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"The Famatina is not to be touched." Processes of struggle and resistance around the exploitation of Famatina Hill, La Rioja, Argentina

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"The Famatina is not to be touched." Processes of struggle and resistance around the exploitation of Famatina Hill, La Rioja, Argentina

Abstract
In this research, we propose to analyze the process of organization, resistance, and struggle that has been unfolding in recent decades in Famatina, province of La Rioja, in response to the installation of metalliferous mega-mining. We do so from a Global South perspective, which implies recognizing, from a critical viewpoint, how new social experiences arise in the face of the advance of what David Harvey has called, in this stage of capitalism, *accumulation by dispossession* (Harvey, 2005). We ask ourselves why a group of neighbors from this region are willing to fight for their natural resources and, above all, for the common goods they share. The main reason that brings these people together is the defense of the territory, nature, and above all, the feeling of belonging to the Hill. The slogans that drive the struggle emerged from there: "*The Famatina is not to be touched*" and "*Water is worth more than gold*," which to this day remain valid as cries of resistance. This paper is part of the Ficyt-Undec 2022 research project, titled "Social representations of Famatina Hill and proximity conflicts. Resistance and territorial (re)existence in Chilecito and Famatina today," where a group of researchers and students from the Universidad Nacional de Chilecito (National University of Chilecito) have conducted semi-structured interviews and life stories to delve into the memories of struggle and resistance to extractive projects in Famatina, La Rioja.

Keywords: Famatina; mega-mining; natural resources; socio-environmental movements; struggle.

"El Famatina no se toca." Procesos de lucha y resistencia en torno a la explotación del Cerro Famatina, La Rioja, Argentina

Resumen
En esta pesquisa, nos proponemos analizar el proceso de organización, resistencia y lucha que se viene desarrollando en las últimas décadas en Famatina, provincia de La Rioja, como respuesta a la instalación de la megaminería metalífera. Lo haremos desde una perspectiva del Sur Global, que implica reconocer, desde una mirada crítica, cómo surgen nuevas experiencias sociales frente al avance de lo que David Harvey ha denominado, en esta etapa del capitalismo, como *acumulación por desposesión* (Harvey, 2005). Nos preguntamos por qué un grupo de vecinas y vecinos de esta localidad están dispuestos a luchar por sus recursos naturales y, sobre todo, por los bienes comunes que comparten. El motivo principal que aglutina a estas personas es la defensa del territorio, la naturaleza y, sobre todo, el sentimiento de pertenencia con el Cerro. De allí se desprenden las consignas que dominaron la lucha: "*El Famatina no se toca*" y "*El agua vale más que el oro*", que hasta el día de hoy siguen vigentes como gritos de resistencia. Este trabajo se inscribe dentro del proyecto de investigación Ficyt-Undec 2022, intitulado "Representaciones sociales sobre el Cerro Famatina y conflictos de proximidad. Resistencias y (re)existencias territoriales en Chilecito y Famatina en la actualidad", donde un grupo de investigadoras y de estudiantes de la Universidad Nacional de Chilecito realizan entrevistas semi-estructuradas e historias de vida para adentrarnos en las memorias de lucha y resistencia ante los proyectos extractivistas en Famatina, La Rioja.

Palabras clave: Famatina; megaminería; recursos naturales; movimientos socioambientales; lucha.

Introduction

In this research we propose to study the process of organization, resistance, and struggle that took place in the last decades of the 21st century in Famatina, province of La Rioja, Argentina, in response to the installation of metalliferous mega-mining. We will do so from a Global South perspective, which implies recognizing, from a critical perspective, how new social experiences arise in the face of the advance of what David Harvey has named, in this stage of capitalism, "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005, p. 113).

We ask ourselves why a group of neighbours are willing to fight for their natural resources and, above all, for the common goods they share. We see that, in the example of Famatina, the defence of the territory is associated with a 'selective tradition' that, according to Williams (1980, p. 153), "is an intentionally selective version of a configurative past and a preconfigured present, which then becomes powerfully operative in the process of cultural and social definition and identification." This means that the Famatina residents select some elements of the past, a common heritage and history (Solá Álvarez, 2012), in this case a town linked to mining since its origins, and connect it with an identity element such as the fact of having been born, raised and lived in front of the Hill. Here, the link with the place of origin and above all with nature (the Hill) would be key to understanding why they are willing to "*put their bodies on the line*" to protect the Famatina. We believe that the meaning of the slogans that dominated the struggle ("Famatina is not to be touched" and "Water is worth more than gold") refers to cultural conditions, as well as environmental, economic, and political demands. To address this issue, we see that the contributions of Williams's theory of culture (1989) will help us understand how specific practices have a social and cultural use. Here, the notion of 'culture' as a mode or way of being in the world is related to material, historical, and political contexts. At the same time, these contributions will provide us with tools to understand this process over time, since, in the history of La Rioja, extractive projects have a long history: first it was gold and copper; then uranium; now it is lithium. This process of struggle that began in the early years of the 21st century, is gaining relevance today. Throughout 2023, a series of constituent assemblies were held to raise their voices to participate in the reform of the provincial

