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## Challenging the three faces of extractivism: the Mapuche struggle and the forestry industry in Chile

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### ABSTRACT

The Mapuche movement is among the most important social movements in post-dictatorship Chile. Since the 1990s, the Mapuche struggle has increasingly turned into a violent conflict over land usage and environmental degradation. By referring to theories of global capitalism and political ecology, we show how forestry extractivism has shaped the Mapuche struggle. Based on extensive fieldwork in the region of La Araucanía, we analyze how different forms of inequalities including social marginalization, cultural repression, and ecological inequalities have led to discontent. In reaction to this multi-dimensional discontent, the Mapuche have developed indigenous forms of ‘collective bargaining by riot’ by attacking the local extractivist network. We identify the transnational forestry industry as a major driver of conflict and discuss the limits of Chile’s extractivist model.

### KEYWORDS

Primitive accumulation; global commodity chains; territorial conflict; environmental crisis; indigenous people; Latin America

### Chile’s socio-ecological crisis and the Mapuche movement

In October 2019, protesters in Chile took the streets to demand social change. The underlying reasons for the Chile Awakened protests (*Chile despertó*) were deep-rooted inequalities, which had already triggered previous waves of protest against a severely deficient welfare, education, and pension system. Surprisingly, one of the main symbols representing the 2019 uprising was the Mapuche *Wenufoye* flag, which represents the Mapuche autonomist movement for territorial self-determination (*autodeterminación*) and, thus, a non-compromised political force from Chile’s periphery (Habert et al., 2021; Marimán, 2012). Since the 1990s, the Mapuche struggle has increasingly developed into a conflict over land usage and environmental degradation (Carruthers & Rodriguez, 2009; Klubock, 2014, p. 278ff.). The main reason for this development is the far-reaching environmental impact of Chile’s economic model which depends on the export of copper, salmon, wood products and fruits. Resource extractivism in Chile has led to local protests because of its reliance on vast amounts of land and water. The Mapuche struggle in south-central Chile is the most prominent of these local conflicts and an extreme form of popular discontent with the country’s neoliberal and extractivist model.

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A major driver of social conflict in south-central Chile is the forestry industry. This industry is the nation's third largest economic sector and contributes to about 2% of Chile's GDP and more than 8% of its exports (INFOR, 2020, p. 4). In 2017, Chile exported about US\$ 6 billion worth of wood products. Accordingly, today, there are huge eucalyptus and pine tree plantations in south-central Chile (an area roughly the size of Belgium), with about 60% of all plantations located in the regions Bío-Bío and La Araucanía (INFOR, 2018, p. 9). Over the last two decades, tree plantations have grown considerably and expanded to ancestral Mapuche land (Wallmapu). Besides intensifying cultural repression and social inequality in south-central Chile, the forestry industry has also led to environmental problems such as water scarcity, drought, and forest fires, thereby fuelling social discontent (Montalba-Navarro & Carrasco, 2003; Torres et al., 2015).

In this article, we analyze the development of this conflict by focusing on the region of La Araucanía (LA).<sup>1</sup> Our research question explores the driving forces of the Mapuche struggle as well as the form this conflict has taken in post-dictatorship Chile. We argue that the Mapuche struggle in LA is a multifaceted conflict with socioeconomic, cultural, and ecological dimensions that has been shaped by the rise of the forestry industry, challenging existing views which tend to focus on single factors such as modern nation-state building (e.g. Kowalczyk, 2013). To substantiate our claim, we analyze the nexus between forestry extractivism and multi-faceted local grievances. Our main argument is that the rise of global forestry capitalism has restructured the pre-existing Mapuche-state-capital conflict leading to new forms of inequalities and non-institutionalized conflict. This dynamic has mainly been driven by what we call the three faces of forestry extractivism: accumulation by dispossession through land grabbing, colonial continuities in the global division of labour, and ecological limits to capitalist expansion. Consequently, we do not see indigenous conflicts primarily as struggles for recognition (see also Coulthard, 2014). Instead, our article contributes to ongoing debates on indigenous movements, extractivism, and commodity frontiers by understanding such conflicts as struggles against (neo)colonial dispossession and for socioeconomic and cultural reappropriation and political self-determination (Alimonda, 2011; Marimán, 2012; Svampa, 2019).

Our article is structured as follows. First, we present several theoretical considerations including the three faces of extractivism that have evolved through forestry capitalism in LA and have shaped the Mapuche struggle (section 2). In section 3, we analyze the origins of the forestry industry and show how the Chilean state promoted its development. Subsequently, we describe our research sample and methodological design (section 4). Section 5 draws from extensive fieldwork in LA to identify three forms of global entangled inequalities (social marginalization, cultural repression, and ecological inequalities) linked to the expansion of the forestry industry. In section 6, we describe the Mapuche's non-institutionalized forms of contention. We conclude that land is at the centre of the Mapuche-state-capital conflict and structural change is needed for a lasting compromise between the conflict parties.

### The three faces of extractivism in Chile's periphery

A number of scholars have studied the Mapuche struggle in south-central Chile and traced its development (Carruthers & Rodriguez, 2009; Kowalczyk, 2013; Marimán, 2012; Pairicán, 2014; Tricot, 2013), contributing to various readings of the Mapuche-state-capital conflict. Some scholars tend to highlight developments such as capitalist expansion (Pineda, 2014), modern nation-state building (Kowalczyk, 2013), or environmental degradation (Carruthers & Rodriguez, 2009) as reasons for the conflict, while others tend to combine different drivers in their work such as

environmental and cultural change (Schmidt & Rose, 2017) or neoliberalism and environmental degradation (Torres-Salinas et al., 2016). The diverging interpretations point to the complexity and multidimensionality of the conflict (Montalba-Navarro & Carrasco, 2003) and to its colonial legacy (Correa, 2021; Pairicán, 2014).

