

ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS AND ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP: THE CASE OF GUALEGUAYCHÚ AND THE PULP MILLS

*Conflictos ambientales y ciudadanía ecológica: el caso
de Gualeguaychú y los pulp mills*

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with interactions between citizenship and political ecology by examining the ‘pulp mills conflict’ in Gualeguaychú, Argentina. The conflict burst in 2003 when the Uruguayan authorities announced the construction of a cellulose plant on the shore of the Uruguay River. The citizens of Gualeguaychú, a city right across the border, initiated a movement of protest that soon transcended the local dimension. I argue that this protest was a battle over sovereignty and an environmental conflict between different conceptions of development and diverse views of the use of a common resource, the river. The notion of ecological citizenship formed in this process is assessed by examining how this concept was constructed by local stakeholders and by unveiling the motivations informing citizens’ engagement.

Key words: ecological citizenship, environmental conflicts, pulp mills, Gualeguaychú, Uruguay River, Latin America, extractivism

1. CONVERGING STRUGGLES FOR CITIZENSHIP AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

This article deals with interactions between citizenship and political ecology by examining the ‘pulp mills conflict’ in Gualeguaychú, Argentina. The

conflict burst in 2003 when the Uruguayan authorities announced the construction of a cellulose plant on the shore of the Uruguay River, which divides Argentina and Uruguay. The decision generated a strong opposition on the Argentinean side of the border because of the negative effects of pulp plant pollutants on the river ecosystems and the impact that these could have on the community. The citizens of Gualeguaychú, a city right across the selected spot for the location of the pulp mill, Fray Bentos, initiated a movement of protest that soon transcended the local dimension. They brought the issue to the national political agenda and were decisive in making the government of Argentina adopt it as a national cause. The controversy became a diplomatic battle and moved towards the international arena as Argentina sued Uruguay at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The conflict had multiple geographical dimensions, ranging from the local to the international, and involved a myriad of actors, including the governments of Argentina and Uruguay, multinational corporations and local citizens. Here I focus on the Environmental Citizens' Assembly of Gualeguaychú, a popular movement originated to canalize protest against the state of Uruguay and the pulp mill industry. I argue that this protest was a battle over sovereignty, prompted by the unilateral decision of Uruguay, and an environmental conflict between different conceptions of development and diverse views of the use of a common resource, the river. My aim is to assess the notion of ecological citizenship formed in this process through a focus at two levels: firstly, by examining how the concept of ecological citizenship was constructed by local stakeholders, and secondly, by unveiling the motivations informing citizens' engagement.

The analysis illustrates the way in which ecological citizenship in the global South differs from widespread accounts of the concept in the global North. In his *Citizenship and the Environment* (2003), Andrew Dobson developed a very influential theory of ecological citizenship, powerful and persuading to defend a transition towards more environmentally just practices in the global North. In this account, only citizens of the most industrialised nations, insofar as responsible for global injustice and resource scarcity, have ecological citizenship obligations. Therefore, citizens of globalised (as opposed to globalising) societies do not have responsibilities of ecological citizenship. From this perspective, they are the sufferers of global and environmental injustice produced by capitalism and asymmetrical globalisation. As compelling as these ideas may be to generate awareness about global inequalities and citizens' environmental responsibility in the

most affluent societies, they have to be complemented by other conceptions which acknowledge the different nature of responsibility in the global South. Citizens in the global South are interacting with their environments in ways which make them agents of civic engagement and not mere passive victims of global injustice. The case studied provides good evidence of this view by focusing on different types of motivation and action emerging in concrete power relations and conflicts. In doing so, this research makes a contribution to those perspectives critical with abstract and universalising concepts of ecological citizenship (Gudynas, 2009; Latta, 2007a, 2007b). Drawing on this approach, the aim for those seeking to advance the notion of ecological citizenship in Latin America is not to develop a particular conception or theory that can be applied to such specific context. Rather, the challenge is to highlight the multiple and different ways to express the relationship between citizens and sustainability, based on their particular environments and cultures. As a result, specific forms of ecological citizenship are likely to emerge in each place.

Nature has become the object of popular protests around the effects of modernisation and globalisation in Latin America (Latta and Wittman, 2010). In the Gualeguaychú conflict nature is politicised through the international dynamics of paper trade. World paper use increases annually and has quadrupled over the past fifty years. This has led to a significant rise in demand for cellulose pulp to sustain paper production. Yet paper consumption varies notably across regions, fuelling inequalities in natural resource use. The global average in per capita consumption is 55 Kg. per person per year. In North America it is 215 Kg. and in Western Europe it is 147 Kg. while Latin America's average is 43 Kg. (Environmental Paper Network, 2018). In parallel, we have witnessed a division between production and consumption countries, with production processes being increasingly located in those areas with more favourable climatic and economic conditions. The growing need of natural resources and the increased environmental awareness in traditional production countries (North America and Northern Europe), where forest protection legislation has been adopted, drove manufacturing industries towards other parts of the world. Eucalyptus and pines have replaced native forests in South East Asia, Central America and, most relevant to this research, the South Cone, especially Uruguay. So while certain world regions have become the greatest paper consumers, like Europe and the United States, others like Latin America and Asia, have specialised in pulp production (Alvarado, 2009; Villalonga, 2006). This has triggered disputes about the

appropriation and use of natural resources and the case studied here is a good example, as I shall argue.

