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Activism and Ethnography in the Basque Anti-Fracking Movement

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2015 CHESS Report

With growing concerns in Europe over energy independence and sustainability, hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” has become a recent environmental controversy across Europe. While the wealthiest member states EU such as France and Germany have implemented bans or moratoriums, the pressure to drill concentrates on peripheral debt-burdened countries such as Ireland, Romania, and Spain. Starting in 2011, a globally-networked grassroots movement emerged in response to fracking exploratory permits across the Basque-Spanish border. In the spring and summer of 2015, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Gasteiz, in the Basque Country, just as it became a hub of transnational anti-fracking activism. Drawing on insights from the fields of political ecology and science studies, this paper begins to explore how communities positioned at the frontlines of climate and environmental conflict are beginning invent, circulate, and mobilize new interpretations of capitalism, progress, and society’s relationship with the natural world.

KEYWORDS: hydraulic fracturing, energy, environmental justice, degrowth, Basque environmental movements.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, fossil fuel extraction has been concentrated in the Global South and rural parts of the United States, Canada and Russia. However, with the depletion of global oil reserves and recent advances in technology, fossil fuel extraction is tentatively and unevenly advancing into many new parts of the world. Hydraulic fracturing, the process of drilling horizontally to extract natural gas from shale rock, is one of several new “unconventional” methods designed to reach fossil fuels in once-inaccessible geological formations. In the United States, hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” is credited with the creation of a “Shale Gas Revolution” that has lowered domestic gas prices and helped recover the national economy. However, this invasive and little-understood practice is also known to produce devastating effects on local environment and public health.

A global grassroots movement has emerged in response to industry efforts to implement fracking throughout as France and Germany have implemented bans or moratoriums, the pressure to drill concentrates on poorer regions including Ireland, Romania, and Spain. The global anti-fracking movement is characterized by a strong spirit of internationalism, commitment to non-hierarchical forms of organizing, and popular participation (Steeger 2015). This spirit is reflected in the popular anti-fracking slogan “Not here, not anywhere”.

Starting in 2011, the Spanish Basque Country is one area where the global anti-fracking movement has been resistance, including symbolic local political campaigns, such as the Consejos Libre de Fracking, protest, street theater, and legislative reform. In 2015, Fracking Ez succeeded in their short-term goal of banning fracking in the Basque Country, with the passage of the Iniciativa Legislativa Popular (ILP). This citizen’s initiative, written by members of Fracking Ez, was signed by over 103,000 Basque citizens. and passed into law by the Basque Parliament. They continue to support nearby anti-fracking organizations in neighboring regions, and continue to bring attention to issues such as climate change and the Transnational Trade and Investment Partnership.

In the spring and summer of 2015, I conducted ethnographic research among the first and largest chapter of Fracking Ez in the city of Gasteiz, the capital of Autonomous Community of the Basque Country in Spain. For three months I lived among this lively movement and participated as an activist-researcher. This research was conducted as part of a six-month ethnographic research project through the 2015 Cultural Heritage of European Societies and Spaces program in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Fracking captured my interest as a global issue at the center of several important 21st century social and environmental issues, namely, energy, climate change, financial crisis, and

the growing crisis in representational democracy. I was particularly interested in how anti-fracking activists negotiated assembly-style decision-making and the construction of expertise. Ethnography, it seemed to me, could help shed light on how global, organized responses to global technologies can be manifested and experienced locally. Initial research questions for this project included:

[1] How do grassroots anti-fracking groups produce and circulate **alternative ways of knowing** about energy and the environment?

[2] How is the anti-fracking movement in the Basque Country situated within larger national and **transnational networks** of environmental activists, scholars, and scientists?

[3] What **conceptions of democracy** and civil society are mobilized by anti-fracking activists in their work? How do these conceptions relate to **ideas about ecology** and local environment?

In the following paper, I present ethnographic data in order to partially and tentatively address each of these questions. I begin by offering brief historical overview of the fracking issue in the Basque Country, followed by a discussion of my ethnographic methods and key literature. I then move on to explore several themes that emerged organically during my research through the lens of my original research questions. One of these themes is the knowledge politics and the cultural construction of scientific expertise. Drawing from sociologist Steven Epstein's notion of "cultural authority", I trace the effects of the highly-politicized knowledge gap in the debate around hydraulic fracturing, and how that led to potent forms of self-instruction and popular education (Epstein 2005). Another theme I explore here is how these activists conceived of the relationship between society and nature. In an attempt to begin mapping the salient discourses of this movement, I flag a Marxian-inspired notion of radical ecology as a key discourse within the movement. Lastly, I give a

brief description of Frackanpada, a week-long international antifracking encampment or *acanpada* hosted by Fracking Ez in the countryside of Gasteiz. Frackanpada was the thread that ran throughout my fieldwork- from literally my very first week to my very last. In addition to exploring these themes and events, I make preliminary steps toward identifying future paths for further research.

