# Socio-territorial Disputes and Violence on Fracking Land in Vaca Muerta, Argentina

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*With the discovery of unconventional hydrocarbon deposits and the consequent expansion of the commodity frontiers in the past decade, a series of territorial disputes over the geological formation called Vaca Muerta has arisen in the province of Neuquén, Argentina, between oil companies, Mapuche indigenous communities, pastoralists, and the state. A general panorama of territorial conflict, state and parastate violence, tension, and negotiation among various actors in conflict in the department of Añelo suggests that violence in the territory is complex and multidimensional, since it supposes the superposition of its direct, structural, ecological, epistemic, and mercantilist forms.*

*En la última década, con el descubrimiento de yacimientos de hidrocarburos no convencionales y la consiguiente ampliación de la frontera mercantil, se han generado en la provincia de Neuquén, Argentina, una serie de disputas territoriales en torno a la formación geológica denominada Vaca Muerta entre empresas petroleras, comunidades indígenas mapuche, crianceros y diferentes niveles del Estado. Un panorama general de la conflictividad territorial, violencias estatales y para-estatales, procesos de tensión y negociación entre los diferentes actores en pugna del departamento de Añelo sugiere que la violencia en el territorio es de carácter complejo y multidimensional pues supone la superposición de su forma directa, estructural, ecológica, epistémica y mercantil.*

***Keywords:*** *Unconventional hydrocarbons, Rural violence, Social conflict, Indigenous peoples*

In the past few decades, the exploitation of fossil energy sources (gas, oil, and coal), precious minerals, and revalued natural resources such as water, lithium, land, and biodiversity has intensified. This "extractive" dynamic for natural resources generates numerous socio-environmental impacts, causes national economies to refocus on natural resources, and blocks alternative development

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in that it usually imposes an exclusive socioeconomic logic that operates with various types of violence. This article takes up the literature on disputes regarding hydrocarbon extraction (Agosto and Briones, 2007; Arias and Favaro, 2008; Bacchetta, 2013; Di Risio et al., 2012; Pérez Roig, 2018; Wahren, 2012). We analyze the tensions, violence, conflicts, and negotiations that involve the populations, especially rural ones, of territories affected by hydrocarbon extraction in the Añelo region of Neuquén, Argentina. Violence in the territory is approached as complex and multidimensional, expressed not only directly but also in the intersection of structural, ecological, epistemic, and mercantilist violence. These processes are articulated systemically, driven by oil companies and the state to ensure the sustainability and expansion of hydrocarbon activity.

In this context, the notion of a commodity frontier (Moore, 2013a) is key to understanding the general framework of territorial disputes and the different forms of violence that are imposed on the subordinate actors in this region—Mapuche communities and the creole or mixed pastoralist families known locally as *puesteros* or *crianceros*. Relating this concept to critical studies on extractivism (Giarracca and Teubal, 2013; Gudynas, 2009; Svampa and Viale, 2014) provides different perspectives that place this dynamic on a Latin American and Argentine scale, systemically linking activities such as agribusiness, large-scale mining, and hydrocarbon activities.

This article is divided into six sections. First, the theoretical framework presents the debate about the extension of the commodity frontier, the configuration of the extractive model, and various dimensions and manifestations of violence in the context of socio-environmental and territorial conflicts. The second section describes our methodology, which is based on fieldwork interviews and observations and on journalistic sources and statistical data. The third characterizes the central elements of hydrocarbon activity at the national and provincial levels. In the fourth and fifth we analyze territorial disputes and the various expressions of violence to which the crianceros and indigenous populations are subjected. In the final section we draw on various elements of the analysis to dialogue with the proposed theoretical concepts and review the article's central arguments for final reflection.

## THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The extractive model is characterized by increasing dispossession of land and natural resources, economic dependency, and reprimarization of economies (Giarracca and Teubal, 2013; Svampa, 2012). To understand this dynamic, we use the concept of the commodity frontier coined by Moore (2013a) to characterize the territorial and ecological reordering of nature that capital generates from its own emergence in areas where there are still large reserves of commons (biodiversity, minerals, hydrocarbons, fertile soil, etc.). These areas are currently found in the so-called Global South, generally where indigenous peoples or peasants live, and are necessary to continue the broad reproduction of capital, especially in the North (Moore, 2013b). These commons are fully commodified with new technologies through the intensive use of transnational capital to increase productivity. In this way, the expansion of the commodity frontier

"promotes the conditions for degradation and social and environmental conflicts" (Conde and Walter, 2015: 171).

Linking the idea of the commodity frontier with debates on extractivism in Latin America (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018) is interesting because they may complement each other to provide a correct theoretical approach for our case study. One of the outstanding contributions is that of Gudynas (2009; 2013), who differentiates the extractivism under neoliberal policies of center-right governments from the neo-extractivism promoted by progressive governments of the so-called pink tide. The difference between them is found in the discursive aspects of each government and in the degrees of social distribution of the profits from extraction by increasing regulations and taxes. Svampa (2012) proposes the concept of "the commodities consensus" as a successor to the Washington Consensus in which economic growth based on primary exports without significant value added is the basis for public policy. For Svampa, this extractive logic unambiguously applies to all the governments of the region (regardless of their different political-ideological orientations) as the only "viable" option for capitalist development in countries that are mostly rich in natural resources and are the weaker link in the "international division of nature"[1] that Coronil (2003) proposes from a decolonial perspective. As Zibechi (2011) points out, there is a paradox in progressive governments' social redistribution of the income generated by extractive activities: While they tend to be oriented toward targeted and palliative policies on poverty—still an important difference from neoliberal administrations—this does not produce significant structural changes. Thus, while the incidence of extreme poverty is reduced, social inequality may continue to grow, since the advance of extractivism strengthens concentrated economic actors.