The trajectory of the pulp mill conflict and the choices of the Environmental Citizens' Assembly produced a notion of ecological citizenship understood as opposition and resistance to an imposed model of development and globalisation¹. This is a citizenship of the public sphere based on the republican notion of the active citizen participating in decisions about the common good. In this conception, environmental responsibility is materialised through collective action and debate in the political arena to challenge unsustainable production processes. So this is not the kind of environmental responsibility translated into personal duties like the reduction of one's ecological footprint or the adoption of the "three R's" (reduce, reuse and recycle) type of behaviour associated with the most common views of ecological citizenship in the global North². Rather, it is in line with notions of responsibility described by Elizabeth Jelin as including "a civic commitment, centered on active participation in public life (the responsibilities of citizenship), as well as symbolic and ethical aspects that confer a sense of identity and of belonging, a sense of community" (1996: 106).

The case of Gualeguaychú and the pulp mills helps us to understand the importance of citizenship debates in Latin America and the way in which social and popular movements have embraced citizenship as a tool in their various struggles since the beginnings of the re-democratisation period. They have been engaged in the development of a new concept of citizenship that transcends liberal models, based on the legal attribution of rights, and focuses instead on the configuration of social subjects who define their rights and fight for their recognition (Jelin and Hersberg, 1996).

2. THE PULP MILLS CONFLICT AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN ARGENTINA

In the early 1990s two pulp manufacturing firms, the Spanish ENCE and the Finnish Metsä-Botnia (hereafter Botnia) initiated a forest development

1. Other theorists have stressed that ecological citizenship should be oppositional and critical. See REID and TAYLOR (2000), GILBERT and PHILLIPS (2003), BARRY (2006) and SEYFANG (2009).

2. There are examples to counteract this claim: think of the environmental justice movement, which has also been interpreted as a form of ecological citizenship (SMITH and PANGSAPA, 2008; LATTA, 2007a).

program in Uruguay, investing in the cultivation of eucalyptus. First ENCE in 2002, then Botnia in 2004, made proposals to the government to build two pulp mills, very close to one another, on the banks of the Uruguay River in the surroundings of the city of Fray Bentos. The conflict originated in 2003 when the Uruguayan government authorised ENCE to build a pulp mill. The initiative generated opposition by the inhabitants of the Argentine city of Gualeguaychú, right in front of Fray Bentos, on the opposite river shore, due to the negative environmental impacts of the plants on the water quality of the local environment. They were alerted by environmental NGOs from Uruguay, who were against the project and visited Gualeguaychú to seek allies. In September 2003 a group of citizens agreed to carry out the first road block on the international bridge *Libertador San Martín*, which unites the cities of Gualeguaychú and Fray Bentos, an action meant to be their most recurrent and powerful strategy. This incident marked the beginning of a citizen rebellion that later became a transboundary conflict over the management of a shared natural resource.

In 2005 Uruguay authorised Botnia to build a second mill to produce 1 million tons of pulp per year, twice as much as the ENCE mill. This decision intensified the conflict and broadened its dimension in two different ways. On the one hand, it catalysed massive protests in Gualeguaychú. On April 2005, over 40.000 people occupied the international bridge to protest against the decision and express their opposition to pulp mills. One month later the Environmental Citizens' Assembly of Gualeguaychú was formed. This movement was meant to play a leading role in the conflict, orchestrating popular protest and collective demands till today. On the other hand, Argentina considered the unilateral decision of Uruguay as an attack on its national sovereignty. The government of Uruguay refused to negotiate and reiterated that the decision fell within its national jurisdiction (Aboud and Musseri, 2007; Magnotta, 2009)

The dispute reached its most critical point in May 2006 when Argentina brought a lawsuit against Uruguay at the ICJ in The Hague. Argentina alleged that Uruguay had violated the 1975 Statute of the Uruguay River, a bilateral treaty aimed at coordinating the management of the transboundary river. The Statute establishes that a party seeking to undertake actions that may affect the common use of the river should inform its counterpart and sets the prohibition of activities that could jeopardise the environmental quality of the water. Argentina's representatives argued that Uruguay had neglected the duty to communicate its intentions to give permission to the

construction of the pulp mills and that it had not proved that the project would not harm the river. Argentina requested that the construction works of the plant, initiated in 2005, ended. The Court announced its judgement in 2006 and determined that there was no evidence to affirm that contamination was caused by the pulp mills (Daneri, 2007; Palermo and Reboratti, 2007).

In September 2006 ENCE declared that the pulp mill would not be constructed in Fray Bentos but further down along the riverside. This was considered a victory by the Assembly. However, two months later the World Bank approved a loan for Botnia to finish building its pulp mill. This motivated the Assembly to initiate a permanent and indefinite traffic block on the international bridge. Uruguay asked the ICJ to force Argentina to take action against the blockaders, but the request was dismissed in January 2007. Argentina attempted a second suit at the ICJ in 2007 and presented new evidence of the polluting effects of the pulp industry. In the meantime, Botnia was given the green light to start production. Finally, the Court's 2010 verdict agreed that Uruguay had not observed its duty to inform Argentina, but it also concluded that this action did not have a detrimental effect on the river. The judgement acknowledged transformations in the conditions of the Uruguay River, accepting some of the evidence submitted by Argentina, but claimed that it could not be proved that these are the result of the activities of the Botnia plant. According to the ICJ, then, there was no ground to force Botnia to cease its production, as Argentina had requested (Payne, 2011; Berardo and Gerlak, 2012; Alcañiz and Gutiérrez, 2009; Matta, 2011). The decision brought the block to an end four years after it had started.

A conflict set in motion by a local citizen protest reached unexpected dimensions, involving a wide array of different actors and seriously deteriorating the political and diplomatic relationships between Argentina and Uruguay, historically defined in terms of cooperation and friendship. It is considered a landmark in the history of environmentalism and civic engagement in Argentina because it transformed the terms of the political and environmental discourses. As a result of this controversy and subsequent citizen movement, ecological concerns were incorporated into the national political agenda, entered the public arena and received massive media coverage in a way no other environmental question had achieved before (Merlinsky and Latta, 2012; Magnotta, 2009; Palermo, *et al.*, 2009).

