

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER TO TOURIST-FREE TOURISM CONTEXT: TRANSFORMATION OF PRACTICES AND DISCOURSES IN PORTMÁN (REGION OF MURCIA, SPAIN)

DEL DESASTRE MEDIOAMBIENTAL AL CONTEXTO SIN TURISMO: TRANSFORMACIÓN DE LAS PRÁCTICAS Y EL DISCURSO EN PORTMÁN (REGIÓN DE MURCIA, ESPAÑA)

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Abstract

Since the 1970s Portmán, a small town on the coast of Murcia, has been surrounded by a growing tourism sector. While much of Murcia's coastline was being developed for tourism purposes, Portmán made its living from mining. But the town's mining industry began to decline in the 1980s and finally disappeared in 1991, leaving behind a devastated environmental and social landscape; the bay that the town overlooks had been completely filled with mining waste. This paper enquires at the changes in the practices and discourses around tourism development, as displayed by the community's interest groups.

Key words

Communication, Cultural mediations, Hegemon, Citizenry, Tourism.

This article is based on «Discursos periodísticos y prácticas comunicativas alrededor del turismo. El caso de Portmán (Región de Murcia)», published in 2016 in *Quaderns de l'Institut Català d'Antropologia*. This version aims to fulfil two objectives: to bring the results of our research to social scientists in the Region of Murcia by publishing it in their reference journal and, at the same time, to make them known outside the Spanish-speaking world.

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Resumen

Desde la década de 1970, Portmán, un pueblo minero de la costa de Murcia, vio desarrollarse el turismo de sol y playa en el resto del litoral, mientras su economía seguía basada en la minería. Sin embargo, tras un lento declinar en los años 80, la actividad minera desapareció en 1991, dejando un paisaje medioambiental y social tremendamente impactado, en el que destaca la desaparición de la bahía frente al pueblo, rellena de escorias mineras. Este artículo indaga en los cambios en las prácticas y discursos sobre el desarrollo turístico, tal y como los muestran los grupos de interés comunitarios.

Palabras clave

Comunicación, Mediaciones culturales, Hegemonía, Ciudadanía, Turismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades Portmán has been an island of mining in a sea of tourism. This town in the Region of Murcia has two additional peculiarities that make it especially interesting for the social sciences in general and communication studies in particular. The first of these peculiarities is that it has captured the attention of the region's written press, both for the dumping of mining waste into the sea –starting in 1958– and for the repeated attempts to regenerate the bay and promote tourism there –starting in 1990–. The second is that it has an active citizen movement (based on local associations of townspeople), something quite exceptional in the region.

According to official population figures, in 2023 Portmán had a population of 952. Located in the administrative district of La Unión in the south-western part of the Region of Murcia, the village lies between the mountain range Sierra Minera de Cartagena-La Unión and the Mediterranean Sea. Geographically it is just about equidistant from the city of Cartagena and La Manga del Mar Menor, and only four kilometres separate it from the oldest (and one of the largest) residential/tourism complexes in the region, «La Manga Club» or, as the residents of Portmán call it, *the golf course*, in operation since 1972 (Figure 1).

Portmán, whose economy depended on mining until 1991, witnessed, from 1958 to 1990, the constant dumping into the sea of almost 70 million tons of mining tailings mixed with chemical reagents (Figure 2) (Conesa; Schulin; Nowack, 2008), (Egea; Vilar, 1994). When the dumping stopped, Portmán's bay had completely disappeared (Figures 3 and 4). During those years the French multinational company *Peñarroya* discharged into the sea, with absolutely no legal impediments, the slurry generated by open-pit



Figure 1. Google Maps. The Region of Murcia. Red shows the approximate boundaries of the Sierra Minera de Cartagena-La Unión. Green shows the Manga del Mar Menor.



Figure 2. Photograph by *La Verdad*: 10/11/2013. Portmán, 1960s. «Los Chorros» where waste was discharged from Lavadero Roberto.

mining operations and the differential flotation processing methods used in the largest facility of its kind in Europe, the *Lavadero Roberto*.

Since the dumping ended in 1990, different levels of government, land owners and the different townspeople associations and environmental groups have all made the development of tourism in Portmán their primary objective, although they have done so with different attitudes and discourses.

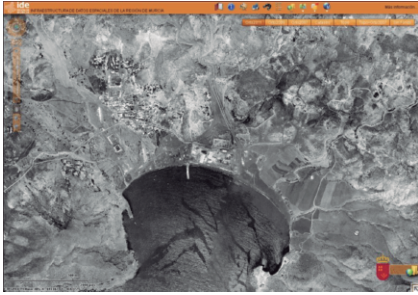


Figure 3. IDE. CARM. Portmán, 1929. Red indicates village of Portmán, green the fishing port.



Figure 4. IDE. CARM. Portmán, 2011. Red delimits area filled with mining waste.

Curiously, the residents of Portmán had begun to think of their town as a tourist destination much earlier.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper describes, from the perspective of anthropology, how a traditional mining village became, in the view of its inhabitants, a tourist destination long before the government thought about it and with no need for infrastructure or tourists (both almost non-existent today).

We look at how the discourses and practices used by the different social agents involved in Portmán's development have changed and how, through the meaningful mediation of tourism space (Nogués-Pedregal, 2005), a development approach based on this activity has come to be pre-eminent. To attain such pre-eminence, however, the approach had to go through the filter of local cultural matrixes (Martín-Barbero, 1987), marked by the associative legacy of the Sierra Minera workers' movement (Vilar, Egea & Victoria, 1987).

