

Affects, activisms and resistances facing the impacts of Capitaloceno: an embodied learning experience in Chile

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Abstract

The planetary transformations of Capitalocene affect us in multiple and heterogeneous forms. In this context, activisms emerging as embodied, experiential and situated manifestations of affectation. This article is an exploration of the activisms and resistances against impacts that Capitalocene -specifically, the extractivism- has had in Chilean society, from the perspective and experience of our own trajectories as global south academics and activists, committed to the entanglements that emerge constantly in the face of the impacts.

Our work refers to the affects and resistances that we as authors have had the chance to experience in spaces of training and companionship of activists who resist in territories affected by the mining, agro-export and energy industry; and those who studied the Diploma in Social Ecology and Political Ecology from the Group of Agroecology and the Environment at the University of Santiago, offered between 2013 and 2017. Based on these experiences, we argue that the "affective turn" offers an indispensable perspective about hegemony, resistances and political changes in the current crisis.

Keywords

Affects; extractivism; activism; resistances.

Introduction

This article is an exploration of our affectation and personal involvement with the destructive consequences of extractivism in Chile. Extractivism refers to the actualization and enhancement of a colonialist matrix of production in the Capitalocene (Ulloa, 2017) that transforms the corpo-materialities of the Global South in “raw material” for the global market (Gudynas, 2009; Svampa, 2013; Mansilla, 2017). In Latin America, this modality has been embodied not only by governments openly in favour of this approach but also for political coalitions self-defined as centre-left, under the promise of generating wealth for the whole population. It is also a continuation with colonial relations installed during the European rule, but perpetuated and reinforced by the local elites that inherited the states formed in the XIX century (González-Casanova, 2006).

Even though this promise has been broken on several occasions, this rupture is not an unexpected outcome, but rather a required condition of capitalism and the modern-colonial form of power that has shaped our region (Quijano, 2011). The intense exploitation leaves a legacy of pollution, drought and destruction that generates “unlivable” lives (Butler, 1993, p.3), uninhabitable territories and “sacrifice zones” (Holifield & Day, 2017; Bolados & Sánchez, 2017; Maino et Al., 2019).

In our trajectories as educators, researchers and activists, we have witnessed how the malaise of the unlivable pushes the desire to act; that is, the resistances and insurrections (Rolnik, 2019, p.90). In Chile, these insurrections have managed to stale the development of energy projects, production and infrastructure (Carruthers, 2001, p.350-358; Schaeffer, 2017, p.93-94) and they seem to have reached a climax in the demonstrations of October 2019.

In our own biographies, this malaise has motivated our own insurrect desire to act (Rolnik, 2019, p.90). With the support of the Agroecology and Environment Group (Grupo de Agroecología y Medio Ambiente, GAMA) from Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH) we designed and implemented a Diploma in Social and Political Ecology between 2013 and 2017, by María Paz Aedo as teacher coordinator and Gabriela Cabaña as a student and then a teacher. We managed to frame this formative programme under the figure of “outreach” without the pressure of professional or

research orientations that are abundant in university courses of specialization. Thanks to that we constituted the Diploma as a space open to the exploration of affects through the exchange of testimonies, embodied experiences and thoughts of teachers and students. All with the aim of strengthening their potential for resistance and transformation (Koch, 2017; Cvetkovich, 2012).

To give account of this process, this article is organised in three sections. First, we describe our experiences of the “unlivable” in territories affected by four of the main sectors of our extractive matrix: mining, agribusiness, forestry and energy. Then we refer to how we engage with the affective turn as an onto-epistemological context for our academic and political work. Finally, we offer our perspective on the trajectories and derived consequences of the Diploma as a liminal space rather than a formative one.

Methodologically, our story relies on autoethnographic research. We explore our experience as actors embedded in reality (Hernández-Hernández, 2008, p.92), reflecting on the origin, development and unexpected effects of this space of learning. We have made use of our field notes elaborated in the context of our volunteering and companionship to communities and organizations in resistance; our reflections on processes of immersion, transitions and emergent phenomena in the context of the Diploma; and our experience participating in the “weaving” created with the alumni of that process. We aim explicitly at going beyond the supposition of autobiographical experiences as subjective and untransferable, claiming “the indissoluble mix between the traditionally called objective and subjective dimensions” through our narrative (Blanco, 2012, p.172)

Unlivable territories

Our story-journey on unlivable lives and sacrifice zones starts in the Atacama desert, the driest in the world. Most of the mining activity has been developed there, copper in particular, which is known as “Chile’s salary” due to the centrality of its exports to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In the hegemonic development imaginary, the desert is an “almost” empty, “almost” lifeless place. What damage could a few explosions here and there on a few bugs and a few people do, compared to all the richness that the mining business generates? Even the environmentalist mainstream associates “nature” to “green”. How could the exploitation of a few square kilometres of barren land be significant?

