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# A Sacred Mountain and the Art of “Impression Management”

Analyzing a Mining Company’s Encounter With Indigenous Communities in Atacama, Chile

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The installation of a radio communication antenna on a sacred mountain, Mount Quimal, led to an interaction between a mining corporation and Atacameño people in northern Chile. The present article focuses on how language games that

involve “over- and undercommunication” of information in this transactional event reflect the distribution of power in society.

Specifically, it looks into the “impression management” (Goffman 1959, 1971) that took place in the interactions and negotiations between the corporation and the communities, within the context of a sustainable development discourse adopted by the corporate world.

**Keywords:** Sacred mountain; Atacameño peoples, mining corporation; sustainable development; power; discourse; impression management; Chile.

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## Introduction

Mining corporations’ interest in the resources of mountains in Chile shows the emergence of different and simultaneous approaches to nature, depending on what social position users of resources occupy in the larger society (Hopwood et al 2005; Escobar 2008). The different approaches to the use of environmental resources support the idea that nature is socially constructed (Escobar 1996). In this discursive process, the specific and historical relationship between nature and capital, recently articulated mainly through the discourse of “sustainable development,” needs to be demystified. According to Escobar, the discourse of “sustainable development” appeared globally in 1987 with the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development convened by the United Nations. In the report (Brundtland 1987), Nature is constructed discursively as something that can be *managed*. When assuming that the management of Nature involves its capitalization, the discourse of “sustainable development” renames Nature as our (human) Environment so that its capital can be sustained. This is to say that a *rational* exploitation of resources assures that capital investments will be persistent through time. The hegemonic representatives of this *rationality* are often scientists.

Not surprisingly, this vision of reason rarely includes other sources of knowledge, such as that of communities affected by neoliberal policies, and Nature is viewed as a potential commodity. This is mainly what sustainable development became once it was accepted by powerful

economic and political actors; however, it is worth mentioning that this notion of sustainable development was an appropriation of a wider concept that was defined in *Our Common Future* (Brundtland 1987). Hopwood et al (2005) call this view “status quo sustainability.”

*Supporters of the status quo recognize the need for change but see neither the environment nor society as facing insuperable problems. Adjustments can be made without any fundamental changes to society, means of decision making or power relations. This is the dominant view of governments and business and supporters of the status quo are most likely to work within the corridors of power talking with decision makers in government and business. Development is identified with growth and economic growth is seen as part of the solution.* (Hopwood et al 2005: 42).

According to Hopwood, in contrast to this instrumental view, at the other extreme are those who adopt a transformatory approach to development that embraces both social and environmental questions. They cover a range of different viewpoints, although all share the view that the mounting crises in the environment and society are interconnected and that social and environmental systems risk break down if radical change does not occur. Some, such as grassroots environmental justice and indigenous environmental movements, may not use the same vocabulary of sustainable development as used in official and academic circles but rather address the issues of how to live within the environment without great inequality or poverty (Hopwood et al 2005: 45–46). Thus, many indigenous communities understand Nature

as something far more complex than a simple source of individualized resources given value in accordance with market prices. Nature is a place where, if not impeded by State actions, Atacameños can have a nonalienated life that involves the practice of a social and geographical identity that connects them to a fulfilling culture their communities have developed over generations.

This has been acknowledged globally, but corporate practices do not necessarily succeed in following this recommendation. Neoliberal ventures have increasingly assimilated environmentalism through key discursive shifts, such as the growing convergence of sustainable development with green capitalism (McCarthy and Prudham 2004: 279). The aesthetic considerations of affected populations, objections to violations of their ethical values, their conception of equity, or even their conceptualizations of the good life, cannot be ruled inadmissible merely because they resist serious monetary representation, or even quantitative representation of any sort, for they may well be the most significant factors for those populations in developing attitudes and planning social action (Rappaport 1992).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the actions taken by CODELCO (National Copper Corporation of Chile) to change its paradigm of community affairs from paying little attention to the presence of Atacameño indigenous communities in their area of mining influence to an *awareness* of the corporation's impacts on these communities. It provides an analysis of the corporation's self-proclaimed shift of paradigm (CODELCO 2004) through the description of an anthropological interview-based assessment that took place during 2002–2003. The assessment's objective was to document indigenous communities' perception of the impacts caused by the installation of a radio communication antenna on a mountain that the mining company realized was sacred to the Atacameño people only after the installation of the antenna was completed. The research questions addressed in this article are the following: (1) Why does a mining corporation shift its attitude of ignoring indigenous communities toward an awareness of the relevance of their "participation" (ie opinion) about a mining project? (2) How does the mining corporation communicate with indigenous communities relevant to their mining interests?

