

The extractive imperative and the boom in environmental conflicts at the end of the progressive cycle in Latin America

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1. Introduction

Global markets' influence over countries specializing in extractive industries goes beyond determining the demand for and price of commodities as well as the capital available for their extraction. The international cycles of boom and bust constantly affect national politics and policies as well as local dynamics around extractive activities. Especially for developing countries, the global economic context strongly influences governments' room for maneuver. In the case of Latin America, the latest commodity boom coincided with the so-called Left Turn or Pink Tide of electoral victories of progressive forces - a regime shift that changed the attitudes and policies towards the extractive sectors. As prices of metals and oil and gas roughly tripled, most countries in the region followed in the footsteps set by Venezuela in 1998 and Brazil in 2002, and voted for radical or more moderate leftist presidents. This boom helped them to push through their political agenda for breaking with the dominance of the neoliberal development model and giving the state a protagonist role in extractive sectors and in programmes tackling poverty and inequality. However, as this special issue shows, this new shape of the extractive imperative went against these presidents' initial promises to also respect rights of indigenous communities, social movements and even the environment. In effect, civic concerns and demands concerning the rapid region-wide expansion of mining and oil and gas extraction produced a boom of conflicts, especially at the local level.

The tide has turned, in more ways than one. Commodity prices fell dramatically and the price of hydrocarbons even returned to pre-boom levels. In effect, exports and investments decreased, and public deficits forced governments to make major budget cuts. All Latin American countries with large extractive sectors experience an economic and fiscal crisis. The poor are the main victims of this crisis since the available policy responses are to cut back on social spending and further increase extraction, which invariably overlaps with landscapes and territories that indigenous and marginalized communities depend on. Furthermore, the importance of foreign financial support becomes even more important, and whether coming from Chinese development banks or the World Bank, InterAmerican Development Bank or IMF, the reserves of natural wealth are explicitly or implicitly a collateral to the newly accumulating debts. Although the stalling of some extractive projects bring temporary relief to the affected local communities, around the other projects the problems tend to intensify as the corporate and government agencies have only less patience and funding to deal with any social or ecological concerns. Meanwhile, at the national level the commodity crisis has contributed to the exposure of new corruption scandals, showing that under new regimes old extractives-related vices continue to reincarnate. Furthermore, social and political opposition to leftist regimes has been amounting, already resulting in power shifts such as in Argentina and Brazil (and arguably Peru). It is now possible to speak of the coming end of the most recent progressive cycle in Latin America.

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2. The extractive imperative

The first paper in this special issue of *The Extractive Industries and Society* by Murat Arsel, Barbara Hogenboom and Lorenzo Pellegrini (2016, this issue) describes the political economic context in which the end of the progressive cycle is taking place as one of 'extractive imperative'. The concept refers to the totality of a set of political economic relationships over nature and natural resources that shape state-society interactions. The extractive imperative manifests itself primarily through environment and development policies that are simultaneously dependent on and reinforcing extractive activities. This is not to state that the extractive imperative only operates within or affects these areas. Since environment and development policies have complex linkages to myriad other spheres, consequences of the existence of an extractive imperative can be far reaching. Ultimately, however, the emergence of an extractive imperative deepens and speeds up the extraction of value from nature and natural resources. These extractive activities are central to the development model of these countries and need to take place under any circumstances --'at all costs' -- hence earning the designation of an imperative. Failing to advance the cause of additional and faster extraction, therefore, risks derailing the development project of a country is suffering from the extractive imperative. As extractive processes get challenged by various actors on different grounds, the link between the extractive imperative and development deepens as state actors further emphasize that divergence from the extractive path would be tantamount to abandoning development. While the meteoric rise of commodity prices and the emergence of the new left in Latin America (among other factors) did play a major role in the emergence of the extractive imperative, which can be defined as a model of development in which intensified extraction of natural resources takes on a teleological primacy, it is argued that neither is required for its continued dominance. In other words, once in place, the extractive imperative creates its own dependencies and legitimization mechanisms.