Many scholars also agree that the conflict has changed over the last two decades and has increasingly become a conflict over land usage and territory, with the expansion of the forestry industry playing a crucial role in this development (Barton & Román, 2012; Klubock, 2014; Torres-Salinas et al., 2016). On a conceptual level, the Mapuche struggle can therefore be considered a local struggle against the expansion of commodity frontiers that leads to land dispossession (Martinez-Alier & Walter, 2016; Pineda, 2014). Since the late 2000s, several Latin American scholars have argued that such struggles acquired new significance due to a boom in commodity prices (2004–2013) and state promotion of commodity exports (Gudynas, 2018; Svampa, 2015). This debate on (neo)extractivism has revealed a significant increase in local export-driven extractivist activities<sup>2</sup> in mining, agriculture, and oil exploration. As mentioned earlier, this development can also be observed in Chile because of its commodity-based economic model.

The Mapuche-state-capital-conflict is therefore multifaceted, as pre-existing inequalities are further deepened by forestry extractivism, which has led to a specific glocalized dynamic in LA (Barton & Román, 2012). The struggles against extractivism are not only driven by the logic of capital, but are rather characterized by factors such as ‘the destruction of livelihoods, by identity-related attributions and affiliations, by the threat to rights, and the participation of diverse actors with various interests’ (Dietz & Engels, 2020, p. 213). In order to understand the Mapuche struggle, one must analyze the nexus between forestry extractivism and the multi-fold local grievances, that derive from environmental degradation, social marginalization and cultural repression. The underlying drivers of these structural problems are what we call the three faces of extractivism: accumulation by dispossession through land grabbing, colonial continuities in the global division of labour, and the ecological limits of capitalist expansion. They are deeply intertwined and represent different dimensions of the same process of extractivist expansion in south-central Chile. They each tend to constrain the land use of local Mapuche communities and have thus led to severe conflicts.

### *Accumulation by dispossession*

By the late nineteenth century, particularly after their military defeat to the Chilean state in the so-called pacification of LA (*pacificación de LA*) (1881–1883), the Mapuche had lost a large part of their lands and received titles of grace (*títulos de merced*) on the land, which turned out to be reservations that they were forced onto. The land grabbing and the establishment of agricultural estates was reminiscent of the enclosure movement in pre-industrial Britain, a process which Marx (1976, p. 874) called ‘primitive accumulation’. Marx described this as a stage preceding capitalism and involving the ‘historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production’ (*ibid.*, p. 874f.).

Harvey (2003, p. 137) later argued that primitive accumulation has continued to evolve in the recent stage of neoliberal capitalism and proposed the concept of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, which has been adopted by many authors (e.g. Dörre, 2015; Gonçalves & Costa, 2020; Pineda, 2014). He analyzed that Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation subsumed a ‘wide range of processes’ including the

commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights [...] into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; [...] and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources). (Harvey, 2003, p. 145)

In Latin America, most economies experienced a wave of neoliberal restructuring that also led to a rise of transnational capital in agriculture and mining, with Chile being a global pioneer of neoliberalism after the military coup in 1973 (Robinson, 2008, p. 51ff.). From this angle, forestry extractivism in south-central Chile can be viewed as an extreme case of a recent wave of accumulation by dispossession. Today, forestry plantations cover about 2.3 million hectares of land, leaving the Mapuche, who have been displaced from their ancestral land, unable to cultivate their former commons. The Mapuche struggle can therefore be perceived as a 'movement against accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003, p. 166).

### *Colonial continuities*

Many scholars have highlighted that the political economy of Latin America and Chile is characterized by its dependent role within global capitalism (Frank, 1967; Marini, 1977), functioning primarily as a raw material producer for Western Europe, the US, and East Asia. This dependency developed alongside Western colonization, which not only led to the military, political and epistemological conquest of territories, cultures, people, and local economies, but also established a racialized hegemonic order (Quijano, 2000; Wallerstein, 2004). As a result, the Latin American (semi)periphery became embedded in a hierarchical global division of labour (Gonçalves & Costa, 2020).

The development of the forestry industry and the Mapuche struggle are therefore linked to this peripheral status and the colonial history of LA. The (dis)integration of Mapuche communities<sup>3</sup> and territories in LA stretches back to colonial times (Bengoa, 1999; Richards, 2016) when the region was shaped by the occupation and concentration of land through state support for dispossession and capitalist expansion (Correa, 2021). In this sense, racism as an ideological concept and political practice of the state and capital (Richards, 2016) must be understood as part of the expansion of the forestry sector and the weakening of the local Mapuche economy (Correa, 2021; Nahuelpan, 2016).

Furthermore, the forestry industry in LA is also embedded in global commodity chains (GCCs)<sup>4</sup> (Bair, 2005; Wallerstein, 2004, p. 23ff.) that almost exclusively see south-central Chilean economic activities occur at their bottom end. The largest profit margins are made at the higher stages of the forestry commodity chain (paper processing, packaging, etc.), which are located far away from the plantations, sawmills, and wood pulp factories of south-central Chile (INFOR, 2020, p. 8). Additionally, the forestry commodity chain is controlled by some of Chile's wealthiest families (e.g. the Matte and the Angelini families). At the same, however, working conditions and payment at the lower levels of the forestry commodity chain (with activities such as planting and harvesting) in LA are poor (Julián-Vejar & Alister Sanhueza, 2018, p. 182ff.). Moreover, the forestry industry creates only few jobs, leaving many Mapuche to rely on informal work and subsistence farming. Thus, a central feature of Chilean forestry extractivism has been the persistence of structures initially laid down during the colonization of the Wallmapu by the state (Klubock, 2014, p. 29ff.). Forestry extractivism should therefore be perceived as a colonial continuity and the Mapuche-state-capital conflict as an anti-colonial struggle (Pino Alborno & Carrasco Henríquez, 2019, p. 212f.).