The article is divided into 4 parts. First, it offers a brief description of the methods used for the assessment and the results obtained; second, it discusses the context of a new trend of social corporate responsibility in Chile; third, it presents and applies analytical concepts for understanding human transactions and the importance of "impression management" (Goffman 1959, 1971) in the interactions and negotiations that took place; and fourth, it closes with conclusions regarding the policy implications in this encounter between individuals who belong to a corporate culture and their attempt to

officially approach indigenous communities for the first time in the history of the corporation.

Goffman's (1959, 1971) idea of impression management imagines the world as a large stage with actors anchored by a social frame of reference that shapes their roles; the actors involved are highly sensitive to anything out of the normal. Impression management is a response to the perception that one or more people sense something to be abnormal or wrong. These impressions need to be managed to reestablish an impression of normalcy. In the process, some information is "overcommunicated," whereas other elements remain "undercommunicated." In the case examined here, CODELCO representatives see the advantage of responding to the concerns of the indigenous communities and prioritizing public acceptance of the reasonableness of their plans for the region.

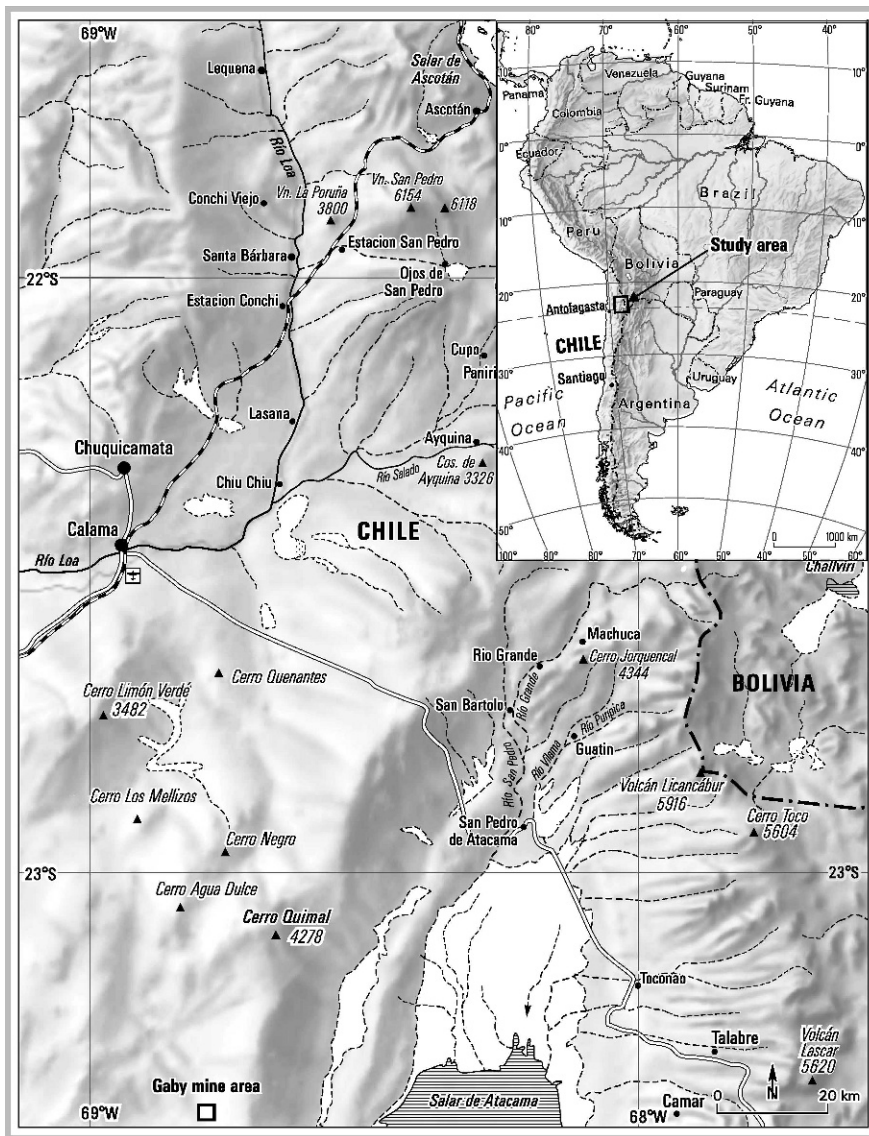
### Description of the assessment

On 27 August 2002, in the legal framework of a process of citizen participation recently developed by the Chilean Environmental Law 19.300 (Gonzalez 2008), chief corporate executives in charge of CODELCO's Gaby mining project in northern Chile organized a field trip with representatives from the Atacameño communities. On this occasion, the representatives of the indigenous communities pointed out the disrespect to their culture that was implied by the presence of an antenna for radio communications on Mount Quimal, which they identified as sacred and ritually connected to their communities (Carrasco 2003). Sacred mountains have played an important role in the life and history of Andean peoples (Castro and Aldunate 2003; Bonilla 2006). In response, the mining company requested an impact assessment to identify the specific communities related to the sacred mountain in question.

The methods involved in the assessment, which the author conducted as a trained anthropologist mandated by CODELCO, included interviewing each of the members of the communities that participated in the aforementioned field trip; thus, a total of 8 in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted in the course of a week of fieldwork in northern Chile. It was possible to determine that the communities ritually connected with Mount Quimal were the following: San Pedro de Atacama, Peine, Camar, Socaire, Talabre, Toconao, Santiago de Río Grande, and Machuca (Figure 1). A second, more intensive 2-week field trip was made to all the communities to initiate a process of consultation. A total of 27 in-depth semistructured interviews were done with 13 community leaders and 14 members. These 27 interviews were conducted in the homes of each community member.

