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Articles

Political value of the borders: Practices and senses

Prácticas y sentidos sobre el valor político de las fronteras

María Alejandra Pagotto[a] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1002-8176
María del Socorro Foio[a*] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1123-6946
David Burin[a] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3960-9035
Claudia Ricca[a] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3271-0520

[a] Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano-Asociación Civil (INCLUIR). Buenos Aires, Argentina, e-mails: alejandrapagotto@gmail.com; msfoio@hotmail.com; burundavid@gmail.com; claudiabricca@gmail.com

Abstract

The notion of frontier in this article is both a means to articulate the methodology and a conceptual category. When used to analyze areas of spatial and symbolic dispute, it allows inquiries into existing tensions among some rural populations in Argentina and Paraguay as they interact with extraterritorial spaces, actors and organisms. Frontier becomes relevant when considered both an area historically-signified by transformations and exchanges (of transit, in-between space and mutual questionings) but also where situations of violence, dispossession, subjugation and inequality take place. Both processes install demarcations and barriers. The main tension analyzed is about space, the significance given to it by populations and their right to decide about the way they want to live their lives. This ratifies the fertility of the concept and makes evident that certain current tensions originate in long-standing conflicts that are difficult to resolve as local events are determined globally.

Keywords: field of political forces; questioning meanings and practices; rural populations, frontier, border.

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*Corresponding author:
María del Socorro Foio, e-mail socorrofoio@gmail.com

Resumen:

En este artículo la noción de frontera es considerada un articulador metodológico y una categoría conceptual. Utilizándola como analizador de zonas de disputa espacial y simbólica, permite indagar tensiones existentes en algunas poblaciones rurales de Argentina y Paraguay que interactúan con espacios, actores y organismos extraterritoriales. Por tal motivo, la categoría de frontera resulta relevante en tanto es considerada una zona históricamente signada por transformaciones e intercambios (tránsito, espacio entre, interpelaciones mutuas) y donde se producen situaciones de violencia, despojo, sometimiento, desigualdad. Am-

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bos procesos instauran demarcaciones y barreras. La tensión principal analizada es en torno al espacio y los sentidos que las poblaciones le atribuyen. Es decir, el derecho a decidir sobre el modo de vida que desean ejercer. Ello ratifica la fertilidad del concepto y constata que ciertas tensiones vigentes se originan en conflictos de larga duración y difícil tramitación por cuanto los sucesos locales están determinados globalmente.

Palabras clave: campo de fuerzas políticas; interpelación de sentidos y prácticas; poblaciones rurales, frontera.

Introduction

Violence shapes the life and relationships that are deployed along and across borders throughout the world and is therefore a unique area for observing mechanisms of dispossession and exploitation. Additionally, according to Mezzadra and Neilson (2017), borders allow us to demonstrate the possible meanings of what is perceived as normal and as a horizon of autonomy.

For some decades now, a literature has existed in Latin America that analyzes processes that can be resignified using the notion of the frontier understood as a zone marked by conflicts that include boundaries and barriers as well as transits, transformations, exchanges, struggles and mutual interpellations. Political practices began to be considered as processes associated with the emergence, expansion and deepening of social struggles, their organization around new identity principles and the reformulation of the horizons of liberation or emancipation (Gutiérrez, 2008; 2017).

For our analysis, we adhere to that general perspective by linking it to what we think of as a border in this article. In particular, we use the notion of frontier as a theoretical and methodological articulator for socio-political inquiry into disputes regarding space and the meanings attributed to it by rural populations in different localities in Argentina and Paraguay.

We also refer to the frontiers between epistemologies, paradigms and customs that guide the action of sociopolitical agents who act in and on those territories: peasant small producers, technicians from state agencies, researchers, political officials and companies. In this way, we consider the notion of border to *a)* interpret actions relating to accumulation and plunder in the world-system as well as the social, economic and political changes of late capitalism and *b*) to trace forms of disputed autonomy exercised by rural communities in a detailed and localized manner.

The production of this article is part of an ongoing research program "Learnings from and in self-management: Autonomy as a Human Project".[1] In particular, we relate the results provided by the analysis of this article to one of the purposes of the program: the production of capacities and practices of populations and social groups that, through a focus on justice, freedom and equality as ways of thinking about the social/political, often question the institutions of society.

[1] This program is based out of Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano (Institute for Social Inclusion and Human Development) (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and was developed through a cooperative agreement with the School of Humanities (Universidad Nacional de San Martín). Part of the program receives funding from the National Agency for Scientific Technological Promotion, which finances the research project "Understanding group learning of a cooperative/solidarity nature: Pedagogies and specific tools," directed by Ana Heras.

In its investigative work, this team is positioned in favor of knowledge production and interventions aimed at supporting types of learning that, collectively generated, promote self-awareness processes by making subjects capable of recognizing their own abilities, create institutions to realize them and question themselves about the political context as they embrace their right to do so.

The casuistic approach that we present in this article was created with the aim of understanding how these populations in their daily life are interpellated in their right to decide on the ways of life they wish to exercise. In our analysis, we make the border visible as a field of political forces, where *a*) communities interact with spaces, actors and extraterritorial bodies; *(b*) certain current tensions in the territory arise from long-running conflicts and difficult procedures because local events are also globally determined; and *c*) the socio-political action of the right to decide is linked to processes of violence, dispossession, subjugation and inequality, for which the same exercise of decision-making in some cases calls into question and seeks to reverse.

The first case involves the population of three communities in eastern Paraguay—Luz Bella, in the department of San Pedro; Maracaná, in the department of Canindeyú, and La Pastora, in the department of Caaguazú—as well as several rural communities in the Pantanal. It is a peasant region where agro-industry led by foreign and multinational companies are confronted with family agricultural production, encroaching on their territories and expelling small producers. In view of this situation, communities have developed organizational processes aimed at producing traditional crops and asserting food sovereignty. The data supporting this case were obtained from primary sources; the collection of these data was carried out in 2008-2014 during the implementation of a program to support seven communities in the aforementioned region. The researcher carried a field notebook to record the experiences as well as the strong opinions of the actors. The analysis of these data was carried out with a comprehensive and contextual approach to the practices and meanings attributed to the communities.

