

Thea Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*

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## RETROCESSION IN ECUADOR

The results of Ecuador's presidential elections this year represented an unmistakable setback for the Latin American left. After years of reverses for the Pink Tide, a few recent developments—notably the election of Alberto Fernández in Argentina in 2019, the Chilean upsurge of 2019–20 and the return of the MAS to power in Bolivia in 2020—suggested that the region's rightward momentum could be stalled. On 7 February 2021, Ecuador seemed poised to confirm this trend, as Andrés Arauz, a 36-year-old economist and former minister in Rafael Correa's government, finished comfortably ahead in the first round of voting. Yet when the second round was held on 11 April, it was Arauz's opponent, the centre-right banker Guillermo Lasso, who emerged victorious with 52 per cent of the vote to Arauz's 48. After four years during which Correa's successor, Lenín Moreno, steadily dismantled the social gains made under his predecessor, the chance to shift the country leftward once more was lost.

A full reckoning of the reasons for this defeat would have to take account of many factors. But central to any discussion must be the role played by years of increasingly bitter contention between two components of the Ecuadorean left: on the one hand, the *correísta* currents seeking to advance the redistributive priorities of the 'Citizen's Revolution', set in motion after Correa came to power in 2006; on the other, a coalition of predominantly indigenous movements, grouped around the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) and the political party Pachakutik, calling for a shift away from an economic model that remained overly dependent on the extraction of natural resources.

The two positions were represented in the 2021 presidential contest by the candidacies of Arauz and Yaku Pérez of Pachakutik, and there can be no doubt that their rivalry shaped the final outcome. In February, Pérez trailed Lasso by a mere 32,000 votes, and may have played kingmaker by recommending his supporters spoil their ballots in the April run-off. In a contest Lasso won by 4 per cent, the *voto nulo* amounted to 18 per cent—a historic high for Ecuador, where it has not been above 11 per cent since the 1980s. The geography of the vote would seem to confirm that many Pachakutik supporters either spoiled their ballots or directly backed Lasso: the banker carried 12 of the 13 provinces Pérez had won in the first round, including many of the poorer and predominantly indigenous highland areas. He often did so by crushing margins, aided by the fact that in several highland provinces, Arauz's totals were smaller than the *voto nulo*. It is hardly a stretch to say that the rift within Ecuador's left cleared Lasso's way to the presidency.

How and why did this rift develop? Thea Riofrancos's *Resource Radicals* offers a thoughtful analysis of the origins and ground-level dynamics of the divergence within the Ecuadorean left. Focusing mainly on the years 2006–2016, it provides a political ethnography of key clashes over the extraction of natural resources, seeing these episodes as central to the consolidation of two broad camps, which Riofrancos terms 'radical resource nationalism' and 'anti-extractivism'. The former 'demands collective ownership of oil and minerals' and sees Ecuador's natural resources as a vital means for carrying out progressive social policies—poverty reduction in particular. The latter camp, by contrast, 'rejects extraction entirely and envisions a post-extractive society', and opposed the Correa government's plans for large-scale, open-pit mining of gold and copper as both ecologically disastrous and anti-democratic, accusing Correa of riding roughshod over the 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution's commitment to prior consultation of affected populations. For Riofrancos, beyond the immediate debate over policy priorities, this contention over resources also raises more profound questions about the purposes of progressive politics and the location of popular sovereignty: not just who controls the subsoil, but, ultimately, who rules?

