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**Mobilizing Narratives:
Anti-Dam Activism in Temaca, Mexico**

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Mobilizing Narratives: Anti-dam Activism in Temaca, Mexico

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Large-scale infrastructure has played a crucial role in the development discourses of nation-states. A large-scale project refers to a “long-term, complex and high-cost infrastructure for services such as transportation, telecommunications, energy or water supply” (Ullberg 2019, 504). Historically, infrastructure was the expression of state power and modernization (Wittfogel 1957 in Ullberg 2019, 503). Over the past several decades, literature in political ecology has critically discussed megaprojects and the power dynamics that shape the relations between society, politics, and nature (e.g. Oliver-Smith 2009, deWet & Odume 2019, Vanclay 2017). Often promoted by public institutions, megaprojects expose the tensions between the state as the main guarantor of rights and its citizens as the subjects of those rights, revealing the contentious relations between development, progress, and human rights, which have only become more fraught as a result of inadequate or absent consultation processes (Börzel and Risse 2013; Raftopoulos 2017). While for some, the greater public good might justify local impacts, for others, this trade-off (deWet & Odume 2019, 140) is unacceptable and calls into question the “democratic character of the development process” (Oliver-Smith 6, 2009).

An example for this is the construction of dams, which have been increasingly scrutinized in the late twentieth century because of their negative impacts and the conflicts they fuel between proponents, who are mainly governments, and opponents such as local communities (Ullberg 2019, 504). From a political-ecological perspective, critical infrastructure literature has increasingly associated water management projects with asymmetrical power relations, displacement, and unequal access to resources (Ullberg 2019). Hence, while some understand dams as a demonstration of progress and the modern “partnership between state and private institutions” (Shiva 2002, 91), others are forced to leave their homes, lose their livelihoods, or grapple with the consequences of environmental degradation caused by such projects. Furthermore, proponents often justify dams as the only solution to water or energy crises, whereby they discard local opinions and “depict local water users and their ecologies as disorganised, irrational, and unproductive” (Ullberg 2019, 505). Scholarly engagement has highlighted the emerging divide between the people, governments, and the economy and, thus, represents the conflicting social, economic, and environmental interests of the different actors involved (e.g. Oliver-Smith 1991; Shiva 2002). These tensions have opened spaces for resistance and have led to calls for social and environmental justice.

In Mexico, water management policies and projects have generated social, environmental, and economic conflicts over the past several decades. These projects are characterized by the deficiency or absence of social negotiation, which has caused inconceivable damage to communities and entire ethnic groups (Weaver, Greenberg, Alexander and Browning-Aiken 2012, 13). One such example is the Zapotillo dam in Jalisco,

Western Mexico, a federal project that seeks to provide two major Mexican cities and one of the most important agro-industrial regions with water. Over the years, the project has provoked opposition across a wide range of different actors, from academia to civil society organizations, not only because of the planned displacement of the three villages Temacapulín, Acasico, and Palmarejo, but also because expert critics saw it as an unsustainable answer to what they regard as Mexico's failing water politics (e.g. Gleason 2014; IMDEC 2018).

In 2005, when the Zapotillo project was promoted by the Mexican federal government, the people of Temaca,¹ Acasico, and Palmarejo saw themselves and their land endangered by the reservoir the dam would produce. In order to defend their village and prevent their displacement, they founded the Salvemos Temaca, Acasico, and Palmarejo resistance movement (STAP, my abbreviation).²

Temaca is located northeast of the city of Guadalajara, and lies next to the Verde River, one of the region's largest rivers. The village has just over three hundred inhabitants, who mainly live off farming or livestock breeding. For many years, Temaca had seen itself as being torn between the development discourse surrounding the Zapotillo project and the protection of the village, its traditional lifestyle, and the environment. Over time, Temaca and other opponents of the Zapotillo project denounced multiple irregularities that they perceived in relation to the Zapotillo dam and demanded the cancellation of the project. Today, the people of Temaca, Acasico, and Palmarejo have successfully avoided displacement. In 2021, they reached an agreement with the federal government that allows the dam to operate and to supply water to Guadalajara³ without inundating the three villages.

In this article, I discuss the STAP movement. The objective of this ethnography of resistance is to contribute to the understanding of the movement's transformative power, which I believe led to its ultimate success and sustained the resistance against the Zapotillo project for over sixteen years. For the purposes of this article, I understand resistance as a challenge to state power and domination and discuss collective action against state-imposed megaprojects.

Studying the STAP movement has revealed interesting and innovative discursive practices. Therefore, I argue that the corruption and the paradise narrative create an underlying script that mobilizes activism. These "resistance narratives," as I call them, address the complementary functions of the resistance. On one hand, I discuss how they can be understood as a deliberate strategy applied by the activists to reiterate their cause, reinforce the collective identity fundamental to the movement, and strengthen it both internally and externally. On the other hand, I examine how the narratives consider the

¹ Short for "Temacapulín", used by the inhabitants of the village.

² Even though the STAP movement was founded in the name of the three villages, the people from Palmarejo and Acasico were not actively participating. The families of Palmarejo left their properties and moved to resettlement centres, other villages, or cities (informal conversations, 2018). Today, the village is abandoned. In the village of Acasico, too, most people have left or are planning to do so. However, Mateo, one of the founders of the STAP movement as well as their spokesman, told me once that it does not matter that the villages are empty, since the people had to leave because of the dam and the villages would be inundated by it, they are still affected by the Zapotillo project, hence, their protection has been included in the objectives of the STAP movement. In other words, the STAP movement stands for the three villages, however, only the people of Temaca are actively participating.

³ Although not to León, a city in the neighbouring state Guanajuato, which was initially also included in the dam's scope.

megaprojects as seemingly cohesive and hosts to corruption. At the same time, the activists build on place-based narratives that do not tie them to transnational resistance movements but emphasize the uniqueness and beauty of the place where the megaproject is supposed to be implemented—that is, the place that will be harmed or even destroyed by the megaproject. In doing so, I contribute to the debate on resistance against large-scale infrastructure projects, situating this article in the field of political ecology and within the literature on large-scale projects and the anthropology of resistance.