The second case concerns the population of Teuco-Bermejito, a rural area of the Argentine province of Chaco. Marked by the scarcity of educational, drinking water and sanitation services, low subsistence capacity, precarious housing, spatial dispersion among twenty-four stopping places (parajes) separated by large distances and even with several family settlements in places without vehicular access, this region has been characterized by its ethnic and cultural differences and the historical disputes between inhabitants associated with this heterogeneity. In this case, secondary sources consisted of a body of texts composed of studies on the subject (Balazote, 2002; Radovich & Balazote, 2003; Barrios, 2005; Ramos, 2012; Gómez, 2015), the Teuco-Bermejito Watershed Integrated Development Project prepared by the provincial government (Proyecto de Desarrollo Integrado Interfluvio Teuco Bermejito [PDITB], 2001), and publications on the Amnesty International website, at the Nelson Mandela Center and in local newspapers. The period considered in the description of the current manifestations of the conflict was from 2000, with the beginning of the implementation of the aforementioned project, to 2018. Based on this historical approach, the analysis seeks to identify the processes of conflict and resistance in that population.

In the third case, the population of interest is composed of technicians from state programs, political officials and the small producers and family farmers with whom the public agencies of rural development and the informal economy work in Argentina.

The article uses primary data produced by interviews and socio-anthropological field notes (*in situ* and retrospective). The analysis methodology used presents the stories of scenes arising from triangulating structured interviews with extensionist technicians, political decision-makers and producers and from field observations in the period 2005-2017. We identify, describe and interpret the tensions generated by the various logics associated with differences in the actors' particular economic, cultural and professional characteristics and the different ways of thinking about and building power relations. Likewise, methodological proposals are developed that allow the building of bridges so that the frontiers analyzed can be substantiated and questioned through action-research mechanisms in collaboration with the actors involved.

The order of our presentation corresponds to the development of a theoretical strategy that proceeds from singular events to conceptualization. In the next section, we introduce a general characterization of the empirical references. Subsequently, in the following three sections, we perform the analysis according to the specificity of each population and the processes developed in each case. Finally, we present a discussion of what the material, taken as a whole, allows us to reveal.

Social Groups in Frontier Situations

The researchers participated in the experiences analyzed by playing specific linking roles with the groups described in circumstances that were guided by very different original purposes, which lent uniqueness to the production of the material for analysis.

In the case first developed, the researcher inserted into the context of a process of peasant self-organization during the presidency of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay. According to the field records, environmental and civil society organizations were eager to support the government's project for reforming social, political and economic relations. In this context, Sobrevivencia/Amigos de la Tierra Paraguay (a non-governmental organization of the Friends of the Earth International Federation dedicated to socio-environmental protection) and Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FOE-EWNI) planned a project to support communities in eastern Paraguay with a desire to strengthen peasant organizations and their traditional crops.

The researcher produced the data presented here—redrafted for the analytical purposes of this paper—while serving as part of the project planning and implementation team to meet the needs of reporting results to local communities, project management organizations and donors who funded the project.

In the second case, the focus was on thinking about a development strategy based on public policies with the *qom* native peoples of the Argentine Chaco. To this end, the researcher involved sought to question the effectiveness of assimilationist policies and propose the relevance of positions favorable to the promotion and development of intercultural practices based on the acknowledgement of multiple worlds. That discussion was based on evidence of the enunciations and practices that underpin the socially shared sense of what can and cannot be done in the community.

The series of cases is completed with several scenes proposed by the researcher to highlight the barriers that arise between the different actors involved in the implementation of rural development projects and the conditions of inequality that

these barriers—material and symbolic—generate. These reflections arose in the framework of instances of the evaluation and systematization of assistance programs for peasant small producers or in collaborative learning processes with rural extension technicians, during which was presented the pedagogical and socio-political need to enable, from the role of evaluator or trainer, reflective thinking that would allow for systematizing support and extension practices, to improve those processes.

The data are presented through situations that can be read as *key events* following Gumperz (1982), the analysis of which promotes specific approaches in each case, which are presented at the end of the description of each one.

In the presentation, we show two aspects that, although seemingly contradictory at first glance, co-exist in the cases considered when analyzed from the perspective of frontiers. On the one hand, we illustrate the conditions that establish disputes around the concept as an insurmountable "barrier" that favors dispossessions of land, cultures and knowledge. On the other hand, we present a reaffirmation of the notion of the frontier in socio-political processes such as the territorialization of struggles over material and symbolic spaces, understood in terms of enunciations of dissent and organizational practices that address inequalities.

Likewise, at the epistemological level, the idea of the frontier implies its conception as places between disciplined knowledge, languages, geographies and institutions, which entails being able to think and act as researchers not tied to organizational and knowledge hierarchies or irreducible limits between theoretical development, research and political action.

Disputes along the Paraguayan Peasant Border

Between 1883 and 1885, after the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870), public land sales laws were enacted in Paraguay, which in five years alienated 25 million hectares of the little more than 30 million hectares in the country. In 2008, 85% of the land was in the hands of 2% of the population, a situation that constitutes one of the most extreme examples of unequal land tenure in the world (Rojas, 2017).

That year, FOE-EWNI and Sobrevivencia began working with the communities of Luz Bella, Maracaná and La Pastora around three components:

a) a socio-environmental rights approach. Community members were trained from a rights perspective: the right to live in healthy environments, to have access to drinking water, and to ensure that forests are not taken down. Follow-up was done on complaints of persecution of peasant leaders, and members of peasant organizations were accompanied to their meetings with local and national authorities;

b) the strengthening of agroecology. Training in production on farms, *chacras* and orchards helped to strengthen knowledge regarding how to improve the production and marketing of their products; and

c) the development of socio-environmental programs for community radio – Community members were trained in the production of agro-ecological messages and in technical aspects of the establishment and management of a community radio station.

