Conflicts, Territories, and the Institutionalization of Post-Agrarian Economies on an Expanding Tourist Frontier in Quilotoa, Ecuador

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Summary. — World Heritage and associated conservation-based tourism can generate significant national income, yet the top-down efforts to open up new tourist destinations can displace communities that are meant to benefit. In Ecuador, the administration of Rafael Correa has invested substantially in both new infrastructure and community level training in order to steer world heritage visitors into a more diversified tourism sector. Our research examined the attempt of one community at the crater lake Quilotoa (Cotopaxi province) to maintain control of their economy in the face of increased state investments. We asked, under what circumstances is a community able to both define and defend a zone of locally managed economic development? To answer the question, we carried out a participatory GIS mapping project focused on sites of conflict and community assemblies and supplemented the mapping with an economic survey and detailed career histories. Our research finds that, since 1988, cycles of conflicts within the community of Quilotoa and between Quilotoa and its neighbors came to define an effective, yet informal, territorial boundary within which residents were highly committed to mobilize to defend their work and investments. Interviews show the importance of territory as political resources used by the community to escalate commercial conflicts into matters of wide public concern and ultimately establish the institutional basis of non-agricultural work.

Key words — andes, tourism, commons, territorialization

1. INTRODUCTION

South America is home to two archetypes of world heritage. The Galapagos Islands were the first site inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage list in 1978. In the 1960s, approximately 2000 visitors arrived in the islands annually, by 2005 numbers had increased to 120,000 per year (Epler, 2007). In Peru, the state created the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu in 1981; UNESCO granted it World Heritage Status for natural and cultural patrimony in 1983; and over 690,000 visitors made it to the historic Inca ruins in 2006, with 70,000 of them hiking the Inca trail to get there (WCMC, 2011).

Together these two sites epitomize central features of large-scale conservation and heritage tourism in the Global South and especially in Latin America. First, tourism is a significant and growing part of the world economy, accounting for 5 percent of global GDP (UN World Tourism Organization, 2015). In Ecuador, the sector generated $786 million in 2010, while in Peru it earned $2.74 billion (The World Bank, 2012). Second, tourism in developing countries frequently relies on heritage, as opposed to, say, simply “recreation.” Foreign visitors flock to sites that UNESCO has declared to be “irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration” with “universal application” (UNESCO, 2012). Third, the very success of these enterprises—both the promotion of humanity’s common heritage and the enhancement of tourism infrastructure—puts that heritage at risk (Chambers, 2010; Honey, 2008; Weaver, 2006). In response, national governments develop programs to divert tourists to new attractions to protect sites and diversify earnings. Fourth, even in the most regulated conservation sites, local residents seek ways to make a living from the cultural and natural resources found there (Castañeda, 2009; Little, 2004, 2009; Maxwell, 2012).

Taken together, the rapid economic growth, the national investment in new natural heritage projects, and high-stakes community conflicts make emerging tourist economies an important scientific opportunity and an urgent development issue. Ecuador offers a particularly valuable case. Trying to divert the Galapagos-Quito flow of tourists and their spending to hard pressed rural provinces, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa increased the ministry of tourism’s budget from $40 million per year in 2012 to $150 million per year 2013–17. With new funding, the state launched “a process of continuous...”

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improvement of tourism destinations” and “implementation of new routes” (Agencia Pública de Noticias del Ecuador y Suramérica, 2013). Such development has expanded tourism in established destinations and has opened new frontiers of activity, including in the Illiniza Ecological Reserve and its crown-jewel, the crater lake Quilotoa. Complementing infrastructure investment, the Ministry of Tourism has set up a new unit of administration, an official “Center of Community Tourism” or CTC. By 2014 more than 250 communities had entered into the process of becoming CTCs (Cabanilla, 2014). Among these, Quilotoa is perhaps the most successful, with over 90,000 visitors in 2014.

All this growth reveals the risks citizens face when the state champions conservation-based tourism on a national scale (Baird & Leslie, 2013; Dressier & Roth, 2011; Miller, Capiow, & Leslie, 2012; West, 2006). At the point when the state makes good on its investment promises, local people face enormous pressure to cede control of the distinctive economies of place amid regulations imposed by national ministries (Brand, 2001; Breglia, 2006). In the severest of cases, states remove agrarian communities entirely from the land they had been farming or raising animals on, or the centers of commerce they had developed (Colchester, 2004). More commonly, the state facilitates expansion of outside enterprise to develop tourist services in ways that concentrate earnings in a few hands and thwart local residents’ efforts to upgrade their work and grow earnings (Moore & Donaldson, 2016). Across Latin America, local entrepreneurs may defend their work by turning to traditions of community mobilization forged in periods of agrarian reform or in the course of indigenous social movements (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009). Such politics, though, may lead to confrontations, are time consuming, and risk reprisals.

