People help the people:

A critical discourse analysis of NGO activism against water privatisation in El Salvador

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Abstract

This thesis concerns itself with the current state of water activism in El Salvador. For 20 years the topic has been a point of conflict for the nation, with both wins and losses for the water activists. The previous academic research into this consists of ethnographic studies. However, not much has been done to discuss this topic through discourse analysis, and so this is what has been done here. The lens of critical discourse analysis enlightens some of the challenges that the activists face, as well as the power relations behind them. Through three semi-structured interviews, the experiences of Salvadoran water activists are examined. The results from those interviews shine a light on the current state of the discourse they are a part of, as well as the discourse they are fighting against. There is still prevalent prosecution of activist NGOs and a lot of criticism and ridicule of activists from the government and its supporters. Despite this, the interviewees all expressed their reasons for continuing in their activism as majorly attributed to the solidarity they feel about it. Thus, it remains important to keep an eye on the fight for water in El Salvador, and to learn from their experiences how important it is to prioritise the environment.

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Introduction:

Water is an essential condition for life, and a necessity no matter where or who you are. The sixth of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) put forward by the United Nations aims to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all". In their latest progress report, they also highlight that the world is currently not making enough headway on this SDG, and that drastic changes are needed if the goal is to be reached by 2030 (E/2021/58: 12). Thus, investigating the politics and power dynamics around the issue of water becomes an important endeavour. For this thesis I will be writing about climate activism relating specifically to water privatisation in El Salvador, which is a notion that has received a lot of attention and opposition for a number of years now. The topic has been debated nationwide, since the early 2000's, and has led to an activist victory for El Salvador in 2017, where a year-long legal fight against the mining company OceanaGold, ended with the Salvadoran court deeming their treatment of the water they had privatised to be environmentally and socially damaging (Broad & Cavanagh, 2021). In the light of this, and with the latest election wielding previously unseen results, I am interested in how the fight continues, and what challenges the water activists are still facing, in what on the surface may appear to be a closed case of positive improvements. I am interested in the subject of the Salvadoran climate activist and their own self-perception of their experiences with climate activism. I also want to investigate the manners in which this can inform researchers about the current climate discourse of their context. The overarching aim of my thesis is to investigate the subject position of the climate activist in El Salvador, and the possibilities and limitations of the environmental discourse they exist within. Specifically, I will base my research on activism regarding water privatization and the resistance that has arisen to these initiatives from the state and the big-business companies, advocating for privatisation of water.

I first became aware of the ongoing fight against the privatisation of water in El Salvador when I visited the country in august of 2018 and stayed with a local NGO – Plataforma Global (or Global Platform El Salvador in English, abbreviated to GPES), as part of a volunteer project I did that year. Internationally Plataforma Global is connected via the organisation ActionAid. In Denmark it is directly connected to Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke, which was the organisation I was volunteering for at the time of my travel. Plataforma Global does activism in a lot of different areas (although, as argued by the members themselves: they are interconnected). All of it made a deep

impression on me, but the way they discussed the environmental issues the country deals with, especially caught my attention. It is a topic I have continued to pay attention to since my visit there, and I have often thought about the people I met, who were directly affected by this societal struggle. It is for this reason that I have felt motivated to write my thesis on this topic.

Research questions:

The research questions for this thesis are:

> *What challenges do Salvadoran water activists perceive themselves encountering in their activism against water privatisation and how do these affect their manner of activism?*

> *What can the experiences of Salvadoran water activists say about the climate change discourse they exist within?*

My study will relate to the field of human ecology in several ways. The topic of climate activism is deeply connected with the concept of natural resource management and environmental justice. When the specific case is about taking action to protect and defend the right to water, we are even dealing with an important condition for sustaining life. In El Salvador, the discourse about that resource is closely in conjunction with the socioeconomic situation of the nation. A possible point to make is how water resource management contributes to inequality in the Salvadoran society, and what role the activist plays in mitigating this phenomenon. In a societal system order is maintained through communication and social interactions (Steiner, 2016: 21). As human ecologists have extrapolated on many times, such systems are also maintained through the material conditions and the energy flow. In this case, this aspect of the Salvadoran structures can be expressed through the water-energy-food nexus, which encompasses the connection between water, food and energy resources and the way these are consumed (Feldman, 2017). However, this interrelation of production and consumption of resources is also affected by the political context of the globalised world. For this reason, in this study I want to focus on these cultural systems and attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the structure that Salvadorian climate activists are surrounded by, and how it affects their manner of activism. This thesis will also be directly concerned with the power structures of a politically institutional exercising of control over the

ecological system for economic gains (Steiner, 2016: 22). Throughout I will also aim for self-awareness of how this thesis itself will contribute to the water discourse in El Salvador.

Firstly, I will be going over the contextual historical background of El Salvador, to further the understanding of the state of water politics in the country today. Following this I will discuss the theory I am going to use, expanding on the Foucauldian framework and discourse analysis, leading into my discussion of that as a method. I will touch upon my selection of interviewees and ethical considerations, as well as how I will proceed in the analysis. As I am doing a critical discourse analysis, there will first be a description of the content of my interviews, followed by an interpretational and explanatory section. This will enable me to close off with the conclusions I have reached.

