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Research Articles

The Threat of the Yrmo: The Political Ontology of a Sustainable Hunting Program

ABSTRACT Various misunderstandings and conflicts associated with attempts to integrate Indigenous Knowledges (IK) into development and conservation agendas have been analyzed from both political economy and political ecology frameworks. With their own particular inflections, and in addition to their focus on issues of power, both frameworks tend to see what occurs in these settings as involving different epistemologies, meaning that misunderstandings and conflicts occur between different and complexly interested perspectives on, or ways of knowing, the world. Analyzing the conflicts surrounding the creation of a hunting program that enrolled the participation of the Yshiro people of Paraguay, in this article I develop a different kind of analysis, one inspired by an emerging framework that I tentatively call "political ontology." I argue that, from this perspective, these kinds of conflicts emerge as being about the continuous enactment, stabilization, and protection of different and asymmetrically connected ontologies. [Keywords: political ontology, multinaturalism, multiculturalism, Paraguay, Indigenous peoples]

In 1999, after four years of a strictly observed ban on commercial hunting, news reached the Yshiro Indigenous communities of Northern Paraguay that the activity would be allowed again under the supervision of the National Parks Direction. Through their recently created federation, Unión de las Comunidades Indígenas de la Nación Yshir, the Yshiro leaders inquired from the Parks Direction about permits to hunt capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*), yacare (*caiman sp.*), and anaconda (*Eunectes notaeus*). They were notified that, although the institution was willing to allow commercial hunting, it actually could not issue the permits as it lacked the necessary resources to send inspectors to supervise the activity. Following the advice from the National Parks Direction, the Yshiro leaders sought support from Prodechaco, an EU–funded sustainable development project that targeted Indigenous peoples. The directors of the Prodechaco agreed to support the Yshiro federation's bid for hunting permits with the condition that hunting had to be done in a sustainable manner. To make the concept clear, one of them explained in plain words: "The animal population has to be kept constant over the years. You hunt but making sure that there will always be enough animals for tomorrow" (conversation witnessed by author, November 1999).

Espousing a "participatory approach," Prodechaco framed the relation with the Yshiro federation as a partnership to which the latter would contribute "traditional" forms of natural resource use. Thus, having agreed on the goal of making hunting sustainable, the Yshiro federation and Prodechaco divided tasks: The federation would promote a series of discussion in their communities to make the goal of sustainability clear and to organize operations accordingly; Prodechaco, in turn, would arrange with the National Parks Direction the technical and legal aspect of the hunting season, which from then on began to be described as a sustainable hunting program. In the ensuing months, each party contributed their specific visions and demands into the making of the program and by the time it was launched it seemed that everybody was operating according to a common set of understandings about what the program entailed. However, two months after the program's beginning, Prodechaco and the inspectors sent by the National Parks Direction began asserting that Yshiro and nonindigenous hunters were actively disregarding the agreed-on regulations, thereby turning the program into "depredation" and "devastation" as they entered into private properties and Brazilian territory (Gonzales Vera 2000a). As I show later in the article, this turn of events revealed that the hunting program had been based on a misunderstanding about how to achieve the sustainability of the animal population, albeit a particular kind of misunderstanding.

American Anthropologist, Vol. 111, Issue 1, pp. 10–20, ISSN 0002-7294 online ISSN 1548-1433. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01073.x

Various misunderstandings and conflicts associated with attempts to integrate Indigenous Knowledges (IK) into development and conservation agendas have been analyzed from both political economy and political ecology frameworks (see Ellen et al. 2000; Fernando 2003; Martin and Vermeylen 2005; Spak 2005). With their own particular inflections, and in addition to their focus on issues of power, both frameworks tend to see what occurs in these settings as involving different epistemologies, meaning that misunderstandings and conflicts occur between different and complexly interested perspectives on, or ways of knowing, the world. In this article, I develop a different kind of analysis, one inspired by an emerging framework that I tentatively call "political ontology." The term *political ontology* has two connected meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology. On the other hand, it refers to a field of study that focuses on these negotiations but also on the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other. Thus, political ontology recasts political economy and political ecology's traditional concerns with power and conflict in light of the notion of multiple ontologies that is emerging from ethnographic works on Indigenous ontologies and scientific practices.

The first set of ethnographies have stressed the contrasts between Indigenous ontologies and modern ontology, especially with regard to the latter's basic assumption of a nature–culture divide and a host of associated notions about personhood and agency (see Bird-David 1999; Descola 1996a, 1996b, 2005; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Grim 2001; Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004a, 2004b).[1] Emerging from this body of work, the notion of "multinaturalism," developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) to describe Indigenous Amazonian philosophies, is particularly pertinent to the political ontology framework and helps to succinctly highlight its contrasts with political economy and political ecology. In effect, while political economy and political ecology mostly operate within the modern "multiculturalist" understanding that we exist in a power-laden world of one nature and many culturally situated perspectives of it, the political ontology framework builds on the "multinaturalist" understanding that there are many kinds of "natures." Thus, in contrast to the "multiculturalist" focus on how different cultures go about knowing the world or on whether the world is knowable at all (an epistemic concern), a "multinaturalist" approach focuses on what kinds of worlds are there and how they come into being (an ontological concern).