BACKGROUND

In 1975, the death of Francisco Franco led to a watershed moment which resulted in the reconstitution of the Spanish government in the form of a constitutional monarchy (Redero San Roman, 1993). This led to a resurgence in Leftism and social movements throughout Spain, including various manifestations of Basque nationalist and independence movements. These monumental political events in the late 1970's coincided with the worldwide spread of radical environmentalism, ecofeminism, and anti-nuclear activism. (McFall 2012). In the Basque Country, ecology groups conjoined with anti-Franco mobilizations and Basque nationalist groups to present the nation's most successful effort against nuclear power. The Basque town of Lemoniz provides perhaps the most famous historical example. This militant struggle (and ultimately successful) struggle went on well into the 1990's (Costejà 2004, McFall 2012).

Throughout the following decades, the Basque Country remained a recurring site of environmental conflict with the central Spanish state. From 1989 to 1992, the militant anti-capitalist and nationalist group ETA became involved in the struggle against the A-15 freeway in the valley of Leizaran, kidnapping and killing several police officers. In the 1990's, another important symbolic struggle emerged around construction of the Itoiz Dam and the damming of the Irati River in Navarre. This project still threatens dozens of villages

and remains a site of ongoing struggle. Another ongoing struggle is that of the Trans-Pyrénées high speed train (TAV) (Barcena 2001). These large-scale infrastructural development projects (or “stupid development projects” as my participants called them) represent state-led efforts have come into conflict with conservation of natural heritage.

claims for Basque autonomy. Defense of the land featured prominently in the discourses of these movements, which sought to maintain the region’s rural character and cultural connections to the land. ...Engage troubled past and present with criminalization, and violent forms of resistance. -militant anti-development , patrimonio,. Symbolic content in the Basque imagination” ...criminzation ..orientation anticapitalist. Although the anti-fracking movement has not engaged militant tactics, (and indeed pursues a colorful ascetic) these struggles- two of which are ongoing- linger in the collective memory.

Yet in order to understand the Basque anti-fracking movement, one must also view it within a transnational context, including the intensifying hybridization of energy and finance in Europe. **Powerful transnational actors such as the European Energy Commission** promote fracking as a way to answer growing geopolitical concerns over **energy security** as well as answer Europe’s ongoing **financial crisis**. **Wealthy member states such as France and Germany have banned fracking or imposed strict moratoriums. Meanwhile, the pressure to drill concentrates** on hard-hit nations such as Ireland, Romania, and Spain.

Figure 1 Oil and gas exploration concessions. 7.1.2015

In 2014, the European Commission’s (EC) published the 2020 Energy Security Strategy, a comprehensive policy framework which outlines member state quotas for fossil fuel storage. The document encourages natural gas development and profiles several gas development

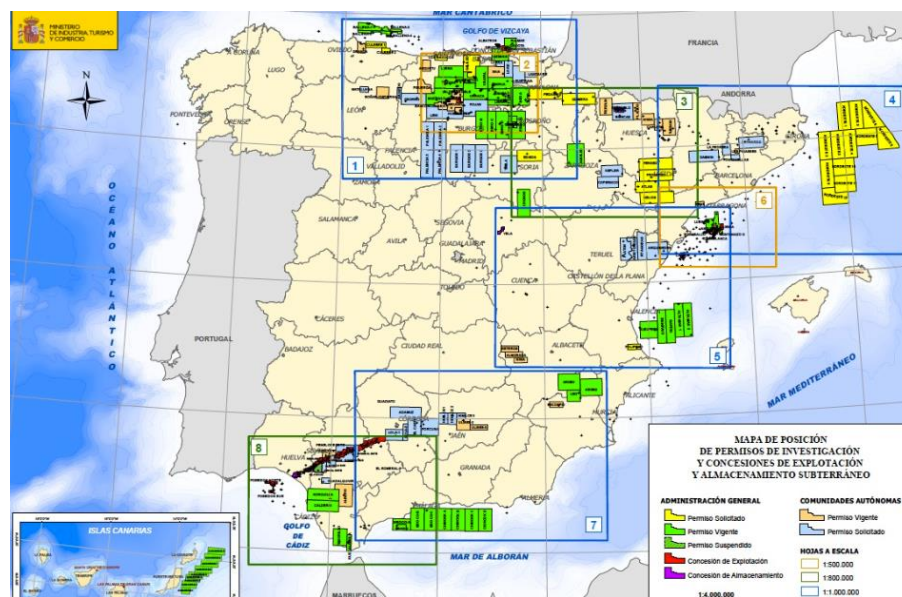
projects. One of the projects outlined in the EU Energy Security Strategy is a “virtual” pipeline bringing Saharan natural gas to refineries in Spain from across the Mediterranean. Global gas marketization also sits at the forefront of two recent transnational trade agreements in Europe: The Transnational Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States and the Canadian-European Trade Agreement (CETA). Both TTIP and CETA are massive deals; together they are posed to encompass a population of more than 800 million people and 54% of the global GDP. One of Europe’s most eagerly-sought conditions of TTIP is the lifting of a decades-old ban on United States gas exports. European negotiators hope to import liquid natural gas (LNG) to Europe, where it will be refined and exported again.

