In Defense of Water: Modern Mining, Grassroots Movements, and Corporate Strategies in Peru

By

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Abstract

This article explores why water is at the center of recent mining controversies in Peru. It explores a conflict between the Yanacocha Mining Company and the community of Combayo in the Northern Highlands. In protests in 2006, campesinos stated that their struggle was over the protection of water resources from mining expansion; the company sought to discredit their claims, suggesting that the protests began as a demand for employment contracts and development projects. The superficial distinction between jobs and water obscures the ways in which modern mining technologies transform the landscape, thus changing both corporate practices and forms of political action.

Resumen

Este artículo explora por qué el agua se ha convertido en un tema central de las controversias mineras recientes, centrándose en un conflicto entre la empresa minera Yanacocha y la comunidad de Combayo, en la sierra norte del Perú. En las protestas de 2006, los campesinos argumentaron que su lucha era por la protección de los recursos hídricos ante la expansión de la minería. La empresa trató de desacreditar estas quejas al argumentar que las protestas comenzaron como una demanda por contratos de trabajo y proyectos de desarrollo. Esta separación entre el empleo y el agua, esconde cómo las tecnologías de la minería moderna transforman el paisaje, a la vez que introduce cambios en las prácticas corporativas de la empresa y medidas de acción política en respuesta a la actividad minera. Este artículo examina el papel del agua tanto en la movilización de manifestantes, la reconfiguración de las alianzas políticas existentes y, al propiciar un acuerdo que reduce el alcance del conflicto que da paso a argumentos técnicos sobre la calidad y cantidad de agua, la promesa de empleos, y un estudio hidrológico. [ecología, medio ambiente, movimientos sociales, Perú]
in response to mining activity. This article examines the role of water in mobilizing protestors, in reconfiguring existing political alliances, and in facilitating an agreement that reduced the scope of the conflict to technical arguments about water quality and quantity, the promise of employment, and a hydrological study. [ecology, environment, social movements, Peru]

Since the early 2000s, protests over mining activity in Peru’s Northern Highlands have contributed to a long list of conflicts over resource extraction in Latin America (see Bebbington 2012; Bebbington and Bury 2013). Protest actions have posed a challenge for transnational companies such as Minera Yanacocha (the Yanacocha Mining Company), a joint venture of the U.S.-based Newmont Gold Company (which holds 51.35 percent of shares), the Peruvian company Buenaventura (with 43.65 percent of shares), and the International Finance Corporation, an arm of the World Bank (with the remaining 5 percent of shares). Minera Yanacocha’s arrival in Cajamarca followed neoliberal reforms in the 1990s that led to an increase in foreign investment in resource extraction. Since it began operating in 1993, numerous controversies have contributed to the company’s less-than-favorable corporate image, including massive protests that put a halt to the Cerro Quilish expansion project in 2004, and conflict over the proposed Conga mine, which attracted international attention in 2012. According to activists and some local residents, both of these projects threatened the area’s sources of water, including water springs and mountain lakes.

This article examines why water is at the center of recent mining controversies in Cajamarca and other parts of Peru, and how it became a point of contention in the arguments presented by mining companies and their critics. The focus here is on the Combayo conflict, which came into public view in August 2006, when protestors from the community of Combayo set up roadblocks and paralyzed mining operations, drawing renewed attention to their ongoing grievances against the company. Protestors communicated to the media that their primary demand was the protection of water resources from the effects of mining activity. Meanwhile, in their own statements to the press, company representatives claimed that the roadblocks were a pressure tactic being used by campesinos (peasant farmers) to secure employment contracts, and that the protestors’ claims about water were a way to conceal this underlying goal and gain public support.

Water’s critical role in recent conflicts cannot be understood only in terms of the discourses strategically employed by protestors and the mining company. Rather, modern mining technologies—vast open pits and cyanide-leaching processes—produce material transformations in the landscape that are reshaping both
corporate practices and forms of political action in response to mining activity. These physical changes and the way they materially constitute the landscape must be considered alongside the meaning-making discourses and practices of various actors.¹ In the Combayo conflict, water was something different to the various actors involved: a source of life, a scarce resource, and an object of environmental management. These various ways of enacting water allowed protestors to gain a broader base of popular support; at the same time, the situation enabled Minera Yanacocha officials to delegitimize the claims of protestors by saying they were motivated by political and economic interests (while presenting the company’s own practices and arguments as apolitical).

The way the Combayo conflict was represented—particularly the company’s attempts to dismiss the protestors’ claims—led me to ask what could be learned from a different kind of analysis, which does not reproduce the opposition between seemingly antagonistic camps (peasants versus corporations) and ostensibly distinct categories (jobs or the environment; technical arguments or political interests). Drawing inspiration from scholarship that reconceptualizes the relationship between human and nonhuman actors in environmental controversies (e.g., Bennett 2009; Braun and Whatmore 2010; Latour 1993; Law 2004),² this article examines how water emerged as a contested entity in mining conflicts. My work expands upon studies that explore the social, symbolic, technological, legal, and political dimensions of water (e.g., Boelens et al. 2011; Linton and Budds 2014; Donahue 1997; Gelles 2000; Orlove and Caton 2010; Strang 2004; Wagner 2013). This literature has shown that people’s relationships to water are not based solely on its economic or utilitarian value, nor can these relationships necessarily be understood in terms of an environmentalist ethic. I build upon these insights by examining how canals, watersheds, and dikes can also provoke politics and have the capacity to transform the spaces of political engagement (see Barry 2001)—for example, by entering into protestors’ claims over rights and enabling alliances among various actors (or preventing their collaboration).