Ethnographies of scientific practices have addressed the question of how different worlds or ontologies are brought into being by showing that "reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped in these practices" (Mol 1999:75). Along these lines, Bruno Latour (1999:266–276) has argued that "facts" (or reality) are better conceived of as "factishes." The term seeks to bypass the sterile modernist discussion on whether the "things" we see in the world are "facts" (purely external and autonomous objects) or "fetishes" (reifications of our subjectivity). The term assumes that "what exists" is always in between the subject–object divide that is central to the modern ontology and that "what exists" is always the ongoing effect of practices or performances. Then, what we call "fact" (or reality) is better conceived of as a "factish" in which objectivity and subjectivity (and, therefore, nature, culture, morality, and politics) are entangled with each other in an indissoluble knot because "facts" are both real and done—or, better, they are real because they are being done.

The actual and potential variety of ways of doing "factishes" (or realities) ground key ideas in the political ontology framework: the notion that there exist multiple ontologies–worlds and the idea that these ontologies–worlds are not pregiven entities but rather the product of historically situated practices, including their mutual interactions (see also Haraway 1997; Law and Hassard 1999; Mol 2002). Building on these ideas, I argue that the "misunderstandings" that occur in settings where attempts are made at integrating Indigenous and modern scientific knowledge might turn out to be instances of what Viveiros de Castro calls uncontrolled equivocation, "a type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and do not know this" (2004a).

Uncontrolled equivocation refers to a communicative disjuncture that takes place not between those who share a common world but rather those whose worlds or ontologies are different. In other words, these misunderstandings happen not because there are different perspectives on the world but rather because the interlocutors are unaware that different worlds are being enacted (and assumed) by each of them. For example, as I will show in detail, the appearance of an agreement about the meaning of "sustainable hunting" actually occluded that "animals"—and, by extension, the world(s) they are part of—were radically different entities for the Yshiro and for the bureaucrats and experts involved in the hunting program. Interestingly, rather than triggering an attempt to establish an agreement on a more solid basis, the revelation that the program had been based on an equivocation triggered a coercive response on the part of the Paraguayan government aimed at containing what was considered the unreasonable (and therefore threatening) behavior of the Yshiro. On this basis, I argue that the conflicts that ensue from this particular kind of misunderstanding go beyond (complexly interested) struggles over the primacy of different cultural perspectives on nature or the world to involve the continuous enactment, stabilization, and protection of different and asymmetrically entangled ontologies or worlds.

COMMERCIAL HUNTING, OLD AND NEW

The Yshiro people live in the northeastern part of the Paraguayan Chaco over the Paraguay River. Although the Paraguayan state began to assert possession of the area in late 19th century, governmental presence has remained tenuous to these days. Bahia Negra, with 1,000 inhabitants and a military base, is the only town in the area with some governmental services. The only connection to most Yshiro communities is through the Paraguay River, and it takes seven to eight hours to reach the farthermost of them. The only regular physical communication that Bahia Negra has with the rest of the country is a weekly boat that comes from the southern city of Concepción after three days of travel.

The lack of governmental presence in the region has been the norm since the 19th century as the Paraguayan state relied on private entrepreneurship to take control of the territories in the Chaco region that it claimed as inheritance from the Spanish colonial period. In effect, logging companies and religious missions, aided by punctual police and military interventions, functioned from the 1880s onward as the spearheads of the Paraguayan state. In the early decades of the 20th century, the Yshiro were more or less forcefully incorporated as a cheap labor force into logging camps. However, after the 1950s, when the logging companies collapsed, the Yshiro became largely settled in two missions and a few cattle ranches on the coast of the Paraguay River. Most of the remaining lands in the Yshiro territory were sold to land speculators; thus, the Yshiro had almost unrestricted access to their territory until the mid to late 1980s when these lands began to be converted into ranches.

After the collapse of the logging economy in the 1950s, the Yshiro became largely dependent on commercial hunting for their subsistence, as the latter became increasingly based on market goods (see Renshaw 1996; Susnik 1995). Commercial hunting pivoted around *patrones*, local military and civilian Paraguayan authorities who, through a system of debt bondage, brokered between the hunting families and the industry that processed and exported the hides. It is important to stress that commercial hunting was a "business on the side" for the Paraguayan authorities and that until the 1990s the dominant policy of the Paraguayan state was to encourage the conversion of all forests into lands for agriculture and cattle ranching (see Stunnenberg 1993). Consequently—and in contrast to what happened with the fur trade in North America (see Feit 1995; Nadasdy 2003)—at no point did the hunting economy generate an interest for conservation or "rational management," let alone a concern for the ways in which the Yshiro understood hunting or animals in general. Only in the late 1980s, when it was clear that several species were being depleted, did the Paraguayan government begin to ban hunting for commercial purposes. Nevertheless, with the connivance of the local authorities involved in the trade, the Yshiro kept hunting illegally, although in decreasing numbers. Two developments allowed the Yshiro to progressively break free from debt bondage and the commercial hunting economy. One was the establishment of a community free from any kind of external oversight after successful land claims in the mid 1980s; the other was the emergence of a commercial fishing economy that offered an immediately accessible market, thereby allowing the Yshiro to operate free from intermediaries. These developments, combined with more effective controls on international trade of wildlife, put an end to the old hunting economy in the mid 1990s.

