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The 'will to improve' at the mining frontier: Neo-extractivism, development and governmentality in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Karolien Van Teijlingen

Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) and Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA), Roetersstraat 33, 1018WB Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, many progressive Latin American regimes have repoliticized natural resource extraction and forged an 'extractive imperative'. In this article, I critically engage with the governmental discourses on the relation between mining and development that have become a preeminent feature of this extractive imperative. Through an in-depth case-study of the unfolding conflict around the Mirador copper mine in the Ecuadorian Amazon, I focus on how these discourses and their materializations function as governmentality projects that enable the expansion of mining – 'in the name of development' – despite burgeoning territorial conflicts. The analysis shows that the subjectivities of the inhabitants of surrounding communities changed along new ideas of development and the nation. This produced appropriate ways of thinking and acting in relation to the mining project and the territorial conflicts around it. Yet, the simultaneous emergence of alternative development subjectivities and counter-conducts shows that governmentality projects are not totalizing and often produce unintended effects. The findings suggests that a governmentality approach to power relations opens up fruitful directions for inquiry into the extractive imperative and its intricate effects at the mining frontier.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Latin America's extractive industries expanded due to booming international commodity market, shifting geographies of demand and investment in natural resources, and new mining techniques. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in natural resource extraction in Latin America boosted and mineral exports experiences an astonishing growth (about 550% between 1995 and 2008, based on Jeffrey and Bebbington, 2013, 49), a trend that only slowly began to plateau as of 2010. During the same period, Latin America observed a series of elections of 'progressive' regimes that turned away from neoliberal socio-economic policies, leading scholars to denominate this period as a 'post-neoliberal' era in Latin America (Veltmeyer, 2012). These regimes politicized their natural resource wealth and promoted the expansion of their extraction under new principles of sovereignty, tough state regulation, higher state shares and their redistribution (Hogenboom, 2012). The resulting form of extraction has been described as 'neo-extractivism' and has become subject of an vivid scholarly – and societal – debate (cf. Gudynas, 2010a, 2010b; Veltmeyer, 2014; Burchardt and Dietz, 2014).

Many of these progressive regimes have promoted the expansion and intensification of natural resource extraction by using forceful discourses on development. In fact, as the 'extractive imperative' settled in, resource extraction became more and more seen as *indispensable* for poverty reduction and development (Arsel et al. this issue). This led to the consolidation of new discursive and material connections between the extractive sector and the state-led development strategies of social spending, redistribution and an expansion of the welfare state (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014; Gudynas, 2010a; Svampa and Antonelli, 2009). Such connections are increasingly important to justify extraction (van Teijlingen and Hogenboom, 2016), particularly in the context of the stark rise of social conflicts and mobilization that came with the expansion of the extractive industries (cf. Araújo, 2015; Bebbington et al., 2013, 2008; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Warnars, 2013).

In this article, I take a closer look at this particular feature of Latin American extractivism by unravelling how these new discursive and material connections between natural resource extraction and development unfold and take effect locally. More specifically, I aim to show how the discourses on development and nationalism constitutive of the 'extractive imperative' are used as powerful emotive ideals (Peet and Hartwick 2009, 1) to reach discursive hegemony within local territorial struggles around

E-mail address: K.M.vanTeijlingen@cedla.nl (K. Van Teijlingen).

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mineral mining. To this end, I present an in-depth case-study¹ of the workings of the 'extractive imperative' in the territorial conflict evolving around the Mirador copper mining project in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Ecuador holds a particularly interesting position in the Latin American trend of neo-extractivism. While the country finds itself at the forefront of debates about progressive development, *Buen Vivir* and alternative human-nature relations, its proclaimed 'post-neoliberal' government provides strong impulses to its nascent large-scale mining sector. This combination led to intense controversies over the future of mining and development (Riofrancos, 2014; van Teijlingen and Hogenboom 2016), with the Mirador project as emblematic spearhead.

2. Mining conflicts, development and governmentality

In the course of two decades of intensification and expansion of natural resource extraction, conflicts around mining, gas and oil have spurred over the Latin American continent. This boom of conflict has been answered by a myriad of political ecologists addressing the drivers, dynamics and possible solutions to these conflicts (Acuña, 2015; Bebbington, 2011; Bebbington et al., 2013; Dougherty, 2013; Helwege, 2015; Himley, 2014; Li, 2015; Moore and Velásquez, 2013). A recently explored approach within this body of literature is the analysis of these conflicts as struggles over territory and territoriality (Composto and Navarro, 2014; Escobar, 2008; Perreault, 2013; Warnars, 2013). It focuses on conflicts that emerge when the territorial logics of large-scale mineral mining superimpose existing complex territorial dynamics of agro-pastoral and indigenous communities and cause significant territorial reconfigurations (Little, 2001; Warnars, 2013). This approach draws analytical attention to the different territorial claims, including the profoundly distinct identities and ways of living related to them, and focuses on the (unequal) power relations that condition struggles over territory.

