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From a geographical mountain to mountain geographies. A social geography analysis of the Chilean Andes

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- 1 Space is the result of a signification process which is only visible as a social construction, and necessarily viewed from a temporal perspective. In this sense, spatial meaning(s) are the result of a social knowledge-practice that involves a radical historicity (Aliste & Núñez, 2015; Gadamer, 1999; Núñez, 2013). From this perspective, the meaning of a space is not constructed by the space itself, but by the social order that gives significance to or defines it. Geography, therefore, when considered as a linguistic extension or adjective that can only explain the evident, the physical and the inert, limits the socio-temporal understanding of space, which makes it necessary to talk of “geographies” plural, to imply relations, scales, temporality, mobility and change, all of which are key elements in contemporary geography studies. A social understanding of space allows us to visualise the fact that every society or social group establishes the meaning of their spatiality, which circulates around the general rule of understanding of “geographic spaces”, or rather, towards “geographies of space”, placing the emphasis on the way in which social groups project or understand their spaces (Levy, 2006).
- 2 In geography studies and other areas, and considering the “cultural shift” of this discipline (Zusman, 2012), there are numerous examples from recent decades that show an interest in identifying the social interpretations of various South American spaces regarding their value and discursive and symbolic context (Baeza, 2009; Lois, 2014; Navarro Floria, 2007; Núñez et al., 2013; Silvestri, 2011). These studies have demonstrated the monopolic, definitive and paradigmatic way in which various geographical discourses are collectively imposed (Amilhat-Szary, 2012). An example is the conception of the Argentine south as a “desert”, which was used to imply that

Patagonia was uninhabited, a spatiality corresponding to a desolate geography of an immeasurable amplitude. A similar process occurred in the area of La Araucanía in Chile in the 19th century, in which the idea of an “uncivilised” territory was developed to justify the subjugation of the Mapuche and the consequent occupation of their lands.

- 3 These examples prove how discursive practices in the area of geographical understanding come to generate a-historic or idealistic/utopian identity processes for the collective nation, losing sight of other possible readings (Foucault, 1995; 2010). From this perspective, the Chilean central state cannot be separated from the process of establishing the meaning of spaces, be it transforming them into barrier-spaces, in the case of the Chilean Andes; isolated-spaces, to define less integrated territories like the Aysén region in Chilean Patagonia; wild-spaces, like the former case of La Araucanía, or under a very current logic, globalised or unglobalised spaces (Serje, 2011).
- 4 In the case of the Chilean Andes, the topic of this paper, the construction of their current socio-geographical image as natural border originated in the need to define a shared space on a national scale, in a process that acquired unusual relevance towards the end of the 19th century. The Southern Andes, in this sense, were a key symbolic icon, and the primary discursive function of the geography established around them was communicating a “political border”. For this, actions and mechanisms were carried out with the aim of establishing the Andes as a “natural” space that was destined to be a barrier and a limit.
- 5 Research on the Chilean Andes has, in general, focussed on their “natural and immobile” dimension, and linking geography solely with the nation-state, regarding its use in establishing borders, as well as in their exploration and recognition by scientists and travellers (Sagredo & Donoso, 2012; Sagredo & Hervé Allamand, 2011). From our perspective, this not only proves a “methodological nationalism” but also reaffirms that abstract and utilitarian image of the Andes as “political border”, in a markedly centre-periphery point of view. In turn, the contemporary collective imaginary continues representing this image as a barrier and empty space (Paulsen, 2013).
- 6 In the past decade, however, various studies have been published that consider this space as a social construction (Amilhat Szary, 2009; 2013a; González Miranda, 2014; Núñez et al., 2013; Peliowski & Valdés, 2015; Tapia Ladino, 2012). Generally speaking, these investigations have sought to visualize a mobile and dynamic Chilean/Argentine Andes, based on the idea that the Andes ought to be understood from their unique characteristics and a social understanding of their “geography”. This research, in other words, focuses on the activities, practices and representations that have been able to survive the prevailing hegemonic discourse projected by the central state.
- 7 This paper, therefore, seeks to contrast two perspectives of analysis and ways of focussing the meanings of a space as broad as the Chilean Andes. On one hand, the sociogenesis that established a spatiality with the dominant function of imposing the Andes as a barrier, as a screen and a “natural feature” that allowed the separation of one nation from another, ultimately, as a political-administrative border. From this reading, the Chilean Andes have been formulated as “geographical mountain” precisely in order to indicate their condition as “natural space”. In contrast, we examine concrete examples of a dynamic Andes teeming with movement. In other words, multiple sociospatial processes have occurred and occur around the Andes which give a far more complex and heterotopian mountain range. From this interpretation, we

highlight a Chilean Andes (Nature) that is cannot be separated from certain social groups (Society), which allows us to consider and understand the Andes from a social geography perspective .

