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CENTRO-OESTE ARGENTINO

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# SOCIAL DISCOURSES ON ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES: WATER AND MINING IN CENTRAL WEST ARGENTINA

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## Introduction

Since the end of the 19th century, the government of the Province of Mendoza has driven the formation of a local identity based on the concentration of resources in the irrigated oasis, large-scale wine production, and European immigration. Toward the end of the 19th century, wine production essentially became the principal economic activity, replacing cattle-raising. As this is an arid region, with annual precipitation generally below 100 mm, surface water was diverted to the irrigated oasis to the detriment of other areas. European immigrants arrived *en masse*, and were presented as icons of Mendoza's citizenry, to the detriment of *criollo* or indigenous populations. Irrigation water rights were tied to ownership of private property, to the benefit of the *criollo* elite and later of European immigrants. Meanwhile, lands occupied by poor, rural farmers and native peoples underwent pronounced aridization. This was the basis for the strengthening of the conception of provincial land and people, made up of two opposed and irreducible socio-cultural realities, the "oasis" and the "desert". These unfolded into a paradigmatic series of dichotomies (modernity-backwardness, developed-underdeveloped, science-tradition), which became established in political discourses and practices.

These dichotomies have again become relevant in the current and lively debate, in Mendoza and in Argentina, over the establishment of large-scale mines as a new developmental thrust (SVAMPA AND ANTONELLI, 2009; DIMITRIU, LOAIZA AND BELMONTE, 2010; MACHADO et al., 2011; WAGNER, 2011). Mendoza has never had a significant mining industry and this activity is perceived to be a potential consumer and polluter of large volumes of water. This would end up being the principal use of water in an arid environment, and would have a significant impact on water basins, making it a major social and political concern. The appearance of these projects, first in the central part of the Province, then in the south, and more recently in the north, has led to re-thinking debates on water, economy, and population policies that have been in place since the 19th century. In the face of unfavorable public opinion, the government

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of Mendoza, which encourages the entry of mining companies, has responded to the controversies with varied policies and arguments.

In this article, we analyze this series of dichotomies as the principal elements of persuasion in the environmental policies promoted by the government. Our analysis is based on two documents that are of great importance for the political climate of Mendoza. They present two sets of guidelines for how natural resources should be distributed and/or used, and for which social, economic, and cultural objectives. First, the “Master Plan for the Ordering of Water Resources of the Province of Mendoza”, 2004, from the General Irrigation Department (DGI, Spanish acronym), which centralizes the administration of water rights for the whole Province; second, the “Environmental Management Plan, 2008-2012”, developed by the Secretariat of the Environment of the Government of Mendoza. In addition to these two documents, though to a lesser degree, we include administrative and legal statutes which are from another era, but constitute the current and historic framework for environmental and water policies in Mendoza: the Water Law of 1884, the provincial Environmental Law of 1993, decree 820/2006, which regulates environmental impact statements for mining activities, and the 2007 law that restricts mining in the Province.

Based on these documents, we will undertake a comparative analysis on four topics in government discourses on Mendoza’s environment and society. First, how is nature, and specifically water, conceptualized and envisioned? Second, how are socio-economic spaces conceived of in the Province of Mendoza? Third, how are social groups and movements represented? Finally, how does the provincial government think of itself, especially in its role of planning, mediation, and execution of economic projects?

The documents conceive of the human-environmental relationship from basically two nature-culture paradigms: a “Western” one that proposes a “colonial” regimen of domination and human domestication of nature (“exploration”, “conquest”, “exploitation”), and another, “paternalist” paradigm in which humans are in charge of protecting nature and have the voice and authority in act in its name (PÁLSSON, 2001). Both paradigms feed, in Bruno Latour’s terminology, the western matrix or “modern constitution”, which proposes a clean separation between the human (society, politics) and nature, a hierarchical relationship of the first over the second (LATOUR, 2007).