The article is based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in the village from September 2017 to June 2018. It mainly addresses the situation in Temaca until 2019 and only briefly addresses the current situation. Ethnographic fieldwork included eleven guided interviews with participants of the STAP movement as well as information gathered from informal conversations. All interviewees are involved in the resistance to different degrees. I chose these eleven people because they possess great knowledge, whether of the village and its surroundings or of the movement. The interviewees mentioned in this article are anonymized to protect their identity. To complement the information from the interviews and fieldwork, the article also draws on official government documents as well as material produced by civil society actors (e.g., human rights and environmental organizations, academics, and environmental experts), particularly the organization IMDEC.⁴ The interviews and the complementary material are in Spanish. Hereafter, direct quotes are my translations.

Development-forced Displacement and Resistance

Megaprojects are accompanied by high expectations regarding their objectives and benefits for the country, its citizens, and the desired progress they aim to bring about (Delphine & Spit 2019, 6). In times of crisis, states and private companies might even project an image of megaprojects as “coherent and benevolent solutions” (Ullberg 2019, 505). These objectives and benefits form the basis of their public justification. Thus, the official discourse often promotes the project in the name of development and the “greater good of the nation” (Vanclay 2017, 7). While it might be true that, in some cases, megaprojects contribute to positive changes for a country and its citizens, the environmental and social consequences are often neglected, and negative impacts crystallize at the local level (e.g. Delphine & Spit 2019, Oliver-Smith 1994).

In this sense, Oliver-Smith argues that megaprojects always entail “large-scale transformations of physical and social environments” (1994, 200). Thus, the displacement of local communities or entire populations from affected areas is a common consequence. Oliver-Smith further claims that displacement due to large-scale development projects is involuntary, since the “people in DFDR (development-forced displacement and resettlement) are ‘pushed’ to move rather than ‘pulled’ or attracted by better possibilities elsewhere” (4, 2009). Moreover, displacement is always based on “intentional decisions by authorities” (Oliver-Smith 4, 2009). Hence, DFDR differs from other types of displacement, e.g., volun-

⁴ IMDEC (Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario) aims at contributing to the public sector by providing analyses, filing complaints, and proposing solutions to current issues. IMDEC is an autonomous organisation which distances itself from any kind of political party or religious institution (IMDEC 2014).

tary relocation schemes, flights from natural and technological disasters, and flights from civil and international conflicts.

Generally, displacement disintegrates social and collective realities and affects the social, political, economic, and spiritual aspects of people's individual and collective lives. Hence, displacement, or the threat of displacement, has great psychological implications and causes emotional distress, such as feelings of powerlessness, uprootedness, and loss of control (Oliver-Smith 1991; Vanclay 2017).

Moreover, studying the national and international power dynamics around megaprojects helps to reveal the state's relationship to local communities. In the case of resource management, small-scale production and traditional forms of resource governance are seen as obstructions to the hegemonic narrative, and the people themselves become an obstacle to progress (Hidalgo, Boelens and Vos 2017, 68–9; Vanclay 2017, 5). In this sense, Vanclay states that “the inequalities in power between those for and those affected by the project may mean that the interests of those affected are seldom properly considered” (2017, 12). The internationally recognized right to consultation is thus not guaranteed. This right means that people have access to accurate information and are given the opportunity to express their opinions and participate in all phases related to the project, from negotiation to planning, implementation, and possible modification. Although various international mechanisms state that consultation is a basic right as well as a necessary aspect of the implementation of megaprojects,⁵ the consultation of affected communities is often avoided or inadequately executed (Vanclay 2017). Furthermore, Vanclay argues that “governments often rely on their power of eminent domain” (2017, 5) instead of seeking social acceptance for the project by involving people in the decision-making process.

As a consequence, Oliver-Smith claims that the threat of displacement and the exclusion from the decision-making processes regarding the impending project “politicizes’ people, even those who have been politically marginalised” (1991, 133). While responses to displacement projects vary, one possible reaction is resistance. Negative feelings are channeled into the resistance, and the movement provides a voice for the people.

Oliver-Smith states that resistance “reveals basic political questions of development and extension of state hegemony over territory and population” (1994, 200), exposing the tensions between the benefits of a project and the needs and rights of local populations. Thus, as a public expression of discontent or grievances, the resistance to megaprojects always involves political actions in which people confront the state, multinational corporations, or international capital. As people's rights are violated and their future is compromised, resistance builds social capital and empowers communities (Bourdieu in Hanna, Vanclay, Langdon and Arts 2016, 218; 2016, 237; Oliver-Smith 1991, 133). Moreover, in the search for allies, “local dramas are internationalized and projected onto to the world stage” (Oliver-Smith 1991, 139). In this sense, resistance movements can evolve beyond the local level and become a matter of global networks of support.

Traditional social movement theory is useful to look at the fundamental elements of a movement, such as the formulation of a shared objective and identity, the definition of an enemy, and the mobilization of material and human resources (e.g. Ibarra 2011). Those

⁵ See for instance the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or Article 5 of the OECD's guidelines ‘Getting Infrastructure Right: The 10 Key Governance Challenges and Policy Options’.

elements construct a frame for the movement, uniting people under a shared purpose and creating a collective identity that underlies the movement. The constructed frame allows us to look beyond these elements and to understand how they are moved and how they move participants, potential supporters, and opponents at the same time.

Eyerman (2006) argues that movements move people by mobilizing emotions, creating a common cause, and discursively legitimizing the movement to themselves and others. In this sense, resistance is a discursive practice that applies a set of narratives in order to “focus and direct emotion/energy and actions into collective, political directions” (Eyerman 2006, 196).

Furthermore, in this view, the understanding of the opposition is built on the temporary transformation of identities in the process of group formation. Biographies and individual identities are mobilized in order to create a group sense of belonging and formulate a common purpose (e.g. Collins 2001 in Eyerman 2006, 195; Ibarra 2011), which come together in a set of what I call “resistance narratives.” Narratives are hereby understood as rhetorical instruments that “link a particular occurrence/experience to others, broadening their meaning beyond the situational, imposing a higher order of significance, thus orchestrating and amplifying both the emotional experience and the meaning of the event, as individuals fused into a collective, with a purposive future and a meaningful past” (Eyerman 2006, 196).