This argument was at the heart of a one-day conference that was organized at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University in The Hague in April 2015, together with the Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA) of the University of Amsterdam. More than forty presentations with the participation of two hundred participants reflected on the meaning and significance of the concept of the extractive imperative. The papers presented in this collection were selected from this event and they deal with a particularly important discussion, namely social conflicts generated by the entrenchment of the extractive imperative and the questions they raise over the political economy of sustainability, inequality and development in Latin America.

In his contribution entitled 'Neo-Extractivism in Venezuela and Ecuador: A Weapon of Class Conflict', Thomas Chiasson-LeBel revisits the evolution of development models in Ecuador and Venezuela, going from import substitution industrialization (ISI), to neoliberal, and to rentier, interweaving ideological and policy changes with episodes and strategies of class struggle, interpreting the latter as the underlying driver of socio-political change. Neo-extractivism, the embodiment of the rentier development model, is seen as a reaction to the neoliberal order that is instrumental to recover state autonomy and results in moderating popular power as well as limiting the power of the capitalist class. In this context, the state can leverage on the tensions and overt conflicts engendered by extractive industries by pitting impacted communities versus the population at large (and the national interest), producing fragmentation and weakening of the popular class. Thus, neo-extractivism is seen as a result of a specific constellation of social classes and in itself as an instrument of class struggle. The purpose of extractive industries goes beyond generating rent and rests in the actual control and redistribution of the rent.

While some parts of Latin America have a century-long history of mining, in countries like Ecuador and Honduras metal ores have only recently been “discovered” as a source for industrial extraction. In the case of Ecuador, this sector has been strongly promoted by the state since president Correa came to power in 2007. The ideological and class struggles discussed by Chiasson-Bel also manifest themselves in discursive strategies and transformations, a theme that Karolien van Teijlingen picks up in ‘The ‘Will To Improve’ At The Mining Frontier: Neo-extractivism, Development And Governmentality In The Ecuadorian Amazon’. Focusing on the first large-scale mining project, the Mirador copper mine, being set up by a Chinese state-owned corporation, she deploys a Foucaultian governmentality analysis by building on Tania Li’s work to interrogate how the Correa government has repoliticized nature – and how nature is converted into capital for development – to legitimize continued and intensified extractive processes. While this has fundamentally transformative outcomes in how the inhabitants of affected communities articulate their subjectivities and their notions of development and well-being, van Teijlingen crucially demonstrates that the final outcome of the extractive imperative in practice is neither predetermined nor linear, making space for ‘counter-conducts’ that promise alternative development trajectories.

While Correa’s progressive agenda for human development and poverty eradication received broad national support, the new mining projects have also created tensions and conflicts around mining sites, feeding into a wider public debate on the relationship between resource extraction (mining as well as oil) and development. Avci and Fernandez’s ‘Territorial dynamics and local resistance: Two mining conflicts in Ecuador compared’ look into the territorial dynamics of two emblematic mining conflicts with different characteristics and outcomes: Intag and Mirador. While in Intag a strong opposition emerged, which gave way to polarization between supporters and opponents of mining, in Mirador resistance was much less articulate, also among the indigenous Shuar, and both sides remained fragmented and weak. Their analysis builds on an understanding of territory as the historically produced social relations at a particular place and the meanings that different groups have assigned to it.

In a similar vein, Jessica Hope’s contribution on ‘Losing ground? Extractive-led development versus environmentalism in the Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS), Bolivia’ explores the tension between extractivism, indigenous rights and nature conservation in the struggle between the proponents and opponents of the highway planned to go through the TIPNIS. The TIPNIS conflict epitomizes the recurrent tensions between the MAS-led government and indigenous autonomy in the Bolivian lowlands and the paper contrasts the opportunistic use of the indigenous and conservation-oriented identity by President Evo Morales in international arenas with domestic policies and practices. At the same time, it shows how resistance to the project puts together a heterogeneous group that in part embraces the same discourses that President Morales enunciates to international audiences. The paper also shows how the tensions between extractivism, indigenous autonomy and the rights of mother nature are resolved in favor of extractivism by real-existing post-neoliberal regimes –one of the main tenets of the ‘extractive imperative’ hypothesis.

