

Who Owns the Water? The Relation as Unfinished Objectivation in the Mapuche Lived World

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ABSTRACT

Anthropological approaches to relations have customarily relied on ethnographic accounts of relations empirically observed through fieldwork, overlooking, in general, the ways in which the very notion of relation is locally conceptualised and put into practice. In this article, we provide a general characterisation of how relations are theorised and practiced in indigenous southern Chile. We propose the expression 'unfinished objectivation' to refer to an ideal type of relationship in the Mapuche lived world, which corresponds neither to a subject–object dichotomy nor to a totally intersubjective model. Unfinished objectivation presupposes a type of relation in which those entities that are connected are submitted to the force of one another, but only to the unstable and contingent point before which they lose their irreducible autonomy and agency. To explore the model of unfinished objectivation we focus on the human–water relationship, which illustrates the tension between the need for objectivation, as well as recognition of the subjectivity of beings involved in the relationship. Nowhere is this tension clearer than in conflicts over water rights and ownership status, which have arisen from the commodification of water resources in neoliberal Chile.

KEYWORDS:

Relation, ontology, water, commodity, Mapuche