Background

In the following part I will outline the political context for El Salvador from the end of the country's civil war up until now. I will also briefly summarise the global state of water politics, and the Salvadoran state of water politics.

El Salvador

Post-civil war (which lasted 1979-1992) the nation experienced twenty years of Arena, the right-wing party as government. This lasted until 2009 when Arena lost the national election. El Salvador then had two terms of the left-wing party Farabundo Martí Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in government but continued to experience the societal issues the voters had felt fed up with under Arena-governing. The two parties have long been considered the only possibilities in the Salvadoran political landscape. That is until the latest election, where Nuevas Ideas won by a large margin. They are still in government now with the president and founder Nayib Bukele as their leader. Nuevas Ideas have held parliamentary power since 2019.

Water politics:

As mentioned earlier, water is considered a human right. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated in 2002 that "...everyone is entitled to safe and acceptable water for personal and domestic use" (E/C. 12/2002/11). The way that access is managed and governed is however contested and happens in rather different ways across the world. Big corporations have over the years managed to secure themselves water rights over local areas all over the world (Feldman, 2017: 8). Usually resistance to this is fruitless, because big businesses bring economic growth for places where there may be high percentages of unemployed citizens. Efforts to privatise water is often regarded as an attempt to commodify water - to turn it from a public service providing for a need and a human right into something that benefits the providers of water above everyone else (Feldman, 2017: 37). Privatisation as with any capitalist apparatus promotes water consumption over water preservation (Shiva, 1988: 43). As such it becomes an unsustainable practice on an ecological level, apart from its socially exploitative aspects. Politics on water are important because they are shaped by the people who at a given time are in a position to exercise power of the water available to them (Feldman, 2017: 123). There are many factors that affect how that power is distributed and what is done with it, such as gender, ethnicity or economic and spatial conditions (Feldman, 2017: 206). In order to have inclusive water management, where every societal group's needs are met, these factors must be understood to be socially constructed (Feldman, 2017: 208). For this reason, it becomes important to ensure that every voice is heard in decision making about water policies. Every group that is affected by the water politics in question should be a part of the management processes surrounding the issue (Feldman, 2017: 195-196). In El Salvador, the topic of water privatisation has been debated numerous times since the end of the civil war. There has been a tradition of letting corporations control the water resource, and the overexploitation of it has hit rural communities most harshly, resulting in days or weeks without access to water for parts of the country's population. However there has also consistently been resistance against these happenings, and push for legislative reforms. A recent major victory on that front, was the 2017 declaration of water as a human right being written into the Salvadoran constitution, and certain mining that was damaging the natural resources being halted. However, there is still dissatisfaction among the Salvadoran people, as

there are many other companies controlling the water access, as well as violence against and prosecution of the water activists.

Theory

I am doing this research using a Foucauldian framework. In a Foucauldian framework, power is a driving force in the production of subject positions as well as the possible agency of said positions. Foucault states that there are no power relations that exists without instances of resistance, and that resistances in fact arise specifically where power is exercised (Foucault, 1978: 95). Because of this, power can be said to be productive, meaning that the hegemonic power will influence how knowledge is produced and thus how a topic is understood.

Discourse as defined by Foucault consists of a collection of statements which determines certain conditions of existence (Jørgensen & Phillps, 2002: 13). The discourse will be the deciding factor for what thoughts it will be possible to think and express, in a way that is considered meaningful (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 6) In short, the discourse is a judge for what is hegemonically considered to be true and what is considered to be false, in a specific historical context (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 5). Because of these established truth regimes, we are constantly self-regulating our behaviours, and limited by what we are capable of perceiving as possible actions to take. A key tool for analysing the power relations of a discourse is the power/knowledge concept, in which it is understood that the knowledge produced is reflective of the power structures in a discourse, and especially of the hegemonic voices at play (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 13).

In Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) power is described as circular, meaning that it is not exclusively a top-down phenomenon, where only the hegemony is a deciding factor. Power is present in all social practices. Therefore, all power can be considered productive and is influenced by the knowledge production that happens in and about a discourse. Because of the circular nature of power, the discourses will be what shapes and creates the limits and possibilities for subject positions within it (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 63). When talking about a Foucauldian understanding of power and power relations, it also becomes relevant to discuss the production of subject positions. When using the term 'subject position' I am referring to the understanding of socially constructed limitations and opportunities for how a certain individual or group can behave,

which is produced through discourse (Hall, 1997: 56). When confronted with the legislative power of a nation's law, the subject becomes the one who follows said law (Foucault, 1978: 85). It is an instance of exercising power and submitting to that power. The subject is defined by the conditions of the disciplinary power. In relation to discourse analysis, subject positions can also be understood as the particular way a discourse is best comprehended.