But the desert is not “empty”. Its subtle threads of water and underground watersheds have sustained endemic wildlife, together with peasant and indigenous people, for hundreds of years. Life in the desert, a conjunction of water, soil, sun, beings and seeds, has been revered and embodied by the Quechua, Colla and Aymara – among other – people. In contrast, mining makes an intensive use of water in its processes and generates a huge amount of toxic residues that pile in pits, known as tailing dams, from which filtrations and particulate material pollute the air and the water. For decades, mining has been extracting and polluting the water basins that sustain the life in the desert, causing destruction in the valleys, the death of endemic species, displacement and precarisation of human communities (Quiroga et Al., 2003; Manzur et Al., 2004). In sum, transforming the desert into what it was supposed to be before: an unlivable place.

In the Atacama region, in the city of Chañaral, for over 80 years the state-owned company Codelco threw mining waste to the river and the sea, increasing the coastline almost 2 kilometres offshore (Cortés, 2010). The beach has a greenish tone, a product of the minerals; the air is loaded with particulate material; the water is full of sediments that are substantially accumulated in and outside the pipes and faucets. The community has denounced the impacts for years and demanded, if not reparation, at least an acknowledgement of the affectations, in order to receive any mitigation or compensation. But in Chile, to confront the largest state-owned company (one of the few survivors of the post-dictatorship privatising wave) is like talking to a wall. There are no norms that allow a retroactive evaluation of damage, and nothing is more important than “the salary of Chile”. In fact, in 2003, president Ricardo Lagos called the press to show him having a swim in the bay, asserting that the water was clean.



The "green bay" of Chañaral, November 2019

All in all, mining continues to expand. The high flows of money generated through mineral export and the increased precarity of local economies generate a circuit of mutual dependency. The State needs money for social policies, people need money for living, and – in the context of neoliberal globalisation – businesses need "comparative advantages" to justify their investments. The norms, purposely lax in their search to attract investment, and the externalisation of social-ecological costs to guarantee the profit have sustained the mining and the extractive industry (Aedo & Larraín, 2004). Worse, in Chile the social benefits are scarce and arrive slowly or not at all, because of the historical obedience to the Washington Consensus (1989) that has forced the state to reduce public spending and leave the provision of social services to the market (Quiroga et Al., 2003). On top of that, the effect of climate change is devastating and synergistic: the rain does not freeze on top of the mountains, and the water creates mudslides that drag downwards not just clay, but the mining waste that has been accumulating there. This happened in 2015 and 2017.

For the mudslide of 2015, I travelled with a friend to collaborate with the delivery of help to the affected. When we landed in the capital of the province, Copiapó, we were greeted by a strong smell of chemicals coming from the ground. We confirmed that it is practically impossible to move by land in the region because the roads are blocked and overflowing with mud. A student of mine, a teacher in the Music Public School, takes us to some help collection centres. The scenery is apocalyptic. The river of mud has not

receded, and the city is practically buried under the soil. Many people stand outside their houses in desolation at confronting the strength of the catastrophe. In between overturned cars, destroyed houses and the pungent odour of the contaminated mud, we see military trucks passing by. A shiver goes through our bodies, remembering the dictatorship. Our skin itches in the places where it has come in contact with the mud, the eyes burn, the smell is simply unbearable in some places. It is an open secret that the mud is full of mining waste. The heat and the wind form clouds of dust even inside the houses. It is scary to breathe, to watch the military, to feel the itch. Quickly the official press and the government declare that there are no waste dams affected, and that the soil of the slides is not polluted. But my body knows that normal mud does not itch or smell of chemicals (Paz, field notes).

We continue our travelling towards the centre of the country, where export-oriented agribusiness has invaded the fields historically oriented to the internal market. The food market, in the context of globalisation, moves in virtue of prices, above considerations like energy use, transportation time, the pressure it puts on ecosystems and the impacts on health (Manzur et Al., 2004; Valdés & Godoy, 2017). Governments promote monocultures to satisfy international demand, disregarding production for domestic consumption. Chile, world food power (Chile, potencia alimentaria) was an official slogan promoted in 2006.

