

“Galiza is (not) a mine”: rural responses to pro-extractivist policies

“Galicia (no) es una mina”: respuestas rurales a políticas proextractivistas

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Abstract

The struggles against extractivist developments have been a constant during the past 50 years of accelerated social transformation of the Galizian rural landscape. From the 1970s As Encrobas and Triacastela struggles against open pit coal and limestone mining to recent mass movements against the Corcoesto, San Finx and Touro metal mining developments, a common pattern emerges of emancipatory rural action to defend lands and livelihoods from the ruling Partido Popular slogan “Galiza is a mine”. Renewed interest for mining developments in the 2010s following growing metal prices, EU policies on ‘critical raw materials’ and corporate interest in investment alternatives after the collapse of the Spanish property bubble has fuelled levels of social contestation unseen for decades in the traditional strongholds of Galizian local power-brokers. Drawing on historical and participatory action research, this paper examines contemporary forms of nonviolent contestation and explores their capacity to build emancipatory alternatives.

Keywords: Galiza, extractivism, mining, nonviolence, rural resistance, anti-extractivism.

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Resumen

Las luchas contra proyectos extractivistas han sido una constante durante los últimos 50 años de acelerada transformación social del paisaje rural de Galicia. Desde las luchas contra la minería a cielo abierto de carbón y caliza en As Encrobas y Triacastela en los años 1970 has los recientes movimientos de masas contra los proyectos de minería metálica en Corcoesto, San Finx y Touro, se vislumbra un patrón común de acción emancipadora rural para defender las tierras y modos de vida del slogan “Galicia es una mina” impuesto por las políticas del derechista Partido Popular que controla el gobierno. El renovado interés por los proyectos mineros en los años 2010, con precios de metales alcistas, políticas europeas de apoyo a ‘materias primas críticas’ e interés empresarial en alternativas de inversión tras el colapso de la burbuja inmobiliaria española, ha motivado niveles de movilización social que habían estado ausentes durante décadas en los feudos tradicionales de las redes clientelares locales. A partir de investigación histórica y de participación-acción, este artículo examina las fórmulas contemporáneas de movilización no violenta y explora su capacidad para construir alternativas emancipadoras.

Palabras-clave: Galiza, extractivismo, minería, no violencia, Resistencia rural, anti-extractivismo.

Introduction

The Iberian Northwest corner of Galiza has attracted for over a century numerous mining developments aimed at extracting its mineral deposits, which contain, among other metals, tungsten, tin, copper and gold. Spain’s position during the Second World War turned the region into a theatre of economic warfare between belligerents seeking to secure their supplies of ores while depriving their opponents from access. Brief periods of skyrocketing prices incited speculative mining across the region, while lack of enforcement on environmental and labour conditions kept a number of operations afloat until the collapse of international metal prices in the late 1980s. Such collapse brought about the closure of the last operating metal mines and the paralysation of prospecting projects.

Metal mines were abandoned to their fate without addressing continuing issues of soil and water pollution, or were converted into open pit developments extracting aggregates for construction in the context of the 1995-2008 Spanish property bubble. Degradation has been (and continues to be) often aggravated by reconverting mines into toxic waste landfills, and back again into active mines in the context of increasing ore prices. The close ties between the mining

lobby and the administration together with the complicity or permissiveness of the later allowed a comfortable 20 years parenthesis in metal ore extraction free from concerns over ongoing pollution or restoration of abandoned sites. The administration’s blind eye has led to continuing episodes of severe contamination, such as the 2014 Monte Neme tailings dam failure or the ongoing spills from tailings dams in Touro, replicating past mining waste disasters as the 1955 ‘Piquito’ dam failure in Moeche and the Juvia river or the 1960 ‘San Finx’ tailings dam failure in Lousame affecting the Muros and Noia estuary.

The recovery of metal prices in the second half of the 2000s immediately after the burst of the property bubble and the associated crisis of construction aggregates operations brought about a highly speculative and still on-going new rush over metal ores, backed by EU policies on ‘critical raw materials’. This ongoing mining boom is intimately related to the collapse of the previous business model, as the same companies and investment groups that profited with the housing bubble are now involved with mining, again serving to open up the country to foreign transnationals —the SACYR corporate group being one notable example. Quick moves to regain control of abandoned mines were supported through intense public subsidies (including regional, state and EU funding) and lack of control and enforcement regarding environmental liabilities and clean-up responsibilities. Although mining and environmental regulation and oversight are the administrative responsibility of devolved autonomous governments across Spain, significant differences exist between regions in terms of legal compliance and alignment with the industry.

The Galizan administration’s passivity from 1990 to 2005 had been secured by the uninterrupted 15-year rule of the right wing *Partido Popular* leader Manuel Fraga, former minister and a key political figure in Franco’s dictatorship. With its return to power in 2009, in the midst of the economic crisis, the *Partido Popular* clearly aligned itself with the mining lobby to present mining as a Grail to solve growing social problems connected to unemployment and rural decline. The slogan “*Galicia es una mina*” (“Galiza is a mine”) was adopted to lure foreign investments and seek social consent (so-called ‘social licence’), while environmental regulatory frameworks were being downsized or suppressed. This vision was enshrined in the 2013 Extractive Activities Sector Plan that openly called for the reopening of old and new metal mines seeking legitimacy in the EUs appeal to expand the extraction of ‘Critical Raw Materials’ —Galiza has known deposits of 8 out of the 26 listed critical materials.

Mining is presented as a viable option to give a new life to the existing economic model based on extraction and rent appropriation by large transnational companies. In the context of the austerity measures brought about by the 2008 crisis, the left focused on demands to change the productive model, strengthen

the safety net, and stop corrupt practices (Franquesa 2016). In response, the same actors that had controlled the housing boom for decades saw mining development as an opportunity to create not only a new business venue, but also to articulate emerging discourse that could counteract grassroots demands of economic and political alternatives—which increasingly include degrowth and a critique of extractivism. Growing pressure over mineral resources due to expanding demand and increasing prices, together with pro-mining geopolitical strategies designed at the EU level, is likely to lead to a scenario of increasing conflict and political moves to suppress and disempower rural communities in their capacities to resist and fight back. In this context, on-going Galizan struggles exemplify the opposition between extractivist politics and grassroots resistances and rural alternatives.