Although commercial hunting was not new to the Yshiro when they asked permission from the Parks Direction to reinitiate the activity, the way in which it was to be carried out within the framework of the sustainable hunting program was entirely unprecedented on several accounts. This was the very first time for the Yshiro that commercial hunting was to be done with the legal and technical backing of experts, following governmental regulations, (supposedly) as partners rather than subordinates of other parties, and in the context of the recent unification of formerly estranged factions. In effect, an important consequence of the creation of the independent community was the emergence of factions among the Yshiro. Away from missionary oversight, some Yshiro individuals reinitiated or intensified practices that had been abandoned or hidden for nearly three decades and that involved communication with several kinds of suprahumans, which are referred to by the generic term *ukurb'deio* (powers or potencies). By following the instructions of the ukurb'deio about the proper ways of behaving toward others (humans and nonhumans), the contours of a "traditionalist" group among the Yshiro began to emerge.[2] Later, a conflict between this group and other community members who saw these practices as conflicting with their Christian faith and, more generally, as a step backward in the "development" of the Yshiro people consolidated two seemingly opposing factions and fueled the creation of separate communities.

Although differences between factions were less stark than what their respective leaders propounded, they kept the Yshiro communities apart and more vulnerable to the forces that began to reshape the landscape of the area in the 1990s.[3] However, by 1999, those who strongly rejected the practices of the "traditionalists" had become a minority, thereby making the differences between groups even less pronounced and allowing negotiations leading to the creation of the Yshiro federation that I mentioned in the introduction (see Blaser 2004). This was the context in which, as requested by the EU-funded Prodechaco project, the Yshiro leaders began to promote community discussions about the idea of making the hunting program sustainable. As we will see, the way in which the Yshiro conceived sustainability was quite different from the way in which experts and bureaucrats did.

SUSTAINING RECIPROCITY, CONSERVING THE YRMO

While on a fishing trip with an Yshiro friend in 1999, I asked what he thought about the regulations on fishing that the government had recently started to enforce and whether they would be useful at all to sustain the stocks of fish. As my friend looked at me utterly perplexed, I further explained that the authorities said that the restrictions were meant to protect the resource from disappearing. My friend said that this made no sense for the amount of fish in the river had nothing to do with how much they were harvested because the fish come with the birds of rain (*Osasero*). As long as there is rain, there is fish. "Then, why do you think that they make all these regulations," I asked. He responded,

> Don't you know? In the bible it says that around the year 2000 the rich will laugh at the poor. Look those tourists that come in their boats, they are all fat, they eat very well. Look at us [the Yshiro], we are thin and our children sometimes cry because there is no food. Yet the government let them take all the fish they want and does not allow us to work to feed our families. They are laughing at our poverty. [conversation with author, September 1999]

My friend was perplexed not about the rationale for the regulations, which he as many other Yshiro have heard before from the radio, but about my expressing this rationale as a matter of fact and without questioning it. In hindsight, I realized that my friend expected that after many years working with the Yshiro I should know better: the rationale for restrictions does not reflect Yshiro conceptions of human–animal relations and, because the consequences of the restrictions are unequally adjudicated, one is warranted to assume that hidden motivations might be behind them. In effect, for many Yshiro the availability of fauna is only indirectly connected to the way humans treat them.[4] Thus, before discussing how the hunting program was conceived in the Yshiro communities, it is necessary to clarify some underlying conceptions of what with some distortion—because this is not their immediate goal—we may call "Yshiro conservation."

The Yshiro call their territory the *yrmo*, a word that also connotes world or cosmos, which, according to several Yshiro elders, is governed by the principle of relationality—that is, the mutual dependence of all that exists. Reciprocity between all the entities that co-constitute it is fundamental to keep the flow of energy that sustains the yrmo. It is against this background that Yshiro understandings of the relations between human and nonhumans, including animals, must be comprehended.[5] From the perspective of many Yshiro, especially those that depict themselves as "traditionalists," individual animals are the *abo* (emanation) of an original specimen, the *bahlut*. Bahluts are one of the kinds of ukurb'deio (powers or potencies) with which the "traditionalist" Yshiro reestablished or intensified communications when the first independent community was established. Most often, bahluts and humans sustain relations of reciprocity with the intermediation of *konsaho* (male and female shamans). Bahluts give gifts to the konsaho that are of benefit for the whole community, for example, the power to bring animals close to the hunters, to cure diseases, or to make the bush fruitful. These "gifts" must be reciprocated by the konsaho in ritual ways that involve the incorporation of other humans into an expanding network of reciprocity and sharing that is in many ways shaped by the instructions of the bahlut. Disregard for these instructions may have negative results in the form of diseases, death, drought, floods, and, key to our discussion, the availability of the bahlut's abo—that is, animals. In the yrmo, then, the critical nexus between human behavior and the availability of animals is the reciprocity that must prevail in the network composed by both humans and bahluts. If animals are not available, it means that at certain points in the network the flow of reciprocity is failing, usually in a human-to-human interface of the network.

