

What Will It Take To Go Beyond “Extractivism?”

by Federico Fuentes

In recent years, a number of important discussions have emerged among and between environmentalists and solidarity activists. None has generated quite as much heat as the debate over extractive industries, particularly in South America.

This is perhaps unsurprising given what’s at stake: South America is home to some of the world’s largest and most important natural resource deposits. It is also a region dominated by progressive governments that have taken strong stances internationally in support of action on climate change, while facing criticism at home for their positions on extractive industries.

Extractivism

The debate has led to the coining of the term “extractivism.” While almost non-existent in leftist discourse only a few years ago, extractivism has become a central focus for many progressives.

Talk of resource extraction and extractive industries usually refers to mining and hydrocarbons exploitation, but also covers industrial-scale agriculture, forestry and even fishing.

However, as Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta explains, the term extractivism covers much more than this. Extractivism refers to a type of economic model that is dependent on the large-scale re-

wreaked havoc on the environment and destroyed the livelihoods of millions.

This also makes clear the magnitude of the problem facing those who have set themselves the task of overcoming extractivism and all of its negative economic, environmental and social effects.

“Wedge issue”

In a July 4, 2014, article in *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (“Progressive ‘Extractivism:’ Hope or Dystopia?” also published in *Green Social Thought* 65 [*GST*] ifc, 14–17), *GST* editor Don Fitz makes a conscious effort to look at the strengths and weaknesses of what he terms the “pro-extractivist” and “anti-extractivist” sides of the debate, even if his inclinations towards the later position are evident throughout the article.

This approach is perhaps driven by his sense (one I share) that extractivism may become a “wedge issue” that could unnecessarily divide social justice and environmental activists who have been working together for years.

Fitz notes that the two sides often “talk past each other” while rarely addressing the “multiple problems” and “fundamental issues” raised in the debate. For example, he writes that “anti-extractivists often write of horrible effects of extractivism without delving deeply into the question, ‘How can Latin America lift people out of poverty?’”

Given the importance that “pro-extractivists” give to tackling poverty, Fitz argues that “anti-extractivists” need to “devote more time to explain-

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moval (or “extraction”) and export of natural resources. Moreover, Acosta notes that extractivism is not a new phenomenon. It has acted for centuries as “a mechanism of colonial and neocolonial plunder and appropriation.”

During this period, countries in the global North used their dominant position to industrialize their own economies, while converting colonies into mere raw material exporters.

Although most of these colonies are today independent countries, their economies remain highly dependent on raw material exports to the North. Extractivism has also led to a tremendous redistribution of wealth away from the global South. This has been facilitated by the entrenched monopoly that multinational corporations headquartered in the global North maintain over the technology and machinery required to run these capital-intensive industries based in the South.

Acosta explains that extractivism has not only resulted in environmental devastation, but also “high levels of underemployment, unemployment and poverty, while the distribution of income and wealth [has become] even more unequal.”

Understood in this manner, it is evident why all progressives in South America should oppose extractivism as an economic model that has deepened the region’s economic dependency on the global North,

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ing how the poor will improve their quality of life without additional national income” that extractive industries could provide.

Fitz also says “pro-extractivists write well of the need to reduce poverty” but pay “little more than lip service” to criticism of the environmental impacts of extractive industries.

It's not enough for "pro-extractivists" to simply point to improvements in terms of new housing, hospitals and schools, argues Fitz. They also need to "demonstrate that these improvements outweigh the enormous [environmental] destruction" that accompany the extractive industries that fund many of these government projects.

In many ways, the weaknesses Fitz highlights in the different sides of the debate reflect the very real challenge facing both left governments and social

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movements in South America that oppose extractivism. That is, how can we best meet peoples' basic needs, while overcoming dependency on extractive industries and ensuring that resources are protected for generations to come.

At times, the overwhelming scale of poverty and need to provide an immediate response to the demands of voters can lead some to want to prioritize development projects, irrespective of whether these projects aid us in moving towards a post-extractivist society. On the other hand, the sentiment that doing anything to stop climate change is better than nothing can lead to the adoption of positions that, while formally anti-extractivist, do little to overcome economic dependency or promote a more sustainable economic model.

Yet the struggle to overcome extractivism cannot simply be seen as an environmental issue, nor can it be put off until after we have dealt with pressing social problems. Instead, it requires us to simultaneously grapple with both of these issues, at the same time as we begin taking steps towards a post-extractivist economic model.

Anti-extractivism or anti-extraction?

Reaching agreement on this point would help us go some way towards overcoming a simplistic framing of the debate that pits "anti-extractivists" against "pro-extractivists," and to an understanding that almost everyone in the debate favors moving beyond extractivism.

Fitz however insists on the validity of this dichotomy, saying it "distinguishes between two points of view which contrast in whether they desire to increase or decrease extraction." The problem here is that Fitz uses the terms extractivism and extraction interchangeably, even though (as noted above) they are two different things. In reality, being against extraction does not necessarily make you anti-extractivist, nor does supporting certain extraction make you pro-extractivist.

For example, there are numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of which are funded by governments from the global North, who campaign in the global South against all extractive projects. Yet they offer little in the way of an

alternative to extractivism. Instead they promote "carbon offset" schemes that pay communities in the global South to protect certain forest areas to "offset" the continuing pollution caused by extractive companies in the North.

