

Contested Underground Water Territories: Law, Knowledges, and Social Movements against Agribusiness in Yucatán, Mexico

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With the current global water crisis, growing competition for hydric resources, and climate change, underground water is becoming more relevant for securing life, and there is an urgent need to better understand it. This project attempts to analyze underground water conflicts by understanding the different hydrosocial territories that are being coproduced by space, law, and science in these aquifers. By focusing on the legal aspect of hydrosocial territories, formed by the social, natural, and political (Boelens et al 2016), this research aims to unpack the relationships between water and justice.

The research centers on the different imaginaries of water crafted by stakeholders—companies, rural communities, scientists, authorities, and lawyers—in relation to justice, development, and risk. More specifically, the research will analyze how different actors involved in water and territorial conflicts understand underground aquifers (meanings), create knowledge to support their claims (knowing) and advance their claims, through accommodation, negotiation, resistance, and the use of law (doings). The objective of the research is to contribute to the analysis of how situated imaginaries of rural development and actions for advancing them can successfully seek environmental justice.

Yucatán, Mexico, is a particularly appropriate case for this work. Pork production in the Yucatán region has risen by 39% from 2016 to 2018, and in 2020 there were more than 410 pig farms in the region (Greenpeace 2021). Homun is located at the center of the state natural reserve of the Ring of Cenotes, a geomorphological formation of 180 km with multiple natural and millennial sinkholes, caves, and depressions connecting water and land. Homun is also the first Mayan community to present a lawsuit against a 49,000 pig Concentrated Animal Feeding Facility (CAFO) in Yucatán. Under the menace of the industrial grain–oilseed–livestock complex (Weis 2013), the Ring of Cenotes is being re(created) as a vulnerable aquifer that needs protection due to its environmental, social, economic, and cultural value.

To think about water and territorial justice, the research will use three main schools of thought. First, it will combine different perspectives of political ecology on the concept of territory, including hydrosocial territories, territorial movements, and body/territory. Second, it will use legal geography with a particular focus on lively legalities (Braveman 2015), critical human rights, and legal pluralism to understand the relationship between law and space. Finally, it will use meat geographies to understand CAFOs biopolitics (Emel and Neo 2015).

During my Landhaus fellowship, I will write two articles. The first article will explore the hydrosocial territorialities of the Ring of Cenotes. The article will analyze the interactions between knowledges, law, and narratives used inside and outside the court. It will look at how different narratives and evidence can be used to present alternative views of aquifers. The second article will use legal geographies to explore the current debate about human rights and the possibilities of using law for protecting nature. Specifically, it will explore how the right of nature to recognize cenotes as direct subjects of protection opens questions of representation. In short, this project analyzes how legal institutions are being used and by whom, to validate or invalidate different hydrosocial territorialities.