


Research article



Environmental conflicts and cultural misunderstandings in a Buenos Aires wetland settlement

Marina Wertheimer^a

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the politics of reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism, drawing on a case of environmental conflict and ontological equivocations in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. On the south of the City of Buenos Aires, the Techint Group plans to build a real estate project by promising *progress* and *development* for an area affected by numerous environmental problems. This project spurred social mobilizations led by neighbors and local organizations, who denounced the environmental and housing impacts. Drawing on an anthropological approach, I investigate what happens when a consensus cannot be reached regarding the solution to — or even the very nature of — an environmental “problem.” Finally, I reflect on the need for a new cosmopolitics that can transcend the cultural misunderstandings that arise from the fact that “the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collectives” (Descola 2012).

Keywords: Urban extractivism, wetlands, environmental conflicts, cultural misunderstandings, ontological equivocations

^a Instituto Gino Germani, University of Buenos Aires, National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina, mwertheimer@sociales.uba.ar



Introduction

This article addresses environmental conflicts in the face of urban renewal projects in coastal areas (particularly, in the south of the city) of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the period between 2004 and 2019, as well as the various constructions around “nature” in the city. In 2004, the riverside area of Buenos Aires underwent a process of land valuation, led by Techint Group, which proposes a large-scale real estate project, Nueva Costa del Plata, in an area of a deactivated landfill. Since then, local environmentalists and social activists have mobilized against Techint Group’s actions to protect the local environment, adopting a socio-environmentalist position. To oppose the development of Costa del Plata more successfully, they have been trying to establish a line of communication with the residents of a low-income settlement next to the deactivated landfill. In doing so, they hoped to build a common framework of understanding regarding the relevance of preserving the delicate wetland ecosystem. Nevertheless, this dialogue –between the collective and the residents– has yet to flourish since these different social actors have not agreed on shared demands or concerted collective action.

The methodological approach tackles social phenomena from the social actors’ own perspectives, exploring the beliefs, norms, values, and conceptions of the world on which they base their practices. In addition, we adopt an interdisciplinary and sociocultural perspective (Svampa 2001; Girola 2006). Besides being a typical case of environmental conflict between powerful economic and political actors, on the one hand, and self-organized communities, on the other, this case also illustrates diverging ontologies. It allows us to reflect upon the fact that, when it comes to reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism, a new cosmopolitics is needed, one capable of transcending cultural misunderstandings, which “result from the fact that the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collective” (Descola 2012).

The structure of the article will be as follows. In section two, I present the case study, the social and environmental characteristics of the territory where the conflict takes place, the main actors and their logics of intervention in the territory. I also offer a brief historicization of how the Bernal-Quilmes coast became a territory object of real estate valuation, previously being the “backyard” for the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Section three presents the main concepts to frame real estate valuation processes, urban extractivism, environmental conflicts, and cultural misunderstandings. Section four develops the main arguments with which political and private actors sought to legitimize the implementation of urban extractivism on the Bernal coast. I also present the resources and strategies used by an environmental collective to resist this process. Finally, section five focuses on the particularity of this conflict: the emergence of cultural misunderstandings when trying to forge common demands to oppose the installation of a real estate megaproject coast.



Figure 1. Ribera de Bernal. Source: Author, based on OpenStreetMap data.

Background

Case study presentation: La Ribera de Bernal

Just south of the City of Buenos Aires, along the Quilmes coastal area, stretches the low-income settlement of La Ribera de Bernal (see Figure 1). This neighborhood was originally made up of small agricultural estates and vineyards, which persevered until the 1970s while the surrounding city became more industrialized. During the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), the farmers and inhabitants of what today is the Ribera de Bernal were violently evicted to make way for what became, at that time, the largest sanitary landfill in the country: the Villa Domínico landfill, managed by the state-run Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado (CEAMSE henceforth).

Nowadays, La Ribera de Bernal is a low-income settlement repopulated by the survivors of the eviction. The neighborhood currently consists of about 120 dwellings. It is surrounded by the Buenos Aires-La Plata highway, the Río de la Plata, the (now defunct) Villa Domínico landfill, and a water treatment plant. This settlement is seated within the Selva Marginal Quilmeña, the southernmost manifestation of the Amazon Rainforest, which runs parallel to the Río de la Plata (Ringuelet 1955). In the 1990s, this area was declared a natural reserve. However, no budget was allocated, and no institutional mechanisms were implemented to guarantee its protection. La Ribera de Bernal stands on a wetland, a depressed, swampy, and flooded area that serves an important environmental function. Houses in this neighborhood are elevated on stilts, allowing the river water to ebb and flow freely.

Since the eviction in the 1970s, the neighborhood has largely remained on the fringes of urbanization. Unlike other informal settlements in Greater Buenos Aires, La Ribera de Bernal is not overcrowded and cramped. Instead, it is a peaceful neighborhood, covered in lush, green vegetation and foliage. Children play on dirt roads and ride horses, and according to the residents, no one locks their door at night (interview conducted in 2015). Moreover, La Ribera de Bernal has access to a large, sandy beach on the Río de

la Plata coast. This is one of the few coastal landscapes along the entire Metropolitan Area that has not been tampered with or artificially replenished.

The CEAMSE landfill

The CEAMSE sanitary landfill was created in 1977 to replace waste incineration. Sanitary landfills were usually set up in wetlands, which were spoiled areas of little value according to the dominant idea of the time. By burying waste there, the land would rise by 4.5 meters, so forests and green spaces could then be planted on top. The technology behind sanitary landfills followed basic regulations for soil waterproofing, with a layer of clay and a high-density polyethylene membrane. Once the desired height was reached, the terrain was “sealed” with a two-foot layer of soil (Carré & Fernández 2013).