Interviewees were asked to identify from among their members ritual experts who could be consulted

**FIGURE 1** Location of Mount Quimal, Mount Licancábur, the Gaby mine, and of the communities that contributed to the assessment. The 2 communities of Peine and Socaire are located south of Camar, no longer visible on the present map. (Map adapted by Anne Zimmermann from an original map by Fernando Maldonado and Andreas Brodbeck, published in Castro and Aldunate [2003: 74])



specifically regarding their belief systems. After collecting primary data, all interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed in the light of relevant literature regarding sacred mountains in the Andes (Martínez 1983; Barthel 1986; Castro and Varela 1994). The final product was a written report with recommendations that was submitted both to the corporation and to representatives of the communities in question. The repetition of the same stories and beliefs about legends and rituals related to Mount Quimal among different communities supported the assumption that the mountain had a sacred and ritual-bound character for the local communities. This was of utmost importance to CODELCO executives (personal communication) because they wanted to be sure that claims made by some leaders were legitimate for the Atacameño people as a whole. Indeed, the secretary of the

National Monument Regional Office of Antofagasta Region indicated that in March 2003 he had pointed out the presence of an antenna on Mount Quimal to the National Monument Central Office in Santiago. At the time he was interviewed for the assessment, he interpreted the interview as a sign that CODELCO was starting to assume responsibility for their sacrilegious action.

Based on the data collection, several meanings that referred to the importance of mountains in general and to Mount Quimal in particular were identified and substantiated the cultural impacts of the antenna on the sacred mountain. Thus, for the Atacameño people, mountains are living entities. From this perspective, the installation of the antenna literally caused a wound to the mountain metaphorically, as if it had been stabbed with a

**FIGURE 2** Mount Quimal, 4278 m high, seen from the base of the mountain. An old road can be used to go as far up as 3800 m in a 4-wheel drive vehicle. The mountain top can then be reached in a 2- to 3-hour hike. Cerro Quimal is so high that the presence of the mast or any other object on the mountain peak cannot be seen on the photo. (Photo by Eduardo Fernández)



knife. But, installing an antenna on a sacred mountain, such as Mount Quimal, is particularly injurious and dangerous, because an external and nonnatural element inevitably disturbs the mountain, and this generates all sorts of material and spiritual disorders.

