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Conflicts and discursive strategies in Chilean salmon farming: Territorial hegemony, actors, and challenges for coastal governance

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ABSTRACT

Salmon farming has established itself as a fundamental economic activity in the southern regions of Chile (Los Lagos, Aysén, and Magallanes), ranking as the second-largest national export sector, with 86,000 jobs and USD $6.463 million in exports in 2023. However, its neoextractivist expansion has generated recurring socio-environmental tensions and conflicts, highlighting structural contradictions between economic benefits and ecological impacts. This research, based on the Critical Cultural Political Economy (CCPE) approach, analyzes the discursive dynamics that sustain the expansion of the extractive model despite persistent environmental crises. The analysis is conducted through a qualitative approach, including document examination and semi-structured interviews with key actors (artisanal fishermen, the salmon industry, government representatives, indigenous communities, and social organizations). The data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis. Findings reveal that salmon farming companies employ collaboration strategies targeting the local production system, government, and civil society, while also utilizing confrontation strategies against social opposition. These strategies operate through processes of discursive selectivity that produce subjectivities, norms, and meanings favorable to the extractive model, turning crises into opportunities to "improve" the sector. It is concluded that the salmon farming industry exemplifies coastal neoextractivism, in which hegemony-building processes articulate material and semiotic dimensions. However, salmon farming industry faces structural limits when crises reveal fundamental contradictions in the extractivist model, underscoring the urgency of democratizing coastal territorial governance.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, salmon farming has become one of Chile's most dynamic export industries, ranking second globally in production, surpassed only by Norway. This remarkable growth has been made possible by the convergence of multiple factors: biotechnological advances, strong government support, foreign investment, and the unique geography of the southern regions (Los Lagos, Aysén, and Magallanes). In these territories, a complex network of production and distribution to >100 international destinations has been developed. Thus, the sector has generated a significant economic impact at the regional and national levels (Quiñones et al., 2019).

Yet, this rapid development has brought with it profound controversies and questions. Research indicates that the salmon farming expansion model follows a neoextractivist logic: a form of intensive, high-volume production aimed at international markets (Gudynas, 2015), which can displace other forms of local economy and lead to socio-environmental conflicts in the areas where it operates. Disputes with indigenous communities, artisanal fishermen, territorial organizations, and social leaders have become recurrent, revealing socio-territorial tensions regarding the use of coastal space, the distribution of benefits, and the ecological impacts of the production model. Among its most notable impacts are excessive antibiotic use, frequent salmon escapes, seabed pollution, and mass mortality events caused by harmful algal blooms (HABs), phenomena that climate change could make even more critical in the coming decades (Buschmann et al., 2013).

In this context, this article follows the analytical framework of Critical Cultural Political Economy (CCPE), based on the contributions of Jessop and Sum (2006) and Sum and Jessop (2013), to explore the

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complex power dynamics, meaning production, and hegemonic disputes that shape the conflicts about salmon farming in southern Chile. This approach allows us to articulate the material, institutional, and symbolic dimensions of the conflict. In doing so, it addresses both the structural aspects of the economic model and the imaginaries, discourses, and strategies deployed by the various actors involved.

The research method is based on a qualitative design and critical discourse analysis to examine strategies of collaboration and confrontation that emerge among key actors in the coastal territory. These discursive strategies work by selecting narratives and imaginaries that legitimize salmon farming as the cornerstone of regional development. Through this process, subjectivities, norms, and meanings are shaped that support the expansion of the activity, despite its apparent contradictions and socio-environmental conflicts.

The article presents first a historical overview of the development of salmon farming in Chile and its main socio-ecological implications. It then analyzes the production process through the lens of CCPE and the neoextractivist regime. It follows the methodological strategy and presents the findings, discussion, and main conclusions of this study.

2. Background

2.1. Development, impacts, and tensions of salmon farming in Chile

The development and expansion of salmon farming in Chile dates back to the 19th century, when salmon species were introduced for recreational purposes; it was in the second half of the 20th century that the activity gained momentum as a productive and commercial activity. Since the 1970s, the industry has grown thanks to international technology transfer, coordination between the government, the private sector, and academia, and the favorable geographical conditions of the southern region. The state, through entities such as the Fisheries Development Institute (IFOP) and the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Service (SERNAPESCA), played an essential role in regulating and boosting the sector, which during the 1980s and 1990s increased production and consolidated Chile as the world's second-largest salmon producer (Abud et al., 2009; Fundación Terram, 2000; Román et al., 2015).

The expansion of the salmon farming industry had a significant economic impact, positioning salmon farming as Chile's second-largest export sector after copper, contributing >19 % of GDP in Aysén, 11 % in Los Lagos, and over 2 % in Magallanes (Appel, 2023; SalmonChile A.G., 2024a). The sector generates approximately 86,000 direct and indirect jobs in the regions involved, and in 2023, generated exports worth USD $6.463 billion, in addition to significant tax contributions (SalmonChile A.G., 2024b, 2024c).

However, this expansion has generated a range of social conflicts and contradictions. On the one hand, the industry has profoundly altered the labor and social structure in some territories. In Chiloé, the population has shifted from traditional activities (small-scale farming, artisanal fishing) to salaried jobs, in some cases improving family incomes, especially for women (Brain et al., 2023; Cárdenas et al., 2021). On the other hand, this process has promoted the proletarianization and loss of autonomy of communities historically linked to fishing and agriculture. The massive arrival of foreign workers and changing labor patterns have altered the social structure and local identity, giving rise to tensions over the use of marine space and pressure on public services (Román et al., 2015).

The environmental impacts of salmon farming are one of the main sources of conflict. Intensive production causes eutrophication in fjords and channels due to the discharge of nutrients and pollutants, resulting in a release of 1.4 tons of sludge per ton of salmon produced, which causes benthic degradation and loss of biodiversity (Arancibia, 2020; Viddi et al., 2023). The massive use of antibiotics in Chile —up to 6 000 % more than in Norway— creates environmental and health risks, promoting the development of resistant bacteria (Brain et al., 2023; Arancibia, 2020). Added to this are salmon escapes (>4 million in recent years), which alter native fauna and spread disease (Brain et al., 2023; Fundación Terram, 2000).

