

Semi-Peripheral Ecological Modernization and Environmental Governance in Chile: Locked into the Iron Cage of Unsustainability?

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Abstract: This paper sets out to critically examine the New Institutional Framework for Environmental Governance (NIFEG) adopted in Chile through new legislation in 2010. Though nominally progressive in both social and environmental terms, the heavy reliance on bureaucratization as the key means for improving the legitimacy and effectiveness of environmental governance paradoxically appears to result in the reinforcement of the network of dominant interests in this policy domain. As a result, this leads to the canalization of socio-environmental conflicts through public mobilization and judicialization, that is: to the bypassing of political representative institutions. By framing Chile as a laboratory of ecological modernization in a semi-peripheral, extractivist context, and through the theoretical and methodological lens of dramaturgical analysis, this paper looks at discursive processes shaping environmental governance as a result of staged performances. It seeks to explore how the interplay of diverse elements – ranging from material enablers and restrictions to processes of psychological and cultural identification between actors and their audiences – result in the reinforcement of path-dependencies in the way of framing sustainable development within traditional power structures. This results in an “oligarchization” of environmental governance which ultimately translates into further deteriorating environmental trends and raises fundamental questions about the limits of environmental governance alongside the discursive lines of ecological modernization.

Introduction

Throughout the last 30 years until the massive social upheaval which erupted in October 2019, Chile had been regarded as a role model among its Latin American neighbors. This was largely due to its apparent success in emulating the ‘central’ countries in terms of macro-economic performance and institutional stability. This paper will examine how the environmental policy in Chile seems to follow a similarly imitative pattern, from the first General Law of Environment in 1994 to the 2010 legislation enacting what we now refer to as the New Institutional Framework for Environmental Governance (NIFEG). Although the “second generation state reforms”⁴ introduced through this new institutional framework may seem timely and relevant, they have hardly improved the state of the environment in Chile and have rather been met with skepticism and suspicion by civil society, academia, and international organizations. Moreover, since the implementation of NIFEG there has been an escalation of socio-environmental conflicts⁵, resulting in greater mobilization of the citizenry in the form of street protests, acts of civil disobedience, and in increased judicialization (Costa Cordella 2012; Pelfini & Mena 2017), which illustrates the failure of official representative institutions to tackle these important problems affecting the

local population. This paper makes an inquiry into the reasons of this critical imbalance of Chile's environmental governance model. The working hypothesis states that, after an early period of environmental proto-governance in Chile, characterized by a contingency-orientation and low capacity for institutional coordination, the reforms introduced through NIFEG – as well as the 2014 tax reform, the 2016 recycling law, the *Energía 2050* policy, among others – have imprinted a clearer orientation towards “ecological modernization” (EM) to environmental governance. Ecological modernization refers to the restructuring of the capitalist political economy by internalizing environmental problems. The latter is framed as a technical-managerial problem that can be controlled without fundamental changes to political, economic, and social institutions (Adams 2001; Dryzek 2005). Our analysis shows that the intersection of the EM discourse with the socio-historical trajectory of Chile as a semi-peripheral country (including its position as a commodity-exporter in the international division of labor) has produced a re-signification of the contents of the EM discourse, and has resulted in further ‘oligarchization’ of environmental governance; that is, it has reinforced a constellation of power that stabilizes an economic development model which poses a structural threat to socio-ecological sustainability, notwithstanding the implementation of a complex array of environmental institutions, plans and norms. This assertion is consistent with the evolution of the state of the environment in Chile over the last decade. Indeed, while Chile has improved environmental indicators in relation to human health (i.a. access to water, water sanitation, and air quality), almost all indicators referring to ecosystem vitality (i.a. nitrogen use, greenhouse gases emissions, fish stocks overexploitation, tree cover loss, biodiversity, etc.) are set on a negative trend (see Table 1).

Year	Environmental Health			Ecosystem Vitality					
	Health Impacts	Water Sanitation	Air Quality	Waste Water	Bio-diversity	Agri-culture	Tree Cover Loss	Fish Stocks	Climate and Energy
	Risk of Water and Air Pollution to Human Health	Drinking Water Quality	Air Pollution	Waste Water Treatment	Protected Areas and Species	Nitrogen Use		Over-Exploitation of Fishstock	Trend in Carbon Intensity
	Over 90%	Over 90%	Over 75%	Over 90%	Under 75%	Under 75%	Under 50%	Under 50%	Under 50%
	Improve	Improve	Improve	Stability	Improve	Decrease	Stability	Decrease	Stability
2007	95.36	90.97	87.56	94.26	72.90	71.20	36.58	51.68	40.29
2008	95.36	91.36	85.97	94.26	72.23	72.72	36.58	46.60	40.29
2009	95.36	92.02	86.48	94.26	72.11	70.32	36.58	47.58	40.29
2010	95.19	92.03	87.64	94.26	71.64	74.23	36.58	63.75	40.29
2011	95.19	92.24	87.72	94.26	71.34	71.59	36.58	61.74	40.29
2012	95.19	93.19	87.85	94.26	75.19	69.05	36.58	61.00	40.29
2013	95.19	93.18	86.98	94.26	74.92	63.67	36.58	43.15	40.29
2014	96.81	94.25	86.63	94.26	75.19	60.12	36.58	43.78	40.29
2015	96.81	94.14	88.68	94.26	74.90	60.12	36.58	39.19	40.29
2016	96.81	94.47	88.40	94.26	75.15	41.21	36.58	38.20	40.29