### *Ecological limits of capitalist expansion*

The expansion of the transnational forestry industry follows a specific logic in that it is based on resource exploitation. Many scholars have argued that capital accumulation follows an expansionary growth imperative (Dörre, 2015; Foster, 1999; Wallerstein, 2004, p. 23ff.). Consequently, endless capital accumulation advances capitalist expansion while remaining tied to limited natural resources. Capital's profit-based growth imperative is thus leading to a 'metabolic rift' (Foster, 1999) between nature and capitalism, crossing potential planetary boundaries. These ecological limits of capital accumulation are not entirely fixed but are socially contested and change alongside technological innovations. However, they are driven by global capitalism and are increasingly manifested in Latin America. In south-central Chile, extractivism has taken an extreme form. The forestry industry, in particular, has caused a number of environmental problems that are destroying local modes of living and production. Today, the forestry industry consumes 59% of Chile's fresh water resources<sup>5</sup> and has led to numerous drought and fires (Martínez, 2018, p. 75). As a result, the impact of environmental degradation in south-central Chile has led some scholars to describe the Mapuche struggle as a movement for 'environmental justice' (Torres-Salinas et al., 2016).

In sum, the three faces of extractivism – accumulation by dispossession, colonial continuities, and ecological limits of capital accumulation – have structured the political economy of the forestry industry in LA. The three faces are deeply intertwined as they relate to the dispossession, control, and degradation of land. As we will see, forestry extractivism produces inequalities which shape the Mapuche-state-capital conflict.

### *The state-promoted rise of Chile's forestry industry*

The Chilean state has played an extraordinary role in the development of the forestry industry. It was not until the late nineteenth century that south-central Chile was tapped by modern agriculture, marking the origins of the forestry industry (Klubock, 2014, p. 31ff.). Although a forestry law was introduced in 1872, the first industrial plantation of the fast-growing Monterey pine (*pinus radiata*) was only created in 1907 (Donoso et al., 2015, p. 213ff.). Since then, the Chilean state has promoted the development of plantation areas, created and subsidized state-owned and private companies in the forestry industry such as CMPC (Compañía Manufacturera de Papeles y Cartones), and built public institutions such as CONAF (Corporación Nacional Forestal). In the 1930s, this development gained further importance due to the increasing role of the state in import-substitution industrialization. State-led development lasted until the late 1960s, when the state created the state-owned paper mills, Celulosa Arauco S.A. and Celulosa Constitución S.A., to diversify Chile's exports (Klubock, 2014, p. 120ff.). Due to the small size of the forestry sector, ecological boundaries were not crossed, and environmental degradation was limited. However, the emergence of large haciendas in the South had an impact on the local Mapuche, but despite recurrent violent conflicts between settlers and indigenous communities, the Mapuche movement was primarily engaged in Corporación Araucana<sup>6</sup> and claims for recognition by the state. It was only in the 1960s and early 1970s that the struggle for land reform and social redistribution gained importance (Kaltmeier, 2004, p. 125ff.).

A second phase began with the military coup against the socialist Allende government in 1973. The Pinochet dictatorship's neoliberal turn profoundly changed the forestry industry by aggressively pushing for its expansion, despite its anti-statist ideology. Consequently, the forestry industry quickly expanded in south-central Chile with around one million hectares of land being afforested



with monocultural plantations. Between 1974 and 2013, the forestry companies received government subsidies of around US\$ 875 million (González, 2015), and in addition, decree law 701 (Decreto No. 701<sup>7</sup>) established subsidies to cover 75% of the cost of planting pine and eucalyptus trees (which in some cases could be as high as 90% with additional subsidies) (Montalba-Navarro & Carrasco, 2003, p. 66), making engagement in the forestry sector highly profitable. Moreover, the military government both privatized state-owned forestry companies and implemented tax cuts. There was fast capital concentration in the sector and, although the state supported the companies financially, it did not exert any control over them or tax their profits. As a result, in the late 1970s the forestry industry grew twice as fast as Chile's GDP to become Chile's third most important export sector in the 1980s (Klubock, 2014, p. 239).

During the dictatorship, the state intensified accumulation by dispossession in south-central Chile and reinforced the region's peripheral role by focusing on export promotion and the establishment of low value chain activities. The Chilean state also laid the institutional foundation for the expansion of the forestry sector with restrictive labour legislations to impede collective organization, lax environmental standards, and the water code (Código de Aguas) (1981), which allowed for the privatization of water rights (Bauer, 1998). The fast expansion of the forestry sector worsened its ecological balance sheet, but did not yet lead to vast environmental degradation. During this period, many Mapuche activists were engaged in the democratization movement and involved with the Ad Mapu organization<sup>8</sup> in its struggle for cultural recognition, while not paying major attention to forestry extractivism. It later cooperated with the Concertación, a centre-left coalition which governed from 1990 to 2010.