To understand a discourse, we must inherently acknowledge the regulations and power relations of said discourse. Therefore, a discourse will always have a subject position that enables it to be understandable (Hall, 1997: 56). This is relevant theory both on an analytical level, when discussing the actual data, but also for my own position as a researcher. I am bound to interpret my empirical findings through the filter of the discourse that I myself exist within. It is important to keep in mind how my personal perspective and preconceived perceptions might colour the text I am producing, and to critically reflect on this as I go along in the process of the project. Epistemologically discourse analysis takes an interpretivist standpoint, typical for qualitative research (Bryman, 2016: 375). In interpretivism the main focus of research is on gaining a better understanding of the social world through understanding of the people living in it and practicing certain behaviours. Discourse analysis investigates prevalent patterns in the social interactions from a constructivist perspective, where the foundational understanding is that the social practices of people produce meaning (Bryman, 2016: 580, Hall, 1997: 3).

It is also important to me to connect as much as possible back to a feminist approach, and I always do my work and writing from the assumption that it is always at least somewhat applicable and always an improvement to a study, to include such considerations and reasonings. For me it means that feminist theory has given me values that affect the voices I am interested in bringing forth in academic spaces (Bryman, 2016: 446). In this case I personally feel a lack of representation of Latin American perspectives in academic discussions, and in this thesis, I strive to bring some of those forth. In relation to this, I will likewise attempt to keep a holistic view of my findings and strive to understand the data in a larger context (Steiner, 2016: 36).

In Fairclough's theory of Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse is approached in a three-dimensional model. The first dimension is the textual, where the text itself is examined. Here, as in all discourse analysis, 'text' is not necessarily taken to mean a written text but encompasses all

forms of communication - in other words, it is the 'knowledge' of power/knowledge. The second dimension revolves around discursive practices, namely production, distribution and consumption of knowledge. The third dimension is of social practice, and the way power can be traced in them (Fairclough, 2006).

Choosing this specific framework is a deliberate choice, because the previous research (sparse as it may be) on this topic is largely in the form of ethnographic studies, and often with a focus on the mining companies' effect on El Salvador. Most notably is Broad & Cavanagh's *The Water Defenders* (2021) - a ten year long ethnographic research project into how El Salvador became the first country to ban metal-mining completely. However, the issue of water justice is larger than mining companies alone and it is still happening, in a new political playfield. Thus, I am of the opinion that a different analytical and methodological framework can bring to light new aspects, and new knowledge about the water activists.

Method:

I have collected my data through three semi-structured interviews. I have chosen this as my method mainly because of the flexibility it allows in the interview situation, which was something I knew I would be needing. I am doing my research on a specific subject group's perceptions of their position in activist situations. For this reason, a qualitative approach is used, as it is the appropriate tool for collecting the sort of information I am seeking here.

Informant selection and interview situation:

The people I have interviewed have all had experiences with climate activism in El Salvador, cantered around the issue of water privatisation. This is the subject position I want to learn about with my research questions.

I first went to El Salvador in august of 2018, where I stayed with the activist NGO *Plataforma Global El Salvador*. During this month-long stay I made and maintained strong connections to the Salvadoran members of the organisation, and through one such member I have been able to get in touch with several other interviewees. Without snow-balling my way through informants, I would not have been able to get very far with my inquiries. I initially attempted to reach out to a wide

selection of local Salvadorian organisations, who are engaging with the issue of water privatisation. However, in actuality this research could not have been done without my prior connections in El Salvador. There were several hindrances in the first attempts at initial contact, i.e., the people willing or able to speak to me, have not always been easily reached online via email. Some of the informants are also busy people - the Salvadoran water activists are working on the issue every day and have full schedules. Thus, fitting me into their time became much easier when I had the recommendation of people they already knew personally.

As typical for semi-structured interviews I knew in broad terms what I was wanting to have the interviews be about. Because of this, and to help both me and the informant stay on track, I wrote up an interview guide beforehand. The interview guide contained primarily open-ended questions about the interviewees' personal history and their positive and negative experiences with activism, as well as some inquiries about their motivations for being involved with water activism. The interview guide is written with the goal of allowing the participants to express their perspectives on the social structure they exist within (Bryman, 2016: 469). It contains open-ended questions (except for introductory background information or questions of clarification), in an attempt to prevent my own preconceptions from colouring the conversations, to the degree that such a feat is possible (Bryman, 2016: 470). The purpose of having an interview guide is to provide me with a red thread throughout the conversation, in case of natural divergence from the actual focus. Essentially, I have used it as a tool, assisting me to guide the conversations when I felt it was necessary, and as a checklist I could consult to make sure I covered everything I wanted to. By using it in this manner, I more easily allowed the interviewees the freedom to steer the specifics of the knowledge they passed on, as well as the ability to bring up topics that I had not considered before the interview. As such, the interviews also opened up new questions for me, over the course of the process.