In Quilotoa, Quichua-speaking residents have been fighting back and the circumstances of their struggle endow it with broader relevance. As in many zones in Latin America, Quilotoa is a rural district where agricultural earnings nonetheless are shrinking in importance falling behind the incomes offered to wages, diverse commercial livelihoods, and remittances (Berdegue, Escobal, and Bebbington, 2015; de Grammont and Martinez Valle, 2009; Lanjouw, 1998). The shift away from agrarian work within the countryside has profound effects for everything from state administration of rural districts to family structure within peasant households. Further, repeated conflicts between locally owned tourist businesses and the state management of natural resources pits a disadvantaged indigenous, ethnic minority against a government and the state management of emerging, place-based commercial resources. English historian Thompson (1993) has argued that the classic English systems of common usage relied not just on rules of use—concerning stinting, for example,—but on custom, which “was a field of change and of contest in which opposing interests made conflicting claims” (Thompson, 1993, p. 6). Extending Thompson’s analysis to current resource disputes, we contend that the assertion of territorial tradition to defend new claims of authority does not, in fact, guarantee consent. Rather, such tactics set narrower and widely intelligible terms for community debate and facilitating the growth of workable rules from hard-won conflict resolutions.

It is no surprise that, rural, indigenous people would assert a territorial identity for their trade association. The predictability, however, should not obscure their inventiveness. Indeed, we identify three tendencies that have emerged in the cycle of conflict that drive further organizational innovation. First, if worries about work amplify participation in territorial conflicts, then the reverse is true: collective conflicts are central to the productivity of community members’ non-agrarian commerce. That is, the political skill needed to restrict the encroachment of the state and competition from outside business rivals is a skill that can translate into practical, joint economic action (Schmitz & Nadvi, 1999). Second, the fights over work can flare up in many ways—among enterprises within the community, between communities, and with rival businesses from afar. Any of these “micro-clashes” can put the authority of a tourist organization in play and a successful outcome builds the capacity for risky “macro-clashes” with the state. Third, in a territorial dynamic that is tied to defending fruitful work, the state does not figure merely as opponent. Residents balance antagonism and accommodation as agencies of the state offer skills training, infrastructure upgrades, and marketing. Earnings rise when these programs work, even as increased state activity also jeopardizes local control. The conflictual public sphere stems in part from regular debates about just how to manage shifting alliances with the state to promote jobs and earnings.

In the pages below, we introduce the community of Quilotoa as it emerged in the 1960s in the epoch of land reform. We then further develop arguments about customary usages, regularize, defend, and authorize their use of resource conservation areas. The act of territorializing is simultaneously a claim to rightful use of resources and an assertion of collective authority and identity (Berdegüé, Bebbington, and Escobar, 2015; Manuel, 2010). It is partly a matter of defending sites of work and critical resources on the landscape. Yet, to evoke territory in the midst of economic struggle also points to a deeper play of values. In Ecuador, as elsewhere “the legitimacy of territorial claims is based on different notions of history and interpretations of the esthetic and productive values of the landscape” (Rasmussen, 0000 , this volume). Customary understandings of the land become a powerful institutional tool. “Customs do things,” as the anthropologist Sider (Sider, 2003 [1986], p. 177) explains, “They are not abstract formulations of, or searches for, meanings, although they may convey meaning. Customs are clearly connected to, and rooted in, the material and social realities of life and work”.

Supporting Rasmussen and Lund’s argument (this volume), the events in Quilotoa indicate that legitimacy and authority of new trade associations do not precede the ability to territorialize but are a consequence of it. The analysis offered in this paper focuses on the interplay between older customs of agrarian socioterritorial units (Ibarra, 2004) and the formation of novel, territorially defined trade organizations that have the power to resist state management of emerging, place-based commercial resources. English historian Thompson (1993) has argued that the classic English systems of common usage relied not just on rules of use—concerning stinting, for example,—but on custom, which “was a field of change and of contest in which opposing interests made conflicting claims” (Thompson, 1993, p. 6). Extending Thompson’s analysis to current resource disputes, we contend that the assertion of territorial tradition to defend new claims of authority does not, in fact, guarantee consent. Rather, such tactics set narrower and widely intelligible terms for community debate and facilitating the growth of workable rules from hard-won conflict resolutions.

Most importantly, a critical institutional problem of community development lies at the heart such rapid scaling of tourist economies. Nearly two decades ago, Agrawal and Gibson (1999) warned that simplistic assumptions about communities doom scholarly understanding of effective, bottom-up participation in conservation and development. They urged a shift away “the mythic community” (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, p. 640) and its vision of a small spatial unit, a homogeneeuous society, and shared values. Instead, problems of local resource-use needed to be framed as institutional ones: what rules will enable local, long-term use of resources? Under what circumstances can people legitimately challenge and change the rules?

In this paper, we look at details of territorial practices amidst conflict in order to identify the ways that people
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