Environmental Knowledges in Resistance

Mobilization, (Re)Production, and the Politics of Place. The Case of the Cooperativa Mujeres Ecologistas de la Huizachera, Jalisco (Mexico)

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Abstract: *The modern/colonial-gender system has imposed a hierarchy on gender, knowledges, nature, and humans. The consequences of this pattern are interwoven in a crisis of civilization; one of its greatest symptoms is the socio-environmental crisis that multiple vulnerable groups have been resisting, such as women in Latin American urban peripheries. In this chapter, we will assume a qualitative, decolonial, and feminist perspective to analyze the case of the Cooperativa Mujeres Ecologistas de la Huizachera in El Salto (Jalisco, Mexico), whose members have mobilized different types of knowledges to confront gender and environmental inequalities in their families and community.*

1. Introduction

From the outset, social, political, and economic inequalities produced by the modern/colonial-gender system (cf. Quijano/Wallerstein 1992; Lugones 2007) have been met with resistance by socially marginalized groups, such as women, peasants, and indigenous and afro-descendant groups. These resistances have mobilized, produced, and reproduced knowledges usually ignored and disregarded by colonial epistemology.

Regarding environmental conflicts and the defense of place[1], such as struggles against deforestation or water pollution, the high level of social mobilization of women stands out, often combined with demands for women's rights. These demands vary in their levels of need, such as basic means to ensure menstrual health and hygiene, food safety, easy and safe access to clean water, among others; issues that are frequently linked with access to education, safe transit, public participation, and spaces that are free of violence against women. In this chapter, we will analyze, from a decolonial gender perspective, the mobilization of knowledges and the process of change driven by women of the Cooperativa Mujeres Ecologistas de la Huizachera (Ecologist Women of La Huizachera Cooperative), short COMEH, in Jalisco (Mexico). The members of the COMEH are an example of how environmental conflicts are interlaced with several gender-based vulnerabilities that women face daily, especially from lower socioeconomic sectors of less privileged geographies. This way, their defense of place is also a defense of their own right to produce and inhabit spaces safely while ensuring their families' survival.

2. Modernity/Coloniality, Gender, and Environment

Since the Europeans' arrival in the Americas in the 14th century, European colonization has imposed a global pattern that Lugones has termed the modern/colonial-gender system. This term was coined by Lugones applying a feminist perspective to the world system and a decolonial analysis by Wallerstein (1974) and Mignolo (2000). In this chapter, we will use the concept of the colonial/modern-gender system, since it links gender, modernity, and coloniality under capitalism. The modern/colonial-gender system is based on the hierarchical distinction between supposed races, human and nature, as well as hierarchical gender relations between woman and man (Lugones 2011). The

1 We understand environmental conflicts to be multifactorial, thus they are not only understood as distributive conflicts but as one of the most evident symptoms of a larger social and environmental crisis, linked to a generalized crisis of civilization, based upon three main ideological axes: 1) civilization as a synonym of economic development and moral superiority, linked to the conception of the labor force and of land as merchandises; 2) Occidental science as the only and morally superior form of knowledge, related to mechanization, colonization, and disciplining of the bodies, passions, and the Other and 3) gendered and racial division of work and societies (Gloss 2021).

gender system it imposed is based on the subjugation of women in all spheres of life. Women are defined by their relation to men, and are thus considered inferior in economic, political, social, and epistemological terms (Lugones 2007). In the Americas, this imposition resulted in different gender patterns derived from a blending with local societies and particular transformations (ibid), thereby creating different gender positions, experiences, practices, and knowledges for the colonized and the colonizing men and women, as Lugones explains:

> Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for White bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations, of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing (Lugones 2007: 186).

The domination of the native population has implied a feminization of the native population as part of the symbolic domination and humiliation, allowing their exploitation and sexual abuse (Lugones 2011; Maldonado/Torres 2007). However, native men collaborated with European colonizers to establish the colonial gender system within their communities (Lugones 2007) and became representatives as well as part of the reproductive system of the modern/colonial-gender system (Segato 2011). Men assumed positions of power within their communities and took on the role of mediators with the colonial administration; while women were excluded from leadership structures and subordinated to their male counterparts (Oyěwùmí 2001; Segato 2011). The modern/colonial-gender system and its hierarchies continue today transformed and adapted to the current socio-economic necessities of the world system (Quijano/Wallerstein 1992).

From the perspective of the modern/colonial-gender system, the environment is characterized by the dichotomy of human/nature and the exploitation of the latter by the former (De Sousa Santos 2014). Economic growth is the main objective, which is achieved by extracting natural resources at a large scale, ignoring the social and ecological consequences of this exploitation (Svampa 2019). In the last two decades, this pattern of extractivism has been pushed again and updated in the Americas. Regions with natural resources have been considered "socially empty" and thus suitable to be extracted regardless of the people living there, their opinion, culture, or well-being (ibid). One example is

La Huizachera, an industrialized peripheral community in the metropolitan area of Guadalajara (Mexico).