Building on Alexander (2006) and Eyerman (2006), resistance narratives consist of four fundamental elements: cognitive frames, affective discourse, moral agonism, and symbolic representation. Firstly, cognitive frames serve as an intellectual instrument that helps to simplify complex realities and contentious relations in order to improve understanding. Secondly, narratives mobilize an affective discourse that creates solidarity and emotional bonds between participants and outsiders. Thirdly, resistance movements are based on a moral agonism that clearly defines moral and immoral domains and assigns different actors to those spheres. In this sense, the participants of the movement and the audience are clearly determined, though the latter is divided between the audience of potential supporters and the moral opponent, which is the enemy of the resistance. Othering is fundamental to defining who or what to move against (immoral sphere) and allows the movement to legitimize itself through its conveyed morality. Finally, the resistance mobilizes common symbols that reiterate the movement’s cause and help people identify with it. Resistance narratives are “symbolic interactions” (Eyerman 2006, 194) that link participants, the audience of potential supporters, and opponents of the movement.

Overall, resistance narratives can be understood as the unwritten script according to which the movement moves. They describe the unfavorable situation of the affected people and imagine a different reality worth fighting for and moving towards. In this sense, I agree with Oliver-Smith (1994, 202) in that resistance narratives are always context-specific. Their effectiveness greatly impacts the movement’s capacity for collective mobilization of the four resources explained above. Thus, ethnographies of resistance play an important role in creating knowledge about such resistance narratives, their transformative and emotional power in imagining alternative social projects, and the underlying functions they fulfill in each case. This article discusses two resistance narratives that appear in the STAP activists’ discourse against the Zapotillo project—namely, the corruption and the paradise narratives.

Temaca



Figure 1: Temaca 2018. Photo: Barbara Stulz

With over three hundred inhabitants, Temaca is the second largest village in the municipality of Cañadas de Obregón (Figueroa 2015, 81). It is located approximately one hundred kilometers from the city of Guadalajara. The municipality lies in the region of Los Altos Sur in the northeast of the State Jalisco (Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco 2018). Temaca is well-located insofar as it is surrounded by fertile land with direct access to the Verde River (Lezama 2013, 67). Its population is Catholic. The main church in the village is dedicated to the village saint Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (Casillas 2013, 121).

The village of Temaca dates back to the sixth century (Lezama 2013, 67). Back then, it was an indigenous Tecuxes community. When the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, Temaca developed into a colonial village. The colonial style can still be seen in its architecture and the rectangular arrangement of the houses. Through the mixture of the indigenous population with the Spanish conquerors, Temaca became a mestizo village (Jiménez 2013, 11) and is no longer considered to be an indigenous community (Gómez & Espinoza 2015, 81). Due to its beneficial location, Temaca has been an important center for agricultural production and livestock breeding in the region since its early days (Jiménez 2013, 18).

Today, Temaca is a small village that is only accessible by a road about fifty kilometers northwest from the highway to Guadalajara (Figueroa 2015, 81). Most of Temaca's population still dedicates itself to agriculture and livestock (Jiménez 2013, 18), growing corn, beans, squash, chile de árbol (a special type of chile), peanuts, potatoes, oats, and other vegetables (Lezama 2013, 67). Farming, especially the breeding of chicken, and fishing are also important sources of income (Lezama 2013, 68). Those who neither own or rent land nor work in the surrounding towns usually work in the fields of the larger farms in the area (Regina 2018, interview statement). As Temaca is mainly a farmer's village, the people depend heavily on their land for two reasons: Firstly, it is their main source of income (Lezama 2013, 68). Secondly, their territory is closely linked to the people's identity.

According to Lezama (2013, 75), an important part of the collective identity of the village is Temaca's cultural heritage, such as buildings and sites. Such buildings are, for instance, the church, which dates back to the eighteenth century, and the cemetery (Casillas 2013, 121–122). A further sacred site is the image of the Señor de la Peñita, which is located on one of the rocks surrounding the village (Lezama 2013, 67). Other important places the villagers identify with are the main square, the park, and the bathing establishments with thermal water from the natural hot springs. According to Lezama (2013, 66–67), the destruction of the people's ties with their territory through forced displacement causes great disruption to the people's individual and collective identities, culture, and traditions, all of which have been created in close relation to those sites and the village surroundings.

The Zapotillo Project

Mexico's history is rife with large water infrastructure projects, such as dams, water treatment plants, and other projects promoted in the name of economic development and progress (Lezama 2013, 65). Figueroa claims that, in the case of dams, these “monumental narratives” (2015, 161) represent a demonstration of power, not only because dams concentrate high economic interests, but also because dams were often named after former presidents, other national or political figures, or institutions (Figueroa 2015, 159).

In Mexico, these projects are characterized by the absence of the affected communities from the surrounding discourse and a failure or absence of social negotiation (Impacto Social Consultores 2017). As Lezama (2013, 65) summarizes, this has historically led to innumerable forced relocations, causing inconceivable damage to villages and entire ethnic groups. For instance, the Cerro de Oro dam in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca was the reason for the displacement of over twenty-five thousand people in the period between 1973 and 1989. The Temascal dam, also in Oaxaca, flooded the territory of more than twenty-two thousand people in the 1950s.

In Jalisco's region Los Altos (Mexico's northwest), the Zapotillo dam is the third government attempt at capturing the water from the Verde River, the principal river in the region. The main reason for the successive dam projects is Guadalajara's “insatiable thirst” (Pérez & Torres 2001, 5) due to its growing population, the increasing contamination of the Chapala Lake (for now, the city's main provider of water), and a drier climate resulting from climate change (e.g. Figueroa 2015; Lezama 2013). The Zapotillo dam has been promoted by the authorities as the solution to the city's water problems.

