid, the primary quality of water is that *it is* a resource upon which secondary qualities, such as cultural beliefs, are attached. This division allows us to think that what water extraction practices do, for instance, is to extract only the primary and 'natural' qualities of water, leaving its secondary qualities within the human imagination. This multicultural logic strongly emphasizes the rational idea, that first there is only one Nature and that human culture dominates it, second that cultural difference is a matter of symbolic difference, and that the dominant and more developed epistemology is that of science, the rest are mere "cultural beliefs" (Escobar 2012, Latour 2004).

In the vast field of Political Ecology, and its analytical tendency to focus on the 'politics of who' (who has the right to act, speak and to have access to the resource), this multicultural grid to understand water issues is widespread. Let us briefly consider just one example of how this multicultural approach informs part of the Political Ecology scholarship. Think about the conceptualization of environmental conflicts as emerging from different and, most of the time, incommensurable 'languages of valuation' (see Martinez Alier 2008). Even if these 'languages of valuation' have been a substantial contribution to considering environmental conflicts out-of-the-box of 'conventional economic accounting', conflicting differences in environmental conflicts appear as 'secondary qualities, as 'cultural' outcomes of different 'languages of valuation'. Put it differently, even if the nature-culture divide has been strongly questioned by political ecologists, a particular analytical premise that separates the knower from the known, the subject from the object, or, in more anthropological terms, culture from nature, it still needs to be further deconstructed. For this logic, the differences at stake in environmental conflicts correspond to 'cultural differences', or 'cultural beliefs', or even to differences in the 'languages of valuation' of one world 'out-there'. In short, 'Nature' remains singular, culture remains plural.

Alternatives to this stabilized multicultural approach have been offered by different scholars working in Anthropology and in Science of Technology Studies. For instance, the work of Viveiros de Castro in Amazonia and its thought provoking -ethnographically grounded- concept of 'multi-naturalism' (see Viveiros 2004), as well as the 'ontological politics' concept by Annemarie Mol (1999), which has inspired the project on Political Ontology proposed by Mario Blaser, Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar, are all conceptual repertories that overcome, in different ways, multicultural approaches, re-conceptualizing difference in ontological terms. What is relevant for these kinds of inquiries is not only the '*politics of who'* but also the '*politics of what'* (op .cit), the kind of realities that are produced in practice in the relationship between humans and non-humans. For Mol, for instance, the 'what' is not seen as a result of cultural beliefs, or as an object 'out-there' that is valued differently by different languages. Instead, the 'what', the 'object', appears as an object multiple

that cannot be known in univocal ways, but which can be practiced differently. There is not just 'an object', there is *more than one*, or in other words, a multiple object. There are not different languages of valuation of an 'object' -one water 'valued' differently- but multiple natures of water.

While there is insufficient space here to share all the details of the ethnographic events mobilized in the workshop, following is a summary of the most significant events. For example, the environmental destruction of Mapuche indigenous communities was not univocally explained through epistemological narratives based on nature-culture divides, but by the consideration of multi-natural dimensions and indigenous human and non-human practices that were more fundamental than the logics of capital and the modern understanding of water as resource. In Callaqui, one of the Pewenche-Mapuche communities located in Alto Bío Bío, Southern Chile, water places, or *menokos*, dried up because of the withdrawal of the specific spiritual entities, the *ngenko*. These spiritual entities "autonomously" decided to leave their traditional water places when facing the land division and eucalyptus forest plantations, which was encouraged and put into practice by the Pinochet administration. *Menokos* were necessary for the cattle, as they could drink water from the streams, but also, medicinal herbs used to grow near these water places and herbalists could collect these herbs with relative ease, without having to travel far. Nowadays, a lack of water is one of the major problems in this community, and during the last years a special municipal truck has periodically distributed water among the inhabitants during the summer. The land division just mentioned, however, did not affect the whole community: half of the community are private owners and the other half still share right over the land. As Pablo, a community member says, "if you compare both, the answer is obvious: those with private rights have lost their streams because the *ngenko* has left, and they do not have water, whereas in this part of the place there are still some streams, and also a few herbs."

