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Global Environmental Politics, Volume 22, Number 2, May 2022, pp. 194-200
(Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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Book Review Essay

Extractivist States: Contesting and Negotiating the “Commodities Consensus” in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Across Latin America

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Gustafson, Bret. 2020. *Bolivia in the Age of Gas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Riofrancos, Thea. 2020. *Resource Radicals: From Petro-nationalism to Post-extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Svampa, Maristella. 2019. *Neo-extractivism in Latin America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Resource extraction has become something of an unavoidable topic for scholars of Latin America. Whether one begins one’s career by studying Indigenous language politics in Bolivia (Gustafson 2009) or populism in Argentina (Martuccelli and Svampa 1997), it seems that, these days, all roads lead to extractivism. There are good empirical and political reasons for this focus. In a context where the provenance of money used to fund progressive political agendas is increasingly under scrutiny (spoiler alert: it’s resource rent) and extractive frontiers are cropping up in relatively new places (where they provoke relatively new social conflicts), extractivism appears as the root problem, the key contradiction, or the articulating concern of multiple social groups. Accordingly, it is also the shared topic of interest for the three books examined in this review.

As Maristella Svampa underscores in her recent summary of the topic, *Neo-extractivism in Latin America*, the commodity boom that started in 2003 prompted Latin American governments from across the political spectrum to lean into the “el dorado” promises of expansive and rapid resource extraction. However, it is the enthusiasm with which an emerging set of leftist governments approached resource extraction that has sparked the most debate.

Elected across the region in the early 2000s and collectively described as the “pink tide,” the new left administrations of Latin America rose to power on platforms that combined elements drawn from socialist, developmentalist, environmentalist, and Indigenous political stances, albeit in different proportions. The pink tide governments’ multifaceted political campaigns often reflected the heterogeneous social movements that propelled them into power. These social movements were united, above all, in their rejection of neoliberalism, but stark divergences in their understandings of what ought to come *after* neoliberalism became increasingly apparent the longer the pink tide maintained regional control.

Nowhere were these tensions clearer than around the topic of resource extraction. While leftist administrations differed from their neoliberal predecessors in that they were capturing and redistributing much larger profits from this resource windfall (hence the prefix *neo-* often attached to the term *extractivism*), the social and ecological impacts of their extractive programs were equal to, if not worse than, those that had come before. For political analysts and leftist organizers alike, this has presented a strategic as much as a conceptual dilemma. At what point are the damages caused by “progressive” economic policies great enough to justify blunt critique? What work will that critique do, and how can it avoid inadvertently strengthening right-wing political movements, which are already resurgent across the region?

Svampa, Gustafson, and Riofrancos all approach this question carefully, drawing on different disciplinary backgrounds but shared commitments to a “postextractivist” Latin American future, however challenging that may be to wrangle from the extractivist present. Svampa, along with Eduardo Gudynas (2009), is one of the strongest intellectual forces behind an effort to understand, name, and resist neo-extractivism in Latin America, and her book offers a succinct review of much of the work that she has been sharing in article form over the last two decades. As always, Svampa’s insights are sharp and constitute a set of guide rails for everyone else working on the subject. In a dialectical analysis, she pairs an elaboration on her term “commodities consensus,” which describes the regional convergence on export-oriented commodity production in post-Washington Consensus Latin America (see also Svampa 2015), with a detailed analysis of the “eco-territorial turn,” which encapsulates “the innovative crossroads between the indigenous-community matrix and the autonomic narrative, in an environmentalist key” (2). In other words, she is thinking through the relationship between, on one hand, regional and national political economic tendencies and, on the other hand, particular forms of emergent contestation, which have questioned not just resource extraction but also the contours of a desirable society and the meaning of “development.” As Arturo Escobar (2006) has long emphasized, the struggle over nature and “natural resources” is always also the struggle over meanings and belonging; Svampa shows how the commodities consensus has elevated this struggle to national and regional levels.

Svampa's is a regional survey, and she therefore explores shared tendencies across countries that appear ideologically opposed, such as Colombia (where neoliberal economics have largely prevailed) and Bolivia (where neoliberal economics have been officially rejected). Regardless of whether resource rents accrue primarily to elites (Colombia) or are more evenly distributed across social groups (Bolivia), Svampa insists that reliance on resource extraction keeps all countries in a shared state of dependence. With an ascendant China, the United States need no longer be so omnipresent in Latin American politics for dependency to remain a recurrent problematic. Indeed, China looms large in Svampa's account, owing to its role in spurring the commodity boom, its regional investment portfolios (in infrastructure and resource extraction), and its status as the most important holder of Latin American debts.