Like its predecessors, the Arcediano and the San Nicolás dams, the Zapotillo dam is meant to supply water not only to the city of Guadalajara, but also to the city of León and the highly productive Los Altos region (Figueroa 2015, 77). The project is designed to do so for twenty-five years (CONAGUA 2012a, 25). The original plan of the dam was based on 80 meters high wall (CONAGUA 2012b, slide 6).⁶ Raising the wall to 105 meters in 2009 would have allowed a reservoir area of 4,816 hectares holding 911 million cubic meters of water (Figueroa 2015, 78). Whereas the original plan would have flooded the villages of Acasico and Palmarejo, because of the larger reservoir, the modified Zapotillo dam would have

⁶ The original project was launched in 2005 and consisted not only of the Zapotillo dam, but also of an aqueduct and a pumping station transferring the water to Guadalajara, the Los Altos regions and to León (CONAGUA 2012a, 20; Figueroa 2015, 77). The mentioned irregularities are related to the Zapotillo dam and the relocation centers.

flooded an area that would have included the village of Temaca (CONAGUA 2012b, slide 12). In light of the government's displacement plans, the Zapotillo project also included two relocation centers: Talicoyunque (sometimes referred to as Nuevo Temacapulín) and Nuevo Acasico (Figueroa 2015, 78).



Figure 2: The Zapotillo dam in 2018. Photo: Barbara Stulz

Ever since its promotion in 2005, the Zapotillo dam has been one of the most discussed projects in Mexico (IMDEC 2021). The state's official narrative justifies the project as an indispensable source of water for the cities of Guadalajara and León as well as the Los Altos region. However, the Zapotillo project has been highly controversial. Firstly, the three affected villages that are home to approximately seven hundred inhabitants whom the plan would forcibly displace have opposed the dam project since the beginning. Secondly, civil society and academics have highlighted numerous other ecological, social, economic, and juridical irregularities over the years (e.g. Gleason 2014; Gómez 2015; IMDEC 2014; IMDEC 2017a; National Autonomous University of Mexico City or the University of Guadalajara in Red del Agua 2017). The following examples represent a brief summary of a selection of these irregularities: the absence of the legal requirement for the project, an environmental license for a dam wall of 105 meters; the unconstitutional raising of the dam's wall to 105 meters, which led to a Supreme Court judgment halting the wall construction in 2013; inaccurate studies conducted by the dam's proponents, such as the one on the availability of water in the Verde River; the absence of an adequate consultation process; visits to Temeca and the planned relocation centers by the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, which resulted in a critique of the latter

since they were not going to allow the affected people to carry on with their main economic activities; economic irregularities, such as the issuing of concessions to private companies before the dam was even built, seen by opponents as “disguised water supply privatization” (Figueroa 2015, 85), which undermines the Mexican constitution’s notion of water as a public good; the involvement of those companies in international corruption scandals; and the inconsistency in the project’s budget and its total cost, which in 2017 had already tripled the original estimates proposed in 2005. Finally, water management experts like Arturo Gleason (2014) from the University of Guadalajara have argued that the Zapotillo dam is an unsustainable solution to Guadalajara’s water deficit because of its limited time of operation; from a technical perspective, they have proposed various alternatives to supply water to big Mexican cities, such as the renovation of the tube system or the capitation of rainwater.

To summarize, while for some the Zapotillo dam represents an important infrastructure project, for others, the dam illustrates the unsustainability of Mexico’s water politics, the government’s failure to protect the rights of local communities and the environment, and the authorities’ attempt to enhance private investment in resource management. In what follows, I focus on the STAP resistance movement as the expression of the opposition to the dam on the local level.

The “Dam of Corruption”

The STAP resistance movement was founded in 2005 and registered as a civil society organization in 2008. The resistance is directed against the Zapotillo dam and the displacement project. Its main objective is the cancellation of the dam project and the survival of the three affected villages of Temaca, Acasico, and Palmarejo. In this section, I explore how the Zapotillo dam is perceived by the STAP activists and how they have seen their individual lives and the collective village life affected by the project as well as the resistance. From these two accounts, I then reconstruct the “resistance narratives” that form the basis of the movement.

Through interviews with activists, it became clear that they understand the Zapotillo project as a threat to their existence, referring to it as “the death project” (José 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement). The dam is seen as an omnipresent threat that would take away Temaca’s beauty and destroy its natural surroundings, including the fauna and especially the river (José 2018, interview statement), which in turn would cause “irreparable damage” to the village, its culture, and the social relations of the villagers (Romina 2018, interview statement; Victoria 2018, interview statement). This threat manifests as strong tensions between the STAP activists and the Mexican government as the proponent of the Zapotillo project and is best expressed in the epithet “dam of corruption” (e.g. @TemacaNoEstaSolo 2017), an expression that dominates the resistance discourse. In what follows, I describe what corruption means for the STAP activists on the three governmental levels.

On a municipal level, the interviews show that, for the activists, the biggest and most important part of the corruption in the project is the fact that their government representatives neither support nor protect them from the project. “The government as our representative has the civil and legal obligation to support us,” claims Victoria (2017, interview statement). However, the “double discourse” (Regina 2018, interview statement) of false promises and lies have shuttered the trust between state authorities and the people (Isa-

bella 2018, interview statement; José 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement; Renata 2018, interview statement; Victoria 2018, interview statement). “They were the first ones to betray us,” says Ximena (2018, interview statement). “Because we are not from the city, because we are not academics, they think they can betray us,” adds her mother, Victoria (2018, interview statement). Moreover, the municipality’s decisions, which were made without consulting the village, as well as their concealment of information (Mateo 2018, interview statement) are seen as corrupt. “The municipality’s fault was to stay quiet and give [the] green light for the project to go ahead,” says Leonardo (2018, interview statement). Furthermore, according to my interviewees, the municipality does not deem it necessary to invest in a place they already see as lost, and this is how they justify the argument that there is no money for the community (Isabella 2018, interview statement; José 2018, interview statement; Leonardo 2018, interview statement; Mateo 2018, interview statement; Mónica 2018, interview statement; Romina 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). “They ignore us as a community,” says Mónica (2018, interview statement), and “they abandon us,” adds Victoria (2018, interview statement).

