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# Processes of Territorial Revindication in the Context of Tourism: The Conflict of “Cerro Chapelco”/San Martin De Los Andes, Patagonia Argentina)

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# Processes of Territorial Revindication in the Context of Tourism: The Conflict of “Cerro Chapelco” ( San Martin De Los Andes, Patagonia Argentina)

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As a result of the so-called “*Campaña del Desierto*”, these background move across time-space categories, setting up a complex social space that allows us to study and analyze, critically, the different forms that exchange strategies can take - submission - survival, and the building of inter-ethnic relations crossed by the reality of tourism.

From a tourism field perspective, the town of San Martín de los Andes has been taken as a case study, which is the most important tourist center of the Province of Neuquén and one of the most recognized of the Patagonia at both, national and international levels, particularly for its winter season and the activities developed in its *Cerro Chapelco* Ski Center.

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## I. TOURISTIC APPROPRIATION OF THE MAPUCHE CULTURE

As a result of the appropriation and distribution of territories in valley of *Lácar* done by the Federal Government, plus successive military consolidation of National Parks in the '30s of the next century, mapuche populations, who lived there prior to the arrival of the

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army and the settlers, were assigned with those leftover or marginal territories to develop subsistence productive activities. Examples of them are: the rugged coast of the Lácar Lake of glacial origins, or the slopes of the hills of *Chapelco* 's bead.

This region, located in southwest of the present Province of Neuquén, it is characterized by transverse valleys to The Andes Mountains, product of glacial action, leaving a series of lakes, including *Lácar*, and crossed by numerous streams and low steps. These conditions enabled social exchange for more than 10,000 years and a natural environmental unit formed by the *Bosque Andino Patagónico*, a territory that has provided with knowledge, wisdom, food and life to indigenous people.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the territory of Neuquén became a Province in 1958<sup>1</sup>, especially since the early '70s, Neuquén State intervention became sustained in this town and in the region by implementing developmentalism public policies, while transforming San Martín de los Andes City in a touristic place. These policies orientated to promote tourism were mainly supported by important infrastructure work, from state and central planning through centralized state planning, as a tool for consolidating this service center, based in an enclave economy<sup>2</sup>.

Consequently, the territorial spaces that were assigned to the mapuche people, previously conceived as unproductive by the State, began to have a great landscape and natural value and, therefore, a touristic one - real-estate - becoming the nature and the

<sup>1</sup> The sanction of law 14.408, by which the territories until that moment of Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz and Formosa was passed to province on 15 July 1955, but newly come into effect in 1958, as a result of the self-styled Revolución Libertadora that in the month of September of the same year overthrew the general Juan Perón.

<sup>2</sup> With the creation and institutional consolidation of a provincial government, regions were defined different socioeconomic areas that persist until today. Divides the province into poles of economic enclave on the basis of specialization, San Martín de los Andes has the pole of tourism development throughout the southern region.

landscape, together with its inhabitants, in touristic attractions and economic resources.

This territory, that for decades was limited by aspects especially related to the production, governance and the distribution of resources (agricultural, forestry and others), acquires a new "value" and linking from the development of the tourism activity.

Since the social shaping of borders in this region of Argentinean Patagonia, which occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inhabitants of mapuche origin are denied as members of the society. As a consequence, they have been suffering an immersion to an inter-ethnic system that has been subordinating them during the past 120 years.

San Martín de los Andes is the county town, in this economic and political center relations between mapuche social sectors and not mapuche people were built on the basis of group homogenization, based on domination in its commercial, educational and touristic aspects.

Members of almost all the indigenous communities in the south of the Province of Neuquén have a work relationship with the nearby urban centers, while this represents a major source of income the majority of these off-farm jobs<sup>3</sup> are precarious. The community members incorporate to the labor market of San Martín de los Andes as paid employees and/or independent workers, jobs that are generally informal<sup>4</sup>.

Also, members of the mapuche communities maintain relationships with certain social sectors of this locality due to the need for food and everyday supplies, plus those exchanges as a result of handicrafts sales to various businesses dedicated to this type of "regional" products.