Spain is a country with virtually no history of an extraction economy, yet has a covetously-high capacity to develop renewable energy.

If a European gas market does emerge, Spain is geographically positioned to act as a middle-man between key exporters such as the United States and Algeria and importers such as France. Spain is currently the only European country to export natural gas without producing it. They take in 1/3 of Algerian gas exports. In 2012, 528 cubic meters of gas, 14% of the EU’s total gas imports. The creation of local gas production is part of a broader plan to transform Spain’s position in the European Union.

There are currently over 70 permissions for exploratory fracking operations within the Spanish state. More than half of these are concentrated in the Basque-Cantabrian Basin, a jurrasic-era geological play that extends beneath three culturally and politically distinct regions: Burgos, Cantabria and the Basque Country. These permissions are held largely between two companies, Trofagas Hidrocarbuous, a subsidiary of BNK Petroleum, and the

Basque Society for Hydrocarbons (*Sociedad de Hidrocarburos de Euskadi*) [SHESA], a public company established by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). Below is a map from the central Spanish government's department of Industry, Tourism, and Commerce website which maps the current exploratory permissions. The different colors representing the type of fuel as well as the level of government which granted the permission.



METHODS

My CHES research was designed as a six-month, multi-sited ethnographic research project. During this research, I chose to focus on grassroots anti-fracking organizations, national and international NGOs, and activist-academic organizations. My methods included participant observation, interviews and media analysis. Over time however, my research took on a more committed form of participatory-action.

I spent January through March 2015 at my first research site of Barcelona, Spain. There, I attended several important conferences on fracking brought together by Catalanian and Spanish ecologists. These conferences gave me the chance to witness a wide variety of opinions and positions. For instance, one of these conferences was held in eco-squat in the foothills of Barcelona. This event led to the formation of Frackanpada among groups such as European Youth for Action, 350.org Barcelona, the Cantabrian Anti-fracking Assembly, and Fracking Ez.

Museu Maritim de Barcelona, “What Drives European Energy” held on Feb 23rd to 25th.

The next day, a separate meeting was held among grassroots anti-fracking groups, including several of the same

While in Barcelona, I immersed myself in activist-academic initiative such as the Environmental Justice Organizations, Liabilities and Trade, based out of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. One of the main projects of this organization was to map environmental justice conflicts.

the Degrowth Collective, and other radical ecology groups. Fracking kept me in constant motion. As I scribbled my notes on cars and buses, in bars and cafes, fracking seemed ephemeral; somehow nowhere yet everywhere at once. Fracking appeared at kitchen tables, meetinghouses, squats, and union offices. It appeared on television and on computer screens.

In Gasteiz I lived among Fracking Ez Araba members and developed a sense of their everyday concerns, values and practices. The core of this group was constituted by about a dozen individuals from diverse backgrounds. Among my regular participants, the youngest was 16 years old and the oldest was 74. Some members of Fracking Ez had been lifelong Leftists and activists- others identified as politically unaligned or were wholly new to

militancia (militancy). My interviewees (both formal and informal) included academics, parliamentarians, firemen, artists, paid NGO staff, university students, squatters, and schoolteachers. Over the course of my participant observation, I engaged in countless conversations. In addition to more informal methods, I analyzed written materials, including over 40 books and official reports, and conducted 15 formal interviews.

During the three months I spend living and working among these activists in Gasteiz, I helped prepare a weeklong, international protest encampment called Frackanpada. Frackanpada was an international effort that took months of preparation by multiple activist groups. Frackanpada's peculiar name is a mash-up of Basque and English. While activists adopted the English term "fracking", *acampada* is a Basque term (although very close the Spanish equivalent *acampada*) which refers to a protest encampment. Although I do not discuss that event prominently here, it made me intelligible to group members (I became "the American" here to provide support) and shaped the trajectory of my work.

About three months into my research, my project took a turn toward activist research. I became involved with a project to design an international anti-fracking encampment called Frackanpada. Frackanpada would be hosted by a group called Fracking Ez and would take place outside their home-base in the city of Gasteiz-Vitoria in the Basque Country. Throughout the spring and summer of 2015, I lived on a daily basis with Fracking Ez (Fracking No) I interviewed members of Fracking Ez, as well as the international support committee. We wrote collaborative documents, shared ideas and insights. As I came to learn more about fracking, and grow more attached to the people and places threatened by fracking. As a American, I was interpolated as someone who had greater insights into fracking, the energy industry, and extraction economies. This helped denaturalize the kinds of social and environmental sacrifice Americans are expected to make on a daily basis.

LITERATURE

Historically, the communities most threatened by fossil fuel extraction are rural indigenous communities (Escobar 1996, 2001; Martinez-Alier et al 2014, Ballard & Banks XXX). With the depletion of global fossil fuel reserves and the subsequent advance of unconventional fuels into the Global North, densely populated areas, and new ecological zones are being subject to fossil fuel extraction.