Table 1: Tendencies of Environmental Performance Index in Chile (2007-2016)

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the 2016 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) (backcasted score)

Our enquiry starts with the observation that despite obvious differences, both the old and the new environmental governance solutions to socio-ecological conflict and unsustainability rest on a common underlying assumption: environmental governance is mainly a techno-managerial endeavor that can be successfully addressed through improved formalization and institutionalization (Barandiarán 2016, 2018). The corollary of this assumption is that once the adequate institutional infrastructure is in place, whatever problems remain must be the result of a mismatch between design and implementation. Our analysis suggests, in turn, that the problem rather lies in the blind spots of the EM discourse, which become manifest in the very attempt of adapting it to semi-peripheral, extractivist contexts. If the above holds, the analytical focus needs to be redirected from the design-implementation gap towards the EM discourse itself, and to the process of its articulation within the Chilean context. In order to understand how and why a selective appropriation of the EM discourse embodied in NIFEG failed to persuade the citizenry, and why it is unlikely to be successful in dealing with sustainability issues and derived socio-ecological conflicts, this paper introduces a “dramaturgical lens” as a heuristic framework, following Jeffrey Alexander (2004).

The paper is structured as follows: It starts with a diachronic overview of the institutional framework of environmental governance in Chile, followed by an introduction of conceptual key elements of EM and some of its expressions in the Chilean context, focusing on NIFEG. We then introduce the theoretical and methodological framework of dramaturgical analysis, justifying this methodological choice. Subsequently, the dramaturgical framework is applied to the NIFEG case, leading to a brief discussion about its possible interpretations. Finally, we draw some conclusions, drawing on Blühdorn’s (2007) thesis of “simulative politics” about the structural limits of currently prevailing models of environmental governance in Chile, to be explored in further research.

New Institutional Framework for Environmental Governance in Chile

The institutional frameworks of environmental governance in Chile can be traced back to Article 19 of the 1980 Constitution (passed under military dictatorship), which grants every person the right to live in a pollution-free environment (a principle directly imported from the 1972 Stockholm Declaration) and to the stillborn creation of the National Ecology Commission in 1984. However, a more systematic environmental regulation in Chile began only in the 1990s (Carruthers 2001) with Law 19.300 on General Foundations Regarding the Environment, which creates the basis for environmental governance in Chile. Law 19.300 was passed in 1994 during Chile’s transition to democracy and the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Though implementing regulations were not enacted until 1997, this gave way to the creation of the interministerial National Commission for the Environment (CONAMA)⁶ as an organizational branch of the Secretary General to the Presidency of Chile. CONAMA’s mission was to coordinate environmental management among the diverse ministries and programs implementing environment-related policies at the national level and to run the Environmental Impact Assessment Service (SEIA)). As a result, CONAMA had few agenda-setting or executive powers, in a context in which environmental policy remained subject to the imperatives of Chile’s extractive economic model⁷. With the introduction of the first environmental policies, Chile sought to demonstrate its commitment to global efforts to preserve the environment while simultaneously gaining access to international markets protected by environmental regulations, which was a common precondition for signing bilateral Free Trade Agreements since the 1990s. Since 2003, Chile has been particularly pushed to conform to environmental requirements from

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (see OECD's 2005 report on Chile's Environmental Performance), which eventually awarded Chile membership in 2010. The development of environmental policy in Chile thus responds more to exogenous requirements than to internal demands or to domestic policy, leaving the historical constellation of power of the elite class largely unchallenged (Estenssoro & Vásquez 2018; Pelfini & Mena 2017).

Furthermore, Law 19.300 reinforces the commitment of the Chilean government to strong central authority, market-oriented principles, and the authority of technocrats (Tecklin et al. 2011), introducing a kind of "depoliticizing environmental politics" (Barandiarán 2016, 2018). On the one hand, this depoliticization of environmental politics in Chile is based on the primacy of "economic rationality" (i.e., commodification, privatization and deregulation of resource management) and on the other hand it is based on "bureaucratic rationality" (reliance on technocratic assessments for decision-making). Thus, depoliticization did not occur through the exclusion of the state but rather through a strong and centralized executive government authority that preferred "an administrative to a democratic state" (Barandiarán 2016, 2018). Hence, the implementation of administrative tools, rules and regulations (such as laws, environmental standards and procedures) became a self-referential, self-justifying process, dispensing not only with public participation, but often also with sound scientific foundation and advice (Barandiarán 2016, 2018).

Unlike other countries with a more significant tradition in this field (such as in Western Europe), in Chile, environmental policy is essentially reactive in character⁸. Hence, it does not contribute to political agenda-setting, but rather merely plays a consulting role, or else comes in to justify or mitigate the undesirable effects of pre-established agendas linked to productive or extractive investment projects, in line with economic and administrative rationalism. In this sense, environmental policy is subordinated to what is considered a socio-economic priority objective: the full "development" of a country with deep socio-economic inequalities, a problem whose "solution" necessarily involves a sustained and accelerated economic growth based on the exploitation of natural resources.