Mount Quimal (Figure 2) is symbolically related to rainwater and fertility. In a desert environment, this becomes very meaningful. Being a water mountain, Quimal is invoked with prayers to beg for rain in the ceremony of the cleaning of canals through a special song and a dance collectively called *Talatur*. The latter is one of the most important traditional ceremonies that have survived among the Atacameño people until the present (Barthel 1986; personal communication 2003). For the Atacameño people, reciprocity is a central value. This means that when they receive crops from nature they must return something through rituals that show that they are grateful to the Earth mother, or *Pachamama*, as they call her. Mount Quimal is also associated with an atmospheric indicator that gives aid in the prediction of weather conditions, which allows people to make important decisions crucial to the planning of their agricultural and herding activities (Interview 2003).

The interviews also showed that, among the Atacameño people, each individual community has its own guardian mountain. But, there are certain mountains that protect all of the communities, which are considered tutelary. This is the case of Mount Quimal and nearby volcano Mount Licancabur (Quimal's male counterpart, because Mount Quimal is considered a female mountain; see Figure 1). More power is attributed to these types of mountains, and they are considered higher in the hierarchy of mountains. On 1 August, the day on which the *Pachamama* opens up and is willing to receive ritual

payments from humans, an astronomic event occurs when Licancabur covers Quimal with his shadow (Interview 2003). In that encounter, both mountains are said to be making love, and this annual event is viewed as the symbolic ideal of fertility according to the Atacameños interviewed.

During the process of consultation, a recurrent theme was that CODELCO's mistake of not approaching local communities before developing their mining projects was not unique to this company. In fact, according to the interviewees, this seemed to be a constant among all the corporations that operate in the area. Nevertheless, interviewees also mentioned that the Gaby mining project seemed intent to establish a different way of relating to communities in their area of influence. The example they used to support this perception was that Gaby (former CODELCO mining project now owned by a Japanese capital) had taken the time to ask them what Mount Quimal meant to them once CODELCO realized their mistake. For the mining corporation, the perception of Mount Quimal had been totally different from the one held by the communities: it was simply evaluated as a spot in the desert where they could get good signals for radio transmissions.

Community members suggested that, if corrective action were to take place, then the most pertinent action would be to remove the antenna and perform a ceremony to reestablish the altered order of things and apologize to the mountain for having disturbed it. They showed themselves willing to provide the mining firm with information about which alternative mountaintop the firm could use to install their antenna that would not directly affect the communities' sacred space. With the exception of 1 urbanized community member, the rest of

the indigenous peoples interviewed did not make explicit connections between the “antenna problem” and the manifold material aggressions against their territories and livelihoods represented by contamination and restrictions of basic natural resources, altered health of humans and animals, and restrictions on their “freedom” to choose an alternate lifestyle in the desert. This lack of “awareness” of the powerful symbol we would have expected the “antenna problem” to become (see also Bonilla 2006) turned out to be a relief for corporate officers (personal communication). The community member who did, in fact, point out the environmental and human damage to which these communities are exposed was highly disappointed by the lack of critique from his fellow community members. Furthermore, he claimed that the underlying problem being ignored was water and mining conflicts. This problem is not only relevant to northern Chile but also to other regions in the Andes, such as Bolivia and Peru (see Bebbington and Williams 2008).

### **Why the shift in paradigm? Corporations, environment, and development**

Why does a mining firm that had paid little attention to indigenous communities in its area of influence suddenly shift to a respectful attitude toward them? We need to explain the emergence of a new trend in corporate responsibility in countries like Chile. According to Karliner (1997), the 1992 International Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, the Earth Summit, marked the coming of age of corporate environmentalism. It melded ecological and economic globalization into a coherent ideology. In the aftermath of Rio, global corporate environmentalism has helped institutionalize ecological concerns as agenda items in the executive suites and board rooms of some of the world’s largest businesses (Karliner 1997: 31).