Nature, placed in the category of otherness, becomes understandable for humans through the medium of scientific models, specifically mathematical ones, which leads to underestimating other types of knowledge and actors. Nature becomes an object, a preserved artificial resource to be administrated by and for humans, who are fundamentally conceived as *homo economicus* (CARMAN, 2011). Power relationships and cultural conceptions are considered to be irrelevant factors (PÁLSSON, 2001).

This article’s guiding hypothesis is that the government documents conceive of society as a collection of human groups that work or should work harmoniously, based on rational capitalistic principles of supply and demand, production and consumption (LEFF, 2006). Nature is represented as an entity that only serves the needs of human groups, which on one hand should be exploited, and on the other, taken care of and conserved. These conceptions at once maintain, and are maintained, by the paradigm that associates

irrigated areas and their population with development, production, and modernity, in opposition to non-irrigated areas, which are seen as backward, unproductive, and irrational.

## Strategic Planning of Mendoza's Environment

Since the end of the 19th century, during the process of consolidation of the modern state, environmental administration has been a central pillar of government policies in Mendoza. The General Water Department (later the DGI) was created by the 1884 Water Law, still in effect today, as the institution responsible for the distribution of surface and subterranean water in the entire province. It is a government institution but also an autonomous, self-governing regulatory authority with its own legislation and organization funded by its users. The DGI represents all water users, defined by properties with water rights, which have not been updated since the middle of the 20th century, so areas included and excluded in the irrigation system are, in principle, unchangeable.

In the 1990s, the DGI carried out a policy of administrative decentralization, giving more power to water users, organized in irrigated areas as Irrigation Districts, which came to have greater control over the income from users' payments. In this context of decentralization, in which mining projects were not yet being set up, the department published its Master Plan (2004), whose goals include proposing future water policies. What we want to show is how the document articulates the meaning of water, nature, and society.

The document begins by proposing an analysis of water using perspectives from different disciplines, such as the "environmental" and the "socio-anthropological". The environmental concerns, it is claimed, "have gone well beyond a 'resource centric' vision, and value water from an integral point of view (...) which comprises the critical elements in the ever more complex relationship between nature and society" (DGI, 2004, p. 13). From a socio-anthropological point of view, simply, "water management is considered to be a tool for mitigating poverty" (DGI, 2004, p. 13). However, the supposed overcoming of the "resource centric" vision is immediately contradicted by denominating water a "resource". The issue of unequal access to water is quickly dismissed and mentioned later, using mathematical formulas that analyze water quantity and quality in relationship to the equation of supply and demand (DGI, 2004, p. 39). The environmental perspective loses steam in the face scarce rainfall, a fact which is portrayed as Mendoza's "natural restriction", driver of provincial history, and even a central element in the "diverse traditions from which Mendoza's identity has been constructed" (DGI, 2004, p. 14).

In this view, water scarcity becomes a natural determinant which excludes other historical and political factors in the structuring of Mendoza's society, and makes it unnecessary to reflect further. "In the Province of Mendoza there has been no necessity to renew the paradigm nor the tools from economy, sociology, environmental science, or others, to establish water resources as being of utmost importance. It could be said that the history of Mendoza is the history of water." (DGI, 2004, p. 13)

The consequence (also seen as natural) of this state of affairs makes it necessary to systematize limited water resources (DGI, 2004, p. 13-14). The Master Plan is presented as a tool for planning and organizing nature (in this case, water), based on the prevailing

rationalist view of its creators (engineers employed by the DGI and water specialists). However, to paraphrase Enrique Leff (2004), this point of view implies that “sustainability” depends on the possibility of valuing nature. So, the government invokes a technological and ultimately economic rationale as an argument to recognize or deny water rights, despite social rights in reference to the use of water.

