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## The Age of Resistance against Extractivism<sup>1</sup>

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Translated by George Hutton

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### Abstract

Many of the environmental conflicts that have taken place in Colombia are linked to the extraction of natural assets such as oil, gold and coal. Although the outlook might appear gloomy, the social responses that emerge in this country, and that spread out to all the territories under threat from this model, provide new horizons of meaning. In this article, we attempt to set out how the various communities affected by mining projects, by oil licensing rounds, by hydroelectric or agrofuel projects, are rising up against this policy. This can be seen in Boyacá, Santander, Guajira, Casanare, Meta, Putumayo, Caqueta, Cauca, Antioquia and Caldas, and many other departments where poverty and environmental decay have increased while mining or oil projects have expanded. The coming together of different social sectors, of national ethnic and campesino organisations, rallying around a unified set of demands to be negotiated with the government, above all for the comprehensive defence of the territory, encourages us to join in with the construction of a dignified country, for the dignified life of all those who inhabit it.

### Keywords

resistance; alternatives to development; extractivism; environmental conflicts; political ecology; Colombia.

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### Introduction

*Una sola golondrina no llama agua.*<sup>2</sup>

Juan Ventes, community leader, South Pacific region

For several months in 2014, the *campesino*<sup>3</sup> communities in San Bernardo, a municipality in Cundinamarca, just over 100 km from Bogotá, managed to halt the exploratory work that the multinational Alange Energy Corp was seeking to carry out in the mountains of the Sumapaz province. The presence and actions of the company Vector Geophysical S.A.S., who had been commissioned to do the seismic exploration, sent a stark warning to

the *campesino* communities, who had never imagined that oil extraction might one day happen in their territory.

Like in San Bernardo, all over Colombia people have risen up to defend their territory from extractive projects. From the far north of Colombia, in the Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina, all the way to the south, in Putumayo; from the eastern plains of Orinoquía and the valleys of the River Magdalena; over the high mountains of the Andes, and right up to the Pacific. This has also happened elsewhere in Latin America, given that the ramping up of the extractivism of natural assets in the countries of the Global South has increased the number of ecological/distributive conflicts throughout the continent. César Padilla, coordinator of the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL, the *Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de América Latina*), has pointed out that this increased resistance has stopped 30 billion dollars from being spent on mining projects. As if it were rising up from the subsoil, this defence of the land, against the threat of extractivism, continues to burgeon and bloom. Recent governments have had to confront the emergence of diverse, complex conflicts. Many different parts of society have joined the struggles: indigenous, *campesino* and Afro-Colombian populations, as well as those from more urban sectors, i.e. traders, educators, workers, unions, youth organisations, women's groups, committees for communal action and student organisations. And, of course, environmentalists. This article seeks to understand how the people construct their forms of resistance, what we can learn from the wealth of related experiences throughout the country, and what the narratives and processes of their struggles are, as well as the foundations upon which such resistance is developed and built.

### What do we mean by “resistance”?

In the River Tapaje region (in the Colombian Pacific), one community decided that they would not leave their homeland following threats and provocations by armed groups who had ordered them to “vacate the territory”. This community have named themselves *los resistentes* (“the resisters”):

“[...] they form part of a new category in the phenomenon of displacement, a displacement which is also symbolic and psychological, that changes the dynamics of the relationship with the territory and its resources, and which leaves children with fear struck in their eyes, and women hungry, with empty tummies” (Roa Avendaño and Toloza, 2008).

*Los resistentes* do not want to leave their territory behind, despite the fact that they receive a distinct lack of support to maintain it, and despite the State's apathy and repression. They defend their land as their only possible

“paradise”, and they have built their resistance through their singing, poetry and dancing. This is how they talk to the river, to the territory, to the *canalete*,<sup>4</sup> to help them face down the many different attempts, by external agents, to eject them from their home (Roa Avendaño and Toloza, 2008).

Their resistance is a matter of containment, of ultimately preventing their being displaced. This displacement, however, is presented to them as practically the only way for them to survive. But such a life would be devoid of meaning without the presence of their territory, because they have built their culture there, having created close ties to nature and the unique features of the local environment.

### The semiotics of resistance

The word *resistance* has various different meanings: one dictionary suggests “the opposition to the action of a force”. During the Second World War, movements in many countries identified with the term, most notably when the Nazis invaded great swathes of Europe. As such, the practice of *resistance* is seen as one of blocking, containing, opposing, rebelling against all that which prevents a community from realising their own ways of life and their culture.