At the state level, my interviewees unanimously agree on corruption. Like the municipal authorities, state authorities are seen as politicians who cannot be trusted (Romina 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). For instance, when the project was promoted, the state published a poll it supposedly conducted stating that more than 50% of Temaca’s people consented to the construction of the Zapotillo dam, however, no consultation or inquiry was ever conducted (Regina 2018, interview statement). Moreover, huge divergences in the politicians’ campaign promises and their subsequent actions again have disappointed the people (Romina 2018, interview statement). Leonardo (2018, interview statement) mentions the fact that the project will benefit only a few despite requiring considerable public funds.⁷

On a federal level, the power of transnational corporations and their impact on the Mexican government (Ximena 2018, interview statement) are seen as corrupt. Their exercise of power results in the violation of people’s fundamental rights as stipulated in the Mexican constitution. “[The government] opens its arms to receive [...] this mafia of transnational corporations” says Ximena (2018, interview statement). Mateo (2018, interview statement) argues that governmental institutions, such as CONAGUA, are corrupt in the sense that these institutions are “puppets of the state and the transnationals.” Additionally, my interviewees mention the lack of transparency of the money flows and their suspicion that the money disappears into private hands (Isabella 2018, interview statement; Mateo 2018, interview statement; Mónica 2018, interview statement; Victoria 2018, interview statement). According to Leonardo (2018, interview statement), the fact that the project has been halted since the official court judgment in 2013, but keeps being assigned more money every year, is proof enough of corruption. “It’s disappointing, there are so many families in Mexico who don’t know what to eat tomorrow,” he said (2018, interview statement), referring to alternatives where the money could be spent in a better way.

Those so-called corrupt practices of the project have caused anger (Isabella 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement; Victoria 2018, interview statement),

⁷ This statement refers to the fact that, although at that point the Zapotillo project is officially detained, millions of Mexican pesos were still flowing into the project, both for maintenance of the wall and as compensation payments for the involved construction companies (IMDEC 2017b).

indignation, harm, contempt, and even hatred (Leonardo 2018, interview statement; Victoria 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). The helplessness and powerlessness they experience make the people feel like they are “not worth anything” (José 2018, interview statement). Victoria (2018, interview statement) calls politicians “pigs,” and Regina (2018, interview statement) says that “politicians disgust her.” Finally, many of my interviewees mention the injustice of the situation they find themselves in and their wish to just go back to the quiet life they lived before (Romina 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). In what follows, I look at how the Zapotillo project has impacted my interviewees’ individual lives and the collective village life.

The Impact of the Project on the Activists’ Individual and Collective Lives

My interviewees describe Temaca as a “small,” “very calm,” and “peaceful” village that means “everything” (Mónica 2018, interview statement) to them and equals “paradise” (Leonardo 2018, interview statement). Direct access to water sources, such as the thermal springs and the river, are important characteristics of the village with which the people identify and of which they are proud (Isabella 2018, interview statement). Religious places, such as the church and the cemetery, are also important points of reference in people’s description of the village (Leonardo 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement). My interviewees highlight how they have lived harmoniously with the village’s surroundings and emphasize nature’s value for the people and their lifestyle (Mateo 2017, interview statement; Leonardo 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). Overall, my interviewees associate Temaca with happiness, family, and nature.

For many of my interviewees, the Zapotillo project has brought about a “drastic change” in their lives (Mateo 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). Many do not feel the calmness of the village anymore, which was extremely important to them in the past (Mónica 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement). Uncertainty and the fear of being displaced are omnipresent in many people’s lives (José 2018, interview statement; Mónica 2018, interview statement). Whereas life in Temaca used to be pleasant and peaceful (Regina 2018, interview statement), according to Romina (2018, interview statement), it is now hard to enjoy oneself. Pressure, anxiety, and the exhaustion felt after thirteen years of resistance have worn the people out and might even be responsible for the serious health problems from which some people in Temaca are suffering (Isabella 2018, interview statement; Mónica 2018, interview statement; Renata 2018, interview statement). Regina (2018, interview statement), furthermore, talks about the elderly individuals who have died over the last several years, blaming their deaths on the pressure resulting from the omnipresent threat of the Zapotillo project. When thinking about the dam reservoir, Leonardo (2018, interview statement) is particularly worried about the cemeteries, where, if the project were to be carried out, the inhabitants’ ancestors’ graves would be flooded. Furthermore, he worries about the contamination of the groundwater and the hot springs (Leonardo 2018, interview statement).

For many of my interviewees, especially the more active ones in the resistance, their daily routines have completely changed (Mateo 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). In general, they state that their priority is now the defense of the village (Romina 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement). Leonardo, for instance, gave up running (he was training every day) in order to focus all his energy

on the resistance movement (2018, interview statement). Ximena works as a teacher in the city of Guadalajara and spent all her free time defending the village: “All of those years, thirteen already, it has been about defending the village” (Ximena 2018, interview statement). She says, they all had to leave their “comfort zone” (Ximena 2018, interview statement) in order to focus on their new goal of fighting the Zapotillo project. Ximena regularly goes to meetings with IMDEC or convenes with other movements or organizations in Guadalajara or elsewhere in the country (Ximena 2018, interview statement). She constantly monitors social media for any news or statements on the project, works on security protocols, and travels around Mexico to participate in forums, events, and press conferences on the topic. Ximena (2018, interview statement) talks about the friendships she has lost and the family reunions which have become much rarer due to the missing time. She also mentions the family problems her participation in the movement has caused, as her husband is not from Temaca and not active in the resistance (Ximena 2018, interview statement).

The familial tensions outlined by Ximena (2018, interview statement) are also a problem for others. Isabella’s husband and his family, for instance, are against her participation in the STAP movement, as they have already sold their houses to CONAGUA and do not understand why Isabella would endanger herself by participating in the resistance movement (2018, interview statement).⁸ However, she says that she tries to support the movement wherever and whenever she can, despite the disapproval of her husband’s family (Isabella 2018, interview statement). Romina (2018, interview statement) mentions that, for her too, the Zapotillo project has changed the relationship with her family, as for the past thirteen years, the only conversations they have had have been about the Zapotillo dam. She states that, in general, the only topic with people, be they from Temaca or from outside the region, is the Zapotillo project (Romina 2018, interview statement).