The emergence and expansion of a network of reciprocity partly shaped by the instructions of bahluts and other ukurb'deio was precisely one of the elements that contributed to the emergence of a relatively identifiable traditionalist group. Yet, it must be stressed that this way of understanding the complex relations between humans and nonhumans is not shared or known in its details by everybody in the Yshiro communities. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that when the leaders explained in community meetings that one of the goals of the program was making sure that "the number of animals do not decrease" because of the hunting, this understanding came to the forefront. In effect, whether explicitly stressing ideas about the yrmo as a network of reciprocity or not, in each meeting people concluded that if the old system was used for the hunting program, animals would begin to hide or diminish like in the old times when patrones only cared for their profits. For example, an experienced hunter said, "We all know that patrones pay very little for each skin, so to sustain your family you need to hunt a lot of animals" (field notes, January 2000). This prompted the leaders to clarify that there would be limits to the number of skins the hunters would be able to trade, which in turn ignited a heated discussion about who would benefit from the program.

It was clear that the families of experienced hunters with canoes and guns would be the main beneficiaries, but arguments were raised in relation to the responsibilities of the Yshiro federation toward all those who had supported its creation, which was practically everybody. It must be pointed out that the Yshiro federation was created through a long and highly mobilizing process in which individuals, even with much sacrifice, contributed their very scarce monetary resources for the leaders' travels to the capital city of Asunción. In the process, people came to refer to the federation as a "baby" that had to be supported until it was a grown-up with the capacity to, in turn, sustain its "relatives." It is in this context that some people in the communities highlighted that the federation had to

"reciprocate" their support. These arguments, in turn, opened the way to more general arguments about reciprocity and duties toward others. For example, some people asked how single mothers and widows who had no close male relatives but participated in the rituals organized by konsaho would benefit from the hunting season. Some elders pointed out the role of the bahlut and the konsaho in a good hunting season, and, in one of the meetings, Don Veneto, a very well respected konsaha, stressed the contradiction of "want[ing] to always have many animals but not shar[ing] the bahlut's gifts widely" (field notes, January 1999). Even a Pentecostal pastor asked, "What about our poor Paraguayan neighbors and friends who shared with us tools and food in times of scarcity? Is it of good Christians not to share with them as well now?" (field notes, January 1999). In short, in one way or another, the issue of sustaining widespread reciprocity ended up weighing heavily on how the Yshiro went about conceiving how to "conserve" the animals that populate the yrmo.

After long debates, in which issues such as the principle of relationality, the instructions from the bahluts, political opportunity, the Christian god, the relatively strengthened position of "traditionalists," and economic considerations were weighed, a consensus emerged that the Yshiro federation should obtain the exclusive rights to broker between the hunters and the exporting industry. In this position, the federation could make sure that the benefits of the hunting season reached every household in the Yshiro communities and even a few households outside the communities, thereby ensuring the conservation of the animals that populate the yrmo.

It is important to stress that the yrmo that emerged from the discussions in the communities was not an essential entity out of history but rather a very particular and situated performance: it was a "factish." Recall that a factish is not an autonomous object or the reified projection of a subject but, rather, a performance in which objectivity and subjectivity, as well as morality and politics, are indissolubly entangled. In the political ontology of the yrmo—that is, the negotiations involved in the performance that brought into being this particular "factish"—several elements were entangled. In addition to the ones mentioned above, there was also the novelty of conceiving reciprocity among humans as mediated by the federation rather than enacted through person-to-person relations, and in general the whole notion of how to ensure reciprocity in the yrmo was inflected by the fact that the program was about commercial hunting, implying thus another layer of complexity in how relationality is currently conceived by the Yshiro. Considering this, it is not imprudent to conclude that this particular yrmo could not be the same as that which existed before the Yshiro entered into permanent contact with the nonindigenous settlers and probably even before the hunting program. Yet, as we will see, this yrmo is still clearly at variance with the different kinds of environments performed by bureaucrats and scientists.

There are two characteristics of the yrmo that contrast strongly with the environments with which bureaucratic–scientific conservation is concerned. The first characteristic is the centrality that the human-to-human interface has in "Yshiro conservation," which contrasts with what seems to be the primary focus of attention in bureaucratic–scientific conservation—that is, human-to-animal relations. In effect, regulations for conservation seem to focus on the quantity of animals that can be hunted, their size or age, and the period during which they can be harvested. These regulations are based on "scientific studies" of animal behavior, patterns of reproduction, and size of populations. Once these "facts" are established, the task of regulations is to attune human behavior to them. Here enters the second contrast, which is the degree of agency that nonhumans have in the yrmo. In comparison, animals as parts of the environment are closer to objects without volition of their own; they are moved by their nature. Precisely because they are conceived as objects, their behavior can be treated as (matter of) facts and not as the expression of fully agentive, and therefore contingent, relationships and communication with humans, among other beings.