Harmful algal blooms (HABs) episodes, exacerbated by climate change and the accumulation of organic matter, have led to mass mortality crises, highlighting the limits of ecosystem resilience and the fragility of the model (Viddi et al., 2023). On a sociocultural level, the industry has transformed traditional life and the connection of communities, and indigenous peoples such as the Mapuche and the Kawésqar, with the sea, affecting their livelihoods, identity, and worldviews (Pitchon, 2015; Bustos et al., 2019a; Barrena et al., 2021; ONG FIMA, 2023).

In political and institutional terms, the oversight and regulation of salmon farming have been repeatedly criticized for their inadequacy and structural deficiencies, with documented environmental violations and limited state capacity to supervise the activity (Schönsteiner et al., 2021; Hernández and Monckeberg, 2019). However, reforms have recently been introduced, such as Law 21,532, which prevents and punishes the escape of salmon and requires greater disclosure of information, as well as stricter penalties for non-compliance.

In short, salmon farming in Chile presents a complex picture where significant economic benefits coexist with negative environmental, social, and cultural impacts. This neoextractivist model, coupled with the absence of effective environmental and social management mechanisms, has generated high costs for local communities, traditional cultures, and fragile ecosystems. It is therefore essential to critically analyze these contradictions to understand that the conflicts associated with salmon farming go beyond purely environmental or economic issues. It also constitutes a web of symbolic, discursive, and material disputes over development, territorial governance, and environmental justice.

2.2. Critical cultural political economy: material and semiotic articulations to understand extractivist expansion

Critical Cultural Political Economy (CCPE), proposed by Jessop and Sum (2006, 2013), is an analytical perspective that enables us to examine the complex interrelationships between the economic, institutional, and discursive spheres within contemporary capitalism. Far from privileging an isolated cultural dimension, CPPE focuses on the relational articulation between the material and the semiotic, recognizing that both dimensions are mutually constitutive in the configuration of social formations and regimes of accumulation (Jessop, 2015).

Given that the material impacts of Chilean salmon farming (economic relevance, territorial transformations, and socio-environmental effects) have been widely documented, this study focuses on examining the discursive strategies that allow us to understand how the sector manages to redefine the territory and the regional economy despite its apparent material contradictions. This methodological choice is justified because semiotic dimensions (imagery, narratives, constructions of meaning) operate as mediators that enable the continuity and expansion of the extractive model even in contexts of crisis and conflict (Sum and Jessop, 2013).

The theoretical framework of CCPE is based on three fundamental conceptual pillars. First, the notion of social formation, understood as a unique historical configuration of relations between classes, state forms, and regimes of accumulation, where the state operates as a strategic-relational field that condenses disputes over hegemony (Jessop, 2008, 2010). Second, the concept of discursive selectivity, which encompasses the processes of variation, selection, and retention (institutionalization) of discourses and semiotic practices that guide the actions of state, business, and social actors (Jessop, 2007). Third, the idea that discursive strategies seek to produce subjectivities, rules, and meanings that are necessary conditions for material activity to develop and expand. The semiotic dimension is therefore not merely a reflection of material conditions, but has its own causal efficacy: "economic imaginaries," that is, discursive constructions about development, modernization, and

competitiveness, inform and legitimize state projects and accumulation strategies that transform territories and social relations (Jessop et al., 2012). In the Latin American context, these imaginaries operate as devices that naturalize extractivist models, marginalizing alternative visions of development and articulating social consensus around capitalist expansion (Clarke, 2014).

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough et al., 2001) thus becomes an essential tool for investigating how social imaginaries shape concrete possibilities for political action and social change. This approach allows us to examine both the legitimation strategies deployed by hegemonic actors and the narratives of resistance that emerge from territories and communities affected by extractive expansion.

In the case of Chilean salmon farming, analyzing discursive strategies is essential to understanding how the hegemony of a model that faces recurring environmental crises, territorial conflicts, and social challenges is sustained. Semiotic dimensions operate as mechanisms that allow material contradictions to be processed and reinterpreted, transforming them into opportunities for "improvement" and "modernization" of the sector rather than evidence of its structural limitations.

2.3. *Extractivism, neoextractivism, and the contradictions of salmon farming expansion*

For this study, we define extractivism following Gudynas (2015), who characterizes it as the high-intensity extraction of large volumes of natural resources mainly for export, with little or no industrial processing. This definition emphasizes both the quantitative dimension (volumes and intensity) and the insertion into global value chains, where Latin American countries occupy subordinate positions as suppliers of raw materials. Neo-extractivism, meanwhile, refers to forms of extractivism promoted by progressive governments which, while maintaining a primary-export orientation, incorporate greater state involvement in the collection and redistribution of revenues, as well as narratives of social development and environmental sustainability (Gudynas, 2015). Although in the Chilean case, neoextractivism does not emerge from progressive governments, but rather from a consolidated neoliberal matrix, we adopt the concept to account for the discursive transformations that incorporate the language of sustainability and corporate social responsibility without altering the fundamental extractive logic.

The Chilean salmon farming industry embodies the central characteristics of neoextractivism: intensive and technified aquaculture production, extensive appropriation of marine spaces, an export orientation (exceeding 95 % of production), minimal value-added products, and a discursive construction about regional development (Vallejos et al., 2014; Moncayo, 2023). Its consolidation has generated profound territorial transformations, especially in Los Lagos and Aysén regions, reconfiguring ecosystems and social relations (Saavedra et al., 2016). For example, conflicts between salmon farms and artisanal fishing communities in the Aysén region reveal processes of dispossession and marginalization inherent to the model, where unrestricted capitalist modernization generates both valorization and social and environmental dispossession (Saavedra et al., 2016; Saavedra, 2012).