After sharing this ethnographic vignette as well as some theoretical reflections on 'ontological disorders' (Bonelli 2012) with the students participating in the workshop, we asked them to think about water conflicts through an ontological framework. We wondered: are these stories entailing just 'cultural beliefs'? Is the

ngenko a secondary quality of a more fundamental primary and 'natural' quality of water? Or could we understand *ngenko* indeed as something similar to a relative, to say it with David's words? Using the theatre of the oppressed methodologies, the students were able to collectively perform different natures of water while immersing themselves in role-playing (Boal, 1993). This required them to put themselves in the shoes of human and non-human "others", an exchange of perspectives that builds ties of empathy, changes one's vision and position when facing different versions of water. Thus, this experience provided an opportunity to discuss the many natures of water at stake in an environmental conflict. The students worked in three groups, each enacting a neo-extractivist conflict in which water was contested.

One of such cases was the U´wa conflict in Colombia. The U´wa people live in the Sierra Nevada de Cocuy, which drains more than 80 rivers and is a very sensitive and complex ecological water system of moorlands (*páramos* in Spanish) and lagoons. In the late 1980s, the National Hydrocarbon Agency authorized the Occidental Petroleum Company (Oxy) to explore the Gibraltar block in the U'wa's people territory. The oil company offered development projects, new houses, healthcare centers and schools, all material stuff that were not of interest to the U'wa. In 1995, the Environmental Ministry authorized oil exploitation in the Samoré block inside U'wa territory. Although Oxy told the government that they had consulted the Uwa population, the Uwa people denied this, saying that their traditional authorities had not been consulted. In 1998, they organized themselves, attracting support from national and international organizations against the oil project (Rodriguez-Garavito & Arenas, 2005).

In their role-plays, students performed different perspectives such as the U'wa territory, the U'wa people, the state representatives and the owners of the petroleum business. *Kajka* (a words in U'wajka language that could be provisionally translated as territory) was enacted by a lagoon performed by a female student, who was sitting down, surrounded by chairs. Water here was fundamental to understanding the U'wa position against oil extraction in their territory. For the U'wa, oil is the blood of the earth, *Ruiria* in U'wajka language. As the blood of the earth, *Ruiria* is the mother of all sacred lagoons (Motta Marroquin et.al., 2000), which not only have life but are

alive, and the blood of the earth or Ruiria works to care for them (2000). In the play, the U'wa people said: *"We are not going to permit any kind of development in our territory. We are fine in our world and we don't want to be in any development world. You must go"*. In fact, the U'wa threatened to commit collective suicide if the company insisted on drilling for oil in their territory.[7] The Oxy Corporation business representative expressed surprise and frustration at the U'wa's position: *"Why don't they want development? It is incredible that they don't understand what could happen: they could improve their culture, it could be a win-win situation in which there is a development process"*. The business representative further asked himself: "*Why are they speaking about different worlds if we are all part of one?*" While the U'wa people enacted a multi-natural world, the Oxy representatives performed a multicultural one constituted by one nature and many cultures. Some cultures, Oxy representatives believed, needed to "improve" and realign towards development and to benefit from economic growth. For the U'wa, in contrast, there was nothing wrong with their world and, at the same time, they did not expect to change the 'white men´s world'. For them, their life had no sense if deprived of the equilibrium and protection of *Ruiria* and other non-human beings (Osborn, 1995).

This illustrates how students were trained in recognizing how water conflicts could be conceptualized as entailing ontological politics. What was at stake in this conflict was not cultural systems, nor was it languages of valuation. Instead, it was a totally different practical understanding about what counts as real. Oil, from the Uw'a perspective, *is* the blood of the earth. Through the pedagogical methodology, the theatre of the oppressed, students were able to perform conflicts in which relations with different natures of water were at stake.