Additionally, the 1980 constitution (imposed by the dictatorship and still in place) defines water not just as a public good, but also as an “economic good”. Due to this definition, the Chilean State grants property rights over the use of water to individuals and corporations, those buy and sell water without any regulation other than supply and demand over prices. This has concentrated the property of water rights among a few big agribusinesses and constrained the possibilities of life in the countryside for small and medium producers. The production of avocados, for example, has dried the basins of whole communities, taking local farmers to bankruptcy and reduced water availability below the sanitary limits (Guerrero, 2019).

Just like in the northern part of the country, the destruction of the economy and local ecosystems forces people to migrate or recur to the big industry for work. But, unlike mining, the agribusiness offers temporary, unsafe and precarious jobs. Pointing

towards “comparative advantages” to attract investment, norms on the use of pesticides are also very lax, working hours too long, and inspection more than deficient (Valdés & Godoy, 2017). The impact of cumulative contact with pesticide and chemical fertilizers on health goes deep to the genetic level (Valdés & Godoy, 2017).

In 2006, the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas) organised a series of local meetings about how they are affected by water privatisation and what can be done, where I was invited as facilitator. After the workshop, we talked while sharing mate and I heard them comment on the problem of one of their friends. Her son was born without his extremities and severe cognitive problems. He cries the whole day. His grandmother looks after him, while the mother and the father work in shifts over 18 hours each, exposing themselves to the toxins. Other participant is outraged because of the illegality of abortion in Chile. This system treats us as disposable bodies that produce and reproduce, no matter the conditions. The silence appears. The looks become sombre. It is the rage (Paz, field notes).

More towards the south, the forestry industry, also export-oriented, sweeps with ecosystems and communities in a territory marked by the presence of Mapuche communities. The Mapuche cosmology, like that of other indigenous people of America, understands the world as an entanglement of human, non-human and more-than-human agents (Marimán et Al., 2006; Ñanculef, 2016) in a perspective that resonates with the affective and post-humanist turn (Rosiek et Al., 2019; Aedo et Al., 2017). Therefore, the destruction of water, soil and other living species due to the wide and homogeneous plantations of two exotic species (pine and eucalyptus) affects their territories, not just their “resources”.

The imaginary of “being Chilean” exoticizes Mapuche resistance epically, because during the conquest these people managed to defeat the Spanish army, forcing the Kingdom of Spain to form agreements on coexistence and uses of their territory. This view homogenizes and stigmatizes the Mapuche people as “fighters” (peleador), admirable in the past but reprehensible in the present. Indians against development, terrorists, ignorant peasants... “Why do you complain?, you are never satisfied with anything, you want everything for free!” say the landowners, businessmen, the police,

the military, the ultra-conservative right, while they displace, reduce and repress communities. The press and the governments of all political tendencies talk about “the Mapuche conflict” as if they –the “conflictive”– were the problem. In the democratic Chilean system, marked by forced consensus, conflicts are solved by suppressing them. The good Indian –as Hale (2004) calls, the “Indio permitido”– is the one that accepts the small subsidies to transform their fields for other exportable products, or that open their doors to the tourist that wants to know their exotic customs. The bad Indian –and its female counterpart, the “India Brava” (Richards 2007) – is the one that insists on their own traditions and ways, not accepting the hegemonic and colonialist role model (Toledo, 2004; Marimán et Al., 2006). Due to their disobedience towards the law, they can be legitimately repressed and even murdered. The Mapuche communities in resistance have in their count most of the dead killed by the police, of political prisoners and even disappearances during the post-1990 centre-left governments.

In Tirúa we find one of the last non-contaminated lakes in Chile, the Lleu Lleu lake. The Mapuche community of the area is taking care of and defending this vital space (in all its levels of complexity) from the threat of forestry companies and mining explorations, specifically the mining project Manto Rojo. Tirúa, just like the entire Araucanía region, has one of the highest poverty indexes of the country. The destruction of the lake would lead them to disaster. In 2008 I travelled to Lleu Lleu to help with a harvest of potatoes and help the mobilization to defend the lonk (head of the community), a political prisoner locked in Nueva Imperial. In his house, towards the night, we had dinner with his wife, sons and other members of the community. Suddenly, someone warns us that a vehicle is coming. Quickly, lights go off and we are told to lay on the ground. The lights look through the window. For long minutes, under the table, when only two minutes ago we were sharing mate and eating tortillas, I feel I have stopped breathing. The fear. (Paz, field notes)

Finally, it is important to highlight that Chile has 8 territories known as “Sacrifice Zones” (Zonas de Sacrificio) (Holifield & Day, 2017; Bolados & Sánchez, 2017; Maino et Al., 2019), affected by the concentration of multiple and synergic impacts from different companies and productive sectors (mainly energy and mining) present in those territories. There, small scale productive activities, like fishing and agriculture,

are practically destroyed, and tourism barely survives. When there are peaks in pollution, the institutional response is to declare themselves incompetent to identify the cause and practically no sanctions are enforced because there are no legal dispositions that enable a synergic or historical environmental impact evaluation (Aedo & Parker, 2020). Besides, the Chilean norms offer a wide range of tolerance to what is considered a “severe” episode of toxicity. The boroughs of Quintero-Puchuncaví-Ventanas are one of those eight zones.