*Resource Radicals* emerged out of the author's experiences living in Ecuador in 2007–08 and out of fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2016. Based in Providence, Rhode Island since 2015, Riofrancos is a political scientist and an active member of the US radical left, writing regularly for outlets such as *n+1*, *Dissent* and *Jacobin*. In her work to date, critical analysis of the Pink Tide has overlapped with eco-socialist advocacy: she is also the co-author of *A Planet to Win*, a 2019 manifesto for a Green New Deal. *Resource Radicals* is written in more academic vein (it is based on her 2014 doctoral thesis), and joins an expanding body of scholarship on the

politics of natural resource extraction. Her approach differs, however, from historical or political-economic studies and from the 'resource curse' literature in its strong emphasis on the discursive realm, as the place where rival political visions are constructed and clash with one another. Yet her main concern is to show how 'popular mobilization shaped the political and economic consequences of resource extraction', and she is always careful to link figurative battles to material facts and to their historical context. The result is a level-headed and perceptive national case study that sheds light on the broader dilemmas of the Pink Tide.

Natural resources have, of course, been central to Latin America's fortunes for centuries—from the colonial exactions of the Iberian powers through to the late 19th-century export boom that drew much of the region more closely into the global economy, on deeply unequal terms. While Ecuador's economy was dominated for most of the 20th century by agricultural exports, discoveries of oil in the Amazon in the 1960s and then gas on the coast in the 1970s made the country a hydrocarbon exporter. For a time, under the military dictatorship of Guillermo Rodríguez Lara, revenues from the state oil company were used to fund national developmental goals. But in the 1980s, in Ecuador as elsewhere in Latin America, amid escalating debt crises and global economic turbulence, this state-led model yielded to neoliberal recipes, combining deregulation and fiscal retrenchment. Developmental goals were side-lined, while export dependency only increased.

Yet it was not neoliberal governments that reaped the benefits of the commodity super-cycle after 2000. Instead, high world prices for oil, gas, metals, minerals, soya and other primary export goods swelled the coffers of one progressive government after another—from Chávez's Venezuela to Morales's Bolivia, and from Lula's Brazil to Correa's Ecuador—making possible significant expansions of social and welfare spending that slashed poverty across much of the region. As Riofrancos notes, however, the peak of the Pink Tide also coincided with the emergence of the concept of '*extractivismo*', which has been mobilized by critics of these governments to assail their continued dependence on natural resources.

The term seems to have begun circulating more widely in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and has acquired a variety of meanings. In its most basic sense, it simply denotes the excessive weight of commodity exports in a given economy. The Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Gudynas, who along with Maristella Svampa is among the most prominent figures associated with this line of analysis, defined it in 2015 as 'a kind of extraction of natural resources, in great volume or high intensity, which are essentially destined for export as raw materials, either unprocessed or minimally processed.'

By this measure, most Latin American countries would certainly qualify as 'extractivist', and many extremely so: primary resources account for more than 85 per cent of exports in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela, for example.

But as the *-ismo* suffix suggests, the concept is also supposed to have a systemic dimension, referring both to a model of development and to the broader effects of resource extraction; to a historical affliction and its present-day symptoms. Hugely imprecise as an analytical category—in different hands it can describe anything from the Manila galleons to the 19th-century guano boom to globalized agribusiness to deep-sea oil drilling—*extractivismo* blurs together centuries and social formations. This has often been part of a broader move to collapse capitalism, socialism and, crucially, the Pink Tide variants of developmentalism into a single destructive project, coterminous with 'modernity' itself.

Despite or perhaps because of its capaciousness, the concept of 'extractivism' has become a kind of political floating signifier in Latin America. This, indeed, was one of the distinctive features of the resource politics of the 2010s: contention was increasingly framed not as being over oil rents or 'development', say, but over the idea of resource extraction *tout court*. The emergence and centrality of what Riofrancos terms '*extractivismo* discourse' in Ecuador is all the more striking because it quickly came to divide political forces that had previously been united around a common anti-neoliberal agenda.