The interviews were all conducted over Zoom, but some of the planning was on chat-platforms such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. I gave each person I wanted to interview the choice of the platform they were used to and comfortable with, as that felt like an important way to reduce any stressful impact my presence in their time schedule would provide. Even with both of our familiarity with the platform used for the call, there were instances of technical difficulties. It has not been too disruptive of the conversation, as I kept track of things with handwritten notes during

the interview, and thus I was able to remind them of where they left off when the internet stabilised again. As mentioned, all the interviews were screen recorded on Zoom, with informed consent from each participant. I have taken some ethical steps regarding this. During the interview itself, I followed the Zoom recommendations for optimal privacy, including password protecting the call, and limiting who could join it (Lobe et. al. 2020: 3). I am also storing the files containing the recordings of interviews in password protected files and have omitted personal identifiable information from my transcripts (Lobe et. al., 2020: 6) Because of the free-flowing nature of semi-structured interviews, and unexpected factors such as technical problems or interruptions from outside sources (e.g., pets, children, other people), the interviews are mostly partially transcribed.

Over the course of conducting my research project, I have continuously been reflecting on my own role as a researcher, and my interpretation of the data and how this contributed to the discourse surrounding the topic of climate activism in El Salvador. Considerations of how my role as researcher influences both the study itself but also my entire methodological approach to it, as well as my expectations for the outcome has been important to maintain transparency throughout the process. I have also kept a critical view on how the study will contribute to the general discourse on El Salvador both specifically and as an example of climate action in The Global South. The spatiotemporal conditions of the research for the study are not neatly overlapping with the spatiotemporal frame for the subject matter, in the sense that I have not been conducting field studies. I am doing the research on climate activists concerned with water rights, access and protection in El Salvador, and the conditions they exist in now, and how these have been formed by the previous years of the country debating the topic. I *myself* however will not be investigating this with ethnographic studies and thus I will be in a very different geographical space. So, whilst doing research on Salvadorian climate activists it will happen from a geographical and cultural distance, which are important factors to consider, in how I will present my data and analysis.

All of this collectively laid the groundwork for the analysis of the empirical data gathered in the interviews. Thoroughly having worked with the texts means a better understanding of the different dimensions of it as both text and social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 68). As such it will be possible to apply it to a critical discourse analysis.

Validity:

I have selected the informants based on their experiences in being directly involved with the fight against water privatisation in El Salvador. This personal experience increases their relevance, and thus adds a layer of validity to my results (Fetterman, 2010: 50). By selecting interviewees who are currently in the field, even if I as a researcher was unable to be, it was always my preferred option. To have the insights of people living in El Salvador as the foundation of my analysis will add a measure of emic and situated knowledge. By aiming for both emic and situated knowledge to have a certain presence in this thesis, I hope to provide a deeper insight to the discourse that Salvadoran water activists are a part of, by focussing on their own descriptions of it. This is also in line with maintaining feminist ethics in the progress of writing this thesis, as it is an important value to give voices to the group of people that are the subject of this study. Pink (2009: 81) states that interviews can be understood as the representation of an experienced phenomena rather than an account of an objective truth. This does not discount the experiences of interviewees, and an emic perspective is indeed a valid qualitative data collection. A project such as this could have been improved upon by basing it in ethnographic field studies but considering the limitations of the timeframe and the geographical distances of myself and Salvadorian activists, it was not a feasible option. However, it would definitely be a point of interest for further future research in this field of study. The type of knowledge I am interested in is of the exploratory and explanatory kind, as I am examining components of the Salvadoran climate activist as a subject position, as well as investigating the discursive forces that shape the phenomena surrounding them (Kitchin & Tate, 2013: 2). The type of knowledge I have garnered from the interviews were not predetermined but shaped by the insights provided to me by the interviewees.

I expect this thesis to be a case of feeling somewhat conflicted about my part of knowledge production about The Global South, when I *myself* am belonging to The Global North. This awareness is however a contributing factor to the validity of my research, in that I am conscious of the context of time and space that I am a product of (Graham, 2013: 22). I understand that any person's patterns of thinking and seeing as something connected to their geographical and social context (Waitt, 2005: 164). The fact that I as a researcher exist in a different discourse than my informants can be considered a weakness and a strength. A strength is that I may be less presumptuous about a culture I am not a member of, and thus do not know detailed customs or

habits for, and therefore will be careful in examining my own biases when analysing the data and drawing conclusions. A weakness might be that there are cultural blind spots, and limits to the way I and my informants communicate, amongst other things because it will happen in a second language for both of us. As language is a means of knowledge production, this is certainly an element that will affect the way I will go forward with my analysis. It is also important to keep in mind that I carried out interviews in Spanish, and that the quotes from the interviews are sometimes translated into English. I have done my best to clarify the point where I myself was uncertain of the interviewees' meaning in the interview situation, and thus feel I have done it as much justice as possible.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