Ultimately, the Combayo conflict produced alliances that enabled negotiations between company, community, and state representatives, and transformed the wide-ranging demands of Combayo residents into an agreement centered on employment contracts, water monitoring programs, and a hydrological study. This reliance on expert knowledge (including techno-managerial strategies such as environmental audit and monitoring) can lead to a depoliticization of conflict that undermines the concerns of local communities while furthering the state’s extractive model of development (see Himley 2014; Li 2015; Velásquez 2012). In the broader context of international development, James Ferguson (1990) describes a similar process when he calls the development apparatus an “antipolitics machine” that suspends the political aspects inherent in the workings of state bureaucracies and the implementation of aid programs, and suppresses challenges to the
status quo. This happens not only through enhancing administrative power, but also by “reposing political questions of land, resources, jobs, or wages as technical ‘problems’ responsive to the technical ‘development’ intervention” (1990:270). For Ferguson, development casts political questions as technical problems that need to be addressed through technocratic solutions.

By framing the conflict in terms of narrow demands such as jobs and technical solutions (including water monitoring and compensation schemes), company and state actors glossed over the broad concerns of local communities. In rural Cajamarca, water is the basis of agriculture and dairy farming, community organizing (e.g., water users’ associations), and connections between communities (through shared irrigation canals and other infrastructure). As such, water materializes notions of campesino identity and rural subsistence, as well as claims to citizenship and territory. The protests were not only a demand for jobs, but were also a rejection of company practices and government policies that marginalize campesinos, threaten their livelihoods, and promote a model of development based on the aggressive expansion of mining activity.

The company’s accusation that water was merely a strategy to conceal other demands minimizes the material effects of mining on communities. This way of framing the conflict also ignores the way “things” like water can give shape to political mobilizations. For example, water enabled collaboration among groups typically opposed to one another (including the signatories to the agreement), but it also led to the creation of new factions as people sought to obtain benefits from the agreement based on their location with relation to the watershed and exposure to mine contamination. A focus on water’s materiality reveals complex relations, including unexpected connections between people and the environment, and unstable alliances with and against the company.

This study is based on two years of ethnographic research carried out in 2005 and 2006 in the city of Cajamarca and communities around the mine. I attended demonstrations, activist meetings, company-sponsored information sessions, conferences, and other events that took place during my fieldwork, which allowed me to interact with activists and company representatives. While this article focuses on the Combayo conflict, my research looked more broadly at the effects of mining on landscapes, livelihoods, and political organizing to understand how resource extraction and the grassroots actions surrounding it are reconfiguring political terrains.

Water and the Making of a Conflict

On the morning of August 23, 2006, a group of protestors from the community of Combayo marched to the outskirts of the city of Cajamarca and blocked the
main highway connecting the city to the Yanacocha gold mine. A group of men and women, some of them wearing the distinctive straw hats worn by campesinos in this area, gathered on a stretch of highway where boulders had been placed to impede vehicles. As the day progressed and news of the road block spread over the airwaves, people from the city arrived to show their solidarity; they included a group of students from the National University of Cajamarca, and city-based activists who had become fixtures in protests against Minera Yanacocha. The group from Comayo remained on site into the evening—a small number spending the night under a blue tarpaulin as the roadblock continued. Comayo is located approximately 35 kilometers from the city of Cajamarca (at the time, a two- to three-hour drive on a partly paved road), but many of the protestors who did not stay at the blockade overnight had homes in Cajamarca, where they spent at least part of the week in order to take advantage of the opportunities that the city provided: better schools, employment, and market opportunities.

The protests did not erupt spontaneously that day, but could be said to have begun three weeks earlier, on August 2, at the site of the Carachugo mining pit. A group of Comayinos entered Yanacocha property to protest against the company’s broken promises, including their commitment to provide the community with employment opportunities and development projects. A confrontation ensued between the protestors and a large contingent of police officers and security guards. An elderly campesino by the name of Isidro Llanos was killed under circumstances that remain unclear; to date, no one has been held accountable for his death. Mr. Llanos was a member of Rondas Campesinas (Peasant Patrol)—groups that have long been the backbone of rural organizing in Northern Peru (see Starn 1999); they continue to figure prominently in conflicts with Minera Yanacocha.

Amidst the chaos of the protests, four campesinos were detained, while the group of protestors restrained one security guard and a contract worker. All were quickly released, but these events contributed to the sense of confusion and the accusations that marked the day. Following the death of Mr. Llanos, Comayo leaders demanded to meet with Minera Yanacocha representatives, and requested the intervention of a government commission from the capital city of Lima to oversee the negotiations and mediate in the dispute. This, they felt, was the only way to reach an agreement, since they perceived local and regional authorities to be working in collusion with the mining company. The turmoil in Cajamarca represented a challenge for newly elected President Alan García. García maintained the mining- and investment-friendly policies of his predecessors, but had to be seen to be addressing the social unrest that extractive activity was generating throughout the country. The government established a commission, the “Unit for Conflict Prevention,” and the Comayo conflict was one of the first cases it handled.
As the roadblocks continued, the protestors emphasized that their struggle was over the protection of Combayo’s water resources from the impacts of modern mining technologies. In contrast to older underground mines, modern mines compete with activities such as agriculture and farming, and their location at the headwaters of river basins can produce changes in the water used by communities downstream. In open-pit mining, large quantities of earth need to be moved in order to extract less than one ounce of gold for each ton of ore. The gold is separated from the ore using a cyanide solution that percolates through the ore, leaching out the valuable metals. Open-pit mining engulfs bodies of water that feed the streams and irrigation canals on which people in communities depend. Groundwater is also pumped out of wells around the pits, as mining requires lowering the water table in order to prevent flooding. These activities disrupt the water cycle, and campesinos allege that as a result, they receive less water in their canals than they did before. The mining process also discharges mineralized residues that can change the color, taste, and texture of water in rivers and canals.

