

A visit to a fracking zone in Patagonia

Por Santini Daniel · 07/08/2015

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[Campo Maripe, Mapuche community surrounded by unwelcome industry](#)

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I have decided to finish this piece on the same day that Eduardo Galeano leaves us, a giant who showed all of us exactly *how* open our veins really were in Latin America. Finishing today is not a coincidence. I'm left threading together my memories of Galeano with my impressions and remaining questions following a journey to one of the many sacrifice zones in this country. Regions where the residents are not consulted on the destiny of that which sustains life itself. Sacrifice zones, localized cruelty reflecting the international division of labor. Today's topic is "neo-extractivism", served by the same people who brought us extractivism, just in a new cup.

Campo Maripe is a *Lof* (Mapuche community) located on top of the world's second-largest known shale gas deposit, known as Vaca Muerta (*dead cow* in English). It could be said to be the community most impacted by fracking. In my case it didn't take more than half an hour of walking around the area for me to get a headache and an itchy nose. Not only does the community suffer the pollution created by fracking, but also the constant traffic of pickups and transport trucks which destroy their roads.

The *Lonko* (Mapuche authority) has been demanding for days that they repair the most recently destroyed path, but nothing happens. The community's animals suffer regular accidents, usually falling into one of the many ditches opened to install pipes. While old roads are destroyed, forests are cut down to make way for new roads. Oil returns to the surface regularly, after having a little dirt thrown on top of it. And there are many more etceteras to add to this list. One of the most striking sights around here is the never-ending line of trucks transporting the 9 to 29 million liters of water required for each well. All in a province that suffers from a serious water shortage. Of course, as the trucks wait, the hoses keep running. Unlike the non-conventional hydrocarbons trapped in the rock thousands of meters below and invisible to the human eye, the horror of the various kinds of contamination is seen and felt everywhere on the surface.

I can confirm the list of dangers that accompany fracking, a reality which these communities and their organizations have been studying and rejecting since the province's first well was tapped in 2009. Allow me to correct myself, if "danger" is what Merriam-Webster calls "the possibility of suffering harm or injury" then this is now the possibility of *worsening* the already existing reality of contamination by an industry that has never been regulated as it should be.

Gas leaks, oil spills (the most recent being this past February) are now commonplace.** The people here point out the conspicuous absence of the employees of the province's Environment Ministry. The ministry says they have five trucks patrolling the region, but people here say they've only ever seen one.

The most distinctive impacts of fracking are: an astonishing consumption of water; deficient or absent management of the water that isn't consumed, left carrying the chemicals used to frack (whose composition the companies aren't obligated to declare); noises and visual impacts; contamination of the land, air, flora and fauna;

opening of new roads; deforestation and seismic activity. All of this, of course, is denied by professionals at the service of the companies and the state, who assure us that this practice, when done well, doesn't carry major risks. Nonetheless, the reality being lived throughout the world contradicts them. Fracking was only made possible in the United States, for example, thanks to the so-called Halliburton Amendment that exempts companies from the environmental regulations constraining other industries.

What's more, hydrocarbon extraction isn't the only activity around here threatening to displace the people. For five months now, this same community has been keeping a close eye on its fences. Ever since a logging baron from the neighbouring town of Añelo, whose business is poplar tree monoculture, tried to lock them out of their own land. In other words, over and above their normal work, these folks are forced to become the regulators of all the activities that nobody is regulating.

There is an overwhelming amount of traffic of 4x4 trucks, the majority of which belong to foreign companies. Their profits are in the millions, supported by special legislation in their favour like the new Hydrocarbons Law passed in December 2014 exempting the companies from consulting communities before beginning to frack.

The closest town, Añelo, has been a center of the Argentinian oil industry since the 1980s. Three decades later it is rich in drugs, prostitution, gambling and will soon have luxury hotels, but still doesn't have a hospital. A perfect summary of the progress that they sell us. That bubble that always bursts. The oil workers, with monthly wages around 30,000 Argentinian Pesos (\$4,000 CAD), can get their hands on the shiny SUV, the plasma TV, and the rest of the products that the North will continue selling us as development and progress; and that this self-titled 'national people's government' will continue selling as "serious capitalism", to quote

President Cristina Fernández. Serious in the sense that nobody is laughing, despite all the talk of Latin Americanism and the *Patria Grande*.

What will we breathe when it's difficult to breathe? Where will we find drinkable water? What will the land provide for us when there's nothing left? For them, these questions aren't worth answering. Meanwhile many "docile servants of official thought", to borrow a term used by Che Guevara, get to call themselves progressives by speaking about decolonization in the universities, while providing very little space for real critical thought where we might ask: What is progress? Progress for whom?

Three hours is not enough time to see all the wells. During those three hours I didn't see one single bird, not one *coyke*, nor any other of the wild animals characteristic of the region. The community's goats were busy trying to negotiate artificial obstacles.

For 360º, towers and machinery mark the horizon of a landscape so vast and beautiful that it both surprises and fills one's soul. It was here in 2013 that the community, with the support of *Confederación Mapuche de Neuquén* (Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén) and other supportive organizations like the *Multisectorial Contra la Hidrofractura* (Coalition Against Fracking), occupied a series of wells. The cost of that action was having their meeting house burnt to the ground.

All this activity has been illegal since the beginning. The community was never consulted, as Convention 169 of the ILO requires of states when dealing indigenous peoples. A convention that Argentina ratified in 2000. The good news is that, as a result of their never-ending struggle, the community was given legal status in October of 2014. As of writing they are currently carrying out the long-promised demarcation of their territory.

Upon our return I graciously thank those who overcome fatigue and time lost from their other work in order to show and explain the dispossession they're living. The six sisters who two years ago chained themselves to Chevron's wells, along with their brother and other family members, take turns patrolling for signs of the invading logger baron. This is how they resist here. Better to fill our lungs with that.

Afternoon was falling and I had to get my ticket back to the capital city of Neuquén. As icing on the cake, the *Andesmar* bus was sold out and I had to ride on the *Petrobus*.

In 1991 Galeano wrote the book *Ser como ellos* (Being Like Them). Today, flying in the face of all the talk about national sovereignty is the reality of the terms of the contracts which guarantee enormous profits at the cost of the lives of our peoples. Those in the countryside living together with the oil wells. Those in town who live beside the company's toxic waste dump. Those who once lived alongside farms, now replaced by the panacea of fracking. Those displaced by Neuquén's booming tourism industry, itself a product of the current petro-expansion. Regardless of if some of us think we actually haven't distanced ourselves so much from our destiny as a colony, nor from the IMF or the World Bank.

Regardless of if we don't believe in the triumphalist speeches about sovereignty. It's worth asking ourselves if in this consumerist madness that destroys both water and land, if we want to continue *being like them* or if we can gather the strength to learn together from the peoples who resist, like the Mapuche people, who defend and regain their conception of the human as a force equal to—not superior to—nature. One of many forces that make up the universe. Because it's simple: without water, without land, there is no life.

I send special thanks to the Lof Campo Maripe and the *Confederación Mapuche de Neuquén*.

* Originally published at [Mediacoop](#) (this article is a translation of the original piece over at [Herramienta](#))

** Translator's note: Since this article was written, another oil spill happened at Campo Maripe on July 14th.

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