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The politics of extractive governance: Indigenous peoples and socio-environmental conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Social conflicts related to extractive industries in Peru tend to be conceptualised as problems of governance, namely, as conflicts generated from ill-designed policies for distribution of revenues from extractive industries, formal political participation, transparency and conflict management. The governance approach, however, does not analyse the historical connection between extractive policies and exploitation/dispossession of indigenous peoples and the permanence of colonial patterns of domination. The main argument of this paper is that many social conflicts related to extractive activities do not derive from problems of 'governance', but more profoundly, they emerge due to divergences that transcend the current governance and express different political ontologies. This argument will be developed through the case study of the *Baguazo* and the Awajun territorial struggles in the Peruvian Amazon.

1. Introduction

In Peru, the number of social conflicts related to social and environmental impacts linked to the extractive activities, or 'socio-environmental conflicts', has increased considerably in recent decades. Many scholars view these conflicts as problems of governance: emerging as a result of ill-designed policies in place for the distribution of revenues (Arellano, 2011; Damonte, 2012; Damonte and Glave, 2012), formal political participation, transparency and conflict management (Panfichi, 2011; Vergara, 2011; Tanaka, 2012; Meléndez, 2004). The governance approach, however, does not take into account the historical connection between extractive policies and exploitation/dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the permanence of colonial patterns of domination. As a consequence, most policy proposals are biased, reinforcing the current extractive governance by assuming that all conflicts can be contained and solved within the boundaries of the political economy of extraction.

By extractive governance, I mean the institutional arrangements that justify and legitimise extractivism, or all economic activities that remove huge amounts of natural resources (mainly minerals and oil but also forestry, fishing and other resources) from 'developing countries', usually in areas inhabited by poor or indigenous communities, and in general for their exportation as raw materials (Acosta, 2013). Extractivism is often connected to important development and infrastructure projects, such as the construction of dams and highways, constructed to facilitate extractive activities. These economic processes define the political economy of many countries in the Global South and explain their economic dependence. But most profoundly, this political economy expresses the permanence of a colonial model of accumulation based on dispossession.

The term 'dispossession' does not refer uniquely to land dispossession; it rather encompasses the dispossession of health, habitat, way of life, and gain from resources within indigenous territories. This is the way in which Bebbington et al. (2008) and others (e.g. Bebbington and Humphreys, 2011; Gordon and Webber, 2008) have interpreted and expanded further David Harvey's accounts of accumulation by dispossession. These different kinds of dispossession could involve displacements, but not in all the cases; it might imply what Nixon (2011) calls 'displacements without moving'. In addition, there is a *dispossession of identities*, or situations where the state embraces a modernising and developmental perspective on indigenous territories, and imposes on the people an identity to attach them to major developmental goals. This is a way to deny indigenous ontologies and one of the most profound and subtle kinds of dispossession directed to facilitating or legitimising material dispossessions.

Many indigenous peoples express a different political ontology because their worldviews or cosmologies contain a different

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conceptualisation of the relation between human beings and the natural environment. The discussions around Amazonian ontologies have been developed by the 'New Amazonian anthropology', especially by Descola's animism and Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism. According to Descola (2004), unlike Western dualism between humans and non-humans, Amazonian cosmologies classify a scale of beings in which the differences between men, plants and animals are of degrees and not of nature. Thus, the worldview is not of the dominant species over the others, but one of a kind of transcendental ecosystem conscious of the totality of interactions developed on its basis. Viveiros de Castro (2004: p. 465) argues that for Amazonian peoples, "the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity".

These perspectives do not propose an utopian harmony, but a 'political economy of life' (Barclay and Santos, 2010), namely, the affirmation of economies in which, from the point of view of social actors, the most scarce resource are their own forces of life. According to this cosmology, the vital force that animates the world is finite and scarce, in constant circulation and unequally distributed; because this substance animates all existent beings and is scarce, the growing of a living being only can occur at expenses of another. This means that all beings are involved in a constant struggle to accumulate enough vital strength to guarantee their survival and reproduction. What avoids the anarchic destruction among species is that all are perceived as 'persons' and have the right to live, so all aggression would be responded to with a new aggression. This results in an ethic of self-regulation that ensures a natural balance (Barclay and Santos, 2010).

These different conceptualisations entail different legal and political arrangements. For most indigenous peoples, individual rights are not the only relevant rights; there are also collective rights based on their special relation to their territory. These two kinds of rights are interdependent and are based on indigenous self-determination. In this context, the main role of self-determination and territoriality is not to divide and protect specific ownerships, but to govern a society composed by social relations that encompass the entire collective. Thus, the indigenous socio-economic system is oriented to the social and economic reproduction of the collective, and the material and non-material benefits provided to each member is not understood only in terms of individual gratification but in terms of general welfare (Rivera, 1990; Holder and Corntassel, 2002).