At the roadblocks, city-based activists expressed their support for the Combayo protestors, and some called for a stop to all mining expansion. On a local radio program, an antimining activist known for his opposition to Minera Yanacocha proclaimed: “The point that unites us is this: We don’t want more irresponsible mining at the headwaters of the river basin.” His statement echoed what has become a common slogan in antimining campaigns. For many of Combayo’s residents, however, the issue was not so clear-cut. A group of young people that I talked to at the blockades expressed their various frustrations with the mining company. Daniel, in his early twenties, explained that, since 1993, the company and community leaders had drawn up a series of agreements outlining development projects that had yet to be carried out. There were still few employment opportunities for people in Combayo, even though he felt it was one of the communities most affected due to its proximity to the mine. The protestors were also angry with the ex-mayor, who negotiated with the company without community consent. Another young protestor, a civil engineer and user of the Azufre irrigation canal, talked about the problems with the irrigation water, which looked murky and left a trace of yellow dust like chochoca (cornmeal) on the pasture. This protest was the first in which these young people had taken part: they had never participated in previous actions against the company. Their complaints and demands were numerous, but a united stance was far from evident, and it was clear that Combayinos did not necessarily oppose mining activity.

On August 28, Minera Yanacocha widely publicized its decision to cease operations, in an effort to create a negative image of the protestors while playing up the mine’s contribution to the local and national economy. Aware of the negative impact of the conflict on its corporate image, company spokespeople stated that the protests had originated as a demand for jobs, and had been started by a group of
Combayo contract workers and *empresarios* (businessmen) who wanted to pressure the company into giving them work contracts. Jobs are, indeed, highly coveted in communities surrounding the mine, and the people seeking work far outnumber the jobs available in modern mines. One of the main opportunities for unskilled laborers is to work on projects that Minera Yanacocha funds in local communities, such as road construction, canal maintenance, and the installation of spray irrigation systems. To address the constant demand for jobs, Minera Yanacocha encouraged campesinos to form their own *microempresas* (microenterprises) so they could be subcontracted to provide services ranging from transportation to construction. After Minera Yanacocha made this suggestion at an earlier meeting with Combayo residents, more than a hundred microempresas were formed. In this and other communities, false expectations fed discontent, while at the same time dividing communities by pitting individuals against each other in the competition for jobs.

Minera Yanacocha officials sought to discredit the protestors by describing their motives as “political” and connecting the protests to the personal aspirations of key leaders. Following the definition commonly used by the media and popular commentators, the company defined these “political” motives as formed by aspirations within formal party politics and key rural organizations such as Rondas Campesinas, as well as radical political organizations and subversive groups. The intent of branding the protests “political” was to delegitimize them by associating them with the economic interests and electoral ambitions of the protestors.

According to the company’s analysis of the conflict, water had only become an element of the protests after the intervention of the NGO GRUFIDES, known for its strong criticism of the company. GRUFIDES was formed in 2001 by a group of recent university graduates with a commitment to social justice issues inspired by a progressive segment of the Catholic Church. Father Marco Arana, a Catholic priest committed to the defense of human and environmental rights and a founding member of the NGO, was specifically blamed for intervening in the protests and shifting the protestors’ demands to suit an “antimining” agenda. In a chronology of events posted on its website, Minera Yanacocha states: “the initial motive [of the protest] changed as the days passed, when Marco Arana began to talk about the defense of water and the environment, something that was not discussed or demanded” by people from Combayo. The company went on to state that the Combayo Defense Committee (*Comité de Defensa*), which represented the community in negotiations with the company, only made a declaration relating to an environmental cause and the defense of aquifers some days after the first protests on August 2. This was the view expressed by Yanacocha’s Manager of External Affairs at a press conference, and he reiterated it to me in an informal conversation some months after the conflict. If I were to analyze the minutes of the meetings that had taken place, he said, I would clearly see that GRUFIDES...
members (in their role as advisors to Combayo leaders) had shifted the focus of the conflict from jobs to water.

While Minera Yanacocha’s public relations team sought to delegitimize the protestors’ water-related claims by calling them “political,” the actions of the protestors reflected a different understanding of politics. Campesinos’ experience in canal administration made them fully cognizant that water is always embedded in politics and relationships of power, not only within communities, but also in their dealings with the company. By contrast, company officials presented their own approach to water issues as a scientific matter to be addressed through technical solutions: environmental management, water monitoring, and development projects (such as improved irrigation systems).

Tania Murray Li (2007) examines similar practices of “rendering technical” the “problems” of development by diagnosing them in ways that match the kinds of intervention that experts have to offer. This process privileges the knowledge of experts charged with providing solutions, often obscuring political-economic questions (see also Mitchell 2002). As Murray Li notes, however, these efforts do not necessarily absorb critique or succeed in achieving depoliticization. She writes that in Foucault’s definition, the will to govern concerns “men in their relations” with resources, means of subsistence, and the territory with all its specific qualities: such as climate, irrigation and fertility; (Foucault 1991:93). There are limits to the art of government and the rule of experts, and a study of “men and their relations” must account for dynamic forces (both human and nonhuman) that cannot be harnessed or controlled (Murray Li 2007).