In addition, a distinctive landmark of the early phase of environmental governance in Chile (from 1990 to 2010) is the centrality of private investment projects as both the main "unit of analysis" and the basic object of all environmental policy, mainly through the Environmental Impact Assessment Service (SEIA). Investment projects are thus the drivers of political decision making, the object of controls and regulations, and the focus of public controversy. There is neither regional or general planning regarding the protection of natural resources or of their surrounding ecosystems (macro level), nor is there significant influence of local public agents at the micro level (Delamaza 2013, Rojas et al. 2003). Rather, public policy is fragmented at the *meso* level of investment projects, and remains centralized in terms of its general orientation, decision-making processes, criteria, and evaluation (Fernández & Salinas 2012). It was only in a second phase of environmental governance in Chile since 2010, that some policies overcame this *meso* scope. A few examples include the 2015 *Energía 2050* policy or the 2016 Framework law for Waste Management, Extended Producer Responsibility, and Recycling Promotion. Yet these remain a command and control type of response that are limited in scope to areas where there are market opportunities, for example in non-conventional renewable energies (which have become competitive with the low prices of solar technologies, mainly from Chinese coal-based industries).

Partly in response to these weaknesses, as well as to local and international pressure and requirements from Chile's expanding export-markets – particularly since its admission to the OECD in 2010 – a second phase in the institutionalization of environmental governance in Chile

began with the passing of a new environmental law in 2009. Three pillar institutions were created through Law 20.417, which amends and introduces new provisions into Law 19.300 as follows: 1) a Ministry of the Environment, with authority to design and implement environmental policies, plans and programs; 2) the Environmental Assessment Service (SEA), which manages the system of environmental impact assessment; and 3) the Environmental Oversight Agency (SMA), which has auditing and disciplinary powers in environmental matters. In addition, a follow-up law (Law 20.600) created the Environmental Courts – special jurisdictional organs whose purpose is resolving environmental disputes within their area of competence and dealing with other environmental matters as instructed by law. An expert considers that “these are to be established outside of the normal judicial system and take the technocratic form of a panel of experts with special jurisdiction over all environmental sanctions. [...] They represent an emphasis on ‘regulating the regulator’” (Tecklin et al. 2011, 892). In this article, we refer to the institutional framework created through Law 20.417 and 20.600 as the New Institutional Framework of Environmental Governance (NIFEG).

Chilean Environmental Governance as Semi-Peripheral Ecological Modernization

The discourse of ecological modernization (EM) has dominated debates on Sustainable Development (SD) over the last three decades (Curran 2018). EM can be framed as opposing a more bureaucratic, hierarchical, and state-centred mode of environmental governance envisioned in the 1970s and 1980s, on the one hand; and a more open and experimental, rights-driven, and civil society-centred conception, on the other (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand 2016). EM, in turn, advocates a flexible, cost-efficient, market-based governance approach, whose distinctive feature is the compatibility (some would even claim the interdependence) of economic growth and environmental protection through the gradual but steady mainstreaming of ecological concerns into social and economic praxis (Mol 2002). This “win-win” rhetoric rests, among other things, on the premise that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation through green regulation, investment, and trade in liberal economic and political settings (Mol 2002). While the EM discourse was initially developed for the analysis of affluent, post-industrial countries, evidence of its adequacy for semi-peripheral contexts is mixed, at best (Adams 2001). The case of Chile offers a particularly interesting laboratory for analyzing the adoption and adaptation of the EM discourse to semi-peripheral contexts. Indeed, research has paradoxically shown that some of the most successful outcomes in terms of technological innovation and material throughput efficiency promised by EM are to be found in countries with a (semi-)authoritarian, centralized governance approach, which contradicts EM assumptions (Tynkkynen 2014; Zhou 2015). Chile represents a case where the actual conditions assumed by EM theory can be verified to a large extent: institutional stability, business-friendly regulation, a political culture prone to imitating patterns from the North, and an economic matrix built around global market demands. This begs the question of how and with what results the EM framework has been assimilated in Chile. In order to answer this question, we use Maarten Hajer’s (2005) heuristic-analytical device checklist to review the central tenets of the EM discourse, and to assess how, whether, and to what extent they are met for the case of Chile:

(1) *Possibility of ‘decoupling’ economic growth from environmental degradation:* being embedded in an extractivist economic matrix and accumulation model (Gudynas 2011), the dominant environmental discourse and policy-approach in Chile completely sidelines the dimension of dematerialization of economic growth, an observation which could be easily generalized for most

semi-peripheral and peripheral countries whose economies depend on commodity exports. Even emblematic efforts such as the lauded Chilean “energy transition” seek to maintain or increase the levels of industrial and household consumption without further consideration of the potential structural socio-ecological impacts of these technological changes.

(2) *Framing of environmental degradation as a problem of collective action to be overcome by coordination and better incentive setting*: this assumption lies at the very core of NIFEG as an intended remedy to socio-ecological problems. Functions and roles are better specified and reallocated. Although citizen participation has been introduced into the institutional design (both in policy design and in environmental assessments), it is strictly limited, controlled, and largely nominal rather than effectively implementable (see Pelfini & Mena 2017). A continuously central role of technocratic experts can be observed in the definition of environmental problems and solutions. The result is a reinforcement of the economic and administrative rationalism in environmental governance.