There is a rapidly-growing social science literature on hydraulic fracturing in the United States. Key findings from these studies suggest that relations between state, corporate, and civil society actors are changing dramatically under the new regime of “unconventional” fuel. In 2014, *Journal for Political Ecology* published a special issue of the journal dedicated to ethnographic accounts and “the new anthropology of energy”. The volume’s editors, Anastasia Hudgins & Amanda Poole, contribute their own examination of the material and discursive construction of policy, public perception, and manufactured consent in the Pennsylvania Marcellus Shale region. Other anthropologists, such as Simona Perry and Kirk Jalbert have assumed community-based approaches in their accounts of the impacts of fracking on public health and local economies. (Hudgins & Poole, 2014, Willow and Wiley 2012, Jalbert & Perry 2013). At the Central European University, Tamara Steeger has conducted a discursive analysis of the global anti-fracking movement.

This research was influenced by an actor-network and science studies framework. Such approaches attend to the dialogical relationship between non-human actors (material objects, animals, geological formations) and sets of meaning (Latour 2005, Ong & Collier 2005, Epstein 2013). This analytic approach allows one to see fracking not only as a material practice, but also as a constellation of discourses and meanings. I have been

particularly inspired by sociologist Steven Epstein, who looks at the construction of scientific expertise among AIDS activists. Epstein gives us the notion of “cultural authority” which refers to the cultural practices and norms that inevitably shape the production of scientific discourse. Another key text in the formation of my project from science and technology studies was Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier’s 2005 edited volume, *Global Assemblages*. Following work laid by Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, John Law, assemblages break the boundary between society and nature. Fracking represents a global assemblage, or global form: which can be “abstracted, transported, and embedded within different localities” (Ong & Collier 2005). The 21st century is distinguished by the spread of global forms as ongoing social and political processes establish the complex infrastructure and conditions which global forms require (Ong & Collier 2005; 12). The study of assemblages and global forms like fracking unbinds the ethnographic research site and calls the ethnographer to attend to “the actual global”; an unstable, yet traceable network of actors and effects (Ong & Collier 2005; 12, Latour, 2012, Heller 2013).

Ethnological accounts of the Basque people date back to the 1930s. Led by notable native ethnologists Julio Caro Baroja and Jose Miguel Barandiaran, these early investigations focused on folklore and understanding the legacy of pre-Christian mythology. Basque scholar William Douglass at the Center for Basque Studies argues for approaches that blend anthropological and historical analysis. In the 1998 edited volume, *Essays in Basque Social Anthropology and History*, Douglass and others foreground ongoing themes of migration, feminism, and political repression and violence (Douglass 1998, Aretxaga 2000). The Basque Country is also home to a rich set of contemporary social movements. Anthropologist Jacqueline Urla has accounted for the Basque language revitalization, youth, and hip-hop movements with particular attention to how minority

languages like Euskara pose unique problems for the project of modernity. Since the 1970's, the Basque Ecology Movement has had a close relationship to on the ground struggles such as protest movements against the high-velocity train, Itoiz Dam in Navarre, and the Anti-Nuclear Movement (Barcena 2001)

[1] PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FRACKING

Grassroots anti-fracking groups produce and circulate their own ways of knowing about energy and the environment by using online, open source technology.

Grassroots anti-fracking groups produce and circulate their own ways of knowing about energy and the environment by using online, open source technology

Hydraulic fracturing was developed in Texas in the 1990's by the Haliburton Company. At a typical fracking site, the drill bores at depths of up to 5,000 meters and then another several thousand meters horizontally through the rock layers. The well is then "stimulated" by a high pressure injection of sand, water, corrosives, lubricants, and gelling agents. These caustic chemicals create fissures in the rock, which releases the gas. Slowly, the gas rises to the surface, where it is captured, condensed, and placed onto shipping trucks. The trucks transport the gas to a refinery, where it is converted into liquid form or LNG and shipped again or sent via pipeline. The LNG must then be re-gasified a different kind of refinery, where it is finally sent to consumers.

As of 2013, over 2.5 million wells in the United States had been hydraulically fractured. According to mainstream American media outlets like Forbes Business Magazine, fracking is a "revolution" which promises to usher in a new "golden age" of cheap fossil fuels. High

level politicians corroborate in the industry's optimistic predictions. For example, in his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama declared his support for fracking on the grounds that it could provision the United States with 100 years of energy and create over 600,000 jobs by 2022 (Synder 2012). Powerful institutions in the European Union have also jumped on board. In the EU 2014 Energy Strategy, the European Commission promotes fracking as a "clean" transition fuel and an answer to Europe's ongoing economic crisis.