This tendency to order and control began a decade prior to the Provincial Law of Preservation, Conservation, Defense, and Environmental Improvement No. 5961, which came into effect in 1993. The law introduced the concept “of sustainable development”, defined as the “environment or surroundings”, a set of elements, natural or created by man, that interact in a set time and space. In terms of the environmental actions to be carried out by the state, it decrees that the Executive Branch must develop an “Environmental Plan” that includes the application of principles of environmental policies, the ecological organization of the province, scientific studies and research, and the “development of guidelines for taking advantage of natural resources, used in an integrated, harmonious, and coordinated manner”, among others.

The duty of creating this environmental plan was deferred to succeeding administrations until 2008, when the recently created Secretariat of the Environment (previously a Sub-Secretariat) drew up the Environmental Plan 2008-2012. This document will be the object of our analysis, as it lays out the Province’s priorities, strategic lines, programs and projects to be carried out in the following years.<sup>1</sup>

In the text of the plan, the concept of sustainable development is reformulated and a new term is introduced: “territorial environmental development”. As María Carman (2011) reflects, one of the paradoxes of this discourse is that the conservation of biodiversity resides in the projected image of a world shared by all organisms, but within which decisions about hierarchies and values, acceptable forms of survival of the species, and the exploitation of resources are motivated by the interests of certain human groups. It becomes an irrefutable argument, brandished by authoritative voices, which constitute a cultural artifact that helps hide the interests of specific groups (who in the end design the management of nature): “Sustaining development also means preserving biodiversity that is continually becoming more cultural, while quite technical, and continually less natural: the terrestrial environment ... is almost completely produced or artificially preserved these days” (JUAN, 2007, p. 7, cited in CARMAN, 2011, p. 60).

Continuing with the analysis, sustainable development is connected to another concept: quality of life. Quality of life is presented as a something to be “raised”, “through the long-term maximization of ecosystems’ productive potential, with the appropriate technology and the active participation of the population in fundamental development decisions” (SMA, 2008, p. 3). Clearly, this participation never happens, and while the government sometimes considers the population to have a right to engage in “environmental justice” activities, the criteria of maximizing productivity remains entrenched in the generalized rationality behind government action. Technicians and functionaries who rely on technical knowledge end up being the only subjects with the authority to direct policy.

## Dichotomous projections and their socio-environmental utility

One key aspect in the provincial socio-environmental vision is the territorial differentiation of irrigated areas from those without irrigation. These representations invoke and conceal great tension. On one hand, this division is considered to be a natural fact, a given. On the other hand, it has been produced and established (both on material and symbolic levels), to a great extent, through political, economic, and cultural conflicts between two blocs of social and ethnic groups: colonizers and European immigrants who gained access to water, and natives and *criollos* who generally lost access. Since the 19th century, this struggle has involved insurrection and repression, legal actions, and the establishment of “cultural” arguments to legitimize rights. The most emblematic case is that of the Guanacache Lagoons (in the northeast of the Province) occupied by indigenous populations (Huarpes). Since the Water Law came into effect, this area has undergone a profound desiccation, despite inhabitants’ repeated appeals to the DGI and the Province (SALDI, 2012; ESCOLAR AND SALDI, [201-]; ESCOLAR, et al., 2012).

The DGI’s 2004 Master Plan includes all the basins and rivers in the Province, from their highland origins (the Andes) to their use in demarcated areas of the irrigated oasis. But it only takes into account sectors with irrigation rights. For this reason, many groups are ignored by this document, such as those in Guanacache, who lack both property deeds and irrigation rights. Indeed, the majority of the population in the Province does not own property with irrigation rights. Water policies exclude non-irrigated areas by simply omitting mention of their existence.

A different and more global conception is presented in the 2008 Environmental Plan, mentioned above, as well as its annual Environmental Reports.<sup>ii</sup> To begin with, the presence of irrigated and non-irrigated zones is mentioned. In spite of being an historic distinction, it is conceived as something synchronic, that is, it remains the same through time and hence is immutable, as its existence is considered to be part of the provincial ecosystem that should be maintained in equilibrium. This is among the priorities of the plan, specifically, “to defuse factors that impact the ecological balance between the oasis and drylands” (SMA, 2008, p. 37).

