

The politics of justification: Newspaper representations of environmental conflict between fishers and the oil industry in Mexico

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Abstract

Media representations of environmental conflicts between companies and communities play an important role in influencing ideas about the rightful exploitation of natural resources. This essay examines local newspapers' representations of fishers' claims over resource access in a conflict between fishers and the oil industry in Tabasco, Mexico. Our analysis is based on articles from two newspapers dating from 2003–2004 and 2007–2012, and ethnographic data from 2011–2012. Drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot's theory of justification, discussions on patrimonial collectivities, and studies of media and social movements, we suggest that Tabascan newspapers reshape fishers' claims over resource access by portraying fisheries and oil as patrimony. As an ambivalent vocabulary for defense of space and locality within a conflict over natural resource enclosure, the newspaper narratives of patrimony both invoke subaltern concerns and reconstrue state authority and local hierarchies. Furthermore, the newspaper narratives are interconnected with fisher leaders' narratives in particular while misrepresenting different fisher groups' arguments, thereby contributing to political division among the fishers as a whole.

Key words: fishers, justification, media representation, oil industry, patrimony

1. Introduction

This study examines newspaper representations of sea fishers' claims during a conflict over access to marine areas in Tabasco, Mexico. Since the early 2000s, intensified exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons in the Gulf of Mexico have caused continued tensions between the oil industry and sea fishers. At the same time, the Mexican government has opened the energy

sector to global investment and given transnational companies access to oil exploration and drilling via subcontracts with *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex), until recently a para-statal company. One of the major controversies between the fishers and the oil industry has concerned the increasing restrictions imposed on fishers' access to former fishing areas that, since 2003, have been reserved for the exclusive use of national and foreign oil industry actors. According to fishers, the intensified oil extraction causes increasing environmental harm, jeopardizing the livelihood of coastal populations who derive their primary income from fishing.

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) suggest that the moral valuations usually drawn on when justifying claims in environmental conflicts have universal characteristics: a justification goes beyond merely stating a particular viewpoint to claim that it is relevant for the common good and generalizable according to the criteria of a shared moral value. They further suggest that in contemporary conflicts, people generally employ justifications that can be divided into seven different value orders or 'worlds' that emphasize the 'civic', 'domestic', 'market', 'industrial', 'inspirational', 'fame'-related or 'ecological' value of the environment (Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993; Thevenot & al., 2000).

However, as many have noted, Boltanski and Thévenot derive these categories from works by Western political philosophers without discussing why and how they apply to non-Western contexts (Honneth, 2010; Lounela, 2015). Furthermore, their claim that justification is exclusively about value-based argumentation drawing on the principle of "common humanity" has also generated critique. Honneth (2010) suggests that the theory of justification should more comprehensively take account of the social structuration of moral values and the related links between values, interests and power. Blok (2013), Latour (1998) and Lounela (2015) argue that Boltanski and Thévenot's tendency to universalize the principle of common humanity results in disregarding both the plurality of actually existing

value systems and the diverse ways in which the environment is involved in the constitution of both humanity and values. Consequently, the ‘civic’ value order, which is based on equality and solidarity, ‘rises’ above the other six value orders as a kind of super category. Our study draws inspiration from these critical re-examinations, from the attention paid by communication studies (Gitlin, 1980; Nygren, 2006; Sobieraj, 2010) to the role of power relations in media representations of groups that could be described as subaltern, and from assessments of the diverse value judgments accommodated by media narratives.

Claims over space and resource access are approached by examining environmental dispute coverage in the years 2003–2007 and 2011–2012, in two Tabascan newspapers, *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy*, which – rather unusually for newspapers – draws mostly on subaltern accounts. These periods marked important phases in the conflict. To strengthen the analysis, the study also combines ethnographic data on fishers’ quotidian arguments on resource access from 2011–2012. Our analysis involves situated forms of what Boltanski and Thévenot refer to as domestic, industrial, civic and ecological justifications, paying special attention to their unequal newsworthiness. Furthermore, we combine Boltanski and Thévenot’s ideas with Ferry’s (2005) theorizations of patrimonial collectivities especially to show how newspaper coverage of the conflict is based on a continuity of representations of oil and fisheries as patrimonial resources. Ferry (2005:10) characterizes patrimony as a ‘highly charged “root metaphor“ and a ‘vital feature of Mexican social, political and economic life’, commonly used to make claims over resources and gain access to loci of power.

The situated, ambivalent meanings of the world of patrimony resonate with Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006: 164–178) domestic world, which encompasses hierarchical relations, family and tradition. In Tabasco, however, representations of both oil and fisheries as patrimony involve the highly unequal valuation of the respective patrimonial collectivities,

the nation as the patrimonial collectivity of petroleum and the local fisher community as that of fisheries resources. Furthermore, patrimony involves particular moral valuations of resources and social relations, which, at the same time as they defend the local within processes of shifting resource governance, provide justification for existing power relations and enable unequal possibilities for appropriation by different subaltern groups, thereby fragmenting the fishers' political struggle. Boltanski and Thévenot tend to pay less attention to these kinds of close linkages between values and power, central in analyses of justification, media and struggles over resources.

As Luhtakallio (2012: 149) writes, subaltern groups often have closer relations with local than national media, and in Tabasco's coastal areas some fisher leaders and *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy's* field journalists had collaborated, and leaders considered the local media an important venue for political activism. Whilst leaders and fishers had little voice in resource politics or the national newspapers, they were the primary source for news about the oil industry and fishing in the local newsprint media. Furthermore, the latter made important contributions to the imaginings and re-imaginings of community and common resources available to local readers (Luhtakallio, 2012, 149). However, although the local media provided fishers one of their only public arenas for putting political pressure on the oil industry and the government, it also actively reshaped their stories. Conversely, although industry representatives appeared in national newsprint coverage of environmental disputes, they were virtually invisible in the Tabascan newspapers, along with NGO representatives and scientists.