For the installation and management of the Villa Domínico landfill, the CEAMSE awarded the construction contract to Techint Group, a multinational conglomerate of Italian and Argentine origin. It is currently the largest engineering and construction firm in Argentina. The contract was signed in 1978, and it established a 20-year term. During this period, the company had to plant forests, lay down roads, and build recreational and sports infrastructure along the 1500 hectares of the Río de la Plata coast. Techint would receive one-third of the recovered land as payment for these services. After a series of amendments during the 1990s, the company was unburdened from these obligations. It acquired additional land – not previously affected by waste disposal but rather 230 hectares along the Río de la Plata basin, all covered by rainforest, the *Selva Marginal Quilmeña*. In 2004, after continuous protests, local organizations achieved the definitive closure of the Villa Dominico landfill, holding the CEAMSE responsible for the irreversible environmental damage. Decades of persistent waste disposal had left behind a polluted landscape, from the atmosphere to the soil, the wetlands, and the surface and groundwater.

A polluted riverine ecosystem

Two main features define and organize riverbank life. The first is the actual river. For Ribera de Bernal settlers, the river possesses an almost omnipresent and all-mighty character. It determines the stability of the dwellings and how long people can live in them. During a *sudestada*¹, the river “grows”² and swells. Its waves can destroy houses and crops and put people’s lives at risk. The following interview with two residents of La Ribera clearly illustrates the above:

Respondent 1: When there was a sudestada in 2002, and we were there, I almost died.

Respondent 2: Our house was taller than that one over there. You know what the river did when it grew really big? The river went nearly up to the floor and started crashing against the house, breaking the front walls and the floor.

Respondent 1: The waves were huge! They reached the window and touched the ceiling!

Respondent 2: And began to crack the floor.

Interviewer: So what did you do?

Respondent 1: I lay down and covered my head. I was so scared! I cried, and I cried, and I cried, you know? That’s the truth. What can I say?

Respondent 2: And the walls began to crack. Made out of wood, they are.

Interviewer: So what did you do then?

Respondent 1: He was calm, I was scared.

Respondent 2: Yeah, I was worried about her. As for me, I can swim. But we were going to die together. I wasn't about to run away and leave her behind—poor girl. I mean, I could have swum off, but...

Interviewer: And how long were you flooded in?

Respondent 2: Not long. The river grows for maybe three or four hours, and then it drops back. But those three hours, while the river's really big, you have to hold on, you understand? And you know what else? You have the waves. They surge and break everything. And I mean everything!

Respondent 1: You have to hold on for dear life. And besides, you lose all you have. We lost all we had. After the waters rolled back, we had nothing left. Not to brew mate³, not even to cook (Interview conducted in 2015).

Another Ribera de Bernal inhabitant similarly referred to the river:

So, we went to keep this girl company, right? And I almost got sick because it was horrible seeing her like that. Her belly was big (...) It was this big. And she was in pain all through the night. And then two or three days later, she gave birth in her house. And the water kept crashing into her bed. It was incredible how the baby kicked inside of her. The water kept coming, and the baby was so happy. It didn't know any better. The girl was eight months pregnant by then. And the baby kicked, and the mother got so anxious. The contractions started that night. It must've been the water, the fright... (Interview conducted in 2016).

Another resident explained: “Sometimes, when we’re angry with the river, we’re just tired, we want to leave...” (Interview conducted in 2016). Nevertheless, this same person then affirmed: “There’s no way I’m leaving the riverside!”. Despite the constant threat of flash floods, no one has left the neighborhood because of them. Not even after the most severe *sudestadas*, which occur every 10 to 15 years.

In the Ribera de Bernal, life moves at the rhythm of the river tides. The river can be captivating and threatening at the same time. Riverside settlers attribute a certain human character and a given degree of *intentionality* to it. The river, they say, “floods and destroys everything.” During a *sudestada*, the river “grows” and swells. Its waves can destroy houses and crops and put people’s lives at risk. It “rises” and “swallows the land.” Its waters “grow large,” break into houses, and prevent people from leaving until they decide to fall back. The second ubiquitous feature of riverside life is waste. Since the closure of the Villa Domínico landfill, the Ribera de Bernal has become a kind of “backyard” for the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Trucks enter illegally to dump demolition debris and “fill in” the lower, swampy areas⁴. The area’s proximity to the former landfill and numerous polluted rivers and groundwaters conspire to expose the settlement to various contaminants. It does not help that, when the river floods, its waters pick up the waste strewn around the city, carrying it down fluvial channels and surface runoffs that lead directly into the Río de la Plata.

When the waters recede after a *sudestada*, residents find plastic bags clinging to bushes, trees, and house fences. They also find many other plastic objects, from bottles to empty containers, flip flops, or broken toys. Each time this happens, the residents must clean up the area, which may take several days. Sometimes, however, they recycle and give a second life to these found objects. This shows the *metabolic cycle* (Swyngedouw 2006)



Figure 2. Basins of the Southern Metropolitan Area (Source:Wertheimer 2020).

of urban life: the residents of the Ribera de Bernal reuse discarded objects brought in by the river and thrown away by people from wealthier neighborhoods, places the riverside settlers may not even know about. In this “socio-environmental metabolic process” (Swyngedouw 2006: 26), the river reveals the interconnections between distant territories and the dialectical unity of urban processes. The pollution and the neglect of public spaces, rather than spontaneous occurrences, are active practices that usually precede urban renewal processes and function as a mode of legitimizing new territorial uses with a higher potential rent.

A real estate project

After thirty years of managing waste disposal at this site, Techint envisioned a real-estate venture in and around the landfill. While there was social pressure for the area to be declared a protected natural reserve, where remediation projects could be carried out, Techint Group instead began to shape the Nueva Costa del Plata project with local and provincial authorities’ support, renewing territorial conflicts.