Environmental activists, public health advocates, and local communities contest these rosy definitions. These stakeholders emphasize the social and environmental consequences of fracking, which include irreversible groundwater contamination, lethal levels of air pollution, sinkholes, explosions, and even earthquakes. For these reasons, activist Bill McKibben declared fracking "the ugliest word in the English language" (Willow and Wiley 2012). However, the fossil fuel industry has been able to conceal the lived consequences of fracking in unprecedented ways. This traces back to 2005, when the Bush administration passed revisions to the Energy Policy Act which excepted the fossil fuel industry from hundreds of environmental provisions. Crucially, the hydrocarbon industry was no longer obliged to disclose the chemicals used in unconventional fuels (such as hydraulic fracturing) to the public. The rationale was that companies in a burgeoning industry have the right to protect their "trade secrets" from competitors. In highly-fracked areas such as Pennsylvania and Ohio's Marcellus Shale, public health officials and local communities are unable to access basic information about the possible contaminants in their water. People living over fracked land report psychical and neurological symptoms such as blurred vision, vertigo, fatigue, skin rashes, respiration problems, and cancer (Willow and Wiley 2012, Perry 2012). Yet their doctors can only speculate as to what is making them sick.

The 2010 HBO documentary *Gasland* brought these issues to global attention. The film follows activist-filmmaker Josh Fox as he tries to piece together the truth about this mysterious technology as it is being brought to his hometown in Pennsylvania. The film features rather shocking footage with dead animals, ruined landscapes and seriously ill people. In one famous scene, a man Wyoming holds a cigarette lighter to a stream of tap water and the entire sink sets ablaze.

The international popularity of *Gasland* helped shape a swift, determined anti-fracking response in many parts of Europe, including the Basque Country. The film is free to watch online and has been translated into many languages. Although some activists in Fracking Ez had previously participated in Basque social movements, for many, *Gasland* represented the first time they had felt compelled by a social or environmental cause. Mariana is one of these activists. She credits *Gasland* not only as exposing her to the issue of fracking, but also as a way of helping her come to a critical understanding about the logics and institutions which govern our everyday lives.

[Mariana] At first, I thought, “fijate! [Which literally translates to “fix yourself” but means “okay” or “good”] Somebody might find work in this”. I didn't know anything. I never stopped to think about it, nor about fossil fuels, or the system. No, I lived in my own world. And then I was talking with some friends who told me about the documentary *Gasland*, and I thought "okay". So I downloaded it and watched it. And then I started to investigate a little more, and I started to think, "They're going to this *here*? It's madness. It can't be, it can't be."

[Eleanor] So for you it was the movie *Gasland*? I've seen the film and it's really powerful. What did it mean to you?

[Mariana] Well, of course, *Gasland* is what made me realize what happens when they find gas. But also it made me realize *what gas is*. What do they have to do in order to extract it? What

type of life does it require, what type of system, you know? That's what it made me get.

Gasland was the first way of opening up my eyes a little bit...And I said, "*Madre mia*, what is this?"

As Marian indicates, Gasland is not the only source online. A quick YouTube query of "fractura hidraulica" brings up dozens of informational videos and tutorials, many of which are quite technical and in depth. Freely-available online materials like these eliminate some of the challenges of internationally-coordinated activism. Anti-fracking groups across the globe share informative and educational materials such as YouTube videos, Prezi demonstrations, and interactive mapping tools. For instance, in preparation for the international event Frackanpada, Fracking Ez circulated their own Prezi slideshow which featured over fifty slides with detailed graphs, diagrams, and high-resolution images. One of their partner organizations in Barcelona presented the slideshow at a public talk or *charla* at an ecologically-oriented squat called Can Masdeu. In Catalonia, even seasoned ecologists were just beginning to find out about hydraulic fracturing and exploratory permissions in their own region. Through global communication technologies, accumulated knowledge and counter-discourses could be presented to them in an instantaneous fashion.

Another practice which framed knowledge production was a range of practices called *trabajo de calle*- Street work.

After informing themselves, Fracking Ez set out to educate the public...

Eleanor: What is the objective of the movement against fracking?

Guru: So, obviously at the start, to prohibit fracking, and then farther (*mas alla*). The second step is to try and

raise the consciousness of the people (*concienciar*) in order to change, in order so that they think about changing this energetic model and therefore the economic [model], and therefore the political [model], and therefore the social [model]. You know? But *beginning* with the prohibition against fracking. And then later *mas alla* (farther). At least that's what I say.

Eleanor: And what is *mas alla*? What does "mas alla" mean?

Guru: So the first step is "fracking ez". First, fracking *NO*. But of course we were forced to do fracking, because fracking is what was going to be done. "What is this energetic system that we have- *why* do we have this energetic system? All of this is raising the consciousness of the people..."

Why do we have to change the energy system? Of course, in order to change the energetic system we have to change the economic system, and to change the economic system, we have to change the political system. AND all of that with connections to social change. That's what I mean by "mas alla". Its, boof! [She swooshes her arm in an arc over her head].

I laugh, "See *that's* why I'm interested in fracking!"