(3) *Environmental damage should be rendered calculable*, hence allowing for a cost-benefit analysis of environmental pollution. In line with this requirement, the central pillar of NIFEG remains being the environmental impact assessment (EIA), as in the previous regime, thereby tacitly affording private investment initiatives a pivotal role as the cornerstone of the whole environmental policy framework, while bypassing systemic, trans- or non-territorial, and cumulative social and ecological impacts (Parker & Aedo 2021; Rivera 2013). This structural requirement also boosts the role of technocratic experts in providing the evaluation criteria and acceptability standards, thereby *de facto* endowing policy decisions with legitimacy and foreclosing the debate about the ecological merits of the investment project at stake.

(4) *‘Endogenizing’ of environmental costs, whether that is on the level of the firm or in terms of the analysis of macro-economic performance*. The main purpose of EIA is to limit damage to the environment, rather than to push investors to bring environmental costs into their economic calculus. However, it does seek to increase predictability, both for the investors and for other affected parties. Other key elements in the institutional architecture for environmental governance in Chile are the self-regulation of economic actors, voluntary commitments, and public-private partnerships in the spirit of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Arroyo & Suarez 2011; Tironi & Zenteno 2013).

(5) *Firm belief in the potential of technological and social innovation*: this last component in the checklist is probably the most marginal one to the adoption of the EM discourse in Chile. The country has scarcely developed R&D of its own, and is rather a net importer of canned, ready-to-use technologies. Noteworthy exceptions include the gradual adoption of “green” technology in the export-oriented manufacturing sector (e.g., the wine industry—thus complying with prevailing standards in their export-markets) and that the Chilean government prioritize attracting foreign investment to the areas of technology transfer and to the diversification and efficiency of the energy sector (Rindefjäll et al. 2011).

In light of the above observations, it seems clear that Chile has tended to adopt selected features of the EM discourse, while simultaneously embedding it in an extractivist economic matrix. In the spirit of the EM discourse, NIFEG thus reinforces an approach of “procedural legitimation”, in contrast to input or output legitimation (Dingwerth 2007).

In the next section, we will introduce the dramaturgical framework as our main theoretical and

analytical lens, followed by an inquiry into the results of the legitimation strategy just outlined, considering the varied range of stakeholders involved in Chilean environmental governance.

Dramaturgical Analysis: The Staging of NIFEG

Methodological Background

Drawing on the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the role of the dramaturgy of social and political processes in the dynamics of discursive change (Alexander 2004, 2011; Hajer 2005). J.C. Alexander extended the dramaturgical approach beyond the original focus of symbolic interactionism on the analysis of micro-level interactions to elaborate a fully-fledged macro-sociological theory of social action as cultural performance. By conceiving of social action as drama, the usual black-boxed articulation of particular discursive instantiations with the general discursive structures in a given society are foregrounded. The unit of analysis is no longer the discourse itself, but rather the *contingent performance* through which a given discourse is (re)produced or transformed in its cultural and material context. By placing relatively greater emphasis on changing the settings, framings, cultural background assumptions, various *dramatis personae* in the play, and the actual staging of discourses (*mise-en-scène*); dramaturgical analysis would help us to “infer under what conditions a variety of people and voices emerge (or do not) in the political discussions, how the variety of contributions can be related to one another in a meaningful way, and under what conditions such statements can be made with influence” on the actual political processes (Hajer 2005, 630–631). With the purpose of identifying discrete factors with relatively greater explanatory weight, numerous analysts have varyingly placed attention on particular elements of socio-political dramaturgies, alternatively emphasizing the staging process and the institutional setting (Hajer 2005; Risse 2004), the external constraints of the performance (Alexander, 2011), or else the combined effect of the various elements (Alexander 2004). In this article, we deal with an attempt at implementing an “extractivist-friendly” version of the Ecological Modernization discourse in Chile. As indicated in the review of the background of governance for sustainability in Chile, NIFEG was indeed “staged” as a win-win development intended at satisfying both international political and market requirements and a population increasingly marked by socio-environmental conflicts. A dramaturgical lens seemed thus more adequate than a conventional discourse-analysis approach to explore the dynamics of the ‘marketing’ of NIFEG in its symbolic, material and contextual complexities. Figure 1 below synthesizes the key analytical categories of Alexander’s heuristic framework and their interrelations.

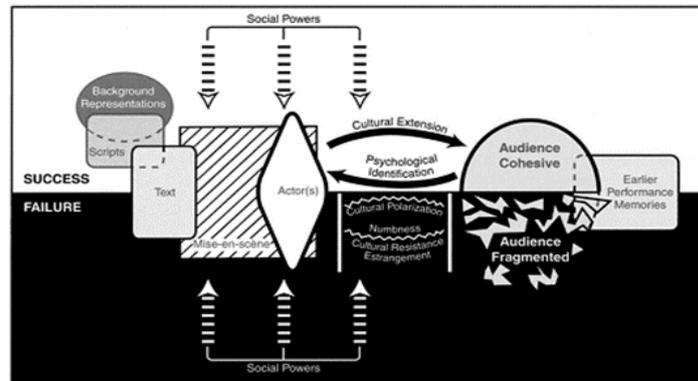


Figure 1: *Dramaturgical Model by J.C. Alexander*

Notes: The upper white area indicates factors and processes leading to the success of the performance, while the black area below displays constraining factors and disruptive processes leading to performance failure.