Despite of its proximity to the town center, the mapuche villager's are not part of everyday life in this city when it comes to shaping, participating or integrating those political bodies - economic or administrative- of San Martín de los Andes.

Although there is a daily human movement of residents in various urban journeys, when they "come down" -as it is used in everyday language, because they live in the nearly foothills- for administrative proceedings before government agencies, medical care, attending schools, visiting relatives or even for their participation in the labor market and in the economic life of the town as products suppliers and crafts sellers at craft

<sup>3</sup> Those jobs, salaried or not, are made outside the community and the majority of these are temporary jobs in urban areas.

<sup>7</sup> Men hold most jobs in construction and women in domestic service, category extending to gastronomic sectors, especially tourist accommodation. During the peak season, a higher percentage of workers are hired, particularly for rooms and cabins cleaning. Besides being employed in hotels and restaurants, a large number joined the State as public employees.

shows; persist an *invisibility* towards the "other", in this case the Mapuche people.

Being outside the social reality of this frontier society -transformed into a tourist mountain range town during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under a tourist model of European villages- enable the indigenous being part only as another landscape feature of excursions, adding an exotic touch when circulating near the properties of mapuche people.

When mapuche attributes become a tourism resource, it indicates that there are fragments making reference to a culture of the past, placed on the market to be consumed for their folk and traditional features. This reduction does not include conflicting aspects, such as the cultural and territorial claims of the last decade.

This Patagonian town, which has built a pro-European tourist image, has been gradually and steadily incorporating "the mapuche" as a tourist resource, appropriating this culture from an "a-historical" vision, deprived of any social and political connotation.

Then, under such conditions, the visibility or invisibility of the mapuche people, mediated by the field of tourism, depends on the dimensions and characteristics of the economic and symbolic dispute at stake. This aims, among other purposes, to sustain the own history of San Martín de los Andes, - 'whites and Europeans' hard-working pioneers who have lived with the primitive Mapuche, a sort of peaceful coexistence with mutual benefits, in a remote village of border-.

When in the fields of tourism they talk about *valuing*<sup>5</sup>, in this case an ethnic tourism product<sup>6</sup> of mapuche origin, they are trying to turn it into an economic resource to be placed on the market. In this way, the cultural is defined by its monetary value: by adapting the product to tourists' tastes and needs, the ways to expose a heterogeneous group of people called mapuche community there are finally established.

With its ethno-political and social repositioning since the end of the last century, and in favor of greater acceptance of difference like gender, sexual, religious and ethnic diversity, indigenous communities, in our case mapuche people, have obtained a more assertive presence and recognition in the territorial-cultural area and visibility, product of the expansion of tourism on

<sup>5</sup> "This usually requires, at least, the conservation of these elements and provides, moreover, to political power, fast and secure way to consensual action. Activation, rather than the enhancement is related discourses "(Prats, Ll. 2005: 3).

<sup>6</sup> It is understood by Tourism Product the set of natural, cultural and human resources with the ability to attract visitors that an area can offer supplemented by infrastructure and support equipment, promoted by a sales organization. Tourism in mapuche communities is a tourist product within the classification of Cultural Tourism. (Plan Maestro de Turismo 2003-2007: 21).

their territory and the dispute over the ownership of the tourism general incomes.

In contemporary historical contexts, as Bartolomé, M (2003) notes, there are social processes of identification developing that express emerging identities (*re-ethnicisation*), related to experiences of political participation acquired in ethno-political organizations. The question that arises is: in favorable contexts of social openness to rescue and dignify ethnicity, which is the role that is going to play tourism regarding the generation and validation of these new ethnic positions, trying to modify the consolidated asymmetrical power relations.

Wracked by political and economic hegemonic structures, regarding tourism development of the culture and mapuche vision of world, traditional forms of tourism deny the status of "otherness" and the culturally contemporary social subject of mapuche inhabitant.

On the contrary, requires for its promotion based on the market, a local mapuche dweller that references constantly for a western and Christian version of the original peoples past, without questioning the reasons and consequences of a genocide and subsequent dispersion, plus cultural annihilation that lasted and was accentuated during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, a past that is present in every ethnic claim.