In the case of Combayo, exploring the material effects of mining can reveal the dynamic force of “things” such as water, climate, pollution, and other elements of the environment—and the relationships they engender. Gabriela Valdivia suggests that in the context of oil extraction, “material aspects of nature can shape, encourage, or constrain social action . . . setting obstacles, opportunities and surprises in processes of resource appropriation and governance” (2008:459). Valdivia also argues that the material qualities of petroleum (from the location of pipelines to properties such as viscosity) can shape people’s sense of identity and citizenship and influence political mobilizations. In the Peruvian case, water’s material properties—its capacity to carry pollution, link communities in a watershed, or cause the collapse of a dike—sometimes created a shared sense of identity and motivated activism against extractive activity; at other times, it thwarted the efforts of communities to unite and demand accountability.

Focusing on the role of water in political mobilizations in response to mining can also shed light on how alliances are forged among environmentalists, local communities, and other groups united in struggles over resources (see Brosius 2003; Kirsch 2006; Sawyer 2004). In some cases, scientific and environmentalist claims serve to link locally specific concerns to a wider network of actors and places,
enabling alliances across scales and differences of knowledge (Mathews 2009; Tsing 2005). In the Amazonian context, Conklin and Graham (1995) describe how transnational activism brings together moral and scientific arguments that bridge the interests of indigenous groups and environmentalist movements. The strategic translations and alliances that have put indigenous struggles in the international spotlight can benefit communities, but they can also be a liability when the actions of indigenous leaders do not conform to stereotypes of indigenous “authenticity” or to a conservationist stance.

Similarly, in the Combayo conflict, the protection of water resources appealed to the values of an outside audience (the media, politicians, NGOs, and other observers). In contrast to the example cited above, however, the alliances that water made possible were not necessarily intentional or enabling of a common goal, nor did they have an explicitly environmental focus. Water brought together rural and urban actors wanting to halt mining expansion and campesinos who did not necessarily oppose mining activity but wanted Minera Yanacocha to fulfill its commitments. Media coverage of the issue—triggered by the death of Isidro Llanos, as well as a growing global awareness of issues such as water scarcity and indigenous rights—made the conflict known at a regional, national, and international level. A three-part series in a national-circulation newspaper La República (which later circulated internationally), put water issues at the center of the story, showing a map with the location of various bodies of water relevant to the conflict and a diagram explaining how mining disrupts the water cycle (Salazar 2006).

Water’s effects could be attributed to its capacity to link local concerns to larger scales and a wider array of actors. What must be stressed, however, is that protestors’ emphasis on water was not simply a discursive device that activists used to mobilize supporters, masking an underlying agenda. Water physically connected communities through irrigation canals and shared waterways, and mobilized people whose water sources linked them to each other and to the property of the mine, amplifying the power of the protests. At the same time, however, water created divisions within communities and focused the conflict on a specific set of demands put forth by those leaders who negotiated with the company. Ultimately, water had the effect of narrowing the scope of what began as a broad-based movement motivated by multiple grievances. The protestors’ arguments about water were also a call on the company and the state to honor their commitments, offer long-lasting opportunities for local residents, and protect their livelihoods from continued mining expansion. As I will discuss below, however, Minera Yanacocha representatives sought to neutralize the protests by focusing on water management, participatory monitoring, and the promise of job creation. The next section explores how people’s immediate connections to and dependence on water resources, as well as changes in water quality and quantity, evoked fears about the impacts
of the mine and raised people’s expectations about the company’s responsibility toward neighboring communities.

Living with the Mine

Along the curving road into the mountains, approaching Combayo’s centro poblado (a minor municipality with its own mayor), are the ruins of the old hacienda and the chimney of the foundry that processed minerals from the nearby mines of Hualgayoc. Established in the seventeenth century during the era of Spanish colonization, Combayo was once one of the region’s largest haciendas, with more than 43,000 hectares (Taylor 1994). The hacienda’s primary economic activities changed throughout its history: sheep raised for wool production in the eighteenth century; cattle ranching in the nineteenth century; and mining from 1898 to 1932, when the hacienda was owned by mining engineer Eloy Santolalla (Deere 1990:79). Another shift in production took place in 1947, when the Santolalla heirs developed a dairy enterprise and became suppliers to PERULAC (a subsidiary of Nestlé), the principal buyer of milk and a key player in the development of dairy production in the region (Deere 1990).

In the 1940s, the hacienda owners began to sell parcels of land to the resident peasantry, keeping only the most productive, irrigated land. The breaking up of the hacienda lands continued in the 1960s through the Agrarian Reform (designed to dismantle the hacienda system and redistribute land); in 1969, the Santolallas withdrew from the hacienda completely and sold the remaining land to Gonzalo Pajares. In the process of breaking up the hacienda system, many land sales were conducted on the basis of oral contracts or handwritten sales slips, and were not recorded in public registries (Deere 1990:178). The resultant lack of property titles and feuds over land sales would contribute to future conflicts. On this already contentious terrain marked by unequal access to land and water, Minera Yanacocha became one more player whose presence exacerbated existing internal tensions while creating new sources of conflict.