Source: Alexander 2004

Data

The data used for the analysis stem from secondary sources: a corpus of legal and policy documents related to NIFEG, as well as their respective official communications (available through Chile's Congressional Library: www.leychile.cl). Specifically, we use two legislative corpora: the general environmental framework law (Law 19.300) and its reform (Law 20.417 and Law 20.600). We also use a corpus of laws passed after the creation of the Ministry of the Environment: Tax reform (Law 20.780), the framework for waste management, and the extended responsibility of the producer and recycling (Law 20.920). In addition, we analyzed policy documents available at the digital federal library (<https://biblioteca.digital.gob.cl/>), and more specifically, the energy policy (*Energía 2050*) and the new forestry policy (*Política Forestal 2015-2035*). Finally, we drew on a set of thirty selected scientific articles about environmental governance in Chile. All the data was coded with ATLAS.ti using the analytical categories above from Figure 1.

Analysis

According to Hajer (2005, 631), the staging process or *mise-en-scène* “refers to the deliberate organization of an interaction, drawing on existing symbols [in Alexander: background representations] and the invention of new ones, as well as on the distinction between active players and (presumably passive) audiences”. The *script* to be staged, in this case, is NIFEG itself, as the institutionalized form of a particular discursive pattern which we have found to resemble that of ecological modernization. Next, we proceed to describe the NIFEG performance in terms of the categories in Figure 1.

Following the EM discourse, the NIFEG script implicitly locates the root of environmental problems in a ‘modernization deficit’, which, according to our data, presents two salient features. First, in the economic arena, it represents an opportunity for a new round of ‘green’ growth via increased foreign investment, trade and energy efficiency. This resounds positively with the *background self-representation* of Chileans (as judged by their political and economic elites, at least), as a country successfully following in the steps of the ‘North’ in the ‘development-ladder’. Secondly, NIFEG is presented as a substantial institutional ‘upgrade’ putting Chile at the *avantgarde*

of environmental governance in the region (Madariaga 2019). Here NIFEG performatively ‘profits’ from the widely recognized failure of the previous bandwagoning scheme of inter-ministerial coordination built around CONAMA (National Commission for the Environment). This contextual effect on the audiences’ receptiveness has been conceptualized by both Alexander (2004) as the *memory of earlier performances*, and by Garfinkel (1981; cited in Hajer 2005), who coined the idea of ‘contrast space’. Below this layer of contrast, however, NIFEG simultaneously re-asserts a fetish of Chilean political culture, namely, the fixation with formal institutionalization as a ‘silver bullet’ (i.e. the assumption that once the adequate institutional infrastructure is in place, whatever problems remain are the result of a mismatch or deficit in articulation between institutions and praxis (Araujo 2016). Hence, the planning and policy-formulation processes are chiefly an exercise in technical optimization, rather than an open political process of democratic articulation of diverse interests and views (Barandiarán 2016, 2018; Risley 2014).

Tensions notwithstanding, insofar as the (foregrounded) NIFEG script builds on the aforementioned (background) cultural representations, it is endowed with ‘narrative plausibility’ (Eder 2006). This explains in part the adoption of the EM discourse – epitomized by NIFEG – in the context of Chilean environmental governance. The NIFEG script is not simply ‘more (and better) of the same’; it also brings in *new actors* or characters into the play and provides them with new distinctive cues for appropriate behavior. Let us enquire into these categories in more detail.

Regarding the cast⁹, the scripting of NIFEG tacitly foresees a leading role for private investors, normally large transnational corporations, which are seen as the engine of Chile’s development through large-scale extractive projects. This mainly includes copper mining, but also large-scale hydropower projects, and, more recently, non-conventional renewable energy power plants, as well as big national companies (mainly in the forestry and fishery sector, but also in agriculture and fruticulture). In terms of the Greimas-actants model (Greimas 1973), the private investor would be the *hero* of the story under the NIFEG market-enabling model (Tecklin et al. 2011). The state, on the other hand, is prevented by the constitution (passed during under military rule in 1980) from taking any form of initiative in the economic field, so its role is limited to guaranteeing the rules of the game and minimizing the necessary ‘collateral damage’ of the developmental process. As we see in the NIFEG script, however, the state has an empowered role compared to the previous regime, playing the Greimas-role of the *sender*, who exercises a certain degree of control over the situation and commissions the hero with a mission, apart from endowing her/him/ with auxiliary powers to carry it out. A third relevant actor in this script is the *technocratic experts* (think tanks, scientific advisory bodies and agencies of environmental impact assessment) who perform a dual role: on the one hand, they play the role of watchdogs against environmentally or health-damaging economic activities, and, on the other hand, experts can be conceived of as Greimas’ *helpers* insofar as they endow both policy actors and private investors with the key resource of procedural and technical legitimacy (Parker 2015), which is indispensable to bring political debates about the desirability or convenience of a given initiative to a clean and rapid closure.