Others, however, understand resistance as something more than just defence or containment. The late Jorge Caballero (cited by Henry Caballero, 2014), who was leader of the department of Cauca, thought that resistance should be seen, in itself, as an alternative proposal for what the world could be like. He said that the forms of living constructed by the indigenous people and local communities who reject neoliberal globalisation, who oppose individualism, despise consumer society and refuse to consider nature as a commodity are, in themselves, an alternative. These forms of living therefore ensure that their territories are a beacon of hope. In this same sense, the idea of “resisting” has various meanings. Machado (2009: 221) says that resisting is an outburst, following the build-up of cracks in the “social supportability”, i.e. a given society’s coping mechanisms, and what people accept when in a state of shock or distress. He notes that resistance in itself helps weaken and undermine these communities’ bleak mechanisms for coping with colonial expropriations, such as naturalising hardship and becoming accustomed to suffering, since it unmasks the true forms of expropriation. Resistance breaks with the normalisation of this dire state of affairs, caused by capitalism and colonialism: it exposes what is otherwise invisible, and it reveals, palpably, what makes their bodies so numb with grief (Machado, 2009, p.221).

The communities who resist are, above all, structures of feeling, both bodily and mentally. Their ways of coping are based on the sensorial, the symbolic, the perceptive and the affects; on their connection to the territory and a past laden with traditions. They are based on the alternative, and on the possibility of other forms of life in the territory (Roa Avendaño, 2012) - essentially, they put everything on the line in order to try and transform the hegemonic power relations.

In this regard, Zibechi (2008) notes that “they prioritise horizontal relations, more dispersed powers, that are less centralised and hierarchical, but above all less fixed and permanent”. He highlights the role of women, who bring their family-like modes and ways into these collective spaces, and who even liken the resistance to their family, accepting members like their own children.

Resistance can also be regarded as a utopian way of dreaming the future, of generating initiatives and ways of living, making them visible, and uncovering them from beneath the cloak of marginalisation and neglect. As and when a community puts up resistance, they develop skills and practices that do not come up at other times. At times of resistance, people learn and build, they gain strength, and they acquire new skills that, beforehand, they might not have bothered to. They learn about law, geology, ecology, biology, economics. They debate issues that were previously thought to be just for the experts, and their forms of living are set out and evaluated.

Resistance is a fight in which social and community-based alternatives take precedence. The advantage of this, in cases involving the breakdown of the social fabric, or those involving displacement and dispossession, is that it allows broken ties to be rebuilt and reinforced.

James Scott (cited by Bebbinton 2011: 60) considers that local communities can resist from their everyday spaces, with traditional practices that protect their dignity. Unlike Scott, however, Escobar (Bebbington 2011: 61) highlights those resistances that, in the social movements, challenge the hegemonic development model by contrasting their ways of living and also proposing others ones, as a way of energising the resistance.

### How resistance is expressed

In Doima (municipality of Piedras, in the department of Tolima) the women there embodied the processes of territorial defence —their land was under threat from new tailings dams, part of the mining project La Colosa, by Anglo Gold Ashanti. The women stepped up as the guardians of their

territory, blocking any intruders who sought to attack their culture, their waters, their environment.

For months, these women kept guard over a bridge that gives access to the municipality, and they sustained, with all their creativity and vitality, a pacific and united movement. They managed to bring about the country's first ever referendum to stop a mining project: by using the discourse of the water and the land, they convinced 99.2% of the population to vote No to the threatened mining work. Elsewhere in the country, just like in Piedras, resistance movements have gradually transformed the narratives of the local inhabitants into discourses and demands that are somewhat more cultural, ecological and even spiritual. In other words, they have looked beyond the merely socioeconomic arguments, something which Maristella Svampa would call an ecoterritorial turn in the social protest movements.

The resistance efforts of the people have challenged the State's eagerness to implement laws and policies that endanger territories and cultures. They also confront the state-sponsored and private appropriation of natural assets, and they emerge, they establish and express themselves by means of the construction of alternatives to the hegemonic model. As such, a path of resistance towards sustainability has been laid down (Martínez Alier; 2004b: 262-265). Thus, resistances are manifested both as the mobilisation against megaprojects that invade the territories and community spaces where life is still being lived, and also as the construction of models for the public and community-based management of common assets. They are also manifested in agroecological processes and seed recovery, in the production of alternative energies, in bringing back trade systems and local markets, in urban agriculture, the use of bicycles and other forms of sustainable mobility, in dialogues between the countryside and the city, in revisiting ancestral forms, in agroecological and productive *campesino* reserves, and in educational processes based on popular and environmental knowledge, for the collective construction of knowledge.