At last, the conventional and massive forms where tourism activity laid on, takes and processes the ethnic question as bounded and functional to the process of taking ownership of the tourism income, "valuing" a reinvented tradition.

## II. ETHNIC AND DISPUTED TERRITORIES IN TOURIST CONTEXTS

In the present century, the tourist story built about San Martin de los Andes has been registering in the precepts of recognition, respect, diversity and integration of a locality self-proclaimed as "intercultural" in the first paragraphs of its Organic Charter<sup>7</sup>.

However, the field of tourism continued the appropriation of isolated and striped elements of the "mapuche" -symbols, names, "myths and legends" - for promotional purposes, aiming to give native and exotic features to various ethnical products offered.

The interethnic relations, that cross social and political life of this town, hold those arguments that defined identities and otherness of indigenous groups in the last century: the homogeneous prevails over the diverse and integrates the *indigenous* - *Native* -

<sup>7</sup> To recognize the specific ethnic and cultural of the mapuche people, respecting the conservation of their traditional values, supporting their development and ensuring their rights in accordance with the provisions of article 75, paragraph 17 of the Constitution and article 53 Chapter II of the Provincial Constitution and recognizing themselves as intercultural municipality" (Point 12 of Chapter II: General Statements. Organic Charter of San Martin de los Andes - July 2010)

Mapuche under a concept based on the submission by the different stakeholders of the public and private sectors, in this context mediated by tourism, replicating stereotypes and prejudices, that become visible in times of stress to ethnic-identity repositioning of territorial basis.

In this context, the Cerro Chapelco and its ski center<sup>8</sup>, the most important in the province of Neuquén and one of the most recognized in Latin America, constitutes an enabling environment to discuss about the dispute over territory, where the ethnic dimension acquires a greater significance.

For 14 years now, in each winter tourist season has been renewed a controversial and conflictive situation, which requires a historical, social and political analysis about those aspects related to rights, property and usufruct of a complex territorial space, such as the one that currently represents the base of the ski resort of Cerro Chapelco.

Chapelco is a territory where the mapuche populations were relocated after the foundation of San Martin de los Andes. These lands of little or none productive value in the past, after the change in its economic logic toward tourism, currently have a very high tourist real estate value.

With the beginning of this century, first as a rejection of the extension of the skiable area on lands claimed as their own, and then by the successive complaints about discharges from the various endeavors grantees of the ski center in water courses on which they depend to survive, mapuche communities began a journey that allows us deepen the analysis on the territorial conflict derived from the territorial claims mediatised by tourism..

The last installment of this whole process, Mapuche communities named *Vera* and *Curruhuinca*, together or separately, with the Provincial Government and by extension, with the concessionaire of the ski center, are claiming portions of its territory that overlap with the base of the ski center, that is to say, the center of operations and production with the private properties located there.

During the last ski season in 2014, the news over the local and regional media emphasized the conflict on the development of a snow park by the Mapuche community *Curruhuinca* in the entrance to the winter sports center, disputing a portion of the territory and the income to the concessionary company *Nieves de Chapelco*.

<sup>8</sup> Until the decade of the '70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, San Martín de los Andes had few communications, presented a moderate population growth and limited movement of visitors. It is based on the development of the skiing over winter season and the subsequent arrival of large contingents of tourists, when there is a significant change in the patterns and characteristics of our everyday lives, and is referenced as a tourist destination for a differential and more exclusive social sector.



Once again, the consequences of the socio-historical process about constitution and location of the mapuche communities Post- *Campaña del Desierto* and the foundation of a military detachment undercover as a frontier town called San Martín de los Andes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are updated.

In these moments, their vindictive actions renew the outpourings of the rest of society from the perspective and look of the field of tourism, where it is expressed in a symbolic way the violence of the ethnic and class conflict.

Mapuche populations are presented before public opinion associated with situations of conflict -land takeover, territorial recovery, strikes-. Before this a-historical, and loaded with prejudice, vision on one of the marginalized sectors of their society, takes as a response to this practice of stigmatization, that mapuche populations opposed its struggle for the full recognition of their rights and autonomy.