A third period began with the end of the military dictatorship in 1990, which was characterized by the fast internationalization and growth of the Chilean economy. Between 1990 and 2013, Chilean GDP increased eightfold, an economic boom to which the forestry industry contributed significantly. Over the same time period, the production of paper pulp grew from 800.000 to more than 5 million annual tons (INFOR, 2018, p. 84). In the 1980s, Chile's industrial capacities were insufficient to process the large amounts of wood produced by local plantations (Clapp, 1995, p. 287). In the 1990s, capital inflows skyrocketed. With the help of these inflows, the forestry companies were able to extend their substantial market power and accelerate their concentration of land ownership. The Chilean companies Forestal Arauco, CMPC, and MASISA emerged as multinationals (transnational companies headquartered in Latin America) and are today among the largest corporations in the wood, paper, and packaging industry worldwide. These companies currently own large amounts of land, around 70% of the plantation areas in south-central Chile (Salas et al., 2016, p. 567), and control the forestry commodity chain. In 2017, the forestry industry contributed to about 63% of LA's exports, valued about US\$ 564 million. The transnationalization of the forestry industry and its vast expansion led to increasing environmental problems and to an expansion of plantations close to the Mapuche communities. Moreover, the state continued its repressive stance by applying anti-terrorism legislation Law 18.314 as well as maintaining the restrictive labour and environmental laws from the military dictatorship. Concurrently, the Mapuche struggle took a new direction as territorial autonomy became a central claim of the increasingly diverse movement and new organizations emerged such as the Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco (CAM) and Identidad Territorial Lafkenche (Pairicán, 2014, p. 22ff.). These organizations pursued different strategies for self-determination, ranging from parliamentary politics to radical autonomist approaches. From the preceding, it is evident that the forestry industry became a symbol of cultural repression and social marginalization.



In sum, due to state interventions and the internationalization of forestry extractivism in south-central Chile experiencing its breakthrough in the 1990s, the Mapuche struggle increasingly developed into a violent insurgency against the forestry industry. Further, although state intervention was a prerequisite for the expansion of the forestry sector, Chile's subsidiary state (*estado subsidiario*) (Carrión & Figueiras, 2015) pushed its privatization and de-regulation. Today, corporations are effectively taking on government tasks such as providing fire and security services on large forestry plantations and have developed strategies of territorial control. These strategies include policies of corporate social responsibility like contracting local enterprises, financing small business projects, and greenwashing activities via certifications from the Forest Stewardship Council. However, the concentration of land continues to force the local Mapuche population to integrate into the GCC of the forestry sector, despite its precarious working conditions (Julián-Vejar & Alister Sanhueza, 2018, p. 189ff.). At the same time, the state is using anti-terrorism legislation to justify the deployment of the national police (*carabineros*) to reestablish order in cases of unrest.

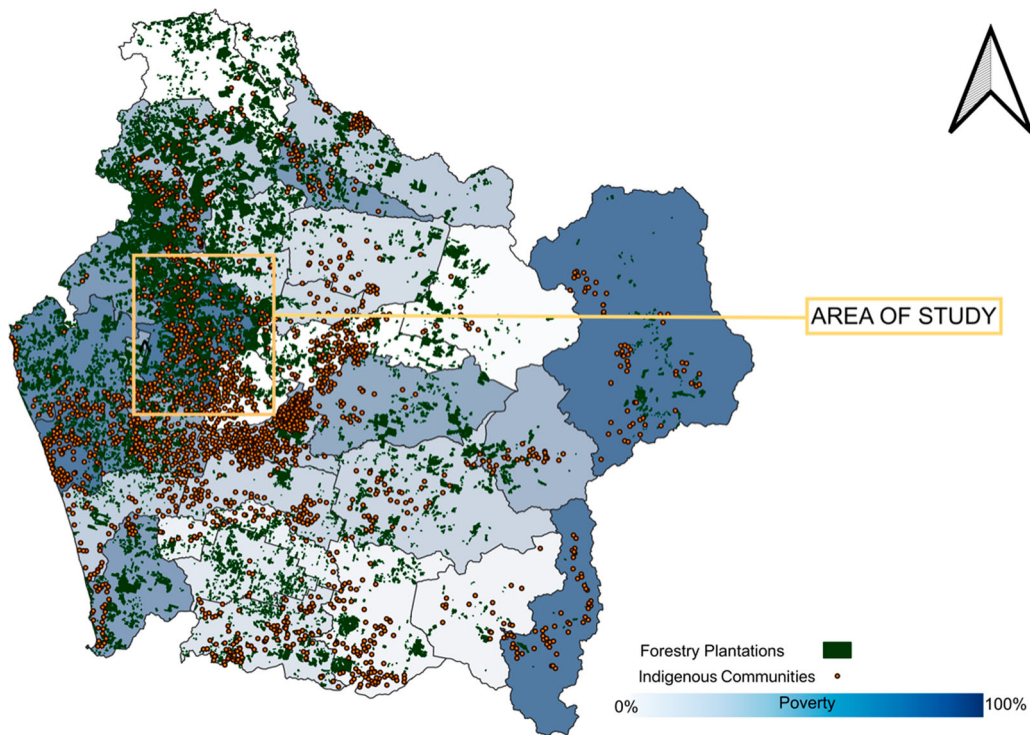
### Research design and methods

Our contribution is based on original research and the use of qualitative methods. For our case study on the conflicts concerning forestry extractivism, we conducted 69 semi-structured Spanish language interviews (Flick, 2014) lasting approximately 1–2 h focusing on the effects of forestry extractivism on Mapuche territory, daily lives, economic conditions, emerging conflicts, and the main actors involved. Qualitative data was gathered across four periods of data acquisition (February–July 2016; March–April 2017, March–April 2019, October–December 2019) through interviews with company representatives and employees (17) of large forestry companies (Forestal Arauco, CMPC, MASISA), as well as forestry suppliers, state officials (7) (CONAF, INFOR, local governments), scientists (13), NGO and social movement activists (11), civil society associations, and local residents (21). In the course of this study, a particular focus was on members of Mapuche communities in rural areas of Galvarino and Cholchol who live in the so-called Nagche territory, an area with many forestry plantations and a high poverty rate (see Figure 1). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). In the analysis, the categories focused on the cultural, socio-economic, and environmental aspects of the conflicts over forestry extractivism. In addition, participant observation (Lüders, 2004) took place in both areas by attending events and workshops and frequently visiting the communities.