To examine this process, we focus on three key socioeconomic moments from the 1960s to today, each of which had its own hegemonizing discourses put forward by the media and the different levels of government, and the corresponding community response. First, however, we must clarify our study's methodological and theoretical perspective.

Our initial hypothesis is that in Portmán the symbolic influence of tourism (in adjacent areas tourism is well established) goes far beyond its real, material influence. While not an important activity in the municipality of La Unión or in the town of Portmán, the meaningful mediation of tourism space

(Nogués-Pedregal, 2005) has transformed the perception its inhabitants have of themselves and their surroundings. In addition, prominent social agents, owners of land in the Sierra Minera and environmental protection groups have all played a role in these processes of change. Their influence has been considerable because of the material and symbolic pressure they exerted over residents of Portmán, who, depending on the moment, have accepted the discourses of these actors to a greater or lesser degree or have drawn elements from them and rearticulated them to suit their own interests.

A major part of our work involved analysing the huge quantity of news items about Portmán appearing in the written press of the Region of Murcia between 1967, when the newspapers began to echo Portmán's environmental problem, and February 2013, when our research ended, so as to compare them with the memories of our informants. We have worked with over 2,000 journalistic pieces from seven different newspapers (*El Noticiero*, *Diario Línea*, *La hoja del lunes*, *La Verdad*, *La Opinión*, *Diario 16* and *El Faro*), while also occasionally making use of publications in other media that have allowed us to reconstruct the history of Portmán, as seen by the press and the discourses the press defended and/or put forward.

Journalistic coverage of Portmán allows us to trace a multitude of discourses, large and small, from political discourses to the environmental discourse, and also the diverse and changing discourses of the different townspeople associations. The latter, along with the environmental discourse, have been expressed with great clarity in manifestos, demands and reports, which we have also studied.

We analyze how different social agents have used and tried to give meaning to different concepts: 'development', 'tourism', 'bay', and how the signification and use of these concepts have changed for each group over time, always in close connection with 'infrastructural' and 'structural' changes.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted between the summer of 2009 and early 2013 completed the research. During the fieldwork we examined local forms of communication, networks and public places in which communication takes place, thus contemplating communication as a space from which we look at society more than a subject in and of itself (Mandly, 2002: 7).

During our fieldwork, in addition to observation, we conducted in-depth interviews and life histories with neighbors who can be classified as belonging to different groups, former workers at Peñarroya and members of their families, former fishermen and their relatives, neighbors with no direct relationship with Peñarroya and new neighbors who arrived after 1991. Most of them had some kind of relationship with the different neighborhood associations in Portmán.

The ethnographic fieldwork was terminated when we confirmed that the information, we were obtaining no longer contributed anything new to our objectives. In this article we use this information as a basis for our argumentation, although we will only resort to direct quotations in exceptional cases for reasons of space.

3. A TOURISM TERRITORY WITHOUT TOURISTS

During our fieldwork we observed that Portmán has become a tourism destination without ever receiving tourists; it has at least for its inhabitants, who see this activity as a necessary and desirable part of their future. This demonstrates the symbolic and material power of tourism and teaches us to approach it as an essential phenomenon in socio-cultural processes, not just in Portmán, but in any area influenced by tourism, as the physical and symbolic presence of tourism has far-reaching effects. In the words of Antonio Miguel Nogués-Pedregal:

«[Tourism] alters the social relationships within and among human groups, gives rise to new forms of production, transforms culture into heritage [...], modifies landscape, creates narratives and metaphors, shapes the ways we see ourselves and others, fractures continuity in the reproduction-production of meaning ... and in short turns *places* into tourism territories and settings through the meaningful mediation of tourism space» (Nogués-Pedregal, 2005: 1).

So tourism appears as a material reality but also as a discourse which, following Foucault (2010), produces truths and ways of understanding, defines the possible and the desirable and, in short, establishes the rules of existence. «This hypothesis explains, for example, that the actual presence of tourists (or their infrastructures) is not necessary to bring about changes in the social rhythms and cultural modes in peripheral and semi-peripheral areas» (Nogués-Pedregal, 2005: 7).

At least during the first decade of the 21st century the hegemonizing discourse on tourism –what Mandly called «the ideology of development» (2008)– took economic growth and social development to be one and the same, while paying little attention to the environmental, cultural and social consequences of its actions and ignoring «the unequal social distribution of the impacts generated by expanding residential tourism» (Aledo, 2012: 156).



Figure 5. Photograph by Raúl Travé. Los Alcázares, 2014. Personal archives. The residential complex Nueva Ribera, example of an abandoned resort.

On the coast of Murcia the residential tourism boom occurring at the beginning of the 2000s brought with it a great deal of property speculation. Thousands of houses were built, some of them isolated residential complexes with few services that are currently almost empty, if not totally abandoned (Figure 5). This happened with no significant opposition –save by the platform «Murcia No Se Vende» (Murcia is not for sale) and the coalition formed by the left-wing political parties Izquierda Unida and Los Verdes–. The lack of opposition was likely a consequence of the hegemonizing capacity of a discourse that presented and defended residential tourism as an infallible tool for permanent economic growth and social development in the towns that accepted it. The discourse on tourism thus becomes the most effective economic stimulus in peripheral and semi-peripheral contexts: it makes tourism appear to be the sole possibility for the development of an area and at the same time gives meaning to the practices implemented to this end.