The project was expanded in 2011 to seven communities in Oriente and Pantanal, and its activities concluded in 2014. The proposal and contents of the trainings were developed in open and participatory assemblies. The project was complemented by

lobbying work in Asunción, the United Kingdom and Brussels, where training outputs, complaints and demands from peasant organizations served as inputs for campaigns and presentations to the European and British parliaments.

The evaluation of the project was carried out by a specialist in local government and civil society organizations with experience in the Paraguayan context. The data obtained allow us to affirm that a strengthening of the territories and peasant organizations occurred, as well as expected and unexpected effects for each situation.

In 2007, in La Pastora, a municipality of seventeen peasant communities, disputes began over soybean plantations, and during 2008, the current inhabitants organized for five months in the streets to successfully stop the entry of soybean trucks into the municipal territory.

Some of the historical leaders of that resistance had been key members of the Christian Agrarian Leagues, the first great Paraguayan peasant movement in the 1960s that no longer exists as such. The struggles in La Pastora are similar to those of the Agrarian Leagues: agrarian reform, community ownership of land, peasant organization, food sovereignty and solidarity networks of trade, among others.

During a visit by President Lugo to Caaguazú in 2008, the Coordinadora Distrital por la Defensa del Medio Ambiente en La Pastora (District Coordinating Organization for Environmental Defense in La Pastora) was at the forefront of the request for the implementation of a Territorial Management Plan (POT, for its initials in Spanish) that would prohibit the planting of GMOs in their territories.[2]

At the request of the Coordinadora, Sobrevivencia held trainings for residents to support the development of the POT, which was approved in 2012.

Luz Bella was formed in 1973 when two peasants' groups from Coronel Oviedo and San Pedro who were politically persecuted settled on the land along the banks of the Jejui River. At the end of the 1980s, tax lands were sold to members of the military, Brazilians and other foreigners. The neighborhood commission established at that time filed a request for expropriation with Parliament, and in 1998, it claimed and obtained 963 hectares. In 2000, the Asociación Campesina de Productores Alternativos y Ecológicos (Peasants' Association of Alternative and Ecological Producers) (ACPAE-LB) was formed, replacing the neighborhood commission. A basic secondary school was established in 2001, and the Professional Farming Initiation program began in 2006. The strategic aims designed by ACPAE-LB included the establishment of an agro-technical college, a health clinic, a radio, a park and community center and a housing project. In 2011, as an initiative of ACPAE-LB and with technical assistance from Sobrevivencia, the technical baccalaureate in environmental sciences began. Despite a lack of municipal political support, a proposal for an ordinance to declare Luz Bella an agro-ecological community was developed in 2014. Between 2016 and 2017, more than 70 houses were being built in the Eco-Urbanístico neighborhood thanks to state subsidies managed by ACPAE-LB.

[2] The *Coordinadora* is a self-convened organization advocating for agro-ecology, land tenure in the hands of producing families, and land use planning to promote alternatives to the extractive agro-export model. It has policy and collective marketing proposals for production, recognizing that the municipal government must be reached to manage the territory, and this generally involves improving partnerships with NGOs and social organizations for legal, electoral and productive advice; obtaining financial resources for electoral campaigns; building electoral alliances at the community level; and strengthening grassroots organization.

At the end of the project in 2014, among the expected effects, we observed that the communities had acquired the capacity to prepare their own proposal for autonomous and sustainable management of their territories, including plans for municipal elections, rural tourism development, the training of peasant leaders in agro-ecological technical schools, the improvement of sales opportunities through new cooperatives and alliances, and the development of territorial management plans in other areas. In many cases, community radio stations and social networks had become channels for issuing complaints and recording cases, democratizing the process of follow-up and demands for solutions. Luz Bella and several communities in Pantanal were particularly active in using mass media for their complaints, becoming reference points at the national level with regard to providing information on peasant realities. Meetings with community leaders from different districts were held to create joint work proposals, not only for the production and marketing of agroecology products but also for their desire to access representative decision-making positions at the local level. Support for agro-ecological technical schools enabled young people to begin university studies in areas that enabled them to continue defending their territories and strengthening links with community organizations. Members of peasant organizations had the opportunity to exchange their experiences of fighting for their territories, defying isolation. These meetings, and every assembly that each organization held in its communities, fostered the possibility to think and create together a different way of sustaining life than that imposed by the dominant productive model. This knowledge was built and strengthened through collective action; in complaints against fumigations, in each community radio program where recipes for home remedies were shared; in product fairs on agro-ecological farms; and in field practices in agro-technical schools.

However, despite the transformations generated by these self-managed initiatives, they require public policies that support land tenure and the agricultural production model produced by associations, giving priority to peasant, family and agro-ecological production and bringing about a real distribution of wealth throughout the territory.

Permanent reassertions of the peasant way of life that is disappearing under a green tidal wave of genetically modified soybeans help to shield communities from the abuses of the *brasiguayans*[3] and the Paraguayan security forces that often protect them.

One of the modalities used by soybean producers is to buy plots from families that do not belong to the agro-ecological producers' organizations, thus fragmenting local topographies, creating "gaps" where the soybean-producing border leaks and apparently leaving peasants homeless. The peasant response has been to denounce soybean plantations in communities to local authorities and their urban, regional and international partners, with varying success in stopping their progress. Within each community, there exists a multiplicity of alignments with or against soybean producers, government policies, and the use of agrochemicals, among others; this could account for the shifting quality of the frontiers of thought and action.

To counter actions that lead to the dispossession of communities, the Sobrevivencia/ FOE-EWNI project promoted the strengthening of interactions for solidarity, for example, training in the use of community radio to disseminate information about the agro-ecological production model and visits to communities by national authorities and the United Kingdom ambassador. The articulation between these strategies

[3] A term used locally to refer to producers who may have been born in Paraguay but usually reside in Brazil.

creates regional and international bridges that bring "ideological neighbors" (Heras & Miano, 2017) closer to practices that advocate anti-hegemonic lifestyles that contest the agro-export model.

In the case of the UK Ambassador's visit, it was the pressure from the project's European partner in the United Kingdom that led this trade partner of the Paraguayan government to take an interest in the situation of the peasantry. However, this represented a tactical alliance at a specific juncture rather than a case of ideological neighbors because, in Latin America, the embassies of countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States play the role of solidifying neo-colonization strategies (promoting highly extractive industries such as open-pit mining) in the opposite sense to that supported by ACPAE-LB.