In order to chart that divergence, Riofrancos begins by carefully tracing the longer-run story of Ecuador's varying forms of popular mobilization. In socio-geographic and ethnolinguistic terms, the country is extremely diverse. Some 72 per cent of the population self-identified as *mestizo* at the last census, a large proportion of them retaining some link to their indigenous heritage. Around 7 per cent of the population classed themselves as fully indigenous, belonging to one of more than 30 ethnic groups that are distributed mainly between Andean highlands and Amazonian lowlands; Afro-Ecuadoreans accounted for another 8 per cent, whites for 6 per cent, and Montubians—a coastal *mestizo* group categorized as a distinct ethnicity—another 7 per cent.

Schematically, there have been important political disparities between highland communities and Amazonian groups, both in terms of timing and in terms of motivating ideas. (The country's coastal strip has historically been a stronghold of the right—especially Ecuador's largest city, Guayaquil—and consequently features much less in Riofrancos's account.) Highland communities have recurrently fought 'against unequal land tenure and super-exploitative labour relations', and their struggles gained particular force in successive waves of mobilization from the 1930s onwards—culminating

in an agrarian reform in 1964 that finally ended the *huasipungo* system of semi-feudal tenancy. Amazonian movements, by contrast, tended to take the form of ‘ethnic organization to defend communal territory against state-led land colonization, and oil exploration and extraction’, and gathered pace starting in the 1960s—after the agrarian reform, which triggered a push for colonization. These two ‘trajectories’, as Riofrancos terms them, only began to converge in the 1970s, as a result of which a national-level confederation, CONAIE, was formed in 1986.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the different currents of indigenous mobilization merged with a broader stream of anti-neoliberal sentiment, and it was their combined forces that repeatedly brought the country to a standstill, and that ultimately helped bring Correa to power in 2006. Within this anti-neoliberal consensus, the predominant view on natural resources was a demand for ‘the expulsion of foreign oil companies, the nationalization of oil, and the channelling of oil revenues to meet social needs.’ As well as appealing to progressive urban middle- and working-class constituencies, such demands mapped onto the highland communities’ calls for redistribution, and were fully compatible with their conception of sovereignty: CONAIE’s 1994 programme, as Riofrancos observes, proclaimed that natural resources should be ‘exclusive property of the Plurinational state.’ Yet already there was another strand of thinking about resources that opposed extraction itself—Amazonian communities in particular seeing it as a threat to their livelihoods and ecosystems.

Both currents, Riofrancos argues, were voicing their demands in the name of sovereignty—but they meant different things by it. One ‘invoked popular national sovereignty against foreign capital’ while the other ‘asserted indigenous territorial sovereignty against extraction.’ As long as they were in opposition to the existing neoliberal paradigm, the two conceptions and their accompanying demands could be conjoined. Yet ‘retrospectively, their distinct logics are apparent’. One made its claims on behalf of a nationwide *demos* and on the scale of the nation-state; the other was grounded in localized claims to sovereignty that in their view took precedence over those of the nation-state. Once the anti-neoliberal movement had opened the way for the ‘Citizen’s Revolution’, the disparity between them would move into the political foreground.

The 2008 Constitution was an important early milestone in the Correa administration, enshrining the country’s ‘plurinational’ character. But as Riofrancos notes, it also crystallized—without resolving—the tensions between opposed views of resource extraction, which had featured prominently in Constituent Assembly debates in 2007–08. She describes the two rival projects for Article 57, which established the rights of communities affected by extractive projects. The minority proposal, supported by many

indigenous groups, was to bring Ecuador into line with ILO Convention 169, which calls for 'free, prior and informed consent'. The majority view, however, instead accords indigenous communities the right to 'free prior informed consultation'—a notably weaker standard. As Riofrancos observes, moreover, the final text of the constitution was laced with further ambiguities that proved consequential: it 'empowers communities affected by extraction, and it grants rights to nature', yet at the same time it 'also asserts the state's exclusive control over subsoil resources and biodiversity itself.'