The emergence of “social environmentalism” played a key role in the “convergence between the public agenda and the government agenda”

around sustainability issues that took place since 2003 (Gutiérrez and Isuani, 2014: 310). On this matter, the pulp mills conflict has been more significant than any other because it had a deep impact on national politics at all levels of government. It has been argued that the fight against pulp mills “made history” and the city became “a reference of dignity in Latin America” (quoted in Magnotta, 2009: 55). Environmental politics had not been a priority for the Néstor Kirchner administration, but the pulp mills conflict was a turning point. Mobilisations in Gualeguaychú “inspired the design of new legal frameworks” (quoted in Magnotta, 2009: 55). New legislation was passed, like the 2007 Law for the Protection of Native Forests and the 2010 Glacier Law. The budget of the federal Environment and Sustainable Development Secretariat increased and the institution was given more visibility and competences nationwide. Kirchner appointed a new Secretary, Romina Piccolotti, an environmental lawyer and activist, head of the environmental NGO CEDHA, and in office between 2006 and 2008. At the time of her appointment, Piccolotti worked as an advisor for both the regional government of the province of Entre Ríos (where Gualeguaychú belongs to) and the Environmental Citizens’ Assembly of Gualeguaychú. This has been the only time in the history of Argentina when an environmental NGO representative was left in charge of the highest environmental agency in the country (Gutiérrez and Isuani, 2014).

Furthermore, new modes of citizen mobilisation and collective action arose in this conflict. As one commentator notes, “the people of Gualeguaychú...initiated massive environmental protest in Argentina...In 2005 and 2006, nobody had the capacity to summon in Argentina that the Environmental Assembly had” (Magnotta, 2009: 55). In fact, one of the first actions organised by the Assembly, the march on the international bridge, has been described as “the environmental demonstration with the biggest capacity to summon in [Argentinean] history” (Magnotta, 2009: 73).

When combined, these circumstances suggest that an analysis of the controversy in relation to theories of, and approaches to, ecological citizenship is worth pursuing. Yet there is a further issue that makes this case paradigmatic to study the citizenship and environment link in Latin America: what started as a local protest became a transnational conflict with ramifications across the local, the national and the international domains. But did the pulp mills episode lead to the configuration of a notion of citizenship beyond and below the nation state, with different layers of membership and participation, as ecological citizenship is usually understood?

3. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY OF GUALEGUAYCHÚ AND ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP

The pulp mill issue has been extensively addressed by both Argentinean and international scholars (Berardo and Gerlak, 2010; Palermo and Reboratti, 2007; Alcañiz and Gutiérrez, 2008; Payne, 2011; Di Martino, 2009). Nevertheless, examinations of the dispute in relation to ecological citizenship have received little attention, with a few exceptions. In this respect, Gabriela Merlinsky and Alex Latta (2012) have focused on the role played by the Citizens' Environmental Assembly in the juridification of the environmental question in Argentina and assessed how this connects with struggles for justice and rights. Marta Biagi and Mariano Ferro (2011) have discussed the social representation of water by the citizens of Gualeguaychú to investigate possible changes in environmental values and behaviours which may, in turn, lead to ecological citizenship. In this chapter, I intend to make a contribution to this approach by further expanding the interpretations of the social processes that took place around the pulp mills controversy through the lens of ecological citizenship.

My analysis is informed by the view that “[c]itizenship as well as rights are forever undergoing the process of construction and transformation”, so “[c]itizens' action must be conceived in terms of its self-sustaining and expanding qualities” (Jelin, 1996: 104)³. Drawing on this perspective I seek to examine what notions of ecological citizenship emerged in this conflict. To this end I first consider the construction of their own notions of citizenship and identity by members of the Assembly. Then I evaluate the motivations that prompted citizens to engage in collective action against a perceived environmental harm. This last point is intended to assess the nature of their environmental responsibility. When combined, these two questions help me determine what specific concepts of ecological citizenship were formed in the conflict and how they relate to wider struggles for ecological citizenship.

3.1. *The construction of ecological citizenship*

Environmental conflicts are “the result of opposing actions between agents who, in their production and social reproduction practices, cause

3. This conception has been applied to ecological citizenship by Jelin HERSELF (2000). Similarly, GILBERT and PHILLIPS (2003) and LATTA (2007a) stress that ecological citizenship is best understood as a dynamic and contested concept that is being constantly redefined by activism.

harm to people's health and their supporting ecosystems, generating a variety of actions and forms of organisation, which often express different symbolic conceptions of resource use" (Vizia, 2012: 83). These social conflicts around environmental issues (from urban speculation, land usurpation and water contamination to megaprojects like mining or fracking) are redefining the notion of citizenship and expanding it towards the environmental domain, since ecological impacts of plans and decisions are voiced in relation to violations of rights of the affected citizens. Struggles around questions such as land distribution, access to natural resources and environmental justice constitute acts of construction of citizenship identity and agency (Latta and Wittman, 2010; Latta, 2007a; Smith and Pangsapa, 2008; Gudynas, 2009). In this section, I address the pulp mill conflict as "a social process through which citizenship is constructed" (Jelin, 1996: 101). I show that this process resulted in a concept of ecological citizenship defined as opposition and resistance, elaborated around the notion of collective identity, grounded on a particular politics of place and mainly focused on the local dimension of citizenship.