In the early 1990s, a group of engineers arrived to buy land from campesinos. Perhaps it was the hardships of life in the countryside and the precariousness of a peasant livelihood that made some people receptive to the offer of 100 soles per hectare (around US$80 at the time). Between 1992 and 1999, Yanacocha purchased 10,200 hectares of land from 126 families for a sum that the company insists exceeded the market price at the time, but for campesinos and the mine’s critics, these initial land sales represented the first of many injustices that would follow. Some ex-proprietarios (ex-landowners), as they are now referred to by the company, sought the assistance of the NGO GRUFIDES to demand compensation for what they saw as deceitful transactions. Others resigned themselves to the short-lived
profits of the land sales and the only privilege that comes with being an ex-
proprietario: having priority in the company’s hiring of temporary unskilled labor-
ers. Combayo was one of the first communities affected by Yanacocha’s operations,
and having the mine as an increasingly intrusive neighbor brought challenges as
well as growing expectations. Thirteen years later, residents of Combayo brought
Yanacocha’s operations to a standstill.

After the roadblocks were lifted, I began to visit Combayo at the invitation of
some of the people I had met during the protests, including one of the members
of the Combayo Defense Committee. In his late twenties, Miguel had arrived in
Combayo to visit his family, about six months before the roadblocks; he hoped to
secure some work at the mine. Miguel participated in the first two protests, which
were over the company’s failure to carry out promised development projects. He
was asked to help out, and because of his education and ability to mediate with
company officials, he took a leadership role in the Comité. Miguel had studied
agronomy at a regional university, and worked for two years in the south of the
country before returning to Combayo. For Miguel, the problems in Combayo
reflected a juxtaposition of extremes: “You don’t see the development. It should be
the most developed town because it’s close to the country’s richest gold mine.” For
him, “development” represented those things that Combayo lacked and that people
identified as priorities in the Plan de Desarrollo (Development Plan) commissioned
by NGOs and by the mine itself: electricity, paved roads, “technified” (drip or
sprinkle) irrigation systems, and work opportunities.

When Miguel was not in the city or attending to business relating to the Comité,
he was at his parents’ house in Combayo, where we spent many hours talking about
the conflict. Miguel’s father, Eliseo, alternated between work in the fields and stone
carving. He had learned the trade from his father and grandfather, but none of his
children showed any interest in carrying on the tradition. Eliseo had always relied
on a variety of activities to make a living and support his ten children, but after the
mine’s arrival, young people in search of work started to set their sights primarily
on the mine. Eliseo was on the list of people waiting to be called for the limited
number of jobs that the company allotted to each community, which were rotated
among able-bodied men. His turn had come up, and he felt obliged to take the job.
After all, such income-generating opportunities were hard to come by, and should
be taken advantage of when they arose.

Like other campesinos used to walking in these mountain areas, Eliseo re-
membered what the area looked like before the arrival of the mine. He recalled the
lagoons that existed in what became the San José mining pit. He had no doubt that
mining produced contamination, since his work at the mine allowed him to see
this firsthand. There was water as bright as the colors on the headstone he had just
painted, he said, referring to the water that collects in old mining pits, leaching out
minerals from the surrounding rock. In Combayo, the contamination was visible
in other ways. When we crossed the river, he told me that the water—which used to be crystalline—sometimes looked black (perhaps from increased sedimentation), with an oily film, and the same was true of the canals. Eliseo worried about how the contamination would affect them, and had a clear sense that the water would dry up or be polluted within a few years, so he was planning ahead. He was considering buying some land on the coast, where his brother lived. “A campesino with good pastures and livestock can live well,” he told me. The sale of milk could provide a steady income: “I’ve never lacked for anything. That’s why we went up there.” He was referring to the first protests at Chaquicocha: “Also, people started to figure out that the company doesn’t keep its promises. They told us they would improve our pastures, so we thought, we’ll be able to buy some animals. But they lied to us. That was also one of the reasons.”

In Eliseo’s account, water was a source of livelihood and sustenance, and an attachment to the campo (countryside). It was the basis of life itself, or what made life in the campo possible. Irrigation canals, for example, bind people through kinship ties as water rights are passed from parents to children, and are a crucial element of community membership, since they require users to fulfill obligations relating to the maintenance and administration of the canal (see Boelens and Davila 1999; Gelles 2000). Canals connected people and landscapes through relations that encompassed but were not reducible to economic or utilitarian concerns. Water represented a connection to place and the ability to be self-sufficient, and not dependent on the company. Eliseo recognized that once polluted or diminished, water could no longer be a life-sustaining element, but would acquire value in a different way: through the damage caused by the mine’s operations, in the form of jobs and economic opportunities.

Minera Yanacocha and other mining companies generally attempt to deal with water issues as if they could be separated from other concerns; for example, Environmental Impact Assessments and other tools of accountability have separate “environmental” and “social” components. While companies might recognize their interconnectedness, this artificial separation of social and environmental concerns is necessary for their mitigation strategies and compensation schemes. This separation of “Society” and “Nature” into distinct domains produces what Latour (1993) calls the work of “purification,” which tries to enforce a distinction between humans and nonhumans (and by extension, politics, and science). Latour notes that in spite of the emphasis on purification, our modern world is characterized by a proliferation of hybrids (or mixtures of nature–culture). In this particular case, the conflict was presented in terms of binary oppositions between jobs and water, environment and society, development and environmentalism. Yet for people in Combayo, the potential destruction of water sources cannot be separated from other fears and aspirations for the future. Concerns around jobs, development,
water, and well-being are part of the same moral economy, and are all entwined in relations with the mine and are thus part of its responsibility (Kirsch 2006:129).