The fishers' frequent appearance in the news raises questions about the representativeness of their arguments. Generally, studies of social movements and the media tend to focus on the ways the media categorize and misrepresent movements, resulting subaltern groups thereby failing to gain 'quality' media coverage that is 'advantageous'

(Amenta & al., 2012; Díaz González, 2013; Hopke, 2012; Sobieraj, 2010). Many studies have shown how media representation of subaltern claims is linked to the wider framework of power relations, influencing the newsworthiness and public persuasiveness of different arguments in conflict situations (Gitlin, 1980; Earl & Rohlinger, 2012). However, Awad (2014), in a study of subaltern media tactics in Argentina and Cottle (2008), in an analysis of contemporary media's reporting of dissent, have suggested that media coverage is seldom exclusively misrepresentative and that even marginalizing representations of subaltern groups may produce important vocabularies for subaltern claims.

In this essay, we suggest that the Tabascan coverage highlights the limited discursive resources that the media provides heterogeneous subaltern groups, reinforcing existing group hierarchies and working to divide subaltern politics. Popular ideas of patrimonial relations between the Mexican state, natural resources and the family, which derive from the state's post-revolutionary rhetoric (Ferry, 2005), are reproduced through what we call narratives of patrimony in *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy*, and are also employed by the fishers' political leaders in presenting claims concerning the environment, livelihoods and protection within the conflict over space. Here we understand narratives as stories reflecting the politics of storytelling about common resources; they are construed from 'available and sanctioned' elements, influenced through institutionally located power (Ezzy, 1998:247). Our study shows how the narratives of patrimony provide unequal opportunities for different fisher groups to make public claims within familiar social relations of hierarchy and dependency, and how, in their daily lives, practicing fishers also present diverging, ecological arguments over access to the environment by emphasizing their fisher identity and their embodied experience of the sea space.

Our essay unfolds in six parts. Following this introduction, we examine theoretical approaches to justification through discussion of patrimony, media and social

movements. In the third and fourth parts, we discuss the socio-political context of Tabascan news and our methodology and material. The fifth part offers an analysis of the newspapers' uses of the notion of patrimony in representing the resource conflict and shows how ideas of patrimony align with various everyday arguments put forward by fishers. This is followed by conclusions about the connections between newsprint representations and fishers' claims, and their roles in struggles over Tabascan natural resources. Through analysis of news and ethnographic data, media representation of environmental conflict is conceptualized as a complex political arena providing heterogeneous subaltern groups with unequal opportunities to present moral demands, carve out a political agency and influence decision-makers.

2. Moral and political (ecological) grammars of resource access in local newspapers

Newspaper coverage of the conflict over Tabascan offshore space illustrates the discursive asymmetries involved when subaltern groups compete with strategically important national industries (Coronil, 1997; Pereira da Silva & Rothman, 2011; Watts, 2001). Recent studies have demonstrated that the notion of patrimony as an inalienable common resource passed from generation to generation, binding together state and people, provides a limited vocabulary for subaltern movements in defense of local natural resources (Breglia, 2013; Ferry, 2005; Thévenot & al., 2000). Thus, Ilyin (2015: 44) suggests that contemporary social research should employ 'patrimony' as an analytical instrument to identify patrimonial characteristics as they are variably understood and employed with regards the 'common good of generations', rather than taking its meaning for granted. In response, this study tracks the situated meanings and justificatory uses of the concept within the conflict over access to the Gulf resources, and how it is connected to other kinds of value judgments concerning the environment's worth.

Ferry (2005:13) and Ilyin (2015: 46) suggest that the notion of the *inalienability* of common resources plays a central role in constituting patrimonial collectivities and power relations. Ferry writes that in Mexico, this ideal encompasses both patrimonial resources and objects such as tools that take part in producing patrimony, thereby securing the continuity of patrimonial collectivities: a crucial notion that actors often invoke when making claims to alienable resources. Furthermore, in Mexico, patrimony is discursively imbued with the ability to designate collectivities, present the origins of existing power relations and explain how and why they should be maintained (Ferry, 2005: 11; Breglia, 2013: 97–99). Consequently, as Breglia (2013:14–15) writes in her study of the relations between the oil industry and fishers in Tabasco’s neighboring state, Campeche, ideas of a ‘patrimonial sea’ provide contradictory discursive resources for different actors because they legitimate access to patrimonial assets for both the coastal fishing populations and the national collectivity as a whole.

This draws attention to limitations within the justification theory deriving from the insistence that we examine justification exclusively in the context of value judgments (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 37), thereby eliding justification of interests and arrangements of power: an unproductive distinction as politically and economically privileged groups also flexibly deploy ideas of patrimony and collectivity. Studies of conflict coverage also draw attention to the links between values, interests and power in public claims, noting that subaltern groups in opposition to industry seldom achieve the media visibility and kind of representation they seek (Pereira da Silva & Rothman, 2011), often being downplayed, excluded or criminalized by the media (Behrman & al., 2012; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2015;).

Latour (1998) and Blok (2013) have critically examined the suitability of the justification theory’s ‘ecological’ value order in postcolonial contexts. Latour (1998) argues that to break from its humanist and modernist legacy, the ecological world should be

conceptualized as a non-modern, political ecological category that acknowledges the environment's value in terms of the 'uncertain connections' between humans and nonhumans. Blok (2013: 504; 507) suggests that, taken together, the ideas of Boltanski, Thévenot and Latour highlight ecology as a value order of 'divergent senses of ecological worth', inviting political ecologists to attend more closely to the possibility of alternative ecological configurations. This is a perspective that links with that of Tabascan fishers in which the uncertain connections with the environment are fundamental, but which, nevertheless, does not advocate a political ecological agenda. In this study, therefore, we examine the ecological value order not as a super category as suggested by Latour but as a value order comprising multiple understandings of the environment's worth.

Finally, as subaltern politics studies highlight, claims arise as a condition of politics itself (Ferguson, 2014; Jung, 2003), and those concerning resource access in the Tabascan newspapers suggest that the media visibility of local groups is conditioned by the domination of the moral and ideological language of patrimony. In the following, we examine representations of fishers' arguments with regards existing arrangements of power, the role of the media in resource politics, and the meanings of the narratives of patrimony for local groups who seek a meaningful place within existing social relations. When linked with discussions of patrimonial collectivities and of the political role of the media in environmental disputes, the theory of justification enables the examination of dispute as a discursive struggle between competing environmental valuations, which, together with state and oil industry politics, works to create divisions among different subaltern groups.