Struggles over *consulta previa*, as it became known, then move to the centre of Riofrancos's account. What made them especially intense was the fact that they mainly revolved not around existing extractive projects but around new ones—and in particular around mining, previously little developed in Ecuador, but which the Correa government sought to encourage as a new source of revenue. It did so in partnership with foreign-owned (principally Canadian) mining concerns, which supplied much of the 'information' the government provided to communities as part of the consultation process. It seems to a large extent to have been this ramping up of mining, which would principally affect highland communities, that precipitated a shift on the part of CONAIE to a fully anti-extractive position. In other words, the two historical trajectories described above were now conjoined in opposition both to extraction and to the Correa government. Protests against the 2009 Mining Law regulating the new sector brought a swath of arrests, and signalled the repressive tack that the Correa government would thenceforth often take in response to anti-extractivist dissent.

Riofrancos provides evocative portraits of particularly significant events such as the 2012 'March for Water, Life and the Dignity of Peoples', a fortnight-long procession from the southern Amazonian town of Pangui to Quito's Parque El Arbolito. Accompanying the march, she noticed how participants articulated a range of discontents with reference to the 2008 Constitution, making the document itself less a static settlement than a tool of struggle: 'the Constitution lived among us', she observes. Riofrancos also describes attempts by indigenous communities and environmental advocates to enforce the higher standard of consent, and to organize their own democratic *consultas*—local ballots that she calls acts of 'vernacular statecraft'. She gives a detailed account of a 2011 *consulta* on gold mining organized by two community water management systems in Azuay province, which opened with an ancestral ceremony—'the musky sweetness of burning *palo santo* infused the air around the concentric circles of fruit, vegetables, grain and flowers arranged on an electric pink and blue cloth'—and ended with a resounding 93 per cent vote against the mine. One of the key organizers of this referendum, which the Correa government refused to recognize as legitimate, was the indigenous activist Carlos Pérez, who in 2017 would change his name to Yaku Sacha ('water of the mountain' in Kichwa)

Pérez—a move that Riofrancos diplomatically describes as testifying to ‘the evolving cultural and political salience of indigeneity’.

Addressing the other side of Ecuador’s resource politics divide, Riofrancos draws on extensive interviews with state functionaries. What the latter shared, according to Riofrancos, was ‘a narrative that defined neo-liberalism as state absence’ and an aspiration to ‘build a state that could expertly regulate economic activity.’ While she is attentive to disagreements within the *correísta* state, Riofrancos argues that on the whole, state functionaries sought to frame resource politics as a technical issue that hinged on the provision of information—in which case opposition was a matter of misinformation or wilful obstruction; a minority veto of majority needs. Ironically, this technocratic attempt to depoliticize resource politics only helped to solidify the battle-lines between the government and mounting opposition.

Riofrancos concludes with a fair-minded attempt to synthesize both the achievements and the limitations of Ecuador’s two lefts, which she terms the ‘Left-in-power’ and the ‘Left-in-resistance’, and to draw lessons from them for the Pink Tide as a whole. She records the Correa government’s concrete achievements—sustained economic growth, a doubling of social spending as a share of GDP, poverty dropping from 38 to 22 per cent—as well as a ‘substantive, grassroots empowerment’ that took place. At the same time, however, Ecuador became more rather than less reliant on resource rents, deepening the dominance of the extractive model, as well as racking up significant debts to China and to regional development banks. For their part the anti-extractive movements succeeded in making the question of extraction itself a central stake in Ecuadorean politics, and they ‘demonstrated the capacity to stall or disrupt both oil and mining projects at the local level’. Yet as Riofrancos puts it, they ‘had difficulty assembling a popular sector coalition at the national scale with the power to articulate and enact an alternative to the extractive model.’