The last Environmental Report presented before the writing of this article incorporates considerations on the development of both areas. “Ninety-seven percent of the Province is arid or desert, which includes non-irrigated agropastoral lands that depend exclusively on rainwater ... in these non-irrigated areas, the principal actors are subsistence producers (small animal herding), herding companies (a secondary activity), the Province, as developer of conservation programs in protected areas, mining and hydrocarbon companies, and agricultural companies (subterranean water resources)” (SMA, 2011, p. 36). All the economic activities mentioned, from self-sufficient animal husbandry to petroleum-related activities and large-scale mining are simplistically thought of as “extractive”. This renders invisible existing social hierarchies, ethnic and class divisions, and the profound historic asymmetries between places, which opens the door to conflicts over use of land and water. However, within this panorama of “irrational” use, mining and oil activities are framed as the most rational, in terms of possibilities for

accumulation possibilities, as they represent more than 50% of the provincial GDP, as they are “attractive for investments” and generate significant royalties (SMA, 2011, p. 83).

With a stronger emphasis on the protection of water, the overall DGI report questions the possibility of large scale mines, deducing that their development, especially in elevated sectors of the basin, “would establish a great number of possible environment impacts in general, and particularly on water” (DGI, 2004, p. 42). It conceives of mining as one of the potential sources of great danger to the environment. However, it says nothing about oil-related activities, located in the south and central of the Province, where there are demonstrated cases of aquifer contamination.

Comparing both documents, we conclude that while DGI’s Master Plan makes a general mention of the potential risk of mining activities in the northern oasis, the latest Environmental Report proposes mining and oil development as an important line of development for certain areas of the Province, especially non-irrigated areas. Even though the Master Plan questions mining, it concurs with the Environmental Plan in the essential omission of references to the potential contamination of oil-related activities, which today is perhaps the principal threat to the environment and water.

Once again watering the oasis-desert dichotomy, extractive activities are presented as “opportunities” for these regions, economically “backward” areas without systems of water provision or irrigation. As Machado mentions, “the representation of regions as ‘deserts’ and poor constitutes an ideological construction that generally conceals historic precedents of economic exploitation of those territories, in order to present them as ‘available territories’ or ‘socially empty-able’, to be given value by economic capital, in this case, international capital” (MACHADO et al., 2012, p. 37).

### **The social dimension of environmental management: from “participation” to consensus and the institutionalization of conflict**

The social dimension is part of the documents, which emphasize the need for integrated management that guarantees the participation of the local population and “the availability of water in accordance with the goals of local development” (SGI, 2004, p. 17).

This proclaimed participation supposes the general necessity of social and local consensus for the advancement of government plans. However, despite repeated references to a consensus, the method necessary to achieve it is never made explicit. The actors who would be part of the decisions are not defined, nor the goal of participation, nor how this participation would be realized in practice. There are even a few sections where this consensus appears to be something previously established: “At the time of the development of this Master Plan, there is a consensus on the convenience of using the basin as the territorial unit of analysis, that is, the proposal and management of water planning processes” (DGI, 2004, p. 18).

If we take into account the institutional forms of water administration in Mendoza according to DGI’s laws and guidelines, participation is only acceptable in formal settings such as the Assembly of Irrigators, in which only users of local water of a specific Irrigation District participate (the institution responsible for taking care of and maintain-



ning local canals). The Irrigation Districts have been regulated since the beginning by the 1884 Water Law, and even existed prior to the law. In the 1990s, in the context of decentralizing policies, the Assembly of Irrigators was institutionalized with the idea that water users participate in the production and control of their own proposals. According to the Master Plan, the organization of water should be based on a participatory criteria that include the users, planners, and managers of water policy at all levels (DGI, 2004, p. 65). In this way, with the idea of incorporating participation into the logic of technology, efficiency, and rationalism into water distribution, the challenge was, and continues to be, the implementation of “a program strengthening the Irrigation Districts, with the goal of adapting to the demands of modern water management” (DGI, 2004, p. 70).