On a cloudy April morning, while going to the University, I listen to an audio message sent by a leader of the organisation Women of the Sacrifice Zone (Mujeres de Zona de Sacrificio). She is in the local surgery, she tells us. A toxic cloud is expanding through the bay and poisoned people keep arriving. They are mostly kids that were in the school when this happened, she keeps saying. “They are bleeding,” she tells us with her voice broken, “I don’t know what else to do.” My legs tremble, I cry. I feel the impulse to run to Quintero, to be there, hug her, help her somehow. But I do not. I am scared of getting sick as well and I would not help in using a spot in the public health system, already too precarious. A few days later I meet with the lawyer that leads the cases and she tells me what happened in her last visit to the area. She talked with one of the women of the family that lives next to the chimneys and that had her daughters, only a couple of months old, in her arms. “She told me she knew she was lost, that she was going to die poisoned and of cancer, like all her family”, she tells me. “But that this –insisting, fighting– was for her, her daughter.” Tears appear. I feel like screaming. (Paz, field notes)

Our engagement with these experiences challenged our academic training as sociologists from two universities that constitute the backbone of Chile’s modernising project, the Universidad de Chile and Universidad Católica, respectively. From a researcher’s point of view, we could see the need to analyse the conflicting rationalities and the failures in the Environmental Impact Assessments from a critical perspective, but we found it insufficient to give an account of the complexities of different forms of abuse and resistances. From the perspective of education, the promotion of an “Enlightened Ecologism” to support resistances had a problematic

colonial undertone. From these concerns, we have come closer to the onto-epistemological perspective known as the affective turn.

Inhabiting the “affective turn”

Our first approximations to the affective turn were linked to the biology of knowing, developed by Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana in their ecological-systemic approach, based on Gregory Bateson theories and research. In this frame, the experience and perspective of the world are interdependent; what we perceive as reality is a co-emergent and multiple phenomena (Varela et Al., 1992). Before separated or essential existences, mind and matter are “patterns of flux” sustained by affectation as the base of our interactions. What we understand as the rational mind is what comes to light in the last stage of emergency, from an “affective tone grounded in the body” (Varela et Al.,54, our translation).

We can relate this outlook with the affects as pre-reflexive, embodied and emergent dynamics with the Spinozian and Deleuzian distinction of affect as potency: what is still about to happen in terms of “reaching the vital power of each body” (Lara, 2015, p.21, our translation). Deleuze's proposal is to acknowledge bodies in virtue of what they are capable of: specifically, overflowing the physical boundaries and conforming dynamic territories understood as “variable perimeters of action of particular potentialities” (Lara, 2015, p.21, our translation). In the encounter with others, the bodies amplify or reduce their territory, that is, the reach of their potency.

Extending the concept of materiality beyond living bodies, we affirm that affects constitute swarms of movement and matter, characterised by the “permeability of the membranes between humans and those others with which it is enmeshed” (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p.16). Hence, we cannot give account of the totality of affectations nor control their emergencies. The bodies that consume polluted water; the seeds that are born from artisanal or biotechnological manipulations; the rivers that are damned and then overflow; the diseases; the resilience and the different forms of care; all conform dynamic weavings where hegemonies and resistances are actualised. In their condition of “creative, generative, mutant and mobile” swarms (Mira, 2017, p. 11, our translation) affects are irreducible phenomena: “though affects are not recognized

cognitively, they are still "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p.15).

This irreducibility does not imply the impossibility of getting closer. In the case of human affections, we can observe the desiring and insurgent movement as a micropolitical expression of vital forces against what limits and disempowers them (Sánchez, 2019; Rolnik, 2019). Within the Capitalocene, anti-extractivist activism emerges as "a fissure in representation" (O'Sullivan, 2001, p.128) from the territorial perimeter imposed by the capitalist hegemonic consensus. This accent on the forms rather than the content of the action invites us to explore an aesthetic of activism; recognize it as a doing, rather than building representations of what it should be.