We can affirm that the frontiers between peasants and soybean producers/corporations possess duel characteristics of resistance and permeability: resistance and reinforcement of interactions around dispossession and openness to interactions around solidarity. These two interactions must occur in conjunction in order to have the greatest impact, as evidenced by the activities that continue to be carried out by the communities several years after the Survival/FOE-EWNI project ended.

The description of the case makes visible the existence of an unequal struggle that is taken up in the desire for transformation and where the place of a third party facilitator appears within the action of self-organized communities. While the peasant communities the researchers worked with have important historical precedents in terms of social struggles, the coming to power of President Lugo in 2008 made it possible for these demands to have an interlocutor in the Paraguayan State for the first time. In this context, the Secretariat of the Environment (SEAM) supported the presence of the international organizations that offered technical assistance and financing in meetings and training workshops that functioned as catalysts for strengthening peasant organizations and communities.

Once President Lugo was deposed, the support of SEAM was lost, however, the peasant organizations opted to participate in municipal spaces of decision-making and interference.

Border areas, as they are articulations, can also be seen as areas where actors exist who are "there," involved in disputes, but that are at the same time are supported or threatened by actors who are "not always there" but who have influence over what happens there; this is clearly asserted in the reflections on practices of co-management and those related to the territorializations of indigenous peoples.

Territoriality in Dispute in Chaco

The process of settlement and nation-building in Argentina was carried out in a territory that was inhabited by indigenous communities, each with its own culture, memory and tradition. Since the late 19th century in the northeastern part of the Province of Chaco, along with the military defeat of the first peoples, irregular colonies were developed, promoted by Creole families from the Provinces of Santiago del Estero and Salta. They settled in areas that corresponded to the fronts of military advancement, in land suitable for extensive cattle ranching and where indigenous groups displaced from spaces used for agroforestry exploitation were also settling.

At a time when statehood in the region was precarious, the Creole settlers contributed to forging a new order, backed by government support and the military guard, which put an end to the clashes caused by intrusion into land inhabited by the *qom* indigenous people.

The forms of social reproduction of both groups have historically been translated into territorialities overlapping in disputes over resources: while the indigenous people use the countryside for gathering, the Creoles carry out extensive cattle ranching in areas delimited only by the movement of animals in open fields.

In the 1920s, as a result of these disputes, symbolically justified by the territorial agents themselves in the "*qom*/Creole" opposition, armed clashes took place. In 1924, these events led the State to recognize 150 000 ha "exclusively intended to concentrate the indians of the North, who are forced to roam aimlessly" (Decree Year 1924 in Balazote, 2002). This sedentarization and disciplining of the *qom* families, according to Balazote, was useful for regional models of logging and cotton production based on the intensive incorporation of unskilled labor.

During the seventy-five years following that decree of territorial transfer, no progress was made in regularizing the domestic situation. The struggle of the *qom* people in view of the intensification of the sale of tax lands in adjacent areas and of forest clearing authorizations led the Chaco government, in 1999, to formalize the land deed in favor of the Meguesoxochi Community Association.

The association, which bears the name of the last cacique killed in combat with the military, had been created ten years earlier by indigenous communities with the aim of achieving recognition of acquired rights and defending and reclaiming their lands. The claim of the title by the *qom* community—413 families in total— in turn prompted the establishment of the Cattle Ranchers Commission of the Teuco-Bermejito Area in the framework of a debate over who was the legitimate owner of the land. Title was given to the association with a five-year use restriction in favor of the Creoles who were to be relocated.

The provincial state launched the Teuco-Bermejito Integrated Development Project (PDITB) in the area, and within this framework a Joint Commission was created composed of state agents and representatives of local residents with the aim of defining the scope, terms of reference and objectives of the project.

As established by the commission, the government sought to relocate 80% of the 425 Creole families residing in the territory. The rest would not be resettled because they had already arranged the purchase of the occupied property with the Provincial Directorate of Colonies. In this case, for the state, those who had an interest in "legally" accessing land would not be affected, while the other families would be considered "marginal by option" by failing to fulfill the possibility of becoming owners of the property (Barrios, 2005).

With the community titling, for *qom* organizations and government agents, the new opposition became "owner-intruders."

The move caused distress for families who had to start over in their productive activities and faced uncertainty due to change. The sense of dispossession and discrimination and the consequent claim of occupation rights was added to the need for social repositioning with regard to the indigenous, who were considered subordinate.

To avoid inter-ethnic tensions and judicial lawsuits, the PDITB aimed to improve the economic base, implement productive projects, build consensus on patterns of

coexistence, and recover collective memory and cultural affirmation. The project area comprised 214 000 ha (multi-purpose reserve area): 150 000 ha of *qom* community-owned property and 64 000 ha to relocate the Creole population (Barrios, 2005; PDITB, 2001).

The official call for participation in the project among the affected settlers led the Creoles to create *Asociación F.OR.T.IN*, which sought access to natural resources and training for production. While the acronym comes from the name "*Familias Organizadas por las Tierras del Interfluvio*", ("Organized Families for the Lands of the Watershed"), the use of the word "fortin" (in English, fort) referred to the history of clashes and territorial disputes with the indigenous[4] (Gómez, 2015; Barrios, 2005).

During the execution of the PDITB, technicians and government officials in their daily interventions devalued the practices of the Creole peasants who were to be relocated, attempting to convert them to the ways of management and work of Chaco farmers of European descent without considering the inequality in the production conditions among them (Barrios, 2005).

This generated a self-perception among the Creoles as marginalized citizens, who believed that the failure of the authorities to recognize their continued stay in the watershed—despite unfavorable living conditions suffered since the establishment of their predecessors—placed them almost outside the borders of the nation (Ramos, 2012; Barrios, 2005; Radovich & Balazote, 2003).

