

# “Anti-extractivism” Misses the Forest for the Trees

by Federico Fuentes

A recent spate of high-profile campaigns against industrial projects based on extracting raw materials has opened up an important new dynamic within the broad processes of change sweeping South America. Understanding their nature and significance is crucial to grasping the complexities involved in bringing about social change and how best to build solidarity with peoples’ struggles.

Many of the campaigns that target specific mining, oil, agribusiness or logging ventures share common elements. They have raised public awareness around a variety of important environmental issues such as water scarcity, forest preservation and sustainable land usage.

In some cases, particularly in Ecuador and Bolivia, these campaigns have also influenced existing discussions on broader issues such as climate change, the rights of Mother Earth and the kinds of alternative development models required to bring about radical change. Another common aspect has been the central role played by rural indigenous communities. This is due both to the fact that many

the wider conflicts between the politics of extractivism among countries led by leftist governments ... and the politics of Pachamama, and how indigenous movements have resisted extractivism in defense of their rights, land and the environment.

Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa takes this idea further and says the emergence of a new model of capitalist domination in South America is responsible for this new cycle of protest. Whereas social movements previously faced off against neoliberal governments beholden to the Washington Consensus, Svampa says the problem today is “neo-extractivist” governments under the grip of the “Commodity Consensus.”

She says this “consensus” represents a new “economic and political-ideological” order. It is underpinned by booming commodity prices that have driven an expansion in extractive industries and brought about impressive gains in terms of economic growth and national reserves. However, this new mode of capitalist accumulation has also led to new forms of inequality and conflicts. The result has been what Svampa dubs “an eco-territorial shift” in the terrain of popular struggles, which now focus on issues such as land, the environment and development models.

Uruguayan journalist Raul Zibechi claims these campaigns

...signal the birth of a new cycle of struggle that will also breathe life into new anti-systemic movements, perhaps more radically anti-capitalist in the

---

## ...territorial autonomy and the right to consultation have become increasingly intertwined with debates over resource extraction....

---

of these extractive ventures occur in indigenous territories and also to the leading role indigenous movements have played in recent years in the global environment movement.

As a result, concepts such as territorial autonomy and the right to prior consultation on ancestral lands before embarking on extractive projects and terms like *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) and Pachamama (Mother Earth) have become increasingly intertwined with debates over resource extraction and the environment.

This is particularly true in Ecuador and Bolivia, where indigenous peoples constitute a sizeable minority, if not majority, of the population. There, indigenous and social movements successfully enshrined such concepts in new constitutions that provide a framework for the kind of society they want to see. Such campaigns can be found in almost any South American country, whether run by right-wing neoliberal governments, such as Colombia, or left-wing indigenous-led ones, such as Bolivia.

### A new politics?

Given these common features, some on the left have concluded that South America is witnessing a new cycle of popular protests pitting pro-extractivist governments against anti-extractivist rural communities. Benjamin Dangl, the editor of *Upside Down World*, argues these new movements are a result of

---

## ...“extractivist” conceals the differences between governments that do the bidding of transnationals and peoples’ governments.

---

sense that they question developmentalism and hold onto *Buen Vivir* as the principal ethical and political reference point.

While the terminology is different, the commonality among these positions is evident. More-

over, all would undoubtedly agree with Dangel's conclusion that a solidarity movement blind to this conflict would represent a "disservice to various grassroots movements struggling for a better world." No one in the solidarity movement would deny the progressive nature of many of these struggles. But a solidarity movement that confines its view of South American politics to a narrow "extractivist vs. anti-extractivism" prism could end up hurting those it claims to support.

## Extractivism

Extractive industries exist in every South American country. However, those fixated on the issue of "extractivism" often neglect to point out that the reason for this can be found in the region's history of imperialist domination. Any campaign against South

American "extractivism," particularly by solidarity activists in imperialist countries, must

start by pointing the fingers at those truly responsible for South American economies dependent on extractive industries: imperialist governments and their transnationals.

The label "extractivist" also conceals the real differences between governments that do the bidding of transnationals and imperialist governments, and peoples' governments trying to use their country's resources to break imperialist dependency and improve living standards for the majority. As Bolivian President Evo Morales told Dangel: "We, the indigenous people, after 500 years of resistance, are retaking power. This retaking of power is oriented towards the recovery of our own riches, our own natural resources."

There are debates over how successful left-wing governments have been in achieving their stated aims and over the problems in pursuing a development model heavily dependent on extractive industries. However, framing the debate as one between proponents and opponents of extractivism ignores the fact that almost no one proposes closing down all extractive industries, particularly in light of the devastating impact it would have on the peoples and economies of South America.

Even some of the keenest critics of extractivism in Latin America, such as Uruguayan ecologist Eduardo Gudynas and Bolivian radical intellectual Raul Prada, acknowledge the need to differentiate between what they term "predatory," "sensible" and "indispensable" extractivism. Also, most movements against specific extractive projects do not propose ending all extractive industries. Local communities involved in campaigns contain a variety of views. The debate is more complex than a simple "for" or "against" extractive industries.

Some support extractive industries regardless of the social and environmental costs. Others see them

as a stepping stone towards a non-extractivist society. Some view certain types of extractive practices as essential, while others merely oppose specific projects that directly affect them.

## Anti-extractivism

It is important to distinguish between campaigns against specific extractive projects and those that seek to use such campaigns to advance their own agendas. One example is the conflict over the proposed roadway through the Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) in Bolivia.