Nonetheless, a fundamental analytical contradiction emerges here: how does Chilean salmon farming manage to sustain and expand its activity despite the recurring environmental crises, territorial conflicts, and social resistance it faces? The data presented in the previous section reveal a persistent contradiction between, on the one hand, the economic importance of the sector (second largest export industry, 86,000 jobs, significant contributions to regional GDP) and, on the other hand, the severe ecological damage it causes (eutrophication, massive use of antibiotics, escape of exotic species, HABs crisis) and tensions with local communities (artisanal fishermen, indigenous peoples, territorial organizations).

This contradiction cannot be resolved solely by analyzing the material dimensions of the conflict. It requires examining how discursive strategies operate to process, reframe, and neutralize contradictions, transforming crises into opportunities for sectoral "improvement" and conflicts into "coordination challenges" between actors. It is here that the CCPE framework turns its attention to the semiotic dimensions to find explanatory keys to the persistence and expansion of the extractivist model.

The discursive strategies we will analyze operate through processes of selectivity that involve: (i) the variation of narratives and positions deployed by different actors; (ii) the institutional selection of certain discourses over others; and (iii) the retention and institutionalization of hegemonic imaginaries that naturalize salmon farming as an indispensable component of regional development (Jessop, 2007). These processes seek to produce the subjectivities, norms, and meanings necessary for the material activity to continue developing despite its apparent socio-environmental contradictions.

From this perspective, Chilean salmon farming cannot be understood solely as a successful economic sector: it constitutes a node of articulation of material, symbolic, and institutional relations that connects local territories with global circuits of accumulation, mediated by specific forms of state regulation and the construction of discursive hegemony. The analytical challenge lies in unraveling these articulations to understand the mechanisms that sustain extractive expansion and the possibilities for constructing alternatives to the dominant extractive logic (Alves, 2021; Lang, 2024).

Recent research has documented the discursive strategies deployed by the Chilean salmon industry and their role in the transformation of coastal territories across different spatial and temporal scales. Bachmann-Vargas et al. (2021) identify three fundamental discourses that re-framed salmon aquaculture in the aftermath of the ISA virus crisis (2007–2009): biosecurity, sustainable protein, and *The Promise of Patagonia*. These discourses have legitimized sectoral growth despite the absence of integrated ecosystem-based approaches, revealing a critical gap in relation to environmental sustainability. This discursive construction is part of a broader historical pattern analyzed by Barton et al. (2023) from a historical political ecology perspective, who show that the concept of sustainability in Chilean salmon aquaculture has evolved over five decades (1970–2020) towards a narrow definition of "business responsibility" centered on eco-efficiency, biosecurity, and innovation. This definition deliberately excludes the more comprehensive notion of sustainable development promoted by international organizations, governments, and NGOs, thereby systematically rendering social and labor issues invisible and suppressing key questions regarding access to and use of marine common-pool resources.

Carrasco and Casellas (2024b), in turn, provide a longitudinal analysis of the Chiloé Archipelago, identifying five discursive and policy phases over more than four decades of salmon industry development. These range from an initial narrative of the region as "empty" (1973–1982), through salmon promotion as a driver of national economic growth (1983–1994), the rise of the "blue revolution" (1995–2006), the ISA crisis and subsequent expansion into southern regions (2007–2015), to the current phase (2016–2023), marked by the emergence of administrative rights over coastal-marine areas to protect Indigenous traditional uses. This analysis developed herein reveals that sectoral discursive frameworks not only justify productive expansion, but also materialize territorial transformations that reconfigure power relations, resource access, and socio-ecological dynamics, consolidating processes of privatization of the marine commons and the exclusion of organized local actors.

3. Methodology and evidence

This study is situated within the critical-interpretive paradigm, employing a qualitative approach based on the CCPE framework (Sum and Jessop, 2013). The objective is to analyze the discursive strategies used by various actors associated with Chilean salmon farming in Los Lagos region and how these contribute to the production of

subjectivities, norms, and meanings that sustain the expansion of the extractive model in coastal territories, despite its apparent material contradictions.

The analysis focuses on semiotic dimensions not as a reflection of already established material conditions, but as constitutive processes that have their own causal efficacy in shaping power relations and legitimizing hegemonic projects (Sum and Jessop, 2013).

The methodology was structured in two main stages. First, a systematic review of secondary sources was conducted, including government documents (public policies, regulatory frameworks, and ministry declarations), technical reports from sectoral entities (SalmonChile A.G., Undersecretary of Fisheries, and SERNAPESCA), academic research on salmon farming, and media outlets from the period 2000– 2023. This phase enabled us to identify the primary discursive themes and key actors. Second, 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors from various sectors: the local productive sectors (artisanal fishermen, mussel farmers, benthic collectors), the business sector (salmon farming companies), civil society (local organizations, NGOs, social movements), and the public sector (government officials). These interviewees hold various degrees of influence at the local level (Los Lagos region), and some are even involved in issues at the national level. Theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was conducted until data saturation was achieved, using criteria of sectoral representativeness. The interviews were conducted between March and December 2022.

In this context, actors deploy political-discursive strategies with collective and communicative intentions (Austin, 1996). For this reason, the study is organized into two main categories according to the nature of these strategies:

- Collaboration: Discursive actions aimed at promoting the convergence of courses of action among diverse actors, through the building of consensus, alliances, and spaces for coordination that incorporate critical perspectives within depoliticized technical-scientific frameworks.
- Confrontation: Discursive actions that seek to delegitimize or impede the courses of action of opposing actors by constructing adversaries, polarizing public debate, and neutralizing territorial resistance.