Nueva Costa del Plata is a real estate project stretching across 230 hectares of coastal land between the districts of Quilmes and Avellaneda, including the deactivated Villa Domingo landfill. Occupying an area of 1,300,000 square meters, this is reportedly the largest urban development project in Latin America — or at least, so claims its developer, Oficina Urbana (Converti & de Marco 2010). The project takes up 230 hectares, enjoying an initial 100 million US dollars investment. 70% of its surface area would be used for public parks and green spaces, while the remaining 30% would be available for residential use, commercial offices, hotels, community facilities, museums,

cultural centers, a business and convention center, and a university. Up to 40 stories high, its buildings would house approximately 25,000 people. And as for the former landfill, it would host a large public park covering 400 hectares. In 2010, Oficina Urbana received the Best Project in America award for *Nueva Costa del Plata* project. This prize is granted by The International Property Awards, an annual architecture and urbanism competition spanning many categories, which receives submissions from all over the world (Fundación Metropolitana 2011).

Theoretical framework

This section reviews different concepts that enabled the main argumentation sustained in this article. In the first place, I revised the processes of territorial transformation that affected the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA henceforth), related to the reconfigurations in the accumulation regime that Argentina went through since the 1970s. Secondly, I address the emergence of the environmental question and characterize the different environmentalisms identified in the case study, including the cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements.

Real estate megaprojects and urban extractivism

Real estate megaprojects, such as Nueva Costa del Plata, involve major transformations to the urban fabric. During the past three decades, the urban fabric of the AMBA has undergone profound changes, following an eminently economic logic that makes vacant spaces and infrastructure the object of real estate speculation and profitability. Far from playing a passive role, the state accompanies these operations –either directly or indirectly–, thus transforming specific fragments of the city (Stone 1993; Ciccolella 1999; Pérez 2006; Herzer 2008; Cuenya 2009)

One such kind of transformation, driven by local governments and private capital, are large-scale urban projects in vacant urban areas, reshaped according to global standards. These projects are carried out through ambitious real estate operations sustained by a complex network of relationships between public administrations and private actors, endowed with a corporate decision-making mentality and a relative lack of transparency in their internal processes (Harvey 2007). Moreover, the aim of such projects is not to solve housing problems but, rather, to satisfy middle- and high-income consumers (Cuenya & Corral 2011), leading to processes of *urban extractivism*.

The notion of extractivism was first used to describe the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the extraction of primary goods, such as minerals and hydrocarbons, during the last two decades (Svampa *et al.* 2009; Gudynas 2012b; Seoane *et al.* 2013; Svampa 2017). The analysis of these processes was limited, at first, to rural spaces and indigenous territories. However, more recently, there has been a shift towards looking at such processes in cities within the category of *urban extractivism* (Svampa & Viale 2014; Reese 2017; Vásquez Duplat 2017; Viale 2017).

The environmental question

As urban and “natural” extractivism intensified in the new millennium, social conflicts emerged. Mega-mining, soy monoculture, biofuels in rural areas, and environmental degradation and real estate speculation in urban areas have turned entire territories into disputed places, mobilizing communities and giving rise to conflicts and social movements that hinge on territoriality. In this context, collective action — organized in networks of social and spatial proximity — has risen with the aim of defending the land or physical spaces (Mançano Fernandes 2005). These social conflicts constitute “environmental conflicts” when at least one party has put forth an environmental argument since no environmental conflict ever occurs “in its purest form.” Therefore, when looking at any environmental strife, we must examine it from various angles and consider its protagonists’ arguments (Azuela & Mussetta 2009). For Martínez-Alier (2006), “environmental conflicts” are defined by opposition to projects with territorial impact and a rejection of the cost-benefit calculations underlying such projects. These opposition movements tend to use other languages of valuation, employing non-commensurable terms to value concepts such as biodiversity, human rights, autonomy, the right to self-determination, and more.

The conflicts analyzed in this article are led by local organizations, which are generally involved in asymmetric power struggles (Nardacchione 2005). In this context, mobilized social actors must broaden their specific demands and present them as public issues of interest to society — or at least to a broad social group. The *environmental field* (Azuela 2006) has been a source of legitimation, in which *nature* appears as a “universalizable value” (Chateauraynaud 2010) that serves to endow actors with legitimate frameworks for action.

Environmentalism contains several currents of thought and action, making it more appropriate to refer to *multiple environmentalisms* (Gudynas 1992; Bebbington & Bebbington 2009; Martínez Alier 2009), presenting a wide spectrum of positions, suggesting different ways of understanding the relationship between the environment, society, and the market. Therefore, they imply different political projects and imaginaries (Bebbington & Bebbington 2009). The following section includes a brief outlook of the main currents of environmentalism present in the case study, focusing on cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements.

Green marketing and ecodevelopmentism

A set of discourses and practices suggests environmental concerns should not interfere with capital accumulation, subordinating environmental care to continuous economic growth (Harvey 1996). Green marketing practices consistently adapt nature to enable profitability and capital accumulation. To build an environmentally responsible image, green marketing disengages from the scientific evidence of “environmentally-friendly” practices and is merely concerned with displaying a credible “green” image for consumers (O’Connor 1994). Throughout this article, I identify the practices and discourses of Grupo Techint and local governments within this current of thought.

In this case study, green marketing practices are intertwined with ecodevelopmentism, a current within environmentalism that hinges on the premise that, although economic activity produces environmental damage, it is possible — with effective controls — to make economic growth coexist with environmental care, though without questioning the precepts that led to pollution and depredation in the first place (Harvey 1996).

Ecodevelopmentism constitutes a contemporary tangent in the concept of development, elaborated since the late 1980s. The concept of “development” — which gained traction during the postwar period and was applied by the United Nations through the Regional Commissions and, especially, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) — is part of a broader belief system that posits economic growth and expansion as inevitable steps towards progress. Harkening back to Enlightenment ideas, “progress” has been understood by hegemonic state-led projects worldwide to search for better living conditions, using Western standards as the reference point (Colmegna & Matarazzo 2001; Gudynas 2012a).

