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Mapuche Resilience: Environmental Justice in Chile

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Title

Mapuche Resilience: Environmental Justice in Chile

Abstract

This paper presents a close analysis of the Mapuche Conflict and its implications from an Environmental Justice perspective. It serves to outline the plight of the Mapuche, a South American indigenous group, in their continued struggle to gain the rights to autonomic control over their ancestral territory from the Chilean government. By utilizing a holistic approach to research, this paper serves to provide a background on the conflict as well as to incorporate claims to justice. It chronicles the depth and breadth of media attention on the issue by incorporating perspectives from scholarly articles, news sources and social media platforms. In addition, the paper places emphasis on the importance of being aware of cultural diversity and epistemic differences through the incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches like history and psychology. Throughout the paper, it is evident that the Mapuche are a distinct ethnic group with a unique history and a unique set of values. However, the work highlights the fact of the Chilean government's continued disregard for and misrepresentation of Mapuche problems in its legislation. Finally, the work utilizes the Mapuche conflict as a microcosmic example of the effects a greater global problem in which capitalists overvalue the accumulation of wealth to a point of detriment of actual human bodies.

Introduction to the Mapuche Conflict and to Environmental Justice as a Critical Lens

The Mapuche are a South American indigenous group who have been fighting for the right to control their ancestral territory since Chile was colonized by conquistadores in the 16th century. Throughout the colonial era, the Mapuche were victims of the Spanish crown's encomienda system¹ which gave grants to conquistadores, political officials and soldiers (known as encomenderos) for the purpose of teaching Indian populations to assimilate with European culture. Under this system, the encomenderos exploited the indigenous communities for their labor and often took control of the land under the guise that they provided invaluable military protection to these underdeveloped communities. It is this system that institutionalized an "us versus them" mentality that still exists in Chile today between those of European descent, who ironically call themselves ethnic Chileans, and the Mapuche. The encomienda system is the foundation off of which cultural differences between government representatives and Mapuche have been continually amplified. Consequently, the encomiendas are representative of the political and environmental reality that Mapuche still face today.

Evidence of the continued existence of an epistemic divide between the Mapuche and those in power can be seen in two additional historic examples. First was the late 1880s

¹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Encomienda."

“Pacification of Araucania”², a military occupation of Mapuche lands which dispossessed and resettled Mapuche peoples from their territory and moved them onto government approved territorial allotments called reducciones, literally reductions. Later was the implementation of Decree #2568³ by the Pinochet regime. The decree was an assimilationist law which refused to recognize the Mapuche as a legitimate people and encouraged the liquidation of their territory. These two policies were government backed and reflected the sentiment of a Chilean constitution which was ignorant towards the Mapuche as a distinct ethnic group with unique beliefs and cultural practices. Surprisingly however, the historic disregard for Mapuche concerns by the Chilean government has not yet discouraged the activism of the group as a whole. The Mapuche continue to advocate for themselves and to seek justice for the rights to the control of their environment through a movement which has been recognized as the Mapuche conflict.

When studying the Mapuche conflict through an environmental justice lens, it is important to recognize a pattern outlined by environmentalist Gordon Walker. He describes justice as the process of reconciliation between claims about how things are and how they ought to be⁴. Evidential claims are simply descriptive because they describe the world as it is. Justice claims are normative because they express feelings about how the world ought to be. Therefore, each environmental justice claim comes with a notion of what is just and what is unjust, or with a mixture of facts and feelings. In the case of the Mapuche conflict, the claim to ancestral territory which the Mapuche people are making is different from the claim which the Chilean government is supporting. Analysis of this issue is important because the Mapuche are a group whose voices are being stifled by an oppressive system; if you do not know how to search for these voices, you will never hear them.

Within the paper that follows, I lay out the number of perspectives from which to view the Mapuche conflict as well as analyzing possible avenues towards justice. It is evident that, the plight of the Mapuche reflects a greater global problem in which human bodies are continually being harmed by an ideology. I believe that ideology is our capitalist reality because the truth is that most of us cannot imagine being disconnected from capitalist modes of thought. However, the Mapuche are able to do it every day. Their traditions reflect a deep connection to the environment which often contradicts the modern global capitalist vision. As a result, the continued existence of a group as historically resilient as the Mapuche is constantly being challenged by people who believe more in money than they believe in the fact that their actions are destroying the environment.