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As part of the reflexive pedagogies of the course, the day after the workshop three students organized a creative feedback in which they had to summarize the key

[7] The U'wa people have committed collective suicide in the past. U'wa oral history tells how a number of U'was committed suicide by jumping The Cliff of Death rather than give themselves up to the Conquistadores (Freitas, 1998). Freitas, Terrence (1998) Blood of our mother Report.

learning components of the previous day. That day, for the first time, they invited the group to go outside the classroom, to participate in a special activity they had prepared at a small lake surrounded by a tropical forest. There they asked all of us to form a circle, to close our eyes, and be silent. They then exposed us to different kinds of smells and sensations, while passing around different kinds of fruits for us to taste, carambolo, uva isabela, uchuvas and mangos, all fruits that grow in Colombia. We were asked to guess the fruit by how it tasted, felt and smelt. Afterwards, they asked us to reopen our eyes.

In the center of the circle, we saw the fruits. Beautiful fruits, they went on, that we should consider as fundamental actors in our understandings of ecologies. At first glance, they added, these fruits might be described as 'just' fruits, or in botanic jargon, seed-bearing structures in flowering plants. For many people, fruits are not water, they are made of water, and while they are not political actors, they are objects mobilized in human politics. For the students, conversely, carambolo, uva isabela, uchuvas and mangos were more than 'just' fruits, more than 'just' passive prey for humans. They also said that the infinite diversity that exists outside academic circles could be seen as a source for learning processes in environmental conflicts. The diverse entities that exist outside academic circles, they said, can teach us something about a kind of politics that goes beyond the political ecology's emphasis on the *politics of who*. We could benefit from attending and learning from those different natures that are at stake in water conflicts. They also invited us to produce knowledge from and for the local ecologies we work with. This whole activity, they said, was an invitation to '*change our vision*'. In the encounter with ontological difference, what counts as our senses also changes, they said. To engage with other worlds might entail the dissolving of all the senses. Thus, they said, fruits are not just made of water, they are water, or they are different ontological versions of water that have active roles within the ecologies in which we work. They emphasized that changing our vision entails two big challenges: first, developing a sensibility that takes into consideration those unstable ontological differences present in our field-site, and second, cultivating a sensibility that re-situates knowledge production processes outside academic circles. In this way, the students helped us to become aware of the need to multiply the

worlds and languages involved in water conflicts in Latin America, *as we are all always part of ontological politics.*

Interestingly enough, the student's reflection of the many natures of water taught us the importance of opening up the dialogue for thinking about "difference" among water professionals. If fruits are water, then could they also be considered, as the Standing Rock Sioux people say at the beginning of this article, our relatives? This was not something easy to grapple with, but through role playing and creative pedagogical methodologies, engineers, lawyers, activists, and academics put aside their own pretensions and suspicions about each other, and engaged in a humble and interdependent conversation with themselves and non-human agents such as water.

Reflecting on the lived experience of the course and seriously considering the feedback provided by the students, we are invited to think that the study of neo-extractivist conflicts where water is at stake might benefit from 1) not taking for granted what water is 2) cultivating a genuine dialogue between various water worlds, those of activists, professionals, indigenous peoples, peasants, and so on, including that of academia, and 3) developing a critical and reflexive learning process that allows young water professionals, researchers, activists and authorities to 'change their vision' and to define some new politics when facing multiple water worlds.

These teachings and learning experiences do not end with this ten-day course. After the course, participants go back to their different countries and share with others a wide range of conceptual, methodological and practical tools for confronting water conflicts. Through political action and collective work, former students create water justice action groups that confront the somehow stagnant position of academia, are critical towards mere activism and promote self-reflection. Previous students have become activists in Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia. They are taking the first steps towards a water justice action network, inviting us to realize that the wider project of political ontology should not only be concerned with ontological conflicts, but might also benefit from a serious consideration of how to create an 'ontological poetics', namely, a generative and open-ended non-violent exploration about what counts as solidarity, inter-dependence, and collective action. Because the

mobilization against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline concerns the Standing Rock Sioux population, but not only.

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