Sixty years on, referring to “development” remains a strategic recourse that still enjoys much legitimacy and acceptance when promoting urban development. According to Sachs: “When someone talks about development, they really mean nothing — despite pretending to have the best intentions. Development is devoid of content, but it serves a purpose: it sanctifies any intervention in the name of a higher, more evolved objective” (Sachs 1997). Development, then, can be considered a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005). Its vague and imprecise nature means many disparate political projects can redefine it. This ambiguity is precisely its strength: it would be difficult to find anyone opposed to the concept of development, which is why it garners support from across the ideological spectrum. Since it is a floating signifier, the very meaning of “development” is dependent on hegemonic struggles.

Conservationism

Conservationism is the most well-known current within environmentalism. It is a movement that argues for protecting nature, landscapes, and living species, valuing nature in its “pristine” state. Its main proposal is to restore degraded areas and create spatial units where human presence is restricted (Reboratti 2000; Foladori 2005; Wagner 2010).

Conservationism — supported in disciplines such as ecology or conservation biology — understands nature, above all, as a collection of separate objects which, taken together, represent biodiversity. Within this current, nature constitutes a separate entity from humanity. According to Milton (2001), conservationism can be defined as the active and explicit effort to impose borders between human and non-human processes, the latter of which defines the natural.

Conservationism is a *biocentric* position, for which life on Earth has intrinsic value that is “independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes” (Naess 1992). The idea of intrinsic value holds that there are attributes independent of human beings that continue to exist even in their absence. As Trentini points out, conservationism, by reducing nature to a biological-ecological issue, obliterates the existence of divergent interests in local populations and ends up acting as a moralizing discourse that defines “what people can or cannot do” (2011: 16).

Socioenvironmental justice

Finally, the type of environmentalism that defines the social organizations reclaiming the commons and resisting extractivism is identified as *socio-environmental justice* (Svampa 2008a; Acselrad *et al.* 2009; Bebbington & Bebbington 2009). The socio-environmental justice movement opposes the unequal spatial distribution of the risks, costs, and benefits of pollution and extraction. Their complaints are based on certain populations’

greater risk due to uneven exposure to environmental contamination. The same people are usually excluded from decision-making processes (Harvey 1996). Therefore, the hardships of environmental problems acquire racial and class dimensions. This current finds its origins in the social justice and human rights movements. For this reason, it advocates “critical” environmentalism capable of integrating environmental and social struggles and defines environmental problems in terms of social justice.

Cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements

The above currents of environmentalism describe how the human-nature relationship is predominantly understood in the West, though alternative approaches exist. In the modern Western tradition, the dominant view of the human-nature relationship constitutes a naturalistic ontology, in which nature is an ontological domain separate from what we call culture or society. However, the ecological perspectives discussed above, even the socio-environmental approach, still overlook an important dimension to such conflicts: culture. According to Blaser, in many environmental disputes, what is at stake is not so much a misunderstanding on the management and access to “natural resources,” but involves cultural — and often insurmountable — misunderstandings (Blaser 2009a; Descola 2012; Carman & González Carman 2020), regarding what things are even at stake. The actors involved “are not aware that each of them is representing (and assuming) different worlds” (Blaser 2009b).

Transcending the naturalist premise of modernity, Blaser and de la Cadena rely on the work of Stengers (2000) to advocate for the recognition of *pluriverses*, meaning radically different worlds or realities that are capable of existing without necessarily interfering with one another (Stengers 2005). For Stengers, the so-called *cosmopolitics* (Stengers 1997, 2005) can function to overcome several cultural misunderstandings. Cultural misunderstandings occur even in the modern Western world and are not limited to disagreements between “ontologically” diverse groups. As Carman points out, to this day, and throughout Western culture, we can find examples of other ways of being in the world: “the worldviews that have nurtured the experience of humanity for centuries have not completely disappeared, and they still play a role in our dispositions and schemes of perception of the world” (Carman 2017: 122).

From this conceptual starting point, I propose the notion of *cultural misunderstandings* to describe certain aspects of the relationship between Ribera de Bernal residents and the environmentalist resistance movement. The following section explores how an extractivist model was imposed on the Bernal coast, based on a public-private partnership between the local government and the Techint group. The main supporting arguments employed by these actors are presented. I also reconstruct the resources and strategies adopted by a local group to oppose the installation of Nueva Costa del Plata, mainly through arguments and environmental practices close to socio-environmental justice, which increasingly veered towards a conservationist position. Finally, in section 5, I examine how this conservationist position ended up preventing any possibility of reaching common ground with La Ribera de Bernal’s settlers and produced cultural misunderstandings.

Results

Progress and development as forms of entrepreneurialism and urban extractivism

Government decisions are not fixed or predetermined but are guided by what can be considered “achievable” goals. In this sense, for the local governments, Techint Group’s *Nueva Costa del Plata* project represented a viable answer to the question of what to do about the deactivated landfill and its surrounding areas. The authorities found, in this proposal, a real estate project with a pre-designed, self-financing urban program, which might give an economic boost and attract an influx of new inhabitants with greater purchasing power (meaning more tax potential and higher budgets for local government). In addition, the *Nueva Costa del Plata* plan would beautify the riverside area and promote public use of hitherto-inaccessible land. All these factors eventually led to the formation of a *public-private partnership* (Stone 1993; Harvey 2007) between local governments and Techint Group, that exploited the riverside territory as a kind of *territorial capital* (Caravaca & González 2009).

