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Limits to “counter-neoliberal” reform: Mining expansion and the marginalisation of post-extractivist forces in Evo Morales’s Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of resource extractivism in Latin America in the last decade has been related to previous neoliberalisation processes, which opened-up mineral exploitation to transnational firms and granted investors favourable conditions. Extractivism, however, expanded equally (or more) in countries which have undertaken “counter-neoliberal” reform—as it is most clearly the case for Evo Morales’s Bolivia. Building on regulationist approaches and strategic-relational state theory, this paper analyses recent changes in the governance of Bolivian mining. It contributes to understanding how and why the Morales governments’ objectives to initiate a transition towards a more plural and diversified economy—informed by social movements—have not been achieved to date. We make three interrelated claims. First, the expansion of mining has been enabled by the maintaining of institutional arrangements for mineral exploitation established during neoliberalism, favouring transnational firms and self-employed (“cooperative”) miners over state-owned and community-managed operations. Second, despite the new government’s improved legal framework for the promotion of environmental and indigenous rights, the mining sector has continued to benefit from *de facto* lax environmental regulation, which constitutes an indirect incentive to expansion at the expense of ecologies and indigenous–peasant livelihoods. Third, the state has played a central role in weakening social resistance to mining expansion, by demobilising those social forces—particularly peasant–indigenous organisations—whose proposals and demands conflicted most clearly with extractivist development. We suggest, therefore, that analysing changing state–society relations is central to understanding the counter-neoliberalisation of resource governance and its limits.

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1. Introduction

The extractive boom of the last decade has had mixed consequences for Latin America, fuelling economic growth, political change and redistribution, but also increasing socio-environmental conflicts and primary-export dependency (Bebbington, 2009). The term *extractivism* has been adopted in the Latin American debate to capture the renewed emphasis on extraction as a growth strategy in the region. Drawing on Gudynas (2013: 3), we define extractivism as a type of natural resource extraction which (a) is large scale and/or very intensive; (b) is oriented primarily towards export; and (c) entails little or no industrial processing. While extraction of natural resources is not *per se* a negative thing, in “peripheral”, resource-rich countries extractivism is typically associated with negative

socio-environmental implications as well as relations of unequal exchange at the global scale (Gudynas, 2013). From a political economic perspective (Becker, 2013), extractivism can thus be understood as a regime of accumulation which is primarily *extensive* and *extraverted*; that is, based mainly on nature’s appropriation and oriented towards primary commodity export.

To the extent that “post-neoliberal” Latin American governments set for themselves the goal of overcoming primary export-based development, the expansion of resource extractivism in these countries is considered paradoxical (Svampa, 2013). Bolivia is a good case in point. Since 2006, the government of Evo Morales and his *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS, Movement Towards Socialism) party have implemented a political project which has been presented as radically alternative to neoliberalism. An important aim of this project has been to diversify the economy and strengthen communitarian productive forms, as part of a perceived need to shift away from primary export-based development (Government of Bolivia [henceforth GoB], 2007). Eight years on, however, Bolivia’s economy is more dependent on primary exports

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than before.¹ This is in line with a general trend in the region, incentivised by high commodity prices; it does, however, point to the challenges involved in using resource rents to fund economic diversification.

Research in political ecology has extensively documented the impacts of growing extraction (Bebbington, 2012); the debate around the *drivers* of the extractive boom, however, remains less developed. Extractive activity expansion has been related primarily to high international commodity prices, but other political economic drivers have also been discussed. Specifically, there is a broad consensus among critical scholars that neoliberalisation has played a central role in facilitating private investment in extractives (Bebbington et al., 2013). In Latin America, the main effect of neoliberal globalisation has been the restoration of the primacy of “export-led development” (Robinson, 2008). The implementation of neoliberal mining codes in the 1980s–90s has shifted investment patterns towards countries in the South by improving “risk/reward ratios” for transnational extractive capital (Bridge, 2004). As part of global neoliberal reform, investment in Southern countries has been encouraged by multilateral institutions, by reducing the ability of states to extract rent and impose regulations (Emel and Huber, 2008). How much do these neoliberal conditions matter, however, to countries which have undertaken a process of investment “post-neoliberal” counter-reform?