3. Studying Tabascan newsprint media and the conflict over access to the Gulf's resources

Newspapers continue to be a critical resource for social movements seeking publicity (Earl & Rohlinger, 2012). In Latin America, especially outside of metropolises, mainstream media has a central role in circulating narratives about social issues, and influencing public opinion (Kitzberger, 2014). In Tabasco, the middle and upper-class inhabitants in particular actively follow newspapers (Rinne & Nygren, 2015), while within the fisher communities, political leaders closely follow *Tabasco Hoy* while fishers rely on the radio and TV for local news.

Our news analysis involves two Tabascan publications. *Presente* is one of the most popular local newspapers, aligned with the centrist-oriented Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which led the Tabascan state government from 1959–2012, and also dominated Mexican national politics from 1929–2000 (Rinne & Nygren, 2015). The circulation of *Presente* in 2011 was about 25,000. *Tabasco Hoy* is a highly popular tabloid newspaper. Its director, a prominent Mexican businessman, has links to the social-democratic Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). The printed circulation of *Tabasco Hoy* was about 30,000, with 45,000 people reading its electronic version. Mexico has a free press; however, the media operates under several constraints both due to increasing violence toward journalists, and dependence on government funding which affects the news coverage of *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy* and most other regional newspapers.

Coastal Tabasco's fishing communities are differentiated by livelihoods, social status and political position. There are at least 7,000 sea fishers¹, half of which are unlicensed (*pescadores libres*) while the other half consists of approximately 2,700 cooperative fishers and 800 license-holding entrepreneurs (*permisionarios*). In addition, many people move between fishing and farming according to the time of year. Many of the unlicensed are ex-cooperative fishers, half of whom now work under more or less casual arrangements for the

¹ These estimates are from the first author's interview with a fishing official in 2011 and official statistics from 2009 (INEGI, 2010).

wealthier *permissionarios* while the rest are informal, independent fishers². The proletarianization of the fishing communities, the competition over restricted space, and the large number of unlicensed fishers who have limited political rights, inevitably fragments their political agendas.

Pemex, the eleventh largest oil company in the world and the third largest exporter of crude oil to the United States (US EIA, 2012), has an active presence in the everyday life of the fishing communities. The giant Sonda de Campeche (Campeche Sound) complex in the Gulf of Mexico accounts for 51 per cent of Mexico's oil production (Pemex, 2013). Since 1992, the Mexican government has opened the energy sector to global investment and given foreign companies access to oil exploration and drilling under subcontracts with Pemex (Martínez Laguna, 2004). In 2003, the government imposed security restrictions on movements near Gulf of Mexico oil installations in a 15,907 km² marine zone of exclusion, established under the federal legislation 'Acuerdo Secretarial No. 117' (DO, 2003). This bans all but oil industry operatives within the zone. While the agreement was justified by terrorism prevention and security enhancement, one of its aims seems to have been to avoid offshore social confrontation in order to ensure undisturbed oil production (Quist & Nygren, 2015). Recent legal reforms (DOF, 2014a; 2014b) made under President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, and the expansion of operations to coastal areas with the participation of foreign subcontractors, will considerably increase the oil industry's influence on the living conditions of fishing communities in the future.

Our study combines news analysis with ethnographic analysis to provide insights into how ideas of patrimony figure in the dispute over resource access both within the media and in the everyday political arenas, and how the media representations and fishers' everyday justifications are interconnected (Krzyżanowski, 2011). While the main attention is

² This is based on Saury Arias' (2010: 111) estimates of the number of fishers in Frontera, one of Tabasco's three coastal fishing towns.

on the media, the ethnographic fieldwork among fisher leaders and fishers contributed significantly to developing a nuanced understanding about the pronounced hierarchies between fisher leaders and fishers and the ways in which leaders' and fishers' narratives overlapped and diverged. The fieldwork especially helped to identify connections between the news representations and fisher leaders' claims and understand the central role that the leaders played in the construction of the narratives of patrimony. The ethnographic knowledge also enabled critical insights into the political agendas and strategies of all the actors involved in the conflict; these helped identify which perspectives the media favored. Correspondingly, the news data suggests a continuity of narratives of patrimony throughout the examined years, giving reason to infer that the fisher leaders' narratives of patrimony identified in the ethnographic material may also have a longer history. Overall, the rather unusual mode of combining newspaper and ethnographic data provided for a much more profound understanding of the role of the newspapers in the conflict than relying on only one set of data.

The media material examined in this analysis consists of 213 articles: 87 from *Presente* and 126 from *Tabasco Hoy* from 2003–2004 and 2007–2012, years which involved important political shifts that impacted on the relationships between the fishing and oil industries and on the thematic focus of news coverage. In 2003, the zone of exclusion was established, followed by frequent protests in 2004. From 2007–2008 onwards, the oil industry intensified offshore explorations, and from 2010 onwards, due to the decline of production at Sonda de Campeche, explorations especially along Tabasco's coastline increased. The establishment of the zone of exclusion and the coastline explorations are both reflected in the peaks in dispute coverage in 2004 and 2010 and in a relatively high number of articles also in 2011 and 2012 (see figure 1). Content was gathered by reviewing printed and electronic archives of the two newspapers, in the latter case employing Spanish keywords for fishing

(pesca, pesq-), oil (petroll, -eo) and the oil company (Petróleos Mexicanos, Pemex). After examining the articles, those that discussed relations between coastal fishers from Tabasco and the oil industry were selected.

As the majority of the data focused on representations of fishers' perspectives, we focused on how the fishers' views were framed and on rhetorical justifications for fishers' resource access. We carried out a qualitative content analysis of the articles by identifying the main themes, news sources, and the main actors, their presented claims and argumentation (e.g. Gorin & Dubied, 2011). Each article's main themes were identified from headings and subheadings, whereas the presented claims and provided argumentation were identified from the entire news text. The articles contained either an explicit claim and a supporting justification or involved a rationale according to which access to the Gulf for particular actors was justified. In the latter case, in order to identify a justification when there was no explicit claim, we paid attention to how the newspapers presented the fishers and oil industry and government actors and their interrelations. We paid special attention to the journalists and news sources and to the repeated publication of articles by the same journalists and sources. We also identified omissions of actors or themes.