The Environmental Assembly of Gualeguaychú created a notion of citizenship understood as opposition and resistance to what they regarded to be an unfair arrangement: the decision to build a pulp mill that could undermine their rights to wellbeing and environmental quality, a decision about which they had not been informed and for which they had not given their consent. Slogans like *No to pulp mills, Botnia out!* and *No to compulsive changes in the social and economic model*, reproduced in the Assembly's pamphlets, illustrate a confrontational (rather than negotiating) attitude. This concept of citizenship was enacted through different forms of action: road blocks on the transboundary bridge (to impede the circulation of trucks transporting materials produced in Argentina that would be employed in the construction of the Uruguayan mill), "resistance parades" (which gathered thousands of people to express their opposition and demand action to be taken by those considered responsible) and other boycotting tactics such as a five-minute blackout to challenge the decision by presidents Tabaré Vázquez and Néstor Kirchner to postpone a meeting that had been scheduled to seek a resolution to the conflict⁴. Some of these tactics had not been used before by social movements in the region, especially the block of the road that links Argentina and Uruguay.

4. www.noalaspapeleras.com.ar

Yet these resistance strategies were not just intended to highlight attacks on their consolidated rights, like the “right to a healthy and balanced environment guaranteed by article 41 of the National Constitution” (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens’ Assembly). They also expressed demands for new rights, especially rights to cultural identity and citizens’ aspirations to define their own model of development:

Gualeguaychú did not give and will not give social license to Botnia...Social license is the right residents must have to accept or not the installation of industries that change compulsively the social and economic model planned for the region. The social model refers to the different economic projects (tourism, agriculture and farming, dairy production, beekeeping, etc...) generated and developed over time by the residents of a region (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens’ Assembly).

These ideas reflect a form of citizen engagement that seeks the “invention/creation of *new* rights that emerge from particular struggles and their concrete practices...In this sense, the very determination of the meaning of “right” and the assertion of something as a right are themselves objects of political struggle” (Dagnino, 2003: 6). From this angle, citizenship is more than a tool for social and economic inclusion. Instead, it seeks to enhance dominant understandings of politics. Actions by the Environmental Assembly of Gualeguaychú sought to fill the gap between formally defined rights and everyday practices of citizenship, or, in Jelin’s words, the gap between the formal concept of rights and the “understandings and practices of the assumed subjects of rights” (1996: 101).

That said, although the rights-dimension is crucial to explain the politics of ecological citizenship that emerged in this conflict, the idea of responsibility is nonetheless present. This is expressed in the determination to engage in collective action to address common problems and participate in decisions affecting the community’s future: “the affected community has to be previously consulted and provided all the information available” (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens’ Assembly). As one activist put it: “I can’t spend my entire life being an spectator, I have to take part” (quoted in Magnotta, 2009: 138). In 2004, the *First Declaration of Gualeguaychú*, adopted by Self-Summoned Neighbours, the precursor of the Environmental Citizens Assembly, stated that “playing a prominent role, in our view, is not an option, it is an obligation especially in societies as deprived as our” (quoted in Magnotta, 2009: 65). The pulp mill episode

highlights that demands for participation and democratic rights can be a form of civic engagement and assumption of joint responsibility, a point to which I shall return.

The Environmental Assembly experienced a process of collective identity construction to define their own subjectivities and the target of their opposition. Citizens of Gualeguaychú represent themselves as having an identity related to the place they live in, a community in harmony with their surrounding landscape, and very much aware of the value and quality of their local environment, unlike other urban communities (Palermo, *et al.*, 2009). The riverside landscape is part of the collective memory and the pulp mills represent a challenge to this memory. The peoples of Gualeguaychú “react because the river is under attack” (Magnotta, 2009: 136). Therefore the river, including the lifestyle, culture and identity of the people who dwell on its shore, is politicised and becomes the object of citizens’ collective action and debate in the public sphere. An anecdote illustrates this special relationship with the river: during parades and roadblocks the most heard song was *Río de los Pájaros* (Birds River), the Spanish translation of the *guaraní* term Gualeguaychú (Stang, 2008).

The fact that Assembly members describe themselves as citizens of a particular local environment highlights that the politics of place is important when we try to grapple with the multiple nuances of the concept of ecological citizenship at stake in the case studied. Gudynas (2009) stresses that the idea of ecological citizenship in Latin America, including its political community and particular demands, cannot be separated from a specific environment. This view contrasts with some versions of ecological citizenship in the global North, particularly those aimed at developing the idea of a responsible and sustainable citizenry, which prescribe green behaviours for citizens that could live anywhere. On this subject, the example of Gualeguaychú studied shows that citizenship is understood and practiced in relation to a given place defined by a specific environment, the river landscape.

The process of identity formation also includes citizens’ experiences of politics. In this sense, the general perception is that of being a community with a strong democratic and participatory culture, with an awareness of their citizenship condition, accustomed to solve their problems autonomously, and with a rich associational life (Palermo *et al.*, 2009). These self-referential ideas express a republican notion of citizenship, an active community that assumes responsibility for managing common affairs. The peoples of Gualeguaychú constructed a notion of citizenship grounded on claims to a

democratic control of their future. In connecting citizenship with the consolidation of democracy and particular rights demands, they have contributed to “a democratizing, participatory project of extension of citizenship” in Latin America (Dagnino, 2003: 4).

The analysis of the notion of citizenship enacted in this controversy shows that the local dimension plays an important role. This is not a citizenship grounded on a national political community and based on formal bonds of citizenship, like that founded in a shared legal status of equal citizens before the law. It is neither cosmopolitan nor global; nor is it a post-cosmopolitan citizenship between individuals distant in space that do not necessarily know each other, as in Dobson’s account (2003). Instead, it is a community-based notion. Knowing each other, having personal relationships and a shared cultural identity are key factors to explain the formation of the Assembly and the magnitude of popular participation generated. Citizens persuaded each other to take part in collective action, to have their say in common decisions and to share knowledge about joint problems. So a proximity-based citizenship developed.