The discourses *around* tourism act as a mechanism for the social construction of reality and signification of the same. Above them, ideologies, along with the socioeconomic structures and their power relations, give shape to and condition the discourses –and, of course, the practices– in an ongoing dialogical relation, configuring identities and social positions in the field of tourism. They also structure the relations between the actors in this field, ultimately contributing

to the creation of knowledge systems, beliefs and values similar to certain ideologies and world visions (Tribe, 2007). In the case of Portmán we will see how each group of actors has deployed and sought to articulate its own discourse around the concept 'development' (mining *vs.* mining-tourism; industrial tourism *vs.* traditional tourism) depending on its interests and with a view to changing the distribution of the positive and negative impacts of the different economic activities. These discourses function as legitimizers of the diverse socio-cultural practices studied. They are also a key feature of the struggles for hegemony –the struggle to become the sanctioned discourse that acts as the backbone of practices– which is ultimately the tool that will permit the negative impacts of the different development options to be accepted and the contrary discourses and practices distrusted.

In Portmán, over the last three decades, there have been heated discussions in the streets, in bars, at association meetings and inside homes, about the type of tourism development that should be promoted (should more or less building intensity be permitted, should it be residential or hotel-based, should it recover traditional fishing activities or focus more on recreational boating, etc.). This battle translates, as indicated above, into an uneven distribution of the positive and negative consequences on the territory and on society, in which agents, forming groups or coalitions, have tried to influence and control the decisions made.

«We turned our backs on the bay even though we knew it was a barbaric thing to do, we defended our work because it was in our interest and it was how we supported our families [...] then they [the company] abandoned us [...] and we finally realized that we had to defend our village» (miner).

In this struggle the sum of capitals of each social agent has been decisive in shaping and controlling the block of practices it hegemonizes. It has been, therefore, a battle at two levels: the discursive level, which seeks to make a given imaginary about tourism development desirable, and the practical level, which seeks ultimately to impose a specific program, which in any case could not be completely opposed to the desired imaginary, because that would risk confrontation with the majority of the population.

This kind of confrontation is a good example of how structures and social agents interact, in what Giddens calls «structuration» (1992). The structures are both the means and the result of action by agents, and agents are neither prisoners totally at the mercy of external forces nor sculptors creating social reality however they wish. This capacity of structuration is what allows agents to take a stand regarding the «development» concept and appropriate it for

themselves, adapting it to their needs and aspirations while trying to reduce its role in strategies of cultural and social domination.

The most recent works published on Portmán after our fieldwork continue to point in these directions. For example, Baños-González et al. (2017) point out the preference of local agents for the development of environmental and cultural tourism in Portmán, as long as it is carried out under terms agreed by the community. In turn, Meseguer (2016) analyses the civil and criminal responsibilities of Peñarroya and Portmán Golf, while agreeing with us on the importance of the social structure and power relations to understand the evolution and changes in the positions of the different social agents in Portmán.

4. TOURISM DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES

The coastline of the Region of Murcia –especially the area of Mar Menor, Europe’s largest salt water lagoon– has seen tremendous expansion in the tourism business since the 1960s, as illustrated by the sector’s economic data.¹ According to *IMPACTUR 2011* tourism accounted for 9.8% of the regional GDP (2,719 million euros), which translates into 55,792 direct and indirect jobs, 10.2% of the total. While these figures are below the national average, where tourism represents 10.8% of the GDP and 12.2% of employment, they must be contextualized. According to the statistics division of Murcia’s regional government (2012) the year 2011 closed with an average of 41,971 persons employed in the tourism sector (direct employment) as indicated by the number of individuals registered with the National Institute of Social Security. This represents an increase of 0.4% over the preceding year, at a time in which the Region was experiencing a general loss of employment of 1.7%. The Mar Menor and La Manga (the strip of land separating the Mar Menor from the Mediterranean) were Murcia’s only tourism references for a long time. Both have a particularly important weight in these figures because according to Spain’s Economic and Social Council (2011: 82) they amount for 47% of the total number of nights spent in the province, and almost 56% if we include the neighbouring city of Cartagena.

¹ We provide the economic data for 2011 and 2012 as an appropriate context for the time when we carried out our fieldwork. The most current data, after the impasse of the pandemic, continue to show a similar picture to the one described, although the tourism sector shows a clear trend of growth in the overall economy of the Region of Murcia, which would reinforce our arguments.

These data give an idea of the economic transformation of an area that in the 1960s had begun to experience structural changes of great magnitude, for two reasons. One was the Tajo-Segura hydraulic project, which made it possible to industrialize agriculture, and the other was the implantation on La Manga (Figures 6 and 7) and the area around the Mar Menor (Martínez, 2002) of tourism practices conducive to the creation of the *masses* to which mass tourism refers. With the arrival of this type of tourism a «destination transformation» took place and a 'tourism context' was generated along the coast of the Mar Menor. To put it another way, not only did tourism become the main economic activity, but the local population began to understand itself, use its environment and find meaning in its practices *through* tourism. That is, tourism has acted and continues to act as a significant mediator of everyday life (Nogués-Pedregal, 2006).



Figure 6. Author unknown. La Manga, Early 1960s. Photographic archives of www.20minutos.es.

Figure 7. Pedro Armestre. La Manga, beginning of the 21st century. Photographic archives of Greenpeace.



Development ideology, characterized by the depredation, elitization and privatization of landscape and resources (Mandly 2008), has prevailed on the coast of Murcia, like on most of Spain's Mediterranean coast, limiting its population's chances of controlling or directing this process. In the Region of Murcia, La Manga del Mar Menor is the best example of this. Portmán, however, has remained on the margins of these dynamics, like a peculiar exception, initially due to the predominance of mining and, decades later, because of problems related to regenerating the bay and urbanizing the land around it.