This paper analyzes the dynamics of nonviolent rural contestation to extractivism in Galiza as a case study to understand the shifts in agency, identity, organization and strategies. Although the ‘environmentalist’ label remains problematic, rural struggles are explored considering shifting patterns of ‘rural environmentalism’ Leonard (2014), from the ‘everyday peasant resistance’ and ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) that characterized Galizan rural resistance movements at least up to the 1980s, to more recent developments that can be framed in what Peet and Watts (2004) called ‘liberation ecology’ and Martínez-Alier (2002) designated ‘environmentalism of the poor’.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was used to explore the experiences and outlook of participants from rural opposition movements. PAR fosters collective and community involvement in the process of (self-)experimentation and (self-)reflectivity with an emphasis on social history of lands and lives, involving an approach to understand change by becoming engaged in bringing it about (Reason and Bradbury 2008). The researcher’s participation and engagement has not been circumstantial but is rather the consequence of an insider positionality that also places this study within practitioner research.

After outlining its theoretical approach, this paper will examine the history of resistance to mining projects in Galiza and how the reconnection with this history continues to influence contemporary resistance strategies and discourses. These 21st century movements of resistance are then presented through a number of case studies of contemporary struggles that illustrate a pattern of grassroots emancipatory rural action based on values and practices that include attachment to land, valuing the commons and defending primary activities and their relevance in terms of livelihoods and identity. The conflicts connected to the San Finx tin and tungsten mine and the Touro copper open cast project are used to show the dynamics of upscaling protracted conflicts by expanding the circles of social concern. The struggles against the Triacastela open-pit limestone mine serve to illustrate cross-generational struggles and

the outcomes of rural youth engagement. And, finally, the mass opposition to the Corcoesto gold mine project serves to explain the development of the wider rural-based social movement against mining extractivism in Galiza. The discussion emphasizes how the primacy of political agency has shifted toward rural grassroots movements in ongoing anti-extractivist contestation.

Community-based rural environmentalism

Across rural Galicia the term ‘environmentalist’ (*ecologista*) has been mostly associated to negative connotations over the last three decades, particularly among older generations that often place under the same term (mostly urban) NGO activists and environmental enforcement officers. ‘*Ecologistas*’ had become a convenient scapegoat for ongoing conflicts between rural communities and government authorities regarding the enforcement of certain laws as well as restrictions associated to newly created protected areas that often collided with traditional rural activities or livelihoods. Local populist power-brokers benefited from a hodgepodge that came to include military police environmental officers (SEPRONA), government environmental agents and environmentalist activists and NGOs, building up a culture of fear and distrust for those actually self-identifying as ‘*ecologistas*’ (i.e., the later).

Although the misidentification of ‘*ecologistas*’ with the structures of State intervention and repression was convenient in terms of diffusing political responsibility and preventing NGO and activist involvement in local struggles and issues, the negative connotations of ‘environmentalism’ in rural Galiza can also be framed in light of the differences between what Martínez-Alier (2002) calls ‘environmentalism of the poor’ and what Dauvergne (2016) labelled ‘environmentalism of the rich’. The later generally overlaps with Martínez-Alier’s clusters of the ‘cult of wilderness’ and the ‘gospel of eco-efficiency’, although infused by the obsession for growth, profit and consumption –to which the adjective ‘sustainable’ is to be added for the appropriate effect.

In scenarios such as Galiza’s mining conflicts, the clash between the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ and that ‘of the rich’ becomes evident, as mining companies and a supportive government have reinvented widespread environmental degradation as ‘sustainable’ ‘eco-business’ key to a greener future of unlimited eco-consumption. Globally, increasing pressure for the extraction of so-called ‘critical materials’, including lithium, in marginal deposits and under ‘low-cost’ operations, has often received only mild criticism from large mainstream environmental organizations that have bought into a ‘Green New Deal’ that presents associated destruction as a necessary prize to be paid. The bureaucratization, subsidy-dependence, co-optation and involvement with greenwashing operations that affect some of the most well

known organizations is not ignored by communities facing threats to lives and livelihoods.

The ‘environmentalism of the poor’, akin to what Peet and Watts (2004) have called ‘liberation ecology’, emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the environment and the livelihoods of rural communities with an ethics based on social-environmental justice (Martínez-Alier 2002: 11). Poverty and acculturation correlate with environmental degradation, particularly in communities that are directly dependent on the land, waters and gifts of nature, which see and suffer extractivism as a form of direct violence that Sehlin MacNeil (2018) identifies as ‘extractive violence’ (using Galtung’s violence triangle). While movements that fall within ‘environmentalism of the poor’ may not adopt explicitly environmental language –at least in terms of how it is expressed in mainstream and institutional environmental jargon– or even self-identify as ‘environmentalists’, it is such rural, indigenous, peasant and community-based movements against environmental destruction that are in the frontlines of global struggles.

Cox (2016: 307) argues that the way in which community-based rural environmentalism relates to “newer forms of counter-cultural and direct action ecology” has yet to be adequately researched, often being disparaged as ‘nimbyism’ (‘not-in-my-back-yard’), ‘rural populism’ or ‘populist environmentalism’ (Allen 2004; Leonard 2007, 2014), particularly when local struggles fail to align with propositions, strategies and language of mainstream environmentalism or when rural communities reject alliances with –often meaning being controlled by– such organizations. In Galiza, for example, most rural community-based movements against mining rejected in 2013 a call to form a front around a “Manifesto for the Sustainable Use of Geological Resources and against Polluting Mining” while in 2019, Portuguese rural civic movements have expressed lack of confidence in large environmental NGOs in the ongoing conflict against wide-scale lithium mining.

Analyzing environmental movements in Ireland, Leonard (2014 71) also framed the term “rural environmentalism” to describe a distinct pattern of rural resistance that emerged through a “combination of grievances around perceived threats to traditional processes and identities”. Grievances including depopulation, unemployment and neglect were exacerbated by the imposition of environmentally-degrading projects articulating a response based on the ‘defence of space’ and ‘cultural resistance to the globalised hegemony of development and consumerism’:

By addressing the political void which had opened around an increased sense of democratic deficit during the scandal ridden austerity era, rural-based environmental protests reclaimed a dominant sense of community through oppositional politics. This potent mixture of traditional values and local

sentiment created a persuasive moral frame for many environmental campaigns to build on (Leonard 2014: 64-65).