Nevertheless, the emergence of the STAP movement and the thirteen years of resistance have also had positive effects. According to Leonardo (2018, interview statement), he has experienced a great deal of personal satisfaction. He has, for instance, traveled to almost all the states of the Republic, participating in events and forums and supporting other movements. “I have grown wings to fly,” he says (Leonardo 2018, interview statement). Ximena, too, mentions positive aspects of the resistance. She feels empowered by the resistance, both as a person and as a family member (Ximena 2018, interview statement). Furthermore, according to her, she has constructed a better social consciousness and is convinced that this helps her make better decisions (Ximena 2018, interview statement).

The Zapotillo project and the emergence of the STAP movement have not only affected the people’s individual lives but also village life. For most of my interviewees, the greatest change in village life are the divisions within the village. When the resistance movement was founded, the national water authority CONAGUA started to offer money for people’s houses (Mónica 2018, interview statement). This has caused tension between those who have sold their homes and those who have decided to resist. The tensions in the village are, on one hand, brought about by CONAGUA pressuring the people into selling their property (Victoria 2018, interview statement). On the other hand, the people, who do

⁸ In 2018, over 50 human rights and environmental activists have been killed in Mexico (Front Line Defenders 2019).

not want to sell see the sellers as “traitors” (Mónica 2018, interview statement). This notion is reinforced by the fact that most of the people who have sold their houses still live in Temaca even though they are not homeowners anymore. In Leonardo’s understanding, those “village enemies” (2018, interview statement) have benefited from the STAP movement and its success so far, receiving money from the government without being active in the resistance. The divisions created over the years are by seen by some as a strategy of the government to weaken the village and the resistance movement (Victoria 2018, interview statement).

Furthermore, Mónica (2018, interview statement) is of the opinion that the mood in the village has changed. Uncertainty and pressure can be felt in interacting with many people (Mónica 2018, interview statement). This notion is reinforced by the occasional police or military patrols conducted by the government, which unsettle and inflict fear in the people (Ximena 2018, interview statement). Even though many of my interviewees highlight that Temaca is much calmer today, the “harassment by the government” (Mónica 2018, interview statement) is still feared, and a feeling of discouragement and fatigue from many years of resisting is noticeable in the village (Sofía 2018, interview statement). However, they also emphasize that today the people are not as afraid as they were some years ago, as they have learned to adapt to different situations and react quickly (Ximena 2018, interview statement).

Despite the negative impact of the project, the resistance has also brought positive changes. For instance, some argue that the village has grown more aware because of the resistance (Leonardo 2018, interview statement; Ximena 2018, interview statement), which makes them more attentive to “who enters the village” (Victoria 2018, interview statement) – in other words, to who might be an ally to the resistance and who “could hurt us” (Renata 2018, interview statement). Moreover, the resistance has taught them to take care of each other (Renata 2018, interview statement), an ability that strengthens not only the unity of the movement, but also the ties between the individual participants. According to Mateo (2018, interview statement) and Ximena (2018, interview statement), the village, through the foundation of the resistance, has gained more knowledge and consciousness about how to organize. At last, the people have learned to have hope (Romina 2018, interview statement), a quality fundamental to the resistance and its perpetuation (José 2018, interview statement).

There is general agreement that traditions such as village celebrations have not changed since the Zapotillo project was initiated (Isabella 2018, interview statement; José 2018, interview statement; Regina 2018, interview statement). On the contrary, the empowerment of the village and the village identity through the emergence of the STAP resistance has created new traditions, such as the Feria del Chile (Chili Festival), which was introduced a few years ago (Ximena 2018, interview statement). Furthermore, various initiatives to “revive” (Mateo 2017, interview statement) the village have been launched. The Patio de la Cultura, for instance, is a space where cultural activities, such as painting or music classes take place, plants are cultivated, and animals are kept. The Volver a la Raíz campaign (Back to the Roots) is aimed at reviving activities such as making hand-made tortillas as well as bring back institutions that used to characterize the village, such as an ice cream shop. In this sense, Mateo (2018, interview statement) sees a great opportunity in the resistance movement and states that the Volver a la Raíz campaign seeks to reinforce the village’s traditions, culture, and identity.

Resistance Narratives

In the descriptive account of the activists' perception of the Zapotillo project and the resistance movement that complemented my fieldwork, I found that two narratives around which the resistance is formulated deserve specific attention. Those narratives are part of a wider discourse around the Zapotillo project that was outlined in the previous chapter. They seem to build the cognitive framework for the movement, creating the underlying script of the resistance.

In the following section, I discuss what I identified as the "corruption narrative" and the "paradise narrative." I argue that these narratives constitute a specific strategy that helps the activists make sense of the Zapotillo project as well as the resistance, empowers them and the movement, and serves as an instrument to mobilize, sustain, and justify the resistance. In this sense, these narratives construct the resistance. They demonstrate how the activists' individual identities have become strongly tied to the collective identity underlying the STAP movement. Hence, the narratives represent a collective energy that moves the resistance in a specific direction, not only for the participants but also for a wider audience of potential supporters and opponents. I examine how these two narratives fulfill specific functions for the STAP movement, functions that can be revealed by exploring the following questions: what does the narrative explain, what does it not explain, and why is it recurring? It is important to note that the two narratives are not disconnected from each other or from other possible narratives. Rather, they overlap and together constitute the script for the resistance.

The Corruption Narrative

The interviews revealed a broad understanding of corruption that goes far beyond the common understanding and that can be defined as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Driessen 2019, 912). The activists' account of corruption includes an emotional and personal dimension, such as the resentment felt at the failure of authorities to fulfill their public roles, such as by running a deficient consultation process or by refusing to invest in the village. So-called corruption thus includes but also goes beyond the ecological, social, economic, and judicial irregularities outlined above (e.g. Figueroa 2015; IMDEC 2014). This shows that the term corruption leaves much space for individual and personal interpretations, which demonstrates the "moral ambiguity" (Driessen 2019, 912) that surrounds its definition. As a result, the term corruption can be framed, adapted, and put to use in a wide range of situations. For the activists, corruption serves as an explanation for the multiple perceived irregularities and unethical behavior related to the Zapotillo dam and the displacement project, all of which are brought together under the term "Dam of corruption."