I will be using critical discourse analysis for the analysis of this project. When investigating the conditions for the climate activist subject position, it is necessary to understand the surrounding discourse in which it exists. Discourse analysis as a method is always connected to the theoretical framework of a given study (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 3-4). In critical discourse analysis (CDA) it is possible to work with the people existing inside the discourses that are being investigated (Fairclough, 2006: 226). When doing CDA you look at a text at three levels: a description of the text - here my interviews - an analysis of the discursive practices behind it, meaning an interpretation of the discourse of Salvadoran water activists, and thirdly the level of social practice, where the CDA according to Fairclough is particularly useful to apply to small data samples from the discourse (Fairclough, 2006: 230). This helps to support my sample selection, as it is qualitative over quantitative, and thus can be said to be lacking in generalisability. As fitting with critical discourse analysis, the purpose of acquiring empirical data from persons that are part of the social movements fighting for the right to water, has provided me with insights I would otherwise not obtain (Resende, 2018: 11). As such, the semi-structured interviews were the most readily available possibility for me to gain these insights and layers of emic. Therefore, they function as a reasonable alternative to ethnographic fieldwork. When applying discursive analysis to an interview, it is also important to understand that both interviewer and interviewee participate in the meaning production process, as a conversation can function as "text" production, in the sense that it contains knowledge being transferred between the people involved. In an interview, the

researcher is obviously there to learn from the interviewee, but I have still formulated questions that directed the conversation. This was, as mentioned, done to make sure we stayed on topic, but I also tried to leave plenty room for the interviewees to bring up something that felt important to them, even if I did not specifically ask about it. I have conducted myself ethically, to the best of my ability, in the data collection process. Yet I am wary of speaking over the Salvadoran people themselves, as my interpretations undisputedly happen from a European perspective. Nonetheless, I also consider it important to give the water activists of El Salvador a platform to be heard and a presence in academic discourse in the Global North, which they are currently sorely lacking. By considering Fairclough's three-dimensional conception of discourse, I will attempt to examine the connection between the discursive processes and social processes of water activism in El Salvador.

Analysis

For this analysis I am going to be categorising the two discourses that exist about activism against the privatisation of water in El Salvador currently, to outline the common tendencies, especially in the counter-discourse of the water activists. This will happen based on the three semi-structured interviews I have conducted with Salvadoran activists. In order to properly understand the activist counter-discourse, a bit of the hegemonic discourse must be explained as well. To begin with, I will present the results of my semi-structured interviews with the Salvadoran water activists one by one, as well as providing an example of the discourse led by government-supporters on a recent online video by *Soy Jose Youtuber*. In this CDA, the texts in question in the model from Fairclough are in the shape and form of the interviews, with the online video functioning as supportive secondary material. Following the descriptive first stage, I will introduce the previously discussed theory at the CDA interpretative stage. In the third stage of CDA, I will discuss the possible larger explanations to my research questions, that become visible via my analysis.

Interviewee #1: Juan

My first interviewee, who I will be referring to as Juan, has been working with the Salvadoran NGO Plataforma Global for many years - most of his adult life, he says. He does activism in a lot of different areas and considers water something that unites almost every one of these. He himself says he has access to water 6 days a week, and considers this a privilege, although the water in

question is not drinkable. He says the real "eye-opener" was when he experienced the more extreme situations in rural areas of El Salvador.

When discussing the ways Salvadoran water activists approach the actual actions of activism, he brings up that it is new times, and that they are learning to use digital resource in an organised way: "Everyone goes to Twitter with a hashtag and try to do advocacy on Twitter…" he also points out that "perhaps it's not very… safe for activists" to engage in online activism, if their profiles tie back to their person. The reason for this form of activism is that it is "the way this government works", by which he is referring to Bukele's social media presence, which is often considered savvy and charming, and thus appealing to Salvadoran voters. Juan describes this: "Denouncing or speaking against articles on Twitter... That's where the government [makes political] moves". Salvadoran activists also do more traditional activism - "old fashioned… we go to the streets". This also includes working with different groups and of course holding big demonstrations on especially important dates. He says he and many activists he works closely with are doing some form of activism "basically all the time".

People had big expectations for the left-wing party to be in government, but they were disappointed by the amount of change that actually happened, and the continued corruption. For this reason, the marketing behind Nuevas Ideas was at the right time and place to be more successful than any other political movement in El Salvador to date. He thinks that there was the idea of real change, and importantly Bukele's anti-corruption platform during the last Salvadoran election. He also says that not a lot of the problems have been solved or necessarily even addressed in-parliament (as of yet), and that corruption is still a big problem. For example, when there were restrictions due to COVID-19 in El Salvador, demonstrations were not allowed. However, the football league matches with approximately 5000-10.000 crowds were allowed to continue in the exact same period of time.

He says that he believes the climate activists need to be careful, even with the juridical wins they have gained in recent years, and that there is a lack of legal representation for activists in legislative situations. They have not used physical force, but they verbally attack activists, they silence them and speak over marginalised groups. They do not have "a good opinion about human rights activists", according to Juan. The "narrative of the government", as he puts it, is that water activists

are infiltrators, who are getting paid to criticise the government unjustly, going against the good of El Salvador. The general discussion of water activists is as people who are doing something wrong, and the government as doing right and "great" things, without really specifying the concrete actions in question of either party. Juan often finds it difficult to understand why the government seems solely motivated by money.

