



Original Article

Extractivist resistance: The case of the Enbridge oil pipeline project in Northern British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

This paper has two purposes. The first is to provide a theoretical framework in which extractivism can be understood globally and within which specific country and regional debates can be situated. The second is to analyse resistance to a specific form of extractivism—specifically, that of oil pipelines in Northern British Columbia—and to illustrate how it can be understood within the context of the turn of many countries towards natural resource extraction as a model of national development.

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1. Introduction

The primary commodities boom of the first decade of the twenty-first century¹ has revived extractivism as a development path as well as the forces of resistance to it. While this revival has specific local characteristics—for example, 're-primarization' in parts of Latin America, 'land grabbing' in parts of Africa and elsewhere, and a quest for 'energy superpower' status in Canada—they can all be seen as part of a wider concern over, and resistance to, the global dynamics of extractivist capitalism.

This paper has two aims. The first is to provide a theoretical framework in which extractivism can be understood globally and within which specific country and regional debates can be situated. Debates over the political and economic costs and benefits of extractivism are not new and we survey these before analysing the specifics of the contemporary post-2000 commodities boom. The theoretical analysis of extractivism has also focussed on ways to understand the resistance to it, its sociological basis. Our framework addresses this and draws on the Latin American experience to ground the analysis.

The second aim is to analyse resistance to a specific form of extractivism—that of oil pipelines—in Northern British Columbia intended to transport bitumen from Alberta's tar sands to Asian markets. We illustrate how it can be understood within the context of the turn of many countries towards natural resource extraction as

a model of national development. While resistance to extractivism has been the subject of much analysis in the Latin American context less is available on resistance in the global north (in fact, the global south in the northern hemisphere) and less still on a comparative analysis. This paper seeks to fill this void and, in doing so, demonstrates the similarities in extractivist resistance in both north and south.

Canada, we argue, provides a good case study for exploring such similarities as it engages in 'extractivist imperialism' abroad at the same time as the natural resource development on the unceded territory of indigenous groups in Canada represents a form of neocolonialism.

The paper is organised as follows. Following this introduction we provide a framework for analyzing debates over extractivism drawing on the controversies that have plagued the strategy over many decades. The empirical base for this framework is derived from recent and on-going developments in Latin America. We then move to an analysis of the Canadian context. After providing an overview of Canadian extractive imperialism we then turn our attention to domestic policy and analyse resistance to the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline. In so doing, we reveal the similarities between extractivist resistance in both the north and the south.

2. Framing the debate: theoretical approaches to extractivism

The economics and politics of natural resource extraction/development can be understood with reference to and in terms of two debates. These debates concern, firstly, the extent to which extractivism can be seen as a viable development strategy and,

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secondly, how best to conceptualise resistance to it. These debates have drawn on Latin American experience and have been particularly active there. The debates also have long historical roots and we provide a brief overview of them here.

2.1. *The economics and politics of natural resource extraction*

The literature on the economic and politics of natural resource extraction in the current context of globalising capitalism takes three distinct approaches towards natural resource development. The first has to do with an argument advanced inter alia by economists at the World Bank, who have presented the demand for raw materials and primary commodities—minerals and metals, sources of energy and agro-food products—as an unparalleled economic opportunity of which resource-rich countries should avail themselves (World Bank, 2005, 2011). From this perspective, the resource-rich countries of Latin America and Africa should take advantage of the large-scale movements of ‘resource-seeking’ investors seeking to maximise the return on their capital in the context of large-scale acquisition of land for the purpose of energy and food security. In the literature on these issues the agency and motor of natural resource development is the private sector in the form of transnational capitalist enterprises, the transnational corporations that have the requisite capital and the technology to exploit and develop the natural resources of these countries.²

Another approach is to take a society’s wealth of natural resources not as a blessing or an economic opportunity but as a ‘curse’, with reference here to the finding that, on average, developing countries highly endowed with natural resources were growing less rapidly than those that were less endowed, or that so many resource-rich countries failed to develop at all while many resource-poor countries are among the most advanced developed countries in the world today (Auty, 2001). Explanations of this resource curse (Acosta, 2009; Auty, 1993; Haber and Menaldo, 2012; Sachs and Warner, 2001) have made reference to or specified at least eight factors, any one of which sufficient to bring on this supposed curse, but in combination a recipe for underdevelopment rather than development.

One factor relates to the exploitation of labour—the ‘unlimited supplies of surplus labour’ generated by the capitalist development process. According to a line of development thought that prevailed from the 1950s to the 1970s the exploitation of labour and human resource development have much broader multiplier effects and far greater linkages into other economic and social sectors than an extractivist approach towards development.