Corporations may be given credit for the reason that, under pressure from community organizing and government regulation (ie environmental legislation), they are instituting a number of real changes in their technologies and practices that are leading to cleaner production and less resource destruction. They have also engaged to some degree in more equitable negotiations and consider forms of benefit sharing. Corporations have appropriated the language and images of ecology, sustainability, and social responsibility in an effort to ward off the threat that environmental and social movements might convince the world’s governments to force them to make much more far-reaching changes (Brosius 2008; Tsing 2008). Self-proclaimed corporate environmentalists have achieved this by absorbing the question of ecological sustainability into their overriding agenda of economic globalization. They have made the worldwide expansion of resource extraction, production,

marketing, and consumption synonymous with sustainable development or what Tsing (2008) refers to as “green development fantasies.”

Such masterful co-optation of various strands of the discourse of sustainable development has been emulated by corporations such as CODELCO. If CODELCO wants to be outstanding in community relations, then its benchmark has to be the environmental discourse of top mining corporations around the world (Carrasco 2001). The positioning of a particular strand of the discourse of sustainable development, the Brundtland report’s version of the concept, on the political agenda made it possible for some environmentally conscious executives to convince CODELCO’s management that it was good corporate practice to conduct a study to assess the impact on a potential asset that could not be assigned a monetary price: a sacred mountain (CODELCO 2004).

CODELCO launched the assessment described above as a means to show their environmental and social engagement, and to initiate their change of attitude toward the local indigenous communities. To better understand how this new form of communication worked and whether it succeeded in achieving the declared aim of the assessment, which was to improve relationships with the Atacameño communities, we shall now explore the discursive transactions that took place between the parties in greater detail. In the following section, Goffman’s concept of impression management evoked in the Introduction is applied, along with some other scholars’ (Barth 1966; Williams 1977; Bauman 1987; Bourdieu 1991) conceptual tools to explore various power-related aspects in discourse.

### **How did the mining company communicate with the Atacameños? Human transactions and the art of “impression management”**

People throughout the world see their lives increasingly through the prism of possible lifestyles offered by mass media (Fox 1991: 198). This becomes extremely relevant in the interactions between corporations and indigenous communities who have become more aware that there are other countries where some corporations are behaving in more environmentally sound ways (eg Carruthers and Rodriguez 2009). In consequence, these indigenous communities demand similar standards. Corporations, therefore, cannot keep playing the role of the powerful versus the unsophisticated community that can easily be co-opted. As a result, mining corporations have had recourse to the same tools as advertisers, prioritizing corporate image over social responsibility.

A significant concept to bear in mind when analyzing communication between mining corporations and communities and detecting co-optation is Bourdieu’s notion of “authorized language.” Authority comes to

language from outside of a discourse. In Bourdieu's words, a "performative utterance is destined to fail each time that it is not pronounced by a person who has the 'power' to pronounce it" (Bourdieu 1991: 111). This seemed to be quite clear to the persons interviewed for the CODELCO assessment: all the participants mentioned at some point that they were not satisfied by simply hearing from an anthropologist (the author) who had been hired to interview them; if the mining firm had the intention of establishing a positive relationship with the communities, they wanted the executive chief of the project to communicate directly with them.

The claim for equal authority between counterparts is just 1 component of impression management. However, to understand the politics of agreements among groups that subscribe to different sets of values, Barth's (1966) discussion of "patterns of social form" is critical. He argues that it can be assumed that patterns of social form are the cumulative result of a number of separate choices and decisions made by people as they act in relation to one another. Barth follows Goffman's (1959) argument that agreement on a definition of any situation must be established and maintained to distinguish which of the participants' many statuses should form the basis of the interaction. The process of maintaining this agreement, and thus of reestablishing the normalcy evoked by Goffman (1959) as a desired social state, is one of skewed communication: *over*-communicating that which confirms the relevant statuses of positions and relationships, and *under*-communicating that which is discrepant (Barth 1966: 36). This language game of over- and undercommunicating information in a transactional situation translates into the acquisition of a certain *adequate* role that will contribute to the "impression management" required by the context of communication. This means that each individual will play the role they believe contributes more benefits as a result of the transaction.