Observing this doing, the first thing we find is that the desire to push the limits of the possible supposes the experience of impossibility. We have witnessed this where mining pollution, agrochemicals, loss of biodiversity and toxic gas emissions have constrained the potentialities of the territories until making them "unlivable". There, extractivism is configured as a policy of exploitation "that assigns value to certain lives over others. It discriminates and leaves aside the right to live and the protection of life, in exchange for progress (...)" (Sánchez, 2019, p.63). Exploitation affects all agents, human and non-human. Soils, waters, air and various forms of life are turned into merchandise within the production, export and consumption circuits. Thus, the native forest has less value than the fast-growing exotic species, more efficient at producing wood and pulp. River water must be channelled and dammed to satisfy agribusiness, so it will not be "wasted in the sea," as businessmen in the industry have explicitly stated. In the Capitalocene, all materiality that does not participate in the economic circuit is deemed useless. The same goes for the bodies of people, because "when you take a human being away from the control of their land, their institutions, means of work and instruments of leisure, what remains? Their body (...) completely redundant, nobody demands a gesture from them (...) neither the motherland nor society need it" (Alba Rico, 2016, p.118, our translation).

Incidentally, the experience of dispossession and exploitation "it is just as prone to set troubling emotions into motion as it is to create comfortable relations" (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p.16). Resistances may emerge together with disempowerment,

combining “emotions usually held as opposites: nostalgia with the passion for utopian vision; the politics of life itself with the specter of mass extinction; melancholia with anticipation; mourning for the past with a brutalist passion for the not-yet” (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p.13).

Capitalism directly impacts the production of affectivities, under what we can call a “political economy of affects in advanced capitalism” (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018 p. 12). At the level of subjectivities, capitalist hegemony needs to transform the desires for well-being into “continuous insufficiency”, to sustain the dynamics of consumption and growth; and the desire to act in “individual responsibility”, to sustain competition, promote privatizations and justify the reduction of nation-states as guarantors of rights.

Under this form of supply-chain capitalism we are incorporated in forms of self-exploitation (Tsing, 2009) and precarious working conditions (Zafra, 2017), both to sustain and to change our conditions of possibility. Under these premises, conservative and liberal sectors of the right accuse activists who fight for collective rights as being “lazy” and “wanting everything for free”. At the same time, sectors of the traditional left accept precariousness and self-exploitation as a condition for political life. In the Chilean popular tradition, the Víctor Jara’s song “*El Aparecido*” tributes Che Guevara by saying: “he never complained of cold, he never complained of sleepiness” (“*nunca se quejó del frío, nunca se quejó del sueño*”). Clearly, none of us could ever achieve such a de-corporealized ideal, but in the imaginary of the Latin American activist, the figure looms heavily. This creates a “loop of impossibility” that disempowers and causes pains (Aedo et Al., 2017, p.387): “I have to be able to” (“*yo tengo que poder*”) as we hear frequently among activists; together with “what I do is not enough” (“*lo que hago no es suficiente*”). In our experiences inside movements, organizations and political parties, we have seen this loop favoring the emergence of two phenomena: the authoritarianism of the leader as a “savior” —as he or she is the only one able to carry the others to the right place— and the corruption of the leader as “martyr” -when she or he feel the need to compensate her sacrifice somehow-.

The affections produced by the Capitalocene are also responsible for depression as a material expression of the annulment of the vital force, of the dispossession of all

power. Depression can be understood as “a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p.11). In Chile, at the Center for Studies of Conflict and Social Cohesion (COES), at the beginning of 2019, the figure of diagnosed depression was estimated at 18.2% of the national population, a high value considered the world average (12%). “It was not depression, it was capitalism,” said graffiti from Santiago during the 2019 revolts. In this political economy of affects when the malaise emerges as a collective movement it is considered an irrational event “that sprouts from a physical sensation of anger that is not under control and that pushed individuals to a multitudinous chaos of uncontrolled actions” (Foster, 2016, p.72, our translation). This outrage must be contained by public policy and the economic decisions, supposedly free of subjectivities and effervescences (Barandiaran, 2016; Aedo & Parker, 2020). The supposition of mobilization as “irrational” of a domesticable other permeates through definitions of “nature” as well. There is a good nature, that serves the interest of humans or that must be saved and preserved for contemplative enjoyment; and the “bad” and dangerous, that threatens with overflowing and that we need to manage as much as possible (volcanic eruptions, flooding, earthquakes, all very frequent in our country). At the same time, there are “good” citizens that comply with the forms of participation offered by the government and receive the benefits delivered by companies, and the “bad” that does not conform to the offers of the policy apparatus and that overflow the responsive capacity of the current government.