In Riofrancos’s view, the sundering of these two left currents has been both tragic and unnecessary. The dispute between them ‘became so polarized that each saw in the other a political enemy more dangerous than neoliberalism.’ She continues:

Lost in this internecine dispute was the radical promise of ‘twenty-first-century socialism’: collective, democratic control over the conditions of socio-natural existence. Such a program could have coherently demanded *both* the redistribution of oil and mining revenues *and* a transition away from the extractive model of accumulation that generates those revenues. Just such a vision inflected CONAIE’s 1994 political program, published amidst massive mobilizations against neoliberal land reforms . . . Yet two decades later, ‘socialism’ and ‘anti-extractivism’ had come to name two counterposed political projects.

For Riofrancos, however, both of these projects contain elements that are fundamentally necessary—and not just in Ecuador. A redistributive socio-economic agenda is urgently needed to address gaping inequalities and injustices; opposition to extraction must form part of any strategy to avert or even slow down a cascading ecological disaster. There is an obvious resonance between her insistence here that the two can and should be combined and the case she has helped make elsewhere for a Green New Deal.

*Resource Radicals* offers a highly articulate and balanced analysis of the intra-left contention that has done so much to shape Ecuador's recent political trajectory. Written at the end of the Correa administration and in the early stages of Lenín Moreno's government, it says relatively little about the latter's assiduous efforts to undo his predecessor's legacy—a puzzle that becomes more comprehensible if one sees *correísmo* itself as a provisional coalition, which all along contained elements frankly opposed to much of Correa's agenda. The swift unravelling of the 'Citizen's Revolution' should perhaps have featured more prominently in Riofrancos's account, since it underlines the internal fragility of the 'Left-in-power' during the period she covers. Nevertheless, *Resource Radicals* provides a detailed picture of how the Pink Tide's broader limitations played out in concrete political terms. Absent a more thoroughgoing transformation of the country's social structures, Ecuador's progressive forces were only able to advance their social programmes on the basis of deepening commodity extraction. High resource rents enabled this to work for a time, but this strategy was always destined to hit a wall when the resource bonanza ran dry, as it began to do after 2014. At that point, contradictions that had long been apparent between a redistributive 'radical resource nationalism' and 'anti-extractivism' became increasingly destructive.

Yet this in turn raises some troubling questions for Riofrancos's analysis, and in particular for her hopes for a synthesis of the two projects. Laudable though the latter might be in principle, her book itself provides a test case of their painful incompatibility in practice, and her account of the rival conceptions of sovereignty in play—grounded as they are in alternative conceptions of the very nation-state—only shows how deep the rift goes. She rightly points out the tendency of the broader anti-extractive critique to posit a 'total, ideologically closed system' and hence to 'foreclose the possibility of transformation, short of an exogenous shock.' This then brings up a profound problem: 'who is the imagined collective subject' that might propel a shift to a post-extractive world? We might also add: through what kind of political struggles—in opposition to what—is that collective subject going to be forged?

While Riofrancos sees the 2019 protests against the Moreno government as a hopeful sign, potentially pointing to a renewed convergence between



Ecuador's different popular sectors, the evidence of the 2021 election is considerably more sombre. It highlights, moreover, an aspect that receives much less attention in Riofrancos's account than it perhaps should. In dealing so extensively with intra-left contention, *Resource Radicals* tends to understate the degree to which Ecuador's Left-in-power, like all other Pink Tide governments, was besieged by an untransformed and still extremely powerful elite, which retained both its economic power and its grip on the media as well as its sway over key institutions, including the police. Not just well placed to take advantage of the rift within the left, Ecuador's elite worked assiduously to amplify it. One obvious result was a startling inversion of the country's electoral map, with Arauz's victories coming in the coastal strip and Lasso carrying the highlands. It remains to be seen how durable that shake-up will be. The prospect of working with Lasso has already caused turmoil in Pachakutik, with Yaku Pérez abruptly resigning from the party on 20 May in protest (though he had also opposed any alliances with Arauz's party). Much hinges on whether the rift within the left remains unbridged, or whether the two lefts can converge once more in opposition to a refurbished and rearmed neoliberalism. Riofrancos gives us grounds for pessimism while making a more hopeful case.