Alberto Curamil and the Goldman Prize: Discussion of Cultural Sustainability in the Region of La Araucanía

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Abstract. The following article discusses the recent winner of the Goldman prize, Mapuche leader Alberto Curamil, as a case in the struggle for cultural sustainability in the Region of La Araucanía, mainly in his role as an activist in the defense of Mapuche territory and culture. This important international environmental award was conferred on Curamil for uniting Chileans in preventing the construction of two hydroelectric projects and protecting a river sacred to the Mapuche people, overcoming violent persecution and attacks against him in this activity. This makes it possible to problematize different aspects of cultural sustainability that are key in the region, in particular the issue that arises between the progress of industry and the ancestarity of indigenous peoples. Thus, it is interesting to discuss from this case how these two views can be harmonized in order to achieve cultural sustainability, bearing in mind the intercultural nature of the IX Region. Finally, this communication seeks to analyze the role of the Chilean State and its actions concerning the practices of cultural sustainability like those led by Curamil.

1. Introduction

The case of Alberto Curamil and his role in the defense of the environment and the culture of the Mapuche people, which earned him international recognition culminating in the prestigious Goldman Prize, allows us to discuss different aspects related to cultural sustainability. However, to have a discussion about these elements, it is necessary to define what we will understand, in this case, by cultural sustainability, exploring the main topics involved and the various aims it pursues.

It should begin by indicating that sustainability came to replace the concept of sustainability, insufficient to address the various issues that have emerged since the end of the last century; as Camarena and Mancilla state, this was only interested in economic, social and environmental development without involving future generations [1]. However, since the 1990s, the need to relate development to sustainability and the human dimension of the life, linked daily practices, local resources and knowledge as the axis of endogenous development has acquired relevance [2]. This is where sustainability arises, with relevance of the context for development. This proposal is interested in local self-management, planned, executed and administered by the subjects themselves. This is a process that seeks to satisfy human needs, of present and future generations, without jeopardizing the foundation of development, i.e., natural resources and ecological processes [3]. This new concept brought forth the need to address not only the three axes considered within what is sustainable, but to
extend it, where the cultural aspect becomes an essential topic due to the need for contextualization. This was already indicated by theoreticians like Felix Guattari [4], who posits that the aspect of human subjectivity must be present along with the environmental and the social to respond to the ecological, emphasizing the cultural.

Thus, it is cultural sustainability that considers culture as an axis that must be placed on the same level as the triad of the social, economic and environmental due to new issues and the need to contextualize the initiatives to be considered sustainable.

2. Discussion of Progress
Alberto Curamil is an authority among the Mapuche people – a lonko – who, in addition to being one of the main spokesmen of the Mapuche Territorial Alliance (MTA), a group organized in defense of the Mapuche territory, has dedicated a large part of his life to the protection of the ecological resources of the Region of La Araucanía, recovery of ancestral practices and the revitalization of his people’s language [5]. This leader was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2019 for his role as a leader of the protests to stop the construction of two hydroelectric projects that would affect the Cautín River, located in southern Chile, mainly by bringing together both leaders of his community and academics, lawyers and environmental organizations [5]. These two projects, High Cautín and Doña Alicia, were dams that were damaging the aforementioned river, which for the Mapuche people is not only a natural resource but is also sacred and occupies an important space in Mapuche traditional practices. Finally, both plants were cancelled at the end of 2016 because, through the action of Curamil, it was demonstrated that the company responsible had not informed the community of the impact of these projects. However, in 2018 the Mapuche leader was arrested for an alleged robbery, so he could not attend the awarding for the so-called “Environmental Nobel Prize”.

We can establish that the activity undertaken by Curamil in the organization of demonstrations and protests and the grouping of various relevant actors in the cultural, academic and social spheres in defense of a vitally important resource for the cultural practices of the Mapuche people makes it possible to consider this leader as a case of cultural sustainability. Furthermore, from the speech given by his daughter Belén Curamil, when receiving the prize on his behalf, her father’s struggle is both socio-environmental and linked to the ancestralty of the Mapuche people [7], integrating three dimensions than we understand by cultural sustainability.

However, in this case a series of significant topics is revealed in the discussion about sustainability, which starts from the antagonism between the ancestral aspects established in the different indigenous territories and the capitalist logic that does not include these elements in its projects.