Information Literacy and Value Based Perspectives

When studying this conflict, it is easy to start with the number of history-based academic sources which have been published about the Mapuche in journals and in books. These publications present a solid foundation for future analysis because they value an observer point of view. They place the Mapuche conflict in context and can provide an unbiased look at the fact of injustice in Chile. Intellectuals analyze the Mapuche conflict in recognition of its most

² Alwyn, Jose. "Indigenous Rights in Chile: Progress and Contradiction in the Context of Economic Globalisation."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Walker, Gordon P. Environmental Justice. 40.

observable roots. Meaning that, they place merit in historic accounts of the group's political oppression like those mentioned above as well as analyze the plight of the Mapuche through the observation and rationalization of their continued struggle against the government for autonomy over their environment. Most of what is included in these types of articles constitutes the "is" portion of analysis. Meaning that, it simply describes the issue. For example, these articles tell us that the Mapuche are a group which make up 5% of the Chilean population⁵ or that the Mapuche faced discrimination through the spread of a white Chilean nationalist sentiment⁶ which devalued their existence as a nationally legitimate ethnic group. Most of the scholarly articles point to a few specific instances of injustice, similar to the ones listed above, and place them in a historical framework; some add nuance through an anthropological lens in which primary source interviews are applied to add dimension. But, in general, most scholarly research is informed by simple observations that present a limited point of view and cannot incorporate claims to justice.

In contrast, contemporarily, the Mapuche make the news for their protests which assert claims to justice against the Chilean government. However, predominantly English-speaking news sources tend to privilege other stories as coverage of these events in major global news publications is infrequent and often biased. But thankfully, a simple google news search yields an alternative in Spanish publications. Articles which chronicle the conflict as it is happening right now are most often found in regional sources like Chile's *The Nation*, *Terra Chile* and news blogs like *BioBio Chile*. Different from academic sources, news sources like these supersede the superficial and provide a sense of what "ought" to be.

The media presents the events of the Mapuche conflict in terms of its volatility. Meaning that, the stories which make the cut are the ones which create the loudest uproar. They are the stories which record violent reactions to injustice perpetrated by those who desire change. One example is a recent article⁷ in Reuters that describes a Mapuche group, *Fight of the Rebel Territory*, who has claimed responsibility for a number of arsons in the past few years and are now facing jail time while on trial in the Chilean Supreme Court. This story demonstrates how typical news stories only cover the most high profile of cases. However, the merit in news sources is that good reporting requires contact. News is better if it incorporates a primary source point of view, so interviewing those who are experiencing the conflict is common practice. Therefore, the media has the potential to act as a platform for the Mapuche to present their ideas about environmental justice, and about what reality should look like in juxtaposition with what it is.

In addition to the news media perspective, there is also a social media perspective where voices compete to be heard online. On applications like Twitter, the Mapuche people have begun to proclaim their opinions about environmental justice and injustice through the use of the hashtag, #mapuche. The thread is maintained by the accounts of individuals as well as the accounts of organizations which attempt to speak for the Mapuche indigenous group as a whole.

⁵Waldman, Gilda M. "Historical Memory and Present-day Oblivion: The Mapuche Conflict in Post-dictatorial Chile." 56.

⁶ Ibid. 57.

⁷ Slattery, Gram. "Mapuche Group Claims Responsibility for Chile Arson Attacks."

Social media sources provide a sort of bridge between the historical perspective of scholarly sources and the reality of major news events by incorporating how people are reacting on the ground. It is a little bit harder to follow the hashtag than to follow other sources however, because most of the tweets are written in Spanish and utilize slang terms which are hard to translate. Nonetheless, a holistic approach to research provides the most unbiased perspective through its recognition of the value in gaining a multi-layered perspective.