Furthermore, real estate projects like this appear to function not necessarily to assuage housing concerns but rather as places where value can be stored (Guevara 2015) or as financial assets (Barenboim 2010). This deepening relationship between financial markets and real estate leads to *urban extractivism*, following the process started in the 1990s within the City of Buenos Aires. Therefore, urban land becomes a financial instrument since its price grows increasingly detached from the “real” economy and determined, in large part, by the oscillations of rent and property values determined by the financial market (Reese 2017).

To argue in favor of *Nueva Costa del Plata*, Techint Group and local authorities advanced the following points: the project would (a) facilitate public access to the river, (b) contribute to local development, and (c) help protect the environment. They were deployed, in this case, by promoters of real estate development — and even detractors of the project — to defend their positions. However, it is worth noting that these arguments are not merely rhetorical flourishes. Projects like *Costa del Plata* can indeed generate incentives and economic opportunities, attracting investments, spurring job creation, and increasing income through the influx of high-income residents. The problem, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) point out, is that the ethics of profit and unlimited accumulation cannot justify themselves and need additional “moral support”.

Facilitate public access to the river

As the popular saying goes, Buenos Aires was built “with its back to the river.” Even today, due to all the urban barriers standing in the way, it can be difficult for the city’s inhabitants to access the Río de la Plata’s shores. Since the 1980s, different local administrations have attempted to recover these coastal areas. Silvestri (2011) argues these actions mean to counteract the experience of the last military dictatorship, promoting public openness against authoritarian urbanism. For the past few decades, the recovery of public space has therefore been a prominent issue on the urban agenda, becoming a unifying idea bringing many other concerns into its orbit — chiefly, political democracy.

The will to “recover” urban public spaces — among them coasts and waterfronts — as sites for the practice of democracy continues to this day. And in the southern districts of Greater Buenos Aires, this recovery process is linked to the overhaul of an older model of territorial management, perceived as violent and authoritarian, and inherited from the military dictatorship. This matter of “recovering” access to the river shore, as well as the creation of numerous public spaces and parks, are all strongly emphasized in the Nueva Costa del Plata project. Whenever possible, Oficina Urbana representatives call attention to the fact that only 25% of the land under discussion would be occupied by new buildings and constructions, with 75% remaining as public space.

Development and progress

Local authorities and project developers appealed to the twin notions of *development* and *progress* to legitimize the real estate project. Even sixty years after the first debates, referring to “development” remains a strategic recourse that still enjoys a great deal of legitimacy and acceptance when promoting urban development, as was the case with Nueva Costa del Plata. Development, as we argued, can be considered as a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005), and its very meaning depends on the result of hegemonic struggles:

With Nueva Costa del Plata, we've managed to reorient private investment to proceed with a development project that will allow society to benefit from growth that moves forward, not backward. (...) This project will make us proud of being residents of Avellaneda, letting us enjoy the same urban and environmental infrastructure found in the most developed cities in the world (Techint Group representative, audio transcript of the November 26, 2008, Public Hearing: Nueva Costa del Plata Project).

No public official or representative of Techint Group ever mentioned how the project would affect Ribera de Bernal's inhabitants and whether they would benefit from this sort of *development*.

A green project

Beyond facilitating access to the river and encouraging development, another factor used to promote the Nueva Costa del Plata was its environmental impact. The project's supporters stressed the need to intervene in and “improve” the natural landscape of Quilmes and Avellaneda. In their arguments in favor of Nueva Costa del Plata, the project's promoters conceptualized nature as a fragile, threatened entity that needs protection. The underlying idea was that “corrective” interventions were therefore necessary. And a well-designed, properly planned intervention could, under this view, transform a polluted site into a “pleasant environment”. In short, the argument was that, through design, planning, and intervention, guided by dominant aesthetic principles, it was possible to rearrange the coastal landscape and hide its more unsavory aspects, such as mud or pollution, to impose an “intact” image of nature. Physical interventions, then, could transform a polluted natural area into a dreamlike paradise:

When the project reflects our vision for it, it generates iconic images. And in these images, what we see most clearly are public spaces. The areas we're concerned about — the rainforest, the riverbank, the river itself, pools recovered as water mirrors — are turned into places where communities can

come together, places that retain their identity and allow social gatherings, places that are the stuff of dreams (Techint Group representative, audio transcript of the November 26, 2008, Public Hearing: Nueva Costa del Plata Project).

Certain features of the riverside ecosystem (the rainforest and the view of the river and so-called “water mirrors”) acquire, in the context of this project, a *patrimonial* status. The project’s architects and designers mean to “rescue” these features from an environment they consider degraded. By turning this environment into a more pleasant place in the public imagination, these features can then be reincorporated as ornaments for aesthetic pleasure. Thus, nature can be domesticated, technified, and transformed into an attractive landscape for future Nueva Costa del Plata homebuyers and consumers.

Techint’s representatives and the professionals involved in the Nueva Costa del Plata project view the relationship between nature and economic activity (or between nature and human beings) from the point of view of *green marketing and ecodevelopmentism*. Then, the Nueva Costa del Plata project seeks to add value to a polluted environment and transform it into a new source of economic dynamism. Nature, in this case, acts as a “reservoir of resources” (O’Connor 1994), used by Techint to obtain additional profits.

Opposition

In 2011, the authorities of Quilmes and Avellaneda gave the necessary approvals to begin building the Nueva Costa del Plata project. This inspired a neighborhood resistance movement – that for privacy reasons we will call “The Local Assembly” (TLA henceforth). Most TLA members came from neighborhoods adjacent to the Ribera de Bernal. They represented a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and ages, from 18- to 75-years old. Most could be characterized as middle-class (being journalists, teachers, students, engineers, biologists, and lawyers), although lower-class participants (including construction workers, homemakers, and unemployed people) were also among their ranks. This follows the trend of protest movements shaping political formats not based on class (Cohen 1985; Schuster 2005).