The research was conducted by a Chilean-German research team that has maintained close relations for more than a decade and has since discussed theories and methods of critical globalization studies to forge enduring ties of 'epistemic friendship' (Nguyen et al., 2016) and adopt a 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2021) approach. This approach addresses social problems through an open eye-to-eye dialogue between researchers and the researched communities. For our study, we brought together local Mapuche communities in LA with researchers through interviews and joint workshop activities to identify socioecological problems and discuss potential alternatives to extractivism, thus, building long-term relationships of trust. We will draw on data from these sources in the next sections.

### Three forms of global entangled inequalities

Although at first glance the Mapuche struggle in LA appears to primarily be a sociocultural conflict, it also involves class-based and socioecological inequalities (Castillo et al., 2017; Durán &



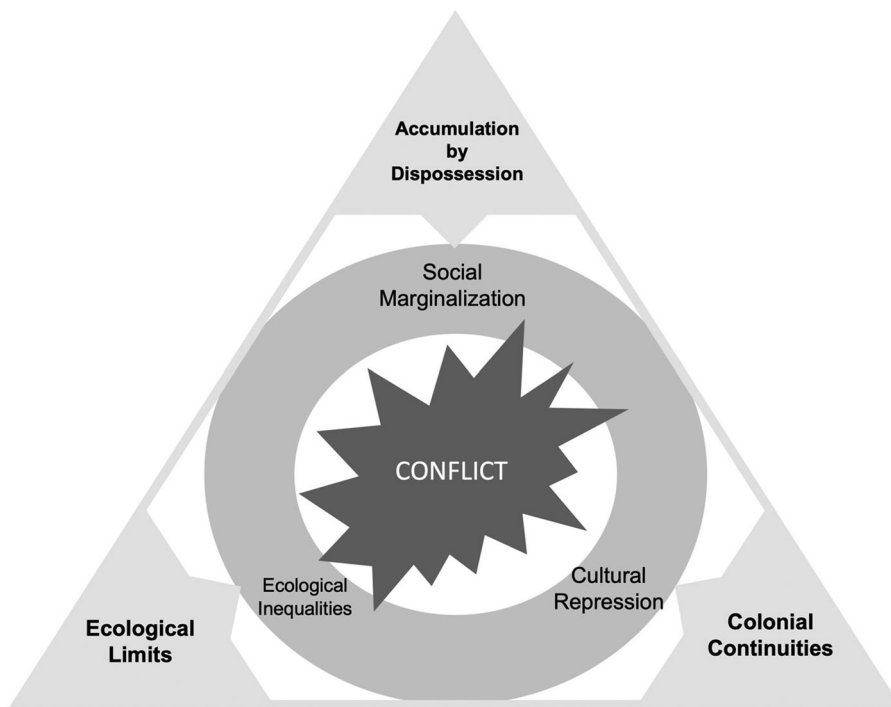
**Figure 1.** Area of Study in La Araucanía. Sources: Own elaboration based on CONADI (2021), INFOR (2017), OES (2019).

Kremerman, 2015). These multidimensional grievances result from the commodification of nature and social relations in which ethnicity plays an important role. Some local Mapuche are integrated into capitalism through their wage labour at the plantations, in the transport sector, and in the processing industry, while many Mapuche households continue to rely on small holdings with cash crops or subsistence farming. At the same time, culturally and religiously significant natural places such as sacred springs, cemeteries, and ecosystems housing medical plants continue to play an important role in the spiritual life of the Mapuche community, which has led to further tensions arising from the expansion of the forestry industry and its environmental impacts.

These structural changes in LA can be perceived as changing forms of ‘global entangled inequalities’ (Jelin et al., 2017), which refer to the interactions of transnational linkages between different geographical contexts and inequalities rooted in social categorizations such as class, ethnicity, and gender. We argue that the three faces of extractivism induce three forms of entangled inequalities: social marginalization, cultural repression, and ecological inequality (see Figure 2),<sup>9</sup> which shape the conflict dynamics in LA.

### ***Social marginalization***

The forestry industry in LA has led to vast resource extraction and few employment possibilities. The total number of employees in this sector in 2019 only numbered around 35.000 (about 12.000 direct and 23.000 indirect employees) throughout Chile (INFOR, 2020, p. 241ff.). Around 4.000 of them are directly employed on the plantations (ibid.), which particularly applies to the Mapuche, who make up



**Figure 2.** Three faces of extractivism and entangled inequalities. Source: own elaboration.

about a third of all residents in LA and a majority in its rural areas. The Mapuche are mostly self-employed, workers or small farmers and earn up to 38% less than non-indigenous Chileans (Cerde, 2017, p. 413; Durán & Kremerman, 2015, p. 13f.). LA, with its high share of indigenous population, is the second poorest region in Chile and has an economy based on tree plantation monocultures. There are about 44 large and 200 small sawmills in LA, as well as six chipboard factories and only one technologically advanced cellulose factory. These activities are located at the bottom of the GCC and are linked to high rates of poverty in the region (Andersson et al., 2016). While large companies make high profits through the extraction of forest resources in regions like LA, the GDP per capita in LA only amounts to 35% of that in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago (Cerde, 2017, p. 409f.). A Mapuche household in LA earns only about half of the country's average wage income, resulting in one in three Mapuche in LA living in poverty (ibid., p. 415ff.).