Participation is proposed as a organizational decision that will guide long term water policy and contribute to the resolution of conflicts that might arise, highlighting “the recognition of the importance of participation of all involved in the management of water in Mendoza, beyond irrigation water” and “to create or articulate an institutional atmosphere for the planning as well as debate and resolution of conflicts of its use” (DGI, 2004, p. 81).

But in spite of this democratic spirit, the Master Plan highlights the need for control and hierarchy along with decentralization: “The vision of a planning process conceived in the spirit of decentralization requires centrality for the execution of specific planning tasks and a “macro” perspective (“top down”) as well as viewpoints by the systems’ irrigators (“bottom up”) (DGI, 2004, p. 80).

Those with irrigation debts cannot participate in the assemblies, and even less so those who have never obtained water rights, who remain completely excluded. This is yet another way in which participation is limited and selective. Another impediment to effective participation in the assemblies is that the topics are defined beforehand by the district authorities and the DGI; it is very difficult to propose different topics, which only end up being discussed by water users once the assembly is finalized, that is, in an informal setting. From this point of view, rather than a form of expression, participation is instead a way of orienting users on the limitations of a singular legitimate logic of distributing water. The consensus shall contribute to this monolithic thinking, and differences in culture and criteria are obsolete. A “acculturated culture” is proposed, for which rationalization and efficiency are the supreme guiding means and objectives, which repress all differences. In this sense, “participation” is in fact another means of social control and discipline, as shown by Boccara and Bolados (2008), Bascopé (2009) and Dagnino (2004).

On the other hand, in the environmental plan, the social dimension of development alludes to social justice, as expressed in equitable distribution and job creation (SMA, 2008, p. 3). Economic variables repeatedly occupy a central role in social parameters. In this document we can glimpse a discourse more adapted to the environmental theme and the Province’s conflictive setting. In this way, participation is brandished as overcoming conflicts, through mediation, management association, or consensus; and by this means, for progressing in the materialization of “beloved Mendoza”.

For example, its first priority is: “Inhibit and reverse negative processes that compromise current and future water supplies and that affect its quality” (SMA, 2008, p. 9).



It established a Mediation Program to improve the capacity for environmental conflict resolution, aiming for the “institutionalization of settings and methods that promote peaceful solutions to controversies in areas with socio-environmental conflicts” (SMA, 2008, p. 37). It is important to highlight that demonstrations opposed to large scale mining have become one of the principal conflicts in the Province and the defense of water sources is one of the principal reasons for opposition.

As María Da Gloria Gohn points out, “institutionalization of social conflict has been a primary strategy in political society to respond to social movements. With every wave of movements a series of laws and new public institutions emerge to deal with the issue” (Gohn, 2006, p. 234). Politics is reduced to institutional channels and games that nullify the antagonisms and transform the conflict into an issue to be administered, transforming actual democratic politics (which assumes that subjects’ interruptions, excesses, and distortions will be represented in a universe ordered by formal political games) into mere “policy” or administration of each component in its social place, pre-established by consensus. Following this analysis, and considering the lively conflicts in the Province over large-scale mining, the same administration that developed the Environmental Plan called on community groups, assemblies, and interested citizens opposed to large scale mining to participate in the Provincial Council on the Environment<sup>iii</sup> in January 2008. Years later, this council ended up canceling its activities due to disagreements with government, especially because of the evaluation of the mining project San Jorge in the north of the Province.