Given the characteristics of the environments performed by bureaucrats and scientists, it is not surprising that, as news reached Bahia Negra that a hunting season would be opened, concerns were raised by two biologists from a Spanish environmental NGO working in the Yshiro area. According to them, studies of the local animal population were improperly conducted; therefore, a hunting program based on these studies would be disastrous for the environment. To assure them of the contrary, the Yshiro leaders invited the biologists to a meeting at which the details of the hunting program would be discussed. After hearing the leaders explain how they planned to make the hunting program sustainable by ensuring widespread reciprocity, one of the biologists addressed the meeting and said:

> We are very happy that you are using your traditions to organize the work. We do not have problems with this idea; on the contrary we think this is very important and good for the communities. Our problem is with the studies about the animals that were not properly made and are being used to open this hunting season. That is our problem. [field notes, March 1999)

For these biologists, it did not matter that according to the Yshiro the sustainability of the project was assured by its focus on sustaining reciprocity; as long as they could not confirm that this view would not contradict their "scientific" understanding of the environment, the sustainability of the program would be in doubt. In other words, the Yshiro could believe whatever they wanted about the environment, but the actions prompted by these beliefs should not run counter to what the biologists knew about the environment. Unsatisfied with the "scientific accuracy" of the hunting program, the biologists kept trying to complicate the launching of the program by bureaucrats in Asunción

city. As we will see, the environment performed by the latter, although pivoting on scientific versions of it, had its own particular inflections.

NEGOTIATING CULTURE, PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

When the Yshiro communities concluded their discussions, the Yshiro federation asked Prodechaco and the Parks Direction to be granted the exclusive right to broker between the hunters and the "export industry." One of the leaders explained that exclusivity would ensure the spread of benefits and clarified: "Our elders say that everybody must benefit from the hunting, otherwise the animals will diminish" (conversation witnessed by author, April 2000). The bureaucrats accepted the request but made no effort to clarify the rationale that linked exclusive rights to broker and conservation. For them, as for the Spanish biologists, such rationale was actually irrelevant for sustainability, and the demand for exclusive rights to broker could be incorporated as a "cultural" token that required no further thought. Thus, in the "translation" from community discussions to technical and legal planning, the rationale for the exclusivity of brokering rights was made equivalent to economic and managerial concerns. This is evident in a press communiqué drafted by Prodechaco to contest environmentalists' public claims about the dangers of the hunting program.[6] In it, Prodechaco asserted that the exclusive rights to broker granted to the Yshiro federation would ensure the sustainability of the project because the Yshiro had "social mechanisms based on reciprocity that discourage individual action" (Prodechaco 2000:6), therefore making it easier to ensure that hunting was done according to the parameters set by the experts. The communiqué also stated that the larger profit afforded by the exclusive rights to broker could be reinvested in ethnodevelopment (see Prodechaco 2000:6). As we will see, translating the Yshiro's demand for exclusive right to broker into a managerial and economic concern made it possible for Prodechaco and the National Parks Direction to accommodate such demand within what they meant by protecting the environment.

Prodechaco was itself the negotiated product of European Union (EU) and Paraguay's bilateral relations, thus the environment that this institution had to conserve was a factish that came into being (most immediately) from the encounter between two different kinds of environments. On the one hand, there was the EU's environment, which embodied the explicit claim that cultural and biological diversity were linked and the implicit demand that the Paraguayan government should give Indigenous peoples large tracts of lands to conserve both. On the other hand, there was the Paraguayan government's environment, which was seen as an idle asset that required inputs from private entrepreneurs (i.e., landowners) supported by the state to develop it. Setting aside the details of the negotiation between the two parties, I want to briefly point out that the political ontology of the environment that Prodechaco had to protect involved holding together two demands: retaining some degree of connection between cultural and biological diversity and heeding to the tacit agreement between the EU and the Paraguayan government that interventions generated by Prodechaco should carefully avoid antagonizing or meddling with the powerful landowners' interests. To do this, Prodechaco promoted the revalorization of punctual traditional forms of natural resource use but carefully avoided addressing the colonial context that curtails the ways of life in which those practices make sense (see Prodechaco 1998:153–154). This followed the dominant tendency in conservation circles wherein Indigenous environmental knowledges and practices are translated into discrete packages of knowledge that can be integrated into the toolkit of conservation practitioners, often as mere informational inputs (see Banerjee and Linstead 2004; Briggs and Sharp 2004; Nadasdy 2003).

Underlying this treatment of Indigenous knowledges is the "multiculturalist" notion I discussed in the introduction, according to which cultural differences are ultimately negotiable because they are mutually commensurable via what is common to all: a world or reality "out there" (see Povinelli 2001). Recall that, in this sense, multiculturalism refers to something that exceeds the liberal policy that goes by the name of multiculturalism; it refers to the modern ontological assumption that multiple cultures are more or less partial perspectives on a single nature or reality. This single nature or reality that all cultures share in common is what makes them mutually commensurable. More specifically, in the context of conservation, what makes different cultures commensurable is the environment. Having a variety of "tools" (i.e., different cultures) with which conservation can be realized, whether one uses one or another, is indistinct as long as the environment is affected in the same way. In other words, culture is negotiable whereas the environment is not. However, it is convenient to keep in mind that the environment is a "factish" that, given the political ontology involved in the case of Prodechaco, was to a large extent performed under the pressing demand of not upsetting the Paraguayan politicoeconomic status quo, particularly the powerful landowners. Thus, in arranging the technicalities of the program with the National Parks Direction, Prodechaco insisted that hunting on private properties should be explicitly prohibited. The National Parks Direction in turn just wanted the simplest mechanism of control and thus insisted on restricting permission to hunt only to the Yshiro.