The ‘environmentalism of the rich’ has laid claim on its huge global regulatory successes –from international treaties to local environmental protection agencies– and presents a bright future of ecologically friendly technofantasy. The increasing divide between an ‘environmentalism of the poor’ of those whose lives and livelihood are being directly threatened by such destructive pressures (“sacrifice zones”) and an ‘environmentalism of the rich’ that has found a comfort zone as institutionalized ‘countermovement’ is evidenced in the discourses of rural, indigenous, peasant and community-based movements. This ‘self-correcting mechanism’ represented by the ‘environmentalism of the rich’ has remained as a palliative remedy for certain results of market ‘self-regulation’, while proving utterly unable to address the looming civilizational challenges that threaten the planetary survival of our species. Bernard (1997) expressed how unprecedented levels of environmental destruction, to the point of threatening our species with extinction, have occurred precisely during the second half of the 20th century when environmental checks and formal controls gained prominence across the world. Even within EU territories such as Galiza placed under a vast normative legal corpus that is supposed to place strict limitations to the destructive potential of extractivist industries, lobby control over administrations and the subservient position of the latter effectively neutralize the countermovement framework.

While the emergence of new expressions of what can be identified as ‘environmentalism of the poor’ in rural struggles such as those of Galiza cannot be presented in purely dichotomic terms with other expressions of environmental activism –mainstream or counter-cultural– the theoretical perspectives offered by Martínez-Alier (2002), Peet and Watts (2004) and others allow us to frame the emerging rural emancipatory movements and its counterparts across the Spanish and Portuguese borders not only in contrast with mainstream and institutional strains of environmentalism, but also in relation to historical examples of ‘everyday peasant resistance’ or ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985).

Galizan resistance to extractivism in history and in memory

Mining extractivism in Galiza can be traced back to the period of Roman invasion starting in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, with massive gold development. Fiscal extortion of local indigenous communities brought about compulsory labour while such developments required the hierarchization and stratification of Gallaecian societies through the creation of large settlements

with new native elites (Evans Pim 2019). The collapse of the Roman Empire and its provincial cities (3rd-5th centuries CE) returned Galizian lands to the domain of stateless indigenous rurality effectively ending all large scale mining developments during the thousand years to come. Artisanal ore recollection continued as in the past, satisfying the local needs of iron, copper and tin essentially through surface handpicking following vein outcroppings.

It was mainly with the arrival of foreign prospectors in the late 19th century that industrial mining operations reached an unprecedented dimension, triggering deep social-environmental conflicts. One early example is the British Burbury family, originally wealthy tanners from Coventry that were socially expelled from the city in the 1860s following a shameful episode of fraud. After several years raising cattle in northern Spain, in March 1880 former Coventry city councillor Gilbert Burbury started to register mining concessions throughout Galiza. By the end of the decade he, together with his son Henry, had established what would become the largest Galizian tin and tungsten extraction poles: in Fontao (Vila de Cruzes) and ‘San Finx’ (Lousame).

Local opposition to these projects soon arose. In 1885, 1888 and 1892 villagers in Fontao repeatedly addressed the Civil Governor of Ponte Vedra contesting mining concessions and warning about how these would affect streams, lands and public health, but the chief mining engineer and the Administration decided to “dismiss the claims”.² This did not turn down the villagers that continuously obstructed British prospectors, denying access to lands, refusing cooperation and obstructing the development in all possible ways. In 1889 the same chief engineer complained about the inability of the State to confront natives in their opposition to the Burburys: “Although the Civil Governor has addressed the [British] complaints, the truth is that the indigenous peoples are able to foil the mandates of authority” (*Estadística Minera* 1889; note the term “*indígenas*” used in the original). In March 1891 the peoples of Fontao escalated the conflict, setting fire to the prospector’s house, the first notorious attack in a rising conflict that would continue over the following decades. In 1907 Mr. Burbury’s house in Silheda was again blown up—ironically—with 12 cartridges of dynamite stolen from the mine itself.³ In both instances nobody was injured.

The rural communities in Lousame, the other mining pole founded by the Burburys, also resisted the mine’s attempts to usurp and pollute their waters, successfully opposing a 1901 water concession permit but also refusing to rent

² Arquivo da Deputação Provincial de Ponte Vedra, Minutes of the Governing Board of 1885-09-03, 1888-05-18, 1892-10-11, 1892/10/20, 1892-01-09, 1892-07-06; Arquivo Municipal de Vila de Cruzes, 123/1.

³ *Gaceta de Galicia*, March 18, 1891; *La Correspondencia Gallega*, August 3, 1907; also see Igrexas Rodríguez, 2012.

or sell their lands.⁴ Yet it was the popular rural resistance against the Fontao mines that motivated the first known environmental legal suit in Galiza over river pollution and ecological damage in 1914. After attempting yet another forced land seizure (expropriation) over lands affected by a new concession⁵ with great opposition, in 1911 the engineers in charge of the Fontao mines requested authorization to discharge polluted mine tailings directly into the Deça river, a project approved by the government the following year.⁶

In 1914 a criminal investigation was initiated in the Lalim Court of Instruction on charges that “[mine] tailings pollute the river with toxic substances destroying fisheries”. The company reacted publishing a letter to the Civil Governor signed by 127 mine workers denying any form of pollution (tailings “substances are not toxic”) and arguing that the “malicious goal of the disruptive elements” that brought such charges to the court was to “take away the bread of hundreds of citizens that will have to beg for public charity, causing not only economic turmoil but also a disruption of public order due to the misery that our efforts will not be able to contain”.⁷ The veiled threats and negationist discourse regarding environmental damage have hardly changed 100 years later, with essentially the same arguments being reproduced by both the mining lobby and populist extractivist discourses of the present. While combining elements of ‘everyday peasant resistance’ with outbursts of escalated resistance –be it legal or illegal– early Galizan movements fighting extractivism fit in Martínez-Alier’s (2003) ‘environmentalism of the poor’ resonating with similar early movements against mining such as those of Ashio, Japan (Nimura 1997; Strong, 1977), Cerro de Pasco, Peru (Dore 2000) or Rio Tinto, Andalusia (Moreno Domínguez 2007).

In the context of Franco’s regime 1960s policies of intense industrialization, the destructive capacity of mining achieved unprecedented heights. After the 1960 San Finx dam failure, which caused extensive environmental damage, Count Barrié de la Maza, a key Galizan industrialist that emerged after the 1936-39 Civil War through his personal relationship with dictator Franco, sold the tin and tungsten mines in Lousame and set out to undertake a massive coal operation in the valley of As Encrobas to feed the newly built Meirama thermoelectric plant. This was yet another project of Barrié’s FENOSA electric corporation, that had already stirred considerable social unrest after its long destructive portfolio, including the Castrelo de Minho hydroelectric dam or the proposed Jove nuclear power plant. In As Encrobas, the open conflict that broke

⁴ *La Correspondencia Gallega*, May 25, 1901: “Most of the villagers of the hamlets of Frojám, Silva Redonda and Vilar, in the district of Lousame, oppose the water concession of the Frojám and Silva streams requested [to the Civil Governor] by Mr. Enrique Winter Burburi [sic].