This exceptionality combines with several interesting socio-cultural dynamics (Figure 8). First, the confluence and clash of the various mining, tourism and environmental discourses articulated around the concept/signifier «development». Second, the presence of a strong network of associations with an ability to mobilize that has remained steady in recent years. Third, the constant appearance in the regional press of the town, its associations and the protest actions organized by them. Fourth, the recognition by the political institutions of the citizen movement of Portmán as a valid interlocutor in the negotiation regarding plans for regeneration and development. Fifth, the inescapable fact that Portmán has been an island surrounded by a sea of tourism for fifty years.

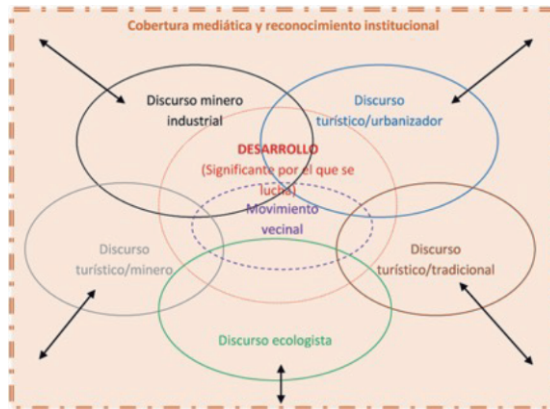


Figure 8. Discourses around the signifier «development» in Portmán.

4.1. Discourses and attitudes over time

To facilitate analysis and comprehension we have divided the socio-cultural continuum since 1967 into three periods defined by economic changes.

4.1.1. 1967-1979: Omnipotence of mining

As the Bay of Portmán disappeared under the tons of waste being emptied into the sea, the Region of Murcia was experiencing a major increase in economic activity connected to tourism. The percentage of the population employed in services rose from 26.31% in 1955 to 50.85% in 1985 while the percentage working in construction rose from 4.21% to 8.19% (Martínez, 2002: 73).

What happened in Portmán in the 1970s cannot be understood without taking into account two factors that determined the reaction of the media and the adoption by some residents of the idea to promote tourism in their town. On the one hand, a new law (the Press Act of 1966) had softened government control of news-related content, suspending prior restraint, or pre-publication censorship. On the other hand, the development of the land on La Manga del Mar Menor and the inauguration of the *La Manga Club* in 1972 brought about an explosion in tourism.

In consonance with what was happening on La Manga and in the towns along the Mar Menor, in 1965 the Town Council of La Unión broached the possibility of bringing tourists to Portmán. With this intention the municipal authorities submitted a request to the Ports of Murcia Administrative Commission, to mark out a section of the coastline that could be used for the construction of a seaside promenade and hotel with which to initiate Portmán's promotion as a tourist destination. The Commission responded that a section of the coast could be set aside for that purpose only if the bay was previously dredged. This condition was accepted by *Peñarroya* and plans were ostensibly made, yet the dredging never took place. However, the guides published during that period began to present Portmán as a tourist destination. For example, the *Guía turística de Murcia y su provincia* (1965), which includes Portmán's beach in the section «List of Beaches», states that: «In the seaside town of Portmán there is a beach of high quality and *good tourism possibilities*, frequently used by residents of La Unión and Cartagena, and by *tourists from other places*» (emphasis added). On the one hand, no mention is made of the already evident contamination caused by the tailings and, on the other hand, the tourism potential of the place is highlighted.

By this time there was talk among Portmán residents and its sporadic visitors of the «wonderful tourism possibilities» that the town and its bay might have, although such talk never questioned the mining activity that employed a large number of the heads of household in Portmán. These discourses laid the foundations of a socially constructed image that the residents have of the bay. A good example is the article «The Cinderella of the Costa Blanca» published in August of 1972 by Carmen Díaz, a retired teacher who had been born in Portmán but now spent only summers there:

«Hugged by its mountains, the beach forms a shell that protects the lovely pearl of this pure diaphanous sea, with its soft dark sands. But this delicious beach is on the verge of disappearing, it is agonizing under the weight of thousands of tons of black slag that are dumped on it every day and are turning into a desert sandpit *something that could be a tourist destination and a positive source of revenue*». (Emphasis added) (Baños, 2004: 35).

In the 1970s fishermen were the most combative group because *a priori* their interests clashed with those of *Peñarroya*. Although the regional press published a series of letters criticizing the dumping of waste signed by fishermen and fishing-related businesses, this group never adopted a position of confrontation or direct denunciation. Their discourse, their attitude –like that of the press– was to point out the evils of excess and advocate the co-existence of the mining and fishing industries. The members of this collective were cognizant of the economic dependence most of their neighbours had on *Peñarroya* and also of the company's power:

«As men of the sea who make a living by fishing in the waters of Portmán, we know the problems afflicting us can be fixed, *with no prejudicial effect whatsoever on the mining industry or the fishing industry, which can and must live together in harmony*». (Emphasis added) (Baños, 2004: 22).

The *Peñarroya Mining Company* tried to counter these veiled attacks by occupying as many pages as they could in the regional press. They found willing pages especially in the daily newspaper *La Verdad* which, for example, on 26 November 1974 published an interview with «Mr Alain de Sagazán, Director of *Peñarroya Mining Company Spain*» in which he highlighted three issues. First, the Spanish authorities had granted the company an administrative concession allowing the release of waste materials that were unexpectedly filling up the bay. Second, the company planned to provide funding and land in Cabo de Palos for the building of a new fishing port to compensate the fishermen. Third, the waste material was innocuous: «the reagents used at the Lavadero oxidize

when they come into contact with air and disappear completely during the transit of the waste to the sea».