After long negotiations and a two-month delay, the hunting program started with a legal–technical framework that apparently considered the interests of all the participants in the program as it established a prohibition to hunt in private properties (as requested by Prodechaco), a restriction that allowed only the Yshiro to hunt (as requested by the Parks Direction), and exclusive rights to broker (as the

Yshiro federation had requested). As we know from the introduction, two months later staff from Prodechaco and the Parks Direction were contending that the hunting program had turned into "depredation" and "devastation" provoked by the Yshiro and Paraguayan hunters. In the introduction, I also advanced that this turn of events revealed that central to the political ontology of the hunting program had been what Viveiros de Castro (2004a) calls an "uncontrolled equivocation," a particular kind of misunderstanding that happens not because there are different perspectives on the world but because there are different worlds and this is not recognized. Let us now see these points in more detail.

"Yshiro conservation" (implicit in the demand for exclusive rights to broker) enacted a series of assumptions that, grounded in the principle of relationality, were profoundly subversive of the dominant concerns the other parties had brought into the making of the program. The first of these assumptions, embodied in my friend's criticism of the fishing regulations imposed on the Yshiro whereas "rich" fishermen are not harassed, is that no one must be denied the means to sustain themselves—all the more so because of the generosity of the bahluts who, in principle, give the animals to everyone. The second assumption is that responsible relations between humans make the equal priority of using "natural resources" for survival primarily inclusive rather than exclusive. As we have seen, of paramount concern in the communities was who should be included to share in the benefits of the hunting program to make sure that networks of reciprocity were being respected. The third and related assumption is that the future availability of animals depends in large proportion on how those responsibilities between humans are honored in the present.

Following the logic of these assumptions to its ultimate consequences implies that "Yshiro conservation" is at the very least in conflict if not in outright contradiction with private property, market values, and even international jurisdictions that were implicit in the hunting program regulations. Yet, other participants in the program did not even suspect that these assumptions were at the root of the Yshiro federation's demands for exclusive rights to broker; rather, they assumed that this demand expressed comparable concerns to their own (i.e., efficiency, manageability, and profits) and shaped the regulations of the hunting program accordingly. The Yshiro leaders, in turn, found it difficult to explain to community members how rules such as the restriction on the participation of Paraguayan hunters, and the prohibition to hunt in private properties, or the injunction to respect national jurisdictions related to the goal of achieving sustainability.[7] Thus, people in the communities acted without regard for these regulations that seemed totally out of touch with the central issue of honoring relations of reciprocity. For example, single mothers partnered with Paraguayan male neighbors with whom the communities had relations of friendship and trust and who had the necessary elements to chase and kill animals. For this, the Yshiro were accused of trading rights to hunt, thus implying that their demand for exclusive rights to broker had nothing to do with Yshiro notions of conservation but, rather, with playing the "culture card" to increase their profits (Gonzales Vera 2000b). Finally, and although the Yshiro and the Paraguayan hunters did not kill beyond the quota established by biological studies, their disregard for private property and national jurisdictions was seen as environmental "depredation" and "devastation."

Evidently, "Yshiro conservation" was recognized as nothing but an "interest" translatable as equivalent to those of other parties to the program and thus was subordinated and reduced to those parties' understanding of conservation. But once it became clear that this translation was based on an equivocation, Yshiro conservation was seen either as a clever manipulation of culture or as being based on error. In either case, it became evident that bureaucratic–scientific conservation could only be enforced among the Yshiro either through the effective or the threatened use of coercive force. Not surprisingly, starting in 2001, the Paraguayan government created a Secretary of the Environment, established the office of the Environmental Prosecutor, and strengthened police vigilance in the Yshiro area—this in addition to declaring most of Yshiro traditional territory a biosphere reserve and establishing a National Park close to the largest Yshiro community without any meaningful consultation or participation on their part.

ONTOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS, EQUIVOCATIONS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE NEGOTIABLE

By deed of the different performances that brought them into being, the yrmo and the environment encountered each other in the sustainable hunting program as different worlds or ontologies. Thus, speaking of different worlds or ontologies is not another way of reinstating largely overcome anthropological ideas of self-contained and clearly bounded cultures. The worlds and the borders that delineate them have to be traced constantly for they are in a constant state of becoming, not least through their ongoing interactions (see Strathern 1996), including uncontrolled equivocations and their consequences. For instance, in our example, those running the technical and legal aspects of the hunting program conceived their role as one of making the different interests or perspectives of the Yshiro, Prodechaco, and the National Parks Direction mutually equivalent in relation to a supposedly preexistent environment, one which was actually being shaped in the very process of building these equivalences. In this way, the experts could not see that the exclusive rights to broker claimed by the Yshiro federation indicated the presence of another world, the yrmo. I will argue that the particularity of this case of "uncontrolled equivocation"—and the responses generated when the equivocation was made evident—reveals that the modern world or ontology sustains itself through performances that tend to suppress and or contain the enactment of other possible worlds.