In addition, there is a fourth, more diffuse agent strongly influencing the performance, which cannot however be assigned any scripted role in the NIFEG-plot but can in turn be rendered visible through the identification of ‘black boxed’ themes. A case in point is the prevalence over time of legal constraints dating back to dictatorial times, as in the case of the outdated constitutional prohibition of state intervention in economic activity (Garretón & Garretón 2010), which is indicative of the presence of *social powers* exogenously constraining the *mise-en-scène* (Alexander 2004).

Let us now turn to the *audience*, which is in principle constituted by whomever is sought to be persuaded by the performance, and thus is required to validate and subscribe to the cultural meanings it conveys and the courses of action these meanings suggest or imply. From our analysis, we identify three distinct audiences for the NIA-performance: foreign, domestic and private investors. First, a *foreign audience*, made up mainly by (potential) export markets, by foreign companies operating in Chile, and by decision-makers in the international arena. As Tecklin et al. (2011, 890) highlight, in Chile the “environmental regime has also functioned to enhance the competitiveness of Chilean exporters in terms of attracting investment, securing credit, and maintaining or opening markets; foreign investment accelerated following passage of the [NIFEG]”. Indeed, the reform of environmental politics sought to respond to the requirements of two important international partners: first, a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States in 2003, and, secondly, the OECD, to which Chile submitted formal candidacy that same year. The expectations from this audience are to see discursive allegiance and compliance of standards in a range of economic and sustainability issues along the discursive lines of EM. Foreign investors will be considered a different audience for reasons explained below. Secondly, there is a *domestic audience*, which refers to the Chilean national public sphere, although specific population groups – especially those most directly affected by socio-environmental conflicts – constitute particularly relevant sub-audiences. The expectations of the Chilean citizenry are manifold and can often be contradictory: the ‘pristine character of the Chilean Patagonia’ should be preserved, and citizen and minority rights respected, yet only insofar as the maintenance of current employment and consumption perspectives are not threatened. As a third type of audience, we identify *private investors* (both foreign and domestic). Their main interest resides in one particular public good: the preservation of a stable legal and institutional framework (read: predictable but also business-friendly rules of the game, where no unforeseen obstacles will come in the way of planned extractive projects and derived returns on investment). Companies sometimes do show themselves open to accept strict regulations, provided that they are stable and coherent both in design and in implementation.

The question remains how successful NIFEG is proving to be in articulating the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations of these distinct audiences. We engage with this question in the next section.

Assessment of the NIFEG-Performance

As the expectations and demands of the distinct audiences differ, so does their assessment of the performative success of NIFEG. Let us thus focus on the diverse audiences separately.

It should come as no surprise that international audiences have hailed NIFEG as a significant progress-marker, since the whole process of environmental governance in Chile has an exogenous rather than an endogenous genesis – it was ‘pushed’, as it were, by the ‘forces of globalization’. Carriers have typically been international companies introducing to Chile the environmental standards in practice in their countries of origin. Additionally one can count international organizations overseeing the conservation of global public goods and the export markets of Chile with their own commercial and consumer regulations, as rightly predicted by EM theory (Mol 2002). The admission of Chile as a full OECD member in 2010, soon after the Chilean congress passed Law 20.417 establishing NIFEG, is indicative of the performative success of this new framework in the eyes of foreign audiences as well as the designation of Chile as host country for the COP25 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change summit. Moreover, recent policies such as *Energía 2050*, the tax reform, or the recycling law are viewed as very progressive not only in Chile, but

also internationally.

Regarding domestic audiences, the participation of the Chilean environmental movement and organized civil society in agenda-setting debates remains marginal (Carruthers 2001). However, since the 2004 disaster in Río Cruces, Valdivia, “internal environmental demands” started to become driving forces (Sepúlveda & Villarroel 2012) and directly criticize the Chilean development model and its collateral damages. Another milestone in the articulation of a strong criticism from civil society was the 2011 massive citizens’ protest against a large-scale hydroelectric power plant development project (Hydro Aysén) planned for one of the most pristine spots in the Chilean Patagonia. As with the disaster of Río Cruces, the criticisms went far beyond just environmental concerns to further encompass the Chilean energy policy and linking both to a deeply unsustainable extractive and accumulation model (Pérez 2013).

The NIFEG, however, remains alien to these trends and firmly anchored in a fixed statutory-based frame of problem-definition and problem-solving, which has “produced their own dramaturgy, one in which the *dramatis personae* is well known and [in which] the different actors play their roles from a generally known script” (Hajer 2005, 642). Meanwhile, new questions have started to permeate the public sphere, showing evidence of a social learning process that develops parallel to institutional frameworks, whose *stage* are the streets and the media, and in many cases the courts, where social disputes and tensions are depoliticized through judicialization and bureaucratization.

Regarding the third type of audience identified, i.e., foreign or national private investors, their reaction to NIFEG seems rather ambivalent: on the one hand, they do tend to assess NIFEG as an improvement on the previous, overly lax institutional framework, but, on the other hand, they regard the deficits in implementation – as judged by the increased conflict levels – as a disappointment. The problem-framing emphasizes the gap between design and implementation and thus appears here, once again, reinforced.

