



Climate Change as opportunity? Framing national identity through marketing carbon neutrality

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Abstract: In this text we explore climate change as an axis for framing Costa Rican national identity and marketing in both the international narrative portrayed by the United Nations (UN) and the official national narrative delivered by the Costa Rican government. We focus on the award of ‘*UN Champion of the Earth*,’ which was given to Costa Rica in 2019 and on discussions around carbon neutrality; the paper analyzes news related to the award. We use tools from discourse analysis and approach our data from a glottopolitical perspective. In our findings, we aim to problematize the framing of climate change action as a profitable economic project.

Keywords: climate change, glottopolitics, discourse analysis, Costa Rica.

1. Introduction

In 2019 Costa Rica (CR) was granted the award of *UN Champion of the Earth* because of its commitment to carbon neutrality. The country has also been known internationally as an example of outstanding environmental protection since the 1990s (Nygren 1998), and has continually positioned itself as a *green country*. This pattern continues into the present with the nation’s branding, *essential Costa Rica*, which uses the ideas of nature, flora and fauna, and

conservationism as the attributes that make the country worthy of foreign investment (Hernández Sánchez, Hinkelammert Palma & Sánchez Sánchez 2019).

In this work, we explore climate change as an axis for framing discourses about Costa Rica in the context of the award of ‘*UN Champion of the Earth.*’ We understand *climate change* (CC) not only as an empirical phenomenon that affects the climate system with both natural and—especially—human causes, but also as a sociopolitical phenomenon, with linguistic materiality. CC is a sociopolitical phenomenon that has changed over the years according to shifting economic conditions and changes in global capitalist formations and geopolitical relationships; therefore, it also affects the non-natural material conditions of people.

We will focus on that linguistic materiality; our objective is to make clear how we understand it concerning CC. For this, we define *language* as a social practice through which we constantly negotiate intersubjectivity and the spaces of/for political communities, because we live in societies of individuals who are politically organized (Fairclough 2001; Voloshinov 2009). Along these lines, we want to suggest with Fairclough that “all linguistic phenomena are social, [but] not all social phenomena are linguistic—though even those that are not just linguistic (economic production, for instance) typically have a substantial, and often underestimated, language element” (19). Thus, language is at the same time both the instrument and the materialization of social practice, as well as being part of other social practices.

For this explorative work, we analyze four news articles. Two are published in English by the United Nations (UN) on their official website regarding the prize granted to CR (United Nations 2019a & 2019b) and two published in Spanish by the Costa Rican government (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019a & 2019b); the first regarding the prize and the second the opening of the PRE COP25, a preparatory meeting for the Conferences of Parties

(COP) of the United Nations Climate Change Convention (UNCCC). We begin by analyzing the narratives about Costa Rican identity found in these sources; then, we go on to narrow our perspective to focus on narratives about the environment.

2. Findings

Here we have decided to cover the UN and the Costa Rican official narratives together, because they are strongly intertwined. Both institutions constantly recall the voice of the other in their texts (*heteroglossia*). The sources can almost be read as a collaborative narrative creating the idea of Costa Rican national identity; there is a sort of repetition of information, like echoes operating in the same direction, thus contributing to the same imaginary. In conceptualizing the creation of a national identity, we start with Anderson's concept of a *nation* as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 6). This imagined community is easy to track in our corpus. We find references to the past, present, and future Costa Rican community, and it is through the comparison of different temporalities that this identity is portrayed.

According to the one of the UN sources, although there were “decades of deforestation” (UN 2019a), Costa Rica started to be aware of environmental issues in the past (we can date this awareness back to the 1970s, when national parks and protected areas started to emerge), thus the president acknowledges the “past generations who protected the environment” (UN 2019a & 2019b) as part of the discourse. In the government narrative, the president highlights the case of coffee production as an exemplar of this kind of environmental awareness because of the changes that started to happen about 30 years ago, such as the recirculation of water and the production of natural fertilizer from the coffee pulp. He affirms that it was the first product in the

entire world to gain international recognition for these kinds of actions (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019b).