The divide between collaboration and confrontation strategies is justified both theoretically and empirically. From the theoretical perspective of CCPE, discursive selectivity processes involve both consensus-building (through collaboration and the incorporation of critical actors) and control of dissent (through confrontation and the neutralization of resistance). Empirically, the analysis of interviews revealed that actors organize their discursive practices according to these two main logics, which are not mutually exclusive but complementary in the construction of territorial hegemony.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in the ATLAS.ti 8.0 software for systematic coding and categorization. Inductive coding (emerging categories) was performed within the framework of a deductive strategy focused on the general categories established above (collaboration and confrontation).

The analysis is structured according to the framework of discursive selectivity proposed by Jessop (2007), which comprises three analytical stages:

1. Variation: Identification of the complete repertoire of discursive strategies deployed by different actors, including both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives, as well as the tensions and contradictions between them.
2. Selection: Analysis of the processes by which certain discourses and strategies are institutionally privileged over others, examining the filtering mechanisms that operate in state, media, and organizational spaces.
3. Retention/institutionalization: Examination of how selected discursive strategies become embedded in regulatory frameworks, public policies, organizational practices, and common sense, shaping the conditions for the reproduction of the extractive model.

This framework allows us to analyze how discursive strategies seek to produce three main effects: (i) "subjectivities" favorable to salmon farming expansion; (ii) 'norms' (formal and informal rules) that facilitate extractive activity; and (iii) "meanings" (shared understandings) that naturalize the model as an indispensable component of territorial development.

The validity of the study is ensured through validation with key informants and external review by researchers specializing in the subject area. Finally, it is worth noting that the study was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee of the University of Los Lagos (Chile). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity in the handling of information.

4. Results

The results are organized around collaboration and confrontation strategies. It should be noted that collaboration strategies are primarily led by salmon farming companies, while confrontation strategies involve both companies and regional residents in antagonistic positions.

4.1. Collaboration strategies: building the business hegemony in the territory

Salmon farming companies systematically deploy collaboration strategies aimed at three main groups of actors: the local productive system, the public sector, and civil society. These strategies aim to foster subjectivities that favor the extractive model, establish institutional rules that facilitate its operation, and construct meanings that portray salmon farming as an engine of regional development.

4.1.1. With actors in the local productive system

With these actors, the salmon farming industry employs at least two collaboration strategies: an economic and productive one, and another discursive, linked to political processes and public legitimacy. On the one hand, salmon companies are concerned with establishing cooperation in technical and production terms, as well as economic integration relationships with artisanal fisheries, particularly through the provision of services (e.g., diving) and the outsourcing of specific tasks, such as cleaning and waste management. By offering economic opportunities to local actors, it promotes collaboration that produces subjectivities favorable to the industry.

On the other hand, some companies propose substantial improvements in the working conditions of their employees: higher wages, higher unionization rates, training in workplace safety (especially for diving labor), stricter requirements for subcontractors, and better work equipment. Other creative strategies seek technological solutions to environmental challenges, such as water decontamination through algae cultivation, which are highlighted and publicized in the media, in conjunction with public actors and the local productive system.

Other local economic activities are also linked by these companies to auxiliary roles within the production chain, either as service providers (port activities, construction, logistics) or because companies attribute them to the industry's own stimulating effect. This is how a salmon farming representative explains it:

This industry has been created and there is a very important hub. For example, the number of flights to this area is due to the fact that there is a powerful industry here. The number of hotels in Puerto Varas, which are full all year round, is because there is a powerful industry […] there are executives who live here, there are people who live here, there are restaurants that operate permanently, so it generates many benefits: construction, the maritime port sector that did not exist before. (Salmon

farming industry representative)

Finally, another strategy employed by salmon farming companies has been to position themselves as an alternative source of employment, offering jobs in diving and navigation for people who have traditionally worked in artisanal fishing. Companies benefit from the vulnerability of the artisanal fishery to cycles of economic stagnation, overfishing, and the aging of the population engaged in this trade.

From a more political or strategic perspective, it is evident that a Sea Council has been established as a permanent coordinating body between representatives of artisanal fishing, aquaculture, and shipowner organizations. These actors convene regularly to discuss various issues of common interest and concern.

These findings reveal a systematic business strategy of building territorial hegemony through the articulation of productive and discursive alliances with local actors. The economic integration of artisanal fishers and other actors in the local production system into the salmon value chain serves as a mechanism of social legitimization, reducing resistance to the extractive model. At the same time, the creation of coordination bodies such as the Sea Council allows conflicts to be institutionally channeled, depoliticizing them and subordinating them to the logic of "technical collaboration" between sectors.

4.1.2. With the public sector

A strategy for collaboration with the public sector involves committing to environmental objectives within the framework of the environmental assessment process for investment projects. This process is regulated by law and comprises a set of protocols for compliance, along with penalties for non-compliance. However, some companies also support expanding environmental regulations to prevent disasters (salmon escapes) and make information transparent, such as the use of antibiotics in the industry. They propose contributing to the establishment of these new rules to participate in the regulatory process of productive activities.

Companies also establish direct coordination with local governments (municipalities), both permanently (working groups) and on an ad hoc basis, to generate solutions in various areas ranging from logistical support (road repairs, waste removal on islands, beach cleanups) to broader social areas (education initiatives, support for the design of social projects). Particular emphasis is placed on working with municipalities that handle connectivity problems or insufficient technical resources. This is seen as a "gray area" involving the acceptance of gifts from companies by the public sector. There is a case in Codihué where the local public school received donations (installation of security cameras, funding for sports activities) from the company Invermar in the context of its community relations process as a strategy developed before the company installs itself in the area.

