
Argentina: For a sustainable Patagonia, against mining

Argentine Patagonia is a vast region covering 800,891 km², encompassing a great variety of ecosystems. Topographically, two environments may be identified: the Andean area (comprising the Southern Andes Cordillera, with forests, lakes and rivers) and the extra-Andean area (steppes and plateaux).

For years now, Patagonia has been thoroughly explored from the air and hundreds of geologists of every nationality have prospected the land. The result is a mining concession map. This process –in addition to the creation of networks of influence within the provincial governments allowing laws favouring investing companies to be adopted– has been carried out behind the back of the population.

Response has been nil from the traditional political context. Until very recently, the environmental issue was not considered and the prejudice that 'growth' is always good, a 'necessary' process with high and inevitable costs, predominated. Later it was said that stakes had to be placed on green technologies, on IRAM (the national certification body) standards, on environmental impact files or on questionable cost/benefit studies.

In other words, what they are saying is 'Stop! Where do you think you're going? Pass by the till please!' For, if contamination is a business, the show of decontamination and prevention is one too. Environmental monitoring –'yes to mining but monitored mining'- is only a part of the same lie. The facts show the contrary: toxic waste from the Angela Mine –cyanide and mercury- have been buried in the mine and now acid drainage is filtering downstream. Reports on 'remediation' carried out at a cost of millions by the Argentine State seem to have disappeared from the Mining Office in the Province of Chubut. The same has happened with the water analyses carried out by the Police in Andacollo in the Province of Neuquen, where Andacollo Gold spills its poison.

In many other cases, direct or indirect violence is used to access nature and literally 'exploit' it, devastating the hills, contaminating rivers and lakes, deforesting large expanses of forest.

The economic 'success' of some countries generated a gigantic ecological debt, swept under the carpet for over two centuries and certainly not appearing in statistics. What we commonly call 'economy' is only a thin and shiny veneer on something that conceals monumental destruction, human suffering and exploitation all over the world. Destruction that is externalized (an elegant word to express concealment), such as chemical waste, the loss of biodiversity and incalculable social damages.

The great industrial, scientific and political challenge is not 'always keep on' as the Titanic crew obediently repeated, but to seek different ways, promoted by a protagonist citizenship.

Along these lines are the self-convened mobilizations against mining in Esquel (Province of Chubut), Andalgalá (Catamarca), San Juan (San Juan), Andacollo (Neuquen), Jujuy (Jujuy), Ingeniero Jacobacci (Rio Negro) and others that are joining them and contributing critical visions, added to

those of the indigenous Mapuche-Tehuelche, who give economic theory lessons to those considering themselves to be the intellectual or political centre of the world, the country or the province. An interconnected citizenship rejects the system because it has discovered its inconsistencies and suffers from them personally. This incipient network, varied, broad, democratic, multiple, confused, immature if you like, but also integrative, productive and creative, is providing answers –and generating alternatives– to a fraudulent, impoverishing system, overburdened with conflicts on all sides.

Centralist maps, particularly those ‘designating’ or ‘arranging’ land use, such as in the case of mining (but equally applicable to oil, transport, or any large-scale activity) should be totally revised. Those who talk of ‘national’ mining and define with the same extractivist mentality the cordillera as a ‘resource’ and mountains as an ‘obstacle’ to obtaining metals or minerals, are on the same side as mining companies, with the only difference that they propose adding a blue and white sticker stating ‘Extracted in Argentina’.

Furthermore, the water in the plateaux is not sufficient for the needs of the mega-enterprises. Therefore, they will pump it from wherever they can: wells will dry up, watering holes and mallines (damp environments where natural forage species grow) where the cattle graze will disappear. Mining activities –that can give jobs to a handful of people for a short while– will destructively compete with other longstanding rural activities in the region, increasing rural migration and desertification and overcrowding in urban belts of misery.

There has been a paradigmatic policy change in which an active citizenship has started identifying and establishing general economic objectives and thinking of ways to achieve them. These social organizations and individuals want to make sure that no metal leaving Argentina is used for weapons, or for jewellery or luxurious decoration, nor to compete with Latin American markets, nor to swamp the Argentines with products whose added value remains in other latitudes.

They demand that in the event some type of mining is considered, on a small scale and for very clear purposes –for a real socially and ecologically speaking economy, to feed a local market of craftspeople and small and medium-sized industries, to cover regional and national needs– a totally different point of departure must be used. The whole cycle -environmental, technological, labour, financial, income and destination of each mineral or metal extracted- must be monitored.

Social organizations in Patagonia demand that the land intended for mining use and the surroundings, be used to cover the basic needs of the Argentine people, fully devoted to organic agriculture, recreation, health, education or to many activities with high added value or just as a space to live in voluntary simplicity. They also want to recover the land that has been stolen and achieve recognition of the Indigenous Peoples’ rights. This territory, under the same tax conditions, favours and subsidies obtained for the mining sector, can offer lands for the settlement of one million families, supportive communities or Argentine cooperatives, establishing decent, creative and sustainable sources of jobs for centuries, in opposition to the 26,000 salaries, ‘royalties’ and devastation proposed by this mining policy which, at the best, has a 10-15-year horizon.

Some will say that this is difficult to achieve, which is probably true. However, it is infinitely preferable to the present destructive and parasitical delirium.

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