Power relations in territorial conflicts involve the power to assign functions, draw lines, categorize (who or what is 'in' and 'out'), enclose and enforce certain surveillance and control over territory: i.e. the power to territorialize (Delaney, 2009). Yet, an equally important dimension of power relations concerns the power exercised through the creation of hierarchies and subjects and through the legitimization of certain truths, meanings and knowledges, that is, a particular order-of-things (cf. Boelens et al., 2016; Gregory and Vaccaro, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Robbins, 2012). This productive and capillary form of power – also referred to as governmentality (Foucault, 2007) – works through processes of "subjectification" and the "self-formation of the comportments, habits, capacities and desires of particular categories of individuals towards particular ends" (Huxley, 2008, 1648). It is essential in rendering certain territorial reconfigurations hegemonic to the extent that a particular territorial 'order-of-things' becomes seemingly natural and enacted as common sense.

As I would like to show in this article, development discourses (and their materializations) play a key role in advancing certain

¹ This article is based on 14 months of fieldwork in Ecuador in 2012, 2014 and 2015. I divided my time between Tundayme, El Pangui, Zamora and Quito, where I was an associated researcher at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar. I held semi-structured interviews with about 120 involved actors, including government officials, mining engineers, company representatives, social movement leaders, inhabitants of surrounding communities, local governments and NGOs. While scholars from the Universidad Andina and the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja have been helpful in providing me with some contacts in the field, most of the interviewees were found through snowball sampling. I furthermore engaged in participant observations during community assemblies, *mingas* (when community-members come together to work on joint projects), rallies and other political, social and religious events to which I was invited by my local interlocutors.

'orders-of-things' in territorial struggles. Broadly speaking, I understand development as the process of societal change giving shape to a certain form of "social and natural life" (Escobar 2008, 164–65). It is both a material practice as well as an object of discourse. The ongoing scholarly and political debates on what "development should mean and how it should be attained" (Arsel and Dasgupta, 2015, 662) show that development does not have a universal content or materiality but should rather be seen and analysed as a power-ridden battleground (Peet and Hartwick, 2009). However, a more important feature for this article is that development concepts, whether defined as *buen vivir* or economic growth, often provide people, collectives and nation states with notions on how to change *for the better*. The largely positive connotations agglutinated in the idea of development turn it into an incredibly "powerful emotive ideal" (Peet and Hartwick, 2009, 1). Tania Murray Li (2007a, 1) eloquently defines this quest for betterment that endows some with the power over others as "the will to improve". In her view, development discourses and practices are governmentality projects that "entice and induce", foment subjectivities, desires and self-formation (T.M. Li, 2007a, 5). These qualities enable their use in territorial struggles to empower and legitimize particular territorial claims 'in the name of development' at the expense of others (Holmes, 2014; Little, 2001). Development discourses, practices and territorial claims, converge into a naturalized systems or "regimes of truth" (Foucault in Huxley, 2008, p. 1642) that incites certain ways of thinking, identifying and acting in relation to disputed mining operations.

Although the governmentality approach has been extensively explored in the field of development studies (cf. Escobar, 2008; Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007a) and in political ecology studies (cf. Boelens, Hoogesteger, and Baud 2013; Gregory and Vaccaro 2014; Holmes 2014; Mels, 2009; Robbins, 2012), its use has been limited within the literature on neo-extractivism and the territorial conflicts around it. Exceptions are recent articles that discuss the role of subject formation in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs of oil companies (Billo, 2015) and state discourses on oil extraction and mining (Davidov, 2013), both in Ecuador. With this article, I seek to contribute to this literature by using the relatively understudied lens of governmentality to scrutinize the development discourses and practices that surround mining conflicts. I deem this lens particularly suitable for the study of extraction in Latin America, since the extractive industries have become increasingly promoted by alluding to 'the will to improve'.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, I introduce the Mirador conflict, as well as the national context in which it evolved. Then, I show how the national government has built strong connections between large-scale mining and development and happiness, and how this particular mining-development nexus (Himley, 2008; van Teijlingen and Hogenboom, 2016) works as an essential element of the 'extractive imperative' as it unfolds around the Mirador project. Subsequently, I discuss how opposing groups seek to reverse and reframe the mining-development nexus in order to contradict this imperative and build alternative territorialities. I conclude by discussing the effects of the strong relationship between mining and development on the territorial struggles around mining and the insights provided by the governmentality approach in this regard.

3. Neo-extractivism in Ecuador and the Mirador conflict Neo-extractivism in Ecuador and the mirador conflict

The proliferation of neo-extractivism in Ecuador is closely related to the country's recent political history. The protagonist of this history is undeniably President Rafael Correa, who came to office in 2007. After various decades of roll-back neoliberalism, corruption, political and economic crisis and growing inequality,

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