Some were quick to use this dispute in their campaign against the Bolivian government's "extractivist" project and rejected the road altogether. But most of the communities that protested did not oppose the roadway, but rather its proposed route. Some thought it should cut through a different part of the Amazon, while others felt it should run closer to the local villages to increase access. All believed that the roadway itself could be beneficial and necessary in some form, just not its current one.

This is just one example of where a clear disjuncture exists between the demands of the protesters, whose main concern was the project's details, and those opposing any "extractivist" roadway from going ahead. "Anti-extractivism" has also been used to greenwash anti-environmental alternatives, particularly in the absence of any concrete proposals coming from radical extractivist critics over how to meet popular needs. One example is the promotion of "carbon offset" schemes. Such schemes pay communities in the global South to protect certain forest areas to "offset" the continuing pollution caused by companies.

For instance, some TIPNIS protesters, at the request of certain NGOs, demanded that indigenous communities be able to receive funds from proposed

---

**... almost no one proposes closing down all extractive industries....**

---

---

## The narrow extractivism/anti-extractivism positions have been used to foster divisions....

---

Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) projects. Such schemes have been denounced by many indigenous and environmental groups as tantamount to privatizing forests. They also serve to entrench inequalities between industrialized imperialist countries and those dependent on extractive industry exports without promoting any meaningful reduction in polluting practices.

Other alternatives include encouraging communities to set up local enterprises such as eco-tourism, sustainable logging and small-scale mining as a way of raising funds to meet local needs. None of these business projects has yet to eradicate poverty, but all have led to the further integration of local rural communities into the capitalist market.

Another “anti-extractivist” proposal is to hand over ownership of natural resources to local communities. This would give them control over what happens to the nation’s wealth. Aside from the large inequalities this could generate between regions, experience shows that such a policy does not necessarily block transnationals or governments who find

---

## ... we should continue to oppose the meddling of imperialist governments and transnationals....

---

ways to co-opt communities to advance their projects.

### Solidarity

None of these options represents a viable alternative for the vast majority of people forced to live in cities as a result of social, economic or environmental reasons. Numbering in their millions, these people also face the consequences of extractive industries, including climate change and environmental degradation. Their demands may take a different form, focusing on infrastructure and access to basic services, but they are no less legitimate. These “spaces of dissent and debate” also deserve to be respected and amplified. They are an equally vital component of the struggle for change in countries such as Bolivia.

After neoliberal governments were defeated and new constitutions written in places such as Bolivia and Ecuador, important societal-wide debates have opened up over how best to make real novel notions such as *Buen Vivir*, the rights of Pachamama and indigenous autonomy while also meeting peoples’ development needs. Different views have been expressed between and within different social movements. However, all are responses to the devastating social, economic and environmental impacts of imperialist exploitation and towards the struggle for a better life.

A view of South America that only sees extractivist governments and anti-extractivist rural indigenous communities is blind to the struggles of this majority and tends to silence rather than amplify the voices of some of those who have been at the forefront of recent rebellions. It runs the risk, in the name of saving some trees, of destroying the entire forest. The narrow extractivism/anti-extractivism positions have been used to foster divisions among social movements, weakening the unity needed to achieve radical change. It has also led some solidarity activists to turn against those very same forces we should be supporting. There is ample evidence to show that foreign governments and NGOs have been working to stoke rather than resolve tensions among the region’s diverse social movements.

Such groups are more than happy to promote “anti-extractivism” if it serves to bring down popular governments and roll back processes of change.

Rejecting the limited politics of anti-extractivism does not mean that solidarity activists cannot support those fighting the impacts of extractive industries. One key role we can play is introducing some of the crucial debates and discussions taking place in South America into our own countries. Effective solidarity requires explaining the context of debates and conflicts within South American countries, and between these countries and imperialism.

This also requires accurately explaining the different positions that exist between diverse social movements and their varying stances towards progressive governments. We can do this while understanding that ultimately only they can resolve their differences. In the meantime, we should continue to oppose the meddling of imperialist governments and transnationals, thereby ensuring that the region’s social movements can best resolve these issues free of foreign interference. We must also remember that radical change requires building social forces strong enough to implement change while resisting the inevitable attacks from local elites and imperialist governments.

As the battle against imperialism is global, it is unlikely that a single nation will be able to resolve all its problems on its own. Bids to “expose” the gaps between the anti-capitalist rhetoric of some leftist governments and the reality of ongoing resource extraction largely miss this critical point. Any chance South American countries have of breaking out of their role as dependent, raw commodity exporting economies depends on creating a new global order, starting with the reshaping of hemispheric relations.

This is precisely what the Bolivian government has tried to do. It has not just denounced capitalism and imperialism at global summits to a world audience, but organized concrete initiatives, such as the Cochabamba

Peoples Summit on Climate Change that brought more than 30,000 people to Bolivia in 2010 to discuss and develop radical policies to confront ecological disaster.

Solidarity activists should spend less time fixating on gaps between rhetoric and reality (which will always exist in any unfinished liberation struggle) and more time explaining why, as long as imperialism exists, these processes of change will continue to face tremendous obstacles and dangers.

Let’s refocus our view on the biggest challenge facing us all. This means recognizing that, as Nicole Fabricant and Kathryn Hicks put it, “Only a popular uprising of unprecedented scale will prompt nations of the Global North to take their responsibility to the rest of the globe seriously, and restrain the coercive forces that constrain states like Bolivia.”

Federico Fuentes edits *Bolivia Rising* and was co-author with Roger Burbach and Michael Fox of *Latin America’s Turbulent Transitions: The Future of 21st Century Socialism*.

---

**“Only a popular uprising will restrain the coercive forces....”**

---