The first author gathered most of the ethnographic material during six months of fieldwork among fishers and government and oil industry actors in Tabasco's coastal area and capital, Villahermosa, in 2011–2012. During this time, she lived first with the family of a political fisher leader, and then with that of an unlicensed fisher, participating in their daily fishing operations, family lives and political activities. This involved participant observation, dozens of informal conversations and 20 interviews with fisher leaders, entrepreneurial fishers, cooperative fishers and unlicensed fishers. Fieldwork also incorporated four interviews with journalists, three with government officials, two with oil industry actors and two with NGO representatives. The second author also carried out four interviews with

editors and journalists. Altogether, we interviewed four journalists from *Presente*, two from *Tabasco Hoy*, and four other journalists who were either independent or worked for Tabasco's other newspapers.

4. The actors and themes in the news focus

In this section, we briefly examine the major social actors and themes in the newspapers and how these were represented. We began analysis by examining the social actors – news sources and journalists – involved in the news-making, finding altogether 493 sources in the 213 articles. Over half of the articles of both *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy* (61.3 and 57.3 per cent respectively) were based on information from fishers, of which the largest groups were the leaders and other formal representatives (25.2 per cent in *Presente* and 27.3 in *Tabasco Hoy*) and licensed fishers (consisting of cooperativists and entrepreneurial fishers: 21.4 per cent in *Presente* and 22.7 in *Tabasco Hoy*). Unlicensed fishers had much less salience (6.7 per cent in *Presente* and 1.2 in *Tabasco Hoy*) (Table 1). The other source groups are available in Table 1.

When mapping the journalists, we found that 65.1 per cent of the articles whose primary sources were fishers had been written by only four field journalists, two from each newspaper. Furthermore, these collaborated several times with the same fisher leaders and fishers. Thus, a large part of the news-making had been carried out via long term relationships between particular journalists, fisher leaders and fishers. Our ethnographic data collected with fishers and journalists also suggested that some journalists and fisher leaders had known each other for many years, and had collaborated.

The newspapers' conflict reportage involved testimony-type articles which reported losses caused to fisheries by the oil industry, and more elaborate articles that presented both losses and related demands by fishers. The critique against the oil industry and

the government was presented mostly through the construction of a categorical juxtaposition between socially and politically marginalized fisher groups and a morally illegitimate yet powerful and unpunished industry. Fishers were generally presented as either neglected and therefore in need of the oil industry's protection or as irresponsible resource-users requiring control; they were also shown as drawing on their subaltern position as a kind of a filial tactic. *Presente*, quoting a fisher leader, wrote: our complaints have 'never been successful, and all the claims we have made against Pemex are always deemed groundless. We will never win a dispute against this powerful company.' (*Presente*, 25 July 2003). There is also a sense of inevitability in the way power relations are depicted, which, while certainly not completely misrepresentative of the actual state of affairs, reinforces images of the fishers' marginalization. Yet at the same, we suggest, fisher leaders and licensed fishers actively used the restricted position made available by a pre-established narrative repertoire to present claims in the media (cf. Awad, 2014).

We divided the news themes into six categories (Table 2). The thematic focus of the articles reflected actual events such as the restrictions on access, seismic studies and large oil spills, with shifting emphasis during election years when *Tabasco Hoy* gave considerably more publicity to the dispute over resource access. Furthermore, in *Tabasco Hoy*, during and prior to the municipal election years 2003 and 2009, news reporting was more than usually an arena of competing perspectives, while in *Presente*, it was more favorable to the government than outside of election time. The modes of representation and justification, however, did not vary dramatically over the years.

5. Newspapers, justification and politics

5.1. Claims to patrimony

The specialty of the Tabascan conflict coverage was that while it drew on fishers' accounts of oil industry-derived harm, it framed them as narratives of patrimony, which involved ambiguous critique of the oil industry. In this section, combining news analysis with ethnographic analysis, we show that this was possible because patrimony's ambivalence as a justification for claims to resource access provided a moral grammar which partially invoked fishers' concerns at the same time as it reconstrued state authority and local hierarchies. The media actively reshaped the fishers' claims for regaining access to the Gulf fishing grounds and receiving compensation for oil industry-induced socioeconomic and environmental damage by privileging fisher leaders' and licensed fishers' perspectives and framing them in narratives of patrimony.

Crucially, the newspapers' generous attention to the fishers' claims through reference to the patrimonial value of fisheries made it possible for the papers to appear to promote the fishers' cause. At the same time, however, they devoted little critical attention to the larger framework of power relations that impacted resource access, especially through the judiciary, and seldom employed investigative journalism to present evidence for fishers' claims. Instead, the narratives of patrimony, involving the fisheries' historical entitlement to space, the continuity of the patrimonial collectivity through family, the ideally inalienable realm of fisheries and related equipment, and relations of responsibility and protection, comprised the dominant approach to justifying resource access. The debate of entitlement to space and resources was, however, conditioned by oil's privileged patrimonial value and prioritization of the national collective construed through oil over the local collective construed through fisheries.

The newspapers framed fishers' claims to space by emphasizing fishers' historical entitlement to environmental resources, and by presenting the material world of

seafood resources and fishing equipment as elements of a historically continuous and inalienable patrimony. ‘The fishers were here before Pemex; for historical reasons we are entitled to attention and deserve protection,’ a fisher leader was quoted as saying in connection with his demand that fishing prohibitions around the platforms be annulled (*Tabasco Hoy*, 6 January 2007). Correspondingly, by making repeated reference to the material components of the work, including diverse fish species and fishing equipment, the newspapers gave meaning to and defended the fishers’ labor as patrimony against the effects of the oil industry’s expansion. “‘The oil spills not only damage our equipment but also frighten the shoals of fish’ ... they [fishers] have ceased fishing species such as black snook, common snook, king mackerel, snapper, jack and sargo, and are waiting to meet with Pemex’ (cooperative fishers interviewed in *Tabasco Hoy*, April 21st 2010). The mundane and material, yet inalienable, historically embedded world of fishing contributed fundamentally to the discursive constructions of the endangered patrimony of the *hombres del mar*. From this perspective, the damage caused to fishing equipment was more than a financial loss, as it represented a fracture to patrimony as an idea of a collectivity’s continuity.