Resistance, then, seeks to generate new social relations, far removed from any form of exploitation. It looks beyond capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, always attempting to overcome the difficulties of the systemic crisis, aiming for renewed dignity, and challenging the existing political and economic systems (Esteva, 2009). In these new culture shifts, resistance also contributes to the construction of sustainability in several ways: by tackling social and environmental injustice; by defending and re-evaluating different kinds of knowledge, traditions, spirituality, technologies and relationships that are more harmonious both with nature and between human beings; and by constructing more horizontal, democratic and fraternal relations.

## New languages of valuation. The construction of social strength

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the indigenous U'wa people, in Colombia, surprised the world by how they stood up to the Occidental Petroleum Company. This company came to their territory to explore and exploit an oil field there, in the municipality of Cubará, department of Boyacá.

The indigenous community did not ask Occidental to carry out prior consultations, nor did they seek to change the environmental impact study that the oil company had presented to the Ministry of the Environment. Nor did they ask the company for higher compensation, given the damage that this work would do to their territory, and they did not request better social investment. Their simple but forceful demand was to say that they did not want this hydrocarbon development in the territory, because oil is *ruiría*, the blood of Mother Earth, and extracting *ruiría* from deep inside the subsoil would cause her death, the death of *Pachamama* herself.

This new language of valuation, as well as reworking the logic of resistance, also brought a spiritual dimension into the disputes around the natural assets (Martínez Alier, 2004a). The U'wa people's fight became emblematic, all around the world. "Territory is sacred. Cultures with principles are priceless" was their slogan, which made a deep impression on many people, who in turn would lend their appreciation and solidarity to the U'wu: their territory is essential to their existence. Among the allies of this indigenous community defending their land there was no distinction in colour, race, religion or nationality. They were brought together by the call to stop the extraction of *ruiría* from the heart of the world, to prevent *Pachamama* from dying.

Similarly, elsewhere in Colombia and the world, processes of resistance against the extractivist model have acquired new narratives or new languages of valuation that cast serious doubts on the official discourses of social and economic development. The environmental struggle is becoming increasingly important within public debate. This ecoterritorial turn has incorporated narratives involving the defence of waters and rivers, the defence of sacred territories, of paramos and life itself, of animal and environmental rights, of the importance of *Pachamama*, of the right to territory.

Environmental activists and indigenous peoples have sought to use a language and a discourse that highlights difference, because independent thinking can be built upon what is different. Because "difference lies in the very process of being transformed" (Escobar, 2011: 79). According to

Caballero (2014), “the only way of escaping from this reality of the [hegemonic sectors] is to refuse to acknowledge their logic”.

In Colombia, over the course of their struggles, the *campesino* communities have re-evaluated what it means to be *campesino*, and their territory. They have constructed discourses and narratives around their culture, around water, around the importance of their world, and their agricultural production. They have claimed back, for the country, their symbols: the *ruana*-type poncho, the sombrero, the espadrille, the seeds, the hoe and, through them, they have strengthened their identity more and more, and they have regained their dignity. Also, through their resistance, they are once again rooted to their territory, and they have sought to pass these concerns onto the new generations of *campesinos*.

These new narratives seek recognition within the official discourses. The right to food sovereignty, for example, was put forward by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (the FAO) to be discussed in their 32<sup>nd</sup> Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean. The right to water has been included in some national constitutions in Latin America, and the right to nature is now part of the Ecuadorian constitution. The fact that these values, so key to the environmental, *campesino* and ethnic struggles, are being included in institutional discourses, serves to legitimise them. If nature is acknowledged as a subject with rights (as in Ecuador’s political constitution), it is thus recognised as a living being that requires care and regulation if it is to be protected.

In Colombia, defending the importance of the paramos means demanding they are protected against the planned mining works. Currently, despite the fact that the paramos are protected in Colombian law, the State and transnational companies have sidestepped the constitution and both national and international legislation in order to access these ecosystems.<sup>5</sup> But in the new narratives, water and the paramos have quite rightly been at the heart of the country-wide protest movements.

70% of the Colombian people consume water that comes from high up in the mountains (including the paramos). In turn, the rivers are the backbone of the construction of the country itself: around the Magdalena, the Cauca, the Ranchería and the Sinú, cultures and civilisations have arisen. The rivers have provided thousands of communities with their ways of living. With the rivers, they have found their sustenance, they have enjoyed themselves, they have mobilised. They have worshipped the riches of their waters. These communities make use of other kinds of narratives, unlike the merely economic or labour-based ones, in order to communicate their concerns and problems. They expose practices of expropriation via their



traditional methods of the production of space, of nature, and of “social consensus” (Machado, 2009: 221).