The selection of coffee as an example of environmentalism in CR implies ignoring other crops. This procedure is called *erasure* and consists of totalizing a certain element and making invisible those that do not fit into the ideology that is being represented (Irvine & Gal). In the Costa Rican context, this erasure is important to note, because coffee has historically been linked to the Costa Rican white political elites, while banana and other plantations have historically been run by transnational companies, and involved human exploitation and agrochemicals (we will return to this point in the discussion).

Moving into the present, Costa Rica's environmental policy is framed almost entirely by positive characteristics; Costa Rica is *committed to ambitious policies to combat climate change, a policy leader, a world leader in sustainability, a pioneer, an example for the region and the world, a successful country in the environmental field, among others* (UN 2019a; Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019a). The UN narrative depicts the political leaders of the country positively, granting them praise for many of the positive environmental decisions (UN 2019b) while highlighting that the country's "environmental credentials are impressive: more than 98 percent of its energy is renewable, forest cover now stands at more than 53 percent [...] and around a quarter of the country's land has been turned into protected parks and reserves" (UN 2019b par.8). Additionally, the government points out the sustainability of current coffee production practices: "Hoy, más de la quinta parte de nuestro café se produce de manera sostenible y es bajo en emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero" (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019b).

Among all of these positive features, there is a metaphor that deserves particular attention: *Costa Rica as a 'living Eden'*, which is salient not only because it is in the title of the UN (2019b) article we analyzed, but also —and especially— because of its biblical allusion. Here we see a process of *iconization* that consists of picking out characteristics presumedly shared by Costa Rica and Eden and linking them so as to seem inherent to both (Irvine & Gal). Because the metaphor is placed in the title, it works as an instruction for the reader in how to approach the features that will be presented. Such a powerful metaphor produces the erasure of basically any negative characteristics in the environmental field of the country because it recalls an interpretative structure that is totalizing.

Across the narrative, we find some negative points about Costa Rica's current environmental practices but these are limited to those that the country is planning to change in the future, such as transportation that produces CO₂ and poor waste management. As an example, we see how when talking about coffee plantations (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019b), the Costa Rican president announces that they are planning to apply similar strategies for other crops, such as banana and sugar cane. There is *another erasure* in this point: there is no reference here to Costa Rica's pineapple crops, which are one of the country's main products and one of the most criticized by the environmental movement (we will come back to this point).

In other words, despite what we know about the past and present communities, there is a focus on the future community; the discourse about past and present functions in accordance with the future community, helping to differentiate the future from both present and past. Because shaping one identity implies a process of comparison to “the Other”, in this narrative we see that Costa Rica is contrasted against the region and with other countries. As presented by one

of the articles (UN 2019b), Leo Heileman, the UN Environment Programme’s Regional Director in Latin America and the Caribbean states that “the country **will achieve its goals and set an example to the region and the world**” (par. 4, emphasis added). Nevertheless, there is also a process of *fractal recursivity* (Irvine & Gal) at work here. The same opposition of Costa Rica vs the Other (region, rest of the world) is applied to that *imagined* Costa Rica vs the *current* Costa Rica (past, present).

This relationship of the imagined community with a future version of itself takes us to another salient metaphor found in our analysis. The president’s mention of DNA recalls the metaphor of evolution when he affirms that “**sustainable development is very much in the DNA of Costa Ricans**” (UN 2019b par.11, emphasis added —the same words appear in Spanish in Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019a par.14). This metaphor promotes the idea of *sustainable development* as a natural outcome for Costa Ricans. It is additionally telling that this metaphor does not come alone but is paired with the image of Costa Rica as unarmed. The coupling of *peace and nature* are mentioned at least once in each news article. For example, in one of the UN articles (2019a), Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, explains that “Costa Rica has been a **pioneer in the protection of peace and nature** and sets an example for the region and for the world” (par.5, emphasis added).