During this period two discourses were articulated: the mining discourse, defended openly by *Peñarroya* and backed more or less discreetly by the company's workers and their families; and the one we call the tourism/mining discourse, defended by businesses, fishermen and land owners. This discourse, although it challenged the mining discourse to a certain degree, did not go beyond the limits imposed by it. In this way a hegemonizing discourse was formed and, along with it, practices that did not question the pre-eminence of mining activity or the work of *Peñarroya*. The multinational company, with the economic and social control it had over a large part of the population, ensured social and cultural hegemony, avoiding ruptures or social conflicts of greater magnitude.

The dialogic creation of consensus was forged in large part in the same spaces that are central for local communication today: the town's cafés and bars and, especially, the meeting halls of the *Liga de Vecinos*, the League of Neighbours, which is the most important association in Portmán. The flipside of this consensus was the marginalization of the environmental discourse (which challenged all mining activity), as shown by the long period of exclusion suffered by this discourse and those defending it (Figure 9). This marginality and the practices of isolation and even harassment experienced by the environmental movement are illustrated by an 'anecdote' shared by one of Portman's first environmentalists; after finding his tires slashed several times he decided to live somewhere else.



Figure 9. Alliances: Discursive blocks and actors in Portmán, 1970s.

The rapid development of La Manga laid the structural foundations for the appearance of an environmental movement and discourse in Murcia in the late 1970s. It was promoted by local scientists, activists and thinkers who, in the lively socio-political atmosphere characterizing the final years of the Franco regime and the subsequent transition to democracy, devoted part of their political fervour to protection of the territory. This is how, for example, the *Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste (ANSE)* had been founded in 1973 and the *Grupo Ecologista Mediterráneo (GEM)* in 1977. These associations started generating a discourse based on the defence of the countryside, that is, the territory and the social, environmental and cultural values of that territory. It began as a minority discourse in Portmán but as time passed it permeated the other discourses and rearticulated them around its principal signifiers (such as sustainable development).

4.1.2. 1980-1991: Decadence of mining

During the 1980s two parallel battles were waged in Portmán: the environmental battle, at times spurred on from the outside but receiving ever greater support inside the town, and the battle of *Peñarroya* workers fighting for the continuity of mining operations and their jobs. Both reached an inflexion point in 1991 when the mines closed and all the workers were laid off. This event resulted in the two battles converging, articulating, in time, a common strategy and discourse.

Seven years before the closing of the mines, in the summer of 1985, the mayor at the time, Andrés Martínez Cánovas, and the Town Councillor for the Environment, Francisco Faraco (both of the Spanish Workers Socialist Party, PSOE), had met with representatives of various townspeople associations to present a project for the partial regeneration of the coast, based on a study funded by *Peñarroya*. The solution proposed consisted of building a breakwater in the eastern part of the bay, a structure long enough to prevent the waste materials from entering and thus allowing for the subsequent recovery of one third of the bay. The corresponding section of land would be equipped with a promenade and garden areas. However, some of those in attendance –identified as local environmentalists– argued that the entire bay needed to be recovered and other citizen concerns were also raised. At the meeting the political authorities promised to incorporate recommendations made by the town's residents and the Portmán Defence Committee was formed. Excluded from the Committee, though, were the individuals connected to the environmental movement, who were viewed as enemies of mining. This event is

illustrative of the period's social instability. During this time discursive possibilities opened up and two blocks with opposing interests took shape (Figure 10), although one of them, the mining/tourism discourse, backed by *Peñarroya*, continued to have greater hegemonizing power thanks to the economic and social control it had over the population.

These discursive blocks had their own practices. Within the mining/tourism block practices of quiescence prevailed (Gaventa, 1980), backed by the consensus generated in Portmán's public areas, while the environmentalist block fomented and engaged in practices of a different nature: protests and events conceived to raise political/environmental awareness, which enjoyed more and more support in the town but were largely organized from the outside. In times of crisis, of instability, clashing social actors sometimes take elements from the rival discourse and try to mould them to their own interests, in an effort to retain or obtain discursive hegemony. This can be seen when *Peñarroya* accepts the compatibility of tourism and mining and even promotes it, having previously opposed it.

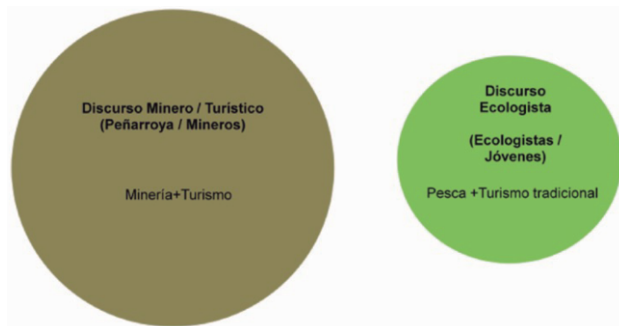


Figure 10. Alliances: Discursive blocks and actors in Portmán, 1980s.

One year after that meeting, on 31 July 1986, the environmental group *Greenpeace* organized an event that would again put Portmán in the national news. Their ship *Sirius* had been in the vicinity of the bay for a few days; the group had informed the company of its intention to block the pipes and the workers had been warned:

«We had been watching the ship for several days and we said to ourselves: ‘something is going to happen; these people are going to do something’. And we could not let them put our jobs at risk. Of course, we didn’t like what had happened with the bay either, but we weren’t going to sit back and let our jobs be lost like that. Later we too showed our disagreement [with the contamination] but obviously it didn’t do any good in the end». (Worker at Lavadero Roberto).



Figure 11. Lorette Dorreboom. Portmán, 1986. Photographic archives of Greenpeace. Greenpeace activists watch as the flow of slurry is blocked.

When two activists tried to block the pipes and two others chained themselves to the metal structure that held the pipes (Figure 11) some of the workers at the Lavadero «ran down» and clashes with journalists and environmentalists erupted. Many mine workers consider that moment to be the beginning of the end of mining activity in the area.