She replies, also laughing, "Of course! And all of this I still I hadn't seen until I started, you know? Yeah, I'd talked about "oh well, capitalism!" But they were abstract concepts that live in an orbit far away from *my* planet. Ya como vale (It is how it is). Capitalism = bad. But I'd never gone there. It did not seem like a part of my everyday life. . So here I am, I come to these meetings and listen to the people, you know, and in four years I've learned a barbarity (*una barbaridad*).

Activists in the midst of that crisis are beginning invent, circulate, and mobilize new interpretations of what the future could be like. We ought to pay critical attention to these narratives and imaginaries. They mobilize people and shape how they engage (or don't engage) with political parties, and one another. They perhaps, in some small way, indicate where we might choose to go

[3] DISCOURSES OF THE MOVEMENT

Social movements are constituted by discourses and dialogic relationships with society at large. In this section, I explore the in Gasteiz.

Drawing from Michel Foucault, anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls attention to the epistemic and ontological ruptures that are created by environmental conflict. That deconstruct the conceptual binary between society and nature.

Anti-fracking activists **reject elite narratives** that fracking can meaningfully alleviate the economic crisis- and **question the legitimacy** of a political and economic system which prescribes fossil fuels just as the Earth is hurdling into ecological catastrophe. ****This movement has really been both popular and radicalizing. I think this reflects a deep, collective unwillingness to continue** with the prevailing political and economic order.**

When I first began my research, I expected activists to voice many concerns about democracy. Many online publications about fracking, had described fracking as a “crisis of democracy”. The centrality of “democracy” in the global antifracking movement is confirmed by analysis of the global anti-fracking movement by sociologist Tamara Steeger.

Furthermore, recent urban movements in Spain have also raised important questions about the nature of democracy and representation. For example, the 15-M in 2011 popularized the idea of *democracia real* (real democracy). Preliminary analysis of written materials from the anti-fracking movement revealed to me that they shared similar commitments to principles of autonomy, horizontality and decentralized forms of organization. I was curious to see how

anti-fracking activists might recontextualize and adapt notions like *democracia real* in a contemporary rural context. However, through ethnography, I noticed that even though they were engaging with such practices, they were not really talking much about democracy. Rather, they spoke in very temporally-rich terms about a “transition” away from a society of “endless economic growth”, and the holistic changes necessary to bring society back within “the limits of nature”.

One evening with the anti-fracking group Fracking Ez, I finally received a direct answer to my questions about democracy. I was at a meeting with Fracking Ez Alava in the city of Gasteiz/Vitoria in their offices. Fracking Ez Alava is arguably the region’s largest anti-fracking group, and enjoy a significant amount of public support. Through the sale of t-shirts and other grassroots fundraising, Fracking Ez pay for a small, bathroom-less storefront space. That night, about nine of us crammed into tiny folding chairs between the unfinished wood t-shirt racks and a long, plastic table.

We were discussing how to title the daily plenary discussions at an upcoming, weeklong *acampada* outside Gasteiz. It had already been decided that first-hand stories of local fracking struggles would constitute the first plenary. “Related struggles” would be the title of the second. And the third would address the systemic roots of these socio-environmental issues. I suggested that they include something in the title about democracy. Eyes widened and a collective “*Oof!*” rose from around the table. Manu, a leader in the group, chuckled and leaned back in his chair,

“Democracy is a little bit of a complicated word here!” he said. I asked why.

“It’s about the context” he explained. The notion of democracy isn’t problematic, but rather that we have to be careful while “constructing a discourse” (*construir un discurso*). Since the end of the dictatorship, the notion of democracy had been used to squash the Basque

independence movement. While liberation groups such as XXX had been celebrated as liberatory anti-fascists,

“Power always identifies with it” he said, “Yet it’s not even a reality.” That night Fracking Ez settled on the title “*Capitalism Desbocado*” which translates to “runaway capitalism” or “capitalism unleashed”. The idea of “runaway capitalism” can be interpreted in a number of ways. It speaks to processes of privatization and financialization in Europe, through which areas of public interest such as energy are increasingly subject to market control. It brings to mind how the innovation of horizontal drilling brings the dislocations and literal fragmentation of capitalism to a geological frontier. However, by putting it into frantic motion, the idea of “runaway capitalism” also destabilizes capitalism. In the construction of their discourse, Fracking Ez wanted to suggest that capitalism in this state can be toppled over and reeled in.

This interpretation of “runaway capitalism” is consistent with the “degrowth” philosophy that framed their understanding of fracking. Rather than problematizing fracking in terms of flattened principles such as “democracy” and “non-democracy”, they locate fracking at the forefront of an impending crisis that is created not only *by* capitalism, but also *for* capitalism.

In the following excerpt I talk to Esti, a Basque woman about my age, who is new to activism. Here she explains this perspective in her own words:

EF: What do you see as the deeper cause of fracking?

Esti: The fact that we are in a system- well, capitalism, basically- where the economy is based on infinite growth. This is not possible to sustain. And this is all based on a very cheap energy source, which is petroleum. Now peak oil was already some years ago, so we don’t have much more of this energy available. And it seems that some

people, especially the ones who govern, are not happy with changing that system.