constitution promoted by Governor Ricardo Quintela. The assembly members draw attention to the use of water and the exploitation of lithium in the province.

Mining exploitation and socio-environmental movements

The context in which the process under study takes place is that of exploitation of natural resources as a result of the expansion of capitalism. For this analysis, we take the contributions of David Harvey, who considers this stage as a new form of Imperialism, which the author defines as "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005). This means the depredation of environmental goods such as land, air, and water, as a result of the transformation of nature into merchandise. One of the characteristics of this cycle of imperialism is that it is rentier and parasitic, where capital liquidity allows for great mobility that translates into massive transfers of investments from one productive branch to another, in a relentless search for greater profitability. Latin America and Argentina, within the International Division of Labor, as producers and suppliers of raw materials, meet exceptional economic and political conditions for the accumulation of profits. Since 2000, Argentina has been dominated by the primary sector, with extensive monoculture production of soybeans, open-pit mining, and extraction of energy resources such as oil. This has generated countless socio-environmental, health, and cultural problems.

In the case of mining, extracted metals are not inserted into the markets valued as consumer goods; on the contrary, they are transferred by owners of the mining companies who pay a minimum percentage of royalties on mine-head value[1]. Metal deposit projects require a large capital investment and are very risky, which is why there is no Argentine capital investing in this type of activity. This is why capital is mostly foreign, in this case, in the hands of transnational companies.

[1] The percentage is 98% for the countries of origin and 2% for Argentina. In addition to the fact that they are granted all the ease, such as tax incentives for exploration and exploitation, deducting 100% of the invested amount and exploration expenses from the income tax, they are given back the value added tax (VAT) on exploration expenses, they are granted fiscal and exchange stability for 30 years, and they are exempt from paying import duties, to mention some of the advantages.

In order to engage in this type of activity, the Argentine National State modified its laws. Through the 1994 Constitutional Reform, it was established that natural resources would belong to the provinces[2]. Based on this regulation, the provinces are the ones deciding who, how, and when these resources are exploited. Likewise, in 1993 and 1995, the Mining Code was reformed, which granted greater access to private investors to the areas of mining exploration and exploitation.

In the case of open-pit mining, this is characterized by being a non-underground mining operation (the latter, for the most part, is already exhausted). The mining cycle is approximately thirty years. It begins with the recognition process, which lasts between 2 and 3 years, then exploration, which can last between 8 and 10 years, and if it is feasible, both from the economic, environmental, and social viewpoints, the building of the mine begins. In all these stages, environmental impact reports must be provided and from the beginning they must be accompanied by public hearings. This is well expressed in Law No. 24585, which establishes environmental protection and conservation of natural and cultural heritage in the field of mining activity[3].

In the case of Famatina, the hill has minerals of economic interest, mainly gold and copper. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the various mining exploration and exploitation projects that have been attempted to be installed in the area, with the consent of the provincial government, have been rejected by the residents of Famatina. One resident warned about the environmental issues and the consequences that this type of activity entails:

> They tell us that there is sustainable and responsible mining, but we know that this does not exist. Instead of tunnels, they now blow up mountains with dynamite, grind the earth, separate metals with cyanide or acids and use enormous amounts of water. In Famatina they calculated that they were going to use 1,000 liters per second (those who have a calculator or a pencil at hand can do their own calculations). That is how they separate the metal and the rest is what they call 'sterile material.' This sterile material is our destroyed mountain, which drains cyanide

[2] This reform was established in Art. 124 of the National Constitution. See: https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/nacional/ley-24430-804/texto

[3] Law No. 24585 (Argentina, 1995) modified Art. 282 of the Mining Code, incorporating as a complementary title "on Environmental Protection for Mining Activities."

> for thousands of years and contaminates everything, after having left us without water. What is sustainable?... Another mining engineer who came to say that sterile material was not going to contaminate because it could be wrapped with plastic membranes. Can anyone imagine a hill thousands of meters high wrapped in plastic to prevent the drainage of cyanide, arsenic, and sulfuric acid? (Suffich, 2007).