Indeed, almost twenty years after the title was handed over, successive governments have failed to meet their commitments to the families that were to be relocated. During that time, there have been accusations by *qom* organizations that show the existence of conflicts with Creole settlers for the permanence of 300 families that were not relocated or that returned to communal lands because they had not gained the ability to carry out their activities on other tax lands according to the provisions of the PDITB.

The distancing of the governing committees of the Meguesoxochi and *F.OR.T.IN* Associations meant that their leaders did not communicate to defend the territory from unauthorized encroachments and extractions, and they ceased to serve as a counterweight to require the State to comply with laws for the protection and conservation of natural property nor arranged the transfer and compensation of the Creole population (Ramos, 2012).

In a context of exacerbating the processes of regional impoverishment, the territorial dispute has been characterized as a war between the poor.

In recent years, various complaints made by Creole families through the Rio Teuco Peasant Association, which belongs to the National Peasant Front, and by *qom* groups opposed to the authorities of the Meguesoxochi Association (because they believe it is aligned with the provincial government) have led to the existence of agreements by *qom* leaders with State officials and forest entrepreneurs regarding illegal logging for the sale of timber, alleging that it threatens nature and jeopardizes the activities of the owners of the communal lands on the one hand (the indigenous) and the occupants (Creoles) on the other.

[4] Once Spanish domination was achieved in the Viceroyalty of Rio de la Plata, the patriotic governments carried out military offensive expeditions—which were known as "campaigns in the desert"— with the establishment of entrenchments called fortines (forts), in order to progressively occupy the territory belonging to the indigenous peoples.

Additionally, the Community Association has protested and legally punished the Creole inhabitants who carry out clearcutting in their *chacras* to use the land for agricultural crops.[5]

The veto by the executive branch of the law to prohibit the exploitation of the countryside in indigenous communal properties for four years to allow for its natural regeneration and recover environmental and social sustainability (Provincial Law 7.775) led to a deepening of the complainant's claim that this situation benefits the economic interests of forest operators while increasing the dispute between the Creoles and indigenous peoples residing on the lands of the Meguesoxochi Association.

In light of the persistent conflict, one of the government's responses was to agree with the association on a methodology ensuring its formal participation in managing permit applications for the exploitation of activities in the area, understanding that this was a way to consider the needs of the *qom* settlers, those of the people selling timber with the corresponding forest guide, and those of the Creole peasants, ensuring the non-approval of permits in areas where they reside.[6]

Another government response, aimed in this case at creating sources of employment, was the Mutual Cooperation and Assistance Convention signed with the association in 2017 to promote and coordinate the Tourism Development Program of El Impenetrable (Master Plan). Its objective is to generate economic activity and opportunities for the sustainable use of the natural and cultural heritage in the region.[7] The process of community titling produced new forms of expression for historical tensions generated through competition for space and the meanings assigned to it—among the Creole settlers, as a resource to appropriate, in *qom* communities as a natural space to be respected and of which human beings are a part—demonstrating a set of oppositions that tends to reinforce cultural differences in reference to an ethnic affiliation. In the discourse of the Creole villagers, settlement by their elders succeeded in transforming an empty, culturally backward and economically unproductive space through work that modifies nature—substantially different from hunting, fishing and gathering. The livestock activities carried out by these villagers are presented and socially valued as practices linked to the national/*Gaucho* essence, differentiated from the indigenous cultures and those of European immigrants.

Among the *qom* people, the conception of nature as living unity vindicates a way thinking, feeling and acting centered on balance in the life of all beings who inhabit the territory. Hunting, fishing and harvesting practices and cultivation in small *chacras* mean the harmonious use of natural goods, while cattle ranching represents a cause of environmental degradation (Ramos, 2012; Barrios, 2005; Radovich & Balazote, 2003).

The case described illustrates a space in motion where the clash—past and present—of incompatible logics, temporalities and rationalities may or may not accept the possibility of building a future of long and lasting convergences that make it possible to strengthen processes of organization, social inclusion and self-determination supported in the suppression of inequality.

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[5] Amnesty International, Retrieved from http://territorioindigena.com.ar/ Cases?id_conflict=110 (6 September 2018); *Northern Resistance Diary*, January 15, and June 16, 2014; Nelson Mandela Center, Resistance, May 24, 2016.

[6] Nelson Mandela Center, Resistance, May 24, 2016.

[7] *Diario Chaco*, June 13, 2017; *Chaco Día por Día*, April 7, 2018.

Escobar (2014) formulates the planting of culture as a radical difference based on the admission of multiple worlds, a pluriverse, which implies a perspective on territory defined as the space—biophysical and epistemic at the same time—where life enacting on the basis of a relational ontology creates the world. These are worlds that co-produce and affect one another on the basis of partial ensembles that are not exhaustive in their interrelation.

From this arises the question of how to design encounters between worlds.

We understand, in this sense, that addressing the relations between cultures considering interculturality requires the emergence of practices linked to dialog, approaching the edges of the links between peoples, communities and social groups, which account for the learning of new forms of interrelations (Semorile, 2009; Vera, 2001). This adoption of strategies that preserve and promote the pluriverse make it possible to generate mechanisms for the political activation of relationality (Escobar, 2014; Borsani, 2011).

To imagine such a possibility for the situation analyzed leaves open an expectation about new designs in territorial policy that are respectful of the rights of peoples and non-humans. Only twenty-five years ago, with the reform of the national constitution in 1994, did Argentine legislation allow for the existence of collective rights of a new subject called Indigenous People.

Coupled with the reparation of injustices for the *qom* people, territorial policy should promote processes of redistribution—of material, cultural goods and the capacity to make decisions about their own destinies—to allow each culture to carry out specific life plans based on its unique affiliation (Díaz & Alonso, 2004; Gómez & Hadad, 2007; Ortiz, 2012).

Dialogical Frontiers in Rural Development Policies

The last case reviews the various logics in tension reflected in interactions between technicians from State rural development programs and projects, political officials, researchers from the science and technology system and the small rural producers—or family farmers—with whom they interact. To this end, we present scenes based on the triangulation of interviews with these actors or field observations that enable reflection and, from this, the formulation of methodological proposals to overcome those frontiers between knowledge.