They'd rather destroy everything than admit that capitalism has to be changed, or removed and replaced by some other system.

When Esti says “they'd rather destroying everything” she expresses a picture of fracking that circulated among my research participants. Communities living over fracked land experience a bewildering array health issues including blurred vision, vertigo, fatigue, skin rashes, respiration problems, and cancer. Fracking permanently contaminates groundwater. In addition to that, it causes noise and air pollution, occupies enormous amounts of land, is highly prone to chemical spills and explosions. The cartoon here refers to the geological disruptions brought about by fracking such as sinkholes and earthquakes.

This destruction coupled with rapid global speculation gave many people a sense that fracking really is poised to destroy the world- and not just among activists. Another interlocutor during my research described fracking as “sucking the blood out of the heart of the Earth”. This “apocalyptic imaginary” is just one conception of the future at play in the fracking debate.

Next, another key turn in Esti's logic is in how she defines capitalism as a “system of endless growth” based in petroleum. This is the crux of the conceptual maneuver I'm trying to unpack. For Esti, capitalism depends materially on petroleum, and petroleum is about to run out. Diego, a specialist on fracking at a Madrid-based NGO, also makes this link:

EF: What comes to mind when you think about fracking?

Diego: Well, I guess it's kind of a common picture. Speculation. I see, you know, someone trying to get the last bit of dust from the cake. It's is a desperate thing, trying to get the last bit of hydrocarbons out of the earth...But I think it's also a signal.

[Fracking] is not only a danger for society, a risk. It is a sign for the end of a society, this civilization based on endless economic growth.

EF: Can you say more about this civilization?

Well, it is, you know, a civilization not connected with the limits of nature, a culture of constant social and eco

While elites look forward to “another century” of cheap fossil fuels, Diego and Esti see an imminent collision between an “endless” society and the intransigent laws of nature. Arturo Escobar’s post-structural account of nature is helpful here. A liberal environmentalist might problematize fracking as a threat to nature, which she sees as needing our protection and management. Yet radical ecologists like Diego, see an unyielding nature that poised to undo capitalist society.

The future that many anti-fracking activists see is conflictual, and characterized by inevitable and holistic transformations to society. In this context, activism against fracking constitutes the *recognition* of a greater conflict that is already in motion. In doing so, it begins to occupy the possibility of a new society, on that is sensitive to nature’s boundaries.

A further line of inquiry could be a more in-depth discussion of this narrative. And the intellectual roots of this narrative. Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society* (2003) Such an inquiry would shed light on how Leftism is evolving with ecological concerns. The debate between climate change and peak oil.

Amaranta, climate change activist who stirred a great deal of attention at frackanpada for saying that the fracking movement had made an “unforgivable” mistake.

At the everyday level, this post-Marxist narrative co-exists with a colorful, celebratory, and humorous sensibility. We can see this sensibility in their propaganda materials. For instance, in the poster for Frackanpada, are presented with what appears to be a child's drawing scribbled overtop a fracking schematic. The schematic is rigid, with straight lines and no color. In contrast, the child's drawing is vibrant and playful.



This sensibility was shared among other Basque movements such as Gora Gasteiz.

In her global bestseller This Changes Everything, left-leaning journalist Naomi Klein frames the climate crisis as the final collision between capitalism and the natural world. Anti

In her analysis of French GMO debate, Chaia Heller shows how French peasant farmers leveled contested notions of food “quality”, emphasizing the social, “solidarity” logic beneath their usage. State actors promoted a quantitative notion of “quality” based on measurable indicators and standards. Mobilized peasant farmers, however, mobilized a cultural notion of quality based on qualitative features such as technique, authenticity, and tradition.

Notions of “Transition” in the Fracking debate followed a similar pattern.

In addition to this vibrant sensibility, everyday operations in Vitoria were based on principles of autonomy, non-hierarchy and consensus. In practice, this means that Fracking Ez have no administrators, presidents, or paid staff. They also require no formalized form of membership and, despite their size, have avoided registering as an official civil society

organization. Manuelle, one of my key informants, expressed this in spatial terms, “We don’t look to Madrid”, he would say, “We keep our feet on the ground”.

Although there was far from consensus around the explicit politics of anarchism, the anarchist concept of prefigurative politics captures how mirroring of present means and future ends. In his 2011 ethnography *Direct Action*, anthropologist David Graeber goes into depth on prefigurative politics. The term has also been used to describe contemporary movements such as 15-M and Occupy Wall Street.

Ethicist Mathijs van de Sande argues that prefigurative politics is useful to social scientists as a method of analysis. In contrast to a “consequentialist” perspective which seek to evaluate movements in terms of ‘outcomes’, ‘intentions’ and ‘achievements’, a prefigurative approach evaluates a movement’s objectives by the social relations it enacts.

