GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Extractivism and Extractivismo

By Thea Riofrancos | November 11, 2020

Extractivism is a capacious concept. It circulates among academics and activists, across the Global South and North. It admits of granular, internal differentiations such as "neoliberal" extractivism versus "neo-" or "progressive" extractivism (Burchardt and Dietz 2014; Gudynas 2009). It travels across spheres of capitalist life. The concept has migrated from its origins in diagnosing the natural resource sectors often located in rural peripheries to the densely spatialized inequalities of cities, themselves key hubs of transnational commodity flows ("urban extractivism"). It also encompasses the operations of digital platforms ("data extractivism") and stock markets ("financial extractivism"), and the governing logic of the global transition to renewable energy ("green" or "aeolian" extractivism).[1] Nearly anything, then, can be extracted: "mineral resources, labor, data, and cultures."[2] The alternatives to extractivism are just as expansive in their vision: "post-extractivism"; "*buen vivir*"; a new "ecosocial pact" (Hollender 2015). This conceptual malleability can result in what Bruno Latour refers to as an "acceleration" of analysis (Latour 2007, 22). In its ever-broadening set of referents, the language of extractivism mimics the proliferation of new extractive frontiers.

Given this breadth, what is the denotational core of extractivism? What are its defining elements? What is its object of critique, and what is its world-making vision? And, in its functions as critique and world-making, of diagnosis and poesis, what traction does it afford scholars and movements? Is it, in other words, a *useful* concept to guide analysis and resistance? And, if so, what are its limits — and its limitations?

In answering these questions, I take an approach distinct from that of extant scholarship on extractivism. This scholarship employs it as a descriptive or analytical term to refer to extractive activities, the policies and ideologies that promote them, their socio-environmental effects, and the forms of resistance that they provoke. In contrast, I regard extractivism first and foremost as the central term that unifies an emic discourse articulated by situated actors reflecting on and critiquing historically specific models of accumulation. I trace *extractivismo* discourse to the intertwined thought-worlds of left intellectuals and grassroots activists in Latin America. For this reason, when referring to this discourse as a whole, I use the Spanish *extractivismo*; when referring to "extractivism" or "the extractive model" as key terms in this discourse — as its objects of condemnation — I use English. Indeed, e*xtractivismo* and adjacent discourses represent the most important contributions of contemporary Latin American critical thought to leftist politics around the world. It is not surprising, then, that the concept of extractivism has traveled far and wide, taken on new significations, and opened up new vistas of critique and resistance.

My exegesis centers the agency of *extractivismo*'s collective authors who, through their intertwined activities of critique and mobilization, shape the terms and stakes of resource

politics in the Americas. It reveals how intellectual production is intertwined with political mobilization: from rallying cries to animated debates to everyday reflection, activists analyze the prevailing order and articulate visions of a world otherwise. As a discourse and associated repertoire of radical politics, *extractivismo* is emblematic of the phenomena comprised by "the Global South," which, most expansively, refers to "the resistant imaginary of a transnational political subject that results from a shared experience of subjugation under contemporary global capitalism." *Extractivismo* discourse exists in complex relations with broader processes of resistance. Invoking its rhetorical elements, activists present grievances and demands, define shared identities, select targets, inform tactics, mediate alliances, and constitute a key element of the rich symbolism that accompanies acts of protest. The discourse as a whole is in turn shaped by the exigencies and events of mobilization.

What, then, do Latin American intellectuals and activists usually mean when they use the term "extractivism"? According to its conceptual architects — environmental and indigenous activists, and public intellectuals — extractivism means "the intensive and extensive exploitation of natural resources; little or no industrialization; export as the principal destination; exploitation that impedes natural renovation . . . the economic form of the 'enclave'" (Chavez, 2013). It is a syndrome comprising the various pathological effects of political and economic dependency on resource extraction.

Extractivismo recombines preexisting strains of Latin American thought with more recent discourses around the environment and indigeneity. It constitutes a critique of the social formation it calls extractivism, into which it folds the traditional Left, seeing in both capitalism and state socialism a wanton disregard for socio-natural harmony. This critique is indebted to dependency theory, expanding on the latter's evaluation of economies organized around the export of primary commodities. It shares with this school of thought a narrative that begins with the violence of "plunder, accumulation, concentration, and devastation" (Acosta, 2016). Like its progenitors, the framework of *extractivismo* attends to the constitutive territorial unevenness of global capitalism, and, more specifically, to the fractal structure of cores and peripheries, a structure relentlessly reproduced via the ever-expanding extractive frontier.