Scene 1: As part of the assessment of a rural development program, an extension worker was accompanied during his visit to producers. At one point, the technician says: "I bring my son sometimes, so that he can see how poorly the producers live. That way he understands that he has to study so that he does not end up like them." The effectiveness of his work was relative; he complained that despite repeated PowerPoint presentations, the producers did not apply his teachings. The relationships were marked by emotional distance: the extension worker gave talks and showed his films but did not seem to be committed to what happened to "those people." He did this because it was his job and he was paid to do so. He used the banking model of education (Freire, 1972) to present technical issues, making it clear that he was the one who had

the knowledge, but rarely did practicums.[8] The producers respected him; in short, he was a veterinarian and possessed a university degree. He also brought vaccines. However, they did not trust his technical knowledge. "What does the engineer know… he comes for a little while, looks around, gives his opinion, but his body isn't in it, we never saw him during a calving, he arrives too *empilchado*[9] to get dirty."

Scene 2: In the context of a systematization of the experience of a smallholder producer organization in northwestern Argentina, one producer tells us: "To receive the credits, we had to be poor; they used criteria to see whether or not one fit as poor to be eligible for the program. One of the things they looked at was whether there was a bathroom with a flush toilet or a latrine. I had just installed a bathroom, and it cost me a lot to buy the pieces and install it. But I tore it down before they came to inspect. When they gave me the credit, I built it again." There are frontiers between being poor and not being poor. Frontiers are imposed by a technocratic mentality that must define, unidirectionally, the focus of public policies in a single way that is considered objective and thus construct the concept of poverty. The frontier itself forces and constructs poverty as a condition for receiving State resources. This was not a producer with capital; his economy was based on subsistence, but he had worked hard and built a bathroom with a flush toilet. The house had a dirt floor, a thatched roof and no doors. Was this type of construction an indicator of poverty or the culturally appropriate way to meet the need for protection and shelter in that place? These "symbolic ceilings" often operate in the subjectivity of many beneficiaries in a regressive manner. In this scene, the producer reads the situation from a strategic point of view. According to the program's Operational Manual, one must fit into the definition of poor to gain access to resources and overcome the border imposed on them as a way of improving their situation.

In other cases, these symbolic ceilings operate as limits. For example, this is the case with many of those who are enrolled in the *monotributo social* [a form of social security]. Participants make a small contribution to join a social program, but the State covers the pension contribution, and thus, they can claim up to an annual limit that amounts to less than a monthly minimum living and mobile wage.[10] If they exceed that limit, to be able to continue claiming benefits, they must register in the lowest category of the *monotributo* and pay quadruple the contributions so that they can claim a higher monthly amount. If they increase the amount they claim, they must again move up in category, but in that case, the increase in the contributions between categories is progressively reduced as more is claimed. The initial increase to pay the quadrupled amount acts as a limit. Those who are registered in the *monotributo social* have an internal border: they must claim less than the minimum wage per month. The regulation, while making it possible to formalize sales, acts as a check on the possibility of growing, being more productive and expanding sales. Claiming more is perceived as a leap into the void, a journey with no return. The

[8] Banking education—a term introduced by Paulo Freire— conceives of the educational process based on the assumption that the educator "deposits" content in the student's mind. Instead of thinking about education as a process of conscious and discerning communication, banking methods characterize the person who is educated as a passive and ignorant subject who learns through the memorization and repetition of content selected and imparted by an educator who is the bearer of single and indisputable truths.

[9] In Argentina, an idiom that means well dressed, dressed elegantly and with care.

[10] Joint Resolution 4263/2010, 9/2010 and 2880/10, Secretariat for Institutional Coordination and Monitoring, Secretariat for Rural Development and Family Agriculture and Federal Public Revenue Administration.

possibility of losing the tax benefit has a heavy symbolic weight. It discourages any idea or impulse. Once framed as "socially vulnerable," one "better not move from that category, just in case. "They may take away your Universal Child Allowance,[11] you never know…". To remain in that category, you cannot own more than one property or have more than three motorcycles or more than one car older than three years (and another registered under a business name), etc. These are borders established by the State that are incorporated into the individual psyche.

Scene 3: A researcher in agricultural sciences had long experimented with a species similar to aloe vera that grew faster and had greater resistance to certain pests. He needed to carry out a type of testing that required extensive cultivation; so, he encouraged a group of producers to grow it. They finally decided to plant several hectares, assuming that this other species possessed the properties of aloe vera and could replace it. At the time of harvesting, a problem arose: there was no market for the plant because it lacked the active principles of the original and had no other component that could be used in the industry. Farmers were unable to sell their product and thus missed a productive cycle. They felt powerless because they had not imagined that the scientist would not take into account that they had to generate income to survive.

Scene 4: A technician with many years of experience worked with several organizations that grew bananas and mangoes and sold them at more competitive prices than the prices for imported fruit thanks to lower transport costs due to the proximity of markets. With the participation of producers, the technician formulated projects appropriate to the needs of each organization, with different amounts depending on each organization. Within a short time, the government administration changed, with the area appointing a partisan leader with no knowledge of rural production. In analyzing the portfolio of subsidies and credits prepared by the technician, he said that it was a political mistake to distribute the money in this way and decided to divide it into equal parts and to expand the number of organizations subsidized. The assumption was that, this way, there would be more organizations connected to its management, and when the borrowed money was to be repaid, it could facilitate the conditions of repayment in exchange for electoral support.

The unilateral, authoritarian decision by the official—without consulting the technician—generated discussions, as some organizations did not have enough money for needed investments, while others had more funds than they could absorb. Not accepting the funds would have caused a rift with the new official and perhaps failure to receive technical assistance, and accepting would require rethinking the uses of the money, as it would not be enough to do what was planned. The sustainability of the projects would not be guaranteed, which made giving back the loans difficult. Some organizations experienced a crisis and disintegrated.