One of the topics with direct implications in several conflicts is the notion of progress, which enables relevant dimensions linked to cultural sustainability to be addressed, such as globalization and development. On progress we consider what Mauricio Rojas expresses [8], for whom it continues to be the great idea-strength within Western culture, which has been disseminated even more widely due to globalization. Rojas points to three key elements within the idea of progress starting from the ideas of Robert Nisbet. The first is the consideration of history as a path towards a supposed goal of perfection, the second, already mentioned, of progress as a feature that defines Western society, and finally, the notion of progress as an immanent force [8]. Thus, the case of Curamil opens the discussion of how the idea of progress is directly related to the various business initiatives that consider their economic activity as something necessary and inherent in society. The companies responsible for the dams, SwissHydro and Agrisol, give account of this idea of progress, in which neither the context nor the voices of those who live in the area are taken into consideration, since what is relevant in this case is the development of a project, which, under market logic and supported by the Government, is not questioned by those driving it due to the relation in this consideration that the more society gains, the greater the state of perfection. We can also mention on this point what Leff reports, for whom this economic rationale under capitalist logic is supported by the processes of globalization present today, where the cultural and environmental aspects of certain areas are left by the wayside in favor of greater production [9]. This is related to the idea that areas like La Araucanía, which has a
high poverty rate, is in a less developed state, such that these projects would provide a solution. However, the various actions by Curamil and the MTA demonstrated how this notion of progress has a strong ethnocentric burden linked directly to the idea of development.

For Colmegna and Matarazzo [2], development is a social and historical construct linked to the idea of progress, and they postulate that Western societies have reached a state of greater evolution and therefore they must help improve the living conditions of other populations, emphasizing the ethnocentrist and evolutionist component of the concept. It is evident that in this developmentalist view, people’s culture is not considered, since, as is reflected in this case, the companies did not consider at any point the quality of ancestral river that the Cautín River has for the Mapuche people, nor did they consult in any way those who live in these areas, since the single idea of progress and development was sufficient to move forward with the projects. It must be emphasized that in spite of the view of development that companies present, in which peoples’ culture and ancestrality are an obstacle to progress, it is important not to go to the other extreme of an idealized view. It is essential to see the heterogeneity of interests and the conflicts that appear among these groups [2]. In the various actions carried out by Curamil, one can see an absence of this populist view, because his activity was carried out not only by people from the Mapuche communities, it integrated different social actors; moreover, his request was based directly on an aspect of Chilean law that requires companies to consult with the communities’ inhabitants.

3. Harmonizing the Exclusive

Although responding to a possible harmonization between these two views is no simple task and requires long discussions among different actors within various spheres, a series of possible ways to begin discussing this topic can be given as well as elements that cannot be set aside in order to combine these two views.

First, it is necessary to talk about the Latin American context, because it has elements of its population that differentiate it from other areas and that must be considered within the activities that they seek to be sustainable. Leff [10] describes the environmental issue in Latin America as characterized by the need for these nations to increase their economic growth, so they have embarked on a neoliberal policy in which natural resources are in the service of this desired growth. As can be seen in the Curamil case, the companies that implement the dam projects and the Government that promotes them have this idea, viewing the natural and in this case cultural resources of the Region of La Araucanía as a resource to achieve greater economic growth. This neoliberal policy does not include aspects integral to the area, which are essential to being able to obtain cultural sustainability and which in this case can be indicated from what is mentioned among the foundations of the MTA, a group of which Curamil is one of the main voices.

“In contrast to the model of imposed development that pursues extraction of ‘resources’ from the Earth as ‘commodities’ at any cost (murder, political imprisonment, persecution and criminalization, etc.), the Mapuche model understands that the rivers speak, the mountains converse, the thunder and the birds communicate… This is to say, there is also an ecological-epistemological conflict, ways and models of life, spirituality and ways of relating to the Earth that must be made visible and known. This, because to fight for the water and ecological balance transcends any type of border or arbitrariness imposed by those in power” [11].