Today, the forestry plantations cover about half a million hectares in this region (INFOR, 2020, p. 32). In some communities like in Curanilahue they account for more than 82% of total land use, while local populations are negatively affected by land-grabbing. Thus, the competition for land between the forestry industry and local Mapuche communities has meant that Mapuche farmers end up with economically unsustainable small plots of land. A member of a Mapuche community explains:

Look, out of the 345 hectares which are owned by our community ... I have the right to a quarter hectare in the community ... because my father has one hectare and looking into the future, I will have a quarter ... But as we live in the mountains, these are plots in the hills, and I definitely have no economic future ... what I can hand over to my children doesn't really exist. (interview, member of cooperative, Mapuche community, 2016)

This sharp contrast between globalized wealth and local economic exclusion is a driving force of discontent in forestry-dependent areas worldwide (Gerber, 2011) and in particular in LA. A resident of a Mapuche community expressed this feeling of injustice: ‘The big forestry companies are transnational corporations, and they take the money with them to other countries, and here we are doing badly. They make us poor, we have no work’ (interview, Mapuche activist, Temuco, 2017). The peripheral or non-integration into GCCs implies that the local population has to rely on other sources of income such as subsistence farming and petty commodity production, which compete with the forestry industry for water and land, especially in the rural areas.

### *Cultural repression*

Many rural Mapuche maintain close cultural ties to the region. Most rural Mapuche perceive the expansion of the forestry sector not only as an environmental or economic problem, but also as a threat to their cultural identity. From this angle, the forestry companies represent a colonial continuity of the plundering of Wallmapu, the ancestral Mapuche territory. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chilean state militarily conquered Wallmapu and endowed the Mapuche with titles of grace of around six hectares of land per person, a number that would drastically decrease in the twentieth century due to population growth and dispossession by large landowners (Bengoa, 1999, p. 57ff.). Moreover, during the Pinochet dictatorship, the land of the Mapuche was further subdivided and privatized (Klubock, 2014, p. 238ff.). Racism and exclusion of the Mapuche was a characteristic feature of state activity in LA and remained present throughout the period of Concertación.

Cultural repression is therefore an important factor in the conflict in LA. Many of the eucalyptus and pine plantations are located on ancestral land with recognized titles of grace, that were confirmed by the ILO’s Convention 169, which Chile signed in 2008. Nonetheless, large areas of that land have been appropriated by forestry companies, which led to an increase in total area of tree plantations in south-central Chile by about 1.5 million hectares since 1980 (Infor, 2020, p. 31). Today, these companies own land around the Mapuche villages in Northern LA, resulting in conflicts about land usage. In these conflicts, cultural aspects have come into play, as for many rural Mapuche, land is a common and a spiritual place that cannot be sold and is accordingly understood to be the foundation of life and a place for cultural and religious ceremonies. Traditional sacred days such as the We Tripantu-New Year’s Day, when people wash in local waters, indicate the importance of nature. The Mapuche cosmovision of nature thus contributes to the conflict (Montalba-Navarro & Carrasco, 2003). In several interviews, local Mapuche expressed their concerns about the impact of forestry extractivism on their culture. For instance, one interviewee was upset that pine trees were planted in the community cemetery which ‘usurped 250 hectares, nearly the whole of the community’s land, [of which] the cemetery [was a part] of this land where eucalyptus was planted, just where our ancestors, our uncles, grandparents, great grandparents are’, so that today his ‘whole family lies under the forest plantation’ (interview, resident of Mapuche community, 2016).

### *Ecological inequalities*

Over the last three decades, monocultural afforestation with eucalyptus and pine trees has caused environmental degradations that have severely affected the living conditions of local Mapuche communities. Large parts of the native forest were destroyed for the installation of the plantations which

caused huge damage to local ecosystems.<sup>10</sup> The plantations are cleared every 11 (eucalyptus trees) or 25 years (pine trees) to ensure the supply of the forestry industry. However, such quick harvest cycles have dramatic effects, as the eucalyptus and pine trees are ‘true pumps of water when they are growing’ (interview, CONAF employee, Temuco, 2016). A fast-growing eucalyptus tree consumes about 30 litres of water a day, which affects the groundwater level and exacerbates droughts. Consequently, the sinking water level and shrinking nutrient content of the soil are destroying the livelihoods of many Mapuche who continue to rely on subsistence agriculture. While forestry companies usually claim that the plantations merely have minor effects on the water supply (interview, forestry company manager, 2017), the local Mapuche hold a contrasting point of view. A resident of a Mapuche community who previously worked for the municipality claims that the environmental damage aggravates conflicts:

The water levels are decreasing drastically, which affects the communities so that the production of everything, livestock, agriculture diminishes ... and the presence of forest plantations creates the conflict through the loss of resources. (interview, resident of Mapuche community, 2016)

A leader of a community agrees, telling us ‘that the eucalyptus dries up the large water resources where we have been collecting our water for generations. We grew everything, be it corn, potatoes, vegetables, and then everything was lost, it dried up’ (interview, leader of Mapuche community, 2016). Scientific studies substantiate these claims of a link between water scarcity and forestry extractivism (Alvarez-Garreton et al., 2019; Martínez, 2018). Environmental degradation also has a gendered impact, as only 4.7% of all workers in the forestry industry are female and the majority of subsistence farmers are women (Corma/Fundación Chile, 2015). In addition, forestry plantations are more vulnerable to fires than natural forests. Between 2014 and 2019, around 150.000 hectares of forest in LA went up in flames (Infor, 2020, p. 52).

In sum, the local Mapuche face three forms of closely linked inequalities that lead to repression and marginalization. These inequalities shape the living conditions of the local population, but do not impact all Mapuche communities in the same way. There are cases where Mapuche initially leased their land to the forestry companies before later withdrawing their support when drought and water scarcity became severe problems (participant observation, workshop with residents of Mapuche community, 2016). Some Mapuche communities are also divided over the impact of the forestry industry with some residents finding jobs at the plantations or planting their own land with pine trees to sell them to the forestry industry, as a local government official reports:

It is a very, very relevant issue because the conflict is brought to us right here within the community and people ... we do not have legal administrative tools to hold on to in order to defend the greater common good. (interview, local government official, 2016)

This contributes to ‘divide and conquer’-strategies of forestry companies, wherein some Mapuche communities create additional employment during the harvest, which coopts certain community members and calms clashes with the companies, while simultaneously exacerbating conflicts within the communities (interview, forestry company manager, 2017). However, most community members perceive forestry extractivism as a threat with far-reaching socioeconomic implications.

