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Original article

# Landscapes of contrast: The neo-extractivist state and indigenous peoples in “post-neoliberal” Argentina

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### ABSTRACT

Prior to the elections of left-leaning governments, Latin American states witnessed the organization, mobilization, and political participation of indigenous peoples demanding the recognition of new cultural and political rights. This new wave of indigenous mobilization took place in the midst of the return to electoral political systems and the consolidation of neoliberal development. In a context not exempt from violence, some states generally responded by granting the recognition of new collective rights, including territorial autonomy, while maintaining their commitment to neoliberalism. The collapse of the Washington Consensus that sustained neoliberalism in the region and the widespread popular resistance toward such policies resulted in the election of new governments committed to increasing the role of the state in development efforts. Such increased state activism, which included some efforts to redistribute wealth, resulted in the end of earlier neoliberal policies—although not necessarily in its logic of capital accumulation. The initial optimism and political support of indigenous organizations toward the “new left” have started to fade as the result of state-sponsored neo-extractivism. This paper focuses on Argentina’s support of resource extraction and the Kirchner’s government’s approach to “national-popular development” and argues that such discourses inform state practices that threaten not only indigenous lands but also future possibilities for indigenous peoples to secure their own visions of development, decolonization, and autonomy. This article also demonstrates how neo-extractivism serves to understand the deterioration of political negotiations between indigenous peoples and the state.

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## 1. Introduction

“We cannot stop extracting oil because we need it for our development and to be able to live.” Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, October 2010

“In the contemporary world, the future of our freedom lies in the daunting task of taming Leviathan, not evading it.” James C. Scott (2009, 324)

Territories indigenous peoples use or inhabit continue to be the target of a systematic intensification of extractive industries operating at a global scale. For many indigenous peoples living in those areas, extractivism is not new. Indeed the most recent intensification of such activities, they often argue, builds on colonial legacies, the expansion of global capital accumulation, and the re-enactment of state-sponsored (environmental) racism. And although these three processes are historically contingent and

locally situated, indigenous peoples generally identify them as a way to interpret the nature of (re) emerging social conflict within their communities, with the state, and with transnational capital.

This paper aims at demonstrating that these conflicts around the politics of extractivism recast antagonisms of a colonial nature as indigenous communities raise opposition to the expansion of such practice by framing their struggle as a quest for self-determination, territorial autonomy, and decoloniality. It does so by defining such struggles as place-based resistance that takes place in wider contexts of global inequalities and by keeping in mind that as colonized subjects, indigenous peoples have limited power to redefine their relationship with states and with mainstream society (Alonso, 1994; Escobar, 2008). By focusing on a limited number of cases of “highly localized and regionalized” instances of resistance (Alonso, 1994, 399), this paper does aim at rendering homogenous what is indeed a repertoire of diverse practices of accommodation, negotiation and organization or Mapuche communities (Briones, 2008). In comparison to other indigenous populations in Latin America, about which a sustained and growing literature has been produced, the Mapuche peoples

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living in Argentina remained very much on the fringes of development studies until recently. In a country of 41 million people, an estimated 105,000 Mapuche people (INDEC, 2006) can be easily dismissed. The Mapuche, and indigenous peoples living in Argentina more generally, have rarely been discussed in national economic development contexts and it was not until very recently that the federal government has publicly acknowledged the diversity of voices of many indigenous leaders challenging the government's extractivist policies.<sup>1</sup>

Given a context of increasing social conflict around extractivism in indigenous territories, some regions in Latin America offer a useful starting point for interrogating the challenges and limitations of the post-Washington Consensus period marked by the significant political changes associated with the election of left-learning governments and the consolidation of extractivism as a state-sponsored development strategy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the notion of neo-extractivism owes much to this convergence between, on the one hand the intensification in the extraction of raw materials, such as minerals, hydrocarbons, forest products, and agricultural goods, and, on the other, the use of the revenue to improve living conditions with the increase of social spending (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014; Gudynas, 2012). In Latin America, extractivism as an economic development strategy is not new (Galeano, 1997). However, the emphasis on the potential of extractivism to lead a "more inclusive" development and "to shore up the equality agenda" can be understood under the new auspices of the "active states" committed both to extractivism and increasing social spending (ECLAC, 2013). In a recent publication by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the organization argues that states "must resume their proactive role and articulate with all social stakeholders the objectives of an equitable and sustainable energy policy." (ECLAC, 2013, 8) The ECLAC Report, focused primarily on the regulatory framework for extractive industries, macroeconomic management, and the public policy implications of social programs funded by the returns of such activities, also warn about the "challenges" beyond the institutional and administrative dimensions of this. Namely, it mentions the "inevitable" socio-environmental conflicts that "will arise during development of the natural resource sector." (ECLAC, 2013, 14) However, references to the potential of social conflicts does not transform the report's overall optimism for extractivism-led development.