⁵ ‘Lavery’, honouring the name of the British liquor magnate who held the mining concessions established by the Burburys: Robert Banks Lavery, owner of the ‘Bodega’ Company.

⁶ *La Correspondencia Gallega*, May 27, 1911; *El Progreso*, September 1, 1912.

⁷ All references in this paragraph extracted from *El Progreso*, October 17, 1914.

out in 1976-79 against the forced land seizures and evictions leading to full fledged battles between rural communities and military police troops armed with assault rifles. Although resistance failed to paralyze the mine, the social outcry forced negotiations with the communities ending in higher compensations (Herrero Pérez 1995). As Encrobas and its iconic images (Herrero Pérez 2008) became a symbol of modern Galizian rural struggles against extractivism, to be continuously reactivated in the face of renewed threats. The ‘spirit of Encrobas’, illustrated by the 2007 *As Encrobas, A ceo aberto* documentary film (Bocixa 2007), guided the mass movements that set out to stop renewed interest in destructive mega-mining in Galiza in the 2010s.

The disarticulation of Galizian rural resistances to the destructive forces of capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s tackling not only mining but other large-scale projects such as hydroelectric dams (i.e., Castrelo de Minho), toll roads or the proposed Jove nuclear power plant, all perceived as alien to Galizian needs— was enabled through a shock process of modernisation and urbanisation conducted in the context of the parallel process of legitimisation the new postfascist Spanish State. In spite of significant regime differences Galizian examples of resistance to mining in this period, such as the Encrobas conflict, are mirrored in many ways by coeval struggles in Portugal, such as the opposition to tin dredging in Beira Baixa (Silva 2013) also during the process of postrevolutionary regime formation and legitimisation.

This constructed legitimacy enshrined the State as prime protective countermovement, using Polany’s framework, to the excesses of market forces, while its *de facto* (and often interchangeable) economic and political elites were ostensibly responsible for the excesses that were to be allegedly controlled. These include nonsensical infrastructures such as the Outer Ports of Corunha and Ferrol, phantom airports and toll roads, environmental disasters such as the 1998 Aznalcóllar tailings dam failure or the 2002 Prestige oil spill, and the ongoing wildfire nightmare associated with publicly promoted Eucalyptus forest monocultures to feed the paper pulp industry. However, for a long time rural reactions to destructive projects remained within the bounds of ‘everyday peasant resistance’ or ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) that for obvious reasons were preferred during the 1936-1975 Fascist dictatorship (Cabana Iglesia 2010, 2013) and endured as a ‘safe’ course of action during the transition toward the post-fascist state.

It is precisely the growing disbelief regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutionalized avenues for dissent what created a fertile breeding ground for counter-hegemonic grass-roots initiatives challenging the extractivist *status quo* (Birchfield 1999: 27). To the disbelief of both the Administration and the extractivist lobby, these movements have emerged mostly in the rural areas which have become prime target for environmentally

destructive projects and that had been seen by many as ‘sterile’ ground for resistance after decades of demographic desertification and intense political clientelism. Client politics had historically been effective in suppressing and co-opting rural contestation and was expected by corporations and government alike to continue to render such results. By driving contestation toward traditional channels of complaint and contestation—which include local ruling power-brokers but also political opposition parties, lawyers and other technicians with often little knowledge of the issues at stake—opponents were invariably relegated to a secondary disenfranchised role. Instead, movements such as those emerging in Corcoesto (2012-14) and the many to follow took traditional actors by surprise claiming the primacy of political agency and openly and directly confronting the politically-controlled administration as an extension of the extractivist lobbies.

On the one hand, contemporary rural struggles reconnected with the historical Galizan examples of ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Martinez-Alier 2002) and ‘liberation ecology’ (Peet and Watts 2004) that are a direct consequence of the socio-economic and rural-urban dynamics that underlie extractivism, which often detrimentally affects primarily the lands, livelihoods, health and culture of impoverished rural populations to expand the wealth of elites. On the other hand, by challenging the dynamics of consumption and extractivism, and calling for a transition towards post-extractivist societies (Acosta 2017; Brand, Boos and Brad 2017), rural communities have also embraced a form of ‘advocacy politics’ in terms of “direct and concerted” efforts to oppose both the administration’s pro-extractivist policies and “the entire way in which resources are produced” (Kerkvliet 2009, p. 220).

“Galiza is (not) a mine”: 21st century resistances

The emergence of new and effective community-based rural struggles can be explained through a combination of factors. These include the growing capacity of rural communities to upscale their conflicts, creating broader circles of concern. The struggles to protect the land create stronger bonds and a more intimate understanding and connection that in turn helps to build resilience and connect with others facing similar threats. Upscaling not only implies reaching out to larger segments within society, but also international audiences. The recognition of some of the common lands affected by mining in Triacastela and Lousame (Grove et al 2020; Evans Pim 2020) as Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) or the engagement with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in Touro following the threats of mining illustrate the capacity of rural communities to internationalize local conflicts that had gone under the radar. The upscaling of rural conflicts had indeed been

present in the past, as the Castrelo de Minho, Encrobas, or Jove struggles evidence, but contemporary movements have been able to connect to broader global concerns harvesting support. While community members argued in interviews that the initial sense of loneliness was disempowering and self-defeating, the expansion of the circles of concern helped create momentum and brought in additional capacities and tools into the struggles.

Another relevant factor is the role of younger generations within rural areas and a renewed sense of belonging that had been heavily stigmatised during the decades of intense industrialization, in which the State had made great progress in breaking the ideological ‘hegemony’ of the poor (Scott, 1985). This has both enhanced the capacities of emerging movements to fight back using some of the ‘weapons of the strong’—including a build-up of capabilities to engage in a technical and legal arena opened up by the digital era— but also to sidestep conventional channels of complaint and contestation that had often lead to failure or cooptation. This has allowed communities to confront a corporate-political-burocratic-academic complex steered by the mining lobby that extends its roots deep into the administration, political elites and the media. Communities have done so through a keen understanding of the local realities and history that allowed it to challenge this complex with alternative narratives, often using its own weapons against them, conveniently reappropriating legal and scientific discourses and establishing a bridge with what has been called ‘liberation science’ (Emerman et al. 2012) and ‘liberation lawyering’ (Lourdes Souza 2001).