Drawing on these observations, we synthetically define extractivism as a multidimensional process that involves (*a*) intensive use of renewable and nonrenewable natural resources on a large scale (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018; Gudynas, 2009; 2013); (*b*) orientation of production toward exportation where the global market in commodities reinforces the international colonial division of labor, nature, and production (Coronil, 2003; Gudynas, 2013); (*c*) the commodification of nature (Coronil, 2003; Giarracca and Teubal, 2013); (*d*) increasing financialization of activity (Giarracca and Teubal, 2013; Svampa, 2012); (*e*) intensive use of capital by large national or transnational companies, which have become top players (Giarracca and Teubal, 2013; Svampa, 2012); (*f*) negative social, health, and environmental impacts (Gudynas, 2009; 2013; Svampa, 2012); (*g*) displacement and dispossession of local populations (Giarracca and Teubal, 2013) through various types of violence against peasant, indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities, among other subaltern actors; and (*h*) strong state involvement in these activities through subsidies, tax exemptions, regulations, and deregulation and/or scant control over their social, health, and environmental impacts (Gudynas, 2009; Svampa, 2012).

We focus on the relationship between different forms of violence and the territorial encroachment of the extraction of unconventional hydrocarbons (fracking) on the populations that traditionally inhabited these territories: Mapuche communities and crianceros. This advance is part of a broader process on a Latin American and global scale. Direct forms of violence in rural

areas mainly emerge from two dynamics: the advance of capital into territories where commons abound (Moore, 2013a) and "the response of the state at a particular stage of capitalist development to the attempts of collective subjects to expand their effective control of natural resources and achieve effective recognition of their ways of being in the world" (Percíncula et al., 2011: 20).

Resistance is under way throughout the continent that, in setting itself up as an alternative to the hegemonic model, is suffering various types of violence. The extractive model requires dispossession, entrapment, litigation, imprisonment, stigmatization, robbery, and threats to and deaths of collective subjects who resist the onslaught of capital. For Narchi (2015), environmental violence assumes the reproduction and maintenance of asymmetric power relations by capital, power groups, and the state in order to construct a nature that allows the intensification of capital accumulation. All this supposes a series of social and environmental losses that conditions human action on a local and global scale. In Narchi's (2015: 7) words, "This kind of violence occurs on multiple convoluted time scales in which structural, gradual, and immediate acts of violence intersect to perpetuate a hegemonic socioeconomic order."

Thus, directly visible violence in socio-environmental conflicts is articulated and superimposed on other forms or expressions that often operate in ways that are difficult to demonstrate but are systemically linked (Navas, Mingorria, and Aguilar-González, 2018). Both episodes of *direct violence* and instances of *structural violence* may therefore occur. While in the former harm to persons occurs rapidly and with a clearly identifiable perpetrator, in the latter social inequality and institutional failures systemically affect the well-being and life of disadvantaged social groups gradually and anonymously (Galtung and Höivik, 1971). Although certain events may trigger episodes of direct violence, the incremental, cumulative, exponential, and long-lasting effects on people of prolonged exposure to environmental degradation involve the deployment of *slow violence* (Nixon, 2009). The negative effects on health, well-being, and socio-environmental survival itself are potentially generalizable to the entire population, but structural inequalities mean that certain groups are more affected than others.

When this type of gradual violence is identified and politicized, distributive conflict—"struggles over the burdens of pollution or over the sacrifices made to extract resources [that] arise from inequalities of income and power" (Martínez Alier et al., 2010: 154)—may emerge. While this conflict may assume a disagreement about the languages of valuation that would regulate a fair distribution of costs and benefits, *ecological violence* is the imposition of one of them. Specifically, when extractive companies and the state assign monetary value to the use of disputed territories and its social, health, and environmental impacts, they are inflicting *mercantilist violence*. By setting amounts of money as compensation, usufruct fees, restitution, etc., they may generate income for the affected populations, but they also impose a monetary measurement on the immeasurable fact of damaging the social, productive, and community fabric. Directly tied to ecological violence is refusal to recognize the knowledge and practices of indigenous populations, peasants, Afro-descendants, etc., caused by the expansion of extractivism into their territories, which represents *epistemic violence* and even "epistemicide" (Santos, 2003)—the rejection of knowledge that does not fit the

hegemonic forms of the "world-system." In the particular case of indigenous populations, epistemic violence is also an expression of the coloniality of power and knowledge (Lander, 2003; Quijano, 2003) that naturalizes the hierarchization of ethnic and cultural differences.

More precisely, the subordinate subjects to whom this article refers—indigenous communities and crianceros—have been impacted by historical processes entailing, for the former, construction of the imaginary of indigenous peoples' nonexistence as relevant actors in the Argentine nation (Gordillo and Hirsch, 2010). As a legacy of these processes, indigenous peoples today continue to face discourses and practices that deny their rights and question their identity in addition to the other subalternizing actions that they suffer: subjugation on their lands, failure to recognize their economic practices, destruction of their life worlds, etc. Although these dynamics are shared with sectors that do not recognize themselves as indigenous—in this case, crianceros—Mapuche communities are subject to a specific kind of violence.

The expansion of the Global South's commodity frontier is most intensely impacted by the intensification of the extractive model. Insofar as these dynamics involve its encroachment on spaces occupied by other territorialities (peasants, indigenous people, etc.), capital must use various strategies to hegemonize a territoriality that is at the service of accumulation. This is where the articulation of various forms of violence is evident, and its analysis must transcend the traditional division between coercion and consensus.