This paper sets out to analyse the complex reconfiguration of mineral governance which followed the crisis of neoliberalism in Bolivia, and how this reconfiguration has related to the continued expansion of resource extractivism. Particularly, expanding a regulationist approach to governance by combining it with strategic-relational state theory (Jessop, 2008), we analyse the role of changing state–society relations in influencing this process. Our argument is based on an empirical exploration of the case of mining in Bolivia. Primary data for our investigation has been accessed in two ways. First, we have analysed relevant statistical data as well as legal and policy documents produced by national and international institutions. Second, we have drawn on data produced via extensive fieldwork conducted in Bolivia between 2012 and 2014, focused primarily on conflicts around mining in the Oruro region in the Bolivian highlands. Field research included participation in community meetings and social mobilisations, as well as over 50 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Huanuni mine, state authorities, experts and members of social organisations, NGOs and affected communities.

Our findings show that, in the Bolivian mining sector, the expansion of extractivism has been related to the reproduction of political economic conditions established under neoliberalism. Despite the government’s declared commitment to re-establishing state control over the exploitation of mineral resources, promote economic diversification and support communitarian productive forms, reform has been limited. While the reactivation of the state-owned Bolivian Mining Corporation (COMIBOL) resulted in greater state participation in the production and processing of minerals, the unprecedented increase in extraction and exports experienced during the Morales years was primarily driven by booming transnational investments and a burgeoning self-employed (“cooperative”) miners’ sector. This, we will argue, has implications for the way we conceptualise post-neoliberal resource governance. First, institutional reconfigurations aimed to stabilise accumulation in response to the crisis of neoliberalism are shaped by changing power relations among

social forces. Second, these changing relations are played out through and influenced by the state. The state should then be understood as a specific reflection (or “condensation”) of social relations, which also actively intervenes in these relations by enabling certain political projects and hindering others.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: In the next section, drawing on regulation theory, we lay the conceptual bases for our analysis. We do so by discussing the relationships between resource governance and state–society relations and by unpacking the notion of “post-neoliberalism”. We also position our contribution in relation to debates in geography and other social sciences around heightened dependency on primary exports in post-neoliberal Bolivia, by suggesting that the marginalisation of social forces opposing extractivism is an important and under-researched issue. In Sections 3 and 4, we engage with the empirical case of Bolivian mining, with two objectives. First, we identify the main changes and continuities in the post-neoliberal reconfiguration of mineral governance, and relate them to the issue of expanding extractivism. Second, we discuss some important ambiguities and contradictions which have accompanied “counter-neoliberal” reform. Section 5 identifies important shifts in the overall balance of power among social forces in Bolivia and discusses the role of the state in reinforcing these shifts. It also briefly discusses the new Mining Law as a condensation of power relations in the second term of the Morales government. Our main conclusions are summarised in Section 6.

2. Regulation, governance, and strategic-relational state theory

The regulation approach is concerned with the social embeddedness of the capitalist economy and the forms of social regulation which seek to solve its tensions and contradictions (Jessop and Sum, 2006). It places emphasis on institutions and relations that sustain accumulation regimes in historic cycles of capitalist development (Jessop and Sum, 2006; Becker, 2013). Regulationist accounts distinguish between the “accumulation regime” and the “mode of (social) regulation”. The accumulation regime is understood as the social organisation of production, circulation, consumption and distribution, including relations with non-capitalist forms. The mode of regulation refers to the ways in which the accumulation regime is reproduced “despite and through its conflictual and contradictory character”² (Lipietz, 1988: 11). It comprises the social institutions, rules and norms which stabilise (or “regularise”) accumulation in the face of contradictions and crises (Himley, 2008: 437; Jessop and Sum, 2006). A regulationist approach, therefore, is particularly well-suited to capture the ways that institutional configurations are restructured in response to socio-ecological challenges to accumulation—and how such a restructuring affects the governance of natural resources.

Since the early 2000s, geographers have drawn on the regulation approach in order to capture the changes in resource governance and environmental policy brought about by neoliberalisation and related scalar restructuring (Gibbs and Jonas, 2000; Bridge and Jonas, 2002; Himley, 2013). Moving from a critique of the nation state-centred focus of early regulation theory (Bridge and McManus, 2000), these scholars have shifted analytical emphasis towards other institutional arrangements, particularly at the sub-national scale. Consistent with an understanding of neoliberalism as implying a shift from *government* to *governance* (Bridge and Perreault, 2009; Himley, 2008), they have given greater importance to non-state actors such as private firms and social movements. Contradictions and conflicts related to

¹ From 2005 to 2012, the contribution of primary goods to the total value of exports rose from 89% to 95% (ECLAC, 2013: 111). In the same period, the primary sector’s contribution to the Bolivian GDP grew from 21.6% to 24.5%, while that of industrial manufacturing declined slightly, from 11.6% to 10.2% (own elaboration based on data from CEPALSTAT, 2015).

² Among these, here we focus primarily on intentional processes of de-regulation and re-regulation undertaken by the state in relation to a range of competing social forces.

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