San Finx and Touro: Upscaling protracted conflicts

Metallic mining collapsed in Galiza in the late 1980s and early 1990s against the backdrop of international price falls. Most mining sites were abandoned without any kind of restoration or protective measures against acid mine drainages from dumps and drainage adits. Toxic sludge dams in Touro, Monte Neme, San Finx and other mines were also abandoned. Mild action by local authorities confronted by the constant complaints of their constituents had little effect while overgrowing vegetation temporarily sealed off abandoned mines from public attention. Yet a few years later the tables turned.

The San Finx mine, in Lousame, which had been the last one to close down (in 1990) was also one of the first to reopen (in 2008) once metal prices recovered and the EU started to encourage the development of ‘critical raw materials’, promptly followed by the large scale Corcoesto and Touro open cast projects and other smaller mines across the country. San Finx’s concession holders faced immediate opposition from surrounding common

land communities that fought against a new attempt of usurping communal lands.⁸ Property of communal lands previously usurped by the mine had been restored to the villages in the 1980s and consolidated after the mine’s closure. One such village commons community filed a legal suit against the company for environmental damage, paralyzing the development for a year in 2009-10. In spite of government subsidies totalling almost 2 million euros, the company collapsed in 2013. The conflict re-emerged in 2015 with a new change of ownership (this time, the SACYR construction conglomerate taking over), again involving a contiguous common land community that was immediately targeted through an arson attack in May 1, 2016, burning 10 hectares of its communal lands, in the context of opposition over occupation and illegal infrastructures in its territory (Evans Pim, 2020).

The conflict escalated in 2016 when mussel gatherers and the Fishermen’s Guilds of the Noia estuary 7 km downstream contested the mine’s intention of obtaining a permit for waste water discharge. Hundreds of mussel gatherers packed the council chamber of Noia during the November 2016 municipal assembly in which a resolution against the mine’s water discharge permit was being discussed. The *Partido Popular* Major, who had been supporting the reopening of the mine and the creation of a mining museum since 2006, was reluctantly forced to vote in favour of the resolution due to public pressure. The reports presented by the Fishermen’s Guilds and environmental organizations (all previously absent in the conflict) transformed a usually overlooked wastewater discharge procedure into a nightmare for both mining company and administration. Some of the affected common land communities also reacted immediately, and less than a year after the May 2016 arson attack, the Froxán Commons had become one of the first territories in Europe to be recognized by the United Nations Environmental Programme as an Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA) being subsequently included in the IUCN managed World Database of Protected Areas.

The San Finx conflict gained international notoriety after environmental NGOs took the case to the United Nations⁹ and the European Parliament for systemic lack of compliance with rights to access environmental information and public participation regarding projects affecting the environment. International mobilization and multisectoral stakeholder involvement pressing simultaneously for legal, administrative and public action so-far proved effective in bringing the mine to temporary closure in December 2017,

⁸ About ¼ of Galiza’s total land mass (29,574 km²) is officially classified as Common Land that belongs to 3,300 Common Land Communities (*Comunidades de Montes Vecinhais*). Commons vary in size from a few hectares to several thousand—the average being around 200 hectares—and village commons communities being anywhere from just one or two “open houses” (“*casa aberta*”)—with people living in them—to hundreds or even thousands, the average being around 40 houses. All in all, approximately 15% of Galizan population lives in commons “open houses”.

⁹ UNECE, Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee file ACCC/C/2017/153.

although the conflict remains active and is far from settled. The ongoing United Nations Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee case, gravitating around the reopening projects of the San Finx and Santa Comba mines, illustrates the Galizan administration's subservient position in relation to the mining lobby and how far it is willing to go to delegitimize opposition. In an August 2018 communication, the administration called for the inadmissibility of the claim, accusing the NGOs of having caused a "collapse of the administration" due to their "intransigence" and the "disproportionate and deliberate nature of its demands," all while adopting a negationist approach regarding environmental damage. The San Finx mine tailing dams, which had caused the notorious '1960 catastrophe' are said "not [to] fulfil any function related to the mineral-mining process" while stating against all evidence that no heavy metal pollution exists.

Just as in the early 20th century conflicts in Fontao, although initial clashes are often related to land grabbing and usurpation, the understanding of larger systemic environmental impacts related to pollution create broader alliances of concern and resistance (Martínez-Alier 2003). This dynamic is also illustrated by the reactivation of the Touro copper mines, abandoned in the late 1980s after 15 years (1973-1988) of intense development that left deep scars in the land and continuing heavy metal river pollution due to acid mine drainage affecting the whole Ulha river basin. A new project promoted under Atalaya Mining (the new concession holder of the historical Rio Tinto mines in Huelva) intended to start out destroying 700 hectares of prime agricultural lands and forests through 10 open cast pits, evicting local farmers and sealing the fate of villages such as Arinteiro, that would become literally surrounded by massive tailings dams of 55 meters of height placed just 200 meters from the village. Critical dam failure would entail immediate death. Subsequent phases would open up new developments in contiguous concessions spanning over more than 120 square kilometres.

Local rural opposition built up a massive campaign that benefited from the early support of other local groups that had continued active after the battle for Corcoesto and had been involved in San Finx and other sites. Most of these groups allied themselves in the "ContraMINAcción" network formed in 2013 that has since then become instrumental in engaging with other communities in their first steps towards mobilization and resistance. Just as in San Finx, a major source of support for the Touro mobilizations came from 40 km downstream in the Arouça estuary, where mussel gatherers and farmers became fully involved in the opposition to the mine, well aware of the consequences that the previous development had over the coastal areas in the 1970s and 1980s.

Although Touro is a traditional rural area, its proximity to Galiza's capital Santiago de Compostela and the economy that emerged around the pilgrimage route to the city also extended the circles of concern well beyond the small

villages in ‘ground zero’—the municipality of Touro has a population of less than 4,000, while Arinteiro, 200 meters away from the proposed tailings dam, is a village of 40. However, over 130 groups called for a massive demonstration against the mine in June 2018 that filled the streets of Galiza’s capital Santiago de Compostela with more than 20,000 protesters, illustrating the growing support rural communities have built around their struggles. In November 2018 the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a consultative body to UNESCO, issued a harsh report warning that the mining project could compromise the ‘Way of St. James’ route’s status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A year later, in January 2020, with elections forthcoming and overwhelmed with reports on the actual and potential impacts of the mine, the Galizan government was forced to issue a negative environmental declaration, scrapping the project altogether.