## METHODOLOGY

This article was produced in the framework of three research projects financed by public science and technology institutions in Argentina.[2] It is a result of an exploratory approach to the territory under study carried out during eight days of fieldwork in Neuquén in August 2017, the systematization of secondary statistical and journalistic sources, and a review of the literature on the case. Our objective was obtaining in situ knowledge of the actors and observing the territory where the violence occurred. We opted for a nonprobabilistic type of sampling with the assumptions appropriate to the social actors that we were trying to survey—whether expert sampling, sampling of type cases, or chain or network sampling (Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista, 2016) and following a dynamic that allowed us to identify significant subjects belonging to each sector. The interviewees were mostly contacted during the fieldwork, although in some cases we contacted them weeks before the trip. Public officials and most of the residents agreed to be interviewed almost immediately after being contacted. Additionally, officials from the Argentine state oil agency,Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF).[3] were interviewed in the city of Buenos Aires prior to the trip.

During our fieldwork we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with members of the Mapuche nation and representatives of their provincial organization, the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, crianceros, officials of Añelo and Aguada San Roque, YPF executives linked to the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbons and public relations, members of nongovernmental organizations such

as Observatorio Petrolero Sur and Diálogo Neuquino, and representatives of the Argentine Workers' Union and the Neuquén Workers' Association. Interviews 30–120 minutes long were recorded with prior consent following a guide reflecting the systematization of the secondary data, literature reviews, and theoretical assumptions that informed our research. Our questions[4] addressed aspects such as the territorialization of companies, relationships among social actors, the context, the impacts of hydrocarbon activity on the territory, corporate social responsibility and the link between the companies and the community (communication, confrontation, consensus building, relationship with political powers, lobbying, etc.), the characterization of the organizations in the territory (trajectory, number of participants, main references), the production and development models and ways of life that are in conflict, and the manifestation of the conflicts and the dynamics of violence that appear in those conflicts.

The interviews were codified and analyzed in terms of the previously designated dimensions and categories of our theoretical approach: territory, violence (and its different types), development, extractivism, identity, collective action, and protest, among others. While adhering to a conceptualization of the territory focused on the relational nature of conflict, the strategy involved first reconstructing the processes of dispute and then seeking elements of various types of violence identified in testimonies by the contending actors. Therefore we developed the text argumentatively, focusing on the subjects and not on the types of violence. In each account, numerous elements emerged that could be framed within a broad and complex definition of violence, and the dialogue between our data and theory—to which generous exchange with our reviewers contributed—led to the choice of six manifestations or forms of violence that served as categories of analysis. Finally, the vignettes that best supported our arguments were selected to illustrate different aspects of the narrative.

We also offer observations about the territorialization of both the companies and the crianceros and Mapuche communities, revealing the points of tension in some territorial disputes. We describe (through field notes, photographs, and videos) the practices with which subaltern actors reproduced their modes of existence and some of the socio-environmental impacts of hydrocarbon activity and the various forms of violence with which they were expressed. In order to protect the identity of subjects, we have fictionalized their names. We also analyze statistics from public sources and data provided by local technicians to characterize the region's agricultural sector and complement them with information about international hydrocarbon prices, the relative importance of the oil sector in the provincial economy, and its recent productive and regulatory transformations.

The systematization of these qualitative and quantitative data allowed us to understand how the different forms of violence operate in the territory and how they support the expansion of the commodity frontier of fracking. In order to give greater density to our research, we focused on the department of Añelo, one of the 16 that make up the province of Neuquén. It is the largest, with 11,655 square kilometers, and occupies 12.4 percent of the province's territory. Its population was 10,786 in 2010 (DPEC, 2016), with its projection for 2019 being 16,003.[5] The department's main activity is exploitation of hydrocarbons. The


**Figure 1. Europe Brent spot monthly price FOB (dollars per barrel), May 1987 to April 2017 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=RBRTE&f=M, accessed October 2020).**

enormous population growth—42 percent in the intercensal period 2001–2010—and the interest of main hydrocarbon sector companies in settling there explain this productive sector's priority. Extensive livestock raising predominates over horticulture and fruit cultivation. Pastoralist production is carried out in open fields under precarious tenure in which grazing permits and long-standing land occupations abound.[6] For its part, in 2008 (the latest available data) the cultivated area of Añelo amounted to 4,182.6 hectares, 3 percent of the entire agricultural area of the department, and was concentrated in irrigated areas. Fruit trees (especially apple trees, pear trees, and vines) were the main crops and covered almost 83 percent of that land (calculation based on DPEC, 2016).

## LEVELS OF HYDROCARBON EXTRACTIVISM

The expansion of neoliberal policies during the 1990s implied, in countries like Argentina, deregulation of the economy and privatization of numerous public companies and natural resources. The establishment of the free market required active participation of the state in forming a counter-framework to eliminate or limit the economy's regulatory institutions (Palmisano, 2017). The neoliberal model damaged the popular sectors and activities related to the domestic market. The social impact was such that in October 2002, 57.5 percent of the national population and 50.7 percent of the residents of Neuquén-Plottier were living below the poverty line (INDEC, 2003). In parallel, the earnings of financial companies and the beneficiaries of economic deregulation grew substantially. YPF privatization between 1991 and 1999 caused the loss of strategic control over hydrocarbons and a large part of the oil and gas reserves because of the lack of maintenance of productive infrastructure and exploration of new fields. In 1999 the Spanish company Repsol assumed control of YPF in the context of an economic cycle marked by high oil prices (Figure 1).

Beginning in 2004, hydrocarbons (gas and oil) exponentially increased in price and geostrategic importance as proven reserves decreased. In contrast, marginal deposits exploited through unconventional methods that until then had not been profitable were preferred. In 2012 the state bought 51 percent of the YPF share package after intense negotiations. Under the slogan of "energy sovereignty" and in the context of an Argentine energy crisis, development was promoted by hydraulic fracturing (fracking) the Vaca Muerta field, which covers several provinces in the southwestern center of the country (YPF, 2012). A year later YPF signed a controversial agreement with the oil company Chevron, generating debate and mobilizations by various social sectors (indigenous Mapuche communities, unions, and territorial movements) that opposed fracking for the risk and pollution it posed. These deposits were presented as an expansion of reserves with significant potential for development, but they created a dilemma with regard to the techniques' social and environmental costs. They also implied an advance of the hydrocarbon commodity frontier into territories that had been excluded from capitalist exploitation with conventional techniques—territories that had been maintained as a refuge for subaltern social actors who were beginning to see that this process disrupted their ways of life and production and was accompanied by violence leading to threats and dispossession.