Because the accent across all of the sources is put on the future community, a prominent feature emerges from our analysis; that the environmental prize granted to Costa Rica responds to the imagined community depicted by the nation’s decarbonization plan, whose results are supposedly going to be seen in 2050. In other words, the country is not being recognized because of its empirical actions on climate change, but rather because of the discourse on climate action in Costa Rica, that is, because of a linguistic materiality. Even though some positive

characteristics of the present community are mentioned, the primary reason given in the official narrative for awarding the prize is Costa Rica's decarbonization plan.

Here we narrow our analysis to the discourse on sustainable development evidenced across these four articles. Our focus is on understanding the characteristics of the decarbonization plan and the Costa Rican relation to the environment that merit being granted the award according to these narratives. The answer is short: Costa Rica's actions are worthy because they are profitable: "Costa Rica is keen to show the world that **clean and green development** is possible and **profitable**" (UN 2019b par.24, emphasis added). Profit is the most repetitive argument given in the news sources for supporting and celebrating Costa Rica's environmental practices. One example is that profit is also mentioned when the president uses the coffee practices as a model (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019b). Thus, even though we find the argument of "sustainability for the future generations" given in the news, the primary reason to change agricultural practices to produce less CO₂ is not nature or climate change, but economic growth. Here we can return to the biblical metaphor to ask *who benefits from this Eden?* (UN 2019b).

Here we need to dig into the pictures and video that accompany each news source. Each of the four news sources covered by our work are accompanied by pictures of natural landscapes without people or human intervention, placed directly right under the title. In one of the Costa Rican government's news sources, we have another landscape and a link to a video about the country that appears at the end of the text (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019a). In contrast, the *living Eden* article includes one video (placed after the third paragraph) and five pictures; the landscape of the title, one picture featuring the president of Costa Rica, and three

pictures that—as is clear in the images—depict Costa Rica’s *landscapes for the gaze of a tourist*. In other words, they also point to the environment as a source of profit.

This alignment of decarbonization with profit implies another process of erasure. If ideologically the economic benefit that comes with climate change solutions is the most important priority, other possible environmental (or otherwise) consequences of the proposal are framed as less important; thus, those possible consequences or limitations become invisible in the narrative.

Another erasure caused by the focus on the future community and its profit potential is more troubling: it erases other current environmental issues. It also erases other possible impacts of the government plans; for example, across the narrative, there are mentions of “social benefits”, but these only concern the economic discourse. For example “Costa Rica’s government says it is going to decarbonize the economy because it **makes economic and social sense**, a statement that challenges the oft-quoted trope that fighting climate change will cost **jobs** and stifle **development**” (UN 2019b par.5, emphasis added).

3. Discussion

The identification of Costa Rica with nature and conservationism is not new. As previously mentioned, it is part of the national brand (Hernández Sánchez, Hinkelammert Palma & Sánchez Sánchez 2019). Our findings present evidence of current ideas of nature as part of a brand for commercial purposes, but also note echoes of previous ideas of environmentalism in these current representations. This allows us to delve further into our understanding of how the country’s environmental narrative has been framed over time.

The *discourse of decarbonization* we described is aligned with that of the *environment for profit*. This latter discourse was also dominant throughout the 1990s, according to Nygren (1998). She explains that at least four discourses about environmentalism coexisted in the country during this period: environmentalism for nature, environmentalism for profit, alternative environmentalism, and environmentalism for the people. The discourse of *environment for profit* consisted of the prospective marketization of tropical nature, which includes ecotourism, foreign investment, and extractivism; the success of commercial forestry over conservation; and the revitalization of agribusiness, which involved changing the country's traditional agriculture model with few criticisms because "nature has to be economized" (219). This process also included forms of *epistemological extractivism* (Grosfoguel 2016), because local environmental knowledge was understood as "a culturally and socially free 'human capital' to be exploited in the service of biobusiness" (Nygren 208). Additionally, Nygren states that the environment for profit discourse promotes all the above-mentioned activities as "free of controversy" (218) while paying little attention to their environmental sustainability and even less to their social unsustainability, basically forgetting peasants and rural communities. This lack of concern about social impact reported by Nygren is also part of our findings; people are mentioned only as part of the economic model (e.g. consumers, workers).