Critical Thinking and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Similarly, thinking critically is important to environmental justice because inherent in the conception of an environment is the idea that the observable world is representative of many intricate parts which synthesize in order to form a physical whole. However, we exist in a world limited by reductionist thinking, so observing the environment holistically is often more difficult than it sounds. Like our understanding of a particular man is as a function of his most observable parts: economic class, ethnic background or gender. Our understanding of the environment is based on our immediate experiences within it. So, if we acknowledge our environment as a whole we are made to face the biases given to us by our existence within it as component parts. For this reason, “Thinking Big” is encouraged by eco-critics like Timothy Morton who teaches us to think as if we were astronauts viewing “the fragility of our world from the point of view of space.”⁸ Morton tells us that thinking big forces us to view our actions as being part of a “mesh”⁹ or web which moves in its entirety in response to the slightest touch. As a small part of the web, the Mapuche conflict becomes important to the environment as a whole because it demonstrates the pervasive influence of our economic system in microcosm. Through the lens of the Mapuche conflict we are made to see the themes of a greater narrative, of the institutional barriers which restrict environmental change.

Taking interdisciplinary approaches to researching the Mapuche conflict ensures critical thought because it reveals the issue’s plurality. The conflict can be observed as political, historical, cultural and psychological as well as environmental. Historically, as mentioned before, Mapuche suppression began with the Spanish conquistadors who invaded, took indigenous territory as their own and attempted to force indigenous culture out of the country through the encomienda system. At this time, the Mapuche were labelled as outcasts and were excluded from a new conception of the national identity. At Chile’s independence in 1810¹⁰, the Mapuche were left without representation in the government. The employment of a psychological contact theory is fitting here in order to describe the way in which the Chilean government was able to justify their continued ignorance towards Mapuche problems. Psychologists¹¹ have proven that a lack of contact between two dissimilar groups leaves out opportunities for those groups to empathize with one another. In this way, the Chilean government was able to separate itself from the Mapuche and, subsequently, was able to overlook Mapuche issues. This type of systematic oppression remains today and is evident in the

⁸ Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

¹⁰ Waldman, Gilda M. "Historical Memory and Present-day Oblivion: The Mapuche Conflict in Post-dictatorial Chile." 57.

¹¹ DeAngelis, T. "All You Need Is Contact."

desire of some Mapuche to secede from Chile in order to create a new nation. Justice is being sought on the environmental level, but also on the political level.

Diversity Awareness and Cultural Competency

In order to understand the Mapuche conflict, it is important to be aware of the fundamental epistemic differences between traditional Mapuche culture and modern capitalist ideology. The Mapuche are a people whose identity is founded in a sacred understanding of nature. Like most indigenous tribes, the Mapuche are deeply attached to the land with “much of their culture, language, knowledge, history, spiritual life and memory”¹² being tied to the environment. In contrast, capitalism is a system founded on profit and endless progress. It is a system which frequently justifies the rape of the environment in order to reap economic returns. Evidenced by projects like the creation of the Ralco Dam¹³, it is obvious that, governments have failed to adequately address historical and present-day injustices perpetrated against Mapuche, partly because of economic imperatives¹⁴.

So, with the minds of most of Chile’s government officials in capitalist grasp, as well as the consciousness of the majority of the rest of the world, it is easy to understand why the greater Mapuche have radicalized their attempts to save their sacred territory from destruction. The Mapuche community “have adopted an increasingly activist stance since redemocratisation, grabbing headlines with marches, sit-ins, property invasions, equipment sabotage, legal challenges and pointed confrontations with political parties and leaders”.¹⁵ However, the group as whole does not entirely agree with radical responses to oppression. As a result, the tribe is facing a division in its pursuit of action, a sad fact which may reduce the ability for the Mapuche to remain resilient and unified.

Ethical Reasoning and Direct Action

In the study of environmental justice, it is not uncommon to find case studies which depict the struggle of indigenous cultures against political machines. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Mapuche conflict is representative of a greater global problem. It is a problem which allows for powerful global capitalists to inflict environmental damages on a region with immense cultural significance in the pursuit of wealth. The Mapuche conflict is critical of a society which values the imagined order of money¹⁶ over the permanence of the environment. And, in addition, it provides recognition for marginalized peoples in a system which unequally privileges the voices of those with money to spend.

¹² Waldman, Gilda M. "Historical Memory and Present-day Oblivion: The Mapuche Conflict in Post-dictatorial Chile." 57.