The provincial legislation requiring mining companies to present reports for government permits states that they should include “the project’s social-cultural and economic impact in the area of influence where the project will be developed.”<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, citizen participation is done through public inquiry and/or hearing. In Mendoza, environmental permits issued by the executive power must be ratified by the legislature.<sup>v</sup> San Jorge (the first large scale mine that was evaluated for the exploitation stage) was approved by the Executive Power with more than 140 conditions, in an atmosphere of increasing social resistance. In the bill sent to the provincial legislature to be ratified, the executive, among his statements, highlights: “During the public inquiry and hearing various issues were raised in opposition to the mining project. Those referring to environmental facets under evaluation were taken into account by the Interdisciplinary Committee for Environmental Evaluation of Mining (CEIAM, Spanish acronym)<sup>vi</sup>. During the stages of the public inquiry (public inquiry and hearing) established by the current environmental regulations, a certain social resistance to the project was observed, based on diverse issues, *but not environmental ones*.”<sup>vii</sup> Here there is an explicit separation of relevant issues considered by CEIAM and social ones that were not evaluated for being “non-environmental”. That is, through this type of statement in official documents, government functionaries unrightfully assume the capacity to establish what is environmental and what falls outside of this category.

In this way, the government avoids talking about hierarchies, conflicts, and contradictions, while at the same time making allusions to participation. A great challenge for government institutions is to incentivize and direct participation, and as this may

involve confrontations, the government's distinguishing role has also been to promote consensus through measured and controlled participation from its various divisions and their functionaries. As María Carman affirms, paraphrasing Scott (2004), "in the theater of domination, an appearance of unanimity operates" (CARMAN, 2011, p. 81).

### **The role of the Province in the canalization of water, conflict, and territories**

Consensus, as we have described it, can be presented as the politically correct face that directs a process, without making it explicit, of arriving at a single way of thinking, and establishing homogenizing planning criteria that drive the formation of a single logic toward "ordering" distinct populations and social and/or cultural groups. The Province often presents itself as the administrator of this process, as can be seen in the 2011 Environmental Report: "it is the responsibility of the government to promote the existence and strengthen participatory mechanisms, social inclusion, prior inquiries and empower the community with principals of equality, transparency, information access, and a focus on gender (SMA, 2011, p. 106). The Province is also in charge of carrying out a "process of cultural change ... accompanying and supporting Mendoza's people in personal and collective learning that such a transformation demands" (SMA, 2008, p. 7).

The notion of "empowerment" alludes to state representatives' self-appointed role of establishing which habits are detrimental to today's culture that should be modified. In this way, the state legitimizes itself, to empower, teach, and direct its citizens. This is made explicit when provincial authorities think they have a duty to enact "cultural change", defined as "a change in environmentally detrimental habits, uses, and behaviors, making it necessary to develop an active reserve of strategic order to safeguard the integrity of our natural heritage: the culture of environmental responsibility" (PGA, 2008, p. 6).

In these lines, the government is presented as an objective, neutral, apolitical entity that is above society, univocal, homogenous and coherent, responsible for signaling to the rest of the population how to behave in order to reach a new culture of "environmental responsibility". This quotation also presents the population in its totality as equally guilty of contamination and equally charged with taking communal responsibility for environmental impacts. In this way, contamination caused by specific private actors or political-economic groups are passed on to and assumed by society at large, and the groups with the ability to control the government and/or the economy are able to externalize the costs and internalize the benefits of their actions (MARTINEZ ALIER AND ROCA JUSMET, 2000). This process is generally accompanied by faith in science and technology, which constitutes yet another strategy of legitimization, as "this privileged statute conceded to scientific practices makes it so that its interventions in human and natural realities are preferred. Any crisis or catastrophe that might derive from these practices is socially acceptable and confronted as an inevitable social cost that can be overcome or compensated by new scientific practices" (SANTOS, 2009, p. 114).

## Conclusions

In this article we put ourselves to the task of exploring representations of nature, culture, and society expressed in different environmental policy documents, on the topic of large scale mining and the distribution of water in the Province of Mendoza. As part of this study, we have tried to analyze the role or place of actual expression and participation of different inhabitants in the definition and execution of these policies. Additionally, as these documents prioritize technical studies, we were interested in detecting how a scientific framework legitimized certain policies and, in parallel, how they affected or filtered into paradigms of nature and culture, as well as regional prejudices based on consolidated dichotomies of oasis-desert and modern-backward.