The combination of traditional hydrocarbon exploitation with new methods of extraction involves an interrelation among the various actors involved in the territories through complex processes of dialogue, negotiation, and conflict. Three large groups of actors stand out in this scenario. The first is the hydrocarbon companies (transnational and national), which aim to maximize profits and understand the environment and nature as resources to be commodified through productive-extractive investment (Svampa and Viale, 2014). The main companies operating in Neuquén are YPF, Chevron, Total, Petrobras, Sinopec, Pan American Energy, Exxon, Petronas and EOG Resources (Forget, Carrizo, and Villalba, 2018; Giuliani et al., 2016). The state company Gas and Petroleum of Neuquén (GyP) and numerous transnational and local contractor companies also operate there. The second is the state hydrocarbon regulatory agencies (through the National Secretariat of Energy and other national and provincial agencies), which since the "renationalization" of YPF and the activation of GyP are also producers. The state also intervenes through public policies that strongly affect the territory (Aguirre, 2017). Finally, the third is the subaltern actors, among which we highlight the Mapuche communities (Aguirre, 2017; Pérez Roig, 2018; Radovich, 2017) and the crianceros (Bendini and Steimbreger, 2011; 2013; Bendini, Tsakoumagkos, and Nogues, 2004), who have cultural values and meanings that cannot be separated from their way of life.

This dynamic plays out in a very particular context because Neuquen has a long-standing oil tradition that has strongly impacted the territory and its people (Arias and Favaro, 2008), becoming a constitutive and structuring activity in the province. Between 1993 and 2016 oil and gas was the most important sector of the province's gross domestic product (GDP), ranging from 65.51 percent in 2002 to 33.15 percent in 2015 (Figure 2).

It is interesting that after the announcement that triggered the Vaca Muerta boom in 2011 the sector's proportion of the GDP did not increase. Oil and gas

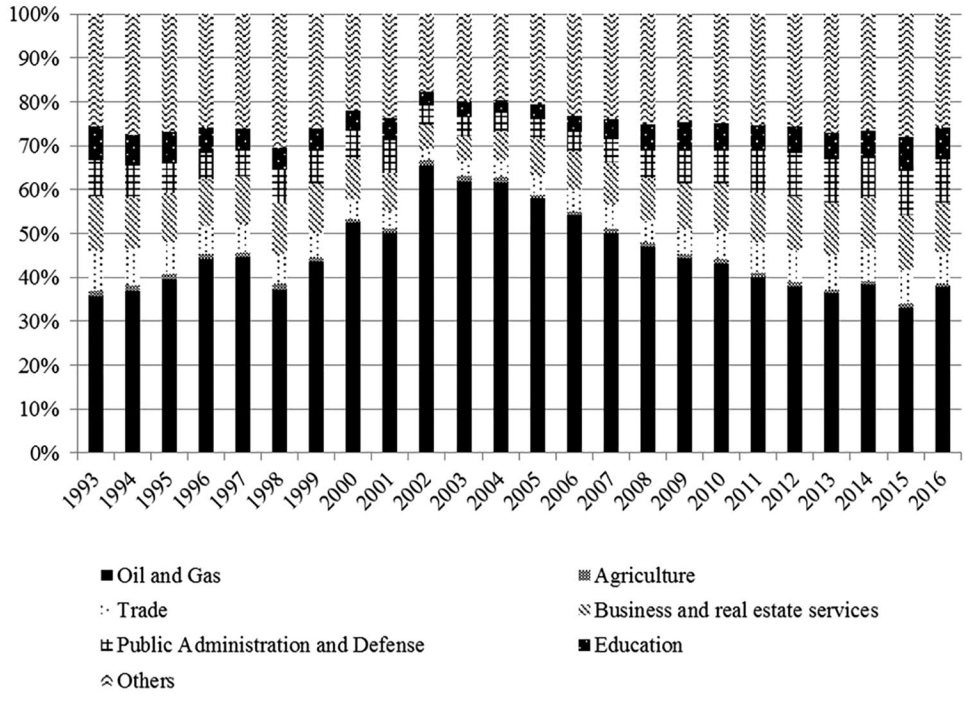


**Figure 2. Distribution of GDP by sector in Neuquén, 1993–2016 (based on DPEC, 2016).**

represented 40.16 percent of GDP and fell two years in a row to 36.48 percent in 2013, ending at 38 percent in 2016. In contrast, the agricultural sector never exceeded 1.27 percent of GDP in the period and in the last five years was 0.7–0.8 percent. With the discovery of the largest unconventional gas reserve in Latin America in the Vaca Muerta and Los Molles geological formations (Bacchetta, 2013), unconventional exploitation methods allowed the hydrocarbon commodity frontier to expand into territories with other socioeconomic uses such as agriculture, fruit cultivation, and livestock production. The position of Argentina's institutional political forces has not changed substantially in the face of this renewed upsurge in activity (Gómez Lende, 2018). As Gutman (2017) notes, "The extraordinary potential of Vaca Muerta is one of the few things on which the current president and his center-left predecessor, Cristina Fernández (2007–2015), have agreed, with neither having made any reference whatsoever to the environmental risks posed by fracking."