But the conflict is not a state of effervescence but rather a phenomenon immanent to coexistence. In line with the openings of the affective turn, we need to give up on the search of the organic utopia (we are all a harmonic and non-conflictive body) and the ideal of the entrepreneur (we all meet in the efficient market). In virtue of its affects, different intensities get activated and entwined in different temporalities and places, generating events, ways of inhabiting the possible (Stengers, 2014). Thus, the importance of paying attention to events, rituals of encounter among those affected, favourable to the emergence of new possibilities of resistance and mobilization. Activism can be understood as “an art of emergency” (Stengers, 2014, our translation), art of generating the context of emergency of new events. This does not mean that it

comes as a revelation or arbitrarily, but rather as triggering new possibilities. The occurrence “does not refer to an ineffable inspiration, to the sudden revelation, nor is opposed to explanation (...) Politics is an art, and an art (that) creates the manners that will enable it to become able to deal with what it has to deal with” (Stengers, 2014:33, our translation). Recognizing activism as an art, “less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world (...) less involved in knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing the boundaries of what can be experienced ”(O’Sullivan, 2001, p.130, our translation), we set out to challenge the limit of the possible within the academy.

Thus, we consider the Diploma in Social and Political Ecology as a counter-hegemonic “fissure” within the academic world, guiding the proposal not to transfer our representations about what activism “should be” in the context of the Capitalocene; but to generate a context for the exploration of “what are we doing” in our affective and embodied activists experiences, without anticipating results.

Trusting in the transformative power of testimonies and encounters, the Diploma of Social and Political Ecology materialised a dream shared with other colleagues and allies: explore activism in social-ecological conflicts weaving the theoretical and political analysis with the bodies and affections involved in the resistances. Doing it inside the academic world was a form of activism, a micropolitical act of openness and occupation of a traditional university. In my inner thoughts, I also took it as an exercise of actualization and resonance with the past. The Universidad de Santiago, before the dictatorship (1973-1990) was the Technical University of the state (Universidad Técnica del Estado, UTE) and was oriented to the formation in arts and crafts. The dictatorship took many lives, both from students and teachers. It seemed to me that this space was part, like a thread, of the fabric they couldn’t break, while at the same time it opened a different trajectory. (Paz, field notes)

Affective entanglements: the Diploma’s experience

Trusting that “liminal situations (...) tend to be highly affectively charged [and] are enormously valuable formative experiences” (Stenner & Moreno, 2013, p.20, our

translation), during the four versions this Diploma was conceived as a liminal space, marked by rituals. In each version, an average of 35 students and 30 teachers participated, meeting once a month in two-day sessions, for 8 months. As a swarm, some teachers participated as students and graduates of the Diploma were integrated in later versions as teachers.

The ritual begins with the separation or rupture of the initial state, followed by an intermediate phase of passage and transition to a new condition. The sharing of the “initial state” was facilitated by actors from non-governmental organizations, social organizations, independent research and creation centers, and universities. We generated a shared context based on our analysis of extractivisms and social-ecological conflicts, observing that all the baseline suppositions and historical patterns that guided the objectives of sustainable resource management — conservation of ecological water courses, agriculture, fishing and “sustainable” mining, among others— are being altered by the multiscalar and synergic phenomenon (Benson & Craig, 2014, p.2) of the Capitalocene.

That context usually felt familiar or resonant to the participants, activists from different places: LGBT groups, students, workers, urban dwellers, rural dwellers, semi-rural-urban dwellers, student movements, feminist movements, peasant movements, environmentalists, social sciences professionals, arts, humanities, biological sciences, medical sciences, agriculture technicians, health technicians, etc.

Later, all participants were invited to share their fears, paradoxes and suppositions on these conflicts. Keeping the liminal condition of the process, we welcomed all possibilities of inhabiting the “unlivable” experience in their testimonial legitimacy as a way of reclaiming a traumatic event, “finding words for what cannot be said because it was never understood or, rather because it was never ‘understable””(Koch, 2017, p.160). This space included exercises on active listening, keeping a personal diary, cartographies and mappings.



Mapping exercises class, August 2016

Building on the trust generated by the sharing of testimonies, we approached the material and embodied dimension of affections, holding the question: what do our activist bodies do? Thus, we developed exploratory movement exercises, based on collaborative games, theatrical performance, contact dance, biodance and martial arts. We also did short residencies, where the group developed a practice of community work in the organization of one of their classmates. These works allowed us to exercise listening and reading of our experiences, observe our differences and go through conflicts. We verified that "if the body learns, if it can embody different corporealities and if these are what determine how we are together, it makes sense to think of training favorable to the (political) project" (Pérez Royo, 2016, p.16, our translation).