As an objection to these mining ventures, residents of Famatina began to organize to stop them. From this arose a broad assembly movement, in defense of the Hill and especially of the water, as it can be seen in the testimony cited. This type of socio-environmental dispute is characterized by having a strong social component, and we would add a cultural one, where both ecological and territorial demands become relevant.

The phenomenon of socio-environmental movements that defend natural resources as a response to extractive policies in Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, is a theme that has gained relevance in recent decades and has been analyzed from different approaches and subjects. For instance, some studies point out that environmental conflicts can be taken as an 'eco-territorial turn.' Within this line, Svampa (2010) argues that this turn accounts for the emergence of new struggles that are anchored, based on new narratives and meanings about nature and common goods, in new forms of resistance. In these processes, the notion of territory is translated into 'struggles for territory' or 'socio-territorial struggles.' In this way, the territory is linked to a protest claim or to the identity of a social group that become forms of resistance, re-signification, and creation of new social relations (Svampa; Antonelli, 2009). We can add the role that women play in this type of struggle. As Solá Álvarez (2022) suggests, groups and organizations constituted by women have been formed through criticism of a patriarchal development model. These experiences support what the author defines as territorial-based ecofeminism. What is interesting to analyze in the case of Famatina is that although it was women who initiated the socio-environmental claim, they did not do so initially as a criticism of the asymmetrical relations between the genders. However, in the course of conflict, relations around power in its various manifestations became problematized. We can make the analysis more complex if we add the contributions of De la Vega (2020), who carries out a detailed study on the

formation of environmental assemblies in the province of La Rioja. The author builds bridges between the notion of class, its formation, and political struggle, highlighting the concept of experience as a key to understanding this process.

These contributions, together with those of Raymond Williams, will provide us with a theoretical and methodological framework to understand how Famatina residents organized themselves and why they fought in defense of water and territory.

Why Famatina?

Throughout the 21st century, La Rioja has been undergoing a process that combines denunciation, struggle, and resistance against the various mega-mining projects in the province. As a result, through social mobilization and the establishment of the Assembly in defense of water, life, and Famatina Hill, several mining exploration and exploitation projects by transnational companies have been expelled since 2007. This process may be divided into three stages: the first from 2006 to 2007, with the expulsion of Barrick Gold; the second from 2011 to 2013, against Osisko Gold; and the third from 2015 against Midais S.H.

However, to date, the assemblies remain on alert, as they claim that there are around twenty mining projects waiting for the green light to be carried out. In this context, it is worth mentioning the initiative in 2017 (to date it has not materialized) to create a National Park on Famatina Hill, with the aim of giving rise to a protected area against mining projects (Jofré, 2022). Since July 2023, the Constituent Assemblies of the Riojan peoples were formed, which demand to have participation in the reform of the provincial constitution, as already mentioned in previous paragraphs[4].

[4] The Constituent Assemblies of the Riojan peoples have been calling attention to the agreement signed between the provincial government and the Israeli company Mekorot to carry out a 'master plan' for the use of technology for water treatment. The assembly members argue that this is the way to privatize water, a key resource for the exploitation of mega-mining. They have also been denouncing the exploitation and exploration of lithium in La Rioja. In particular, the creation of the company Kallpa Sapem by Governor Quintela, which has been carrying out more than 20 projects of this type, already leaving serious consequences for the environment, as in the case of the El Leoncito salt mine (Martin, 2023).

The region of Famatina is located in the north-central part of the province of La Rioja, from where we can see the General Belgrano hill (6,100 meters above sea level), better known as the Famatina snow-capped mountain. In the Kakan language, originally from the Diaguitas, it was named *Wamatinag*, which means "mother of metals." This mountain range has peaks of permanent snow and glaciers, whose melting ice water is used for irrigation throughout the region. It has a population of 6,061 people according to data from the 2022 Census (INDEC, 2022) and its economic profile is oriented towards wine, olive, and fruit production on small farms. For instance, fruit trees such as quince, apple, pears, figs, plums, apricots, among others, are harvested, with which artisanal jam is produced. It also has olive groves that produce olives and olive oil and vineyards that are used to make table wine, the best-known variety being Torrontés, and also to make patero wine. Likewise, the production of walnut trees stands out, which are mainly sold abroad, but are also used to make typical foods such as candied walnuts. Tourism is also another major activity in the area, as it has a number of tourist attractions to visit. It is worth noticing that since 2014 the region has been declared a World Heritage Site, as it is part of the Inca Trail, named Qapac Ñam.