I argue that the corruption narrative does not seek to define corruption related to the Zapotillo project but can rather be seen as a discursive instrument applied by the resistance to delegitimize the project and legitimize the resistance. It does so by defining the moral and immoral domains related to the project. Eyerman argues that, in a social movement, morality or immorality is attributed to a person, a group, or an object, which then "creates a relationship, an emotional bond, an in-between, with the other" (2006, 200). In this sense, the movement is based on the imagination and a discursive construction and judgment of the other in relation to the self, which allows for criticism based on perceived ethical and moral criteria (Driessen, 2019, 912; Eyerman, 2006, 200). I claim that, for

the STAP movement, the corruption narrative and the morality criteria defined by it distinguish between the immoral or corrupt practices attributed to those promoting or in favor of the Zapotillo project and the moral domain ascribed to the STAP resistance, or what is referred to as “Temaca.”

Furthermore, Hanna et al. (2016, 218) state that protest, or resistance, always develops from asymmetrical power relations that result in one party defending its interests. The STAP resistance can thus be seen as a direct rejection of the political domination perceived by the activists. In this sense, the corruption narrative expresses the complexities of accountability and the feeling of misrepresentation sensed by the STAP activists. I show that this has two implications for the resistance. First, the corruption narrative contributes to the creation and strengthening of the resistance’s collective identity, which comes to be based on the idea of the “Dam of corruption” and the negative feelings that accompany it. In this collective consciousness, Temaca is excluded from participation in decision-making, while it is simultaneously confronted with the constant threat of displacement. Additionally, the activists observe the violation of their right to consultation and the obstruction of justice; the claim to be heard as well as the claim to remain in their village and maintain their livelihood activities has resulted in deep mistrust of the local and national government as well as of state institutions. These individual experiences of strong feelings of injustice and powerlessness add up to a shared interpretation of reality – the “Dam of corruption” – that unites the people in the resistance. In this sense, the emotional responses triggered by what is considered to be corruption create an emotional bond between the participants and define the common “immoral” enemy, reinforcing the collective identity of the resistance.

Secondly, the corruption narrative constitutes a simplification of the social and political issues around the Zapotillo dam. This simplification, whether conscious or unconscious, is meant for participants of the STAP resistance, neutral outsiders of the movement, and its opponents. For the activists, it becomes a slogan as well as a justification of the resistance. When directed towards outsiders, it works as an engaging discourse that is easily understood and replicated. Moreover, it resonates with the anti-corruption movement that has characterized Mexican politics for a long time and, consequently, it is part of a popular discourse to denounce government and private sector practices. When directed towards the promoters of the Zapotillo project, the corruption narrative is a clear accusation and expresses a severing of relations between the STAP activists and the actors involved in the Zapotillo project. To summarize, the narrative not only mobilizes the resistance internally, but it also builds a ground on which the cause of the resistance can be easily communicated to possible supporters on the outside as well as the proponents of the project.

Nevertheless, the corruption narrative remains a generalization of the project and of actors promoting the Zapotillo dam. Furthermore, it shows the flexibility and the framing of the term corruption, which can be employed whenever useful; it could thus be argued that, in this sense, the accusation loses some of its weight. This means that it also represents a potential target for proponents of the Zapotillo dam to attack the movement by providing grounds for its own delegitimization. Moreover, the corruption narrative might foment the activists’ mistrust of public institutions or other actors that might act in good faith. Unfortunately, the years have also shown that the accusations of corruption have

persisted, and it is not clear whether the government's decision to finally modify the project is a direct response to those accusations or to other factors.

The Paradise Narrative

The account of my interviewees' personal experiences with the Zapotillo project is characterized by what I call the "paradise narrative." The paradise narrative consists of recurring attractive, and sometimes even glorifying, descriptions of the village and its culture. The former refers to Temaca's surroundings, specifically the Verde River and commonly known places, such as the cemetery or the church, as well as to the peace and calm of the village. The latter encompasses traditions and social activities the village shares, or used to share, such as annual fairs or gatherings at the riverside. These attributions paint a very specific, almost fairytale-like picture of the village. In that sense, the narrative expresses a strong emotional bond with Temaca that is reiterated in the activists' self-identification with the village, such as in phrases like "Temaca is my family" (Mónica 2018, interview statement), "... my territory" (Victoria 2018, interview statement), or "... the root of my existence" (Mateo 2018, interview statement). Moreover, the paradise narrative paints a picture of a village united in the resistance and describes an imagined community and a perceived strong emotional bond between the villagers. The paradise narrative is thus a discursive mobilization of the cultural and social meanings that the activists attribute to Temaca whereby Temaca seems to go beyond the settlement and its physical boundaries, including the social life of the village as well as its natural environment.

However, the activists' account described above shows two inconsistencies within the paradise narrative that are worth mentioning. First, the narrative only reflects a limited view of the village and village life. By portraying Temaca as a place of harmony in the past and the present, the paradise narrative ignores differences and issues between the villagers—not only the issues of today, but also those that might have existed before the Zapotillo dam. Nevertheless, for instance, some of my interviews do recognize the internal divisions caused by the CONAGUA campaign.

Secondly, the narrative is a limited reflection of the resistance. Whereas in relation to its symbolic dimension, Temaca seems to include the physical village, its surroundings, and its cultural elements, in relation to the movement, there seems to be a selective understanding of who belongs to Temaca. From the activists' perspective, Temaca seems to consist of the people who somehow, whether actively or passively, participate in the resistance movement. Interestingly, during my fieldwork, it became clear that this understanding also includes outside actors that support the resistance, such as IMDEC. However, the activists' account shows that there is also opposition to the resistance within the village itself, and the movement is struggling to attract more participants. Moreover, since most young people are leaving because of the lack of opportunity (Lezama 2013), their ties with the village are weaker and their interest in participating in the resistance is low. Overall, the paradise narrative projects a strong image of the STAP movement as well as of village unity, whereas in everyday life, tensions in the village itself might hamper the resistance, and participation may be rather limited.