As can be seen, unlike the neoliberal logic, these resources are no longer available for economic growth, but rather they represent an entire life model and relation to the environment, responding directly to the Government’s economic policy and to business groups. These indigenous movements seek to renew cultural and productive practices and connect them with the environment, for which they demand cultural autonomy and the right to self-management of their resources [10]. Curamil also addresses this point in an interview prior to the delivery of the Goldman Prize, pointing to the environmental nature of his actions and how this combined with his defense of the Mapuche has made him a “thorn in the side” of the business community [12].
One of the relevant points to be able to harmonize the two views in the cultural and environmental arises from what was described by Colmenga and Matarazzo [2], for whom it is important to be aware of the diversity of these peoples, to see the specificities and complexities that they present within but, similarly, to see the similarities and differences with the Western view, thereby creating a new type of knowledge. Although it is difficult to find similarities in cases like that of Alberto Curamil, it is necessary that both the Mapuche people and the Government open a dialog where the need for growth and the defense of the Mapuche culture have points of contact, passing from the criminalization of the Mapuche people to a promotion in local initiatives and self-management. In support of this idea, Leff [13] reports that a viable and democratic practice is constructed from the combination of different sciences and the mixture of various types of knowledge, which is why strengthening the local initiative with support from external actors may be a good starting point.

This idea can be developed from the concept of environmental rationality, where two types of rationality, the capitalist and the ecological, must compare their interests and determine common goals to arrive at an environmental rationality that permits sustainable development [10]. Thus, the capitalist rationality corresponds to the companies and the Government that drive the projects without considering the ancestral nature of the territory, and the ecological rationality corresponds to the activity of Curamil and the MTA in that they are seeking to preserve this environmental and cultural right. However, to arrive at an environmental rationality and for the initiatives in the region to be of a truly sustainable nature, there must be a change in the way of thinking and reflecting on them as a starting point. As Guattari indicates, there must be a change in the subjectivities where the main issue is to arrive at this environmental rationality by determining common objectives, but always starting from the self-management of the peoples who inhabit these areas [4]. Through his actions, Alberto Curamil has been able to provide an account of this issue, mainly with the grouping of several types of knowledge, but there must be a harmonization between this thinking that is born of the local and the role that the company and Government play in it.

It is worth noting that this concept of environmental rationality involves cultural rationality: it is possible to achieve development from respect for the cultural practices of the same populations, with their technical and productive knowledge [10]. Here the same opportunity appears as previously discussed, where the Chilean Government’s need for growth and development can be realized from the practices of the Mapuche people, such as those made known by the MTA and Alberto Curamil.

4. The Role of the State

Finally, it must be emphasized that from the case of Alberto Curamil and his role in the defense of the Cautín River, a brief comment is warranted regarding the action of State in this case and others with similar characteristics, where mainly repressive activities have been conducted against demonstrators, which has distanced the State from this idea of cultural sustainability.

As mentioned, Curamil was arrested in 2018 in a confusing incident that led to his incarceration. There are no witnesses or charges, being based solely on an anonymous phone call to conduct this legal proceeding. This might seem an isolated case, but it has similarities with cases like those of Camilo Catrillanca or Matías Catríleo, who were murdered in confusing situations that were never fully clarified. In this case, therefore, we consider it possible to refer to a possible form of State terrorism in terms by William Schulz [14], for whom it is appropriation of economic means by means of violence and repression of one population dominated by another. Alberto Curamil suffers this repression by a state mechanism such as the Carabineros, with the aim of silencing another of the voices that promotes self-management and the cultural rescue of the environment in the Region of La Araucanía, with the possible intention of introducing other projects of environmental impact in the future. This violence can occur not only directly and repressively, as the State also has another mechanism to try to control the region’s environment and resources, which Hannah Arendt calls race and bureaucracy, where the State, through administrative mechanisms, denies access to positions of power to these subaltern groups [15]. Thus, every action by Curamil and the MTA is outside the law and can be considered criminal, since there are no concrete spaces in which to make demands for a
cultural right, and every action ends in being minimized by the State, an aspect that Curamil was nevertheless able to reverse by calling several voices to unite around this environmental and cultural cause.

These two forms of state violence that have been repeating for some years in the region illustrate that there must be a change within the rationality itself of the State and from this criminalization to the support or assistance of local initiatives.

5. Closing
As has been seen, the case of Alberto Curamil opens a discussion about a series of relevant aspects associated with cultural sustainability, mainly with the notion of progress and how this idea has not allowed for true sustainability in southern Chile. For this to occur, there needs to be a change in mentality, in which the views that appear as exclusive shift towards a new way of thinking where they have points of contact, so that there is a development from local self-management without jeopardizing the environment or the culture of the communities in southern Chile.

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