Hills of Eirós: Cross-generational struggles

Almost 200 km eastwards, in the foothills of the Iríbio mountain, the small community of Vilar simultaneously faced a similar struggle against an open pit limestone mine that encroaches several village commons and the notorious Cova Eirós—a cave featuring remains of the last Neanderthal populations and the first populations of Anatomically Modern Humans in NW Iberia, as well as a number of panels with paintings and engravings that represent the earlier known examples. In May 2015 the ‘*Homem de Acordo*’ (‘Man of Agreement’, a consuetudinary honorary elected position) of the Vilar Commons was tried at the Courts of Justice in Vigo for alleged libellous comments against the Brazilian multinational Votorim mining corporation, owner of the Cosmos limestone mine. The company demanded 45,000 euros in compensation in addition to a large bill for legal expenses. This was just the first of a long chain of litigation involving commoners and the recently re-established Vilar Common Land Community with the mining company and local *Partido Popular* power-brokers aligned with its extractivist interests.

Personal threats, continuous land seizures and destruction of natural sites of great cultural importance have been constant since a contested 1971 decree of Franco’s cabinet that enabled the usurpation of the traditional common lands of the surrounding communities.¹⁰ Even if during the 1970s Vilar and surrounding commons communities partially lost the battle against the mining company and a subservient administration, the conflict did not regain intensity until 2005 — when prospectors sought to extend the area of their mining rights— and turned

¹⁰ *La Vanguardia*, May 29, 2012. <<https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/20120529/54300809710/adeaga-y-una-asociacion-cultural-acusan-a-una-cantera-de-usurpar-un-monte-comunal-en-triacastela.html>> Accessed April 05, 2019.

into overt hostilities in 2012 —when for the first time the mine’s machinery invaded the common lands of Vilar.

Commoners placed themselves in front of bulldozers ignoring police forces and local power-brokers attempting to enforce the mine’s ‘rights’ over the usurped commons that had been continuously used by Vilar in spite of the 1972 secretive arrangements. The attack was also catalytic in terms of the reawakening of the Vilar commons and reconnecting the younger generation that had not faced the previous battles with a continuing struggle. This younger generation took the struggle beyond the local arena building alliances across communities which in turn were instrumental to face together the incoming threat of the Corcoesto gold development project.

A year before the *Homem de Acordo* of the Vilar Common was standing before the court, the community had become the first full member of the international ICCA Consortium in the Iberian Peninsula, an international association established to promote the appropriate recognition of, and support to, indigenous peoples’ and community conserved areas and territories (ICCAs). The ICCA Consortium described Vilar as “a genuine community organization in charge of an ancient body of natural resources held as ‘commons’”, also alerting that “As the collective property is under the impending threats of mining and other forms of destructive developments, the Consortium will likely be solicited to support them to maintain control of their commons in years to come”.¹¹

As in San Finx and Touro, Vilar was also able to extend the circle of concern, which encompassed not only local commoners but also a variety of actors alarmed with the impacts over the contiguous pilgrimage way to Santiago de Compostela and the unique heritage of the Eirós cave, as well as international organizations defending indigenous and community-led conservation. Vilar was also able to confront mining greed transcending so-called ‘nimby’ (not-in-my-back-yard) primary reaction through a systematic critique of the extractivist economy and continuing developmentalism which had its roots deep in the State apparatus and the elites that control it. Notoriously, after the burst of the Spanish property bubble these elites had been promoting gigantic developments such as the Outer Port of Corunha at a cost of 1,000 million euros and thousands of tons of limestone-based cement extracted from the mine encroaching Vilar. Vilar’s struggle also served to open the eyes of many that had been blind and indifferent to the growing rural contestation to which they were about to wake up to.

While in the 1970s local rural struggles were sometimes compromised through their dependence on external agents (lawyers, hired technical experts, political agents), that were subject to being bribed or threatened by opponents or

¹¹ *The ICCA Consortium Newsletter*, October 2014.

were simply inefficient, the younger generation taking on the struggle benefited from technical capacities (including active members trained as engineers, architects, historians, biologists, lawyers, etc.) and a positive disposition to screen technical and administrative background information, that had usually been alien to communities of resistance. Digital tools allowed for horizontal networking that helped similar groups work and cooperate with each other, mutually covering needs and offering skills that were present or absent across the network. The ‘Galiza non se vende’ (‘Galiza is not for sale’) network that emerged in 2007 is one early example of this form of horizontal grass-roots engagement and that would be replicated in the emerging scenarios of mining extractivism.

Corcoesto: a rural movement emerges

While the squares of Spanish cities had been taken over by the ‘15-M’ anti-austerity movement in 2011, a huge breach existed between urban and rural populations, with the former being particularly unaware of the struggles and challenges of resistance of the latter. Urban and rural youth indeed faced common concerns with extremely high unemployment rates and a growing disconnection with the social legitimacy of the Spanish post-fascist state. Austerity measures hit rural areas especially hard, as basic services including schools and healthcare were removed farther away, making populations especially vulnerable. But it was the threat of physical destruction of the lands and communities themselves that would ultimately set off a rural emancipatory movement to resist not only extractivism but its underlying capitalist dynamics.

The Corcoesto massive gold mining development and the large 2012-14 social struggle spearheaded by the rural local communities was a benchmark for the development of a coordinated community-based rural environmentalist movement in Galiza. The proposed development was (at the time) the maximum expression of destructive speculative mining, threatening with the creation of a 1,5 km pit and tailings dams for 11 million cubic meters of toxic sludge. The *Partido Popular* administration declared it as a project of strategic interest and formally included it in its proposed 2013 Extractive Activities Sector Plan as flagship of its “Galicia is a mine” strategy. 17 million tons of acid mine drainage generating waste would be piled up to extract just 30 tons of gold, destroying a whole valley (again as in As Encrobas or Castrelo de Minho) and severely contaminating a river system that flowed into another productive mussel gathering area (Rubinos et al. 2010). The irrationality of such proposed developments was further exposed as the movement presented evidence comparing its proposed outcomes with those of gold recovery schemes from so-called ‘urban mining’ (recycling), also making the case for a wider questioning

of human priorities regarding resource extraction and use.