Despite the importance of the local, community element noted above, a transboundary conflict like this could have been the appropriate scenario to test a conception of citizenship below and beyond the nation state, showing how local awareness can be the basis for developing a global sense of responsibility. However, this was not the case. The Botnia pulp mill represented a large investment. It was meant to create thousands of jobs, including the construction period and the plant operation. This was a tempting project for Fray Bentos, a city of 25.000 inhabitants facing prolonged unemployment. For Gualeguaychú, on the contrary, it was a zero-sum game: with nothing to win, in terms of jobs or investment, citizens and local authorities felt that they had so much to lose. The members of the Assembly perceived that the Uruguayan society was confronted with two situations difficult to overcome: unemployment and economic difficulties that made the pulp mill mega-projects too tempting so as to put potential ecological dangers aside, and the general lack of information and awareness of those dangers amongst the citizenry. These circumstances, they believed, put them in a better position to fight the battle when compared with their Uruguayan neighbours, who were constrained by short-sighted considerations. The Assembly repeatedly stated that their protest was against the government and the pulp mill industry and not against its citizens, who were regarded as victims of political manipulation and imperialist strategies. Yet the truth is that, albeit this discourse, the

roadblocks were affecting Uruguayan inhabitants, especially those living in the borderland. And that some of the campaigns launched by the Assembly, like the *No veranee en Uruguay. Uruguay contamina* (Do not spend the summer in Uruguay. Uruguay pollutes) campaign, would clearly have a negative impact on the Uruguayan society (Stang, 2008; Palermo *et al.*, 2009).

Certainly the Assembly could have tried to build ties of transboundary citizenship with Uruguayan environmental NGOs, who actually alerted them in the first place. At the early stage of the conflict there was a trend seeking to establish a transnational network including Uruguayan NGOs and environmental groups active in the province of Entre Ríos. The spirit behind this effort was to raise awareness of the importance of protecting common resources and pressing for the adoption of international standards to guarantee a sustainable river management. However, after the Assembly was formed, and as citizens' oppositional discourse radicalised, a concern for building a common position against the pulp mill business gave way to a narrative built upon the defence of local interests (Palermo *et al.*, 2009). This position later evolved when what had so far been a local struggle of a community to protect its environment was related to national interests. Some actions organised by the Assembly encapsulate the idea of an expanded citizenship beyond the territory of their local community. For instance, in February 2006, several parts of the country expressed their support to the Gualeguaychú battle, with a national scream, *el grito nacional*. However, I do not think that the nationalist turn that the issue experienced was produced by a genuine concern about the negative impacts that the pulp mills would have in the rest of the country. Rather, it was related to the perceived attack on the national Argentine sovereignty. So it could be argued that, initially, there was an attempt to build a transboundary citizenship, as one of the main concerns of citizens involved was to claim for their right to participate in decisions concerning their shared environment. Yet the nationalist momentum that the conflict gained and the fact that citizens of Fray Bentos did not oppose the pulp mills, combined with *nymbism* (an issue I tackle further down), frustrated the promise of a transboundary environmental citizenship.

3.2. *Drivers for collective action and the politicisation of nature*

The Environmental Assembly and the citizen movement around it were mobilised due to a combination of motivations and claims, namely health

and well-being, the river protection, the quality of the local environment, the idea of development and national sovereignty. Although some of them acquired greater importance than others at different stages of the conflict, they were often mixed up in citizens' discourses as drivers for collective action.

The first and most obvious concerns were contamination and resource use. Large scale pulp mills, like those located in Latin America, require abundant land for monocultures (usually large plantations of genetically modified eucalyptus), present high levels of water consumption and produce a considerable amount of emissions on both the air and the river water (Stang, 2008). Citizens feared that these potential impacts would have negative effects on the community's health and well-being. The Assembly's slogan *No a las papeleras, sí a la vida* (No to paper mills, yes to life) expresses such concern for quality of life.⁵ In the pamphlets and documents produced and distributed by the Assembly, references to the environment, a clean river, human and animal health and future generations abound:

We ask our representatives to think about future generations.

The method used by BOTNIA to produce cellulose pulp is the Kraft method that uses chlorine dioxide...Chlorine dioxide produces chlorinated organic compounds...that belong to the group of compounds named COP, persistent organic contaminants, that will be dumped in the river and the air, thus being a latent danger for life...They penetrate into humans and animals through contaminated food...Most of them are toxic in the long term, (chronic intoxications), producing a variety of symptoms...

The operation of the pulp mill will affect the quality of the water of the Uruguay River, the air we breathe, the biodiversity of the different ecosystems, agriculture and farming activities, fishing, beekeeping, tourism, etc. And above all it will have a negative impact on the health of the residents in the region.

Fearing the negative effects of contamination, citizens demanded independent and reliable environmental impact assessments of the projects to proof and demonstrate that the pulp plants would not be harmful: "So far there is no single study, report or document scientifically valid that explicitly states that the Botnia plant with its volume of production, the technology used and its geographical position, does not pollute" (Technical Report of the Environmental Citizens' Assembly of Gualaguaychú).

5. Although their main slogan was against *papeleras* (paper manufacturing plants) it is pulp what is produced in the region and not paper.

Yet pollution and resource consumption are also attempts against the cultural and biological diversity of the people of the Uruguay basin. From this point of view, concerns were raised about the right to cultural identity of the citizens of Gualeguaychú, a right that pulp production activities could undermine (Daneri, 2007). So contamination and degradation were equally perceived as attacks on health, biodiversity and local culture.