In environmental conflicts, women are subject to a double dispute; on the one hand, the distributive conflict of natural resources; and on the other hand, the existing gender inequalities in the distribution of resources and the use of space in the affected communities (Martinez Alier 2005). Due to the different types of oppression that women suffer through their bodies (disregard, violence, economic dependence, unwanted pregnancies…), the defense of their own bodies is usually the starting point and the reason for their political involvement. As a consequence, their primary demands are gender-related, such as autonomy, reproductive rights, sexual emancipation, or a life without violence (Harcourt/Escobar 2002).

Due to the socially constructed role of women in the family, they are usually, and especially in communities with economies of self-subsistence, the first to react to conditions of privatization, scarcity, or contamination of fundamental resources that threaten the survival of their families (Bryant/Bailey 2005; Martínez Alier 2005). The same women (and bodies) who claim gender rights simultaneously defend their territory, its meaning, and value to ensure their families' survival (Harcourt/Escobar 2002). In this way, feminist demands, and environmental struggles are often entangled.

These practices of resistance have (re)produced epistemologies that are different from Western science, based on previous knowledges of communities, methods of organization, and experiences (De Sousa Santos 2018: 2). For example, these epistemologies propose different alternatives in defense of nature through an integrative and holistic perspective (Harcourt/Escobar 2002). The variety of knowledges, acquired through different practices and social bonds, some of them maintained throughout generations of women, are often underestimated or ignored within the capitalist modern/colonial-gender system. The epistemology of the modern/colonial-gender system is based on scientific knowledge, that is to say, on "systematic observation and controlled experimentation" (De Sousa Santos 2018: 5.) Knowledge produced following these principles is considered universal as well as objective, the only valid way of understanding the world and change it. This epistemic system has not only underestimated other knowledges, and in the Mexican context specifically those mobilized by women and indigenous communities, but also contributed to the reproduction of the modern/colonial-gender system (De Sousa Santos 2018).

Given this situation, the ecologies of knowledges defend a non-hierarchical dialogue and co-existence of diverse epistemologies. The promotion of this di-

alogue would require identifying other knowledges, their values, and methods (De Sousa Santos 2014). For this purpose, we must question the universality and objectivity of colonial epistemology. However, challenging Occidental universality and acknowledging epistemic diversity does not mean cultural or epistemic relativism. Such an endeavor implies a more complex analysis of different world views and the entanglements between them (De Sousa Santos/Meneses 2014). Moreover, from a gender perspective, it is necessary to consider gender inequalities in the access, production, and legitimacy of knowledge production. Women of the COMEH put this dialogue into practice by combining different knowledges – scientific knowledges, local knowledges, and new knowledges acquired by their collective experience – in the field, as we will show in the following analysis. Experiences and struggles such as those led by the women of the COMEH evidence the multiple levels on which the coloniality of gender operates and remains present, increasing women's multiple vulnerabilities, in this case, those of poor peripheral communities in Latin America. Following Lugones (2011), we argue that the analysis of their struggles for survival and their rights as women at the margins of privilege can contribute to feminist decolonial studies, as their political action is centered around different needs and priorities than those of middle and upper class Mexican mainstream feminist women.

3. Knowledge Mobilization and Production: Towards a Politics of the Ordinary

The following qualitative analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork consisting mainly of interviews, group discussions, and participant observation carried out from 2013 to 2014 and between 2019 and 2021, involving members of the COMEH in La Huizachera, El Salto, (Jalisco, Mexico). We will introduce this section with a short contextualization to situate the women of the COMEH and illustrate the everyday socio-environmental problems they face and the scope and relevance of their political action.

The women of the COMEH live in La Huizachera, a small peripheral community in the municipality of El Salto, part of the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, Mexico. They are mainly women between the ages of 35 to 70, and their families face constant economical and health difficulties. The socio-environmental conflict that the cooperative COMEH is confronted with is multidimensional. One of its most urgent challenges is the alarming water

pollution of the Santiago River, the most polluted river in Mexico. The Santiago River flows through El Salto and El Ahogado canal, one of the most densely contaminated bodies of water that crosses La Huizachera. Additionally, the air in this area is highly contaminated due to several national and transnational industrial activities[2]. Other vulnerabilities the communities there are facing are a lack of basic services, such as access to clean water, proper sewage maintenance, and trash collection. Among other social problems, people in La Huizachera face unemployment, poverty, corrupt authorities, political manipulation, and criminal networks (Gloss 2015).