Mining is part of the culture and history of Famatina. These mountains were already known before the Conquest and their minerals were exploited by the native peoples. Unlike the economic purpose that the Spanish gave it, the gold that the Incas extracted had a ceremonial purpose for them. In 1592, the Spanish conquistador Juan Ramírez de Velazco arrived looking for "the gold of Famatina," then it was the Jesuits, when they settled in the region, who extracted minerals. After independence, in the 1820s, Facundo Quiroga, with the metals of Famatina, minted the first coins of the province and had a dispute with President Bernardino Rivadavia, who at that time had already promised the gold from these mines as collateral for a loan signed in 1824 with the Baring Brothers bank. At the beginning of the 20th century, the English resumed their interest in the area and the 'La Mejicana' mine began to be exploited. To transport the mineral, the Cablecarril was built, a great work of engineering that linked Santa Florentina with Chilecito; the gold extracted was loaded onto the railway bound for the port of Buenos Aires. Mining continued to be practiced on

a smaller scale throughout the 20th century and had harsh consequences for the people of Famatina. As one interviewee recalls: "between the 1940s and 1960s, only widows and orphans remained here due to the deaths of men caused by lung problems... mining is part of our family and daily life" (Crabbe, 2023).

The struggle against Barrick Gold

At the beginning of the 21st century, open-pit mining exploration and exploitation projects began in the area. In 2004, the governor of the province of La Rioja, Ángel Maza[5], announced that the Canadian company Barrick Gold (Bonasso, 2011)[6] would begin exploring the area around Famatina Hill. A year later, an agreement was signed between the Riojan mining company Yamiri S.A.[7] and Barrick Gold. This agreement granted the latter company exclusivity in exploring the area surrounding the hill. That same year, on the anniversary of the municipality, the governor announced that there would be mining investments and a provincial mining royalties bill. At the same time, the provincial Ministry of Mining and Education provided the community with a series of courses for geological assistants. These were held in schools, where teachers warned that "it comes to cyanide, to explosions" (Crabbe, 2023).

A group of Famatina teachers, faced with the threat of mining exploitation in the area, began to organize themselves; on the one hand, by word of mouth, house by house, on the other, by making phone calls to acquaintances and friends. In this pioneering 'ant work,' Carolina Suffich, a Famatina teacher, along with a group of colleagues, was in charge of mobilizing and organizing the first

[5] Ángel Maza was governor for the Justicialist Party (Peronist) in the province of La Rioja for three terms: between 1995-1999; from 1999-2003; and from 2003 until his suspension on March 13, 2007 and subsequent dismissal on April 12 that year.

[6] The Barrick Gold company was already exploiting Bajo de la Alumbrera in Catamarca (1997) and Veladero in San Juan (since 2003) and the Pascua-Lama binational project (Argentina-Chile).

[7] Yacimientos Mineros Riojanos S.A. (Yamiri S.A.) is a mining exploration company, governed by Argentine law and linked to Yamiri Gold And Energy Inc. based in Vancouver, Canada. The company was created by the Government of the Province of La Rioja in 1987, as a mixed capital company (Sociedad de Economía Mixta) to foster mining in the province. In 1997, it was turned into a Public Limited Company and currently has a majority private participation and the Provincial State holds 20.4% of the shares.

meetings. For instance, Ana Gloria González[8] told us that Carolina Suffich called her on the phone to say: “Ana Gloria, I am calling people committed to the town, we have a serious problem, there is a mining company that is coming... if you have some time and we can talk, I want you to join us” (González, 2023).

The problem they initially faced was “how to raise awareness” about this issue among the neighbors and the students at school. As Jenny Lujan recalls, “raising awareness was a learning process” (Lujan, 2023). Also, Andrea “la Gringa” Crabbe explained “that they had to teach with clean hands” (Crabbe, 2023). To do so, they had to study, prepare, and work creatively, alluding to the fact that they had nothing to give in return, in a society used to clientelist ties. Above all, in a context where the Ministry of Education of the province of La Rioja prohibited them from talking about mining and the environment. At the same time, the Barrick Gold company distributed school textbooks and required them to be used in classrooms. Gabriela Romano, a history teacher, recalls “that several teachers refused to use that material and had the support of parents and students” (Romano, 2007).