The idea of continuity was also highlighted by references to the fisher family as a core unit of the patrimonial collectivity. ‘This is unfortunately the only work our fathers taught us...,’ a fisher leader was quoted as saying (*Tabasco Hoy*, 18 September 2004). Another article reported the decrease in yields since the introduction of the restrictions on sea traffic: ‘The catch shrank seriously and fishing became unviable for the families that depended on it’ (*Presente*, 3 February 2012). By making continuous reference to the family, the news highlighted the economic crisis of the patrimonial fisheries as a risk to the continuity of the way of life of coastal communities.

During fieldwork in 2011-2012, there were also often moments when fishers themselves employed patrimonial justifications for access to resources, although they mostly

discussed patrimony in terms of the fisher cooperative as the patrimonial collectivity of labor. Both licensed and unlicensed fishers often talked with pride about the collective, hard work and (especially past) yields involved in cooperative fishing. The idea of cooperatives and their continuity also involved the family, as many cooperatives continued to consist of family members, while many fishers also mentioned the power games and corruption, which, due to historical relations of government protection and control, were involved in cooperative politics.

As mentioned above, however, the language of patrimonial entitlements and responsibilities positioned the oil industry's patrimonial importance above the fishers. In the newspapers, fisher leaders themselves were often quoted as acknowledging the *paraestatal's* privileged role as the 'motor' of the nation: 'It is urgent that both Pemex and the authorities and fisher organizations sit down to analyze the situation of the fishing sector "because we are not opposing the exploitation of hydrocarbons; we know it is our country's wealth, but it needs to be noted that we as a productive sector are also very necessary for the nation"' (*Tabasco Hoy*, 3 November 2003). In 2012, as the conflict continued with no satisfying solution for the fishers, *Presente* wrote: 'fishers need the authorities' help, which is why they ask Pemex to be slightly wiser in this respect and to permit fishers to approach the platforms a little in order to gain better hauls' (*Presente*, 16 April 2012). Pleas like this appear to take the fishers' side by relying on their accounts, meanwhile justifying the oil industry's access to the sea space.

In everyday discussions during fieldwork, it was mostly fisher leaders who made arguments that connected with the newspapers' argumentation. Generally, fishers acknowledged the bleak contradiction between the understanding that the Gulf was, historically, '*la zona de los Pescadores*' (according to a cooperative fisher), while being forced to 'negotiate' access with Pemex (in the words of a fisher leader), which had taken

possession of the sea in the name of the common good, offering community development programs as a form of clientelist compensation (first author's fieldnotes, 2011). However, fishers were strongly divided concerning the notion of patrimony as an acceptable justification for the disparity in resource access. Most fisher leaders saw that the conflict between the two patrimonies required negotiation instead of outright protest; according to one, negotiation and collaboration were the only viable options, because protesting carried the risk of incarceration (first author's fieldnotes, 2012). Another leader said: 'We want to hear what Pemex's proposal would be. We know that Pemex generates income for the country.' (first author's interview, 2011). In a similar tone, a third leader said that the sectors 'need to work in harmony ... *Petróleos Mexicanos* has to be the fishing sector's ally, and in the zone where *Petróleos Mexicanos* is, there still are many fish species we can exploit but we need better ships. We need to have alliances.' (first author's interview, 2012).

In quotidian discussions during fieldwork, most licensed and unlicensed fishers rejected the idea that the national interest justified restrictions on their fishing grounds and authorized the state to define the sector's future. However, the very idea of patrimony divided the licensed and the unlicensed fishers as it provided them unequal possibilities for belonging to the state-acknowledged collectivity. In order to maintain the official fisher identity that the unlicensed fishers lacked, licensed fishers often justified resource access by drawing on their ownership of fishing licenses and related entitlement to state protection of their livelihood; to maintain access to the compensation schemes, the licensed fishers also mostly supported their leaders' attempts to negotiate with the oil industry instead of directly opposing it. In contrast, without political subjectivity to give them a voice, entitlement to subsidies from the government and compensation from the oil industry, the unlicensed fishers were in the frailest position within the patrimonial collectivity. Consequently, their political support was the least valuable to the fishers' struggle. Meanwhile, the fishers' leadership, caught between the

demands of the licensed fishers and state pressure for various forms of extra-legal negotiation, sought to maintain support from its constituencies despite restricted legal mechanisms to promote their political objectives.

5.2. The sea as patrimony, as resource and as identity

The newspapers also presented fishers' proposals for solving the resource conflict. Mostly, they relied on a combination of patrimonial and industrial justifications, producing argument combinations that associated the securing of patrimonial continuity with more efficient resource exploitation. The fisher federation leader's official proposal (below) to the oil industry during the height of fishers' protests after the establishment of the zone of exclusion demonstrates this. The news article involves three very different proposals, the first of which involves a patrimonial justification while the second and the third involve combinations of patrimonial and industrial justifications:

‘One of them [solutions] is that work be offered to fishers at Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) on the platforms, “in order for the resource to keep flowing to the municipality, because if fishing is finished and fishers are given money, they will leave from here and the municipality will be left alone to collapse”. Another solution that we propose to the corresponding authorities would be “the creation of fishing parks where each fisher would have their future secured...[T]he third proposal would be that Pemex exchange three or four boats to a ship’. (*Presente*, 26 March 2004)

The first of the above solutions, exceptional in the newspaper material, assigns worth to fishers through their role in keeping together a coastal municipality's patrimonial collectivity and suggests fishers can un-problematically become oil platform workers and thereby part of the more valuable national collectivity. The second solution alludes to both the

patrimonial and industrial values of fisheries by referencing continuity ('each fisher's future'), and more efficient resource exploitation. The third solution also draws on an industrial justification and, although it does not contain explicit patrimonial justification, it is premised on the idea of fisheries' patrimonial continuity. Here, as elsewhere in the news coverage, the presented claims do not challenge the oil industry's entitlement to access the patrimonial sea but rather assert that fishers are also important in making and sustaining patrimony and collectivity. The first proposal further highlights how the newspapers flexibly accommodate the ambivalent meanings of both oil and fisheries as patrimony while positing primacy to the oil industry. At the same time, it emphasizes what the other two solutions also imply: that the question of access to fishing is about the collectivity's continuity. Finally, the combinations of patrimonial and industrial justifications show how a claim for space per se is not sufficiently convincing but rather requires additional explication of how resource exploitation should be rationally organized within the reduced area.