### Impacts of the new narratives

In Acacias (Meta), in Tauramena (Casanare), in the provinces of Sumapaz (Cundinamarca) and Sogamuxi (Boyacá), the communities chant, in unison, the slogan “Agua sí, petróleo no” (“Water yes, oil no”). As such, they have emphasised the environmental value of the water, in order to fight against the projected oil works that are invading these territories. Similarly, in municipalities where mining projects are being rolled out, communities have asserted the importance of water in order to defend their land.

Thanks to these other kinds of language, Colombian society is showing increasing concern for the extractive processes that affect the waters, rivers and paramos. There have been acts of resistance against mining and petrol works in those territories where the transnationals have tried to set up shop, and these protests have shown the need to reinforce the discourses and struggles of the *campesino* and environmentalist movements and organisations. The Movimiento Ríos Vivos (the “Living Rivers Movement”), which was formed following regional processes in Huila, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Santander, Córdoba and Antioquia, has put forward a staunch defence of the rivers, asserting that cultures are found there, communities live there, and they are an important source of food. “Flowing rivers, thriving communities”, “Water is for life, not for death”, “Don’t dam up our lives”<sup>6</sup> are some of their most emblematic slogans. Contextualising this resistance is crucial when it comes to informing the communities about these matters, because that way it brings the arguments closer to home, i.e. those arguments used for narrating the resistance, so that the people accept them as a collective and discursive form of protest.

These new narratives have also encouraged society to think about the importance of water compared to gold, or the importance of the land compared to an oil project, or the savannahs compared to advances in agribusiness, or the social and cultural importance of the rivers. In short, members of society are invited to state what they believe to be more vital for the country’s development: the exploitation of natural assets, or the role that these assets play in the lives of communities. In other words, resistance also works by legitimising those ideas and kinds of knowledge that have been made invisible throughout history, in order to form, based on difference itself, an active social force (Escobar, 2011 and Bebbington, 2011).

The resistance offered by different social sectors in Santander and Tolima, against the gold mining works in their mountains, has exposed certain policies which benefit commercial interests and private finance, to the detriment of these public assets. This exploitation has spurred grassroots organisations into action, and it has helped open up channels for dialogue between the inhabitants of the countryside and those in the city. In the discourse of this resistance, the advantages of the traditional systems of production were highlighted, and it helped consolidate environmental awareness. This exploitation also led to other ways of talking about nature and its goodness, and, importantly, it meant that the emerging resistance movement was included in the country's national news agenda.

### Who comes together in these resistance movements?

On the 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011, the main auditorium of the Cenfer Convention Centre in Bucaramana (Santander, Colombia) welcomed over two thousand people. They were there for a public hearing, organised by the Colombian Ministry of the Environment, to listen to arguments for and against the Angosturas opencast mine project, which the Canadian company Greystar was seeking to start up in the Santurban paramo. The mood in the auditorium was palpably one of disapproval —the people of Santander were clearly against this mining project. Those opposing the large-scale mining developments greatly outnumbered those who supported it.

The tireless work of the Committee for the Defence of the Water and Paramo of Santurbán was already beginning to bear fruit. This was the result of a coming together of the social and environmental protest movements in defence of water, who managed to convene both the long-time defenders of water and many other sectors of society in Santander: teachers, students, workers, trade unionists, women, young people, *campesinos*, community leaders, political activists, and so on. Together, they all spoke with one voice.

Just like in Santurbán, other anti-extractivist struggles have swept aside, in Colombia and other countries, the more traditional forms of social organisation, bringing together sectors that otherwise had nothing to do with each other. There are other cases that illustrate this particularity well. In the department of Tolima, the Comité en Defensa del Río Ranchería (the Committee for the Defence of the River Ranchería) includes environmentalists, trade unionists, people who work for mining companies, university students, councils for communal action, indigenous people, Afro-Colombian people, people from rural areas, from urban areas, and from the river basin. In the department of Tolima, the Comités Ecológicos (the Ecological Committees), which started out as a student platform, now

includes *campesinos*, mid-range farmers, traders, women's organisations, unions and community leaders. And in Tauramena, a municipality of the department of Casanare, in the December 2013 referendum on oil exploitation works, the people voted against the project.

"These convergences", according to the Antioquia organisation Cinturón Occidental Ambiental (COA, i.e. the Western Environmental Belt), "are built upon relationships of solidarity and [...] autonomy", and they strengthen emotional ties, thus allowing "principles of fraternity and dignity" to thrive (COA, 2014). From their perspective, this coming together revolves around the defence of land, and it allows us to "think of ourselves as political subjects with the right to decide our life projects, without subordinating ourselves to political parties, and social bases unite around the love for our land, our family, friends and traditions".