Two realities coexist and are rejected in this tourist town. One intended to show an image free from problems, prepared to meet the visitor in harmony with nature. On the contrary, other formed by an invisible and refused social sector, belonging to the mapuche, competing for the participation and management of resources and tourist income.

The members of the first sector focused their interest on the economic consequences of a strike in the peak season, and the "other invisible" implement such a measure as a way to draw attention to their needs, making their claim effective by pressuring to be listened and have access to the media.

Now we are facing a new scenario, where the tension occurs between sectors that are vying for the exclusivity in the exploitation of a mountain range that already had an ancestral use by mapuche communities, when these social actors express their intentions to join the tourism market with equal participation.

In this regard, the conflict derived from the distribution of the tourism income acquired an ethnic dimension in San Martín de los Andes. This stigmatization of the mapuche, unknown and denies the adaptive strategies of subordinate societies, which are indispensable to survive in certain discriminatory and racist contexts like the one developed here.

The already mentioned ethno-political repositioning of mapuche communities, has promoted the inclusion of the "mapuche issue" in the political agenda. The conflicts that emerged in the various seasons in San Martín de los Andes did not impacted as much on the tourist season, as they did on the diagrams where inter-ethnic relations over the past century were consolidated, and where was evidenced the organizational capacity of the mapuche communities to use experiences of struggle carried out by indigenous communities of the country and from various points of Latin America.

The reaction through its multiple networks and folds of the political and economic power resulted in the development of complex strategies aimed at reducing the clashes and neutralize conflictive situations.

On one hand, practices vary between cooptation by political parties offering advisement, or the drafting and signing of agreements that several times has a difficult or null compliance, with the aim to postpone and delay the decision-making processes to finish each tourist season. Those strategies have also been implemented to capture some members of the mapuche communities, time-bound goals patterns and conditions to carry out activities related to the business of tourism, with the consequent discretionary funding for endeavors in their current territories or in the process of mapuche claim.

Even from an ethical staging, one of the consequences of the tourist exploitation in indigenous territories was, on one hand to facilitate its growing visibility as social subjects, in our case of the mapuche people.

As has been happening with native peoples throughout Latin America, the conflicts resulting from disputes over access and ownership of the resources and identity resulted in the strengthening of practices of resistance that allowed them to be social, cultural, economic and politically positioned, in a process of consolidation of the ethnic identity and its political expression -ethnicity-.

The different claims and mobilizations in tourist contexts generated, directly and indirectly, the acquisition of rights from the disputes that are derived by access to resources, as well as the consequent public visibility.

Due to the increasing territories' value, product of the advance of various tourist undertakings-real estates, in the settlement and/or claim areas of these populations, has resulted in varied mobilizations and litigation, some of them still pending. This context has led to the constitution as political subjects, to the extent which allows them (and in many cases forced them) to dispute their positioning in political, economic and symbolic terms.

Indeed, from the expansion of tourism activity, there has been a greater indigenous presence and mobilization. Also it emerged the feeling of being part of a native people group (made invisible until that moment).

In this way, it turns out that the tourism represents on one hand, a factor that plays, the inevitable clash of two cultures and two classes: dominant – subordinate, as in other areas, one that is prevailing, sets out the criteria and, in the final analysis, the game rules which the others should follow. These *others* have built a Mapuche identity linked to rural life, dedicated to goats and sheep farming.

San Martin de los Andes faces the contradiction of a marketing strategy that promotes the staging of a life built over an image of unspoiled nature, in which mapuche people is part of its tourist attractions with a landscape free of interethnic conflicts and class.

In a binding manner but at the same time competing, in this dialectical process by incorporating the image of the Mapuche peoples and ethnicity as an integral part of the landscape, at the same time and unintentionally the field of tourism gives existence to those who denied, favoring its reformulation as public group, as individuals and active subjects and contemporary.

As stated throughout this work, a social vision of tourism and the critical analysis of the structural conditions of the consequences generated by this activity in populations originating in, lets us explore and deepen a social phenomenon of multiple implications, in the framework of the development models and the resulting intervention strategies and imposed, as an extension of the relations of subordination and subjugation, contextualizing the space tourism and historically in relation to minority communities.

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