The response was massive, involving large-scale demonstrations and a petition that registered over 250,000 signatures. Although Galician environmental NGOs were supportive and active, the weight of resistance was carried out by dozens of community-based organizations, committees and platforms that sprung out locally in the affected rural areas, directly confronted by pro-mining ‘*contra*’ soft counterinsurgency groups created and subsidized by the mining company itself and an extremely hostile media campaign paid with public relations funds. The diversity and structure of these groups made the movement virtually immune to cooptation, a strategy frequently used when large, single, often professionalized environmental NGOs take a leading role in opposition movements (Harrison 2015). The company and local power brokers attempted instead to pitch opposition groups against each other, but the limited success of this strategy proved even more dangerous, as uncoordinated groups opened up additional channels of hostility and harassment against the project that were harder to contain and suppress.

The project finally collapsed because of building pressure and growing disagreements between the company and the administration, that was caught up in accusations of corruption and bribery –including an alleged 1,5 million euro ‘bite’ that was to go directly to the Galician President Mr. Alberto Núñez Feijóo, Regional Minister of the Environment Mr. Agustín Hernández and Director General of Energy and Mines Mr. Ángel Bernardo Tahoces.¹² The Canadian concession holder Edgewater was also allegedly ‘invited’ to reach an agreement with the Spanish SACYR corporation, which at the point was strategically transitioning into mining as a consequence of the collapse of the Spanish property bubble, as a veiled condition for a favourable resolution of the mining permits. In fact, immediately after the failure of the Corcoesto project SACYR purchased the San Finx mine together with a large set of concessions and prospection permits in the Galician tin and tungsten belt, currently in early development phase.

Corcoesto served to bring together not only local rural groups opposing this specific project, but also dozens of similar collectives facing similar threats throughout Galiza that allied with each other to continue to fight against political-corporate complicity and a lack of transparency and participation. Corcoesto became a symbol of resistance, just as Encrobras had been in the 1970s, but not of destruction but of life. Since 2013 Corcoesto gave way to a well-organized and mainly rural network, ContraMINAcción, that also became closely involved with similar networks internationally through the ‘Yes to Life, No to Mining’ initiative. The network provides immediate support to

¹² *Economía Digital*, June 3, 2016. <https://galicia.economiadigital.es/directivos-y-empresas/la-conexion-entre-sacyr-corcoesto-y-las-minas-de-san-finx_374287_102.html> Accessed April 05, 2019

communities facing emerging developments but also protracted conflicts that often face long and costly legal battles. This has led to notable successes such as the paralysation of several metallurgical quartz extraction projects that rendered prime agricultural lands useless (particularly in Terra Chá, where the struggle had been set off in 2009), feldspar mines in Límia and rare earth developments in Galinheiro.

In February 2019 ContraMINAcción brought together 14 similar platforms and networks from across the Iberian Peninsula, often facing the same corporations and pro-extractivist policies. The “Compostela Declaration”,¹³ issued unanimously, demanded that mining corporations and their greed are not to be placed over the will and life of people and local communities, on the basis of “financial speculation, lies, skulduggery, denial of impacts, false and biased propaganda and imposition”. The Declaration also questioned excessive consumption as a driver for extractivism following debates on how movements should spearhead a transition towards post-extractivist societies.

Discussion

The shifts in political agency that have taken place in Galiza primarily in the 2010s and namely after the 2009 return of the *Partido Popular* to government illustrate the crisis of the institutionalized environmentalism, in line with what Dauvergne (2016) called ‘environmentalism of the rich’. Under a thick layer of ‘green’ legislation that is supposed to protect people from profits, emerging community-based rural environmentalist movements exposed the underlying dynamics of destructive market fundamentalism. Legally-binding protective mechanisms have been turned into mock regulatory frameworks, which are systematically ignored, unapplied, overlooked or deliberately suppressed or debilitated. Arguably, never in Galiza’s history (and, with a mostly common regulatory framework, also in the EU), have so many checks, controls and limits existed to allegedly protect the environment and societies from the destructive greed of market forces. Yet existing regulations have been dramatically ignored.

The inability or unwillingness of pro-extractivist governments to resolve (even if just in appearance) the contradictions of a new thrush of environmentally-degrading excesses has generated a growing mass of social contestation in its former rural strongholds, a trend visible in Galiza but also across Portugal and other areas in the Iberian peninsula as the open season for low-cost lithium operations has been declared. This includes movements opposing mining (which is the focus of this paper) but also toxic landfills which

¹³ Yes to Life, No to Mining, March 8, 2019. <<http://www.yestolifenotomining.org/14-plataformas-de-espana-y-portugal-se-reunieron-en-febrero-para-analizar-los-impactos-de-la-mineria-en-la-peninsula-iberica-declaracion-final-del-iv-encuentro-de-contraminacion/>> Accessed April 05, 2019

usually follow mine closure (as part of a commodification of waste and a surge of international dumping markets), land usurpation for new electric generation infrastructures, and the generalized destruction of biodiversity and landscapes through pulp tree monocultures (namely Eucalyptus).

In contrast with rural struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, instead of being led by environmental or political organizations (that in the past had sometimes instrumentalized and even compromised local resistances) community-based rural environmentalist movements have forced or pulled traditional actors to move behind or besides them, but not without them. While in the past there had often been instances of ‘solidarity’ organizations mobilizing rural communities in the face of unperceived threats, it has become increasingly frequent for emerging rural movements to set the agenda of such organizations, often hit by the ongoing crisis of institutionalized environmental activism (Rootes 2003).

While this does not downplay the relevance of external collaborators, which continue to play key roles, it represents a hierarchichal reversal or at least a horizontalisation of the relationships within movements. Although embedded in their particular rural dynamics, community-based rural environmentalist movements are far from spontaneous, being mostly a result of a process of grass-roots self-organization and disengagement with channels of complaint and contestation that are seen as inefficient in terms of the pressing threats of large scale mining developments. This distances these movements from prior dependence on strategies of ‘everyday peasant resistance’ or ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) but also from ‘nimbyist’ approaches to environmental issues that some have described as ‘rural populism’ or ‘populist environmentalism’ (Allen 2004; Leonard 2007, 2014).