Scene 5: Technicians receive a mandate from the central management of their organization to begin a subsidy program for producers' organizations. To implement it and execute the budget, it is necessary to create organizations where none previously existed, and hence, they propose to various producers' groups that had been meeting to get to know one another and work together in an incipient manner to form a legal

[11] A social security program in Argentina that grants benefits for each child who is under 18 or disabled to unemployed persons who work informally or in precarious conditions or have salaries below the minimum, vital and mobile wage.

entity to receive the subsidies. That was the objective of the technicians; however, what was the objective of the producers? They were not prepared to sustain a legal entity, and they did not have the will to meet as an assembly, keep minutes, balance finances and administer the sales of the group. Nor was it financially justifiable to put forth more effort, as the families had income from outside the farms, and some of the little that they produced was for their own consumption. However, additionally, having to define management roles according to the demands of the statute type would generate conflicts within the group, given that until then they had managed themselves without differentiations or hierarchies. The requirement to establish a legal entity and to institute management ended up being overwhelming. It seemed better to focus on strengthening linkages, improving business aspects to expand sales, and learning about and discussing technical/productive issues rather than spending hours of time and energy on paperwork, certifying signatures, keeping minutes, and holding meetings on bureaucratic and formal issues. To avoid confronting the technicians, however, the producers ultimately formalized the organization. The subsidy took over a year to materialize. By that time, the participants had dispersed.

As we travel through the various territories, we find associations and cooperatives created based on the impetus of technicians and politicians as a requirement to access subsidies and credits, an instrumental logic that later clashes with reality because if this approach is taken as a starting point, rarely do groups become strengthened and remain united after receiving a grant.

The abuse of this perspective constructs an imaginary social significance of associativism that links it to an instrumental need: receiving State funding with the assumption that mere investment in material goods can bring a group together. Thus, it removes other possible meanings, such as building a long-term project that is autonomous from short-term public policies and instead based on bonds of solidarity. In contrast, we have witnessed processes based on this other logic of self-management that remain united even though the State has not financed their projects, precisely because of their degree of autonomy.

The analysis of the scenes we present demonstrates how emotional, pedagogical, epistemological, methodological, political and economic boundaries are erected that block the ability to develop autonomous thinking, understand and respect other ways of organizing life and strengthening self-management processes. Each actor insists on their own interests and habits, prejudices, prescriptions and paradigms, without questioning what other existential experiences may expand the way they see and operate in reality.

Thus, the scenes described lead us to ask if (with what practices, in what interactions and through what mechanisms) it is possible to cross those frontiers? How does one produce change and learn about other possible organizational modes and ways to guide technical/political action? What collective and collaborative institutional mechanisms can be constructed?

The experience we have been developing in our research center and in conjunction with other related groups suggests that it is possible to build bridges to highlight borders and analyze them critically through different techniques and action-research tools in collaboration with territorial actors (Heras, 2014). These include the following:

- Applying and adapting the techniques of forum theater, legislative theater and other variants of the theater of the oppressed that make it possible to dramatize situations of oppression and think about the changes necessary to overcome them;
- Editing fragments of filmed interviews—juxtaposing incongruities and dissimilar postures—and screening them for the different actors gathered to then discuss the contradictory content of what was viewed;
- Screening testimonies from the most powerful and least powerful actors and then problematizing the content of their explicit discourses or comparing the lives and experiences of the weakest as a result of the actions of the most powerful actors;
- Using approaches from institutional analysis and institutional psychology that are aimed at making the implicit explicit and examining the mechanisms that sustain asymmetric power relationships in inter-actoral spaces by generating symbolic differences and inequalities;
- Systematizing the experiences generated in a territory on film for use in other contexts, whether to show that certain training is possible or to generate identifications or questions about shared experiences so as to identify aspects that present potential for local development;
- Systematizing legislation generated elsewhere that is aimed at reducing barriers to market access, facilitating access to resources such as land, water or financing, or improving the conditions of family farmers, thus allowing access to decision-making and the approval of similar legal systems at the local system;
- Identifying, describing and disseminating information about innovative technologies and organizational tools developed by producers' organizations;
- Promoting and accompanying working groups in which members or representatives of various self-managed organizations participate to share research questions. This allows for the analysis of critical situations with others identified as peers who have experienced or can understand such situations;
- Promoting and attending local roundtables for technicians from different governmental and non-governmental units, governed by criteria of parity (beyond the fact that the technicians involved are part of hierarchical-bureaucratic structures);
- Translating standards and instruments into informal language to facilitate producers' access to resources (business plans, spreadsheets for project development, model statutes, etc.); and
- Developing discursive and interactional strategies to "blow up bureaucracy" and facilitate legitimate projects that often do not fit the guidelines established in government programs.

Discussion and Conclusions

The argument sustained in this article explores a Latin American socio-historical fabric from 2000 to present. Throughout the presentation of the cases, we identify different ways of producing frontiers and disputes between institutional cultures; the cultures of rural, peasant and indigenous communities; international organizations

and logics; and the orientations (interests) and frameworks of thinking of actors involved in creating and implementing development plans and programs in different territories. We believe that making real and symbolic borders visible, particularly those that generate disparities and asymmetric power relationships, and designing conceptual tools to analyze and, if possible, transform them are essential for strengthening self-managed organizations in local communities of both rural producers and urban workers.

The reflection presented in this article contributes to the scientific literature because it suggests a way forward so that the knowledge generated by different social actors is built in a synergistic way, articulated beyond constantly shifting boundaries and organized as a possible way of understanding the science as work.

In terms of our theoretical framework, the analysis of the first case allows us to reiterate the need to think about the frontiers between peasants practicing traditional agriculture and the capitalist agro-industrial-export model in a dual sense: on the one hand, it is necessary to reveal exchanges that mask more inequality and exclusion, and on the other hand, we must discover possible emergences of borders that are permeable to the creation of solidarity links, that reinforce the life choices of peasant communities as environmental guardians and providers of healthy and accessible food.

In turn, the case of the Teuco-Bermejito area—one of the many indigenous territories condemned by modernity to be and exist in a different space and time—leads us to return to the concept of the border created by agreements in a clash of sociocultural tensions between dissimilar worlds, demonstrating the conflict surrounding the perseverance of territorialities that cannot be reduced to the logic of capital nor installed as resistance, challenge and possible permeation against the consolidation of a territory of domination.