Immediately after, meetings and open assemblies followed in the town's parish, where the priest Tomás Braile lent the multipurpose room every Thursday and even the mayor Lídoro Leiva joined in to participate in them. The first assembly of Famatina residents was held in May, and as a result of this, the Assembly of Self-Convened People in Defense of Water was formed. Then the meetings spread to Chilecito and over time a coordinator of assemblies was born, which was renamed the Assembly of Citizens for the Life of Chilecito, adding people from Campanas, Villa Unión, La Rioja Capital, among others. One of the first actions they carried out was in Chamical, in an event where Governor Maza was present, carrying signs that read "water is worth more than gold" and "Famatina is not to be touched" (González, 2023). Paradoxically, World Environment Day was celebrated at that event.

[8] Ana Gloria González is an assembly member, dentist, and nurse by profession. She is part of the Social Front of the Citizen Assemblies of Chilecito and a union delegate of the Riojan health union, Aproslar.

At first there were only a few people and the organisation work was carried out between Famatina and Chilecito. Through assemblies, where there were representatives in charge of communicating and organising, they started a series of actions that ranged from public awareness campaigns in schools with students and their parents, to marches, leaflet distribution, artistic interventions, and caravans in Famatina, Chilecito, La Rioja Capital, and even Buenos Aires, where they made their claims visible. The first emblematic march was on 31 August 2006, to La Rioja Capital, where a massive demonstration was held, covered by the media at the provincial level. Then came the roadblocks and the camps[9]. The first one took place on the Capayán River, where residents of Pituil, Campanas, Chañarmuyo, Chilecito, Vichigasta, and Catamarca arrived. In addition, they linked up with experiences and realities from other provinces where mining was already a reality. As Carolina Suffich recalls, "we had no idea what contamination, leaching, cyanide, or anything else was. We had to learn everything" (Suffich, 2007). One of the activities they carried out was to screen the documentary film *Asecho a la ilusión*[10] at an assembly, which tells the story of Bajo de la Alumbrera. A teacher from Catamarca participated, sharing her experience with Barrick Gold and asking people to become 'multiplying agents' and to go out and tell what they saw (Asecho a la ilusión, 2005).

As a characteristic to highlight, we may mention the constitution of the assemblies of neighbors as a form of horizontal organization, which raise their voice in defense of their common goods, such as water, the hill, and the territory. Within the assemblies, tensions, social classes, and heterogeneous partisan and union experiences are observed. Despite the differences, they were united by a common interest, which defines and brings them together in an 'us' against 'them' (De la Vega, 2020). Here, what is common is the defense of the Famatina hill. For its part, the enemy consisted in transnational

[9] Roadblocks and pickets are a form of protest that began to be deployed in Argentina in the 1990s, following the implementation of the neoliberal policies of the Carlos Menem administration, which left thousands of workers unemployed. The first picket was in Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul, in the province of Neuquén, on June 20, 1996, following the mass dismissal of workers from the State-owned company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF).

[10] Documentary film directed by Patricio Schawaneck in 2005 (73 min.).

companies, the provincial government, and its repressive apparatus. Also, the national government, as facilitator and guarantor of the extractive policy

According to a neighbor, they chose this form of organization:

> Because we all have the same responsibility and the same right, and we come to an agreement together... There are no authorities here. We all have the same right to speak, to give opinions, to decide. The assembly is not partisan, because this struggle is greater than any political party: here we fight to defend life and the future (Díaz Moreno, 2007).

A common denominator from the beginning was that the assembly was not partisan, as we can see in the testimony. The experience of struggle over time would bring the political participation of some of its participants, but this premise was always maintained within it. As background in the way of organizing, we can highlight that the practice and experience in assemblies of some of the women who started this movement were taken, since several of them are teachers, as one of the interviewees told us. We may add to this experience the importance and relevance of the teacher as a character in a small community. The fact that teachers were the first to raise the alarm about mining exploitation in the area helped to sensitize, mobilize, and raise awareness from their closest environment, the school, to families and the community. For instance, Javier Rodríguez Pardo, an environmental activist who participated in these first meetings, pointed out that "the information work with talks in schools where students and parents themselves angrily threw out the officials and technicians who tried to convince them of the benefits of mining ventures." Regarding the composition of the assemblies, he pointed out (Pardo, 2006) that "they are professional teachers, housewives, and farmers... whoever has a farm or orchard and prays that they have enough irrigation water and that the weather is good."

As we can see so far, women began this process. The first to meet and inform themselves, to raise their voices, to activate family ties and bring the community together. According to the author Solá Álvarez (2022), this type of women's participation was uneven throughout the conflict and was mostly expressed in those spaces in which traditional actors remained outside the

conflict. This enabled women, outside of traditional and vertical institutions, to have significant levels of participation in the public sphere, as in the case of the assemblies of neighbors. For many of them, the experience of struggle changed their lives. As Gabriela Romano said, "this is the most powerful experience in my life. We cannot be blindfolded to reality. We must go out, fight, commit ourselves. Through actions or omissions, a people shape its own destiny, it is the true protagonist of history" (Romano, 2008).