In 1987 the association *ANSE* organized a campaign denouncing the situation, another example of protest and awareness-raising practices, aimed at counteracting the generalized passivity. As part of this campaign a report was published: *Problemática de Portmán*, by Isabel González and Pedro Baños. The report's decalogue of conclusions sums up the thinking of one part of the town of Portmán and, more importantly, it puts forward ideas related to the concept of sustainable development that have subsequently been assumed by the great majority of residents. This «sustainable development» should take concrete form in a type of tourism controlled by the community and compatible with other activities, an idea mentioned in point 5 of the decalogue:

«The town is sacrificing the possibilities of a stable future (fishing, farming, tourism, culture...) so as to extract a mineral present in limited amounts in the greatest quantity possible, in the shortest time possible and with the least investment, instead of finding ways to make all the facets compatible». (González & Baños, 1987: 10).

In 1988 *Peñarroya* sold all of its assets and liabilities in the Sierra Minera to a newly-created company based in Cartagena, *Portmán Golf*. From the outset, the new company said its intention was to make mining and tourism/urban development compatible, even while announcing the end of all mining activity in a year and a half's time and the transfer of the employees to construction activities as part of a project for the massive development of the bay's viewshed. The agreement appeared to be good for all parties and the tourism myth constructed over so many years seemed about to become real.

In the beginning, *Portmán Golf* managed, just as *Peñarroya* had, to exert control the majority of Portmán's residents, who believed their interests were aligned with those of «the company». But several different crises and contradictory actions on the part of the new owners put cracks in this capacity, leaving large spaces open and receptive to new influences. When people ceased to believe their interests were the same as those of «the company», environmental discourses began to permeate those of local associations, who gradually came to occupy the hegemonizing role previously performed by *Peñarroya*.

On December 2nd 1991 the mine workers of *Portmán Golf* went to Cartagena to sign their settlement agreement. The company had broken its promise and let its employees go. That day, the company sealed its fate: it was no longer the hegemonizing actor in the area. However, the workers, understanding that mining had come to an end, facilitated the convergence of their interests with those of the other residents and laid the foundations for the network of townspeople associations becoming the agent with the most prestige and the most hegemonizing potential of Portmán.

Portmán's citizen movement, in its role, would not reject all of the previous system, but rather decompose it into its basic elements and select those which, after modifying their content, would be useful for rearticulation in a new system (Gramsci, [1929]1975: 1322). In this case, it was the idea of using tourism as a tool for development, although in terms very different from those proposed by *Portmán Golf*.

4.1.3. 1991-2013: The omnipotence of tourism

After the closing of the mines, the workers' movement slowly integrated with Portmán's townspeople associations –about a third of the approximately three hundred workers at *Portmán Golf* lived in the town–. This integration was conducive to a new discourse taking root among the population in the period from 1992 to 1996. This discourse revolved around the concept of



Figure 12. Some headlines regarding citizen struggles.

«development» articulated with a tourism economy –by that time generally accepted as the central element of national and particularly Mediterranean development– but with elements taken from the environmental protection discourse, such as sustainability.

The citizen movement, with *La Liga de Vecinos* at the forefront, was capable of drawing together most of the population around the vindication of regenerating the bay and reactivating the area economically (Figure 12). This became clearly visible to us during one of our first field visits, which coincided with the demonstration held on 28 June 2009. On this occasion people had mobilized to protest the construction of a container port in the nearby Bay of Gorguel, which would make the regeneration of Portmán more complicated and, especially, would condition its development as a tourist destination. That day we could see the degree of citizen involvement and the importance of local associationism. Not in vain the demonstration ended at the headquarters of the *Liga de Vecinos* with food and musical performances –from flamenco to protest songs– all transmitting the same message.

Almost all the residents of Portmán participate or have participated at some time in the *Liga de Vecinos*, although it is true that most of its executive posts have been occupied traditionally by persons connected to left-wing political parties. The association has received support from groups such as *ANSE* and *Ecologistas en Acción* and from members of the academic community at the Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena and the Universidad de Murcia, all of which have been collaborating actively through the *Fundación Sierra Minera* since 1998.

The associative movement has been working for years to gain more control over the institutional and administrative decisions affecting Portmán. In a way, the citizen movement, having become an agent with hegemonizing capacity at the local level, came to occupy the role formerly held by *Peñarroya*.

Three main issues have hampered, unfortunately, the possibilities for regeneration and recovery of the bay and mountains. First, the lack of funding with which to undertake any of the projects that have been considered. Second, the difficulties in reaching an agreement about the reclassification of lands. Third, the tense relationship with *Portmán Golf*, another actor in the battle for control over the possible forms of tourism development in the area.

Although land use reclassification and the development of the area for tourism purposes are viewed by all social agents (land owners, residents, politicians and environmentalists) as the best option for the future, the differences among them are also important. The most critical position and discourse regarding land use reclassification were initially headed by the environmental group *ANSE*, while *Portmán Golf* sought the highest possible building-to-land ratios.

During this time the townspeople association movement showed itself to be active and unified. The differences among fishermen, miners and environmentalists gradually lessened and quite a homogenous block of action and discourse took shape (Figure 13). However, different sensibilities showing greater or lesser concordance with environmental demands started to be visible in two of the main townspeople associations, the larger *Liga de Vecinos* (closer to the environmental movement) and the *Asociación de Vecinos Bahía de Portmán*.