Meanwhile, the observations made in the third case emphasize our idea that in planning the implementation and evaluation of public development and inclusion policies, it is necessary to reveal the boundaries established between the ways of thinking of the different actors, to think them through and think of others, about the possibility or otherwise of building bridges, and to cross borders by seeing things through the eyes of others.

The general theoretical framework on the notion of frontiers in the first two presented cases offers a variation in meaning. From the reference to the demarcations required by the policies of expansionism and conquest, i.e., order/disorder and open borders/containing walls, and, more specifically, in the concept of the cultural frontier alluding to statements and practices that sustain what can and cannot be done, socially speaking, whose most current expression is found in the tension between assimilation/pluralism, we move toward ideas related to processes of territorialization and re-territorialization and permeation. In the third case, the notion of border also gives way to a type of thinking-between, specific to social theory, which for its configuration appeals to the knowledge generated by different disciplines and actors.

Based on the analysis of the three cases, we can conclude that a variety of factors come into play such that we tend to characterize the experience of Paraguay as positive, while the other two present more difficulties in terms of achievements, but they also offer many challenges to interpellate the notion of borders. In this regard, we have seen that in the first case, different factors come together that have enhanced the experience of resistance and struggle against the agro-export model of dispossession that communities have been sustaining. These are the empowerment of peasants

during the presidency of Fernando Lugo, the project by Sobrevivencia/FOE-EWNI to strengthen traditional organizations and crops through actions developed in open and participatory assemblies for socio-environmental, legal and agro-ecological training and through the strengthening of community radio and social networks that became channels for issuing complaints and recording cases, democratizing the process of follow-up and demands for resolution. All of these global actions improved the likelihood that young people would remain in their communities and local leaders would emerge, and they generated capacities to prepare proposals based on autonomous and sustainable land management and food sovereignty. Likewise, they favored bonds of resistance between the communities involved in the project and encouraged the exchange of experiences regarding land claims. Meanwhile, as a political tool, the implementation of the Territorial Management Plan allowed for the implementation of checks against the entry or permanence of GMOs and agro-chemicals.

In the case of Teuco-Bermejito, the State only restored part of the land claimed. In the current socio-economic context, this situation has generated losses for both groups that share the territory, making it difficult to re-construct or reterritorialize the coexistence of multiple worlds. The struggles of the *qom* communities in the area involve demands for territory, self-government, respect for their own socio-cultural systems and greater participation in policy-making and decision-making bodies. We could say that the appeal to cultural diversity that prevails in existing public policy fails to provide effective responses to the inequalities in the insertion of inhabitants in a hegemonic and globalized economic, social, political and cultural system. The establishment of symbolic/semiotic borders in situations of interaction is not solely due to the existence of different representations of the world by Creole and *qom* people; these differences are marked by power relations that are not brought to light and questioned with a view toward possible transformations.

In the third case, with regard to development and social inclusion policies, we believe that most of the frontiers that appear in their implementation exist in the minds of those who interact directly in the territory: technicians, producers and political officials. The practices of these actors are not universal. In each territory, the contexts are specific, and the subjects are unique. This diversity of logics grows with the intervention of more actors in other spaces and times: those responsible for determining targeting criteria to establish the limits for defining poverty, or situations of vulnerability, or for dictating rules and regulations that are impossible to meet, difficult to understand, or unconsciously condition the subjectivity of recipients.

In short, the review of experiences reveals two ways of looking at frontiers: one that emphasizes the issues of inside/outside, demarcations and barriers, and another that refers more centrally to transit, in-between spaces, liminal space or mutually interpellatable areas; transversally, we view the power relations explained in our analysis as disputes. That space of being built on an undetermined and politically conflictive dynamic makes it possible to assume other discourses, other productions of meaning, another social semiosis that is linked to a possibility of justice. We assemble ourselves around the political value of the border, understanding that all positioning is relative to a forcefield, and that is why frontiers are simultaneously boundaries and membranes, roadblocks and openings.

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María Alejandra Pagotto
Argentine. Master´s in Magister in Interdisciplinary Studies of Subjectivity by the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Researcher on the proyect "Learning and creation in the building of autonomy and self-management projects", at the Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano (INCLUIR), Buenos Aires. Research lines: territoriality, power, resistance; production of subjectivity in street situations; social intervention practices. Recent publication: Heras, A. I., Miano, A. & Pagotto, M. A. (2017). Una apuesta por la vida: Ética y estética en formas colectivo-solidarias. *Nómadas*, (46), 129-149.

María del Socorro Foio
Argentine. Doctor of Cognitive Sciences, UNNE, Argentina. Researcher on the project "Understanding group learning of a cooperative-solidarity nature: Pedagogy and specific tools" at the Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano (INCLUIR), Buenos Aires. Research lines: organizational management, territory, public policies, citizen participation. Recent publication: Foio, M. del S. (2016). Desarrollo de un modelo de observación del sistema social en espacios participativos promovidos por el Estado. *Question*, (49), 252-270.

David Burin
Argentine. Chemical technician. Escuela Nacional de Educación Técnica O. Krause, Argentina. Researcher on the projects: "Learning and creation in the building of autonomy and self-management projects" and "Learning and the perception of difference in autonomy projects" at the Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano (INCLUIR), Buenos Aires. Research lines: social communication, local development, self-management, labor, cooperative endeavors, social policies. Recent publication: Miano, M. A., Burin, D. & Heras, A. I. (2016). Tecnología y autogestión en cooperativas de trabajo. *De Prácticas y Discursos, 5*, 1-33.

Claudia Ricca
Argentine. Master's in Gender and Politics, University of London. Researcher on the project "Learning about co-management in educational centers for total production: Ethnographic and sociolinguistic analysis of interactions in multi-actor educational processes" at the Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano (INCLUIR), Buenos Aires. Research lines: informal memory and visual arts. Recent publication: Ricca, C. & Scolnik, A. (2017). Memoria histórica y auto-organización en Argentina: Enfoques desde las artes visuales para producir narrativas colectivas con grupos de la sociedad civil. *Constructive Engagement of Conflict Journal,* (4).