Due to the high level of air and water pollution, many inhabitants of La Huizachera and El Salto suffer pollution-related diseases like cancer, renal failure, and respiratory and dermatological illnesses (Tribunal Interamericano del Agua 2007; Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí/Comisión Estatal del Agua de Jalisco 2010; Greenpeace 2012). The correlation between pollution and chronic diseases in this area has been consistently denied by the state of Jalisco's government. Through a state confidentiality clause that was in effect from 2011 to 2021, official evidence of heavy metals in children's blood was hidden for ten years (Arístegui Noticias 2020).

The knowledges that the COMEH mobilizes and generates are linked to several sources and contexts (Gloss 2021; Corona 2021): community knowledge, indigenous cultures, ecofeminism, agroecology, the Zapatistas (EZLN), specifically regarding the role of women and the construction of autonomies, popular education, and ecological building techniques.

Their practice of incorporating diverse knowledges into their daily lives and group activities has defied cultural community guidelines on several occasions. Through agroecology and its practice, women of the COMEH started to signify nature as a living entity. As they worked the soil at their community and domestic orchards, which was infertile because of the multiple sources of pollution surrounding their community, they developed parallel strategies linking the healing of the earth and of themselves. This process implied learning about natural cycles and their relation with the phases of the moon, which usually guide traditional farming in Mexico. Specifically, the analogies made between the phases of the moon, women's cycles and natural cycles generated conflicts with the knowledge promoted by the Catholic Church and validated by the community. The cluster of knowledges that the COMEH constructed

2 These industries are focused on the production of metal-mechanics, car components, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and food and drinks.

through their defense of place[3], in combination with their biographical and family knowledge, led them to recognize themselves as experts in agroecology and eco-technologies in their community, as well as in other communities they visited. This action had a strong political impact inside their families and community because it implied being "visible" in the public space, as women who acted differently from the rest; it also implied being "seen" and judged as crazy, lazy, negligent with their care labors, rebels, or libertines (Gloss 2015).

This self-recognition process, as women who "know", had two main functions. The first one relates to the fact that these knowledges have led the women to understand nature, and themselves, through – and as a part of – nature. As Carla, the community educator that has accompanied the COMEH from the beginning, points out:

> The patriarchy somehow has naturalized our body. Based on that, it has exploited it […] seeing it as merchandise, as an object, and it has feminized nature, considered it a woman he has to exploit […] When I speak about feminizing earth, it's not in this capitalist sense of exploitation, but in a loving sense that women have as this caregiver's role that has been given to us, I speak about caring, protecting. Esperanza [her friend] expressed it very well 'I am a mother of people, trees, plants, and animals' (Personal communication, 5 May 2018).

Relating themselves to nature and soil as mothers and as caretakers and guardians of life through their socially constructed roles led them to recognize their own captivities and violences to which they are ordinarily exposed in the streets, jobs, and homes. Building a safe space for expressing and validating their feelings and needs also led them to build places for contemplating both the past and the future. Remembering their past experiences, as hard as they could be, drove them to recognize, celebrate, value, and admire their power,

3 We consider it important to vindicate the notion of place, as a dynamic set of relations, practices and meanings that frequently, yet not necessarily, are rooted in a physical or even real space (Escobar 2010; Gloss 2015, 2021). Throughout Mexico and Latin America, the defense of territory is the most commonly used term to express struggles related to socio-environmental or land dispute conflicts. In this case, the use of place is important because of its analytical scope, specially concerning women's struggles. This way, we can understand the defense of place in its multiple social and spatial dimensions – body, family, group, community, public space, glocal meshworks and nature – on the basis of the analytical approaches and framework relating to "women and the politics of place" (Harcourt/Escobar 2007, 2012; Gloss, 2015, 2017, 2021).

resilience, and the set of knowledges they have produced and mobilized to survive and confront multiple adverse conditions. As the women of the COMEH gained knowledge about nature and learned different techniques to live in harmony with it, they simultaneously gained knowledge about themselves (individually), about each other, and the community (collectively), and ways of self-care and collective, sisterly care, and love. These practices also became projects, such as opening special moments to speak of their feelings and internal conflicts or participating in larger women networks.

The second function of recognizing knowledges which the COMEH produced, gained, and mobilized has to do with self-esteem; this implied overcoming the fear of speaking up, being seen, and recognizing themselves as capable of learning from different sources. This way, recognizing and valuing their diverse stocks of knowledges built trust in their own abilities, their power to take control over spaces in their homes and claim their place in the decision-making processes in the public and private spheres.

The women of the COMEH recognized that neither public nor private spheres had been properly theirs until they were able to use them, transit, and occupy them. This process entailed a defense of their bodies, as the first place that is inhabited and socially produced, and their right to have spaces of their own. For them, this discussion goes beyond notions of "legal property" of their households, typically or traditionally owned by men[4]. Home is a place of care, production and reproduction of life, a place that the women of the cooperative consciously intervene in through their political action, and which they use for the common good. The COMEH also defies the private property or government property logic that is part of the modern/colonial-gender system, as they understand nature as a shared living system that transcends individuals or human beings in general.