During fieldwork, many fisher leaders saw possibilities in developing offshore fishing and aquaculture into more capital-intensive and efficient resource extraction, but did not actively push for changes. Rather, they considered increasing state support for large-scale aquaculture projects as a possible threat to small-scale fisheries. In the everyday arenas of fishing, most fishers and some of the leaders thought that regaining resource access simply meant restoring entitlement to fishing grounds integral to their cultural existence as fishers. This conception involved an ecological justification, which, while it was close to ideas of patrimony, contrarily drew on the fishers' intimate, embodied experience of being fishers in the offshore environment (Blok, 2013; Latour, 1998). Fishers expressed the ecological valuation of sea space when telling heroic stories of life at sea or sharing their knowledge of various marine species and their uses. Characteristic of the accounts was how they portrayed fishers within their sea environment rather than discussing the world of patrimony and

associated ideas such as collectivity, cooperative labor, family and continuity. Whereas fisher leaders and licensed fishers often combined ecological with patrimonial justifications, the unlicensed fishers mostly judged the patrimonial world by drawing on the ecological world. Thus, they often paralleled ideas of moving freely in offshore space away from cooperative politics and government surveillance as constitutive of their fisher identity.

On the other hand, ecological justifications occupied almost no newspaper space, and were not articulated in the political claims fishers and their leaders made to the oil industry; they also ran counter to the industrial and patrimonial justifications, which were more convincing in the context of enclosure and the maximization of efficient extraction. This highlighted how the terms of political debate both in and outside of newspapers favored particular moral arguments and hampered the articulation of experiences of identity in claims (cf. Luhtakallio, 2012: 157–159).

5.3. Fairness in the vernacular and the question of the “civic world”

Analysis of coverage also showed how the media portrayed ideas of fairness by promoting fishers’ claims that the oil industry was socially and environmentally unjust, and by publishing their calls for governmental agencies to monitor and punish the industry. The following kind of argument appeared in both newspapers: ‘Fishers have not received a solution to their rightful claim [that Pemex] admit and take its responsibility for thwarting [fishers’] livelihoods with oil spills’ (*Presente*, 29 September 2009). Importantly, these ideas of unfairness mostly involved the breach of the oil industry’s responsibility rather than the fishers’ basic rights. Furthermore, their dismal accounts portrayed the fishers as confronted with the impossible task of persuading an unpunishable industry to assume its patrimonial responsibility.

Similarly continuous coverage of appeals to governmental agencies also showed that the newspapers acknowledged the government's important role in the conflict. However, the news mostly involved denials by governmental agencies of the grounds for fishers' claims, or did not mention any reply at all. *Tabasco Hoy* reported a cooperative representative's concern: 'The environmental authorities such as the Federal Environmental Prosecutor (PROFEPA) and the Secretariat of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (SERNAPAM) declared the fishers' complaints unjustified and argued that the material [oil spill] did not cause damage to the environment nor to the fishers.' (*Tabasco Hoy*, 16 February 2011). Furthermore, only a few articles drew on journalists' firsthand evidence, which consequently left the truthfulness of the fishers' claims to the reader's judgment. Often, then, these complaints, while ostensibly presenting ideas about un/fairness, actually undermined the fishers' politics.

In 2010, however, two articles appeared on the conflict, one in each newspaper, which made an exception to the language of patrimonial responsibility by referring to legislation and rights. In a report on fishers' frustrations about the continued restrictions on sea traffic, the representative of the fishers was quoted: '[W]e think we have been very pacific because the secretary of ... [governmental agency] has up to a point helped us construct a negotiation project with Petroleos Mexicanos, but we also know it's necessary that the fishing sector demand its rights... We demand respect for our rights and that Pemex keep its word.' (*Presente*, 10 August 2010). Here the fisher leader emphasized that, despite reconciliation through clientelist agreements with Pemex, the question of resource access was fundamentally an issue of the fishers' basic rights, not one of negotiation. Yet even here, the argument was that Pemex ought to *respect* those rights; the establishment of the zone of exclusion had made it more difficult than before for fishers to use legal arguments.

In a similar vein, *Tabasco Hoy* published the outrage of two fisher leaders: ‘Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) is able to trust in the protection of laws and agreements that ignore [fishers’] elementary rights to pursue development in a clean environment and benefit from natural resources’ (*Tabasco Hoy*, 1 June 2010). This was the only time that the news explicitly argued that the law was against the fishers’ fundamental rights to the environment and livelihood (though neither article mentioned the unlicensed fishers).³ These justifications were, therefore, not purely ecological, civic or patrimonial but a bit of all three. They also suggested that rightful access to the environment and fisher identity was not necessarily contradicted by differentiated access for different fisher groups.

Whereas the newspaper representations of the conflict drew primarily on the accounts of fisher leaders and licensed fishers, unlicensed fishers gained considerably less media visibility, although a few articles presented arguments made by them that diverged from the patrimonial canon and contained elements of civic and ecological justification. *Presente*, for example, wrote about the concern of unlicensed fishers for ‘the ecological damage and scarcity of diverse fish species’ caused by ‘subsoil explosions’, adding that ‘over 3,500 unlicensed fishers who are equally impacted by contamination are excluded from support by Pemex’ (*Presente*, 13 March 2004).