The first results of these joint actions consisted in the creation of the Municipal Environmental Department in Chilecito. Also, the City Council declared, through Ordenanza No. 2695-06, the department of Chilecito "non-toxic and environmentally sustainable" and approved a resolution rejecting open-pit mining with cyanide leaching techniques[11]. This was the starting point for a series of laws that would be approved later at the provincial level. This was one of the most important objectives that the neighbors set out to fight for, in addition to Barrick Gold withdrawing from Famatina.

In the first months of 2007, in a politically tense context due to allegations of corruption against Governor Maza, the provincial legislature decided to remove him from office and began impeachment proceedings. Vice-governor Luis Beder Herrera took office in the executive branch[12].

One year after the conflict began, a blockade was organized in Peñas Negras to prevent the company from using its machinery to climb Famatina. What started with the intention of being an action of a couple of days extended for months. In response, the provincial government used police force against residents who had gathered at the site. Without being able to dissuade them from lifting the blockade, the Barrick Gold company had to withdraw its camp from Famatina.

[11] This ordinance was enacted on September 14, 2006 (De la Vega, 2020).

[12] Luis Beder Herrera has a long career as a politician in the Justicialist Party (Peronist). Originally from Campanas, he obtained his first position in 1983, as Provincial Representative for the Famatina Department (1983-1991). Then his political career continued: in the period 1991-1995 as Vice Governor of the Province; in 1995-1999 as Coordinating Minister of Government, of the province of La Rioja; in 1995-2007 as Vice Governor of the Province; in 2000 as Coordinating Minister of Government, simultaneously; in 2007 as Governor, after the dismissal of Ángel Maza; in 2007 re-elected as Governor of La Rioja; in 2011 re-elected as Governor of La Rioja; in 2015-2019 as National Representative. In 2008 he repealed the laws on mining.

Even more important, on March 8, 2007, the Provincial Legislature unanimously approved three key laws for the anti-mining struggle: 1) Law No. 8137, which prohibits open-pit mining with the use of toxic substances; 2) Law No. 8138, calling for a Popular Consultation in the Departments of Famatina and Chilecito on July 29 of that same year; and 3) Law No. 8139, where an investigative commission was formed to analyze the exploration contracts of the company Famatina Barrick Exploración S.A on Famatina Hill.

This first experience of resistance and struggle against the Barrick Gold company served as a reservoir where forces were accumulated and 'awareness' was raised for the future challenges they had to face with the persistent attempts to exploit the hill. As Rodríguez Pardo (2006) stated, "Barrick did not imagine that the towns located at the foot of the Famatina snow-capped mountains would offer such firm and tenacious resistance, defending soil, air, and water."

The struggle against Osisko Mining

After the departure of Barrick Gold, the conflict and the state of alert continued due to the various attempts of the current governor Beder Herrera, who, after taking office, "*changed his discourse*" and tried by all means to install mega-mining in the province. As Gabriela Romano stated:

> Governor Luis Beder Herrera changed his discourse. At first he supported our struggle, saying that we had to protect water and natural resources. But after the elections he forgot what he said. He recently announced in San Juan that La Rioja will become a mining province. All the statements he makes in this direction are made outside our territory; he doesn't dare to do so here because he knows that more than 90% of the population disagrees (Romano, 2008).

The first thing Beder Herrera did in relation to mining exploitation was to ignore the laws that he had helped legislate and sanction some time ago. In addition, he sanctioned Law No. 8380, to create the company Energía Minerales Sociedad del Estado (EMSE); through which the State proposed, according to its own declaration, "to carry out by itself, through third parties or in association with third parties, activities of exploitation, industrialization, and administration

of all energy resources" (Coscarelli, 2015). With the creation of this company, the government established a legal umbrella to exploit on its own account or, failing that, through third parties, the energy resources in the province. The immediate result of this law was the authorization to the company Uranios del Sur S.A. to explore uranium in the Riojan territory.

The second thing the government did in response to resistance to mega-mining projects in the province was to repress in a more violent way and criminalize the struggle. In this sense, 2009 would mark a turning point towards the demands of the assembly members, since the response of the provincial government became more violent. For instance, the investigating judge of Chilecito, Alfredo Ramos, called the assembly members to testify and placed a police checkpoint in Peñas Negras to "guarantee free movement" (Coscarelli, 2015). He also applied Art. 194 of the Penal Code to imprison Carina Díaz Moreno "for assaulting officials" (Coscarelli, 2015).