¹³ Carruthers, David, and Patricia Rodriguez. "Mapuche Protest, Environmental Conflict and Social Movement Linkage in Chile." 747.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 744.

¹⁶ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. 187.

Historically, assimilationist policies¹⁷ challenged indigenous culture in Chile through denied recognition of the Mapuche as a distinct ethnic group. Without representation in or recognition from the government, the Mapuche opinion was suppressed and the people faced unlawful seizure of their ancestral lands. For example, in the early 20th century the Chilean government carved up and sold reservation lands to non-indigenous buyers and eventually pushed the Mapuche onto roughly 5% of their original territory. Identifying themselves as “people of the earth”, the Mapuche culture is deeply embedded in the “profound cultural, mythical and symbolic meaning”¹⁸ of the land. Therefore, the seizure of the Mapuche environment created deep feelings of distrust in the government and functioned as a violation of Mapuche values.

The scope and focus of indigenous reactions to the conflict are varied, but there are two which stand out. Like I have demonstrated above, holism is very important to environmental justice. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that, although the injustice which is causing the Mapuche conflict itself is objective, the reaction to that injustice will always be subjective. On one end of the spectrum, there are nonviolent protest groups who desire to end injustice through cooperation with the government on socio-political reform. These groups have led traditional occupation and march-like¹⁹ protests as well as using methods like hunger strikes to gain attention. The nonviolent group hopes that the Mapuche will remain citizens of Chile while simultaneously continuing to practice their own culture. However, among the Mapuche are some more violent protest groups who seek to create an entirely new nation²⁰ for themselves while seceding from Chile. In order to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the oppressive state’s system they do not protest peacefully, but riot instead. Oftentimes, Chilean police have been called on these Mapuche for perpetrating crimes like arson²¹.

The growing division between the peaceful and radical branches of the Mapuche tribe is representative of the power of our capitalist system. Not only does this system have the autonomy to lend corporations more respect than it often does real human people. It is also powerful enough to carve up the land in a way which divides entire societies in turn. It is certain that the loss of the Mapuche would be a win for capitalism, but at what cost? The Mapuche are a part of the web just as much as any other living thing, and who knows what kind of ripple effect their disbandment would create. With their intimate connection to the environment, I submit that Mapuche problems or even indigenous problems should be recognized as the world’s problems.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, I have laced together a number of concepts in order to support the conclusion that the Mapuche conflict is an example of the pervasive influence of capitalist

¹⁷ Carruthers, David, and Patricia Rodriguez. "Mapuche Protest, Environmental Conflict and Social Movement Linkage in Chile." 744.

¹⁸ Waldman, Gilda M. "Historical Memory and Present-day Oblivion: The Mapuche Conflict in Post-dictatorial Chile." 57.

¹⁹ Ibid. 61

²⁰ Ibid. 62.

²¹ Mirroff, Nick. "Land-reclamation Campaign by Indigenous Mapuches Scorches Southern Chile." The Washington Post.

ideology on the masses. The “is” of the matter is clear. From a combination of historical, psychological, cultural and environmental perspectives as well as through the utilization of scholarly material, news media and social media it is evident that the Mapuche have faced continuous oppression throughout the hundreds of years since colonization. Whether it be through discriminatory legislation or a simple lack of cultural contact, the Chilean government has failed at viewing Mapuche problems as legitimate to the health of the state. However, it is evident that the Chilean government “ought” not only recognize Mapuche problems, but view them as imperative.

All issues of justice are generally thought to be conflicts of interest and/or misunderstandings of equality and the Mapuche conflict is no different. At its core, the conflict is the reflection of a clear epistemic divide that has existed for hundreds of years. On one side of that divide is a powerful majority who claims that it is just to destroy the land in favor of gaining capital. On the other side of that divide there exists another group who feels a deep and spiritual connection to that same land’s preservation. The position of the Mapuche, clearly that of the latter, is one which is critical of how easily we accept the current system as truth. The Mapuche conflict should show us that a simple change in modality can reveal an entirely different world. I insist that, the Mapuche are critical of those who do not take the time to take a step or two back from their selfishness in order to reveal a world like Morton’s web. In reality, the only thing which we all have in common is the ability to coexist on planet Earth.

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