During the Meeting for Defenders of the Waters and Paramos held in Tasco, Boyacá, in July 2014, one young attendee highlighted, in his intervention, the sheer strength being transmitted by the hundreds of people there. He pointed out that the huge attendance was an expression of fraternity, solidarity, further power for their resistance. He was one of many young people who went to the event. He told the audience that "your presence here is so important for us in this municipality. Without you, we would just be silence", paraphrasing the hit song *Sin ti, soy silencio* ("Without you, I am silence"). The young people from Tasco reiterated their message through music, showing the importance of joining forces and efforts, so that the voices of *los resistentes* can transcend.

Although these articulations can transcend borders, "local resistance movements give life to and strengthen the international networks, and vice versa" (Martínez Alier, 2004a: p. 7). Furthermore, on a local level, "some global environmental concerns [are used] to benefit certain social agents, as further arguments to back up the local resistance movements, expressed in other languages" (ibid.). As such, campaigns arise which manage to work on different levels of the wider struggle.

This is what happened with the resistance of the U'wa people, who at one point managed to mobilise solidarity and support groups in over thirty countries. Or with the Latin American networks and movements for the people affected by dams, who create strategies to support the different regional processes, and who debate concepts that the protest movements then take on. Oilwatch (a network for resistance against oil projects, incorporating organisations from Asia, Africa and Latin America) has been greatly enriched by the local protests, but in turn it has proposed new ideas, like the moratorium on oil projects, or the slogan "leave the oil in the soil", which was then taken up in Ecuador, Nigeria and Colombia. The

proposal in Ecuador to “leave the oil in the soil”, in the Yasuní Natural Park, part of the Amazon rainforest, Huaorani territory, is gaining strength in other countries like Nigeria, Colombia and Bolivia. This line of protest at Yasuní led to a new verb, *to yasunize*, and the idea of *yasunizing* territories is still growing, aimed at protecting land from the advances of the oil industry. This way, concepts typical of global resistance movements have arisen, but they are very much based on local matters, i.e. food sovereignty, environmental or climate justice, and the right to land.

### Culture-based protest

In the south-east of Antioquia, all the houses in the beautiful towns there display a small flag that states *No a la minería*, “No to the mining industry”. These flags match the bright colours of the houses’ façades. In this *campesino* region, the people pride themselves on having the most beautiful mountainous landscapes in Colombia, and they have launched a campaign called “South East: A sacred territory for life”. The campaign is run by the COA, a combined group of different organisations in that part of Antioquia, and their aim is to defend the territory from large mining companies and the projects they seek to set up there. By recovering the meaning of territory, by emphasising its sacred character, the COA seeks to strike a nerve with the people there, who have strong ties to their *campesino* ways of being. The COA enhances this by highlighting the importance of their natural assets (their mountains, their abundance of water, their landscapes) and their cultural ones (such as the *campesino* coffee culture).

In another municipality, Cajamarca, in the department of Tolima, the *campesino* people fight against Anglo Gold Ashanti’s proposed gold mines, in order to defend their culture. In 2017, young and *campesino* people called for a referendum on the mining projects that this South African company was seeking to set up in their territory. Despite the power of this company, the resistance managed to secure an overwhelming majority vote against the new mines. These *campesinos* and young people who resisted the onslaught from the mining industry understand the reality: this extractivism, as well as threatening them with displacement, dispossessing them of their lands, plundering their nature and destroying their ways of living, will also erode their history and spirituality.

Since territory is a social construction, defending it is also a protection of culture. By safeguarding their mountains, rivers, wetlands, paramos and landscapes, the transcendence of the *campesino* culture is assured. It also guarantees material and individual survival, as well as the continuity of their collective life.

## Immaterial plundering, business strategies with culture

Precisely because they are aware of this people-power, the mining companies have sought to appropriate it for their own PR strategies. They have studied the cultural and spiritual importance of the communities' symbols, and they have set out to win them over. They try to do so by including these cultural values in the marketing material they distribute in the places where these projects are to be set up.

In the department of La Guajira, coal empresarios appropriated an indigenous name as part of a mining project. The indigenous Wayúu people refer to El Cerrejón (a now-exploited mountain, which is sacred to this community) as *Wayuunaiki Iiwo'uyaa*, which means "the stars that herald the arrival of springtime". This name, in turn, was appropriated by the empresarios for the project P500, which would divert the river Ranchería. Further west, in the department of Córdoba, the energy company Urrá took their name from the Emberá-Katío language. "Urrá," as once explained by Kimy Pernía (1999), a leader who was disappeared and murdered, "is a small bee. In order to hurt us, even our names have been stolen". There are many other examples in which national and multinational businesses have taken the communities' identities for their own projects, using language and images from their cultures.