TLA’s primary objective was coordinating actions to prevent the construction of the Nueva Costa del Plata project and, thus, guarantee the preservation of the local ecosystem — the wetland and the rainforest — while denouncing the constant filling-in and clearing of the area. TLA members defined their movement as socio-environmental and decried the environmental and social effects of urban planning on the river shore. In a press release, they communicated their central demands:

- Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on the planet.
- They are a fabulous reservoir of biodiversity, oxygen, and freshwater.
- They regulate the rising and falling of water, mitigate floods, and refill aquifers.
- They preserve water quality by retaining pollutants by transforming and transporting sediments and nutrients.
- The Ribera de Bernal neighborhood has resisted eviction for over 60 years.

- Its inhabitants have the right to preserve their homes and demand decent social conditions for their neighborhood and families. We cannot allow the government to privatize our neighborhood and our coast.
- WE DEMAND THE PROTECTION OF THE NATURAL RESERVE!
(TLA blog 2011b).

This marked an attempt to give the community a more autonomous, critical role in the decision-making process regarding their territory. This follows from the rejection of the traditional bonds of political representation, inspired by an “anti-bureaucratic” sentiment that tends to “see everything as legitimate when it comes from the citizens and as suspicious when it comes from the public administration” (Azuela 2006).

One of the main characteristics of TLA — which is shared by other social movements that emerged after the 2001 crisis in Argentina — was its constant public protests, as its members sought to voice their demands in public spaces. Indeed, TLA’s early period was marked by a strong propensity for direct action. They held meetings to communicate their message. They hosted festivals and art workshops. They organized walks down the coast, with the motto: “Know it to defend it.” During these walks, they summoned nearby residents and the general public to visit where the *Nueva Costa del Plata* was being built: the Ribera de Bernal settlement, the Selva Marginal Quilmeña rainforest, the wetlands, and the outer perimeter of the former CEAMSE landfill.

“For someone to defend something, they first have to know about it. And that’s what these walks allow because they show people how nature works and what’s being threatened,” said one TLA’s member (Lavaca 2013). The most crowded of these walks attracted around 70 people, mostly from adjacent neighborhoods. During these three-hour strolls, visitors could discover the “green lung” of the Quilmes and Avellaneda districts and briefly forget about their routine and urban life. However, the actual residents of the neglected, low-income Ribera de Bernal never attended any of these walks. Instead, they would look on with surprise at these strangers from nearby middle-class neighborhoods.

TLA integrated itself into both national and regional socio-environmental networks. This gave its members a shared framework for understanding diverse environmental and territorial issues in and outside Argentina, lending a certain “unity” to struggles that would otherwise have seemed unrelated and isolated. This, in turn, provided shared frameworks for action (Cefaï 2008). Thus, TLA members framed local issues as part of a broader socio-territorial process — namely, the elitization of the Buenos Aires riverbanks, as the local manifestation of a regional mechanism in which investment capital commodifies natural resources and common areas.

According to TLA, there are significant similarities between real estate speculation in urban areas and capitalist expansion in rural contexts (echoing, through this argument, the notions of *extractivism* and *urban extractivism*). TLA challenged the “productivist” view of nature and territory, stating it would be impossible to prevent the impact of 25,000 new homes and 40-story buildings on the unique ecosystem of the rainforest and the wetlands. As another TLA member put it:

[Techint] are falling into a contradiction: they say they want to protect the environment, but they’re occupying, mutilating, and deforesting fifty-four hectares of rainforest, declared of interest by UNESCO. So, they’re mutilating the rainforest, and they’re going to extract four million cubic meters of material from the river and dump it onto the wetland to raise the ground level (TLA

member, *Audio Transcription of Public Hearing, November 26, 2008: Nueva Costa del Plata Project*)

In 2012, TLA filed a protective lawsuit (an *amparo*) to stop the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata, which had gotten underway that year with trees being cleared and land being removed. This action was justified based on (1) citizens' right to public participation in decisions regarding their territory and (2) the obligation to carry out Environmental Impact Assessments as established by Argentina's *Ley General del Ambiente* No. 25,675 (General Environmental Law, LGA). According to the case, neither legal concept had been respected when Techint began work on the Nueva Costa del Plata project. However, the lawsuit's main argument was that both the local authorities and Techint Group breached the *Ley Nacional de Bosques* No. 26,331 (National Forest Law, LBN), which establishes a foundation for environmental protection within Argentina. The *amparo* found, in the letter of this law, its central arguments as it requested the cessation and reconstitution of all environmental damage caused by Costa del Plata. As stated in the lawsuit, this urban project would destroy the rainforest, the disappearance of the wetlands, the loss of the native flora, and severe consequences for the coastal areas, including erosion and flooding. Consequently, the court validated the *amparo* and, for many years, the real estate project was put on hold.

An interesting effect of this precautionary measure — and of its assertion that the rainforest needed guaranteed protections — was how it shifted TLA arguments. Of all the angles an environmental issue may be approached from, the lawsuit fixated on the need to *conserve* an endangered ecosystem, highlighting this over other potential topics (such as, for instance, the right to housing). This emphasis — and its court support — gradually simplified the environmental conflict. TLA focused explicitly on the defense of the rainforest and the wetland (out of many topics open to discussion) and thus adopted an increasingly *conservationist* position.

The protesters, then, adopted the forms and language imposed by the dominant order (through laws and scientific tradition). They did this, consciously or not, to increase their chances of being heard. Their arguments were supported by legal frameworks and primarily scientific language, historically defined as epistemologically valid (Nygren 1999). TLA members appealed to “experts” to legitimize their claims. And they increasingly deployed “expert” language concerning wetland conservation. For example, they denounced the Nueva Costa del Plata project for its direct impact on already urbanized areas west of the Buenos Aires - La Plata highway. Furthermore, according to TLA, when the Río de la Plata rises, the wetlands function as buffer zones, containing the water runoff from urbanized areas upstream. They argue that the preservation of the wetlands is crucial in preventing floods. Using a physiological metaphor, they explain, “The wetlands are like an immense kidney that filters all the polluted water we send to it” (TLA member, interview conducted in 2015).