Numerous indigenous and environmental groups have denounced such schemes as tantamount to privatizing forests. They serve to entrench inequalities between industrialized countries in the global North and those dependent on extractive industry exports — without promoting any meaningful reduction in polluting practices.

Alternatively, specific extractive projects could contribute in some way to overcoming extractivism. One example is Bolivia's proposal to extract and industrialize lithium, critical among other things to the production of electric cars. If done properly, this could have an important effect on decreasing dependency on petrol, and contribute to an overall reduction in the need for oil extraction.

Of course, many other factors would also need to be taken into consideration: state control over the industrialization process, ensuring processed lithium is used for environmental purposes, consultation with local communities, strict environmental safeguards, among others.

The point remains however that viewing the debate through the simplistic prism of for or against extraction could see environmentalists rejecting pro-

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jects with the potential to help us overcome extractivism, while supporting "alternatives" that simply maintain the status quo.

Governments vs. social movements?

Another false dichotomy that Fitz continues to perpetuate is describing the debate as between rural indigenous and social movements that are "anti-extractivist" and progressive "extractivist" governments. Fitz talks about "the enormity of movements raging all across Latin America" against mining and agribusiness. Yet this statement is an exaggeration at best. The number of "anti-extractivist" protests is in fact tiny when compared to overall protest numbers.

Take for example Bolivia, one of the most conflictive places in the region. A study of protests that occurred between 2009–2011 — the most conflictive period so far for the Evo Morales government — shows that conflicts over issues of land, natural resources and the environment made up only 7.2% of all protests. In comparison, 20.2% revolved around peoples' economic situation, 14.9% were over wages and workplace issues, and 11.5% focused on obtaining access to basic services. Together, the number of social protests relating to issues of poverty and basic services numbered well over 1000, far more than the "enormity" of 195 protests against mining across all of Latin America that Fitz makes reference to.

Furthermore, if we delve more deeply into those protests, we find that even most of these were not “anti-extractivist.” The same study reveals that most of the disputes that occurred in Bolivia in relation to issues of land, natural resources and the environment were not in opposition to extraction, but rather over who got to control extraction. A large majority involved disputes among and between cooperative miners, local communities and mineworkers who, as a result of booming mineral prices, were competing for access to lucrative mines.

Without denying that there have been a number of protests by indigenous groups (and others) against particular extractive projects, there is little evidence

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to back the assertion that we are witnessing a generalized trend towards anti-extractivist movements anywhere in the region.

Who’s silencing who?

Given that overcoming extractivism is a complex issue that requires confronting multiple social, economic and environmental problems, we should expect a diversity of debates, conflicts and positions. Surprisingly, Fitz accuses me of labeling opposition to progressive governments as divisive, and of opposing debate on the left. Yet that is the complete opposite of what I wrote in an earlier article on extractivism. There I argued that given the complexity of overcoming extractivism “different views would always exist between and within social movements regarding these issues.”

As such it is just as wrong to accuse those who oppose certain projects as being “manipulated by anti-environmental NGOs” (which Fitz falsely accuses me of having done), as it is to label those who support certain projects as dupes of the government or multinationals. It does however remain the case that the best way we can encourage and support these debates is by opposing any meddling by foreign powers (be they governments, transnational corporations or NGOs) that always seek to advance their aims by stoking divisions.

I also argued that, beyond any immediate differences these movements may momentarily have, all of their struggles share an important commonality in that they are all “directed against the devastating social, economic and environmental impacts of imperialist exploitation and towards the struggle for a better life.” As such, they all deserve to be heard and treated as legitimate actors.

Yet, when we simplistically frame all conflicts as between “extractivist” governments and “anti-extractivist” critics, we not only perpetuate a false dichotomy, but tend to distort and even silence the voices of the majority of those fighting the impacts of extractivism.

Solidarity

A more holistic view of what would be required to overcome extractivism and all of its social, economic and environmental impacts, is also vital to our solidarity work at home. We should be very hesitant to accept any simplistic dichotomy (anti-extractivist/pro-extractivist, governments/social movements) when it is obvious that we are dealing with a very complex issue.

Better understanding extractivism should also allow us to realize that the best way to fight extractivism in the global South is by focusing on the main culprits, namely governments and transnationals based in the North.

If we understand all this, we can easily propose an alternative to Fitz’s somewhat ludicrous suggestions that supporting progressive governments means “solidarity movements need to advocate the purchase of [fossil fuels]” or “stand in solidarity with ‘progressive’ production of GMOs.”

A much better campaign focus (to either promoting the purchase or boycotting/sanctioning imports of fossil fuels) is demanding climate justice via the transfer of technology and funding to the global South so that they may begin to move their economies away from extractivism. Such a campaign focus would allow us to both squarely target the main culprits, and provide an avenue to link up with all those fighting the environmental, social and economic effects of extractivism.

It would mean that we are not placing demands on some of the poorest people in the world to shoulder the burden for something they are not responsible for, and instead provide them with the means by which to meet peoples’ needs while protecting the environment.

In this sense, Fitz is right to conclude that “extractivism in Latin America is a global question of what type of society we are striving to create.” He is also correct to focus on the need to “share the wealth,” but this, just like the fight against climate change, has to be viewed globally. Just as no country alone can overcome climate change, no country alone will be able to overcome extractivism.

Campaigning for climate justice, a term that ironically has increasingly become absent in the de-

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bate as others such as extractivism have become so common, must therefore be seen as vital to any genuine campaign to reduce extraction and overcome extractivism.

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