The Chilean Andes, political border and limit: a geographical mountain range

- 8 Towards the end of the 19th century, the diplomat, geographer and engineer Eduardo de la Barra made the biblical claim that “between two nations – Chile and Argentina – Nature placed the great snowy Andes to divide their lands and their waters with the unforgettable line of the peaks” (1895, p. 49). This influential man of society did not hesitate to define that rugged mountain range as a natural landmark whose central function was to divide and separate the two young nations.
- 9 This point of view, that the space around the Chilean/Argentinian Andes was an inherent part of each nation, and that both border and Andes were essential spatialities because of the key role they played in delineating, defining, enclosing and clarifying the nation, was a discursive practice that rapidly became structural. Many studies and “learned” government officials on both sides of the border, engineers and geographers included, took it upon themselves to stamp this as an official practice. The process of the production of historical and geographical knowledge related to the border and the binational Andes was underway, and mere decades later, it had become part of the collective imagination and collective memory of both societies.
- 10 In various studies throughout the 20th century, the Andes were defined and highlighted as “peaks”, “a wall”, “a line”, “a range of great elevation”, and “a compact chain”, among others. Diego Barros Arana, Chilean historian and statesman in charge of the border negotiations, said at the time, with necessary exaggeration, that “the Himalayas compare themselves to the Andes...” (1902, p. 89). It was necessary during the process of construction and definition of the border to reaffirm the physically evident: that this Chilean mountain range was imposing and majestic, especially when seen from the capital Santiago. The latter gains relevance when we consider that this projected geographical image of the Andes was undoubtedly based in and sustained by the political centre of the nation.
- 11 In this context, therefore, as the Chilean nation-state in formation started to institutionalise space, the need to define limits on both a “national” and an “internal” scale was inherent in the value placed on the concept of border. This was fairly evident, and indispensable. A series of mechanisms were put in place to consolidate the necessarily communal meaning of the young nation: the implementation of History on a national scale; the consolidation of the city over the rural to avoid and diminish “empty spaces”; the execution and promotion of exploratory voyages, with the aim of recognising, defining and incorporating new territories; numerous cadastres to gather information; and the implementation of technology that would help to change the meaning and dimension of space, such as telegraphs, post and railways (Núñez, 2009). The need to construct a geographical meaning of the Andes was a fundamental symbolic device within this framework, a geographical meaning that turned this mountain range into a natural border, and therefore a limit and a barrier.

- 12 This activation of a geographical imaginary that would give the spatiality of the nation unity and form was therefore essential (Ahumada, 2015). Territorial domination and control, along with the creation of icons that gave a sense of homogeneity to the inhabitants, were equally relevant. As previously mentioned, the configurations of knowledge and geographical discursive formations are related to systems of social classification and control and cannot be separated from, for example, the homologation of Chilean mountains with the idea of national landscape (Navarro Floria, 2007).
- 13 The naturalisation of the Chilean Andes as a limit led to the creation of discourses that were geared towards reiterating this image of a massive geographical space: “This immense mass of snow and granite [...] will always rise, majestic and near untraversable, against armies that would ignore God’s designs and the indications of manifest destiny in attempting to scale them with ambitions of domination” (Altamirano, 1899, as cited in Escolar, 2013). With these words, the Chilean delegate to the Buenos Aires conference of 1899 aimed to cover the Andes with eternal snow, which, when added to their elevation, emphasised that this mountain range would clearly, emphatically and “geographically” define each nation.
- 14 This political interpretation of the Chilean Andes was synonymous with an uninhabited and impassable space. This view, at the start of the 20th century, reflected a type of social order that framed the dialogue of a geographic knowledge that was in turn power/knowledge. From this perspective, as Foucault (2010) has explained, the history of spaces is also the history of power. This need for a snowy mountain range, a rocky massif like the Chilean/Argentinian Andes, thereby became the base on which the concept of an Other beyond the Andes was constructed.
- 15 Extending this reading, the border of the country named Chile was understood in relation to an Other, Argentina. The Andes provided the ideal natural support for the drawing of this border, this line of imposition and domination. The significance of the line of the “Chilean” mountain range contributed to the strengthening of the vertical (north-south) orientation along which the territory of the nation was being understood and projected. This, in turn, obscured the numerous practices and activities that functioned in a horizontal (east-west) sense, in what has been called the land of the basins (Núñez, 2009, 2012).
- 16 Currently, this social discourse around the space of the Chilean Andes persists with a vitality and robustness as striking as it is notorious. The discourse of modernity and the modernity project, the foundation of the nation-state, remain solid. The geographic imaginary that validates this social memory of the Andes as an empty, inert and linear border essentially persists unaltered. The geography textbooks, for example, used by primary and secondary school students since the start of the 20th century, have actively contributed to the erasure of the Chilean Andes as a cultural subject, focusing solely on physical or so-called “geographical” aspects, and their role as border, barrier or “climatic screen” (Paulsen, 2013).
- 17 That barren and immobile configuration of the image of geographical space, akin to a still life, minimises a social perspective that shows that in many aspects mountains and therefore borders in Chile are not mere obstacles. Rather, this social perspective offers an understanding of innumerable mountain “geographies”.