Moreover, besides its valuable functions for society, the wetlands and the Selva Marginal Quilmeña — for TLA members — had *intrinsic value* (beyond its social utility). They, therefore, adopted an increasingly *conservationist* position. TLA members, then, embraced this scientific language in their protection of the riverside environment, wielding it as a tool to contest the arguments of the local government and Techint Group, their rivals in the dispute. However, this linguistic and rhetorical choice prevented any possibility of reaching common ground with La Ribera de Bernal's settlers.

Discussion: cultural misunderstandings in the Ribera de Bernal: land to live — or an environment to protect?

For the inhabitants of La Ribera de Bernal, the conflict around the Nueva Costa del Plata project was only one in a long list of daily problems and uncertainties. From their point of view, the broader concerns and issues being tackled by TLA members in their confrontation with businesspeople and government authorities were of little relevance.

When the project got underway, the middle-class residents of nearby neighborhoods banded together to form a unified “us,” conscious of its group interests and motivated to organize collective action to halt the destruction of the riverside environment. Meanwhile, for the residents of La Ribera de Bernal, the threat posed by the Techint Group was primarily a *housing* problem, calling into question the continuation of their way of life. For them, the specter of eviction was nothing new, as it was for the protesters confronting Techint Group. Indeed, for the inhabitants of La Ribera, the risk of eviction dates to the very foundation of their settlement, which survived removal following the installation of the CEAMSE landfill in the 70s. As an old-time neighborhood resident mentions: “When I was 3, 4 years old, Techint already wanted this land. Now I’m 54, and Techint hasn’t gotten a thing.” Thus, the possibility of being forced out by the real estate project did not surprise or stir La Ribera’s residents — at least, not more than usual.

Other settlers said “someone from Techint” assured them the construction of the real estate project — or what the settlers considered a “gated community” — would not affect their livelihood. “Techint told us they wouldn’t touch the neighborhood. They weren’t going to harm us at all. On the contrary, they might’ve even... brought a lot of improvements” (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016). Many residents found the idea of installing a “gated community” quite suggestive. They aspired to indirectly benefit from *progress* and from the investments the state had never made:

Interviewer: Do you think the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata will harm you?

Respondent: Sure... But maybe... Look, the truth is, I think it'll be a good thing. They'll try to take care of this place. Wherever you have people with money, they look after everything. So, they'll look after this place, make it better (Extract of an interview conducted in 2015).

Most riverside inhabitants have, over the years, developed coping strategies to deal with the uncertainty and restlessness of the constant threat of eviction:

When the day comes that the CEAMSE people tell us, “Well guys, you have to leave,” I think that if they want us to leave, they'll have to compensate us, too, because you have people who've been living here for 40 or 50 years. And you can't kick them out on the street just like that. You can't... (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

Look, people say a lot of things. Some say they're going to build a gated community. Others say they're going to connect Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Berazategui with a new road. Or that they want to lay down a coastal road. People say all those things, but no one knows anything for sure (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

An essential part of the TLA plan of action was to forge connections with La Ribera’s inhabitants and agree regarding Techint Group encroachment on the forest.

TLA's goal was to involve the settlers in the defense of their territory — and have them view it as an *ecologically-valuable* zone, not just *habitable* space. However, no inhabitant of La Ribera ever participated in TLA's activities nor understood their proposal:

Respondent: I know the environmentalists were building a dry toilet. They always go over there, but I don't know what they're looking for. Maybe a bit of soil from the river? But I don't know what they do.

Interviewer: And aren't you interested in knowing what they do?

Respondent: The truth is, no, not at all

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

Likewise, despite numerous invitations, La Ribera's settlers have never felt compelled to participate in TLA's rainforest walks, which have been held for over ten years. "Nature," for these settlers, is an empty category.

It is simply the stage of their everyday lives. They live and deal with this environment and do not perceive "nature" from exteriority but by dwelling in it. To paraphrase Ingold, they know about the world "not by describing it from outside but by immersing themselves in it" (Ingold 2012). Indeed, no resident of La Ribera is even aware that the natural reserve under discussion — and which TLA is so diligently fighting to protect — is where their neighborhood is located. This is expressed throughout the following interview excerpts: "the natural reserve is further away. Nobody goes there. Only the boys go on walks, those *ecological* boys" (Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

I've never gone (to the natural reserve). I know it's by the beach, further away, between the trees. But I've never gone. You can see it's around the corner. They say it's beautiful... Those walks, they say they're very beautiful.

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

Despite mutual collaboration and cordiality, the relationship between La Ribera's settlers and TLA's members is defined by *cultural misunderstandings* (Carman & González Carman 2019), which, as we said, "result from the fact that the various collectives that populate the world do not really understand the fundamental questions that engage other collectives" (Descola 2012: 409).

The above is exemplified by the testimony of one La Ribera resident:

If the environmentalists are protesting, or something like that, sometimes we go, too... We look at them, but don't get involved. Everyone has their own opinion, but we disagree with them. They actually came here and introduced themselves. They said we had to take our children to school on horseback. They criticized us for demanding water supply or electricity. But we live here and want to live well. They have cars, but they park them under the bridge.

(Extract of an interview conducted in 2016).

TLA's environmentalists and La Ribera's inhabitants may exchange cordial words and solidarity, but the latter also feel a degree of resentment towards the former.