Furthermore, this year was significant because the first 'Pueblada'[13] took place in Famatina, as a reaction to the meeting of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner with representatives of Barrick Gold in Buenos Aires. This action also ended with repression towards Famatina residents (Coscarelli, 2015).

The exploitation of mega-mining in the region thus became one of the primary activities for the country's economic development. This was expressed by Beder Herrera, in a meeting of the local Justicialist Party, "with regard to mining, let us do what we have to do, let us not act as if we were the pretty ones and go out to fight and campaign for non-polluting mining" (Coscarelli, 2015).

From 2007 to 2011, exploration attempts continued in the area. As Gabriela Romano said, "no one explores if they are not going to exploit" (Romano, 2008). This is what the Salamanca Project did, as well as Minas Argentinas Yamana Gold, and then the Chinese company Shandong Gold, which did not prosper.

[13] Form of protest or popular insurrections that have taken place in Argentina since 1969, with examples such as the Cordobazo, Rosariazo, and Tucumanazo.

The second stage of this cycle began in 2011, with the signing of an agreement between the Canadian company Osisko Mining and the provincial government for the exploration of Famatina in search of gold. This agreement was signed with the provincial company Energía y Minerales Sociedad del Estado (EMSE). As in previous cases, the response of residents was immediate, mobilizing on this occasion broader sectors of the community, such as the parish priest of the town, Omar Quinteros, and the mayor at that time, Ismael Bordegaray. At the end of October, a document with more than 1,270 signatures against mining exploitation on the hill was provided. A group of residents who were in favor of mining exploitation also emerged, in a context where the discourse of economic development and job creation by the company Osisko Mining began to divide the town and show internal fissures. In response, anti-mining neighbors issued a statement stating that "the social license of our towns is not negotiable, it is not for sale" and that "they will not open any channel of dialogue at this stage, neither with the provincial and national governments, nor with the mega-mining companies" (Coscarelli, 2015). Faced with the advance of the government and the Osisko Mining Group company at the beginning of 2012, the assembly members carried out a roadblock in Alto Carrizal, on the access road to the La Mejicana mine, to prevent the company from beginning exploration work. This roadblock lasted until October and was attended not only by Famatina residents, but also by people who came from other towns and provinces to show solidarity with the struggle. In the same way, they received help with provisions, food, and water to sustain themselves for so many months (Canifrú, 2023).

As an outstanding feature of this stage, we must mention that support for the anti-mining struggle increased, adding the solidarity of unions and workers' federations, such as the Autonomous Argentine Workers' Central (CTA) and the State Workers' Association (ATE), parties of diverse political colors, such as the Radical Civic Union (UCR), with national representatives Julio Martínez and Inés Brizuela y Doria, the Civic Front, left-wing parties such as the Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR) and the Left Front, independent entities, non-governmental organizations (NGO), to mention a few

Similarly, the forms of struggle and resistance took from the previous period the modalities of marches, caravans, public escraches, festivals, artistic performances, and the area of pazos in Famatina. However, some new mechanisms were added, inherent to the experience and knowledge acquired. On the one hand, the conflict gained notoriety: media coverage was no longer limited to the local or provincial levels, it also reached the national and international levels. On the other hand, the incorporation of legal knowledge that translated into the request for public hearings, environmental reports and, above all, the emphasis on the 'social license.' From now on it was the people who decided on their natural assets, and if there was no agreement, neither the provincial or national power could move forward with these projects. As one neighbor said, "we had to learn what an environmental impact report is, a baseline, what the social license is. We also had to learn what the State is" (Crabbe, 2008).

The provincial government also introduced new forms of repression and added extortionate methods. For instance, Governor Beder Herrera cut off the shared funds for the Famatina Municipality after Mayor Bordegaray spoke out against mega-mining[14]. In addition, he ordered the interruption of the public transport service that linked Famatina with other towns, isolating it. He also sent hundreds of members of the Operational Action Brigade, like the elite group of the Riojan Police that was installed at the main access to the town, controlling the entrance and exit and requiring personal data. Likewise, the director of Provincial Roads of La Rioja, Miguel Ángel Bertolino, filed a criminal and civil complaint against the assembly members who blocked the road on Provincial Route 16. In this way, ten assembly members were prosecuted under Art. 194 of the Penal Code. Also, the Union of Citizen Assemblies denounced "the emergence of a blacklist created by the company Osisko Mining, where personal data, profession, etc. of members of these assemblies are identified in detail" (Coscarelli, 2015).