The critical discourse of *extractivismo* also deviates from leftist tradition. Dependency theorists contemplated routes out of the situation of dependency: they were sharply divided over nationalist-developmentalist versus revolutionary paths to development (Svampa 2016, 193-266). The first hoped for an alliance of the state and national capital, whereas the second hoped to overthrow both dependency and capital at once. In contrast, *extractivismo* discourse not only rejects "development" as a goal but regards the extractive model as deeply embedded in social structure, ideology, and even subjectivity, thus troubling the very possibility of revolutionary transformation.

When deployed in political practice, *extractivismo* discourse recurrently deploys a set of tropes: (1) a focus on the communities directly affected by oil and mining; (2) the concept of *el territorio* ("territory" defined as a socionatural landscape); (3) the imbrication of environmental and cultural destruction; and (4) the longue durée timescale and spatially expansionary imperative of the extractive model. Through these themes, *extractivismo* redraws the cartography of domination and resistance. Compared to preceding emancipatory visions in Latin America and the Global South more broadly — which fused class analysis to a

horizon of anti-imperial liberation and rendered a popular collective subject at the scales of the nation, the Third World, and even the international — *extractivismo* centers the territories and communities directly affected by extractive projects. These locales are more often than not in rural spaces — though, of course, the encroaching extractive frontier results in new patterns of urbanization — and populated by Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and/or lower-class *mestizos*. In Ecuador, for example, Indigenous movements (especially the confederation of Indigenous nationalities, CONAIE), at times in alliances with radical environmental groups (such as Acción Ecológica), have played a key role in developing a repertoire of resistance that invokes collective rights — ensconced, though rarely enforced, in national constitutions and international conventions — to territorial and cultural integrity, and prior consultation, against the threat of extraction to livelihoods and landscapes.

To zoom in on the first element: anti-extractivism centers on the directly affected community. Such communities, located in the immediate zones of extraction, are at once the collective subject and geographical site of protest against oil and mining development.[3] Returning to Ecuador, communities in the southern highlands and southeastern Amazon emerged as forceful political subjects in the conflict over extraction, oftentimes acting through base-level organizations linked to the national Indigenous confederation, or repurposing organizations initially established for a different purpose, such as local water associations.

The local territorialization of resistance is a strength and a limit. On the one hand, community-level mobilization can obstruct a crucial chokepoint in the political economy of extraction and, by slowing or stalling specific projects, shape the global contours of the extractive frontier. On the other hand, this form of mobilization faces the difficulty of assembling a broader popular sector coalition with the capacity to take political power and transform the model of accumulation.

Despite this challenge, “community” is not a homogeneous or isolated collective actor, nor are its modes of protest rooted in a mythic past. In Ecuador, under the rubric of anti-extractivism, a multi-scalar alliance of indigenous and environmental movements enacted new forms of democratic participation (such as holding community consultations to vote on planned extractive projects), organized outings to the territories slated for extraction, produced their own knowledge regarding socio-environmental impacts, brought cases to the national and regional courts, and physically blockaded attempts to develop mining or oil projects. The systemic object of anti-extractive critique is immanent in the spatial contours of anti-extractive resistance. Traversing mountains, wetlands, and rainforests; urban plazas, state ministries, and shareholder meetings, directly affected communities and their allies mobilize along both the physical frontiers of extraction and the political-economic centers of extractive governance, confronting the extractive model at the roots of what they see as its expansionary imperative.

This cartography of territories and frontiers is joined by a temporality that anticipates future damage in order to shore up present resistance. Similar to the literary technique of prolepsis, in contexts where movements seek to stall or prevent a mining or oil project that has not yet occurred, or a pipeline that has not yet been built, activists prefigure extractive ruin: they behold a future past and invoke a politically potent attachment to what has not yet been lost (Riofrancos 2016). In the process, they enlist the landscape as a political ally in their fight against extraction. Anti-extractivism radically decenters human beings: crude and ore were

political protagonists; wetlands and mountains were moral agents. The problematic of *extractivismo* shifts the focus away from the classic concerns of both Marxism and egalitarian liberalism: the mode of production, the property regime, the pattern of distribution, the regulation of the economy, or the means to socio-economic development. In its purest form, the perspective of *extractivismo* discourse regarded these concepts and their political targets as not only insufficient but as reproducing the developmentalist pathology that was the essence of Western civilization.