We can view Frackanpada through this lens by looking the internationalism of the event. And by looking at the participatory, assembly-style decision making it sought to enact. Another principle the movement sought to manifest was a new energy model.

[3] GLOBAL PRACTICES

Among these environmental **mobilizations** in the Basque Country, the anti-fracking movement is distinguished by close relationships with similar groups in neighboring regions.

event through the lens of a “global form” (Ong & Collier 2005).

The global anti-fracking movement is characterized by a strong spirit of internationalism, commitment to non-hierarchical forms of organizing, and popular participation (Steeger 2015). This spirit is reflected in the popular anti-fracking slogan “Not here, not anywhere”.

**This movement has really been both popular and radicalizing.

a deep, collective unwillingness to continue with the prevailing political and economic order.**

- Encampment protests are themselves a “global assemblage” that is becoming increasingly common across Europe.

Vitoria became a transnational hub for the movement in the summer of 2015.

Small in size, but ambitious in scope.

The weeklong anti-fracking encampment *Frackanpada*. The sensibility of frackanpada was highly celebratory, experimental and creative. Frackanpada was particularly welcome to children, as activists erected their own DIY children’s space and created kids programming around topics such as gardening, and renewable. In one half the camp, energy was generated through solar panels and small wind turbines. While these practices extend beyond typical

understandings of prefigurative politics, they show how activists tried to bring the features of a future society to the here and now.

One of the outstanding features of Frackanpada was the art space. Over the course of a week, art was prepared for a march through the countryside to the center of the city. Paul, a self-described “artist” from the United States poetically ties together crisis, prefigurative politics, temporality, and imagination:

[A]rt can play a huge role in helping people understand that there's more than one story, that there **are infinite future possibilities**, not just a narrowing window of apocalypse that neoliberalism has defined as reality.

In contrast to Esti and Diego, who emphasize inevitable collision between nature and capitalism, Paul poses infinite future possibilities. He continues,

There's a phrase I like a lot, which a friend used, which is "**remember the future**". Right now we're at a critical moment, not just because of the climate catastrophe, but because we have so much traditional knowledge on this planet right now that might well be gone in 20 years. **There's a whole generation of elders alive right now who have all the information we need on how to live sustainably.** And we need to appreciate that knowledge, and harvest it, and pass it on.

In telling us to “remember the future”, Paul reminds us that the past becomes a tool to make sense of we are headed. We “remember” the future both in terms of remembering to be mindful about the future, and in terms of using the past to construct and imagine the future. Traditional knowledge, indigeneous... His words also reach back to Escobar and the idea that social movements are privileged sites of imagining social change. – traditional and indigenous knowledge as a basis of transformation.

*Frackanpada raised tensions.



Colorful celebrations like this are typical in the Basque Country, which has struggled with decades of violence, the label of terrorism.

CONCLUSION

The word ‘crisis’ traces its origins through Latin and Greek (krisis), translating literally at various periods to judgement, decision, or separation. In popular use, ‘crisis’ refers to a moment of systemic breakdown and disarray. A wide range of academic and popular

thinkers- from Slavoj Žižek to Naomi Klein- have called attention to the ways in which crisis spark new ways of imagining the social world. Social movements “intervene in the knot where everything is decided”. Ecological and cultural economists have made particularly compelling insights into this line of inquiry. For instance, cultural economist Bob Jessop suggests that we are now embroiled in a global triple crisis: one that is simultaneously financial, economic, and ecological.

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, extraction technologies like fracking are being increasingly applied in the Global North. Hydraulic fracturing represents just one of a growing number of issues that sit at the nexus of this troubling knot. These practices are still in the early stages of producing transnational social, economic, and ecological transformations.

Anti-fracking activists use online materials, talks and demonstrations to produce knowledge. They do this within a participatory social framework. They have to navigate complex histories in order to develop cultural authority.

Anti-fracking activists in Gasteiz are situated within a global anti-fracking movement. Their closest links are in Europe, their networks extend through Latin America, Northern Africa, and the Middle East. These links are manifested in global forums, including encampments.

The data collected during my research suggests many possible paths of future research. I could pursue a deeper discussion of what it means to develop cultural authority in the Basque Country. I could develop a study around transnational activism as a global form, a technology in itself which responds to global technologies. I could continue exploring the discourse around degrowth, and Green-Marxist narratives that are becoming increasingly

common throughout Europe. A fourth line of inquiry, which was less developed in my research proposal, but which emerged from the fieldwork experience is the role of affect in climate and energy movements, which tackle the despair of climate change firsthand.

In *Culture and Truth*, Renato Rosaldo reminds that the emotional force of a death exists less from abstract brute force than from a “particular intimate relations permanent rupture”.

Activism can be understood in a similar way. The abstract, brute fact that fracking was destroying the world was less motivating than the relationships people had with their communities and land. Yet this “force” falls to an unconscious place- where our sense that

Finding out that hydraulic fracturing is coming to your community creates a forceful emotional experience. The sense of eruption and possibility that comes along with resistance.

“Not here, not anywhere!”

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