In the everyday during fieldwork, as the legislation excluded half of the fishers, those with a license and officially recognized political subjectivity used both the law and narratives of patrimony to defend their groups’ privileged resource access. This was, for them, a question of preserving human dignity and fisher identity for all fishers; however, radical ideas on extending fishing rights to unlicensed fishers were seldom presented. Although some licensed fishers did see themselves as defending unlicensed fishers, many disapproved of the relative ‘freedom’ of the *pescadores libres* who in their view managed to evade the norms of

³ Interestingly, Rinne and Nygren (2015) have noted that during the same year (2010), *Presente* and *Tabasco* began employing a rights discourse in reporting on flood governance in Tabasco. However, in the coverage of the conflict between the fishers and the oil industry, these references to rights remained as an exception.

cooperative labor and often shifted between selling their labor to various licensed entrepreneurs without committing to any. The unlicensed fishers themselves considered they were unfairly denied representation and distribution of benefits from the state and the oil industry, and made civic arguments supporting political subjectivity and redistribution.

Finally, the newspaper representations highlighted patrimonial entitlements and responsibilities and downplayed the importance that fishers assigned the judiciary in determining resource access. In their quotidian arguments for fairness in resource distribution and political representation, the fisher leaders' and licensed fishers presented claims that combined civic and patrimonial values whereas unlicensed fishers used civic justifications about equality. The use of the various justifications by media, fisher leaders and different fisher groups demonstrated, following Ferry's study (2005), how the narratives of patrimony dominated resource access debates and was implicated in sustaining the asymmetrical arrangements of power between the para-statal industry, local fisher leaders and fisher groups. The media provided its own interpretation of the conflict by presenting categorical images of the disputants, by downplaying the role of legislation and by privileging representations of fisher leaders' while excluding those of unlicensed fishers. However, the fishers' uses of civic justification did not, contrary to Boltanski and Thévenot's suggestions, place the civic world morally 'above' the other worlds. Rather it offered one important moral and political vocabulary among many that were active in the asymmetric power relations, meanwhile highlighting the fact that the notion of patrimony provided different classes of fishers unequal opportunities for making claims to resources and a place within social hierarchies.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that ideas of patrimonial resources and collectivities dominate Tabascan newspaper representations of environmental conflict between fishers and the oil industry. The narratives of patrimony provide contradictory discursive resources for subaltern groups to present justifications for resource access at the same time as it reaffirms state authority in resource governance. By also drawing on ethnographic analysis of the competing justifications different fisher groups employed in their everyday discourse, our study has shown how local newspaper representations work to reinforce existing divisions between subaltern groups by privileging certain perspectives. In order to make our claims, we have drawn upon our research on the representations of *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy* in 2003–2004 and 2007–2012 and ethnographic data from 2011–2012, to elucidate the working of patrimony within a context of enclosure.

The majority of the news articles analyzed here portrayed fishers' arguments by presenting patrimonial justifications for their claims, particularly through references to fishers' historical entitlement to the Gulf environment, and to the valuing of labor through a hierarchical relationship between the national and the local collective. By providing fishers considerable extensive media visibility through the patrimonial portrayals, the newspapers appeared to promote their concerns while simultaneously legitimating the oil industry's resource access as a patrimonial entitlement. During fieldwork, fisher leaders also employed the patrimonial justification, arguing that the expanding oil industry and fishers should share the Gulf space. However, for the leaders, the oil industry's compensation schemes increased the pressure to acknowledge the patrimonial value of petroleum resources and engage in 'negotiation'. Contrary to newspaper framings, most practicing fishers and many leaders drew on ecological justifications for claims, emphasizing fisher identity, experience and professional knowledge of the sea environment and thereby asserting professional authority in

resource management. These experiences did not belong to the fishers' discursive-political repertoire, however, but were primarily shared in the everyday arenas of fishing.

The newspapers' few references to legislation and rights, on the one hand, and different fishers' arguments that resource access was a question of human dignity and an issue for legislation, on the other, further demonstrated diverging arguments about fairness, emphasizing how the media downplayed, while fishers highlighted, the importance of the law in determining resource access. The fishers' arguments also showed that, in the everyday, ideas of rights and entitlement did not involve a complete abandonment of patrimonial dependencies and hierarchies, which remained a part of how the different fishers asserted fairness. These issues underscored the impossibility of approaching the civic value order as a superior category compared with other value orders (Honneth, 2010: 379; Lounela, 2015).

Our analysis of subaltern claims in light of Boltanski and Thévenot's ideas shows how the value orders they list are not straightforwardly appropriate in a postcolonial context, as their meanings are context dependent (Ilyin, 2015). What they do highlight however, is how current conflicts over resources are fundamentally and in multiple ways linked with conflicting grammars of moral value. Finally, the model is most useful when attention to values is combined with simultaneous attention to the political and sometimes violent aspects of environmental conflicts to identify the diverging 'persuasion power' and newsworthiness of different justifications. Together, these discussions also draw attention to the challenges subaltern groups face in building shared agendas for resource distribution (Blok, 2013).

Our analysis of claims' justifications suggests a more complicated picture of the media's representational politics than most existing studies, which emphasize unequal media visibility and misrepresentation of subaltern groups (Amenta & al., 2012; Sobieraj, 2010). In Tabasco, fisher leaders in particular and some licensed fishers actively used the discursive

space provided by the newspapers although the narratives of patrimony gave the fisher groups a vocabulary that undermined their agenda and worked to highlight existing divisions and hierarchies. Nonetheless, to a certain degree, they enabled claims to a meaningful place within social relations of hierarchy and dependency, resembling Awad's (2014) notions of the working of TV discourse as an arena for subaltern claims.

As our study stressed, however, the divergence between the dominant justification presented in the newspapers and the ecological justifications expressed by fishers themselves demonstrated that, when drawing on the patrimony justification, newspapers and fishers took part in constructing representations whose boundaries were primarily drawn by more politically powerful groups (Gitlin, 1980; Nygren, 2006). It highlighted that the political power of claims and justifications is always linked to the un/likelihood of groups with unequal access to power and resources being able to work together. It further demonstrates how even justifications that are shared among large groups are often accommodated to the dominant moral discourses promoted by political and economic elites and the media's implicit rules of newsworthiness. Nonetheless, the fact that the representations also involved some diversions from the dominant, patrimonial grammar was a reminder of the always contingent character of representations. In other words, they evolve through struggles such as that of the fishers.