## Contesting forestry extractivism

The impact of forestry extractivism, with its complex interplay of environmental (e.g. water scarcity), social (low employment effects), and cultural factors (racial discrimination) has driven local

conflict. In this struggle, the Mapuche, with their demands for territorial autonomy and social and environmental justice, have faced both the forestry companies and the state. The Mapuche struggle is therefore a specific form of an 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier & Walter, 2016, p. 43), wherein subaltern classes challenge not only environmental degradation and class relationships, but also cultural repression. Hence, unlike the classical Marxian class antagonism, this conflict is driven by accumulation by dispossession and, thus, by competition for access to scarce water and land between two conflicting parties. While the forestry companies highlight their role in economic development and political stability, the Mapuche see the forestry industry as a colonial continuity of repression and as responsible for the destruction of their livelihoods.

However, in this struggle, the local Mapuche do not rely on a traditional 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly, 1986, p. 2) such as strikes to make their concerns heard. Starting with the burning of three timber lorries in Lumaco 1997, the autonomist Mapuche movement has rather turned to a repertoire of non-institutionalized forms of contention such as roadblocks, violent clashes and, most importantly, arson attacks (Tricot, 2013).<sup>11</sup> Although only adopted by a fraction of the Mapuche movement, these non-institutionalized forms of contention are a frequent topic in the discourse of forestry companies' representatives:

Someone with torches was at the back of a pickup truck throwing burning wood into the interior of the farm to start the fire ... It was clearly intentional, and I have heard such stories since 2008 or 2009 which said the community arrived and blocked the road. (interview, employee of forestry company, Santiago, 2016)

Consequently, the three faces of forestry extractivism have also shaped the way the conflict has evolved, as we will illustrate in the next paragraphs.

### **Non-institutionalized conflict**

An important reason for the development of the conflict is the lack of social dialogue and compromise with local elites. The Mapuche struggle challenges colonial legacies, authoritarian statism and puts pressure on local forestry capitalists. Local logging companies are highly dependent on the large forestry companies, while at the same time earning low profit margins at the lower stages of the GCC despite bearing most of the risk. The Mapuche struggle challenges their position by disrupting the production process, while the large companies and the state do not support local producers with compensation. Several interviewed managers and company owners complained about robbery, land occupation, and arson attacks, as well as the resulting costs. For instance, the owner of a local company lamented in an interview about the 'poverty concentrated next to the forests, many [local Mapuche] start robbing, because they have nothing'. He added that 'a Mapuche community started to occupy parts of our land and burned 20 hectares of our pine tree plantation' (interview, forestry company owner, Temuco, 2016). Conversely, a Mapuche activist explained that this 'is what makes us strong, that we operate on the dark side of the law' (interview, Mapuche activist, Temuco, 2017). Consequently, local logging companies occupy an intermediate position between large corporations and the local population and feel abandoned by the state, which itself provides the impetus for self-organization. As a result, local capitalists have organized themselves into the Business Association of Araucanía (Multigremial de la Araucanía) which was founded in 2008 'as a response of regional employers to the serious events directed against state institutions and the legal system in the region' (Multigremial de la Araucanía, 2016). This organization has called for state repression to deal with the contentious Mapuche. In sum, the non-existence of any institutional mechanism to mediate between both parties is related to the



hierarchical structure of the forestry commodity chain, and thus has created a breeding ground for non-institutionalized conflict.

### **Network disruption**

The Mapuche, on the other hand, use their ‘disruptive power’ (Piven, 2008: Ch. 2) to stop the production and logistics of the forestry industry. Their strategy of contention relies upon the network-like structure of the forestry commodity chain. Unlike point source-based extractive industries such as oil exploration, the forestry industry is organized as a diffuse network of several plantations (comparable to gem production) and is based on an infrastructure network that transports wood to ports and processing plants (Ramírez, 2018). However, both the *ruta de la madera* (wood transport route) as well as plantations are susceptible to conflict. Social conflict in networks with diffuse sources takes a specific form. Unlike extractivist networks with point sources such as mining, where workers use strike actions as a strategy of contention, contention in diffuse networks tends to attack the infrastructure of the network itself. A Mapuche activist told us how his community tried to stop forestry companies from reforestation with plantations in their territory:

When the companies want to plant again and there is opposition from the community, usually they do it with force ... Unfortunately we have no other choice because we don't have weapons, so we have to defend ourselves with sticks and stones. (interview, resident of Mapuche community and civil society activist, 2016)

Contention can therefore be directed both against at the production process (arson attacks at plantations) and the transport network (street blockages of wood transport). As a result, a number of small conflicts in the network have evolved that are difficult for companies or the state to contain. For instance, a representative of the forestry industry's business association stated in an interview that the arson attacks had a huge impact on the business and threatened jobs and workers (interview, business association representative, Santiago, 2017), leading his association to officially demand a state of exception from the national government bringing about interventions by the military (CNTC, 2017).