## DISTORTIONS OF DAILY LIFE: IMPACTS OF OIL EXPLOITATION ON CRIANCEROS' PRACTICES

The approximately 100 local families dedicated to pastoralist livestock production in the Añelo area have holdings of 2,000–6,000 hectares of open fields with no fences or obvious delimiting markings and a few pastures where only a few hundred breeding animals, mainly goats and sheep, can survive. The conditions of production are so adverse that state agencies consider a person or

family with up to 1,000 goats a small producer. The crianceros' main objective is shearing and selling wool (sheep) or mohair (goat) and meat, partly for family consumption (Bendini, Tsakoumagkos, and Nogués, 2004). Most families have been on the same land, which originally belonged to the state that gave them their grazing permits, for several generations. Despite the fact that some of them have begun the process to claim ownership of the land (some say that their claims date back to the 1940s), very few have managed to obtain property titles. These actors have developed a sense of belonging anchored in their long history on the land.

Along with economic difficulties that put them in the category of subsistence economic actors (Bendini and Steimbreger, 2013), these families' stories highlight infrastructure problems that keep many in relative isolation, profound impacts of climate cycles on livestock production, and migration of youth to urban areas. These elements can correctly be considered long-standing forms of structural violence. In this context, crianceros analyze the new incursion of the hydrocarbon commodity frontier in different ways. Generally, there is resignation or inevitability in the face of possible fracking on their land—a form of structural violence in that there are no viable alternatives.

At the same time, new tensions have emerged as a result of the possibility of charging for the "right-of-way" for hydrocarbon projects. Under this legal precept, when a natural or legal person uses the property of another, the owner can claim monetary compensation. Crianceros and Mapuche communities have only grazing permits issued by the provincial government, and the authorities, which are reluctant to acknowledge long-standing land occupations, discourage any negotiations by the companies. This dynamic is overwhelming for rural actors (Carlos Méndez, interview, Aguada San Roque, August 29, 2017):

> My dad always lived in the country, and he believed that he had always lived there and that it belonged to him, but he never filed with the Provincial Land Directorate, so most of the crianceros believed that "I live here, this is my grazing area," and they paid grazing fees. . . . they believed that by paying grazing fees for so many years the land would be theirs, and they never filed a claim to find out the situation of the land on which they lived. Today, with the onslaught of oil, the criancero wants to be compensated for losing revenue from the sale of animals and seeing all the oil activity that is occurring, and he is confronted by this.

While royalty payments and reimbursements have improved the situation of some crianceros,[7] the paradox of this mercantilist violence is that most of the interviewees see the recent extension of the hydrocarbon commodity frontier as negatively impacting their production. First, the proliferation of roads and extraction facilities has reduced grazing areas, and increased circulation of vehicles and machinery produces clouds of dust that damage native vegetation. Both factors have intensified the impacts of the dry climate, reducing animal husbandry. To alleviate this situation, producers have had to resort to buying fodder. Second, toxic spills represent an expression of ecological violence that, according to several interviewees, may remain uncorrected for a long time or be handled precariously. Third, the new roads for access to oil wells have facilitated theft, which is usually connected with an intensification

of wild-animal poaching that impedes one of the crianceros' own practices (Carlos Méndez, interview, Aguada San Roque, August 29, 2017):

> Hunting is one of the things crianceros want to engage in because they feed themselves and their animals, such as dogs, by hunting. This is common for them . . . but these hunters enter our land, and they kill 10 or 15 animals in a single day, both guanaco and ostrich. . . . When they come, they hunt whatever they find. If they find a goat, a cow, a horse, they kill it and take it away, and the criancero is the one that suffers the consequences.

In this process, the incremental destruction of the agro-ecological conditions of production (slow violence) overlaps with a mercantilist tendency to compensate, in some cases, for damage from pollution. All this results in a weakening of the conditions of reproduction of the crianceros' way of life, which leads to rural exodus. The arbitrary nature of negotiations with the companies generates tensions that reveal the inequalities in the companies' treatment of them, whether in the concession of material benefits (money, goods, supplies, etc.) or in building trust with the legitimate owner of the land. According to local actors, companies compensate monetarily with impunity for environmental impacts, but they also counteract the individual and collective resistance of those who live in those territories.

For example, GyP has several wells in the field of one of the crianceros interviewed, and relations between the two parties are strained. Even though the criancero receives one of the lowest payments from the company (15,000 Argentine pesos per month, about US$870 at the time of the interview) and despite his repeated complaints, the company systematically delays payment until he resorts to blocking the oil workers from going to work. After a few days, the money is deposited, and things calm down until the situation is repeated the following month. This dynamic is not free of lawsuits that force producers to appear before courts in the provincial capital, almost 200 kilometers away. Again, the field in question is located a couple of hours by dirt road from the city of Añelo and has no basic public services. A few years ago the company built a large hydrocarbon monitoring, extraction, and storage location containing various facilities, including electricity, in front of a criancero's house. In response to his requests to pay the company for access to electricity, the company said that it was not allowed to connect electricity there because his house was made of sheet metal and wood. However, after he had remodeled his house, the company still refused, this time without further explanation. The place shows severe inequality: the enormous plant located in the middle of the field with numerous high-powered lights that are constantly lit and some 200 meters away the house, with only a small solar panel. Something similar happened with water (Eduardo Martínez, interview, Añelo, August 27, 2017):

> You have to ask them for a water truck, beg them, and for them to bring you a water truck you have to open one day when they come to work so they can bring you a water truck to wash your hands, have fresh water to wash your clothes. . . . They tell you, "So you want a water truck? Well, get up there, and we'll send you a water truck right away."

The variability of these relationships may depend both on an express company policy with regard to relating to local actors and on the goodwill of the person in charge of coordinating tasks. When the company that operates the site changes (the rotation of contractors is quite common), the conflict erupts again. Subcontracting may also cause tensions, shifting the focus of complaints to each company's specific actions rather than the territorialization of oil extraction in general, but it ultimately represents constant structural asymmetry between subordinate actors and companies, in turn an expression of structural violence to which the former are subjected.