For Nygren, the state plays a particular role in this model because "the neoliberalist Environmentalism for Profit seems to justify strengthening state power—for controlling the effects of liberalisation among the rural poor, and for eliminating the most radical ideas of resistance" (210). Going back to our corpus, the main figure depicted as responsible for Costa Rica's green identity is the government, particularly the figures of individual political leaders who are praised because "Costa Rica's leaders are undeterred. They've pushed the boundaries

before” (UN 2019b, par.9). In that UN source, the figure of the current president is represented horizontally in a medium shot that implies a close social distance to him (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Public institutions, the private sector and international cooperation are all explicitly linked to the environmental policies in question, yet the only reference to people is in their relation to “effective policies that involve the state, citizens, scientists, and the private sector” (UN 2019b par.4).

In other words, there is an erasure of other political agents, such as environmental groups or social movements, in favor of institutions of national and transnational governance. Nevertheless, this erasure could be expected if we return to the concept of erasure as the invisibilization of elements that are opposed to the interpretative structure framed by the UN and the Costa Rican government’s narrative. Social movements have demonstrated the existence of a national double discourse on the environment (Rivera Alfaro 2019); even the same day the award was announced, critics of Costa Rica’s environmental policy emerged from the environmental sectors of civil society, voicing discontents regarding current issues, such as the polluting pineapple plantations and the overuse of agrochemicals in the country (Álvarez M. 2019).

The government discourse on carbon neutrality has likewise been criticized. According to Baltodano Aragón (2008), decarbonization implies the commercialization of pollution. To rephrase him, *trading carbon* is another current form of *environmentalism for profit*. This takes us to another understanding of our findings and to our opening questions: what does it mean to be “pioneering” carbon neutral policies in the climate change framework? What is the relationship of these policies to the global market and to geopolitics?

Relating our data to the Western perspective of nature as an empty space that is there waiting for humans “to go and colonize it” (Ashley Dawson, personal communication, December

04, 2019, presentation for the Future Initiatives class), we can now answer that being framed as *pioneering* in these policies implies reproduction of the colonial system. Costa Rica presents itself as a place for investment in the extraction of air, in the words of the president, as a *laboratory of decarbonization* (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica 2019b).

As it has done with other materials, the Global North seeks to reproduce the economic extractivist model with the air. The same idea of trading carbon as a possible expression of colonialism can be discussed by relating the previous ideas and our findings to Grosfoguel (2016). For this author, “En las zonas del ser [Global North] el sistema administra los conflictos con mecanismos de regulación y emancipación, mientras que los conflictos en las zonas del no ser [Global South] se deciden mediante mecanismos de violencia y desposesión” (Grosfoguel 130). Thus, we complete the answer to the second of our questions by understanding that these policies reproduce the same geopolitics of capitalism, which are well known for their unsustainability.

4. Conclusions and further research

In our discussion, we presented evidence that allowed us to affirm that carbon trading represents the extractivism of the air. Within this framework, Costa Rica has carried out an identity discourse that is co-created by local and international institutions.

The nation is framed as a green model to be followed for sustainable development, although it is not understood as a developed country in the geopolitical landscape. This forces us to formulate new questions, for example: is Costa Rica at the center/answering to the current global capitalist formation or the capitalist necessities in which we live? Is CR framed as a model to be copied by all countries or mainly by other “underdeveloped” countries? What are the

consequences of the tensions between green extractivism and the search for development? What is the relationship of the discourse on climate change to the discourses on other local environmental subjects? What are the positions of the Global North in relation to those other problems that involve forms of extractivism, such as for the production of tropical fruit? Further research needs to be carried out in order to answer these questions and to relate our findings with previous and contemporary research.

To conclude, it is important to rethink our perspective on the linguistic materiality of climate change. As we have seen with our analysis, Costa Rica's discourse on climate change is what is being awarded, not its empirical actions. In other words, we can see this as a move related to the framing of the local identity through the trading of carbon, but not as a realistic solution to the natural materiality of climate change.

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