Generally, we have been able to establish that these government documents position the relationship with nature according to Pálsson's (2001) "westernism" and "paternalism", in order to support the exploitation of natural resources as essential goods for advancing along the road of development, which at the same time will lead to an increase in quality of life for all inhabitants. In this framework, water use and distribution are understood in the terms and parameters of international markets, as well as prioritizing the objective of reducing management costs. For this reason, the keywords of indisputable themes are scarcity of water, efficiency, development, and modernization. Turning to the local sphere, the idea of oasis-desert is also incorporated. All of these words are used as givens, *a priori*, naturalized and depoliticized (that is, not problematized), as if scarcity were not relative to different uses and users, and as if irrigated and non-irrigated areas were not a human construction with continually disputed limits.

On this topic, the DGI's Master Plan lays out policies only for irrigated zones at the level of basin and for users of water, and as such, those living in non-irrigated areas are not considered in its policies. The Environmental Plan and its latest Report consider the oasis-drylands to be a natural balance, dismissing all attempts to debate the basis on which water was distributed at the end of the 19th century. In both documents, water scarcity is indisputable, such as the provincial opening of developmental roads and market logic.

If we compare these documents, we see a significant difference in terms of the role of large scale mining in the local economy. In DGI's Master Plan, this activity is considered to be a rising economic activity in the Province, but warns of the danger of negative impacts it could bring, such as increasing water scarcity and contamination. The DGI presents itself as the protector of water, taking on a role of judge, insofar as it limits its use, and where and how this should be applied.

The Environmental Plan, its Report, and related legislation present a more ambiguous position on large scale mining. On one hand, they establish the government as the protector of the environment, but on the other hand, suggest that the large-scale mining is strategic and part of the economic model to which the Province should be receptive if it wants to move along the road to development. In the same Plan and Report, the government is presented as a rational and objective entity that must orient the population toward a better use of different resources, establishing areas that can be exploited and those that should be protected. All of this supposes that this decision was the only and most rational possibility.

Considering that the government has the capacity to decide, then a hierarchy between humans is laid out. It is proposed that the State is made up of men with a permanent search for equality and sustainability, and who, guided by science, have the role to guide the rest of the population. Additionally, this population is presented as a collective of groups with diverse interests that should come together in a single project. From this perspective, other types of knowledge and interests not directed toward exploitation/conservation of natural resources are seen as irrational and consequently dismissed. Under these premises both documents make invisible political orientations of diverse sectors that comprise diverse government agencies. They also conceal the difficulty of overcoming social conflicts that involve values of different groups that make up the social complexity of the Province. In these conflicts, certain very powerful socio-economic sectors are able to legitimize their particular interests, presented as public interests.

In our analysis we decided to highlight the importance of the image that the government constructs of itself based on its environmental documents, and how its propositions and actions are blurred for the rest of society, in the distinction between the public and the private, the idea of conflict, the notion of society and social sectors that make up today's socio-political and economic complexity. In this way the social dimension is simplified, in the face of a more complex natural world in which scientific and technical studies take priority. In policy and environmental reports, social and cultural concerns become second or third in importance. In this way, all real participation of distinct groups in decisions on how they want to live, and from what, remains absolutely relegated or denied. These groups are then treated, denying all possible diversity, as if they were only organized by principles of necessity and consumption, and that differences can be dealt with through economic agreements.

In conclusion, we believe by simplifying social and cultural dimensions, the interest groups behind these documents legitimize, through supposedly scientific parameters, decisions over the use of natural resources, in this case, water and minerals. In this way, they negate the debate of the political overtones, and make invisible (or disqualify) different views on these topics in society, making it so the extractive-protectionist economic model is presented as indisputable.

In the face of this concealment, we have tried to make explicit the invisible, and the reasons behind its intentional absence. It now remains to investigate other types of knowledge that are concealed/hidden/delegitimized in these documents, but which are expressed in debates, marches, demonstrations and diverse social expressions centered around water policies disputes and/or the presence of mining activities in the Province.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> There are previous documents by the Government of Mendoza, such as the 1997 Environmental Report.