## FORCED COEXISTENCE: THE MAPUCHE AND THE OIL COMPANIES

According to the latest census, the indigenous population represents 2.4 percent of the almost 40 million Argentines, with Mapuche being the most numerous: approximately 21.5 percent of the indigenous population, some 205,000 individuals (INDEC, 2012). Because of the historical processes of expulsion and assimilation to which they have been subjected, many of the Mapuche are settled far from their original locations. Around 71 percent of Mapuche live in urban environments (INDEC, 2006), with each community making its own modifications to its traditions in territories that allow them. Mapuche who settle in rural areas maintain forms of economic reproduction typical of their cultural heritage but adapted to the environment, such as small-animal breeding and related activities: shearing, spinning, weaving, and selling animal products. Animal husbandry is usually extensive and in some cases nomadic (Bendini, Tsakoumagkos, and Nogués, 2004). It is combined with external jobs, usually linked to seasonal rural activities such as fruit picking and sheep shearing, to supplement incomes (Balazote and Radovich, 2014). Where the community is near hydrocarbon operations, residents may have jobs in construction and services.

The Mapuche people represent a notable example of resistance to the expansion of extractivism and the defense of ethnic rights, with a vast organizational history both west and east of the Andes.[8] In Argentina, the first supracommunity organizations emerged in the 1970s (in the case of the Neuquén Indigenous Confederation, predecessor of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén created in 1972) but were consolidated only after the return to democracy in 1983. The Indigenous Advisory Council, the Mapuche Centers, and the Coordinator of the Mapuche Parliament of Río Negro, among others (Kropff, 2005; Valverde, 2005), continue to promote and support this area's territorial struggles to this day.

Among the most resonant of the numerous conflicts involving Mapuche are those of the Santa Rosa de Leleque community against the Benetton economic group in 2002, which led to harassment, repression, and the ongoing civil and criminal prosecution of community members (Hadad, 2013). Others include the case of Relmu Ñamku, who in 2015 had to face trial for alleged attempted murder in the context of a 2012 eviction from the territory of Winkul Newen (Gutiérrez and Millamán, 2016); the 2017 death of Santiago Maldonado, who was disappeared more than two months after the national police carried out a raid during a protest in Pu Lof, Cushamen, Chubut; and the death of Rafael

Nahuel, shot in the back by members of the Argentine Naval Prefecture during an ordered eviction of Lafken Winkul Mapu, near Lake Mascardi in Río Negro. Other cases have been less prominent but equally serious, among them the death in 2013 of Cristina Linkopan, chief of Gelay Ko in Neuquén, at the age of 30 as a result of pulmonary hypertension caused by the contamination from oil activity in the territory and the emotional stress of living under siege (Gutiérrez and Millamán, 2016). These instances of direct violence are intertwined with many other forms of violence. In the cases of Santa Rosa de Leleque and Winkul Newen, structural and epistemic violence in the form of legal proceedings was notable.

In Neuquén, Svampa and Viale (2014) suggest, the presence of YPF in the territory has led to the ethnic reidentification and political organization of the communities there, particularly in the past two decades. According to a report by the Observatory for Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Salgado, Gomiz, and Huilipán, 2013), hydrocarbon activity is the main threat to the defense of collective rights of the Mapuche in Neuquén. The collective actions of the communities of the Loma de la Lata field against pollution and health risks on the Repsol-YPF sites on their territories are examples of this. In fact (Di Risio et al., 2012: 153),

> In the late 1990s [Loma de la Lata] attracted attention for environmental pollution and the high concentration of heavy metals in members of the Mapuche communities . . . Kaxipayiñ and Paynemil. "The least contaminated member has 16 metals in his body, and this was verified by the analyses of a foreign laboratory," the leader of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, Verónica Huilipán, stated.

This type of situation became more common after the Vaca Muerta boom. According to Maraggi (2017), of the 64 Mapuche communities in Neuquén, 32 are on Vaca Muerta land and 18 are directly affected by hydrocarbon exploration. The Paynemil and Kaxipayiñ communities live on a stretch between the Neuquén River and Barriales Lake near Añelo in the north of the department of Confluencia, the Campo Maripe community in the Fortín Vanguardia area of the department of Añelo, and the Futa Xayén community along Provincial Route 7 in the Tratayén area, also in Añelo. The territory of the Paynemil and Kaxipayiñ communities is known in oil jargon as the Loma de La Lata field, while the territory of the Campo Maripe and Futa Xayén communities is called Loma Campana. Campo Maripe is the community closest to the town of Añelo.

A territorial survey carried out in 2013–2014[9] documented that the Campo Maripe community dates to 1927 (Villarreal and Meza Huecho, 2015). Pedro Campo and Celmira Maripe are its founders and leaders. Since the first years the family has raised livestock and made payments to the state for grazing rights, originally occupying some 27,000 hectares. It has made several unsuccessful attempts to regularize its land tenure situation, showing its uninterrupted occupation of the territory it is claiming today. Currently, the community consists of 144 persons, members of 35 families, whose means of life have been diversifying. While rural activities continue (although in clear decline), many of them, especially the youth, are opting for jobs in companies operating in the region, both oil companies and related services.

As previously mentioned, the expansion of the commodity frontier that frames Vaca Muerta's oil extractive model collaterally contributed, paradoxically, to the emergence of the Mapuche communities' political organization. In some cases, as in the case of Campo Maripe, the need for formal constitution of the community not coincidentally parallels the oil expansion, since coexistence with this activity was tolerable until it became much more invasive and toxic. The Campo Maripe community obtained judicial status in October 2014 through Provincial Decree 2407. However, this did not bring substantial improvement to its negotiating position with other social actors operating in its territory, mainly companies and the state, and therefore direct action continues to be its option.