Local actors and also public officials accuse the public sector of having a flexible attitude toward regional salmon farming. This has historical roots, as the state initially focused on regulating industrial production activities, securing coastal areas for them, rather than traditional activities (artisanal fishing, shipbuilding, customary uses by indigenous peoples, among others) and their adaptations (small-scale mussel farming). A public official describes it as follows:

The State has played a much greater role in promoting economic development in the coastal areas rather than in maintaining a balance with traditional activities because, for example, the first aquaculture centers appeared in 1978– 1980, and by 1990 they had already been granted special status. […] Chronologically, the first areas to be created with preferential rights were those for aquaculture, the management areas. The Lafkenche Law only appeared in 2008, the Caletas Law […] in 2017, and occupations already associated with activities carried out by mussel farmers, such as seed collection with permits, began to emerge in 2010. Note that the activity began in 2010 and then by 2019 there was a law. Indigenous communities had a historical use of the coastline, but it took 18 years after the Fisheries Law was passed before a law was enacted that recognized them. And to this day, there are uses of the coastline that are not recognized anywhere. (Regional government official)

Since then, it is noted, the State has indiscriminately granted concessions to the salmon industry, despite opposition voices accusing it of saturating the maritime space throughout Reloncaví. Even though a moratorium on the authorization of concessions was imposed in 2010, the expansion of salmon biomass continued to be authorized.

Similarly, attention is drawn to the flexibility granted by public regulatory bodies to salmon farming companies regarding the sanitary treatment of fish mortality, such as the exceptional permits for the disposal of this toxic waste in the context of the 2016 red tide crisis in Chiloé.

Collaboration with the public sector reveals a pattern of state capture, in which salmon farming companies have systematically influenced the development of regulatory frameworks that favor their interests. The timeline presented by the public official shows how the Chilean state has historically prioritized the creation of regulatory frameworks for the salmon farming industry over the recognition of the territorial rights of traditional and indigenous communities. This "state selectivity" operates through both formal mechanisms (participation in regulatory processes) and informal ones (donations and relationships through "gray areas"), shaping a regime of institutional privileges that facilitates extractive accumulation.

4.1.3. With civil society actors

Regarding collaboration with civil society, the key concept is corporate social responsibility (CSR) ,[1] which serves as a model for the relationships between companies and local communities. Companies approach local grassroots organizations to offer some benefits, such as: infrastructure (financing their community centers, rural drinking water facilities), gifts (for children, delivery of food supplies), management financing (payment of basic services to organizations), education and training (trade workshops, literacy). As a result, some residents express their support for the installation of companies in exchange for promises of jobs and other immediate and perceived future benefits. Critics of the CSR model warn that a significant part of its success relies on the retrenchment of public services, which companies take advantage by serving these social functions and creating a sense of debt in the communities that can be translated into support for their investment projects.

Furthermore, companies make direct approaches to grassroots organizations to position their pro-salmon farming discourse in meetings and other community forums. This begins prior to the company's installation and includes influencing public opinion through the media. The corporate discourse emphasizes the economic impact of their endeavor: employment, services, payment of permits, improvement of the quality of life in the area. In some instances, they also adopt the discourse of environmental sustainability, highlighting their innovative practices (for example, Colaco's "eco-fish farming plant") and shifting attention to other activities and socio-environmental problems (sanitation companies, pollution from wood heating, feral dogs) as a way of softening the negative environmental impact of the industry itself in the public imagination. The construction of a favorable cultural environment appears necessary to enable the material production desired by the

[1] CSR has evolved. From mitigating impacts to an institutional strategy of territorial engagement that integrates companies, the state, and communities through dialogue and consultation to sustain production. This normalization legitimizes private management of the territory, promotes social cohesion, and projects a virtuous image of "progress," concealing extractive effects and negative externalities (Leiva, 2019).

company.

In some cases, the implementation of the so-called "Lafkenche Law"[2] opened up an opportunity for collaboration with indigenous communities. Until 2020, salmon farming circumstantially expressed support for Coastal and Marine Space of Indigenous Peoples (ECMPO as its Spanish acronym) requests in order to avoid tensions with what was then a right-wing, pro-business government (both national and regional). On the other hand, there are cases of indigenous communities that have released portions of their ECMPO requests in favor of salmon farming and port companies after negotiations of unknown content. In certain cases, there are clientelistic relationships that have preceded these releases:

In San José Bay, where the port of Cabo Froward is located […] there are three salmon farms that have had a very positive impact on local stakeholders. Camanchaca managed to turn the indigenous community into a strategic stakeholder, because salmon farms tend to try to build patronage relationships with stakeholders with whom they have conflicts, in exchange for benefits, thereby transforming them into strategic stakeholders. So, how do they do it? They hire people from the community to work at the plant, they finance things for them, and in exchange, the community has given Camanchaca a lot of things. (Regional government official)

Finally, it should be noted that some environmental NGOs have worked alongside salmon farming companies to develop internal protocols to raise their environmental standards and even to clear allegations of environmental damage.

After the ISA virus, the seas were not clean. The salmon industry was responsible for producing false reports that favored the continuation of salmon farming here in the area, and there were international organizations that produced reports for them. And I take responsibility for what I said, because in May 2008, I met in Oslo, Norway, with people from WWF [World Wildlife Fund], who in May 2008 already had a report saying that the seas in this area were free of ISA and that they could continue producing. (Mapuche community representative).

Strategies for collaboration with civil society operate as mechanisms of social legitimization that seek to neutralize conflict by building local consensus. The CSR model functions as a device for discursive colonization that exploits the state's deficiencies in providing public services to generate dependency and community support. The clientelistic relationships with indigenous communities, documented in the Camanchaca case, reveal how companies transform potential opponents into "strategic actors" through selective benefits, weakening the cohesion of territorial resistance. The mobilization of international actors (such as WWF) highlights the global dimension of legitimization strategies, where internationally renowned organizations are instrumentalized to endorse the continuity of the extractive model.

4.2. Confrontation strategies: disputes over territorial hegemony

Confrontation strategies involve both salmon farming companies and local actors (artisanal fishermen, indigenous communities, territorial organizations) in antagonistic positions. Companies mainly engage in confrontation with the public sector (when regulations threaten their interests) and with critical civil society actors. Residents confront corporate practices and the state policies that favor them. These strategies reveal the limits of consensual hegemony building and the persistence of territorial resistance.