Pollution matters were mingled with economic interests. Tourism is a strategic sector for Gualeguaychú and citizens worried that the presence of the pulp mills and the contamination they would cause may have adverse effects on tourism. They were also afraid that pollution could affect crops and meadows, and hence jeopardize agriculture, the local cattle and food industries. The Technical Report produced by the Assembly is very clear on this topic:

Such project (1.000.000 tons per year) is incompatible with a healthy environment and with the profile of the city developed over the past decades, and focused on environmental protection, the health of residents, touristic-recreational development, and the strong promotion of rural activities and food industry, hence the damage caused by the operation of the [Botnia] plant can be considered as being highly detrimental for Gualeguaychú and its surroundings.

A second major motivation inspiring citizens' involvement was the opposition to an imposed development paradigm, represented by the pulp mills, which threatened their own development model. Twenty-five years ago Uruguay initiated its forest project in order to become a world referent in pulp production. So ENCE and Botnia were just a tiny little part of the problem. The government's plan was to build several pulp mills along the Eastern shore of the Uruguay River. To protect this productive model, Uruguay signed a bilateral treaty on the reciprocal protection of investment with Finland. The treaty establishes a special free trade zone, an agreement highly criticised by the Assembly and environmental organisations in the region for being a withdrawal of sovereignty that leaves the door open to social and environmental abuses perpetrated by foreign corporations (Alvarado, 2005; Stang, 2008; Magnotta, 2009; Palermo, *et al.*, 2009).

Significantly Finland, a paper production country and the eighth largest world consumer of paper (Environmental Paper Network, 2018), is exhausting its primary forests to satisfy demand by the wood and paper industries and is looking for raw materials elsewhere. In his *Úselo y tirelo* (Use it and

throw it away), Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano wrote that the president of Uruguay boasts of selling trees to a timber producer country such as Finland, "...a great achievement, like selling ice to Eskimos. But as a matter of fact the Finns plant in Uruguay artificial forests banned in Finland by nature protection laws" (2004: 15-16). From positions sympathetic to the projects, including the Uruguayan authorities and representatives of the pulp mill industry, it was argued that cellulose plants to be constructed along the Uruguay River would meet the standards of similar production plants in the global North. However, research done by Jorge Óscar Daneri (2007), environmental lawyer and executive director of the environmental group M'Biguá, reveals that if European Union legislation on water policy was to be applied to the Uruguay River basin, the construction of mega-plants like those planned by ENCE and Botnia would not be authorised due to their scale and social, environmental and economic impacts.

The citizens of Gualeguaychú reacted against this dynamic. They refused to be implicated in the globalisation process as a natural resources reserve. As a matter of fact, an anti-imperialist discourse has constantly been present in this citizen fight. My own experience during a trip to Gualeguaychú in 2014 leads me to assert not only that this rhetoric is still very much alive amongst the Assembly members, but that it is often combined with a colonialist narrative emphasising the historical and present exploitation of the North to the South, today incarnated by multinational corporations and international institutions like the European Union and the World Bank⁶. The global North, especially Europe (recall that ENCE and Botnia are European firms), is accused of a spendthrift and unjustified use and waste of tons of white paper. Citizens of Gualeguaychú feel that the European Union is displacing towards Latin America polluting industries like pulp mills, no longer considered sustainable in the global North but whose products are still much demanded:

Any project of this type....requires the previous consultation of the affected community and the diffusion of all information available, according to European Union requirements for its own members. In our case, they are trying to impose a double standard and ignored to ask the people of Gualeguaychú

6. I visited Gualeguaychú between the end of March and the beginning of April 2014. During this sojourn, I attended a few Assembly meetings and spent time with some of its members. This gave me the opportunity to hear their own views about the questions discussed in this chapter.

and the rest of the region (Technical Report of the Environmental Citizens' Assembly of Gualeguaychú).

Finland is the main culprit of the presence of Botnia in Fray Bentos...The capital investors are responsible for investing to their own benefit and to the detriment of the health and economy of the locals and the environment (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly).

The role played by the World Bank in supporting dictatorial regimes worldwide and the transfer of dirty industries to impoverished countries is highly criticised (Magnotta, 2009). In some of its pamphlets, the Assembly quotes the words of Laurence Summer, former vicepresident of the World Bank, from which Botnia received funding, which were published in an article by *The Independent* in 1992. He is reported to have said,

Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the Third World?...Many countries are very clean so it would seem logical that they received dirty industries and industrial waste, since they have a higher capacity to absorb pollutants without too much cost...a certain amount of pollution should take place in countries with lower costs, with lower salaries, and where compensation for harm will also be lower than in developed countries (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly).

This anti-imperialist narrative also extends to the ICJ. Although citizens pressed for the Argentine state to submit a dispute against Uruguay, they were skeptical that the Court would acknowledge their interests to the detriment of European corporations. Local media reported the general feeling of disappointment after the ICJ's decision: "this deplorable judgement only favours Botnia-UPM and powerful transnational interests" (Matta, 2011).

Palermo and his colleagues also note that in this conflict, "culture was and is a central dimension, because a local community with its own development model, or at least a perception of it as being inherent to its own identity, clashed with a national and global production process considered by the community itself as deadly challenging" (2009: 181). What was this alternative paradigm citizens sought to defend? The peoples of Gualeguaychú are proud to have consciously chosen a development path for their community based on sustainable tourism (and hence not compatible with the extractivist model), the carnival celebration (perhaps the most popular and multitudinous in Argentina) and the river culture. The city has a long history of

environmental awareness. Their *Dirección de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sustentable* (Directorate of Environment and Sustainable Development) has been very active in promoting the city's transition toward sustainability. This entity has implemented a variety of citizen-oriented initiatives like environmental education programmes and projects to encourage waste management and recycling, including workshops for self-production of recycled paper. These factors, as well as the fact that Gualaguaychú is predominantly home to an educated and informed middle class, played a key role in the definition of the problem and civic mobilisation that followed.

