

## Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century, Latin American economies were highly favored given the high international prices of commodities (leading to a commodity boom), which began a period of economic growth. This new conjuncture was preceded by a change in the region, characterized by intense anti-neoliberal mobilizations, leading to the denaturalization of the relationship between globalization and neoliberalism. In political terms, as of 2003, this process was crowned by the emergence of progressive governments (left or center-left, depending on the case) that, above their differences, combined heterodox economic policies with the expansion of social spending and increased consumption. Thus commenced the so-called Latin American progressive cycle, which would spread until 2015.

Likewise, the dynamic of economic growth created a transitional and conflictive situation wherein one of the major factors would be the *commodities consensus*, which expressed the distinction between neo-extractivism and a new version of development. The increased pressure on natural goods, lands, and territories added a dimension of dispute and conflict between, on the one hand, current indigenous organizations, socio-territorial movements, and new socio-environmental groups and, on the other hand, governments and large economic corporations. Indeed, over the years, past all of the ideological differences, all the Latin American governments implemented the return of a *productivist* vision of development and sought to deny or conceal discussions regarding the implications (impacts, consequences, damage) of the extractive export model. Moreover, in the heat of extraordinary profitability, the number of large mining enterprises and the construction of mega-dams multiplied, while the oil and agrarian frontier expanded, the latter through monocultures such as soybeans and African palm.

To denote this phenomenon, a unifying concept was coined: *neo-extractivism*. It is true that this not a completely new development, since the origins of extractivism trace back to the conquest and colonization of Latin America, at the dawn of European capitalism. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the so-called phenomenon of neo-extractivism was acquiring new dimensions, not only objectively – by the number and scale of the projects, the different types of activities, the national and transnational actors involved, and the dimension of the ecological crisis, but also for its political and symbolic aspects. This new phase introduced various dilemmas and gaps within the field of mobilized social organizations and leftist political parties. This demonstrated the limits of existing progressivism, visible in its link with authoritarian and imaginative hegemonic political practices of development.

By 2013, the fall in commodity prices was a far cry from signifying a weakening of this model. Rather, it led to a deepening and exacerbation of neo-extractivism. A process of reprimarization would accompany the advancement of the commodification of economies. This process would not only affect South American countries, but it was also associated with the increasingly prevalent presence of China in the region, which served as both the main partner and the raw material demander.

In this Element, I propose a dialectic synthesis explaining the expansion of neo-extractivism in the Latin American region, especially in South America. I additionally account for the dynamics of socio-environmental conflicts as well as the emergence of new counter-hegemonic narratives associated with the defense of the land and territories. I will argue that above the specific markers (which depend, in large part, on local and national scenarios), the dynamics of the socio-environmental struggles gave rise to what can be called an *eco-territorial turn*. This is illustrated by the convergence of different matrices and the vernacular, that is, by the innovative crossroads between the indigenous-community matrix and autonomic narrative, in an environmentalist key, to which would be added, by the end of the cycle, the feminist key.

Based on this, I first present some of the critical concepts such as *neo-extractivism* and the *commodities consensus*. Then I address the various phases of the socio-environmental conflict. Section 2 presents a summary of the development of extractive violence in the territories. In Section 3, I expand upon some of the topics of the eco-territorial turn, including *Buen Vivir* (BR), the Rights of nature (*Derechos de la Naturaleza*), common goods (*bienes comunes*), and the ethics of care (*etica del cuidado*). I also refer to the debates regarding the development of alternative methods, including post-extractivism, which is a transition and exit from neo-extractivism. The Conclusion proposes the consideration of these issues in terms of the end of the progressive political cycles and its ambiguities and limitations, in light of the opening of a new political cycle, marked by the strengthening of regional rights.

### Various Preliminary Conditions

Before moving forward, I would like to provide some preliminary considerations and definitions concerning the theoretical and epistemological assumptions that guide this Element. The first consideration refers to the type of conflict that our societies are experiencing today. We live in complex societies, where the risks and uncertainties caused by industrial dynamics and exponential and unlimited economic growth produce systematic and irreversible damage to ecosystems. This affects and threatens the necessary functions of nature and

the reproduction of life. Therefore, the decisions that were previously reserved for experts and specialized bureaucracies have acquired wider social and political recognition. Currently, the supposed models of development, far from being naturalized and accepted without discussion by the population, have raised intense social debates regarding their economic, environmental, socio-sanitary, cultural, and political consequences. Moreover, they tend to provoke political debates.

In this regard, the socio-environmental conflicts that traverse the Latin American region need to be addressed as well. Socio-environmental conflicts include those connected to the access and control of natural assets and territory, which imply divergent interests and values on the part of opposing actors. Concurrently, these actors are involved in the context of a large power asymmetry.<sup>1</sup> This definition leads us to make two clarifications. The first is that debates regarding development have a deep anchoring in the political definitions of a society, and more specifically in its cultural history. Certainly, there is no single development model, but when we reflect on the various models of development present in Latin America, the question is not only epistemological (their conceptual and ideological construction), but it is also political, as a matrix of social objectives.