Group exercises class, August 2016



Residencia Yungay Cultural Centre, Santiago, November 2016



Residencia Mingako Foundation, Maestranza, October 2017

The experimentation spaces ended up in "rounds of thought", where we opened up a space for the expression and realization of a plurality of interconnected ethical-political desires, such as "relational swarms" (Teles, 2009, p.119, our translation). Unlike political assemblies or discussion groups, in the rounds "the capacity of thought of the people that make it up is revealed, the ideas that are created and expanded, the possibility of approaching daily problems from different perspectives to those habitual" (Teles, 2009, p.126, our translation), producing affective

relationships that did not homogenize multiplicity and therefore did not inhibit conflict. Thus, we talked without seeking consensus or generating agreements, only by sharing our reflections about what was happening to us.

The delimitation of these milestones (sharing, testimonies, exploration of movements, residences and rounds of thought), allowed us to go through processes of personal and collective transformation without putting the participants at risk, carefully staging the liminal process. Without a delimiting structure for emergencies, “liminality can be chaotic, disorderly, dangerous and destructive. Instead of being a formative experience, transitions can be deforming” (Stenner & Moreno, 2013, p.25, our translation). With this precaution, we manage to stage affective events without prescribing results.

What emerged in this space? In this initial rupture, something highlighted repeatedly in group dynamics and personal diaries was the trust they felt to share their experiences from the non-perfection. From the recognition of affectations and vulnerabilities in this context of trust, we learnt that modern hegemony and the utopia of sustainable development affect not just the predominant order but also the imaginaries of the resistances. Supposing the arrival of a right time of human-nature articulation as a harmonic and organic whole implies also a “correct agent of change”. The agents must be infallible, impeccable, unimpeachable; but above all, aware and coherent, that is, rational and enlightened. When entering the Diploma, many activists rejected their fallibility: tiredness, the times they fail, the times they fell in authoritarian practices, not being on the front line all the time, wanting to quit. They also felt ashamed if their pleasure was “complicit” in what they question or reject. In line with the economy of affects mentioned above, there was a feeling that “we are never good enough, but still we should try to be so” (Paz, field notes).

In opposition to what would be expected from a traditional environmental education or a leadership training course (aimed at “empowering”, “consciousness development” and delivering a set of tools to get closer to the ideal) we explored the materiality of these testimonies through testimonies and movements, observing and inhabiting the paradoxes of our being activists and suspending what we “should be”.

In the rounds of thought, through observation and sharing what was happening to us, we discovered that recovering the complexity and non-linearity of activism was consistent with inhabiting the complexity and non-linearity of social-ecological systems (Benson & Craig, 2014, p.2). This finding allowed us to open other ways of exploring the limits of the possible as activists, taking the right to decide how far to go, asking for help, rest, enjoy, change course. So, we learned that the construction of other possible worlds does not assume that their agents are in perfect control and knowledge about himself and the world; precisely because this reduction of complexity and illusion of control is in the heart of the current crisis (Stengers, 2014, p.40). Overall, it was possible for the participants to explore what they had denied themselves of under the ideal of how they should be. A comrade from a Sacrifice Zone acknowledged that she wanted to leave and to stay, at the same time. We heard a comrade and then teacher, an urban Mapuche woman, share her affinity with diverse cosmologies, dismantling exoticizing suppositions. Some comrades that feared their own sadness and rage, were able to explore them as mobilising affects, also necessary for life and especially for resistance. Comrades installed in the stereotype of the Enlightened and strong community leader were able to explore tenderness, listening and silence. And so on.

We are halfway through the diploma, exploring different emotions and how we embody them, using music, dancing and breathing. I feel a little awkward, while I see others next to me comfortable with the exercises. But when it comes time to explore anger, I feel like my body is activated almost immediately. I finish the round feeling heat and power in all the cells of my body. When talking about the exercise, I share that I was surprised to see how quickly anger reached my body. Someone next to me laughs sweetly: "Does he? I'm not surprised!" I am puzzled by his reaction. Later I understand that, in the relatively short Diploma period, we have come to know each other so that each of us rediscovers ourselves in a new light. We talk about how anger can help us activate our sense of justice and determination. I feel calm. Also, I am glad that, for once in my life, I am not being judged for my rage (Gabriela, field notes)

The experience of multiplicity and resonance allowed each participant to know herself as part of a non-unitary and non-homogenous network, and conceive their political

practice as an event not reducible to planning, individual will, or utopia (Aedo et Al., 2017). This process offered to each participant to move from the learned insufficiency to the acknowledgement of dignity as inherent to their existence; not subjected to good behaviours. Furthermore, we expanded our vital force and created a desire to keep meeting each other, to continue affecting and exploring possibilities together.