While both political discourses (in all their variation) and environmental discourses used (and still use) tourism as a central element, differences between them can certainly be detected. The main difference lies in the content given to the adjective «sustainable», which varies according to the interests of each social actor, with the ultimate goal of influencing the discourses and attitudes of the residents. So, if for most of the residents and environmental groups «sustainable»

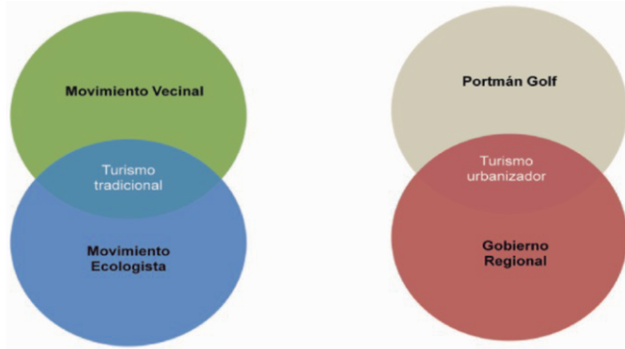


Figure 13. Alliances: Discursive blocks and actors in Portmán, 1991-2013.

meant being able to control tourism development and combine it with other activities, for *Portmán Golf* and the Regional Government the adjective is more of a marketing label. For example, while the Regional Minister of Tourism, Pedro Alberto Cruz, spoke of «reorganizing regional tourism [...] *in harmony with nature and not at its expense*» (emphasis added) (*La Opinión*: 31/08/11), he proposed a plan that the press called the *Côte d'Azur of Murcia* (*La Opinión*: 01/09/11) and could be summarized as «several luxury hotels, a golf course, fancy homes and a seaside promenade»; the group *Ecologistas en Acción* described such a plan as a return to «the exhausted, damaging and unsustainable model of construction and golf courses» (*La Verdad*: 02/09/11). The residents of the area repeated their intention to stay in control: «Tourists, yes, but in limited numbers [...] the residents of Portmán do not want the Bay to fill up with apartments and hotels» (*La Opinión*: 16/12/11).

The period between 2001 and 2013 can only be understood by taking into account the economic growth occurring in the Region of Murcia, based on property speculation, and the Regional Government's increased prioritization of the tourism economy in the first decade of the 21st century:

«The Land Use Act of 2001 clears the path for the promotion of residential complexes. The same is true of the Guidelines for Territorial Planning in the Tourism Sector, in that it favours broad-based actions in tourism, with a view to heightening demand for quality services, with hotels and complementary offerings, in the understanding that the pillars of the new tourism scene are golf, sailing and outdoor sports» (Vera, 2006: 170-171).

This period in Portmán can be described as a continual barrage of announcements of regeneration and development projects that are «soon to be launched» and «unfortunately delayed»; constant attention in the press; contradictory behaviour by the executives of *Portmán Golf*; and an ever-greater convergence of the environmental positions and discourses and those of the townspeople associations as regards tourism/urban development.

The citizen movement considers regeneration of the bay a much-needed door to tourism development but also a question of historical justice. For this reason, the residents remain vigilant and are unwilling to let tourism turn into a form of domination that takes away (yet again) their control over their town, their land and their future. The acceptance of these basic premises, currently hegemonizing at the local level, is clearly visible in the fact that following the period of conflict and lack of unity (1996-2001), the different resident groups again formed a single block of action and discourse, motivated by the need to find solutions for a question that affected the lives of all residents of Portmán.

When in 2001 the Regional Minister of Public Works, José Pablo Ruiz Abellán, proposed «leaving the deposits of heavy minerals in their current location», that is, not moving the wastes, and beginning «a partial action to control the environmental, visual and marine impact of the submerged tailings» (*El Faro*: 13/11/2001), the inhabitants of Portmán rejected the idea unanimously: «Of course nobody could even conceive of the idea of sealing off the bay and leaving it as is; that was practically an insult to the many struggles and the many people who had worked so hard to see that the bay was recovered» (professor).

Contrasting with the Regional Government's proposal to seal off the bay and build a sporting marina and other facilities, the goal of residents was to recover the original coastline, limit pleasure boat dockage at the new marina and prioritize that of fishing boats. The confrontation shows how different meanings are assigned by these actors to two concepts that both groups tend to put together: «tourism» and «sustainable development». For the Regional Government the priority was to develop the area with the impulse provided by the sporting marina and a few other recreational facilities (promenade, golf courses, etc.) to ensure the investment would bring economic benefits in the surrounding area. As regards sustainability, the elimination of contamination risks was the only action contemplated. However, in the eyes of town residents the tourism project needed to mandate comprehensive environmental regeneration, as a matter of historic justice. For them the central axis of «sustainable development» should be environmental and cultural valorisation,

while urban development should be controlled. For that same reason their main priority was to recover the fishing port and limit the dockage capacity of the potential pleasure boat marina.

At that moment, environmentalists and *Portmán Golf* were facing a paradoxical situation. The former, always strong defenders of the recovery of the bay, actually came to prefer sealing the bay as a quasi-environmental solution to patent government inaction, although they remained opposed to the pleasure boat marina and the urban development plan. The latter tacitly opposed sealing the bay, as it might limit the economic benefits of the urbanizing operation, but supported the urban development plan and the building of recreational facilities, especially the marina.

In the end, the environmental movement joined forces with the resident association movement, opposing the sealing of the bay and advocating a comprehensive regeneration project supervised by local residents; and the Regional Government modified its position to be more in line with that of *Portmán Golf*, to try to maximize the area's economic prospects. So, although they were in agreement about almost nothing, the two blocks converged in the need to recover the bay.