In that context, whereas from Western political ontology the natural environment must be appropriated and exploited through proprietary entitlements and modern technologies, for indigenous cosmologies it constitutes their territory and includes earth-beings who must be respected and can be considered political actors in extant socio-environmental conflicts (De la Cadena, 2010). This political ontology does not portray a sort of essentialism or immutability as argued by some critics of perspectivism (Ramos, 2012). On the contrary, this political ontology is expressed today in current indigenous activism and public policies in Latin America through new discourses such as *Buen vivir* or 'rights of mother earth' in an effort to forge new indigenous aspirations in relation to the state.

This paper responds to these issues, broadening understanding of the dynamics and the foundations of indigenous peoples' resistance to extractive activities. It suggests that many socio-environmental conflicts that involve indigenous peoples do not derive from problems of 'governance', but more profoundly, emerge due to divergences that transcend the current governance and express different political ontologies. However, the extractive governance framework overlooks indigenous understandings of the natural environment and therefore, excludes indigenous ontologies. Indeed, the conceptualisation of nature as a resource for appropriation, economic growth as an endless process for the development of the 'nation state', and accumulation as a natural activity of all human societies are the premises of extractivism that are often challenged by indigenous movements. Yet, in spite of its importance, the dominant liberal model undermines and marginalises indigenous identities, socioeconomic organisation and political practices (Rivera, 1990).

This argument is developed firstly by analysing the divergence between macroeconomic performance and the increase in socio-environmental conflicts, and the different theories that explain these conflicts as problems of 'governance'. The article subsequently focuses on the case of the *Baguazo* and the Awajun territorial struggles in the Peruvian Amazon in order to explain how important social conflicts are located beyond the extractive governance. Finally, the article critically assesses the governance perspective and explores the meaning and potential of indigenous political ontologies.

2. Macroeconomic performance and social discontent: socio-environmental conflicts as problems of 'governance'

During the 1990s, policies of privatisation, reduction of public expenditures, tax benefits for extractive industries and elimination of trade barriers, converted Peru into one of the most neoliberal countries in the world (Bury, 2005). Its business-friendly institutional environment has facilitated the extractive exploitation of areas that were once considered restricted (such as frontier zones), the increment of fusions and acquisitions among companies, and a rise in the number of concessions in the Andes and the Amazon. At the beginning of the 1990s, mining concessions covered 2,300,000 ha but by 2011, covered over 24 million ha, 19% of Peruvian territory (De Echave, 2011). Much of the same is taking place with hydrocarbon exploitation: at the end of 2008, 72% of the Peruvian Amazon was under concession to petroleum and gas exploration and exploitation (Finer and Orta-Martinez, 2010). Moreover, between 1990 and 2007, Peru received US$ 12.35 billion in mining investments, helping to transform it into one of the world's most important exporters of silver, copper, zinc, lead, and gold (Bebbington and Bury, 2009).

The contribution of extractive industries to the whole economy is understood as crucial: it contributed an average of 22% of the total tax collection and 42% of the total income tax between 2007 and 2010 (Sotelo and Francke, 2011). Even though it could be argued that the extractive industries have been responsible for the country's sustained economic growth (around 6% in the last 10 years), its contribution has come at a high social cost. In 2007, the Peruvian Ombudsman's office recorded 78 social conflicts in the country, of which 37 were socio-environmental; by January 2014, it had recorded 213 social conflicts, of which 136 were socio-environmental (Ombudsman's Office, 2014).

Many socio-environmental conflicts show the resistance to the processes of dispossession deployed by extractive industries: the dispossession of resources such as water or grazing lands, as in the case of huge mining projects like Tambogrande, Majaz and Conga (Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007); the dispossession of health in the case of the lead mining company, Doe Run in La Oroya (De Echave and Gómez, 2013); and the protests over the perceived real value of mining activity, specifically when people lobby for what the believe to be more equitable economic compensation, as in the cases of the Bambas and Tintaya projects (De Echave et al., 2009). In the Amazon, the most significant conflicts that has surfaced to date was the *Baguazo* in June 2009, in which Awajun and Wampis indigenous peoples opposed not a specific project but a legislative package aimed at facilitating the growth of extractive activities in the territories which they inhabit. The massive protest in the town of *Bagua* triggered a violent confrontation between indigenous