During the summer of 2016, for example, community members blocked the road to their territory and adjacent oil wells, demanding the survey that was necessary for state recognition of ownership of their ancestral lands. The disputed area covers 10,000 hectares of which the government has only recognized about 900 hectares as belonging to the community, and it is impossible to carry out the extensive grazing and agriculture that families require on this little land. Faced with the state's inaction, the community began a new blockade of the area in mid-2016, preventing the opening of new YPF-Chevron wells. In response to the protest, 100 police violently raided the community territory in June 2017 to safeguard the companies' work. A family from the area that had used its land titles as payment for a loan (even though it was inhabited by the Campo Maripe) then filed a complaint of "usurpation" of the land.

This attack by security forces on indigenous land had various consequences. The national police had entered the community's territory without warning, inflicting direct violence. The intrusion generated a protest led by the XawvnKo area council of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén (to which the communities of the Vaca Muerta area belong) and the Campo Maripe community in which several community members chained themselves to the doors of the national gendarmerie headquarters in Neuquén to draw attention to the conflict and forestall the repression that was expected in these cases (*Río Negro*, 2017). As one of the confederation's members pointed out (Nahuel, interview, Neuquén, August 26, 2017),

> When they entered [Campo] Maripe, they came with 80 gendarmes to do a specific job, to guard the workers . . . , but on the second day we took the police station here [in Neuquén], we occupied the station. . . . Then in that occupation with Maripe's chief they recognized that they did not have a court order, they had a political order. . . . They were acting with a political order, and they withdrew, because we were also taking over the station, realizing that there would be repression.

Community members faced various criminal prosecutions as a result of resisting police presence on their land. The state's strategy of direct violence is part of a national policy that criminalizes indigenous communities (*La Izquierda Diario*, 2017).

The same has occurred with the Paynemil and Kaxipayiñ communities, whose conflicts with the companies began as early as the 1990s and have continued to escalate. These families' recorded presence on the land dates back to

the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of the Paynemil (Blue Gold in Mapudungun) community, ownership claims for the lands they occupied began around 1903, and the provincial government recognized the land as an "indigenous reserve" in 1964 and granted titles to 5,000 hectares in 1991 (Maraggi, 2017). For its part, the Kaxipayiñ (Back to the Origin) community achieved recognition of 4,300 hectares of the more than 6,000 they claimed in 1998 after a struggle with Repsol-YPF and the Neuquén government over the Proyecto Mega (Balazote and Radovich, 2001; Pérez Roig, 2018).

The most recent Mapuche territorial claim in the area was filed by the Futa Xayén community, and its situation is the most precarious. Its territorial reaffirmation was announced in May 2017, and in September of that year it was repressed and evicted by the province's police forces. The media strongly questioned the legitimacy of this case, in which the territory was a very recent recovery, arguing the "falsity" of the families' ethnic identity and their opportunism given the hydrocarbon sector's valuation of and interest in the area.

These events show increasing instances of direct violence through repression by the police or the national security forces (mainly the national gendarmerie). Especially in the most recent territorial claims, threats to indigenous rights arise constantly. Ethnic affiliation and collective identification go unrecognized, and the hegemonic discourse accuses the indigenous of opportunism, reinforcing their exclusion and marginalization. The following testimony of a local public official openly expresses this form of epistemic violence (Daniel Ducca, interview, Añelo, August 28, 2017):

> The department of Añelo did not have indigenous peoples. They were created after Vaca Muerta. That is basic. . . . It does not come from the locals themselves. . . . Peasants in the true sense . . . are good people. Country folk are friendly, they are kind, always in this area. . . . Paynemil is the oldest [community]. Paynemil dates back more than 100 years. . . . It is also the only one that we can say is a community . . . because they had their cacique, they had their organization before, with or without legal status. They were already an indigenous community, do you understand me? The cacique José María Paynemil, a pure Indian, the sight of him scared me, no? They were, they were guys who practiced their culture, brutish Indians, do you understand me?

This is a scenario of increasing conflict, in a worsening national conjuncture in which widespread characterization of the Mapuche people as an internal enemy is confronted by the communities' tenacious and consistent resistance.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE VIOLENCE

As we have observed, the expansion of the extractive model suggests a complex and multidimensional deployment of violence that is expressed not only directly but also and more profoundly in the superimposition of structural, ecological, epistemic, and mercantilist violence. In this sense, this case may be a contemporary example of frontier appropriations (Moore, 2013a) focused mainly on energy resources. For the expansion of this commodity frontier to be effective requires exclusive and violent dynamics involving

social dimensions such as the threat of extinction of a way of life and ecological ones such as the loss of biodiversity and the proliferation of environmental costs. In parallel, the erosion and delegitimization of local knowledge (epistemicide) reinforces the entrapment of subaltern actors and leads them to feel that they have no alternatives to the developmentalist promise of extractivism. These scenarios constitute a complex network of tensions, negotiations, and violence in which states, companies, and myriad subaltern actors operate. Although there are incidents of direct violence, the shifting frontier also operates through gradual and cumulative mechanisms in which new technologies, more sophisticated company strategies (corporate social responsibility and nongovernmental-organization-mediated negotiation, for example), and hydrocarbon hegemony constructed under a long and intense (in terms of GDP) presence in the province play a central role.

From our analyses of Mapuche communities and crianceros in Añelo, we have identified various forms of violence articulated with the specific historical processes that have marked these actors' relationships with the state and the hydrocarbon companies. With regard to the Mapuche communities, the Campo Maripe police and military's attempts to evict them in 2016 and the effective eviction of the Futa Xayén community in 2017 are the most recent examples of direct violence. Lands reclaimed by Mapuche communities are juxtaposed with lands used by hydrocarbon companies for extraction, generating disputes over the advance of the commodity frontier and indigenous peoples' resistance to encroachment on the territories that they have inhabited and worked since ancestral times. This represents the application of mercantilist violence and knowledge that leads in the first case to a reclassification of territorial uses that favors companies over communities and in the second case—barring the possibility of maintaining traditional ways of life and economic reproduction that are characteristic of Mapuche ethnic identity—constitutes an "epistemicidal" practice involving a form of structural violence.