To summarize, we can see the audience in the NIFEG-performance split as follows: the OECD and other representatives from the foreign audience can be metaphorically seen as watching only the first act of the play from the foyer of the theater, dubbing all points in their check-list, before moving on to the next theater (Olivares 2010), while the other two types of audiences are more committed and deprived of exit-options.

According to the hypothesis of a dramaturgical rupture between the citizenry and the elites in Chile in recent years (Ruiz 2016), the public at large seems to perceive NIFEG as a ‘theatrical performance’ in the pejorative sense, because it is understood as a way of seeking to deceitfully increase the social legitimacy of a political model that continues to marginalize alternative voices and does not lend ears to more substantial questions emerging about the prevalent economic model in Chile, its ecological and distributional aspects (Castro et al. 2016; Sepúlveda & Rojas 2010). One could say that the issue at stake is the discursive underpinning of NIFEG, or, in metaphorical terms, its ‘dramaturgical genre’. Since 2011 and not only and mainly regarding environmental politics, it is still controversial for the citizenry to merely want ‘a little more’ participation and ‘a little more’ transparency or a different genre (Bowen et al. 2012; Mayol 2012), as became dramatically apparent with the recent social upheaval since October 2019. Hence, the performance failure is perhaps not attributable so much to this specific play (i.e., NIFEG) or to this performance in particular, as it is to the genre it embodies, that is, to the discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) upon which it draws from. In this sense, the selective EM embodied

by NIFEG has not been able to achieve a persuasive ‘re-fusion’ of the relevant elements in the performance (Alexander 2004).

For their part, the investors initially showed themselves favorable to NIFEG (i.e., they approved of the script), but throughout the course of the performance, skepticism began to grow: in practice, their goals are not being met (*mise-en-scène* failure). This increases uncertainty. As a consequence, the judiciary and the direct self-expression of the citizenry through protest are given a relevant, unforeseen part among the cast, and this form of conflict management renders calculations more difficult.

In conclusion, for all three audiences, it can be said that NIFEG has failed to generate ‘dramaturgical loyalty’ (Benford & Hunt 1992, cited in Hajer 2005), therefore leading to a failed performance (with the possible exception of disengaged foreign audiences with a shallow insight into the drama). The ultimate expression of this clash between the mutually excluding foreign and domestic appreciations of the NIFEG-performance was arguably the forced relocation of the COP25 climate summit from Santiago to Madrid in late November 2019, in the wake of an unprecedented social upheaval across the Andean country. Chile’s elites had been hoping to present themselves to the world as the “new Eldorado for green energy”, and as an exemplary EM apprentice, yet this hopeful vision suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed under the weight of social tensions. This dramaturgical analysis contributes to exposing part of the reasons behind this collapse.

Discussion and Conclusions

NIFEG built on the previous institutional infrastructure for environmental governance in Chile, with both institutional frameworks being conceived on the basis of a common, unquestioned assumption. This results in path-dependent problem-framing, namely: that sustainable development is a matter of adequate technocratic management under an overarching economic rationalism, as a result of which all observed deficiencies must be attributed to a gap between design and implementation. On the contrary, our analysis suggests that – apart from and beyond the design-implementation gap – the NIFEG-script failed to profit from the symbolic yields of EM as a discourse associated with the prosperity of advanced capitalist liberal democracies. Our research hypothesis involved the idea of a re-signification of the contents of the EM discourse as a result of its intersection with Chile’s socio-historical trajectory, including its position as a commodity-exporter in the international division of labor, as well as its early adoption of strong neoliberal principles. Such re-signification, our data suggest, had a strong impact in the symbolic performativity of the EM discourse, meaning that what might otherwise have been perceived as progressive reforms were instead largely perceived as attempts to slow down, control, and co-opt a profound, ongoing re-politization process in Chilean society.

Indeed, the most striking insight that the dramaturgical analysis of NIFEG in Chile reveals is that EM served as an (unsuccessful) *political* legitimation device for the state vis-à-vis its various audiences with stakes in environmental governance. While international bureaucracies welcomed the NIFEG package (see for example the last report of environmental evaluation of the OECD 2015), at the national level, large parts of the citizenry rejected it as foreclosing a *political* debate (rather than a merely *techno-managerial* one) seen as timely and necessary regarding Chile’s development model and its socio-environmental consequences (Rungruangsakorn 2021).