Looking beyond the region’s countries governed by the New Left, the case-study by Middeldorp, Morales and van der Haar, ‘Social mobilisation and violence at the mining frontier: The case of Honduras’, shows how the ‘extractive imperative’ plays out in Honduras. Since the coup by conservatives, in 2009, mining has become a spearhead of the national development plan and public mining revenues are invested in the police and military rather than in poverty reduction programmes. As avenues for progressive legal reform were closed, the anti-mining movement resorted to direct

mobilisation at community level and effectively countered the discursive pro-mining campaign of the industry and the state. In this context, local public referendums as a means of avoiding the formal consultation process have become an important mobilisation mechanism and a symbol of political resistance. However, this success has also given way to a hardening of the strategies deployed to extend the mining frontier, including pre-empting community consultation, repression of community protest and the use of violence against activists.

In many ways, these narratives of conflict and resistance belie the positive and progressive early years of the Left Turn that resulted in an extractive imperative coalescing as the main model of development policy. Early on in this process, progressive social movements, environmental activists and indigenous organizations not only supported the leaders that have come to represent the Left Turn but also worked alongside and, in some cases, together with the state to advance their radical agendas. The Yasuni-ITT initiative of Ecuador, which promised to 'leave the oil in the soil' is arguably the best example of this moment of optimism. Lucia Gallardo's 'Oil or 'life': the dilemma of the Yasuni-ITT Initiative' introduces fresh and controversial data on this now defunct initiative, demonstrating the ways in which the initiative developed – and ultimately failed – as two conflicting narratives jostled for influence. Her article shows not only the challenges of shepherding a novel policy initiative through obstacles within state and civil society but also the ways in which even an environmental initiative over which there was broad agreement can create deep chasms between different stakeholders as its location within development policy is negotiated.

Eduardo Silva's 'Patagonia without Dams! Lessons of a David vs. Goliath Campaign' ends the collection on an optimistic note. The paper is interested in understanding how local challenges to national development plans and projects can become effective in creating positive outcomes in terms of environment and development. In articulating a number of important conclusions that have broad relevance to Latin American political ecology and development studies, Silva focuses on the resistance against the Hidro Aysen hydroelectric dam project, which after a tenacious campaign that ran between 2006 and 2014, proved to be successful. His argument that the 'multi-class' nature of the resistance and the need to do 'connective' work is especially salient for our understanding of the improbable victory of David over Goliath.

3. Conclusions

Overall, this special issue advances three arguments on emerging patterns regarding social conflicts over natural resources in the region. First, the experience of indigenous as well as campesino communities embodies the contradictory impulses of Latin American development politics. In many cases, expansion of the extractive frontier is justified as being in their interest – characterized in terms of poverty reducing economic growth and large-scale investment in transport, education and healthcare infrastructure – even if doing so requires dispossessing them of their territories and rights. Second, dissent against the intensification of extractive processes is increasingly being criminalized, sometimes even prosecuted under anti-terrorism laws, further deepening the chasm between indigenous and other marginalized communities and the state. Across the region, political mobilization against the state is not simply challenging development policies regarding extraction but the states' treatment of dissent itself. Third, while conflict can be productive and a force for progressive change, broader processes at the level of global capitalism condition many of the conflicts observed in the region to become sustained, long-

term struggles where potential outcomes for dissenting groups range between total defeat and Pyrrhic victory. In light of this, the costs of the conflicts arising from the extractive imperative go beyond 'environmental' or 'economic' but concern broader indicators of well-being, including political freedom, communal identity and ability to imagine alternative paths to development.

Ultimately, this special issue shows that the extractive imperative is a Faustian bargain: achievement of socioeconomic development at the national level but at the cost of heavy impacts on local communities and the environment. That is, indigenous and peasant communities are being asked to become collateral damage to the advancement of a cause whose accomplishment should ultimately be emancipatory. This cause, development, is inherently desirable. The process through which it is realized has turned into an imperative that admits no exception and tolerates no resistance.

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