[14] The Municipality of Famatina opened a current account at the Banco de la Nación Argentina to receive donations that allow it to provide basic services (Coscarelli, 2015).

Despite the repression, persecution, and criminalisation, the struggle of local residents led to the termination of the contract between EMSE and Osisko Mining in July 2013, due to lack of a social licence and, as a result, the company's withdrawal from the area.

The struggle against Midais SH

The third stage of this cycle began in April 2015, when the Salta company Midais SH signed an agreement with the provincial government to exploit gold in Angulos, a few kilometers from Famatina. The Executive Branch stated that the company was going to use a method of "dry river aquifer mining," without chemicals, water, or explosives, and that it was a family business, not a multinational. Through mobilization and a focus on the Río Blanco riverbed, the assembly members managed to expel the Midais SH company's machinery. On this occasion, as a distinctive fact to highlight, more assemblies joined the claim, such as the El Retamo Assembly of Nonogasta, Vecinos por la Vida of Campanas, the Riojana Capital Assembly, and the Llanos Assembly for Life. They invoked from the very beginning people's right to protest and self-determination. In October, a march leaving Angulos, which was intended to reach the camp where the Midais SH company was located, was repressed by the Infantry Guard of the provincial police. As a result, a large number of people were prosecuted for blocking the way to the company; among those who were denounced there were the priest of the town of Quinteros and the mayor Bordegaray. The company's attorney, Daniel Adolfo Luna, accused them of unlawful deprivation of personal liberty and reported that the neighbors threatened to kill the mining workers with firearms (Luna, 2015). The prosecutor Diego Torres Pagnusat and the judge of Instruction No. 1 of Chilecito, Marcelo Carrizo, intervened. In November, the Bishop of La Rioja, Marcelo Colombo, reported in a circular notice that the Midais SH mining company was withdrawing from the Río Blanco in Angulos by decision of the government to achieve social peace in the area (Colombo, 2015). The Chilean courts also lifted restrictions on assembly members that prevented them from getting close to the mining camp.

In this way, the struggle managed to expel another mining company from the area.

What do we fight for?

The question we asked ourselves at the beginning was why Famatina residents were willing to defend their Hill. As one interviewee reported, "we, Famatina residents, are quiet and ordinary people, and quite disunited in general. But the defense of Famatina united us. The Hill is defended with the body. The people defend it" (Crabbe, 2023). As we can see in the testimony, according to the interviewee, Famatina residents were not very united; however, they were willing to defend their common good. To the point that political, ideological, class differences or even personal enmities did not matter. The Hill and its defense thus become a unifying element, a selective tradition, according to Williams, which forged experiences through the struggle. As we have noticed throughout this study, the forms of organization and resistance were varied, through horizontal assemblies, they carried out demonstrations, roadblocks, and camps. Similarly, we observed that women were the first to raise their voices, those who gathered and became 'multipliers' of what they learned from other neighboring experiences, such as that of Bajo de la Alumbrera. As expressed by several of the teachers who participated in this process, it was a learning process that took time and was done with 'clean hands.' Without resorting to clientelism, and resorting to creativity, they managed to 'raise awareness' in a town that responded positively when Famatina was threatened. In this case, it was effective to claim from the very beginning, in the school, in the assemblies, in the leaflet distribution, in the street that the Hill would disappear if open-pit mega-mining was installed in Famatina. In this way, by linking identity elements in relation to the Hill, they managed to make a natural resource become a community resource. Because the Hill belongs to everyone and belongs to them, because they have a heritage and history, which translates into a culture that defines and identifies them. For this reason, ordinary people went out to fight and faced the repression and criminalization of the municipal, provincial, and national governments. The reason why they defend the Hill is thus linked to a selective tradition that used elements from the past that are reinterpreted in the

present. Likewise, the defense of the Hill becomes an ethical and moral responsibility, a matter of caring for nature and for themselves. Because caring for the place where they were born is what ultimately gives them identity and a sense of belonging. When we asked them if they would fight again, the answer was yes, without hesitation. Jenny Luján said: “we are going to protect the Hill with our lives. Because if we don’t die here fighting, we are going to die poisoned. We are sure that it depends on us. We do not resign ourselves to what they want to impose on us. We have decided to fight” (Lujan, 2007). The decision to fight for the Famatina is what motivates them to keep on moving, to raise their voices, to denounce, to put their bodies on the line. Because the fight awakened them and persists to this day.

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