Transcending past characterizations as homogeneous and static, rural communities have shown to be capable of fighting with the tools of their opponents, using traditional neighbourhood and kin networks to rally the needed skills and qualifications –including legal and technical capabilities– while creating learning environments for horizontal capacity building that also incorporate lessons from past struggles as part of a growing *identity of resistance* or *resistant subjectivity* (Franquesa 2019). The succession and buildup of countermovements has had a ‘spillover effect’, stimulating resistance and diffusing strategic innovation across emerging or protracted conflicts. The previous experience of the “*Nunca Mais*” (Never Again) movement contesting the 2002 *Prestige* oil spill likely conditioned the evolution of protest “counter-spaces” in Galiza (Rosman 2017), particularly in terms of lessons-learned and the relative efficiency of different strategies, a matter often discussed within movements themselves.

As with the *Prestige* disaster, public legitimation of continuing environmental destruction is supported by a corporate-political-bureaucratic-

academic complex that systematically attempts to green-wash and fabricate pseudo-scientific arguments to maximize profits at the cost of the health and wellbeing of the land and its peoples (Kirsch 2014). When attempting to rally support for destructive projects, the mining lobby often reminds the public of how the industry ‘endures’ and ‘suffers’ a burdening regulatory pressure making any substantial negative impact virtually impossible. The administration and its pro-extractivist political leadership have systematically used the same argument to minimize dissent and contestation in a continuing stigmatization of what being an ‘*ecologista*’ implies in rural Galiza: citizens are to feel reassured by the full protection provided by the Administration’s strict regulatory and enforcement mechanisms and the compliance of all market operators under its control; citizens should entrust all protective countermovement to the Administration and its agents –any alternative counter-movement which questions the capacity, purpose or integrity of the Administration and market operators it controls is delegitimized as being unfounded, alarmist, unscientific, or politically motivated. Pro-extractivist populism and the corporations under its protection heavily rely upon media-academic outlets to crush opposition (Kirsch 2014): in Touro rural resistance was labelled ‘*illuminati*’ and ‘professional agitators’ while in Corcoesto a mock pro-mining local platform was created by the lawyers and Public Relations consultants of the extractivist corporation.

The long history of mining-related conflicts in Galiza is radically different from the idyllic historical perspective that the Galizan mining lobby (represented by the Official Chamber of Mining) and complicit governments insistently try to forge through school and tourism materials,¹⁴ the mining museums of Fontao (Vila de Cruzes) and San Finx (Lousame), and through field visits to open pit slate and coal mines, abandoned copper pits and cement processing facilities. In 2019, the Galizan mining lobby and the administration launched the largest consent-building effort under the brand “Galiza’s Sustainable Mining” (*Minaría Sostible de Galicia*) that included kindergarten, primary and secondary school curriculum materials, children’s storybooks and comics aiming at long-term impact over their target populations. A careful effort to hide the intensity of social conflicts and to deny the massive environmental impact of mining developments is underway. As community members themselves acknowledge, this unprecedented effort, while hugely challenging, is a clear sign that community-based rural movements have become effective in reaching out to the hearts and minds of society at large, triggering equally unprecedented extraordinary measures to try to stop them.

¹⁴ In 2019 the mining lobby issued *Coñece a minaría de Galicia* (“Get to Know Galiza’s Mining”), a set of children’s books and curriculum guides with associated audiovisual resources.

Conclusions

The European Union's Raw Materials and Minerals Policy Framework and the Galician government's continuing open hand and 'light' regulatory control, together with the country's geological context, pose a continuing threat to rural communities across the country. The ongoing economic crisis and the siren calls of jobs and prosperity for all is the constant discourse offered by mining prospectors with the invaluable support and complicity of a populist administration and its local 'cacique' power-brokers, that apply clientelist approaches to 'secure' jobs in exchange for votes. Initial local hiring from the inner circles of local and regional power are strategically used to crush any opposition before it emerges, or to fight it vehemently as the conflicts in Triacastela, San Finx, Corcoesto or Touro illustrate. Extensive corruption at local and regional level feeds into the spirals of fear and hope that are infused by pro-extractivist populist overlords.

But such moves no longer go unchallenged. The multiplication and severity of new extractivist projects since the 2008 burst of the housing bubble and the EU policies on critical raw materials have led to a grass-roots articulation of community-based rural environmental movements challenging extractivism at the heart of the new developments and aiming straight at the populist circles of government which continue to encourage it. These movements have been able to break the norms of conformity that have traditionally constrained rural struggles to conventional channels of contestation that often place rural communities in subaltern roles. By exercising the primacy of political agency and directly attacking the intricate structures of the administration and the mining lobby, the movements have turned both effective and autonomous; while the horizontal and acephalous nature of the network that brings communities together in their struggles made it virtually immune to cooptation. Its successes can be measured not only by the paralysation of numerous mining development projects but also in its ability to delegitimize consent-building and environmental green-washing strategies and instead generate widespread mass support for the communities engaged in the struggles. Significantly, while anti-mining campaigns can easily fall into 'nimby' (not-in-my-back-yard) arguments, Galician community-based rural environmental movements have overcome such contradictions aligning themselves with global resistance discourses of 'liberation ecology' (Peet and Watts 2004) and the 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier 2002) that confront the extractivist dynamics of capitalist modernity generating arguments for the transition toward post-extractivist societies.

Facing discourses that continue to appeal to uncritical popular support for mining projects under the promise of job creation, the "Galicia is a mine" programme has been confronted by mostly rural resistance movements that have

transcended previous limitations (particularly dependence on external agents), creating new synergies and building critical discourses against extractivism that are slowly permeating broader sectors of society. In the face of (at least initial) mild or ambiguous stances from the institutional left—which had done little to change the situation during its brief 2005-2009 presence in government—new forms of political subjectivity and emancipatory rural politics have allowed for a build-up of experience(s) of resistance in what had previously been, at best, unconnected and fragmented local struggles, and often deserts of silence and compliance.

A growing articulation of solidarity and collective action channelled through networks of grass-roots organizations has achieved the withdrawal or paralysation of several notorious projects and checked a ‘business as usual’ approach until recently characterized by outspoken corruption, little to no oversight for social and environmental impacts and general noncompliance with environmental obligations.

In parallel, community-based rural environmental movements have combated the positive image of mining that corporations and administration have been heralding in an attempt to obtain ‘social licence’ and demobilize society. This has also helped connect local rural discourses with global issues related to (de)growth and the extractivist dynamics of capitalist modernity, and also communities themselves with their own histories of resistance. In fact, the shift towards degrowth can be at least partly explained as a reaction to the discourses of the mining lobby itself, that insistently place metal mining (particularly of ores such as copper, cobalt, lithium or rare earths) as an unavoidable component of a transition towards a ‘Green Economy’ that can justify unprecedented levels of environmental destruction.

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