When discussing his personal motivations for doing activism, he says that he feels an obligation, and wants to be on the right side of history. He says that he does experience moments of fear, when doing activism, and that sometimes participating openly "depends on if you are feeling brave that day". He personally knows people, actively engaging with water activism, who have been thrown in jail or persecuted without an apparent cause. He also says he is very aware that water activists can easily go missing, and that there is not a lot of reliable help from the government. This is a shared sentiment for water activists: "People are afraid, activists are afraid…because we have had some cases… guys we *know* for *sure* they have not [been] in any kind of conflict with laws, they have been captured". He also cites this as a big reason that the water activists are in need of legal representation.

However, the way he thinks about water activism personally, is that his support is needed. "I think that every single person is important, but only one person isolated, basically, it's pointless". He says that "if you can support the movement a bit that is good", but that he does not believe one person, "like the president", will be able to do the job alone. He calls it a "very collective" effort, "fighting for what's fair, what's important". For him, it is "a matter of conviction", although just as he does not understand the government's motivations, he says it is "hard to believe people are doing this [activism] because it is fair, but that's basically the main reason". Juan considered himself more well-off than a lot of his fellow Salvadorans. For this reason, he considers it his duty to help keep their voices heard in negotiations about water rights. As he says: "We have a saying here, in El Salvador: only the people save the people".

Interviewee #2: Luis

My second interviewee studied economics in La Universidad Publica De El Salvador and attained a big interest in the environment post-graduating. He says issues with the climate became very

obvious in El Salvador in the 2000's and onwards. He is now involved with the issue of water rights with Plataforma Global. He lists his areas of interest as "[de]forestation, contamination and the theme of water".

Luis is critical of the climate strategies used in the country, both by the government but also by the activists' groups. He thinks they need to reinvent the form of activism, that traditional activism ("doing a march") is not sufficient. Most of the activism he does, he goes to comunidades (literally *communities* but in this context meaning the extremely rural areas with small peasant settlements - often the places hardest hit by lack of access to water), to hear what they want and need, and bring their voices to the larger climate conversation in El Salvador. Apart from this, he participates in the same kinds of activism as Juan: online campaigns and organised protests.

Luis thinks a lot about governmental politics and has an interest in it. He says that he knows he is a part of the social structure, the civil rights movement, and he considers it a duty to fight for improvements in this structure. This duty is to other people, less fortunate than himself, who cannot as easily participate in environmental justice fights. He says that is why the water activist organisations are important: that "the civil movement has a role inside the structure of the political system".

It is "very important" to Luis to partake in activism. He considered these important words to say aloud, because "the word activism generates a lot of noise". By this, Luis means that a lot of people do not like using the word, in his experience. They do not want to preoccupy themselves too much with the themes of politics, because they feel "bored of the corruption". Personally, he feels that because he is an activist it becomes a negative label that he is always associated with. He cannot put that label away or really take a break from it, and he constantly gets stereotyped because of it. Since there are negative associations with activists in El Salvador, it gets exhaustive, and can make everyday life difficult. Luis thinks his own opinion has changed from before he was an activist to now. Having the ideas of the issues with water privatisation is a different thing from living/experiencing the actual effects, as he does with his activist work in the comunidades.

Thus, for him personally the positives he experiences in doing activism lies in the fulfilment of the sense of duty he feels and the experiences of solidarity across a diverse group of the population. His negative experiences include the accusations of espionage and persecution of water activists.

There is a sense of paranoia in the activists' groups, that they might be in danger of raids or arrestations. Something he actively feels impacts him, is how, if a person is involved in politics, their entire personality is "painted" in this light. They are always seen through the lens of them being involved with activism. The Salvadoran phrase for the phenomena is that a person is "burned", meaning that they are marked out primarily as water activists, which, according to Luis induces immediate negative associations with him, in situations outside of his activism.

However, in spite of this, Luis makes sure to emphasise that El Salvador is a "relatively young [democratic] society" with room to grow, and that their context *is* changing. In order for the change to remain progressive, he believes that it is important to continue to work for creative, open-minded solutions, whilst avoiding the constant conflicts they are encountering now. He wants for a better, more productive conversation across the board. A Nicaraguan saying, he uses about this philosophy is: "It is about entering as a They and leaving as a We".

Interviewee #3: Eduardo

My third informant - Eduardo - from La Alianza stated that the topic of water is difficult, and he thinks the biggest issue water activists are facing is informing the Salvadoran people. Knowing the people and knowing how to talk to them about climate issues is a difficult task. Communicating effectively takes a lot of effort, but informing the people is an important manner of activism for Eduardo. He thinks these conversations also furthers understanding of the different situations across El Salvador: "Marginal comunidades might have water access one day a week", by his estimations, whereas it is not normally a noticeable issue in San Salvador, the nation's capital.