Now, discussion about values and perceptions behind citizen mobilisation would not be accurate without reference to nationalism, which completes economic, environmental and development-based explanations. One of the peculiarities of the conflict is that demands of citizens included a combination of environmental and sovereignty-related claims. In the various documents produced, speeches made and interviews given by the Assembly members, there are countless references to the attack on the national sovereignty perpetrated by the government of Uruguay, for example:

The Uruguayan government is the local responsible since it has authorised a polluting plant without the consent of Argentina and without the social license of the dwellers of the Uruguay River basin. (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly).

Uruguay authorised unilaterally an illegal project (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly).

So the Argentine state was addressed and asked to react against such attack: "The conflict has not been solved so the national state must claim the closure of Botnia-UPM and avoid the construction of new pulp mills" (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly).

Citizens' relationship with the government went through different phases. At the outset it was seen as the enemy to blame equally as the Uruguayan state and the pulp mill corporations. But the situation changed when the federal government and the regional authorities of Entre Ríos agreed a national position on the conflict, which mirrored the interests and demands of the Assembly. Thus, the Argentine state and the Citizens' Assembly soon became allies, although popular protest periodically targeted the government whenever citizens perceived that it was not exerting enough pressure on Uruguay. The conflict was endorsed as a national cause by the government and the Assembly's pretensions were pictured as defending the national interest

by the media (Palermo et. al., 2009). This nationalist motive is accentuated by the attitude of the successive governments of Uruguay, which have refused to negotiate or reconsider their position⁷.

Reflection on the different motivations leading to collective action is useful to understand the kind of ecological citizenship that this conflict triggered. This point can be further elaborated by comparing the notion of ecological citizenship assembled in Gualeguaychú with other conceptions. Let's focus on what is, perhaps, one of the most quoted theories of ecological citizenship in the global North, Andrew Dobson's (2003). This account emphasises citizens' responsibilities and voluntary duties for the reduction of one's ecological footprint, founded on "always-already" relationships of injustice caused by our acts of production and reproduction of life in an asymmetrically globalised world. Drawing on Dobson's notion, the degree of civic commitment of citizens of Gualeguaychú should be assessed by looking at the extent to which their actions aim at reducing their ecological footprints. The discussion in the previous pages shows that reducing one's environmental impact does not seem to be the main objective or motivation of citizens in the pulp mill episode. In fact, it may be argued that citizens' participating in the civic movement originated in Gualeguaychú are not ecological citizens in the sense that their behaviours do not necessarily correspond with what most citizens would understand in the global North as sustainable lifestyles. And once more my experience in Gualeguaychú confirms my arguments.

However, as Gudynas (2009) highlights, in Latin America we find different examples of citizens' assuming responsibility for their environments driven by diverse motivations, from concern with endangered species or food sovereignty to pollution. So it may not be appropriate to ground environmental responsibility *just* on the idea of the ecological footprint reduction because sometimes people react as a response to other types of motivations. Consequently, the citizens of Gualeguaychú should not be judged *just* by the degree to which they conform to the ecological citizen type. As we

7. The government of Uruguay has long supported pulp mill projects. The initiative started with Jorge Batlle, president at the time of the conflict burst. Tabaré Vázquez, president between 2005 and 2010, had declared its opposition to pulp mills during the electoral campaign. Disappointment grew in Gualeguaychú when he assumed the presidency, as his government gave continuity to the pulp production projects initiated by his predecessor. The same forest policy informed José Mujica's government between 2010 and 2014. Tabaré Vázquez is in office again and has authorised the construction of new pulp mills in other parts of the country.

have seen, their sense of civic duty responds to a variety of motivations. And some of them can be read as environmental responsibilities, especially the opposition to extractivism and the defence of a more sustainable and fair development model. This posture does not only entail an anti-globalisation or anti-imperialist discourse. It also expresses a particular view of socio-natural relations and includes issues such as overconsumption, limits to resource use, the commodification of nature, ecosystems integrity and environmental injustice. So members of the Assembly consciously decided to assume responsibility for their environment and their polity, responding to potential pollution by pulp mills and the further consequences this may have on their landscapes, ecosystems, well-being and development. But, as noted earlier, this view of environmental responsibility is not expressed through individual acts in the private sphere but as democratic demands in the public realm. In fact, this was not only an environmental conflict, it was also a democratic conflict. One of the main reasons that motivated citizens and brought the movement together, beyond environmental considerations, was the claim to control their future and decisions affecting their lives.

Having said that, the fact that citizens considered the relocation of the ENCE plant as a success may be taken as an indication that they were not opposed to extractivism in general for being detrimental for Latin America. They seemed to be more concerned about resisting the implementation of this model in their river, as one of the slogans reproduced in some of their pamphlets goes: *No to paper mills in the Uruguay River basin*. Likewise, the Environmental Citizens' Assembly defines itself as "the voice of ordinary citizens of Gualeguaychú, who defend our way of life" (Technical Report of the Environmental Citizens' Assembly). This localism and defence of their own interests was also displayed in the way they sought to attract support for their cause: "Mr. Traveller, Mr. Citizen of Gualeguaychú, this is a beautiful and rich area of our coastland. Help us defend it" (Pamphlet produced and distributed by the Environmental Citizens' Assembly). Interviews with implicated actors conducted by Palermo *et al.* (2009) suggest that opposition to the pulp mill industry and the development agenda it presupposes were the preoccupation of environmental groups already active in the region when the conflict started, prior to the constitution of the Assembly. These concerns were also frequent during discussions in the Assembly in its early stages. But gradually the Assembly's dominant position evolved towards "not in my backyard" views. As Magnotta puts it, "environmentalists would get later on lost amongst the nascent assembly members (*asambleaistas*), who

were mere neighbours relatively informed, with their consciousness shaken, worried and ready to defend themselves” (2009: 65-66). During the time I spent in Gualeguaychú, I could confirm that this has been and still is the dominant attitude: members of the Assembly do not define themselves as ecologists or global injustice activists but as citizens concerned with their local problems and fighting for the interests of their community.