These findings from the dramaturgical analysis of NIFEG can be interpreted in various, even competing ways. One possible reading would be to see the described developments in Chile as the corrective mechanism set in motion by emancipatory forces within civil society to smooth out the flaws of the established economic and societal project, thus driving its self-stabilization and self-improvement over time (Tironi 2014). Such explanation would be, to an extent at least, consistent with the presuppositions of EM theory itself, even if this implies rejecting its own theoretical predictions and normative prescriptions. Although we do not fundamentally oppose such interpretation, we find merit in theoretical approaches that mistrust the emancipatory quality of civic resistance at face value. Ingolfur Blühdorn's (2007) thesis of *simulative politics* is a particularly insightful case in point. Viewing the case of Chile through this lens, one would have to conclude that the fragmented and contradictory character of stakeholders' interests in trying to reconcile ecological sustainability and extractivism presents the political system with a possibly insurmountable challenge. As a result, in their demands and promises of effective action, respectively, both the political leadership and their constituents tacitly collaborate, consciously or not, in a 'performance of seriousness'. However, 'actually getting serious' would have radical implications that no one seems ready to confront (say, a reduction in consumption on the part of upper and raising middle classes, and a cut in profit levels on the part of transnational companies). Therefore, the shared, unspoken expectation – by both NIFEG supporters and detractors – is that such 'seriousness' never actually materializes beyond the boundaries of the discursive stage where the tragicomedy of 'saving the planet' is being performed. If this holds, then such 'simulative politics' has to be understood not as a dysfunction of the political system, but rather as a *necessary* replacement of effective action (Blühdorn 2007; York et al. 2010). Indeed, such replacement can hardly be attributed (only) to deceptive behavior on the part of political and economic elites in order to pursue a secret agenda, or else to delay the 'inconvenient' or uncomfortable consequences of effective action. The matter is rather one of insurmountable structural constraints, which commit techno-managerial environmental governance approaches to inevitably hit the barriers pointed out by stronger conceptions of social and ecological sustainability.¹⁰ Strong sustainability approaches have long pointed out the "blind spots" of EM, which can be grouped into at least three categories. First, research on EM on a global scale has focused primarily on institution-building and the dissemination and harmonization of standards, norms, and practices, but has largely neglected material flows and throughput analysis (Beling, forthcoming). Secondly, EM ignores structural socio-economic and cultural restrictions to the "centripetal movement of ecological interests" (Mol 2002), in this case mainly the extractivist matrix of economic development in Chile, as well as the generalization of unsustainable modes of life in upper and middle classes (Brand & Wissen 2017). Thirdly, EM downplays the socio-political dimension beyond institutional-technocratic processes (passions, political humor, variable and contradictory demands, etc.), and assumes civic activism and democratic arrangements to be emancipatory per se. Additionally, it presupposes the state to be *de facto* a capable and willing guarantor of the common good (Blühdorn 2007). These assumptions entail a conflation of normative and descriptive accounts regarding democracy and governance.

When looking at the Chilean case from this perspective, the selective adoption of elements from the ecological modernization discourse, adapted to semi-peripheral contexts under the guise of NIFEG, largely amounts to a theatrical façade and simulative politics. Yet at the same time it also becomes clear that it *cannot be anything but a simulation*: ecological modernization cannot deliver what it promises, at least not without confronting the ideational and material pillars of the current world order and dominant culture, where central countries and population groups (i.e. the rapidly expanding global consumer class) increasingly depend on the exploitation of labor and on the destruction of nature in the (semi)periphery in order to sustain their unsustainable, inherently

non-generalizable way of life (Brand & Wissen 2017). Simulative (pseudo-) environmental politics would thus be the self-delusional strategy of societies in the early 21st century that manage to sustain what is known to be unsustainable (Blühdorn 2007). This insight also has substantial implications regarding the expectations we can reasonably have about the role of states – but also of the private sector and civil society, as well as individual citizens and consumers – in implementing an effective environmental governance. The thesis of simulative politics thus offers an unconventional yet potentially insightful vantage point worth considering when framing research questions on ecopolitical developments, particularly (but not only) when analyzing Center-Periphery implications. Whether current eco-political processes mirror nothing but self-delusion at the societal level, as Blühdorn suggests, or whether they will create new room for radical collective learning processes to unfold and steer societal transformations towards socio-ecological sustainability, is a matter to be empirically verified over the coming years.

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⁴After a comprehensive wave of privatizations, decentralization, and deregulation in the spirit of the Washington Consensus to the benefit of markets throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was a slight tendency to develop more open public institutions, in response to the demands for greater democratization and social justice, which are referred to as "second-generation" reforms in Latin-America (Brito 2003; Cunill Grau 1999).

⁵For detailed information about environmental conflict in Chile, see the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (www.olca.cl), and the report of the National Institute of Human Rights (INDH, <https://mapaconflictos.indh.cl/#/>)

⁶Spanish acronym for 'National Commission for the Environment'.

⁷This context is typified by the so-called 'Frei doctrine', a deliberate subordination of the demands of sustainability and environmental regulation to the imperatives of an extractive economic model oriented to the export of raw materials (Pelfini & Mena 2017; Sepúlveda & Villarroel 2012).

⁸This is clearly visible in some of the emblematic environmental crises in Chile, such as the 2004 poisoning in Valdivia's Río Cruces, the Pascua-Lama mining conflict, the 2007 ISA Virus crisis (which decimated the Chilean salmon industry), and the chronic air, soil and water pollution of the Puchuncavi-Ventanas "sacrifice zone".

⁹In the context of a dramaturgy, the term 'actor' designates the diverse characters in a play that perform the script or plot in front of an audience – the collection of which is known as the 'cast' of a play.

¹⁰On a recent case of political influence of economic elites around the avocado boom, see Madariaga et al. 2021.

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