In the context of wildlife co-management arrangements, Paul Nadasdy (2003:114–221) has shown that even when bureaucrats and experts might understand and be sympathetic toward Indigenous Knowledges, those knowledges end up being sidelined because they often contradict the assumptions on which bureaucratic and scientific concerns, goals, and politics are based. As we have seen, this was the case both with the bureaucrats involved in the hunting program and with the Spanish biologists that opposed the program. In other words, these different (and even mutually antagonistic) performances of the environment had something in common: the hierarchical relationship they established with the yrmo. This hierarchy was based on what Latour (1993) calls the modern constitution. For my purposes here, I want to recall one aspect of Latour's argument, the notion that what he labels as the two "Great Divides" central to the modern constitution are intrinsically connected. Latour writes:

> the Internal Great Divide [between Nature and Culture] accounts for the External Great Divide [between Us and Them]: we [moderns] are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others—whether they are Chinese or Amerindians, Azande or Barouya—cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require. [Latour 1993:99]

Precisely, by dismissing "Yshiro conservation" as being irrelevant, a product of bad faith, or based on error, the biologists and the bureaucrats implicitly claimed to have an epistemologically superior understanding of the environment because it was not clouded by culture (or lowly interests). For this claim to hold, however, another claim has to be settled first: that the environment is one reality "out there." Here is where the conflict generated by the hunting program reveals itself as ontological rather than epistemological, for at stake are not different cultural perspectives on the world but the very assumption that this particular world of one nature and many cultures, rather than a relational world of humans and fully agentive nonhumans, is the ultimate reality. In effect, even if the biologists and bureaucrats were to claim that theirs was just another way of knowing the environment (neither superior nor inferior but different from the perspective that the Yshiro have), the modern ontological divide between cultures and nature, implicit in the multiculturalist stance, is already imposed on an ontology that does not operate on the basis of such a divide.

But how is the unity of the environment as a single reality "out there" achieved in spite of its multiple performances? It is accomplished through what Annemarie Mol (2002) calls coordination and distribution: operations by which different performances are either made to hold together as a single entity or are kept apart to avoid mutual interference. Succinctly, coordination works by adding performances as if they were multiple perspectives on a single object (the idea here is that the larger the number of perspectives added, the more accurate the representation will be) and by discarding dissonant ones (the idea here is that some perspectives are simply inaccurate). Distribution, in turn, works by keeping different performances apart so that inconsistencies between them do not turn into clashes where some sort of adjudication of "truth" has to occur to preserve the unity of a given object. I argue that the enrollment of Indigenous Knowledges in natural resource management and conservation programs, as well as the multiculturalist stance that grounds it, has "coordination and distribution effects" that contribute to ensure the unity of specific factishes such as the environment and more generally to protect the modern constitution.

For the Spanish biologists, Yshiro "cultural understandings" of conservation, while very interesting and worth preserving, had to be "distributed" (i.e., kept apart) from the actual practices of conservation. For Prodechaco and the Parks Direction, Yshiro conservation was (initially) just another perspective on the environment that could be "coordinated" (i.e., added up) with their own. In either case, as long as the underlying ontological assumptions of the Yshiro's demand for exclusive rights to broker could be bracketed off, it appeared as if they could be either added up or kept apart without further complications. However, when Yshiro ontological assumptions manifested in behaviors that could not be treated either way, they were forcefully sidelined and silenced. Interestingly, this appeared as a reasonable response on the part of the government. In effect, either because they were based on error or bad faith, the behavior of the Yshiro justified the establishment of tighter controls ultimately reliant on the coercive presence of policing forces. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2001) has argued, the restriction on the use of coercion within a paradigm claiming that different cultures are equally valid perspectives on the world applies as long as Indigenous peoples operate within the limits of what is reasonable and conceivable. These limits are defined by reality "out there," in this case, the environment that was brought into being by bureaucrats and experts in the context of the sustainable hunting program.

We can appreciate that, in the process of coordinating and distributing different performances of reality, tolerant multiculturalism at the same time sets up the terms of what is reasonable and conceivable and makes coercion appear as the logical response to unreasonable behaviors. Multiculturalism thus ensures that the performances of other realities will not interfere and challenge the unity of reality "out there." The importance that protecting the unity of reality "out there" has for the modern ontology becomes evident if one considers that the consequence of accepting the existence of multiple ontologies or worlds would be the end of the "Internal Great Divide" between culture and nature and therefore of the fundamental characteristic that differentiates (and supposedly makes superior) the moderns in relation to the "others." In this line, various

exponents of the Latin American modernity–coloniality research program (see Dussel 1995, 1998; Escobar 2003) have argued that the modern divide between Nature and Culture and the divide between modern and nonmodern are historically coemergent and cosustaining. This means that the performance of a modern world in which nature (or reality "out there") and culture are absolutely differentiated involves keeping at bay the threat posed to it by the existence of other worlds.