On the other hand, what has been said does not imply affirming that the entirety of socio-environmental conflicts leads to a dynamic of contestation among the dominant development model (neo-extractivism and its control and domination mechanisms). In other words, not all socio-environmental conflicts demonstrate the eco-territorial turn or are configured as environmental justice movements. The social dynamics are designing different scenarios and gradations, depending on the localities, countries, and social sectors involved, as well as the available imagery and traditions of struggle, including the questioning of megaprojects. In a schematic way, it can be affirmed that there are those social actors who accept the dominant narratives and emphasize the discussion about the distribution of economic benefit; however, there are also those who denounce the dynamics of dispossession and tend to challenge the development model. Yet, both positions can coexist with tension in the same social organization – which is observable in countries such as Peru and Bolivia – with a strong extractive model.

The significance and resonance acquired by those conflicts and struggles that challenge the dominant development model cannot be defined exclusively from a quantitative point of view. The significance of collective action is qualitative in nature; its importance is in terms of generating new trends and new rhetorical value and their impact both within a common field (social movements) and in

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<sup>1</sup> I follow in part the definition of Fontaine (2003), but I add a reference to the asymmetric character of the struggles.

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relation to the society (the introduction of new public problems). One of the hypotheses behind this Element is that the positions can be analyzed in terms of social conflict, insofar as they are integrated in a study of alternative society projects (elite or dominant fractions and subaltern sectors). In this sense, the classic developmental debate on productive, technical, and economic issues aims to be interwoven with another that introduces the analysis of power, by thinking about politics in a context of socio-ecological crisis; through this, it generates the construction of collective imagery about a *desirable society* (Svampa ed. 2014). In this line of thought, where the extractive projects are questioned, the involved populations claim forms of participatory and direct democracy, while they dispute what is meant by “development.” More generally, they ask about other ways of building society and inhabiting the world. In short, it is this type of conflict that draws attention today in Latin America, which continually sets new trends, beyond the traditional repertoires and responses, that generate and converge with new counter-hegemonic narratives about territory, nature, culture, and the environment. From this, the goal regarding the design of another *desirable and attainable society* ensues.

The second clarification refers to the scenario of social asymmetry that is constitutive of these conflicts: although the socio-environmental conflicts are also argumentative struggles, they do not operate in a context of equality. It is impossible to deny the effect of lobbying by corporations (mining, oil, agribusiness) on the state and its institutions and on the media, and their interference and pressure on citizen and judicial decisions, even in the electoral processes and the practices of delegative representation. There is a deliberate omission from the political-business sphere regarding providing the conditions for public debate on the consequences of the different forms of neo-extractivism. This aspect is visible in the tendency to obstruct or challenge forms of direct democracy (referenda or public consultations) promoted from social organizations and foreseen by the current institutional arrangements. In contrast, the asymmetry also refers to the opacity of the State at its different levels (national, regional, local), despite its obligation to guarantee citizens the right to access information of public interest. The fact is, when it comes to collecting statistical information on jobs; profitability; investments made by extractive companies; and environmental, social, and economic impacts, much of the information provided by official bodies directly involved – the secretariats and ministries of mining, energy, strategic planning – tends to include unreliable statistics, ostensibly inflated economic projections, or simply replications of the information provided by corporations.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An example of this is not only mega-mining, especially in relation to the creation of jobs, but also the exploitation of non-conventional hydrocarbons through fracking, with respect to economic profitability and exploitation projections, among others.

The difficulty of accessing accurate information created one of the pillars that structures the collective debate in the Latin American region. This need to generate reliable sources of information was rapidly construed as a commitment to produce independent critical knowledge regarding the different powers (economic, political, media). Consequently, without ignoring the official data, my work appeals to its own sources (elaborated collectively and in an interdisciplinary way, concerning mega-mining and fracking), as well as to different academic sources (EJAtlas, ECLAC, and research by various colleagues in the region at the national level) and nonacademic (OCMAL-Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America, diverse social organizations, and activist stories) to account for these processes.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, regarding the place of enunciation, it should be clarified that this Element is not written from a supposed value of neutrality or the distancing of the “experts.” To paraphrase Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003), objectivity is sought but in no way does it advocate for “neutrality,” a discourse in which the most varied areas of power have hidden interests. This is a theoretical and methodological approach that is part of the tradition of critical social sciences. This field emphasizes the inequality of environmental costs, the lack of participation, lack of democracy, and environmental racism toward indigenous peoples – in short, gender injustice and ecological debt. It is a theoretical and epistemological commitment that seeks to resume and affirm the critical role that, I believe, academic institutions must play in the social production of knowledge, as well as in the discussion of the issues that run through our society, such as that a valuable dialogue with social organizations can encourage the production of alternative knowledge.