<sup>ii</sup> The Environmental Reports describe the annual progress of the Environmental Plan.

<sup>iii</sup> The council created to audit the Executive Power, made up of legally constituted entities that investigate and preserve the environment, who can invite other organizations concerned with the issue of the environment (Article 9, Law 5961).

<sup>iv</sup> Decree Number 820. Official Bulletin, Mendoza, 2006, p. 4092.

<sup>v</sup> Ratification established by law 7722/2007, which prohibits the use of toxic substances in mining, approved in the context of significant social demonstrations opposed to large-scale mining. The San Jorge project was rejected in the legislative proceedings.

<sup>vi</sup> This commission is responsible for evaluating projects and preparing a report, which the executive power uses as the basis to decide whether to accept a project or not.

<sup>vii</sup> Our emphasis.

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# SOCIAL DISCOURSES ON ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES: WATER AND MINING IN CENTRAL WEST ARGENTINA

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**Abstract:** Since the nineteenth century, government policies in the province of Mendoza (Argentina) have favored the centralized distribution of water, to the benefit of the irrigated oasis and the wine industry, which have been controlled by the political elite and European immigrants. This distribution of water has been legitimized by arguments that postulated a supposedly scientific and universal rationality, subsequently connected to the care of water and nature.

Given recent conflicts arising from large-scale mining projects that would use and pollute water on a large scale, we analyze government conceptions of socio-environmental relations, their contradictions and their political effects, on both the social distribution of resources and the environment. We conclude that the Government of Mendoza interprets nature according to its potential exchange value, under the rhetorical appeal to technological efficiency, development, modernization and consensus, at the expense of social and cultural rights.

**Keywords:** Water management; Government and mining; Nature, culture and politics.

**Resumo:** No estado de Mendoza (Argentina), as políticas estatais favoreceram desde o século XIX a centralização e distribuição da água em benefício dos “oásis de rega” e da atividade vitivinícola, controlada pela elite política e imigrantes europeus. Esta distribuição foi legitimada por argumentos que postularam uma suposta racionalidade ambiental científica universal, ulteriormente associada ao cuidado da água e a natureza.

A partir do recente conflito pela instalação de projetos de mega mineração que seriam fontes de exploração e contaminação da água em grande escala, analisamos as concepções do estado sobre as relações socioambientais, as suas contradições e os efeitos tanto nas políticas de distribuição social dos recursos quanto na própria configuração ambiental. Concluímos que o Estado mendocino interpela a natureza segundo seu potencial valor de câmbio, sob a apelação retórica à eficiência técnica, ao desenvolvimento, à modernização e ao consenso, em detrimento de direitos sociais e culturais.

**Palavras chave:** Administração da água. Estado e mineração. Natureza, cultura e política.

**Resumen:** En la provincia de Mendoza (Argentina) las políticas estatales favorecieron desde el siglo XIX la centralización y distribución de agua en beneficio de los oasis de riego y la actividad vitivinícola, controlada por la elite política e inmigrantes europeos. Tal distribución fue legitimada por argumentos que postularon una racionalidad ambiental supuestamente científica y universal, ulteriormente asociada al cuidado del agua y la naturaleza.

A partir del reciente conflicto por la instalación de proyectos megamineros que serían fuentes de explotación y contaminación del agua en gran escala, analizamos las concepciones estatales sobre las relaciones socio-ambientales, sus contradicciones y efectos tanto en las políticas de distribución social de recursos como en la propia configuración ambiental. Concluimos que el Estado mendocino interpela a la naturaleza según su potencial valor de cambio, bajo la apelación retórica a la eficiencia técnica, el desarrollo, la modernización y el consenso, en detrimento de derechos sociales y culturales.

**Palabras clave:** Administración del agua. Estado y minería. Naturaleza, cultura y política.

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