Other factors include the Dutch disease, with reference to the negative exchange rate effect of primary commodity exports on other production sectors (Berry, 2010); the notion that what goes up (prices of primary commodities) must and often does come down, resulting in a boom-bust cycle³ if not a trend towards deteriorating terms of trade for primary commodities

² In this tradition the risks and pitfalls of natural resource development are recognised but it is believed, or argued, that any negative impacts can be mitigated if not avoided and that problems can be managed via a technological fix, prudent resource management and if necessary, an appropriate form of governance and regulatory regime. An example of this approach is a study by Collier and Venables (2011) who recognise at the outset that ‘often plunder, rather than prosperity, has become the norm in the industry’ but that this as well as other problems (environmental degradation, for example) can be eluded or managed by following certain ‘improv[ing] the management of natural resources in developing countries’ and following certain ‘key principles... to avoid distortion and dependence’.

³ The slowdown of the commodity supercycle in the same year (Konold, 2013) suggests that extractive capitalism has not yet outgrown this propensity. Global commodity prices dropped by 6% in 2012, a marked change from the dizzying growth during the ‘commodities supercycle’ of 2002–12, when prices surged an average of 9.5% a year, or 150% over the 10-year period (Konold, 2013). On the other hand, while prices declined overall in 2012, some commodity categories—energy, food, and precious metals—continued their decade-long trend of price increases.

(Prebisch, 1950); the ‘infrastructural inertia’ associated with primary commodities export-oriented production, which biases not only subsequent investment but the very organisation of capital, labour, and the state in the region in which it is sunk (Innis, 1956; Bunker, 1988); problems of dependency on the use of foreign direct investment (FDI) as a mechanism for the extraction and transfer of surplus value; and the propensity of extractivism and natural resource development towards economic concentration, the use of relatively little labour relative to technology and capital, and excessive inequalities in the distribution of the social product and the benefits of economic growth—the ‘inequality predicament’ as conceived by the economists associated with UNDESA (2005); and, the incentive and means for political elites to form a (typically comprador) rent seeking coalition which is more interested in personal accumulation than national development.

A third approach has focused on the primary commodities boom in Latin America in the context of the turn of many governments in the region towards a post-Washington consensus regarding the need to bring the state back into the development process—to bring about a more inclusive form of development (Infante and Sunkel, 2009). In this context, government after government in the region turned towards extractivism—a strategic reliance on foreign direct investment in the exploration for, and the extraction of, minerals, fossil and bio-fuels, and agro-food products in high demand—and the exportation of these products, or ‘reprimarization’ as it is referred to in this context (Cypher, 2010).

The intention has been to pursue a post-neoliberal strategy of combining an extractivist development strategy with a new social policy of poverty reduction designed for a more inclusive form of development than had been the norm for the previous two decades. From this post-neoliberal perspective, a strategy of natural resource extraction was viewed as a means of bringing about a process of inclusive development—using resource rents and taxes on corporate profits as a means of reducing poverty and securing a more equitable distribution of the social product—‘progressive extractivism’, in the conception of Eduardo Gudynas (2010, 2011), a senior researcher at the Uruguay-based Latin American Centre of Social Ecology (CLAES).

Another variation of this political ecological approach is much less sanguine about the prospects of successful natural resource development. Reflecting a deep concern about the environmental and social costs of extractivism, the issue from this perspective is that the social and environmental costs of extractive operations, many of them externalised and unaccounted for, far exceed the benefits of economic growth; moreover the benefits are highly concentrated, appropriated by very few (with even the government taking but a marginal share of the proceeds), while the costs are disproportionately borne by the poor and the most vulnerable segments of society that received few or none of the benefits (Veltmeyer, 2013).⁴ Proponents of this approach often shift the focus from the system dynamics of extractive capitalism towards the complex and multiple social responses of the communities affected by the operations of extractive capital (Bebbington and Bury, 2013).

2.2. *The resistance to extractive capitalism*

The literature on the resistance to extractivism can be placed into three main categories. The first relates to what we might term the political economy of the resistance, an approach based on a class analysis of the objective and subjective conditions of the capitalist development process. From this perspective, the process

⁴ This is argued with substantive evidence in case studies presented in Veltmeyer and Petras (2014). See, for example, the studies in this book by Giarracca and Teubal on Argentina, Veltmeyer on Bolivia, Dávalos and Albuja on Ecuador, Lust on Peru and by Sankey on Colombia.

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