### **Wood fires and arson attacks**

The repertoire of Mapuche contention strategies is also strongly influenced by cultural norms. Wood fires and arson attacks are a common form of indigenous resistance against forestry or tree plantation extractivism (Gerber, 2011) and are related to specific micropolitics of self-defense and self-organization that the Mapuche have practiced for centuries (Nahuelpán, 2016, p. 108ff.; interview, CONAF employee 2, 2019). However, there are divergent perceptions of these attacks. While organizations such as the *Multigremial de la Araucanía* usually claim that the Mapuche are solely responsible for the wood fires, indigenous activists also report cases where forestry companies themselves have set fire to their infestation-ridden plantations to receive insurance benefits before blaming Mapuche activists. ‘This is what the companies themselves do, to cover the costs of the plague so that they don't have a complete loss of the infested trees. These are the practices they use, and this shows the power they have’ (interview, Mapuche-activist, Temuco, 2017). In fact, local conflicts are continuously disrupting the daily operations of the forestry companies. In 2016, the *Multigremial* recorded 104 violent conflicts in LA, most of which are arson attacks. In response to these events, local forestry companies, in collaboration with the national police and private



security companies, have responded with repression. The consequent state of exception has instigated recurrent violence and led to numerous deaths among the Mapuche, such as the death of Pablo Marchant who was shot by national police in July 2021.

This indicates that the Mapuche-state-capital conflict has an exceptional character. The radical wing of the autonomist Mapuche movement draws on a repertoire of contention that enables them to cause damage that can be perceived as a form of ‘collective bargaining by riots’ (Hobsbawm, 1952, p. 59). Like the bread riots in early industrializing countries in the eighteenth century, the Mapuche protests involving arson attacks and road blockages are a specific form of non-institutionalized conflict. Likewise, the organization of employers in the Multigremial has followed a similar logic to the first employers’ associations in Western Europe, which were anti-strike associations aimed at repressing the emerging union movement. Consequently, the Mapuche-state-capital conflict is characterized by the non-existence of class compromise, indigenous forms of contention, and the diffuse extractivist network of the forestry industry. However, the Mapuche movement has shown a great heterogeneity in the way it copes with the post-dictatorial reality and the expansion of forestry extractivism. This includes the different forms and objectives of political action put forward by different groups of the movement ranging from armed struggle of organizations like CAM to forms of solidarity economy in some communities (Pairicán, 2014; Pineda, 2014; Pino Alborno & Carrasco Henríquez, 2019; Richards, 2016; Tricot, 2013). The political diversity is evident in the diverging strategies to claim land, concepts of territorial autonomy, local economic projects, and forms of cultural rejuvenation.

### Conclusion: the need for structural change

Since the 1990s, the Mapuche struggle in LA has increasingly turned into a multidimensional conflict over ecological inequalities, social marginalization, and cultural repression. These three dimensions of the conflict are closely linked to the three faces of forestry extractivism, accumulation by dispossession, colonial continuities, and the ecological limits of its expansion. Attempts to mitigate or even solve the conflict in LA by addressing only one of these three grievances are doomed to failure. This is particularly true because the three faces of forestry extractivism, as well as the three entangled inequalities, are directly related to the control over and distribution of land. The latter turns out to be at the centre of the Mapuche-state-capital conflict. Thus, the conflict cannot be resolved through policies of cultural and political recognition alone. Both forestry corporations and Mapuche communities have an urgent need for land and territorial control, though, for very different reasons. For many Mapuche communities, land is a common and spiritual place and a basis of livelihood, while for forestry companies, access to land is necessary for further expansion. The resulting competition for land is a major reason why the Mapuche struggle is characterized by non-institutionalized forms of contention and state repression is unlikely to lead to social compromise. Therefore, the call for dialogue between the conflict parties by the recently elected left-wing government of Gabriel Boric faces great challenges. Structural change of the export-driven and commodity-based economic model is the prerequisite for a lasting compromise between state, capital, and the Mapuche communities. However, a change of the extractivist model and a resolution of the conflict over land in south central-Chile can only be achieved through a large-scale redistribution of land to Mapuche communities. A political approach which addresses the three dimensions of the conflict requires a new deal between the state and the Mapuche communities. This deal would be based on three elements: territorial autonomy and land reappropriation by the Mapuche communities, ecological restitution of territories affected by the forestry industry, and cultural self-

determination through territorial development. The recognition of these three elements by the Chilean state implies the development of state policies which increase the economic resources and the sovereignty of the Mapuche communities.

## Notes

1. LA is not only an important location for the forestry industry, but also the region with the largest share of Mapuche population.
2. We understand the term 'extractivism' to refer to economic activities based on the export of non-processed or weakly processed natural resources (Gudynas, 2018, p. 21).
3. The Mapuche have been organized around the traditional notion of Lof, which comprises different families with blood ties. In 1993, the N° 19.253 Law was passed which led to a legal recognition of Mapuche forms of association through the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI). Today, the Mapuche communities are subjects of collective rights. Currently, the CONADI register includes a total of 3,814 Mapuche communities in the regions of Biobío, LA, Los Ríos, and Los Lagos.
4. GCC connect different zones of the capitalist world-system (core, periphery, and semiperiphery) by organizing a worldwide network of production processes to transform raw materials into finished commodities.
5. This refers to total running water, groundwater and rainwater.
6. Corporación Araucana (founded in 1938) was the most important Mapuche organization until the late 1950s, as it unified many smaller Mapuche organizations.
7. Besides subsidizing the growth of the forestry industry, decree law 701 (1974) officially pursued further objectives including reforestation and poverty reduction.
8. Ad Mapu is a Mapuche organization which was founded in 1980 and which was very active in the struggle against the Pinochet dictatorship and in the transition period to democracy.
9. Gender also plays an important role in the Mapuche struggle. However, gender does not structure the conflict as an independent axis, but rather as a transversal category.
10. Recent studies reported a 'loss of 19% of native forest (782.120 ha) between 1973 and 2011' in Chile (Miranda et al., 2017, p. 285).
11. These forms of contention have a male connotation, as many male activists refer to the *weichafe*, the traditional Mapuche warrior.

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