In the case of Campo Maripe, the community resisted on its own land and acted jointly with other communities in the occupation of the police headquarters, taking the conflict and direct state violence beyond the commodity frontier to the provincial political center. The conflict became more visible there, breaking the siege of the security forces and the media and preventing the intended eviction. In the case of Futa Xayén, the provincial security forces' direct violence was more effective in expanding the commodity frontier, since they managed to remove the community from part of its territory (although the conflict remained latent). At the same time, the discourse of coloniality characteristic of Argentina's hegemonic history, which has periodically made indigenous existence invisible, has been restored and renewed (Gordillo and Hirsch, 2010). This tradition draws upon delegitimizing discourses and practices about the nature of indigenous people's rights and doubts regarding their identity.

Slow violence, as in environmental deterioration, and structural violence, as in the institutional sphere of justice, have operated in Mapuche communities, but they are more acute in the situation of the crianceros. In the case of the criancero Méndez, structural violence intersects (in legal challenges to landownership and criminalization of protests) with gradual environmental violence

(contamination of land and water, theft of breeding animals, poaching of wild animals, and destruction of the fragile ecosystem). This scenario makes effective use of the land occupied by the crianceros impossible and is often accompanied by mercantilist violence. Even though most of the interviewees recognized the irreversibility of the onslaught of the hydrocarbon frontier, their acceptance of royalties suggests a triumph for the companies' and the state's language of monetary valuation. Thus, the installation of new wells and infrastructure for unconventional hydrocarbon extraction presents a double paradox. In the short term, it ensures the landowners some income, allowing them access to goods that have historically been unavailable to them because of their social position. In the long term, the sustained destruction of the agroecosystem will very probably prevent farming from being restored or recreated after oil activity ceases.

In sum, forms of violence overlap in the area under analysis. Although cases of direct repression are not the most numerous, the epistemic violence (sustained by colonial discourses of power and knowledge) behind threats to and suspicions about the veracity of indigenous identity, legal harassment (structural violence), deterioration of common property (ecological violence) and structural poverty correspond to an otherwise extreme scenario. This framework configures a paradigmatic map of the hydrocarbon commodity frontier's exclusionary and violent logic in a region where business interests are combined with state interests at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Clearly, the quantification of monetary costs supposes another, more subtle form of violence (of a mercantilist type) that reduces subaltern actors' particular way of life to a sum of money that represents a temporary solution to their economic situation, but it is ultimately difficult to reconstruct agricultural activity once the oil is depleted. Likewise, as previously stated, this mercantilist violence—coupled with direct, structural, and slow violence—breaks down the social/community fabric of the population and hinders the construction of alternatives or reconfigurations of the territories affected by extractivism. This is more intense in criancero families, which seem more atomized than the indigenous communities, with their networks of resistance and capacity to create more powerful alternatives.

In conclusion, this article shows that the encroachment of the hydrocarbon commodity frontier is sustained through the juxtaposition of different forms of violence and that they differentially impact various social actors in the same territory who resist them with more or less difficulty and organization. The evolution of these territories will be determined by two simultaneous and overlapping processes: on the one hand, the deployment of the dynamics of gas and oil commodity frontier in the framework of the global market, and, on the other, the conflict, dialogue, and negotiation (and their relations of forces) that are embodied in Vaca Muerta. On one side of these relations are the hydrocarbon companies and the state and on the other the crianceros and Mapuche communities that continue to resist and claim their rights to ancestral/traditional territories to produce and reproduce their ways of life. This case is one of many paradigmatic exponents of the ways in which commodity frontiers are expanding as an expression of extractivism in Argentina.

## NOTES

1. This notion implies considering land and, by extension, nature as part of the dialectic of capital development originally proposed by Marx as a dyad between capital and labor. Coronil (2003) proposes adding nature to the original formula to emphasize its importance as a generator of wealth and framing the analysis in the colonial relations that underlie capitalism.

2. Projects UBACyT 20020150200006BA, PICT 2014-3343, and PICT 2016-3718.

3. An Argentine state oil company founded in 1922 dedicated to the exploration, exploitation, distillation, and commercialization, among other activities, of gas and oil and its derivatives. Currently it is 51 percent owned by the Argentine state and is the main hydrocarbon company in Argentina.

4. Some of them were What are the current situation and the economic, social, health, and environmental effects of oil activity in the area? What is the companies' relationship to the different levels of the state? How do you evaluate the policies/actions of the company/ies in the territory? What are the main conflicts/challenges that arise in the territory? What roles do companies and the state assume in these conflicts? What are the long-term prospects of their activity in economic, social, and environmental terms? What productive alternatives exist in the area? What are the views or imaginaries about the land/territory, the environment/nature, development, and new technologies? What are the difficulties of reproducing the traditional way of life of the territory's residents, and how do they resolve them?

5. From the interactive calculation tool on the website of the Provincial Directorate of Statistics and Census of the province of Neuquén (https://www.estadisticaneuquen.gob.ar/#/proyecciones_app).

6. According to the National Program of Rural Titling and Rooting, in 2016, 4,011 agricultural operations (72 percent of the provincial total) of Neuquén had precarious land tenure (https://www.magyp.gob.ar/sitio/areas/tierras/programa/convenios/index.php).

7. Although some crianceros mentioned improvement in their quality of life, they sometimes noted the paradox of having to manage money austerely and having their daily lives transformed by an activity that extracts millions of dollars from their land.

8. The Mapuche in both Argentina and Chile have followed similar paths regarding their persecution by the state and their confrontation with the public and private economic interests that threaten their territory.

9. This report represents the anthropological expertise required by the process of territorial regularization under Law 26.160 on "emergency in the matter of possession and ownership of lands traditionally occupied by indigenous communities."

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