Although the image of Temaca and the resistance painted by the paradise narrative might be imagined or even idealized, I highlight that these two inconsistencies with the activists' account emphasize the narrative's importance. The image of the resistance portrayed by the activists—for instance, the idea of there being strong participation in the

resistance and in Temaca's traditions—serves several purposes. First, as Tilly states, in order for a movement to appear legitimate and attract new supporters, the collective actors must communicate that they are “worthy, united, numerous and committed” (2003, 197; 2003 201). The unity propagated through the paradise narrative thus might paint a bigger and stronger picture of the resistance, as my empirical insights show. This projection seeks, on the one hand, to delegitimize the Zapotillo project by playing up the resistance's importance, and on the other hand, it serves to attract new supporters.

Secondly, the paradise narrative appears specifically in the context of displacement—that is, in light of the possibility of losing one's environment and social practices. In this sense, I claim that it can be understood as an instrument to confront feelings of loss and the loss of control and channel them into the resistance. In this regard, the ideas of unity and of Temaca's enchantment that underly the paradise narrative also fulfill a strong psychological function for the activists themselves by fostering a feeling of belonging and a shared interest in defending the village. The paradise narrative thus creates an imagined “environment of trust” (Giddens in Oliver-Smith, 1994, 198) that links community relations, the environment, and traditions.

In this sense, the paradise narrative strengthens the resistance's collective identity through the creation of these strong emotional ties, mobilizing specific descriptions of practices and places that are regarded as shared by all inhabitants of the village. For instance, discursively reinforcing and highlighting newly introduced traditions such as the Feria del Chile, seems to counteract the development of people emigrating from Temaca by creating and strengthening a sense of belonging on the part of the villagers. Oliver-Smith highlights the importance of the mobilization of such cultural and territorial representations for resistance movements in the fight against displacement projects as well as the importance of the “ability of the people to interpret and recontextualize the threat of resettlement in terms of those symbols” (1994, 204). In other words, they become fundamental resources that the resistance uses to justify the movement, not only to potential supporters on the outside, but also to participants themselves, thereby increasing peoples' motivation to participate.

Moreover, the resistance's collective identity is reinforced through the paradise narrative's hidden process of othering, which distinguishes between who belongs to Temaca and who does not. This not only reiterates the movement's common enemy, but it also homogenizes the STAP resistance itself. In this sense, the paradise narrative simplifies the complexities of the village, its social structures, and the outside support that strengthens the movement in order to promote a shared interpretation of reality.

Finally, I conclude that the paradise narrative contributes to the creation of an alternative discourse to the official state account of the Zapotillo project. While the latter is based on the dam as a supplier of water to a densely populated area that includes two major Mexican cities, the former understands the dam as a threat to a specific lifestyle and environment, emphasizing Temaca's cultural and social value. The paradise narrative can thus also be understood as a value discourse that is applied by the STAP activists to defy the threat of the Zapotillo project and challenge its official justification.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the local resistance to a state-imposed megaproject. The Zapotillo dam in northwest Mexico exemplifies the tensions between state interests in infrastructure and the local perceptions of the affected villages. The official state justification of the Zapotillo dam as a supplier of water “for the greater good” illustrates a hegemonic discourse of development that clashes with a participatory and sustainable understanding. The imposition of the project on local communities furthermore illustrates the power dynamics involved in the project, a project that neglects the opinions and rights of local people and would have ultimately resulted in the involuntary displacement of Temaca. These tensions triggered the resistance movement *Salvememos Temacapulín, Acasico y Palmarejo*, through which rights as well as access to justice are claimed.

Analyzing the STAP resistance, I have illustrated how the movement has been able to unite people in their opposition to the Zapotillo dam by creating a collective identity and an alternative discourse through which the movement moves and seeks to move others.

In this sense, I discussed the opposition to the Zapotillo project through the mobilization of discursive resources in the form of what I have called “resistance narratives.” I argued that the resistance narratives discussed in this article provide a cognitive framework for the movement, serving as an underlying script that creates a shared understanding of the Zapotillo dam among the participants, simplifies its complexities, and mobilizes emotions and symbolic representations. Furthermore, I have shown how the activists move the inside as well as the outside of the resistance through the use of resistance narratives. In this sense, I have illustrated how the resistance narratives are, on the one hand, directed towards the participants themselves, fulfilling fundamental psychological functions, such as creating a sense of belonging or of control, and on the other hand, how the narratives seek to mobilize a wider public that includes potential supporters as well as the movement’s enemies, evoking solidarity and morality through the narratives’ affective politics and the mobilization of Temaca’s social, cultural, and spiritual values. Thus, the narratives define morality and value criteria according to which they seek to delegitimize the Zapotillo project and legitimize the resistance.

Moreover, the account of the activists’ experiences of the Zapotillo project has shown how the resistance seeks to promote a different social reality that goes beyond the Zapotillo dam. Imagining the village as a strengthened entity with vivid traditions and a strong connection to natural resources, such as water, the movement also aims to reinforce and revitalize local culture and traditions. Also, the self-empowerment of the village and the individuals participating in the resistance demonstrate that resistance has various facets. This allows for an analysis of power that goes beyond the imposition of power by dominant entities such as the state. The movement in Temaca shows that resistance not only emerges from unequal power relations, but also generates power. Through their resistance, Temaca refused to surrender to the state’s efforts to implement the project. While this signifies a counterforce to the power of the state and the hegemonic discourse, it also creates new social relations and new systems of knowledge and opens a space for individual and collective innovation.

The claim for people’s rights and the value of Temaca expressed in the STAP resistance demonstrate the tensions between what is promoted in the name of the greater good of the nation and the rights, histories, and local identities of a small group of people. I

believe that, through the resistance narratives, the STAP movement, both consciously and unconsciously encourages its audience, be they potential supporters, neutral spectators, or enemies, to rethink megaprojects.

Finally, resistance to megaprojects is a claim of rights and thus always contests the dominant power (Oliver-Smith, 1994, 214). Through the discussion of resistance narratives, we can enhance our understanding of how resistance materializes on the local level and how resources are mobilized to create and sustain it. An analysis of resistance narratives confronts us with important questions on human rights, ethical responsibilities, state-citizen accountability, and the theory and practice of development, contributing to our understanding of the power dynamics involved in these struggles.



Figures 7 & 8: Resistance paintings. Photos: Barbara Stulz.

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