In late 2005 the agreement regarding the regeneration and the development of the area appeared to be imminent. The central government would undertake the bay's regeneration while the Regional Government would be in charge of «drawing up and executing the technical project for a pleasure boat/fishing marina» with no more than 650 moorings (*La Verdad*: 15/11/2005). On November 16th the agreement was signed at a meeting of residents and representatives of the Spanish Ministry of the Environment and of the Region of Murcia. The residents started out defending the coastline of 1957 and the recuperation of fishing activity:

«At the meeting we saw that it was not possible to recover the bay completely, but we couldn't let the opportunity to do something pass us by, so we drew a line more or less down the middle of the old bay, so at least that part would be recovered... Later on, at the meeting with all the town's residents to explain and approve the proposal, it was very hard to convince people. It was like renouncing a historical demand and admitting that never again would the bay be the way it used to be. There were people, the older folks, who cried... but it was accepted» (professor).

The details of the final project were to be decided by means of a design competition, with the hope that the works would be adjudicated in 2006 and completed between 2009 and 2010. But once again almost none of the plan was implemented.

Upon conclusion of the design competition, all of Portmán's townspeople associations presented, jointly, a series of proposals to improve the plan for the recovery of the bay and its environmental uses. In so doing, the groups showed both unity of action and assimilation of their own tourism discourse. In global terms they had a positive assessment of the project but they made suggestions for improvement in some significant areas. They pointed out, for example, that cultural heritage such as the *Lavadero Roberto* facilities should be protected and showcased, that the whole fishing port should be recovered and that the link between the Calblanque Nature Reserve and the beach of Portmán should be re-established.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Portmán has become a tourism territory even though it has undergone almost no material transformation in that respect: no hotels or recreational facilities have been built, it is not included in the packages offered by tour operators, it does not receive regular visits by tourists. The transformation has thus occurred in what we can call superstructures.

The ongoing process of construction and reconstruction of hegemony, of «the limits within which ideas and conflicts move and are resolved» (Hall, Jefferson, [1975] 2014: 99) has been mediated by two phenomena that arrived with great force in this community in the 60s; tourism, which began to take root in the town's surrounding area (La Manga and the Mar Menor), and mass communication. The regional newspapers paid close attention and were eager to report whatever happened in this small town. Through these *mediations* society began to understand itself; society and its relations began to be thought of *through* the two phenomena, although not in a direct manner, rather a negotiated one.

In Portmán the disappearance of what had been the hegemonizing agent *par excellence*, the *Sociedad Minero Metalúrgica Peñarroya*, and its replacement by another, *Portmán Golf*, with coercive capacity but no faculties for achieving consensus, enabled the residents of Portmán, as a collective, to move from quiescence to active participation as a political agent. That is, both *Portmán Golf* and the Regional Government expected to be able to impose their plans for tourism/urban development in the same way that *Peñarroya* had seen to it that open cast mining, the dumping of wastes into the sea and the resulting disappearance of the bay were accepted by the population. However, the reality is that, although the vision of Portmán as a tourist destination has prevailed, the

town's inhabitants have found a space in which to build their own discourses about «development». Such discourses do not veer far from the dominant idea of tourism but they are articulated with elements of their own and also elements taken from environmentalist discourses.

The fact that during the Franco regime Portmán's entire population assumed a series of premises does not necessarily mean that political conflict disappeared. In fact the attempts to reconfigure the «hegemony» at the local level never ceased. As shown above, fishermen, businesses and land owners initially, and young people (not miners) with environmental concerns later, attempted to negotiate the discourse and practice of «mining development no matter the cost» by trying to insert the following elements into the discourse: fishing, tourism and sustainability. The social agents making these attempts were those who found themselves somehow on the periphery of society, far from control but also far from the profits derived from mining activity. For them the prevailing discourses and strategies of domination were not as apt or effective, so these agents ended up having the greatest possibilities of articulating new discourses.

Behind what appeared to be a discussion among multiple interests until they reached consensus was in fact a struggle by each to make its own voice heard and be recognized as legitimate interlocutors. Until the early 1990s *Peñarroya*, with the help of its employees, managed to hush these voices which –even if they occasionally acted as interlocutors or found space to express their vindications– were controlled by the combined application of strategies of coercion and consent.

It was when *Peñarroya* disappeared, and then mining, liquidated by *Portmán Golf*, that these voices were able to articulate a new hegemonizing discourse, taking advantage of the vacuum that mining left behind. This new discourse ended up being adopted and defended, in a single block, by those who had previously supported the mining discourse. Its great success, apart from specific vindications, is having managed to become the legitimate interlocutor in conversations with agents adhering to the development ideology in the battle for socio-cultural hegemony at the local level.

In Murcia, where with few exceptions the construction of large residential developments and golf courses has been favourably received, it is particularly interesting to note the attitude of most of Portmán's residents. Since the very hard years that came with the end of mining activity, they have advocated the development of tourism but they have always fought to see that it did not take the same form as in the rest of the region.

Attitudes regarding what is possible and what is desirable have gradually taken shape in Portmán under the influence of the tourism discourse (tourism as the only viable option for the development of peripheral areas) and the influence of the environmentalist discourse present in the area. Because of local cultural patterns, the citizen movement has appropriated both. The result is a tourism discourse rearticulated around elements taken from the environmentalist discourse. This new, combined discourse has been able to take root in the structuration of everyday life because it was articulated around elements taken from the outside but modified from the inside. It is not only a discourse of resistance; it also encourages action at the local level, generating an exceptional degree of activism and citizen participation in decision-making, with participation having been achieved, on many occasions, through protest actions.

In any case, the situation is neither permanent nor stable. The current hegemonizing capacity of the citizen movement and the tourism development discourse is still in progress. In the words of Raymond Williams, «a lived hegemony is always a process [...] It has to be continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own» (Williams 1977: 112).

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