Mountain geographies: the Chilean Andes as a social space of mobility and relations

- 18 Since the 1980s, border studies in the region have abandoned this centre-periphery perspective which was marked by the ideological production of space, and the focus has instead turned towards studies in which different types of relations or interculturalities have importance in border spaces (González Miranda, 2012; González Miranda et al., 2008; Grimson, 2000). These studies have visibilised various actors, practices and representations neglected by previous studies. Consequently, these studies have also highlighted border spatialities that are less known, less prominent, and alienated from the nationalist gaze, and whose action and mobility actively contradicts the traditional scheme of national borders.
- 19 Within this context, the Chilean Andes have for centuries functioned not as a barrier, but as a relational space that transmits diverse worlds from one side to another, where particular rhythms, flows and times are established, a practice that continues today. This should not be confused with a border which allows flow, as a political border imposes restrictions that affect that subjects linked to it (Grimson, 2011). However, from a social geography perspective, it is possible to identify numerous relations and processes of mobility around the Chilean Andes which, as previously mentioned, have been less taken into account.
- 20 In the northern sector, for example, the Chilean Andes have been opened up to various possibilities and dynamics, just as has occurred in the area between the province of San Juan in Argentina and the region of Coquimbo on the Chilean side. For decades, *arrieros* (muleteers) have freely migrated from one side of the border to another, creating mobility in the border space (Escolar, 2000; 2013; Hevilla, 2007). This practice continues, despite the 2001 restrictions imposed by the Chilean Servicio Agrícola Ganadero (SAG) regarding the movement of livestock to and from Argentina: “Chilean pastoral activity in the high valleys in the summer pastures of San Juan was maintained without losing continuity during the entire 20th century, legally or illegally, as determined by the rhythm of binational relations that oscillated between the perspective of border as place of controversy and danger and the conception of the border as zone of meeting and integration” (Hevilla, 2014, p. 6).
- 21 Another example of that mobility is also present in the link between the desert and the Atacama Plateau. Firstly, there was undoubtedly that same interest in declaring it uninhabitable. In 1899, for example, the Argentinian naturalist Eduardo Holmberg defined the Atacama Plateau as a place where everything was “sad and scant”, and one Boman, a Swiss naturalist, said that “the nakedness of this nature is horrific: everything becomes bleak and taciturn” (Boman, 1908, as cited in Molina, 2013). However, according to Molina (2010), the dynamism of the Plateau and the Andes at the height of the Atacama was important: “This extreme environmental discourse obscured the indigenous population of the Plateau and the Atacama mountain range [...] For these communities, the Andes is a space comprised of both the Plateau and the mountains, which contain natural resources – pastures and water meadows – that are necessary for agriculture. The distribution of these resources has served agricultural production, livestock farming, transportation systems using pack animals, and settlement, and has formed part of their symbolic ritual system”.