These business strategies have sparked a strong response from the communities, who see, in this immaterial plundering, further cause to reject extractivism. They observe how the extractive industry sponsors their community traditions (*fiestas*, festivals and carnivals) or their symbols (their saints, football teams and places for social gathering) to generate good PR, while the same industry brings about a rupture in the social fabric that actually created them.

### "They'll never steal our precious treasure"

This rejection of big business has been turned, by the communities putting up resistance, into the exaltation of said cultural symbols and values, both in their protests and their day-to-day practices. Furthermore, they believe in fighting for culture as opposed to corporate appropriation, and they seek to open up spaces so that people can come together and construct alternatives, based on the question: who are we? The *campesinos'* *ruana*-type poncho, the indigenous rucksack and the *totumo* bowl have all become important symbols in support of the communities who are fighting back.

These are real ways to counteract the mass-media apparatuses that just reproduce the discourse and languages of pro-extractivist businesses and policies. This is also true of the people's artistic expressions, as they share their realities and demands. An art of resistance can be seen in their marches and protests: this has been realised as *golpe llanero* dances against the environmental impacts of the oil companies; sessions of traditional *copla* music in Antioquia, defending their land against the mining projects; the music of Tolima; and the poetry based on the emotions of the Afro-Colombian woman:

*The planet will overheat,  
setting off a detonation;  
our rivers are drying out,  
ready for enslavement.  
The world will be polluted  
wreaking great devastation,  
monocultures that bring  
but pain and displacement.  
Let's look after the land  
we should take the lead  
because coveting wealth  
is just worldwide greed.*

*They'll never take away our precious treasure  
that our ancestors, with spiritual dignity, looked after forever.*

Mailen Quiñones

## Reclaiming dignity

*What use is dignity to you?*  
From the film *La estrategia del caracol*

At the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference on Paramos, which was held in 1999 in Málaga, department of Santander, a campesino from Cerrito named Ceráfico Calderón gave a lecture about the importance of the paramo known as El Almorzadero. At the end of his talk, somebody asked him: "Doctor Calderón, could you explain to us the effects that the mining works would have on the paramo?". Ceráfico explained that he was, in fact, just a normal *campesino*, like the many others who were there in the auditorium. For some in the audience, his presentation was so precise and sound that they assumed only an academic could have possibly dealt so well with all the concepts of this complex biome.

In a meeting between the Living Rivers Movement and the National Authority for Environmental Licenses (the *Autoridad Nacional de Licencias Ambientales*, or the ANLA), Guillermo, a *campesino* and gold-panner from

the Bajo Cauca region, and a member of the Movement, addressed one of the Authority's officials, after said official had reprimanded Guillermo for speaking so forcefully. With respect, Guillermo took the floor and he told the official that he believed the meeting had been cordial, and that these officials had been treated with great courtesy, as doctors, just like when they visit their regions. He added that the *campesinos* there were also doctors: he, Guillermo, considered himself a doctor of gold-panning; Fabio, a doctor of agroecology; and he listed other examples, in which their titles were earned due to the experience and knowledge of their ways of living.

### Certainty about the value of culture

Some riverside communities have reaffirmed the value of their cultures, something which has been aided by their defence of their rivers, having faced the threat of hydroelectric developments. These communities have deep knowledge about the natural surroundings, and they have constructed their forms of life and culture around their relationship with the river. To cultivate their meadows, they have learnt about the land's natural cycles; to organise their fishing systems, they know about the dynamics of the river species, a kind of knowledge which also helps them in their gold panning, and which also means that they do not need to use chemicals such as mercury. As such, their daily sustenance comes from the riches of the river, the meadows, the marshes, and, in turn, the communities' myths, legends and cultures revolve around these elements.

In general, in resistance movements, those who participate start to change the way they see and feel about their context. This shift in sensibility is mediated by the prevailing dynamics between communities, environmentalists and social organisations. The *campesino* peoples start to reassess their countryside way of life, and the environmental, social and cultural importance that their territory has for their lifestyle, and the dignity of being oneself. They begin to take pride in who they are.

Similarly, indigenous and Afro-Colombian people, having endured many centuries of racism, seek to nurture the recognition and dignity they deserve. They are reviving age-old knowledge about their territories, as well as the customs built around natural knowledge and spiritual power. They are bringing back these experiences and skills. All of these communities defend their place of living; they build discourses around their culture, around water, the swamps, the marshes, around *campesino* agriculture, indigenous culture, and its spirituality. They strengthen their identity and thus rouse, in their children, a fresh interest in these issues, which encourages a strong sense of connection to their territory.