The dominant economic-production and gender system is also challenged as the women of the COMEH evidence and vindicate their active role, skills, knowledges, and experiences as caregivers and in the preservation and reproduction of life. Simultaneously, they also point out their capabilities to reach several autonomies through agroecological practices, political, and eco-technological knowledges. Ana, a member of the COMEH, recalls when she claimed a space in her household to set up her domestic orchard:

4 In most of Latin America, in families dedicated to agriculture, culturally and traditionally, women could not, and in some cases still cannot, own land, because only men are socially legitimated to be landowners and farmers.

> This was formerly my sons' garage […] When I planted here, they told me: 'Mom, you invaded our plot.' I told them: 'No, you are crazy, how is it I invaded your plot? Well, this is my house and you have not respected it, and from here to there, I don't want you to step on anything.' (Ana, personal communication, 17 October 2014).

The first response most of the women in the COMEH received to their involvement in the cooperative's activities were anger, judgment, and/or rejection from their families. Gradually, as members of their families benefited from the domestic orchards and the implementation of eco-technologies, they started to contribute and get involved in the COMEH's projects; with daughters, grandchildren, and daughters-in-law being the most receptive, and husbands and sons the most reluctant.

The knowledges women of the COMEH have acquired, but also valued and vindicated retrospectively, represent opportunities of economic autonomy and food sovereignty for them, their families, and other women of their community. Put into practice, these knowledges have been used to build productive and reproductive places, like their domestic or community orchards, which represent an autonomous and/or alternative food source. To produce and consume through processes that respect nature is actively resisting the dominant agro-industrial production system. Producing and consuming homegrown fruits and vegetables means taking an important political stand on health and nutrition. Such practices are especially relevant in the socio-environmentally devastated immediate context of the COMEH – an increasingly generalized reality in Mexican rural, suburban, and urban areas.

Through ecological technologies they built at their homes and the community orchard, members of the COMEH have to spend less on natural gas and potable water from private waterpipes – given the lack of potable water from public pipelines. This also enhances their autonomy from the traditional assistance and manipulative politics of the local government and the dominant political parties in the community. By putting into practice these alternative forms of knowledge, granddaughters, grandsons, daughters, sons, daughters-in-law, and even husbands – the most reluctant family members, followed by sons – started to explicitly value and become engaged with the activities of the cooperative.

As Zibechi (2012) points out, "societies in movement" in Latin America have strong territorial bonds and are led by women, especially in peripheral areas, taking a stand to highlight the dimensions of rootedness and important mi-

cro-politics, or politics of the ordinary, that are inherent in these struggles and movements. The small groups that form these societies in movement frequently resemble a family organization and are grounded in specific families as the nucleus of the group, as we can observe as a relevant and potent quality of the COMEH's struggle, among other groups facing similar problems (Zibechi 2012; Gravante/Poma 2018; Gloss 2017, 2020).

The central and constant learning experiences have resulted in the COMEH's members recognizing the repression and domination mechanisms inside their homes and community. At the same time, this process led them to recognize the reach of their political actions, which is centrally, but not exclusively, based on daily life. For communities who are facing and resisting socio-environmental conflicts like La Huizachera and El Salto, their form of applying their own knowledge is a form of "everyday resistance" (Sofia Enciso, Personal communication, April 2021), or a politics of the ordinary.

4. Final Thoughts

Thinking and learning collectively, through self-reflective processes, has enabled groups such as the COMEH to map, understand, and critically analyze their specific contexts and the related social and environmental problems. As a result, the members of the group have become political, learning, and knowledge-producing subjects. At the margins of the modern/colonial-gender system and its epistemology, groups like the COMEH are able to name, abstract, and conceptualize their realities following a practical and contextualized, or place-grounded, logic. A logic that defies hegemonic, colonial, and patriarchal hierarchies in knowledge production processes, that values and vindicates diverse sources, as well as knowledges produced by individual and collective direct experiences.

Regarding research such as the one discussed in this chapter, research related to groups of people who defend their place, and specifically women, one of the most persistent questions is which concepts these groups have appropriated from the researchers' intervention in their realities. In the case of women's groups, and specifically the COMEH, one could ask if they, for example, consider themselves feminists. Feminism is within their scope, but not necessarily central, even though their political practice could be considered and labeled as such. When health and basic conditions of survival are disputed, every day turns into a fight for survival or for not living in fear of premature death and

disease. In this light, concepts that are deemed important according to dominant epistemology do not have the same relevance for resisting communities. One could ask, for instance, whether feminism, in this case, is not better considered as a continuously nurtured practice or an individual and collective process in constant movement, as part of a politics of the ordinary that is simultaneously a politics of place, care, and knowledge.

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