Furthermore, analysis demonstrated that within the shifting processes of resource governance and proletarianization, the narratives of patrimony had come to provide few points of reference for the increased number of fishers with no state-acknowledged identity, meanwhile promoting the interests of state actors and socioeconomically privileged fisher groups. In the context of new forms of resource governance, therefore, its role as a moral and political language had weakened. However, the fishers' everyday narratives of patrimony suggested that the threat of a new kind of poverty within the context of resource

exclusion – Ferguson’s (2014: 155) ‘asocial inequality’, implying a cutting off from former social relationships of inequality – was experienced as something worse than the familiar, hierarchical social relations in which prior poverty in coastal Tabasco had been embedded. In the Tabascan context, strategic national interests were increasingly governed through mechanisms that involved the oil industry’s privatization and the employment of public-private partnerships in the oil industry’s compensation programs (Quist & Nygren, 2015). Ultimately, in these conditions the patrimony justification was flexibly accommodated as part of neoliberal politics, while identity-related quotidian arguments for resource access which acknowledged the environment as constitutive of the fishers’ way of life remained unarticulated both in fishers’ political claims and in the newspapers.

Social actors	Presente (%) (n=163)	Tabasco Hoy (%) (n=330)
Representatives of fishers and fisher -campesino organizations	25,2	27,3
Cooperative fishers	15,3	19,7
Entrepreneurial fishers (permisionários)	6,1	3,0
Fishers (unspecified)	8,0	6,1
Unlicensed fishers	6,7	1,2
Residents of coastal communities	8,0	7,6
Fishmongers and other fish entrepreneurs	0,6	0,9
Representatives of research institutions, specialists	2,5	8,8
Representatives of federal institutions	8,6	6,4
Representatives of state institutions	2,5	2,1
Representatives of the oil industry	1,2	2,1
Politicians (fed. & state)	9,8	5,8
Representatives of the private sector (other than fishing)	1,8	3,9
Representatives of environmental and human rights NGOs	2,5	2,1
Others / no social actors	1,2	3,0
Total / fishers	61,3	57,3
Total	100,0	100,0

Table 1. The social actors used as news sources in *Presente* and *Tabasco Hoy* in 2003–2004 and 2007–2012.

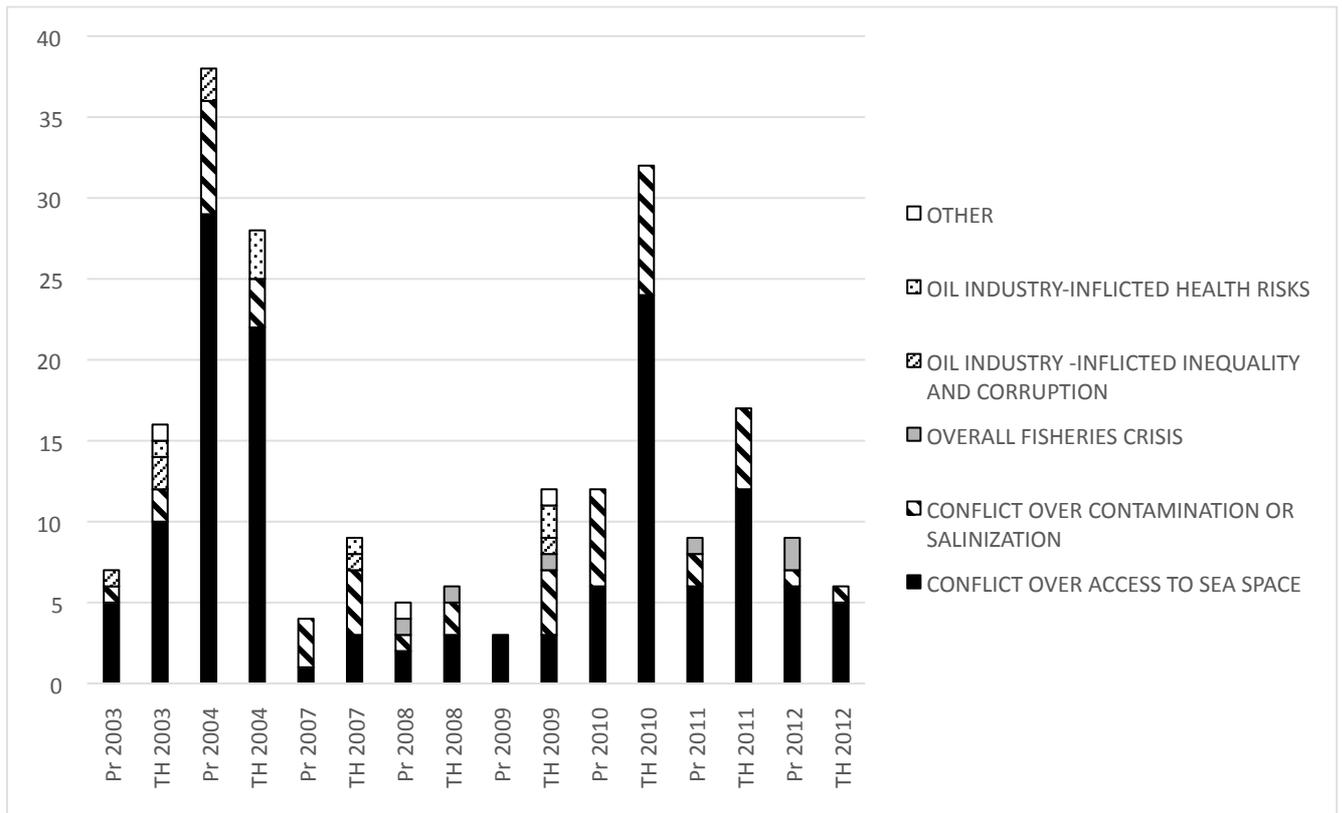


Figure 1. Frequency of main themes in articles in Presente (n=87) and Tabasco Hoy (n=126), in 2003–2004 and 2007–2012.

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