## Mobilisation and pacific resistance

In January 2012, *campesinos* and fishers from Huila, under threat from the hydroelectric project El Quimbo, had to cling onto each other and go into the river in order to escape from the tear gas being fired at them by the Esmad riot police. The images of this event shocked the Colombian public. The people were defenceless against this police action, which was launched when they were protesting against this project. At that time, and afterwards, they stated that their resistance was civil and peaceful, and that their aim was to defend their territory.

In February 2013, *campesino* people from Tasco, in Boyacá, set up the Permanent Campsite for the Defence of the Pisba Paramo. For forty days, they camped on the paramo, in order to monitor the actions of the multinational Hunza Coal, and to protest the institutional silence about the potential damage these actions could do to the land. These institutions, namely the Regional Autonomous Corporation of Boyacá (Corpoboyacá), the Municipal Town Hall of Tasco, the Regional Prosecution, the Municipal Attorney and the Boyacá Government, all allowed these works to go ahead in January of that year, so Hunza Coal duly destroyed hundreds of *frailejones* and other plant species on the paramo. The *campesino* community in Tasco set up their campsite so that various different people, collectives and organisations could come together to create strategies for defending their water and the paramos, and come up with alternatives, to fend off the exploitation by the mining/energy industries.

In June 2014, they started filling the reservoir for the hydroelectric plant on the River Sogamoso. Those living nearby saw the river “disappear” for a few hours. Their complaints and protests forced the authorities to go to the region to observe what was happening, and listen to the people. The locals showed them the irregularities of the Isagén company, during the filling of the reservoir. In March 2015, a group of 70 people, mostly women, many of whom were elderly, walked together to Bucaramanga. They called this march the “Riacrucis” (a river-based play on words with “viacrucis”, the Way of the Cross), to “bid farewell to the Sogamoso and Chucurí rivers”, to expose what was happening in their territory and to denounce the neglect of the public institutions. They walked for three days. When they arrived, they gathered at the park opposite the Government building. They stayed there for seven months, until they managed to reach an agreement with the Government, and with Isagén. The resistance put up by the Movement in Defence of the River Sogamoso, alongside the Living Rivers Movement, was enough to force the authorities to ensure that Isagén would comply with their demands. The communities warn that, without this mobilisation action, the region and the country would never have known what was happening in the region.



Most of the resistance movements in Colombia have been like this. The U'wa people, in the south east of Antioquia, the Wayúu people in northern Guajira, the Living Rivers Movement. In a context so adverse to participation, and one that is lacking in democratic spaces for resistance, this mobilisation has managed to halt projects, reopen surveys of those affected, bring lawsuits against unforeseen impacts, demand compensation and change the technical plans. Ultimately, they seek to guarantee the rights of the affected communities and peoples.

### **Does resistance itself entail an alternative? Does it lead us there?**

There is often debate about whether resistance is an alternative in its own right, or whether resistance is more like the starting point. There are also those who claim that resistance movements are just a reaction, that they do not offer anything new, they are unsustainable and they do not “propose a political project that can be applied as an alternative to the hegemonic model” (Zibechi, 2008).

Jorge Caballero brought nuance to the discussion: he considered that the ways of living and the alternatives constructed by the people who confront the hegemonic model are, in themselves, a new proposal for what the world could be, ensuring that “their territories are, in themselves, a beacon of hope”. He stated that they should be understood in terms of their differences, their unique qualities, their diversities.

Upon the paramo of El Almorzadero, several alternatives to the spread of extractivism have sprung up. This territory covers regions in the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander, regions where there has long been resistance to coal mining. The paramo sustains communities in fifteen municipalities, and the *campesino* people there have woven their whole sociocultural fabric around this land. Their alternatives include the practice of agroecology, the recuperation of native seeds, the construction of agroecological and market-ethical systems, the community management of water, renewable energy projects and the promotion of artisanship, and the boosting of democratic and participatory processes.

It is worth pointing out that alternatives are not only driven by the urge to resist the threats to people's ways and means of living —throughout history, proposing alternatives is how people have sought to preserve their culture, improve their production, and bring back their older forms of commercialisation and trade. That is, this is a diverse process, in which there is a revitalisation that has opened up new contexts for the debate on

who we are. With this in mind, the arguments for defending the mountains become even more solid.