Much of the literature addressing the political context of neo-extractivism tends to focus on the notion of post-neoliberalism to explain the transition from the Washington Consensus neoliberalism that consolidated in the region in the 1990s to the "pink tide" of center-left governments (Cameron and Hershberg, 2010; Castañeda and Morales, 2008; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Weyland et al., 2010). Overall, these studies tend to rely on inconsistent definitions of populism and manage to privilege an institutionalist analysis that result in conceptually "thin" distinctions between the "good" left and the "bad" left (Yates and Bakker, 2014). The analysis suggested here to understand Argentina's neo-extractivism builds on a series of recent contributions that render such dichotomies problematic thus emphasizing continuities in the ways in which governments in the region respond to the demands of global capitalism in different historical epochs. For under the Kirchner administrations (2003–2007 and 2007–2015) there was clearly a political project to challenge previous neoliberal strategies focused

on privatization of public assets, financial deregulation, and the flexibilization of labor; and the market-based rationales for public services provision. By denouncing free trade agreements, increasing public spending, and nationalizing public utilities companies, to name a few, the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner sought to distance themselves from the neoliberal project that preceded them. To suggest a clear-cut break from neoliberalism, however, would be an exaggeration as there is more to neoliberalism than a set of policy prescriptions implemented at the national level (Brenner et al., 2010). In the case of Argentina, this is nowhere more visible than in the government's dismissal of social conflict around extractivism as a refusal of local communities to understand the opportunities of the post-neoliberal moment, crystallized in the so-called "national-popular development model," described below. Under the Kirchner administrations, for example, the "incorporation of popular movements" into mainstream politics have encouraged mobilization on the one hand, while limiting the ability of many place-based movements to radically alter power relations and institutional politics in local settings (Yates and Bakker, 2014, 70). The disregard that the federal and provincial governments have shown toward local communities opposing extractivism—highly dependent on global markets—is one instance in which the tensions between state-sponsored economic growth models and place-based protests against them become apparent but also very familiar to those who analyzed social mobilization under the height of neoliberalism (Prevost et al., 2012; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2011; Svampa and Pereyra, 2003).

In focusing on conflicts taking place in Mapuche communities in Northern Patagonia, Argentina, I do not attempt to draw a generic characterization of Mapuche communities, the region of Patagonia or Latin America in relation to neo-extractivism. Rather, I seek to rescue from the specific cases I study the tensions between global-scale processes, state responses, and community life in relation to neo-extractivism. By engaging in this context-specific analysis, I seek to uncover some of the transformations that affect states and indigenous communities under a historical moment sociologist Svampa (2015) characterizes as that of a "Commodities Consensus." In order to accomplish this analysis, my objective is to contribute to broader debates in three specific ways: (1) by improving our conceptual understanding of the continuities between the Washington Consensus neoliberal period and the Commodities Consensus "post-neoliberalism" under the Latin American "new" left; (2) by encouraging discussion on the tensions that exist between state-sanctioned "development" discourses and indigenous responses to them; and (3) by pointing to specific instances of social conflict where contradictory discourses meet definite social practices.

I begin this analysis by making the case that conflicts emerging in indigenous territories today in relation to the expansion of extractivism can be understood as an affirmation of decoloniality in the context of struggles against specific capitalist formations. To be sure, the struggle for territorial autonomy and the collective rights associated with such struggles are not new. Neither is the emphasis of indigenous struggles as anti- or de-colonial, despite the articulation of previous struggles as "class-based" (e.g. peasant resistance). In this section I describe how the notion of "decoloniality" helps to understand the contemporary discourses of place-based indigenous resistance against neo-extractivism. I continue in the second section by establishing and clarifying the ways in which the national-popular model has been able to define development discourse along the lines of "social inclusion" based on neo-extractivism. I do this in order to signal the tensions that exist between the predicament of transnational capital and its focus on natural resource extraction and the government's imperative of wealth redistribution through social spending. With

<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that 2.4% of the population in Argentina self-identifies as an indigenous person (INDEC, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> These changes include the election of Hugo Chávez (Venezuela, 1998), Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay, 2004), Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva (Brazil, 2002), Néstor Kirchner (Argentina, 2003), Evo Morales (Bolivia, 2005), and Rafael Correa (Ecuador, 2006).

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