Eduardo also talks about his involvement with the more bureaucratic side of things. Talking and working with the legal procedures about the water law is a big way he is involved with activism. He also points to resistance from the comunidades as being an important manner the water activists collectively fight. At the time of the interview there was a currently happening fight between a comunidad and its volunteer activists and a big company for the right to their local water system (Daniels, 2021).

He thinks that the fault lies in many places: bad "facilities", private companies and other societal issues taking the focus away from this topic. Where the fault does not lie is with the Salvadoran people. "It is a historical crisis that has not been resolved."

Eduardo also experiences moments of fear, and feeling unsafe, typically at demonstrations themselves, or sometimes if the government is doing excessive raids of activist NGOs. These raids are supposedly either to fight the gang-wars or to supervise that the activists are not "conspiring". He keeps working: once you become conscious of the problems around you it is difficult to leave that "circle" (meaning the culture and collection of likeminded people). Even when he perfectly understood the issue of water, he still did not grasp the complete complexities and problems of activism. What makes it so difficult to leave water activism, for Eduardo, is that "once you start doing the work of activism, political work and especially the work of informing the Salvadoran people, you start learning so much more". He calls it a "fight in process", and the goal is for everyone to gain something from it. Knowing to take advantage of the times where there is a general interest in an issue is a key tool for making the biggest impacts.

According to Eduardo, the topic of water is very unifying. Other civil rights groups are for their own cause (and they are important) but "water is affecting everyone". The feeling of unity is important. "Si no hay unidad no hay luchar", he says: if there is no unity there is no fight. It is much easier to have a collective fight when going up against economically strong businesses and the government. Sectional fights do not have the same effect as collective fights, that supports the majority's interests. The whole of his NGO is united about the activism they do, and because of the collaborative work they do, they have more resources (both GPES members mentioned the importance of legal representation, which GPES does not have but La Alianza does).

He has experienced a change in the understanding of activism, and he thinks the shape and form of activism has changed over the years, but he does not think he personally has changed much - he has always been aware of the water issues from the beginning of the fight against privatisation, and he has witnessed positive changes. "At this moment the people are becoming conscious [of the problem with water privatisation]", he says, about his optimism for the future.

Governmental hegemonic sentiments:

As secondary data, I have viewed videos that present anti-activist sentiments, and paint them in a satirical light. This data is really a minor point, to provide an example of the context for the subjective accounts from the interviewees. One such video, uploaded the 7th of November 2021 by *SOY JOSE YOUTUBER* delivers news intercepted with 'comedic' clips, meant to ridicule said news. The news presenter claims that activists are "crying crocodile tears" (1:25), or that they are protesting "against everything" (3:43), and proceeding to list off more and more discrediting things, such as being anti-vaccinations.

Furthermore, the government routinely executes raids of Salvadoran human rights activists, as a part of the Bukele government's increasing displays of authoritarianism. A recent example happened November 2021, where many activist NGOs were raided, supposedly because of embezzlement concerns (Daniels, 2021). This event happened during the time I was conducting my interviews, and was discussed by my interviewees, who expressed how the violence and scrutiny caused by the raids put a lot of stress on both the activist NGOs included in this thesis.

Tabel 1. Overview of the common themes in the interviews

Themes	Interviewee #1: Juan	Interviewee 2:	Interviewee #3:
Access to water	Usually good	Reasonably reliable	Usually good
Types of activism	Online, community workshops, demonstrations	Online, community workshops (especially rural areas), demonstrations	Conversations as informational campaigns, demonstrations, legal action, online (to a lesser extend)
Motivations	Sense of duty, fairness, fear of inaction	Personal interest, sense of duty	Continuously learning from his work and discovering new aspects in need of attention
Positive experiences	Feelings of collectiveness	Meaningful conversations with different societal groups	Experiences of unity
Negative experiences	Fear, worry about the future, personal safety, violence	Fear, stereotyped against as an activist	Fear in intense moments
Changes in opinion	Personally: yes, more awareness Societally: it could go either way, the activist efforts might not come to fruition in face of governmental corruption, but there has also already been positive progress, so it is possible that it can continue	Personally: yes, feels a big difference between knowing about an issue and experiencing it first-hand Societally: optimistic about positive change, there is more general awareness, El Salvador is a young nation with room to grow	Personally: no change, he has always been aware of the issue, but he is always learning more Societally: it is a moment of change, there is more general awareness, activism is taking a different form

Looking at these common traits of the experiences of my interviewees, a clearer picture of their discursive structure emerges.

They are all three quite concerned with the element of possible danger, if there is a tense moment, for example as when the government performed raids, but also if the situation in general escalates. My interviewees have the impression that that fear is widespread, as Luis expresses it: "We are all afraid". The water law, acknowledging it as a human right is a win, but it is not a complete solution to the issues around water privatisation.