In light of this argument, it is important to stress that the political implications of engaging Indigenous ontologies seriously necessarily goes beyond the immediate politics of a given project or institution to involve the inherent coloniality of the modern ontology. Indeed, if Indigenous worlds and ontologies were taken seriously, the modern constitution would collapse. This is the reason that, in practice, the multicuturalist approach puts the onus on radical worlds by telling them "be other so that we will not ossify, but be in such a way that we are not undone, that is make yourself doable for us," otherwise, "the message conveys the stakes of refusing to be doable, ... actual legal, economic, and social repression" (Povinelli 2001:329). All of which apply to the Yshiro case, as we have seen, precisely because the practices associated with the yrmo constitute, from a modern perspective, a recalcitrant anomaly that constantly makes evident what modernity cannot seriously negotiate without coming undone: namely, the existence of multiple ontologies or worlds.

The conflict that ensued from the hunting program highlights the need to understand these kinds of situations from a political ontology perspective that focuses on the power dynamics produced in the encounter between the dominant modern ontology and Indigenous ontologies as they are embodied in concrete practices. The different political ontologies that shaped the "environments" of bureaucrats and experts make evident that "modern" factishes—as much as any factish—are variously "interested" and therefore not entirely coherent. However, this should not blind us to the commonality that the underlying "multiculturalist" ontological assumption provides. In effect, while disagreements among people who share a modern ontological ground might be significant for them, those disagreements are less important from an Indigenous viewpoint than their shared views. Thus, from a political ontology perspective, one must never assume that cultural perspectives on a single world are what is at stake in a conflict or negotiation; rather, attention to the possibility that different worlds are what is at stake is warranted. Otherwise we risk falling into the trap of uncontrolled equivocation and simply reducing other worlds to our own. As I have tried to show here and as other ethnographies of ontological encounters reveal (see Clammer et al. 2004; Cruikshank 2005; de la Cadena 2007; Nadasdy 2007; Poirier 2008; Povinelli 1995), this reduction is not innocuous; rather, it sets the stage for the continuing subordination of other worlds. Thus, a critical question is, what would it entail to do an anthropology that avoids the trap of uncontrolled equivocation? Although I cannot fully address this question here, I want to stress that this is perhaps the most fundamental challenge that any political ontology approach must face. Put in other terms, the challenge is how do we account for ontological encounters when any account presupposes an ontological grounding? I hope this article will entice readers into taking up the challenge.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. The ideas presented in this article are the product of collaboration and exchange with a number of colleagues who, without necessarily agreeing with this label, are contributing to shape the field of political ontology. They are Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, Harvey Feit, Justin Kenrick, Brian Noble, and the members of the Crabgrass Collective. The *AA* Editor-in-Chief and the five anonymous *AA* reviewers challenged me to think through weaknesses and inconsistencies in my argument. Elena Yehia has also pushed me to think harder about it. To all of them, I offer my heartfelt thanks. The writing of this article was supported by a Standard Research Grant of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. When speaking of the "modern ontology" in singular, I follow the usage common to most of the sources cited as "building blocks" for the political ontology framework. However, I am cognizant that such usage might be problematic for many scholars who argue that modernity is not singular but multiple (see Eisenstadt 2002; Kahn 2001). Elsewhere, a colleague and I have argued that the notion of multiple modernities is problematic on several accounts (see Aparicio and Blaser 2008); however, the debate exceeds the scope of this article. Thus, for my specific purpose here, when I refer to the "modern ontology" I am talking about the dominant expression of what Latour (1993) calls the "modern constitution," which is built on the nature–culture divide. In this sense, my use of the singular does not preclude the existence of other ontologies that might operate in a different fashion from what is described here and yet be deemed modern by other scholars.
2. External observers first applied the label of "traditionalist," but eventually the leaders of this group began to use it as well.
3. In 1991, Paraguay joined the Mercosur (the South American free trade agreement), which opened the door to Brazilian investors who began to buy and use the lands in Yshiro territory that were in the hands of real state speculators. The increase in regional commerce associated with Mercosur also fed plans to build transnational highways and waterways in the area. In addition to the prospects of megadevelopment projects, the extensive clear-cutting that the new "owners" of the land did prompted several internationally backed projects of conservation, which impacted the Yshiro's access to natural resources.
4. Similar Indigenous conceptions of "conservation" and "management" have been described in other geographical settings (see Brightman 1987; Fienup-Riordan 1990).
5. Indigenous conceptions of networks of sociality transcending the society–nature divide have been well documented throughout the Americas (see Arhem 1996; Cajete 2000; Descola 1996a, 1996b; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Hallowell 1960; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976; Rival 1993; Tanner 1979; Viveiros de Castro 2004b; Waters 2004).
6. As the Yshiro federation was invited to cosign, the drafting of the communiqué was a missed opportunity to clarify the rationale of the Yshiro demand for exclusive rights to broker. However, without foresight of what would later happen, neither the leaders nor myself considered it critical to clarify the misunderstanding when we were given the opportunity to read and revise a draft of the communiqué. In part this was because, as Poirier points

out, "Indigenous peoples have learned to conceal those aspects [of their ontologies] that are considered, from the point of view of modernist (and Cartesian) ontology and epistemology, as a radical alterity, those that are not taken seriously and at face value" (2008:83).

7. Never before had the Yshiro (nor the old hunting *patrones*) concerned themselves with whether the places they hunted in were private property or not, nor for the most part had landowners created obstacles for the Yshiro to hunt. This is because the effective use of the land by "distant" owners began in earnest at the same time as the old hunting economy was declining.

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