In the case of the transactions between the mining company and the Atacameño communities, the corporation overcommunicated their environmentally sound and friendly intents: this confirmed their attempts at changing the negative reputation historically gained by the corporation. However, the communities overcommunicated their immemorial rights to the shared environment, because this was a means of confirming their position as rightful "claimants" to Mount Quimal.

Communication between corporations and communities in the frame of impression management, specifically in the realm of undercommunicating, involves power. In this regard, Bauman (1987) speaks of discourse and power and brings in Foucault's concept of the "decentering of discourse." This is the process through which discourse is objectified, and its abstraction from the situational context becomes recognizable as the exercise of a kind of power, a means of defining, appropriating, taking control over, and manipulating discourse for

certain ends beyond those that prevail at its moment of utterance. Decentering also implies recentering. In the words of Bauman, recentering is "the re-contextualization of the objectified discourse in new situations of use, and this too implicates power of control over discursive production" (Bauman 1987: 4).

At this point, the following questions may be asked: what are the implications of decentering and recentering discourse between corporations and communities? Outcomes of decentering and recentering are more likely to favor corporations than communities, because the only threat a community may pose to a corporation by making social justice claims is a slight delay in the corporation's profit making. On the contrary, communities may experience threats that range from ill health because of pollution to constraints on traditional ways of making a living. This continuum of threats has led communities to elaborate sophisticated versions of tradition as counter-hegemonic strategies that can be analyzed in the light of the concept of recentering. Williams (1977) argues that what we have to see in our analysis of indigenous people's discourses is not just a "tradition" but a selective tradition: "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification" (Williams 1977: 115). A discourse-centered approach to these interactions becomes relevant to the deconstruction of views of nature, tradition, and development. Understanding the motivations behind the "arts of impression management" of each party involved can be useful for social scientists and development practitioners in their efforts to provide thorough assessments that can contribute to conflict resolution guidelines for relations between corporations and communities in general.

## Conclusions

Mining corporations worldwide hold an instrumental view of nature, because their purpose is to produce economic added value through use of nonrenewable natural resources. This view is closely linked with the status quo concept of "sustainable development," which, in a neoliberal understanding, is made part of the legitimating of economic solutions for dealing with conflicting environmental and/or development policies. This reveals power struggles between dominant and subordinate social forces and discourses.

The author's role as an applied anthropologist in the encounter between Atacameño communities and CODELCO was to "overcommunicate" to the chief executive officers the relevance of a genuine respect for the culture of the affected populations if the corporation hoped to move from its historic negative relationship with the involved communities toward a more ethical relationship in the future.

In the end, the recommendations made to the corporation were (1) take the antenna from Mount Quimal, (2) hold a meeting with communities and do a presentation with detailed explanations about the implications of GABY mining project, and (3) offer financial support for the rituals of repair that community members had to perform to mend the damage done to the realm of the sacred. All these recommendations were followed by CODELCO.

One of the research questions this article addressed was why does a mining corporation shift its attitude of ignoring indigenous communities toward an awareness of the relevance of their “participation” (ie opinion) about a mining project? In response, it is argued here that such incorporations of environmentalism into the heart of neoliberalism’s central institutions has done far more to smooth social resistance to development projects than attempts to dismiss or reject environmental concerns outright. A second research question addressed in this article was how does the mining corporation communicate with indigenous communities relevant to

their mining interests? I argue that communication between corporations and communities in the frame of impression management involves power. Neoliberal ventures have increasingly assimilated environmentalism through key conscious discursive shifts such as the growing convergence of sustainable development with green capitalism. The art of “impression management” is just one such trend.

In closing, the assessment’s impacts on CODELCO’s *modus operandi* with indigenous peoples heavily influenced the contents of the formal policy statement on relations with indigenous communities later published by CODELCO in 2004. This publication was partly triggered as a result of the assessment. Chief executive officers (personal communication) considered the Mount Quimal experience as one of their successful case studies. The assessment presented here has made it clear that it was in the corporation’s best interest, and not just in the interest of the communities, to establish win-win relationships for a more sustainable development of this mountain region in the future.

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