Having lived with the mine since it began operating, people in Combayo had reason to be concerned about the quality and quantity of water available for agriculture and farming. The problems were already evident throughout the area; at the time of the protests, the company pumped treated water (from its acid water treatment plant) into five canals that have their source on Yanacocha property, to make up for reduced flows. People’s fears intensified with the construction of a dike in the Azufre River. The mining company asserted that the dike would help control the sedimentation produced by the mining process and would not affect the quantity of water in the canals; however, some campesinos were convinced that it would divert water for use in the mine’s operations.

People in Combayo also noticed that the dike was being badly constructed, and indeed, some irregularities were evident: the company hired to build the dike did not present the geotechnical studies required to get the project approved, and canal users and local residents were not given an opportunity to participate in the environmental impact assessment or in a visual inspection of the construction site (Salazar 2006). When the rainy season arrived, the dike could not withstand the increased river flow and collapsed in March 2006, causing flood damage to some campesinos’ agricultural fields.

Eusebio, whom I had also met at the roadblocks, was my guide during one of my visits to Combayo. He was studying business administration at one of the private universities in Cajamarca, and visited Combayo every few weeks, on weekends. According to Eusebio, there were some key things that visitors to Combayo needed to see in order to understand the conflict, and he showed them to me. The first was what he considered a high level of poverty and lack of development in Combayo; he pointed to the unfinished electrification projects, and to lampposts still unconnected to the grid. Second, he showed me evidence of Minera Yanacocha’s badly executed community projects, such as a new town square that flooded during heavy rains. Third, it was important that I see the damage caused when the river burst its banks: the fallen trees, broken branches, and other debris. The overflow caused the river to split and change its course, which meant a reduction in the amount of water going into the canals. Canal users complained that there was now less water for irrigation—a reduction in flow from 100 to 25 liters per second. For Combayinos, water issues had always been in the background, but they surfaced with the collapse of the dike.

Precarious Agreements and Shifting Alliances

Several months after the protests, I visited Miguel and his family in Combayo. With some time having elapsed to put events in perspective, he recounted the events
leading up to the roadblocks. He explained how the focus on water was established during the August 2 protests at Chaquicocha, following the death of Isidro Llanos:

When the death took place, we agreed, the theme here will be water. We said, if we’re going to talk about jobs, or about development projects, no . . . We won’t have an impact. And that’s how it began to take shape. With us, up there [at Chaquicocha]. That same night, after he died . . . “We’ve come to protest about the water.” A protest for water, because the lagoons have disappeared, because they were building the dike very badly, because every day, the water is dirty. Everybody that was there in Combayo . . . at least they would support us.

We analyzed the situation: here, one lives from agriculture and farming, and for that, water is important. The water has its source inside the property of the mine. The perforations that they make . . . they could alter [the water’s] course. Analyzing the situation, we agreed that the issue was water. And finally, [we wanted] to win. We were worried that we would be blamed for the death . . . That’s when we decided that water would be the principal issue, so we could succeed and defend ourselves.

The leaders involved in the protest were aware of the power of water and its importance as the basis of people’s livelihood, but Miguel identified this as a key moment when leaders also recognized water’s ability to draw supporters, and to connect people in ways that made them part of the protestors’ cause. Water could serve as a unifying force for campesinos, and a way to re-scale the protests to involve urban residents and the state. Fearing that they would be held responsible for the death of Isidro Llanos, they also believed that the public would be more sympathetic to their cause if they were made aware of the extent of the mine’s impacts on local communities. To argue (as the company did) that water was simply introduced into the conflict with the intent to manipulate would deny the role that water has always played in people’s lives, and in the relationships between communities and the mining company. At the same time, protestors recognized the political force of water in mobilizing supporters and in their dealings with the company. On the one hand, people were connected by irrigation canals (through canal associations) that were considered to be under threat from the mining. On the other hand, people’s precarious livelihoods were reshaped by the arrival of the mine, which also increased their reliance on company-sponsored programs (such as short-term employment, donations, and development projects). These opportunities, presented as evidence of “Corporate Social Responsibility,” were marked by unequal relations of power between campesinos and company officials.

If water played a key role in mobilizing the protests, it also influenced the outcome of the conflict and the solutions proposed to deal with it. The Combayo conflict was one of the first the newly instituted government of President Alan García faced. At the request of the protestors, Premier Jorge del Castillo
initiated a dialogue between Minera Yanacocha and Combayo leaders. On August 30, protestors agreed to put an end to the blockades, the mine resumed operations, and a meeting was set for September 3 to discuss the protestors’ demands. The events were highly publicized and covered in the national media, as part of an attempt by the government to promote an image of transparency and democratic participation. The meetings were not uncontroversial, however: protestors picketed the auditorium during the proceedings, and community members of rival factions disagreed over who would best represent their interests and what strategies should be used in the negotiations.