4.2.1. With actors in the system of local production

Artisanal fishing organizations and social leaders have used direct confrontation in the public arena to denounce the harmful effects of salmon farming. There have been reports of leaders speaking out in formal settings, openly criticizing the industry's anti-ecological practices. At the same time, however, there has been recognition of the need to change, or at least combine, this strategy of direct and public confrontation with one that is open to dialogue with business actors, attributing the difficulty of transforming salmon farming practices to its social, political, and economic hegemony.

We had to make a decision: either we talked to the salmon farmers or we just kept fighting them, hitting them hard, criticizing them. […] But we saw that throwing stones at each other didn't change anything; the situation remained the same. Because let's not forget that salmon farming generates a lot of economic resources, jobs, and so on. So, it's difficult for any government to say to them, 'Look, gentlemen, you are doing…' Besides, they were given free rein. At the time, the salmon farmers were the gods of the sector. […] We changed our strategy and said, 'Let's sit down and talk.' […] The first thing is the environment. Second, sustainability. These are issues that we, as artisanal fishers, will not compromise on for anything. (Artisanal fishing representative)

Thus, as part of this same innovative strategy, artisanal fishing organizations declare that they will continue to strongly advocate for greater environmental sustainability in the industry. Another area of confrontation involves direct competition in the marketplace. Companies tend toward horizontal integration; salmon farming companies are beginning to expand into mussel farming, leaving behind small and medium-sized mussel farmers, who have less organizational capacity to manage applications for special seed collection permits and less accumulated capital to mobilize for new investments.

The strategic evolution of artisanal fishing organizations from direct confrontation to dialogue highlights both the effectiveness of salmon farming hegemony and the structural limitations of purely confrontational strategies. The recognition that salmon farms "were the gods of the sector" reveals the magnitude of the economic and political power accumulated by the industry. However, the shift towards collaboration does not imply abandoning environmental demands, but rather a tactical reconfiguration of their articulation. Commercial competition in mussel farming illustrates how the horizontal expansion of salmon farming generates new sources of conflict that transcend purely environmental issues, giving rise to disputes over control of traditional productive niches.

4.2.2. With the public sector

At this point, criticism is primarily focused on the occurrence of subterfuge by companies aimed at continuing their activities despite legal protocols and regulations. Thus, in the context of environmental assessment processes, companies omit or distort information before the Environmental Assessment Service (SEA) that would warrant greater efforts at environmental remediation and social and patrimonial compensation, such as the existence of protected areas, endemic biodiversity, archaeological heritage, the existence of indigenous populations, and underestimation of impact (environmental, water, and noise pollution), among others. In other words, failure to comply with legal obligations is a form of confrontation with the state. Another practice along these lines is beginning work before completing the respective procedures or obtaining studies, permits, and authorizations from public agencies.

In addition, companies complain of legal uncertainty regarding the use of space, as expressed in the SEA's requirements for investment projects, both in terms of environmental assessment requirements and enforcement and penalties for non-compliance with the commitments set out in environmental qualification resolutions (RCA).

Pressure from companies on the public sector is also mentioned in the context of decision-making on environmental regulation and land use planning. A local activist recounted this in the context of the conflict in Lenca-Metri:

A senior executive at the company had the nerve to send an email,

[2] Law 20.249 creates the concept of Indigenous Peoples' Coastal Marine Areas (ECMPO), portions of coastline and/or maritime space handed over to indigenous communities for administration in order to protect their customary uses.

which is evidence, to a person at National Monuments […] who was directly threatened not to present the file to the National Monuments Council. […] The person who received the threat said that he did not care about the threats they had made to leave him without a job and other things. (Local activist)

Strategies of confrontation with the public sector reveal a fundamental tension between the logic of corporate accumulation and state regulatory frameworks. The documented "acts of subterfuge" show how companies deploy practices of "systemic illegality" that openly challenge state authority when it threatens their interests. Direct threats to public officials, as documented in the Lenca-Metri case, illustrate the use of economic power as a tool for political pressure.

4.2.3. With civil society actors

Groups opposed to large companies use a range of strategies to express their opinions (through press releases, media pressure, and protests) and to block companies' actions. In relation to the latter, an initial avenue is administrative appeals to the competent authorities, following citizen oversight of the companies' activities in the territory. When the administrative route is exhausted, the judicial route emerges, undertaken by the organizations themselves, occasionally with advice from NGOs, congressmen, or other agents with greater technical and political capabilities.

Opposition is also manifested in the formal participation processes initiated by companies to comply with environmental regulations. Some organizations even refuse to engage with companies outside of citizen participation protocols.[3]To counter this opposition, companies employ various strategies, primarily aimed at influencing public opinion. Their discourse suggests that the industry is "necessary", or that it has a "responsibility" due to its importance to the regional, national, and local economic structure. In a more drastic tone, the company also links its hypothetical departure from the territory to the impact on employment and economic dynamics, and consequently, on social conflict and the quality of life in the territory.

When the ISA virus outbreak occurred, 20,000 people lost their jobs, and Puerto Montt went into decline. So, ultimately, the industry has a social responsibility. And bear in mind that when you talk about benefits, they are not just benefits for this region. Eighty thousand hectares of grain from family farms in Regions VIII, IX, and X are used to feed salmon. We are linked to agriculture, we are linked to the transport sector, to the maritime port sector, to logistics. So, in the end, it's not a question of saying 'let the industry go' […] it's not that simple. (Salmon farming association's representative)

It responds to accusations of environmental damage caused by the industry by pointing to natural causes, generally of a global nature, or to insufficient information that would allow causality to be attributed to phenomena such as HABs, which generate red tides and contribute to salmon deaths.