- 22 In the same zone and based on a similar logic, Jorge Tomasi (2013) has stressed that the nomadic pastoral practices in the highlands of the Andes still function today as a productive strategy and a way of life that implies a specific conception, perception and lived experience of these mountain spaces.
- 23 The Andes around Tarapacá in the north of Chile continue to present a social meaning that can unpick the way in which nationalist discourses seek to use this mountain range. In fact, in current border disputes with Bolivia, the Andes have once again been projected as an insurmountable barrier, just as at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century. Despite this, it has been demonstrated (Benedetti & Laguado, 2013; González Miranda, 2013; Tapia, 2013, among others) that this mountain space is a territory of integration and exchange, where contact and transnationalism were – and are – the dominant characteristics.
- 24 To take another area as an example, in the 1930s the south of Argentina was more associated with the Chilean regions of La Araucanía, Los Ríos and Los Lagos, and therefore with the Pacific instead of the Atlantic, a connection of spatialities that hinged on the Andes. From this perspective, the Andes can be seen as a continuum of habitability and permeability, a condition that is obscured by the process of nation-building, but not erased (Bandieri, 2005; Flores, 2013). This link between the south of Argentina and La Araucanía is maintained today, particularly through the cities of Neuquén, Bariloche and Temuco.
- 25 In recent decades the mobility of the Andes has not diminished. However, the entrenchment of globalisation has produced a notable discursive duality around them. In times of tension or border conflicts the image of the Andes is key, useful and necessary in ratifying and highlighting “the national”, while the Andes are just as easily erased in order to articulate Chile’s link with the world and emphasise it as a “globalised” nation (Núñez, 2014). An example of this situation can be appreciated in the 1997 Argentine-Chilean Mining Integration and Complementation Treaty. This treaty enabled mining companies to overcome possible obstacles on both sides of the mountain border (concessiones, privately owned land or property, etc.), although in practice it also ignores the existence of communities that have inhabited and used these spaces for centuries (Amilhat Szary, 2013b).
- 26 Two of these gold mining projects are Pascua Lama and El Morro, both located at over 4,000 metres above sea level in the Atacama region, which entail an investment of more than US\$ 10 billion (Barricklatam, 2015). The Comunidad Diaguita, ancestral inhabitants of this territory, have protested against both projects, not just because these projects may affect the glaciers which are the primary water source of the Huasco Valley, but because these reservoirs are also located adjacent to the Private Nature Reserve Los Huascoaltinos. These lands are used for livestock grazing by the community, and this situation has affected the growth of livestock farming in the area, as the public access road has impeded the mobility of people and animals to and from the pastures (Sánchez et al., in press).
- 27 Finally, Matossian (2012) has shown the role played by the population of Chilean origin in the urban space of San Carlos de Bariloche, and how the Andes are key in the strong links this population maintains with relatives located on the Chilean side of the border. This also proves that despite the geopolitical effects of economic crises and dictatorships, the migratory processes via the Andes are maintained and even incentivised.

- 28 More interesting examples of social factors in the geography of the Chilean Andes are easy to find in the lives of the *arrieros* throughout the southern Central Andes, just as in the porous yet permanent family links in Chilean-Argentine Patagonia. There, for example, in the area of Lago Verde (Chile) – Las Pampas (Argentina), which though separated by a political line are barely 10 kilometres apart, approximately 80% of the inhabitants are members of the same original family that settled in this area before the border line was set at the start of the 20th century and that today live together and communicate just as before (Núñez & Baeza, in press).
- 29 In this way, numerous “mountain geographies”, or social spaces, surround the Chilean Andes. Through these, we can reflect on the existence of spaces that are “utopian” (Foucault, 2010), “abstract” (Santos, 2000), “absolute” (Harvey, 1994) or “ideological” (Lefebvre, 2013), whose action matrix is coherent with a geographical knowledge that is at the same time a power-knowledge and a reflection of a social order based on a centre-periphery logic. From this perspective, the Andes are a barrier, an empty space, inductibly a limit. From other readings, based on a hermeneutical understanding of geography (Aliste & Núñez, 2015), supported by a multiscale geography, and anchored in an interest in studying lived and relational space, the Chilean Andes comprise a multiplicity of links, movements and memories that are undoubtedly greater than the scale that seeks to standardise them as an uninhabited space and a barrier.

Conclusion

- 30 The geographical meaning of the Chilean Andes is undoubtedly linked to the processes of social hermeneutics, through which spatial configurations are woven. Currently, the production of geographical knowledge that establishes this area as a limit or barrier, in other words a space that only be validated by the nation-state, is a process that in fact currently exists alongside other social constructions, ones rooted in diverse social groups. The Chilean Andes are therefore, in many areas, a space of articulation and communication. However, it is important to also acknowledge that on a global scale, the Chilean Andes are not represented as a barrier, but instead minimised and made invisible, to emphasise Chile as a globalised nation and link it with the rest of the world.
- 31 From this perspective, we can say that the meaning of their spatiality is impossible to find in the rugged mountain range itself. It is the significations and resignifications of the Andes that socially produce a space, that are created to fit with what social groups look for in their memories. In memories, as Todorov (2013) explains, when omission is the main characteristic, the memory will always be dependent on configurations constructed by power.

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ABSTRACTS

Ever since the establishment of national boundaries, the Andes have been defined as a “natural” and uninhabited space that determines where one country ends and another begins. The following paper examines the socio-discursive framework regarding the function of the Chilean Andes as a natural barrier between Chile and Argentina. This natural border has led to hidden

socio-spatial processes that occur around the Andes, emerging from various social spaces or “mountain geography” areas which, combined, form a highly complex and dynamic territory.

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Keywords: Mountain Range, discourse, social space, geographical imaginaries, borders

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