One month after the protest that led to the death of Isidro Llanos, the meeting resulted in an 11-point agreement signed by Combayo’s leaders, Minera Yanacocha representatives, and government officials. With respect to the death of Mr. Llanos, the mining company agreed to provide “humanitarian aid” for the family, without taking responsibility for the incident. With respect to water, the agreement stated that Minera Yanacocha would construct water treatment plants to provide potable water for residents of Combayo. Furthermore, the state would coordinate the participatory monitoring of water quality and quantity, adding five additional monitoring points to the six already established.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the agreement was the commitment to carry out a comprehensive hydrological study of the watershed to assess (and continue to monitor) the quality and quantity of water for agricultural use and human consumption. The Peruvian government would coordinate the study, with US$1.5 million in financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank. Before returning to Lima after the meeting, Premier Jorge del Castillo declared: “This is democracy. We discuss and reach an agreement.” His role as mediator was widely applauded, and the agreement marked the “official” end (at least in the eyes of the company and the media) of the Combayo conflict. However, activists who opposed mining expansion were disillusioned by the actions of the Combayo leaders and accused them of “selling out.” Some Combayinos also expressed disappointment, since they had felt pressured to sign an agreement that exempted Minera Yanacocha from all responsibility for Llanos’s death. Furthermore, the agreement contained a clause stating that water quality and quantity were “normal,” which many considered to be false.

As the protests gained momentum and water took center stage, the company was compelled to incorporate water into the discussion and its own negotiation strategies. Allegations of water contamination and reduced water flows were addressed by constructing water treatment plants, increasing the number of test points for environmental monitoring, and conducting a hydrological study. Water ended up being a convenient focal point for all parties involved: the Premier was seen as taking a proactive stance on behalf of President García’s new government (without threatening mining interests), and the company boasted about its ability.
to turn the conflict into an opportunity for improving relations with local communities. For Combayo’s leaders, meanwhile, water provided some of the benefits that they were fighting for, even while they recognized the partial nature of their victory.

In addition to the water issues contained in the agreement, Minera Yanacocha restated its commitment to investing in various development projects in Combayo, including the construction of a principal highway and electrification projects. Combayo leaders originally depicted as having an “antimining” stance went from protests and roadblocks to meetings and negotiations with the company. The same leaders who led the roadblocks later received work contracts or became involved in development projects sponsored by the mining company. For company officials, the fact that the protestors soon became subcontractors and allies confirmed that the roadblocks had been about jobs after all. However, the ongoing nature of this and other conflicts suggest that more than jobs are at stake, and that the alliances made are unstable and precarious.

Water is one of the elements that has influenced the formation of alliances as well as their reconfiguration. Water—and more specifically, watersheds, rivers, the dike, and irrigation canals—created new forms of organization and configurations of political power. The temporary settlement produced by the agreement remained susceptible to new antagonisms as the mine’s effects continued to be felt in new and unanticipated ways. After the protests came to an end, Minera Yanacocha and Combayo leaders met to work out the details of the 11-point agreement. The company used the opportunity to promote an image of openness and transparency, and claimed to be working with leaders who were representing the entire community. However, at the same time as the public meetings were taking place, smaller meetings went on in the background to discuss the specific development projects that would be sponsored by the company. These meetings involved a handful of Combayo leaders, were scheduled privately, and were held in undisclosed locations.

One of the most divisive issues in the negotiations was how employment contracts and development projects would be allocated, and which communities in Combayo would benefit the most from Minera Yanacocha’s support. By now, the 18 caseríos (small villages or hamlets) that formed part of Combayo had been divided into two groups. Miguel was part of the caseríos de cuenca (watershed hamlets), officially named the Comité de Desarrollo de la Microcuenca del Rio Azufre (Development Committee of the Azufre River Micro-watershed). Another committee grouped together those caseríos that were not part of the watershed but were still considered to be within the mine’s area of influence. Miguel’s group claimed that the caseríos de cuenca were most affected due to their location on the banks of the Azufre River, downstream from mining operations.

The leaders of the watershed committee demanded that the company’s investment in local development be split 60–40, with 60 percent of the money going to
the cuenca, and 40 percent to those outside the cuenca. Their justification was that the Azufre River came directly from the area of the mine, so they were most likely to be affected by the sedimentation or pollutants coming from the mine’s operations, or by a reduction in water flows. Other caseríos did not have irrigation canals, or had canals where the source was not within the mine’s area of operations. However, leaders from these other communities pushed for an equal split in compensation. A Plan de Desarrollo (a Development Plan containing demographic data, development priorities, and a proposed budget) would determine which caseríos received development projects and which microenterprises would be awarded contracts to carry them out. Miguel wanted to ensure that his group’s version (elaborated with the help of a local NGO) was presented to the mining company instead of the one prepared by the rival group. For those leaders who had their own microenterprises, these decisions would translate into direct economic benefits.

The mine exacerbated tensions between rival communities and made the watershed a relevant entity that brought with it new risks, economic opportunities, and alliances. Although disputes among families over land and water dated back to a time well before the arrival of the mining company, what changed was that the political lines were now drawn based on new factors: the degree of exposure to contaminants from the mine, belonging to the company’s “area of influence,” and the mine’s effects on water used by various communities. As Orlove and Caton (2010) observe, water can mark the boundaries of groups and communities, defined by shared involvement with water (as in the case of an irrigation canal), and it can also redraw those boundaries. In Combayo, the problems with the dike and the threat of changes in water quality and quantity made the watershed a newly significant basis for mobilization, separating the caseríos de cuenca from other communities. These divisions, in turn, translated into different loyalties and alliances with the company and other actors, as well as material benefits to be derived from agreements with Minera Yanacocha. Water enabled some people to acquire economic benefits and political visibility, and people’s relationship to water was again transformed by the continued influence of the mine.