According to Svampa, the neoextractivist turn can be periodized in three phases: an optimistic phase focused on social spending and poverty reduction (2003–2008), an intensified phase marked by the proliferation of both "megaprojects" (dams, highways, open-pit mining, etc.) and social resistance (2008–2013), and an "exacerbated phase" characterized by an expansion of extractivist projects, especially unconventional energies, in the wake of falling commodity prices (2013 to the book's publication). She also notes that one of the primary tensions within the neoextractivist project, a tension that has mounted across all three phases, is the matter of free, prior, and informed consultation (FPIC). In many Latin American countries, FPIC is constitutionally or legally guaranteed to communities affected by extraction and other megaprojects; importantly, it has also become a primary tool for Indigenous peoples fighting for autonomy and territorial control. Nevertheless, FPIC has been unevenly respected in practice, and the right itself has become increasingly vulnerable with the deepening of the extractive frontier. Latin America, Svampa notes, is the region where the most environmental activists and land defenders have been assassinated worldwide, an upsetting statistic that she connects to a generally reduced willingness on the part of neoextractivist states to respect Indigenous or local territorial decision-making processes.

Throughout her book, Svampa points repeatedly to two cases where the contradictions of neo-extractivism have been most acute: Bolivia and Ecuador. It is therefore fitting that the other two books examined here are engaged in deep analyses of extractivism in precisely these two countries. Gustafson's *Bolivia in the Age of Gas* is a remarkable ethnographic examination of the emergence and dynamics of what he calls Bolivia's "gaseous state," or a state dependent on and defined by the dynamics of natural gas extraction. Building on a long-standing research program addressing the relationship between Bolivia's central state and the apparently peripheral projects of the Guaraní people of the Chaco region—which also happens to be the site of Bolivia's most lucrative gas fields—Gustafson invites readers to reflect on the centrality of fossil fuel political economies to "the reproduction of patriarchal and racial capitalism and militarization of social life" (13). Pulling analytical

inspiration from two mid-twentieth-century Bolivian scholars, Sergio Almaraz Paz and René Zavaleta, Gustafson seeks to understand how the Bolivian state has been shaped by natural resource booms that include but also predate the current natural gas frenzy. This is a subtle but important shift for ethnographies of Bolivian extractivism, which have tended to focus on the figure of former president Evo Morales and the changes made (or promised) by his administration. Evo is certainly present in Gustafson's analysis of Bolivia's gaseous state, but he appears as much a subject shaped by the imperatives of the natural gas economy as the architect of said economy.

Bolivia in the Age of Gas is divided into three parts, each of which examines a particular dimension of the gaseous state: time, space, and excess. The first section considers how history and memory influence contemporary politics, moving from the Chaco War (1932–1935: a conflict that pitted Bolivia against Paraguay in what is frequently remembered as a war for oil) to the history of nationalization in the Bolivian oil sector (1937 and 1967) to the nostalgia generated in the wake of the dismantling of the state oil company in the 1990s. The second section explores the particular issues of spatial scale generated or exacerbated by natural gas extraction, which is always both an intensely local and geographically extensive process. It traces the history of regionalism in Bolivia, showing how natural gas played into and amplified territorial struggles at multiple levels, such as between the western highlands and eastern lowlands, between the wealthy lowland city of Santa Cruz and the highland capital of La Paz, and between Guaraní communities near natural gas fields and surrounding regional elites. This second section deals extensively with the forms of racist and patriarchal capitalism that have characterized the gaseous state, particularly within the anti-Indigenous lowland struggle for regional autonomy.

The third section, which takes its cue from Zavaleta's argument that struggles over state formation and hegemony in Bolivia can be understood as a "quarrel over the excess," is perhaps the most interesting part of the book. In Gustafson's chapters, the category of "excess" is multivalent, incorporating everything from the political work done by the appearance of dead bodies to the political work done by people attempting to capture excess resource rents. If the latter theme of circulating resource rents is a well-trodden theme in the extractivist literature, the discussion of dead bodies, as well as the spectacular narratives and images they engender, is not. Yet Gustafson makes a convincing argument about their importance, juxtaposing descriptions of more recently assassinated bodies against famous images of Che Guevara after he was executed by the Bolivian army in 1967. Thinking about these bodies, the reader is reminded of Svampa's comments about the increasing criminalization and ongoing violence associated with resource extraction, which she frames as evidence of authoritarian, extractivist violence. From Gustafson's anthropological perspective, this violence becomes more intimately constitutive of the extractivist state, rather than an external effect of it.

Echoing contemporary trends in Latin American social movements, both Gustafson and Svampa swerve the ends of their books toward a discussion of feminist and (in Gustafson's case) queer politics. Gustafson does the most work here, actively connecting the patriarchal practices of the natural gas business, where male employees assumed access to both company privileges and women's bodies, to the masculinist limitations of the Morales administration and the "gaseous state" in general. By historicizing traits that cannot be contained by the Morales regime alone, Gustafson avoids reproducing tropes of *machismo*, which were regularly levied against Morales by racist lowland elites. Like Svampa, Gustafson closes his book by suggesting that the recent growth of feminist social movements, including those against femicide and domestic abuse, those fighting for legal abortion, and those advocating for queer and trans rights, are indicative of the future direction of Latin American politics, including anti-extractivist organizing.