And this is what is happening in this long run, some leave, others arrive in our lives, and so it is how we all receive small pieces of other people that we never met, but that are somewhere in the person that is in front of us today, and so we will continue meeting others, and giving them small pieces that were given to us, to me the interconnection is there, among all of us and everything (Personal report #16, anonymized, 2015)

I move with them, with my peers, to generate networks of linked worlds with others to create collectively, share learnings, pieces of knowledge, and experiences (Personal report #19, anonymized, 2015)

It made the emergence of a common ground possible: three years after the last version of the Diploma, we and more than a third of the graduates stay in touch regularly, through virtual platforms and in some cases in shared projects that have grown in the warmth of the encounter. Even though every year there were graduates that proposed the creation of a formal organising body, in practice the weaving has emerged without central management and without planning. The network emerges and it is sustained by affectation and mutual support desire. It does not have a name or norms, it also does not demand commitment. It activates and deactivates following the interaction and positions of its members. It does not have a territorial affiliation; its members inhabit and move through different places and zones in conflict. Due to the multiple affinities and convergences, there are multiple encounters among participants: meetings, conferences, courses, projects, litigations, impact assessments, researches, restoration process. There is no competing, there is permission to fall, get tired, say help and rise up again. It is possible to be and not to be, go out and then back again, even not going back ever again, because nothing happens uniformly. If we were a centralised and normed organisation, these discontinuities would be threats. Since we are not, there are no successes and failures: just emergencies in the swarm, those don't need to fill all the gaps.

Also, the swarm support our resistances at critical moments. In the middle of the wave of protests and repression in October 2019, it held a space of information, contention and alert. In the middle of pandemic-induced lockdowns, we have been generating spaces of mutual support and encounter. "You are not alone, you carry all of us wherever you go, count on us, your presence is enough!" says the collective presence. And because we know we are worthy, we demand and embody our dignity at the same time.

Continuations

Our relationship with the "affective turn" is marked by our history as activists, educators, and researchers. Starting from our own discomfort and paradoxes, we wanted to challenge the traditional experiences of training in the environment and sustainability, focused on the construction of "conscious and enlightened" subjects. Our Diploma offered a space where to deal with the affects and the corporeities constituting the resistances that we met; and where we can recognize ourselves in our needs for respect and care.

We can highlight at least three central learnings of the process. First, the construction of a space in which to share and inhabit the discomforts, instead of avoiding this phase and rushing to find solutions. Secondly, in this present, embodied and shared experience of testimonies, movements, residencies and rounds of thought, we blur the activist "role model" as a hegemonizing structure and by resonance, we find that all hegemony has cracks. And finally, based on shared experiences, we witnessed and contributed to the emergence of a network as a "community", not as something that is, but as something that happens between those who recognize themselves not next to each other (or one above the other) but entangled. An activist community lived as a swarm that "although moving towards a goal, experiences everywhere a turn, a dynamic presence of others, a flow." (Stenner & Moreno, 2013, p.22, our translation).

It could be argued contrariwise that it is not possible to resist the extractivism impacts and build political projects "only" on occurrences because we need regularity, projects, plans. And that it is impossible to make politics starting from small limited experience

of community or from the swarm. But this argument reduces politics to the repetition of sequences, to evolution or development of new organics and strategic calculus. Activism, as an art, plays with movements, elements, contexts and experiences for the emergence of unpredictable events while actualize the civilisational course. This is precisely why they are so fundamental.

Indeed, revealing the micropolitical importance of activism does not mean denying the importance of macropolitics, nor refusing to investigate and reflect on formal structures of resistance (organizations, corporations, political parties). Rather, we trust that it enriches its approach, by revealing the immanent fissures of all hegemony (Rolnik, 2019).

Furthermore, we suggest the affections of the extractivism at the Capitalocene involve human and non-human agencies; and we recognize our focus on the human affective experiences, as the malaise of the unlivable. We acknowledge that this intersection must be developed further and we visualize these gaps as open paths for research and learning.

Finally, we offer our story as a contribution to explore the possibilities of academic and activist involvement in our troubled times. Sharing of our own affectations and trajectories allows the emergence of new affective events; and we need contexts to stage it. Having the experience of activism as an art of the emergent and our resistances as a swarm, is fundamental to inhabit the Capitaloceno with less individual despair about the crisis.

This is how we lived the beginning of protests and social agitation at the end of 2019. Non-predictable occurrences, but also not unexpected for those of us that were, from activism, invoking and embodying the fissures of hegemony in many ways, from many places. And we know that it is impossible to predict where the current crisis will take us.

But, have we ever known?

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