Another set of strategies are those deployed in the context of citizen participation processes required by environmental regulations. First, they seek to circumvent the requirement to conduct an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for large-scale projects, as this involves a more formal and complex process of citizen participation. Instead, projects are often fictitiously fragmented, and even large companies present themselves as groups of smaller companies, allowing them to submit only an environmental impact declaration (DIA) and thereby seek to simplify and accelerate their approval by the authorities.

In the process of citizen participation itself, the companies distort the information presented to local communities. For example, they conceal information about the use of antibiotics in salmon, or change details about production volume, the scale of operations, or the amount of water to be used.

There are also cases, such as the conflict in Huelmo,[4] where the citizen participation process was carried out solely for the purpose of complying with regulations by collecting signatures and attendance lists, and projects are implemented without considering the agreements or proposals of local communities and organizations.

Another strategy is to discredit opposition actors. Here, the mechanisms are varied: they are portrayed as "external agitators," differences between local actors are exaggerated and exploited, or public opinion is shaped to believe that social conflict is being generated by project opponents.

In relation to indigenous communities requesting ECMPO, salmon farming employs pressure strategies on various actors to obtain the release of these spaces. In public discourse, companies seek to discredit indigenous communities requesting ECMPO, accusing them of hoarding coastal and maritime spaces and delegitimizing their customary use. In more private dealings, they employ mechanisms to manipulate or pressure key local actors. One example is what happened in the context of the ECMPO application on Quihua Island, where Invermar is accused of having drafted a letter of support for the company itself, on which local leaders allegedly attached their signatures.

The relationship between salmon farming companies and civil society is one of constant tension. Opponents utilize administrative and judicial channels, as well as protests, to raise awareness of their demands. At the same time, companies respond with discourses of social responsibility, exaggerate their economic impact, and discredit their detractors. They use tactics such as manipulating information and project fragmentation to avoid strict participatory processes. When dealing with indigenous communities, they exert pressure and manipulation to control spaces, seeking to weaken the legitimacy of social actors. Thus, the scenario is one of strategic dispute, as companies seek to consolidate their position by neutralizing resistance and building consensus, while social movements attempt to strengthen their influence.

5. Discussion

The results show that both collaboration and confrontation strategies shape a complex field of discursive disputes surrounding salmon farming, where actors deploy multiple tactics to position their interests and visions of territorial development. These discursive strategies do not operate in a dichotomous manner, but rather intertwine in dynamic and contradictory ways, generating specific territorial consequences that transcend the conventional limits of sectoral analysis.

However, these results, analyzed within the framework of Jessop's (2007) discursive selectivity, reveal how discursive strategies surrounding salmon farming operate through complex processes of variation, selection, and retention that shape the semiotic conditions for the expansion of the extractive model. These processes aim to produce the subjectivities, norms, and meanings necessary for the material activity to develop, despite its apparent socio-environmental contradictions, thereby responding to the paradox raised in the theoretical framework regarding the persistence of the salmon farming model in contexts of crisis and conflict.

5.1. Discursive variation: the complete repertoire of territorial strategies

The analysis revealed a wide range of discursive strategies employed by different actors, shaping what Jessop (2007) refers to as the moment of "variation" in selectivity processes. This variation includes both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives, highlighting the

[3] Further details on civil society's repertoire of action can be found in Retamal et al. (2025).

[4] In 2019, the local community of Huelmo (Calbuco) began to oppose the installation of a fish farm by the Novofish company, a conflict that included legal proceedings and demands for the application of a citizen participation protocol.

complexity of semiotic disputes surrounding the extractive model.

Salmon farming companies deploy a repertoire that ranges from collaborative narratives (CSR, multi-stakeholder alliances, participation in territorial governance) to confrontational strategies (political pressure, systemic illegality, discrediting opponents). This variation allows them to adapt tactically to different contexts and audiences, maximizing their capacity for hegemonic construction.

These mechanisms operate through the technical depoliticization of conflicts, transforming disputes over development models into problems of "coordination between actors" and "optimization of procedures." Territorial governance thus becomes a strategy of legitimization that keeps power asymmetries intact while creating the impression of democratic participation (Bustos et al., 2019b).

The inhabitants of the territory also employ diverse strategies, combining confrontation (such as protests and public complaints) with institutional participation (utilization of legal resources and engagement in dialogue spaces). This variation illustrates the increasing sophistication of territorial movements and their capacity to adapt in response to corporate co-optation strategies. Thus, social actors such as indigenous peoples and artisanal fishermen promote narratives linking salmon farming to environmental degradation and territorial dispossession (Saavedra, 2018; Herrera, 2020).

These discursive disputes have generated processes of territorial polarization, fragmenting local communities between those who benefit directly from salmon farming and those who face its adverse effects. This polarization manifests itself in intra-community conflicts that erode the social fabric (Garriga and Morgante, 2023), reinforced by corporate strategies of differentiated co-optation, which generate selective benefits for specific sectors while excluding others.

The findings also reveal tensions within each group of actors. Among companies, there are coexisting visions ranging from extractive laissez-faire to proposals for "sustainable salmon farming." Among residents, tensions range from those who prioritize direct confrontation to those who opt for strategic dialogue, as evidenced by the evolution of artisanal fishing organizations. This discursive variation constitutes the raw material on which the institutional selection processes that shape territorial hegemony subsequently operate.

5.2. *Institutional selection: filtering mechanisms and discursive privilege*

Institutional selection processes determine which of the various discursive strategies gain privileged access to state, media, and organizational spaces, shaping the conditions for their subsequent institutionalization (Jessop, 2007).

The Chilean state has operated as a filter that systematically privileges corporate narratives over territorial resistance. The chronology presented by the public official in the results shows how regulations favorable to salmon farming preceded the recognition of traditional territorial rights by decades. This selectivity is not neutral, but rather reflects the configuration of the state as a *strategic-relational field* (Jessop, 2008, 2010), where power relations favorable to salmon farming capital are condensed.