Thea Riofrancos's *Resource Radicals: From Post-nationalism to Post-extractivism in Ecuador*, is a fascinating analysis of the relationship between what she describes as two "resource radicalisms," or two divergent ways of thinking about the relationship between natural resources and progressive politics in Ecuador. "Radical resource nationalism" demands collective resource ownership and nationwide redistribution of resource rents, whereas "anti-extractivism" rejects extraction entirely because of its adverse effects on local ecologies and communities. Although other scholars have identified this tension within Latin America's pink tide, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, Riofrancos offers a compelling periodization of the two tendencies and situates them within a broader analysis of state-society relations. She traces a relational history between radical resource nationalism and anti-extractivism, arguing that the former is rooted in a Marxian critique of imperialism and was strengthened in the period of anti-neoliberal activism of the early 2000s, while the latter is rooted in early Indigenous organizing and crystallized as a collective movement after the putatively "post-neoliberal" administration of Raphael Correa ascended to power in 2007. Social movements, Riofrancos posits, develop their critical language of resistance in response to the policies and practices of the state, so the arcs of resource nationalism and anti-extractivism can only be traced in relation to one another. In other words, what Riofrancos offers is a Foucauldian analysis of the emergence of the anti-extractivist critique, embedded within a dialectical analysis of state-society relations.

Given this focus, *Resource Radicals* avoids state centrism and is attentive to the complicated dynamics of anti-extractivist activism. After historicizing the emergence of the discourse of resource nationalism and the discourse of *extractivismo*, Riofrancos examines recent anti-extractivist strategies, showing how they engage with a shifting terrain of legal tools and direct actions. This is the heart of the book and its most exciting contribution. Riofrancos is a political scientist, so her research speaks to core concerns of her field, such as

the influence of resource extraction on regime type and economic trajectory. But she is also a politically committed ethnographer, and the richness of her ethnographic methods shines through in her chapters on anti-extractivist activism, particularly her descriptions of the two-week March for Water, Life, and the Dignity of Peoples (March 8–22, 2012), in which she participated.

In these chapters, Riofrancos discusses how the Ecuadorian constitution, which—like many of the pink tide countries—was rewritten in the early 2000s, has become a key focus for activist claims. These claims, however, are not limited to the constitution itself but also involve resuscitating proposals that were made (but ultimately rejected) during the 2007–2008 Constituent Assembly, the event that culminated in the exciting but often contradictory constitutional document. Demonstrating Svampa’s point that FPIC has become a key source of contention within the new left, Riofrancos shows how activists in 2012 revisited Constituent Assembly-era demands for free, prior, and informed *consent* (rather than consultation) to push back against Correa’s plan to activate a large-scale mining industry in Ecuador. In parallel, she shows how state bureaucrats evaded genuine consultation processes by equating the *consulta* with “socialization,” or the dissemination of information, an elision that suggested that anyone who opposed extractivism was merely ill informed. In this context, the constitution’s many lives—or the discourses that exceeded the document itself—became objects as well as the terrain of struggle.

In discussing the *consulta* and its interpreters, Riofrancos also explores important questions about the composition of the *demos*, or who constitutes “the people” in a democratic nation. Particularly given the work done by activists in Ecuador and Bolivia to rethink the concept of the nation—which has resulted in both countries in an official embrace of the concept of “plurinationalism”—the tension between the two “resource radicalisms” identified by Riofrancos is also unavoidably a tension around the question of who makes decisions about resource extraction projects, particularly given their unevenly distributed costs and benefits. As Gustafson emphasizes, this is a scalar question, and it is intimately connected to the “eco-territorial turn” identified by Svampa. Rather than taking a firm stance on this question, Riofrancos closes her book by suggesting that it is the polarization of the “two lefts,” rather than either resource nationalism or anti-extractivism per se, that is real the problem. “Lost in this internecine dispute was the radical promise of twenty-first century socialism. ... 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” (182, emphasis original). With this conclusion, Riofrancos positions her book as a more sympathetic critique of the resource nationalist left than those offered by either Svampa or Gustafson.

Although the commodity boom that sparked the rise of neo-extractivism is typically said to have ended in 2013, the questions raised by these three books continue to be highly relevant. As Svampa shows, the fall of commodity prices

has resulted in more, rather than less, resource extraction across Latin America, while Chinese investment in Latin American “megaprojects,” including resource extraction, continues to grow. Moreover, the coming global energy transition promises an uptick in the demand for metals and minerals needed for renewable energy generation and storage (lithium, copper, zinc, etc.), which will likely increase pressure on Latin American countries to expand their extractive frontiers. In this context, the question of how to build a united left, capable of managing the tensions between redistributional nationalist and anti-extractivist tendencies, will remain key to scholars and activists interested in post-extractivist, or even simply less extractivist, futures.

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