The same is true in south eastern Antioquia. There, the avalanche of applications for mining permits over the last few years has spanned, in some cases, almost the whole municipality, in such a way that hints at the erasure of the indigenous and farming communities who have found, in these places, their sacred territory for life. The discussions about what this sacredness means, and this very conceptualisation of the territory as the defining element of their work and day-to-day life as a community, is precisely what led to the focusing of efforts on the alternatives that, for many years, the settlers had been establishing there. This focus gave them a powerful voice to fight against, amongst others, the mining works.

In Bajo Sinú, fisher *campesinos* affected by Urrá have constructed a creative proposal for their living, based on their knowledge of the region's complex wetland system. By retrieving this ancestral knowledge, they have revitalised a network of food production, they have built up a circuit for their agroecological *campesino* market, they have regained over 45 km of gallery forest to protect the territory from flooding, they have developed alternative energy proposals to guarantee potable water and energy for their communities, they have set up dialogue between the marsh-neighbouring municipalities and the *campesino*-fisher ones, they have realised truly democratic exercises and they have garnered impressive social recognition.

In the Tapaje river region, *los resistentes* do not want to abandon their river —they are not going to be forced to “vacate the territory”, as threatened by the armed groups behind the palm oil plantations. The only tools that, based on their resistance, have allowed them to subsist and endure the onslaughts of violence are the processes of ethnoeducation, in order to reinforce their culture —with this, they have been able to appropriate and reclaim the territory, given the affection they have for their own productive and cultural traditions. These elements are, in most cases, the basis for those who choose to defend life and its communion with the land. Singing, poetry and dancing are the weapons of these men and women who speak to the river and the *canalete* —this is how they fend off the bullets of those who have tried to eject them from their home.

In Santander, *campesino* communities in the Soto province and communities from the neighbourhood of La Joya, Bucaramanga, along with the organisation FundaExpresión, have come together to try to enable the mutual comprehension of various issues: the scale of their territorial struggles, the importance of the *campesino* communities in the production of healthy food and the protection of bodies of water and natural assets,

and the concerns of the city-dwellers. This was put together especially as part of the Festival for Rural and Urban Expressions, which encourages countryside-city dialogue. For several years, they have built, by means of this celebration, a strong relationship: this has been seen in the setting up of an important *campesino* market, in the recuperation of public spaces at the neighbourhood residents' disposal, and in other local alternatives.

In all these cases, the proposals have been constructed based on resistance, seeking to get out of the dominant logic imposed by the economic model and the State: "But this," Caballero stated, "is not achieved by challenging the system from within this mess they've got us into, but rather we always have to move within the reality of our resistance, in our world and with our people" (2014).

In most cases, a great deal of the energy in these processes has been dedicated to guaranteeing the survival of the communities in the territory, the reinforcement of the local agroecological productive processes, cultural restoration, exchange processes, the recuperation of forest and water reserves, public spaces, and the local commercialisation of their products with a view to guaranteeing food sovereignty for local communities.

Right there, in the possibility to construct social, economic and political relations, non-capitalist ones, is where resistance is to be found (Zibechi, 2008). To resist and construct an alternative, as Martí (1985) would say, should be a call to action to think in your own way, and forget the inherited conventions. Resistance should be part of our creativity, a change of spirit, and part of our understanding of the elements in our own nature. For others it would be what the Andean peoples call the good life, i.e. societies that transform the society-nature relationships, and the relationships between human beings.

Finally, it is clear that the construction of new proposals enriches the resistance movements, and the resistance movements strengthen these proposals. Communities are thus reaffirmed in their being, in their identity - resistance strengthens their symbolic referents, and it gives people the power to recognise themselves as social subjects who can change the world.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> This a play on the expression "one swallow does not a summer make". Here, however, Juan Ventes uses "water" (*agua*) instead of "summer" (*verano*). In this context, it is a reference to the importance of collectivity and community. [Translator's Note]

<sup>3</sup> The term "campesino" here refers to the class of rural farmers throughout Latin America. There is no real English equivalent with quite the same cultural connotations, so it shall remain in Spanish throughout. [Translator's Note]

<sup>4</sup> A *canalete* is a type of long wooden pole (not an oar) used to propel canoes, and is used by communities in Colombia who live by the marshes or rivers. As such, it is an important, respected object in their day-to-day lives, and a symbol of their close relationship with the water. [Translator's Note]

<sup>5</sup> "The State," according to Antonelli (2009: p.52) "is but a partner in disappropriation, in an asymmetrical position of relinquishment, not only of territories, but also of resources and state apparatuses, according to laws produced to fit corporate interests."

<sup>6</sup> In Spanish: "Ríos libres, pueblos vivos"; "Aguas para la vida, no para la muerte"; "La vida no se represa".