Conclusion

This article has provided an account of events surrounding the Combayo protests that does not seek to separate out the various layers of the conflict or to ascertain whether the protests were about “water or jobs.” Instead of trying to untangle the connections between people and water that have been created and transformed by modern mining, I have examined how water shaped the socio-natural landscapes around the mine, the response of communities, and the practices of the mining company. From the time of Minera Yanacocha’s arrival, people in Combayo have
witnessed the disappearance of mountain lakes, experienced diminishing water flows, and suffered the effects of increased sediment loads in rivers and irrigation canals. The controversial construction of a dike in the Azufre River and its eventual collapse confirmed the central role of water in conflicts between the company and neighboring communities.

I have also discussed water’s ability to provoke activism and reshape politics. Water mobilized people, contributed to the organization of political groups, and also created new divisions within communities. People organized not only through political parties and associations, but were also connected by irrigation systems and linked through shared waterways. A “watershed committee” grouped together some communities while excluding others, and made water the basis for determining how development projects and jobs would be allocated. The watershed became a new unit of organization, and the mine’s impacts (manifested as changes in water quantity and quality) came to define the territory of action.

Combayo leaders, the media, NGOs, solidarity activists, Minera Yanacocha, and state actors all contributed to making water central to the conflict. Water connected and divided people, places, and issues in ways that furthered the goals of different actors at various times. Water made it possible for the company and state representatives to render the protests technical, delegitimize the arguments of their critics, and reduce the protestors’ demands to the kinds of solutions that they were willing to provide. In the end, the intricate ways in which water played into the demands of local communities were reformulated into an agreement about employment, work contracts, technical solutions, and a hydrological study. Water became an object of monitoring and scientific study, which delegitimized campesinos’ assessment of the changes experienced as a result of mining operations. The agreement’s focus on economic compensation also reduced the scope of the protestors’ demands, which called for a more sustained commitment from the state and the company to safeguard their livelihoods and water resources into the future. Ultimately, the signing of the agreement neutralized local opposition and allowed the mine’s expansion to continue.11 However, these developments indicate that the kinds of alliances and settlements produced by the Combayo agreement are not permanent, but have the potential to generate ongoing conflict.

In light of continued tensions over the proposed Conga mine and other projects in Cajamarca and elsewhere in the country, the Combayo conflict provides some insight into why water has emerged as a central point of contention. Water connects people to the company, other communities, and a rapidly changing landscape. An analysis that foregrounds the role of water instead of dismissing it as a tactic that conceals other agendas and motivations can help us capture the fluid nature of political alliances, the exigencies of communities affected by modern mining, the materiality of the mine’s effects, and changing relations between water, people, and the landscape.
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Notes

1. Richardson and Weszkalnys (2014) suggest the term “resource materialities” to examine how “resources” such as water or oil come to be known, the infrastructures required to transform them, the ways they are experienced and embodied by people who handle them, and assumptions about their nature (or ontology), qualities, and potential effects.

2. The incorporation of nonhuman actors in studies of science and technology, particularly as described in early work on Actor-Network Theory, has been criticized for its distribution of agency and its “symmetrical” treatment of humans and nonhumans (see Sayes 2014). Without ignoring differences in power and intentionality among different actors, or the particular ways in which human actors mobilize knowledge and interests, a focus on water can reveal unexpected dynamics and provide novel ways of analyzing environmental controversies.

3. In a climate of heightened tensions and distrust between various groups, my introduction to the conflicts came through the work of NGOs and activists with a critical stance on mining. However, my position as an academic researcher without formal affiliations to any institution afforded me some level of independence and the opportunity to talk to people on various sides of the conflict.

4. In the first reports to the media, Yanacocha’s Manager of External Affairs announced that Mr. Llanos died of heart failure as he fled from the police, but an autopsy established that he was killed by gunshot wounds.

5. The organizational structure of Rondas facilitates the mobilization of large groups of people to participate in mass rallies and marches. Also important in shaping current mobilizing strategies are the political experience, skills, and networks of urban contacts gained by the older generation through participation in Rondas (see Taylor 2011).


7. See also Davidov (2014) on the materiality of copper.

8. According to the company, the treated water it returns to the environment meets legal standards for water quality. However, campesinos and canal users note that the taste, color, and texture of the water have changed, and that they do not receive as much water as they once did (see Li 2015).

9. The name of the river refers to its high sulfur content. The company argues that some bodies of water in the vicinity of the mine were never suitable for human use and consumption. However, campesinos insist that (irrespective of legal indicators and environmental standards) they are able to evaluate the changes that have taken place and that are affecting their ability to use the resources as they did before. Some even claimed that, before the arrival of the mine, the waters of the Azufre were not polluted but had the power to “purify” (Salazar 2006).
As scholars have noted, there is always some ambiguity in how a watershed is defined, and thus the framing and adoption of watersheds as a relevant unit of governance or organization is always political and has the potential to reconfigure power relations (Budds and Hinojosa 2012).

Some have argued that, in spite of its outward focus on dialogue and negotiation, the company was engaged in covert tactics to suppress opposition. In late 2006, the newspaper *La República* reported that a surveillance operation had been tracking the movements of GRUFIDES staff and other critics of Minera Yanacocha. Father Arana and other activists were stalked, filmed, and photographed as part of a complex operation named “El Diablo” (“The Devil” was the moniker given to Father Arana by those tracking his moves). According to the investigative report, e-mails connected the surveillance activities to an employee of Forza, the company subcontracted to provide security for Yanacocha (*La República* 2006).

**References Cited**