Regional media outlets serve as a second filter, amplifying narratives of "development" and "modernization" associated with salmon farming while marginalizing reports of socio-environmental impacts. This phenomenon reflects what framing theory identifies as the selective construction of media reality, where certain aspects are highlighted while others are rendered invisible (Koziner, 2013). The media construction of the "salmon farming hub" as a symbol of regional progress illustrates how specific meanings are selected while others are rendered invisible. This narrative is adopted by campaigns such as SalmonChile's "Pride of the South, Pride of Chile" (SalmonChile, 2025), which positions salmon as a "source of national pride" and Chile as a "global food power," obscuring the socio-environmental problems documented by community and academic organizations.

Participation mechanisms (sectoral roundtables, advisory councils, environmental assessment processes) operate as filters that privilege depoliticized technical-scientific discourses over narratives of environmental justice and territorial rights. These mechanisms transform political disputes over development models into problems of "coordination" and "management of externalities." Furthermore, companies in the sector seek to reposition themselves as "partners in territorial development" committed to socio-environmental sustainability (Ramos, 2015). These narratives operate through the construction of "multi-actor alliances" that include joint environmental monitoring projects, local training programs, and territorial compensation funds.

Business strategies show greater capacity to access institutional selection mechanisms than territorial organizations. This reflects both asymmetries in resources (technical, economic, organizational) and the structural configuration of institutions that favors the reproduction of the extractive model. These selection processes shape the conditions for certain discursive strategies to move toward institutionalization, while others remain marginalized from public debate and policy formulation.

5.3. *Retention and institutionalization: hegemonic sedimentation and the production of subjectivities*

The moment of retention/institutionalization encompasses the processes through which selected discursive strategies become embedded in regulatory frameworks, public policies, organizational practices, and common sense, shaping the structural conditions for the reproduction of the extractive model (Jessop, 2007). In this way, collaborative business strategies have become embedded in regulatory frameworks that facilitate the expansion of salmon farming: concession regimes, flexible environmental regulations, and community relations protocols. The Fisheries and Aquaculture Law and its successive reforms exemplify how frameworks that privilege "weak sustainability" are institutionalized, where environmental and territorial issues are subordinated to the imperatives of economic growth (Gudynas, 2012; Escobar, 2016).

Sectoral CSR, citizen participation protocols, and roundtable discussions have been institutionalized as "normal" practices for relations between companies and territories. These practices operate as conflict management mechanisms that channel resistance toward depoliticized collaborative frameworks.

The most profound institutionalization occurs in the production of territorial subjectivities. The "salmon-type Chilote"[5] identified by Bustos et al. (2019a) illustrates how local identities articulated around values of modernization and economic progress associated with the extractive model become sedimented. This subjective production is fundamental because it generates consensus "from below" that legitimizes the expansion of salmon farming, while also creating tension with traditional cultural forms, thereby developing what has been called "territories in re-existence" (Carrasco and Casellas, 2024a).

Beyond formal regulations, institutionalization produces informal "rules of the game" that naturalize the primacy of economic objectives over socio-environmental considerations. The normalization of recurring crises (spills, HABs, labor conflicts) as "technical challenges" rather than structural issues illustrates this normative production. The most successful institutionalization is that which naturalizes salmon farming as an indispensable component of regional identity. The common-sense notion that "without salmon farms there is no development" operates as a discursive closure that hinders the imagination of post-extractivist alternatives.

However, institutionalization processes face structural limits. Recurring material crises (ISA virus, red tide, massive escapes) function as "ruptures" that challenge institutionalized frameworks and open spaces for the reactivation of territorial opposition. These crises thus function as "revealers of contradictions," exposing the limits of the

[5] "Chilote" is the demonym for the inhabitants of Chiloé, connoting a certain tone of informality or affection and can be pejorative or nostalgic.

neoextractivist model and opening space for critical discourses. Events such as the HABs constitute "critical junctures" that make visible the hidden externalities of the model (Rivas, 2022) and fuel discursive strategies of confrontation.

Together, these processes of variation, selection, and retention constitute a regime of discursive selectivity that sustains the expansion of the extractive model by producing the semiotic conditions necessary for its social legitimation and political reproduction.

6. Conclusions

This research demonstrates how Chilean salmon farming manages to sustain and expand its activity despite recurring environmental crises and territorial resistance, through sophisticated processes of discursive selectivity that produce the subjectivities, norms, and meanings necessary for the reproduction of the extractive model. The analysis confirms that semiotic dimensions have their own causal efficacy in shaping territorial relations. Discursive strategies are not mere reflections of material conditions but rather constitutive processes that enable the continuity of the extractive model in contexts of crisis and conflict.

The application of Jessop's (2007) framework reveals how territorial hegemony operates through complex processes of variation, selection, and retention. Salmon farming companies have managed to gain privileged access to institutional selection mechanisms through their collaborative strategies, establishing themselves in regulatory frameworks, organizational practices, and shared understandings that naturalize the extractive model. However, territorial hegemony is neither complete nor stable. Confrontational strategies reveal the persistence of opposition that forces companies to combine consensus mechanisms with forms of coercion. Recurring material crises serve as "ruptures" that challenge established institutional frameworks.

This study contributes to the development of CCPE through the systematic application of the discourse selectivity framework to a case of aquaculture extractivism; the empirical demonstration of how discursive strategies produce subjectivities, norms, and meanings that sustain extractive expansion; and the conceptualization of "aquaculture extractivism" as a specific mode of appropriation of marine-coastal spaces.

The findings suggest the need to democratize decision-making processes regarding marine-coastal territories, strengthening participation mechanisms that extend beyond the technical management of externalities to include open debates on alternative models of territorial development. This requires recognizing and maintaining the multiple territorialities that characterize coastal spaces, creating conditions for the construction of post-extractivist alternatives.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alejandro Retamal: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **César Pérez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Juan Pablo Paredes:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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