Although *extractivismo* crystallized in the conjuncture marked by the Pink Tide of leftist governments in Latin America and the global commodity boom that saw an intensification of extractive activity, the processes it names and condemns have only grown in the saliency as climate change intensifies, and new forms of extraction take hold, threatening communities, territories, and ecosystems. Indeed, one of the most recent innovations in *extractivismo* discourse targets the forms of extraction and dispossession that accompany efforts to confront climate change. These are the extractive frontiers of green technology supply chains and the land-use patterns of large-scale solar and wind farms. In the Atacama Desert and across the Andean plateau of Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia — where lithium is extracted to produce electric vehicles and battery storage for renewable grids — new forms of resistance are taking shape to protest what movements call "green extractivism" and to demand protection of Indigenous rights and vulnerable desert ecosystems. This latest expansion in *extractivismo*'s evolving repertoire of signification is yet further evidence of the concept's generative potential — and its continued relevance in this moment of political and ecological turbulence.

References

Acosta, Alberto. 2016. "Las dependencias del extractivismo: aporte para un debate incomplete."

Aktuel Marx 20, 1–22.

Arboleda, Martín. 2020. *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction Under Late Capitalism*, New York: Verso Books.

Burchardt, Hans-Jürgen, and Kristina Dietz. 2014. "(Neo-) extractivism–a new challenge for development theory from Latin America." *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 3: 468-486

Chávez, David. 2013. "El estado del debate sobre desarrollo, extractivismo, y acumulación. en el Ecuador." (Working paper) Quito: Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales. http://cdes.org.ec/web/investigacion-el-estado-del-debate-sobre-desarrollo-extractivismo-y-acumulacion-de-capital-en-el-ecuador/.

Gago, Verónica, and Sandro Mezzadra. 2017. "A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism." *Rethinking Marxism* 29, no. 4: 574-591.

Gudynas, Eduardo. 2009. "Diez tesis urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo." *Extractivismo,*

política y sociedad 187, Accessed November 10, 2020. http://www.rosalux.org.ec/pdfs/extractivismo.pdf#page=187.

Hollender, Rebecca. 2015. “Post-Growth in the Global South: The emergence of alternatives to development in Latin America.” *Socialism and Democracy* 29, no. 1: 73-101.

Howe, Cymene, and Dominic Boyer. 2016. “Aeolian extractivism and community wind in Southern Mexico.” *Public Culture* 28, no. 2: 215-235.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mezzadra, Sandro and Brett Neilson. 2019. *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Moliner, Liliana Arroyo, Obaid Amjad, and David Murillo Bonvehí. 2019. “My data, my rules: From data extractivism to digital empowerment.” Accessed November 10, 2020. https://ictlogy.net/bibliography/reports/projects.php?idp=4133.

Viale, Enrique. 2017. “El extractivismo urbano,”in *Extractivismo Urbano: Debate para una Construcción Colectiva de las Ciudades*, ed. Ana María Vásquez Duplat. Buenos Aires: Fundación Rosa Luxemburgo, Centro de Estudios y Acción por la Igualdad, 15-24.

Riofrancos, Thea. 2016. “Proleptic Protest: Local Resistance to New Extractive Projects in Ecuador.” Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies. Accessed November 10, 2020.

Riofrancos, Thea. “Scaling Democracy: Participation and Resource Extraction in Latin America.” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (2017): 678-696. https://kellogg.nd.edu/proleptic-protest-local-resistance-new-extractive…

Svampa, Maristella. 2016. *Debates Latinoamericanos: indianismo, desarrollo, dependencia, populismo*.

Cochabamba: Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia.

---

[1] This essay draws on ideas from Riofrancos, Thea. 2020. *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador.* Durham: Duke University Press.
For examples of these concepts in use, see: Arboleda 2020 and Viale 2017 for “urban extractivism”; Gago and Mezzadra 2017 for “financial extractivism” (as well as a more general discussion of extractivism); Howe and Boyer 2016 for “aeolian extractivism”; Moliner et al. 2019 for “data extractivism.”

[2] For the quoted phrase, see the publishr’s blurb for Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, available at https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-politics-of-operations

[3] For more on the scale(s) of resistance to extraction, see Riofrancos 2017.

About the Authors

Thea Riofrancos is an assistant professor of political science at Providence College, an Andrew Carnegie Fellow (2020-2022), and a Radcliffe Institute Fellow (2020-2021). Her research focuses on resource extraction, renewable energy, climate change, green technology, social movements, and the left in Latin America. These themes are explored in her book, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador* (Duke University Press, 2020) and her co-authored book, *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (Verso Books, 2019). Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times, The Guardian, Boston Review, The Baffler, n+1, Dissent, Jacobin,* among others.

How to Cite

Riofrancos, Thea. November 11, 2020. "Extractivism and Extractivismo." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.