## 1 Dimensions of Neo-extractivism

### 1.1 Extractivism and Neo-extractivism

Neo-extractivism is an analytical category born in Latin America that has a great descriptive and explanatory power, as well as a denunciatory aspect and a strong mobilizing power. It would be impossible to synthesize the contributions and characterizations, such the profusion of articles and books produced in the past decade that relate to its applicability to the affected actors and social movements that constitute it. In this first section, I am interested in giving

<sup>3</sup> In the case of the mega mining, Machado Araoz, Svampa et al. (*Voices of Alert*, 2011, published in different versions in Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Peru); for fracking, Bertinat et al. (2014, reissued in 2018); and on development models and neo-extractivism, Svampa and Viale (2014). At the Latin American level, we appeal to the individual and collective contributions of the Permanent Working Group of Alternatives to Development (*EL Grupo de Trabajo Permanente de Alternativas al Desarrollo*), in addition to academic research at the national level, carried out in collaboration with social organizations, which will be cited appropriately.

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an account of some readings that point to the multidimensionality and multiple scales of the phenomenon.

In terms of the “accumulation model,” all the authors recognize the historical roots of extractivism. For the Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta, “Extractivism is a form of accumulation that began to be massively forged 500 years ago,” molded since then by the demands of the metropolitan centers of nascent capitalism (Acosta, 2013:62). In this regard, as the Argentine political scientist Horacio Machado Aráoz affirms, extractivism is not one more phase of capitalism or a problem of underdeveloped economies but constitutes “a structural feature of capitalism as a world-economy ... a historical-geopolitical product of the differentiation – the original hierarchization between colonial territories and imperial metropolises; the ones thought as mere spaces of looting and plundering done for the provisioning of the others” (Machado Aráoz, 2013:131). Furthermore, the Venezuelan sociologist Emiliano Terán Mantovani adds to this argument by claiming that neo-extractivism can be interpreted as a “particular mode of accumulation,” especially with respect to Latin American economies, “which can be studied from the social and territorial scope encompassed by the nation-state, without detriment to other scales of territorial analysis” (Terán Mantovani, 2016:255–256).

Other works consider extractivism as a style of development based on the extraction and appropriation of nature, “which feeds a scarcely diversified productive framework and is very dependent on an international suppliers of raw materials” (Gudynas, 2015:13). Thus, for the Uruguayan author, extractivism refers to a “mode of appropriation,” rather than a mode of production – that is, “a type of extraction of natural resources” that refers to activities that remove large volumes of unprocessed (or limited) natural resources for export. Throughout history, there have been successive generations of extractivism. The current third- and fourth-generation extractivism is characterized by the intensive use of water, energy, and other resources. Despite the differences between traditional extractivism – which is replicated by the most conservative governments in the region – and progressive neo-extractivism, a new type, whereby the State plays a more active role in capturing surplus and redistribution, thereby guaranteeing a certain level of social legitimacy, the negative social and environmental impacts are incessantly repeated. In addition, the differences between traditional extractivism are replicated by governments (Gudynas, 2009b, 2015).

From my perspective, neo-extractivism is a concept with analytical dimensions. In this regard, contemporary neo-extractivism refers to a way of appropriating nature and a development model based on the over-exploitation of natural goods, largely nonrenewable, characterized by its large scale and its

orientation toward export, as well as by the vertiginous expansion of the borders of exploitation to new territories, which were previously considered unproductive or not valued by capital. Consequently, it designates and expands on the activities traditionally considered extractive. These range from open-pit mega-mining, the expansion of the oil and energy frontier, the construction of large hydroelectric dams, and other infrastructure works – waterways, ports, oceanic passes, and so on – to the expansion of different forms of monocultures or mono-production, the generalization of the agribusiness model (soya, palm leaf, among others) and over-exploitation of fisheries or forest monocultures.

That said, coinciding with the previous definitions, extractivism has a long history with a historical-structural dimension. Certainly, since the time of the conquest (1492), Latin American territories have been subject to destruction and looting. Rich in natural resources, the region was reconfigured again and again in the heat of successive economic cycles, imposed by the dynamics of capital and the international division of labor, through the expansion of the borders of goods. A reconfiguration at a local level would lead to great contrasts between extraordinary profitability and extreme poverty, as well as a great loss of human lives and degradation of territories, converted into zones of sacrifice. The city of Potosí, in Bolivia, marked the birth of a means of appropriation of nature on a large scale and of a mode of accumulation, characterized by the export of raw materials and by a scheme of subordinate insertion in the world economy. Internal specialization and external dependence consolidated what the Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil (2002) rightly calls “*Sociedades Exportadoras de Naturaleza*” or “nature-exporting societies.”

However, the history of extractivism in the region is not linear; it is marked by successive economic cycles, dependent on the demands of the world market, as well as by the processes of affirmation of the national State, especially in the middle of the twentieth century. During that time, national control of extraordinary income occurred, especially in sectors such as mining and oil. The possibility of income capture by the State would also feed a certain social narrative about Latin American nature and its benefits. In the heat of the successive commodities’ booms, an *eldorado* vision appears, expressing the idea that due to the convergence of the abundance of resources or natural riches and opportunities offered by the international markets, it would be possible to achieve development, like that in core countries.

What is the novelty then in this new cycle? Several elements are involved – global, regional, and territorial. For one, the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism translates into a greater expansion of the commodity frontier (Moore, 2011). Certainly, the consumption model associated with advanced capitalism requires a greater amount of raw materials and energy for its maintenance,