They suspect the environmentalists, at some level, mean to “educate” them on how they should lead their lives. TLA’s ecological messages and activities, utterly removed from the daily experiences and preoccupations of the settlers, are thus perceived as an imposition. As far as La Ribera’s inhabitants are concerned, the environmentalists can embrace nature because they do not have to deal with it every day — or suffer the risk of losing everything or even dying in a *sudestada*. What is more, the environmentalists can choose to reject “progress,” while the riverside settlers long for its arrival.

In short, the relationship between environmentalists and settlers is riddled with *misunderstandings*. All attempts by the former to bring La Ribera’s inhabitants into the “environmental cause” were understood, by the latter, as partial acts of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2014). With their scientific knowledge, ingrained and naturalized as a *habitus*, the environmentalists ended up becoming the “environment’s authorized spokespersons,” holding a “superior epistemological position” (Carman & González Carman 2019). This came into conflict, repeatedly, with La Ribera’s inhabitants and how they understood their own lives and surroundings. As mentioned before, TLA’s strategic use of a *conservationist* discourse served to legitimize the cause in public debates. But this same discourse, and its conception of nature, hindered the possibility of engaging in a symmetrical dialogue with the inhabitants of La Ribera. Despite the many actions undertaken by TLA against the construction of Nueva Costa del Plata, in 2016, a provincial law was approved that gave the project, and Techint Group, legal authorization to proceed.

Conclusions

In 2004, the riverside area of Quilmes and Avellaneda, in Buenos Aires, underwent a land valuation process. Since then, public debates have discussed how this territory may be used. Three major positions have arisen. First, there is the one held by Techint Group, which proposes a large-scale real estate project, Nueva Costa del Plata. This position is, in turn, supported by the administrations of Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Buenos Aires Province. It is a pro-development stance, advancing *growth*, *progress*, and *economic development* arguments.

As suggested in this article, the second position is the *environmentalist* stance, adopted by organizations mobilized against Techint Group’s actions. This group, over the years, was nourished by new social actors — The Local Assembly (TLA) members among them — who rose to act to protect the local environment. Gradually, this contingent shifted to a *conservationist* viewpoint.

Finally, the residents of La Ribera de Bernal, a low-income settlement next to the CEAMSE landfill, make up the third group. However, they do not hold a single, well-defined position regarding the desirability of the Nueva Costa del Plata project. Instead, they have their own list of preoccupations — concerning their precarious housing conditions, their permanence within the neighborhood, and other everyday problems — which do not seem to be directly linked to environmental concerns.

The public partnership between Techint Group and local authorities of Quilmes, Avellaneda, and Buenos Aires Province points to an *urban extractivist process* that seeks to exploit the territorial capital of the coastal land to improve the urban competitiveness of the affected districts. Among their areas of interest, we find the Río de la Plata’s sights,

the “virgin” forests of the Selva Marginal Quilmeña, numerous undeveloped hectares, and the zone’s proximity to the Buenos Aires-La Plata highway, which guarantees a swift connection to the national capital.

The leading role of private investment in much of the refunctionalization of the coastal areas is part of a general trend, not an exception. To be economically profitable, urban interventions — and the housing and services they offer — are aimed at high-income segments. In this context, the provision of public spaces “open to all society” acquires merely secondary importance. Thus, the “recovery” of public spaces, according to Gorelik, ends up serving as a “progressive alibi” for “wild” urban neoliberalism (Gorelik 2008). While the public spaces generated by such projects do allow a certain amount of collective enjoyment, they also legitimize the consolidation of spatial inequalities and “enable a peaceful vision of wealth” (Svampa 2008b).

In consideration of its potential benefits, local governments disregarded the controversies and widespread disapproval sparked by the Nueva Costa del Plata project, principally among environmentalist groups and neighborhood organizations, who stand against real estate projects on the riverside area and favor the conservation of the local ecosystem.

Similarly to the wider trends seen in Latin America these past few years, TLA played a key role in organizing protests, with their famous walks along the riverbank in an area declared a natural reserve. However, despite its embrace of both environmental and social justice perspectives, this group had severe difficulties in interacting with the local settlers directly affected by the Techint project. Their praxis of “critical” environmentalism — which integrates environmental and social struggles — encountered additional difficulties and limitations. Anchored to a modern, naturalist framework, TLA’s members could not avoid cultural misunderstandings when interacting with the inhabitants of La Ribera de Bernal and their thoughts and feelings about their own lives and surroundings.

As for the inhabitants of La Ribera, they did not feel spoken to by TLA’s environmentalist claims. Similarly, the latter could not understand that La Ribera’s settlers inhabit “nature” every day and do not conceptualize it from a distant, outside perspective. To better understand this point, we can bring up the findings of Gordillo (2018), who explains that people from low-income or popular sectors and who live near assets or beings with patrimonial value tend to be indifferent to the emphasis on preservation and reject the abstractions and sensibilities of the middle or upper classes.

Through an ethnographic approach, this article delved into the many meanings sparked by an environmental conflict. Being present at the site for long periods, interviewing, observing, and participating, made it possible to understand the particular ways in which actors rehearse strategies based on how they see and exist in the world — which also leads them to equivocations and misunderstandings. This approach revealed the cultural misunderstandings and ontological disagreements that occur when, in such environmental conflicts, there is no consensus regarding the actual problem, the solution, or even the heart of the issue. Under certain circumstances, social, cultural and even ontological differences all conspire against the consolidation of a self-conscious sociopolitical collective — demonstrating the need for a cosmopolitics that can transcend the naturalist premises of modernity and cultural misunderstandings.

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Endnotes

1. Sudestada (“Southeast blow”) is the Argentine term for a weather phenomenon common to the Río de la Plata and surrounding regions, consisting of strong storms, brisk winds, and flooding rivers.
2. Native expression.
3. Typical South American hot drink.
4. According to environmentalist groups, these trucks are hired by local settlers to raise the ground level by burying demolition debris. They are allowed by local authorities who, in the long term, wish to “fill in” the entire wetland area for urban development.

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