One might argue that the localism of their claims brings them closer to *nymbism* and self-interest than to notions of civic engagement and common good. In addition, the idea of national sovereignty and nationalist claims to resources, especially when these are common resources like a transboundary river, are an obstacle to notions of shared responsibility and the principle that all those affected by a decision should be entitled to participate in the making of such decisions. Furthermore, there is no evidence that citizens’ opposition to the extractivist paradigm of development and the defence of their own sustainable development model has led them to endorsing sustainable habits and routines in their daily lives or more just human-nature relations. Therefore, we must be prudent and acknowledge that the type of ecological citizenship enacted in the process analysed is not a very solid one. But still, it could be a first step for a broader sense of belonging to a wider community, which does not displace problems onto citizens of other communities and their environments. Only time and future conflicts will tell if this is the case.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed some aspects of a conflict that was different from many other conflicts and mobilisations in Latin America. It was led by the Environmental Citizens’ Assembly, a group of middle-class, educated, informed people, with a strong sense of identity and belonging related to their particular environment and very self-conscious of their rights, their record of civic engagement and their democratic participatory culture. Many environmental conflicts in the region burst in areas where the state presence is limited or virtually non-existent, where populations are excluded from political participation and access to basic services. They involve indigenous communities and marginalised, impoverished groups fighting not only for the exploitation and degradation of their environments but also for their recognition as citizens and for an equal treatment vis-à-vis the state (Yashar,

2005; Gudynas, 2009). Likewise, the conflict was not perceived by the public opinion as a radical or ideological cause, like that of, for example, *piqueteros* in Argentina. It was a different type of struggle for two main reasons. First, because it did not point at the connection between exclusion and environmental harm. And second, because the Citizens' Assembly was broadly perceived as autonomous and legitimate, not linked with any particular political force or ideology and consequently it was able to engage with diverse interests and social segments. These are arguably the main factors explaining the repercussion that the conflict had at the national and international level and the widespread support it gained from different actors, including the state and the media.

The citizens' movement has been successful in many respects. The Assembly managed to place the conflict at the core of the national agenda. This gave a new impetus to environmental issues nation-wide. Citizens also made enough pressure to force the ENCE plant be constructed further down its original placement (although the ICJ sentence did not fully accept their demands and the pulp-mill is in full operation. But did they contribute to spreading ecological citizenship in Latin America?

The Citizens' Assembly may not have totally achieved the main objective of their fight but it was successful in mobilising people. The case of Gualeguaychú points towards a type of citizenship defined from below and emphasises how citizens experience democracy and practice their citizenships in their daily lives. This was a struggle for power, to confront states and corporations and the way they make decisions affecting societies without their consent. It was a fight for a community's right to decide about its own future, to be an autonomous and self-organised. Civic engagement probably led to personal transformation through political and social learning and, as I noted, this arguably indicates that the struggle for the definition of their own account of citizenship was also a fruitful one. So it seems reasonable to conclude that the Assembly and the movement around it were successful in constructing their own view of citizenship and participatory politics, serving as an example for other groups nationwide of the power of citizens when they unite and act together. And this is an important dimension of ecological citizenship.

However, there is another key dimension: the environmental one. On this point it should be taken into account how nature was included in this fight and related to citizenship. At the beginning of this article I noted that an interesting approach for researchers on ecological citizenship in Latin

America focuses on the different ways in which the citizenship-sustainability connection arises in various environments and contexts. In the case studied, these were ultimately related to *nymbism*. My research has suggested that the main concern for citizens was the degradation of their local environment, the economic and social effect that the pulp-mills could have on their community life and the perceived attacks on their consciously chosen model of development. The fact that Assembly activists celebrated the relocation of ENCE as an achievement is quite illustrative. And this crowds-out other ecological citizenship related motivations that were also driving popular engagement in this conflict. Spreading environmental awareness in Argentina was perhaps an indirect consequence but I do not think that it was ever intended or deliberate. This would explain why citizens and groups with a wider environmental concern did not see themselves represented by the Assembly and were excluded by it.

The Argentine government also endorsed the Assembly's not-in-my-backyard position and missed the opportunity to address the perils and promises of the pulp mill industry in a broader nation-wide or Latin American perspective. Argentina has supported extractivist policies for almost two decades. This has generated citizen opposition to projects like deforestation, mining, GMOs or agrochemicals, and fuelled multiple environmental conflicts in the country. Significantly in this case, the government aligned itself with citizens who resisted extractivism, unlike in other similar episodes in Argentina (as well as all over Latin America), where citizens confront state-backed extractivist arrangements and they are criminalised for doing so. But as my analysis shows, this was not an environmental conflict like many others; it was also a diplomatic battle and a conflict of sovereignty. The notion of sovereignty connected well with Assembly members. They saw in this discourse an opportunity to get wider support by focusing on an objective broader than what would have been otherwise perceived by many as a narrow, fundamentalist, anti-development cause. This points at political opportunism and the power of nationalism to unite actors with diverse interests. A role, in this case, also performed by nature.

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