Since water is an essential part of daily life, there is a great deal of power to influence the shape and form subject positions take to fit around the water politics applied to their specific society. The narrative of the government - the hegemonic power agent in El Salvador, especially since the Bukele election - is that the environmental activists are harmful to Salvadoran values. When their sentiments are received by the activists I interviewed as "what they are doing is good and what you [the activists] are doing is wrong", it is clear that they are painting a picture of water activists as disruptive and thus bad. It becomes un-Salvadoran, unpatriotic, to partake in activism. They feel targeted by the government's way of framing them, saying that the people in hegemonic discourse do not need an exact argument: they are, as Juan says, "repeating a lie a thousand of times" until it becomes the perceived truth in society. In this case the truth that the government is producing is of the water activist subject as a problem for and in the Salvadoran society.

The NGO work with the comunidades becomes important because the members of the most marginalised groups in El Salvador, otherwise have a hard time being heard in the larger discourse. The people in different spaces do not have equal suffering with regards to the access to water. The collective effort of counter-discourse across multiple social groups are important in achieving the Salvadoran climate activists' goals. There is a collective sense of identity in the Salvadoran people, that makes the water activist feel a responsibility to do what they can to provide aid for their fellow people in worse off situations. The Salvadoran water activists exist inside a discourse, where they need to be concerned with their personal safety, and where they experience a lot of violence. They also live with a fear stressor, that impacts their lives, and influences when and how they might participate in activist actions.

In El Salvador, the identity of Activist is never put away, the way it sometimes can be in the Global North. When I go to my part-time job, I am not primarily regarded as a climate activist. The water activists have their identity stereotyped. Being an activist is considered bad in the general populace. Activism is seen as something for people without Salvadoran values. Even when they might be actively doing activism, by for example proclaiming dissatisfaction with their lack of water, they do not like the context of the label *activist.* Doing activism is essentially considered unpatriotic, which is in turn considered morally wrong. The water activist subject position becomes othered. From these responses and the patterns identified, we can extrapolate that the Salvadoran water activists all exist within a discursive structure that affects the ways they can do activism in limiting ways. The way they operate around said limitations, to carve out a subject position different from what is ascribed to them is also a noteworthy point.

I will now be discussing how my empirical data and the first steps of the CDA can help to answer my research questions, in the third step of CDA, the analysis of social practice. The difficulties Salvadoran water activists are experiencing are some of the well-known legal concerns for climate activists (Sands, 2003: 292). Juridical linkages between human rights violations and environmental activism are important to be aware of, in order to understand the risks, the activists are taking (Sands, 2003: 292). This is also reflected in the empirical data, when multiple of my interviewees bring up the importance of having their own lawyers available against both the government and the big businesses in water disputes. Apart from legal persecution, the Salvadoran water activists are also in a violent society, making their activism downright dangerous to carry out at times. These power structures are in place regarding access and control of water, because the government is largely motivated by its interest in economic growth, as well as an easy way of controlling its populace. Control over water becomes easy control over the people. The state of insecurity in El Salvador is partly connected to the larger global pattern of inequality between The Global North and The Global South. The underlying reasons for the Salvadoran government to prioritise economic growth over a more equal distribution, in the question of water rights, must be seen in a global context as well. Here, El Salvador is firmly categorised as belonging to The Global South, and thus they are in a less privileged position on the global stage. For future research it would be interesting to view this conflict through something like world-system theory and looking at El Salvador's position in the periphery compared to the United States, or other western countries in

the core. In this context, Salvadoran water activists are going against a much more globally established set of hindrances, due to the power imbalance they face, when they are not only stereotyped as being problem-making activists, but also as being from a country marked with relatively recent civil war and still on-going gang wars.

This thesis is also in and of itself an example of the lack of - if not knowledge production, then knowledge distribution about the Salvadoran water activists, and their perspectives in academia. In the interview situation, the communication and distribution of knowledge was very straight-forward between me and the informants. But with putting all this in writing and publishing (mainly) to The Global North, it becomes more complex. On one hand, it is arguably continuing the current norm of unequal distribution of knowledge. On the other hand, it is bringing forth voices with direct experience to an audience who may be in large parts unaware of the challenges faced by Salvadorans, and who may gain insight from them.

Conclusions

The Salvadoran water activists appear to still be facing a lot of challenges. Their personal lives are affected greatly by their work as activists. The fear for the government, means that they are limited in practicing activism, and that they are negatively marked by the label of being *activist*. Nonetheless, the feeling of unity they experience is inspiring and has shown to harvest real results. It is important to note how my research and conclusions are based on a very limited selection, and the subjective experiences of three individuals, and thus further studies on this topic could benefit the future knowledge production on the topic. On a larger scale, I hope this will be a beneficial addition to the field of water politics and their place in human ecology. Of course, since the thesis is produced in The Global North, there is room for improvement on this subject too. However, as it is, this may have helpful implications for understanding power structures between the state and the people, as well as The Global North and The Global South on a broader scale. Looking at the experiences of the Salvadoran activists as simultaneously uniquely challenged by their local context and fitting into a broader pattern of documented struggles, climate activists face on a global scale, is important for understanding how the Salvadoran experiences can inform further research on the topic, whether specifically on the Salvadoran situation, or on water activism as a larger field.

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