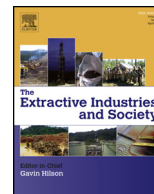




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Original article

Territorial dynamics and local resistance: Two mining conflicts in Ecuador compared

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ABSTRACT

In Ecuador, the promotion of mining by the Correa government has led to an escalation of conflicts at specific mining sites, as well as an intensification of the public debate concerning the relationship between resource extraction and development. In this article, we compare the contexts of two different mining sites in Ecuador, the Project Mirador in Zamora Chinchipe and Intag in Imbabura to analyse how territorial dynamics play out in these conflicts and affect the local responses to mining. More specifically, we scrutinize why and how in Intag a strong opposition alongside a clear polarization between the supporters and opponents of mining emerged, while in Mirador both groups remained weak and fragmented. We develop our analysis on the basis of the concept of territory, understood as the totality of social relations historically produced in a particular space and the meanings different groups have assigned to it. By examining the processes of territorial fragmentation of the Shuar communities in the area of project Mirador, and the construction of a territorial identity as part of a broader political project of alternative development in Intag, we can better understand the divergent trajectories of the two conflicts.

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1. Introduction

Recently mining has become a highly contentious issue in Ecuador. Ecuador has been an oil dependent country since the 1970s, but does not yet have large-scale mining operations. The government of the leftist president Rafael Correa (since 2007) has been promoting “socially and environmentally responsible mining” as the new source of income to pursue its political project based on social policies to alleviate poverty and improve social justice. This push for mining development has triggered or aggravated conflicts at the local level around the proposed mining sites, and fuelled intense public debate concerning the relationship between mining, development and environment. Particularly the environmental and powerful indigenous movements have criticized the government, arguing that large-scale mining is not compatible with either the definition

of societal progress as “buen vivir”¹; (good living), or the rights of nature, both enshrined in the country’s new Constitution of 2008.

The response of the government to social mobilization against mining has been to criminalize protest and delegitimize it, blaming those criticizing its mining policies for acting against the national interest and hindering the country’s development (see e.g. Arsel et al., this issue; Becker, 2013; Dosh and Kligerman, 2009; Moore and Velásquez, 2012). It treats the various reactions to mining development from diverse social actors as manifestations of unfounded, anti-developmental, nostalgic, particularistic or in President’s own words “infantile” positions and ideologies. By doing so, the government eludes not only the question of unequal distribution of the costs of the expansion of extractive activities (Arsel et al., this issue), but also the much more complex and

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¹ The concept of *buen vivir* was taken from the Andean Kichwa communities and refers to the notion of living in harmony within the community and with nature. After being incorporated in the Constitution of 2008 there has been much debate within indigenous organizations and among academics as to whether current extractivist policies are in line with this philosophy (see Arsel, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012; Walsh, 2010).

particular dynamics of local conflicts. By constructing the expansion of extraction as an “imperative”, the government denies the need and the possibility of a broader and deeper debate as to why and under what conditions mining can be socially desirable and acceptable, as well as what alternatives other than mining or oil extraction might be reasonably pursued.

We contend that in order to challenge the view of extraction as an unquestionable necessity to achieve developmental goals, and of social mobilization around it as misguided and futile, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is diversity and ambiguity in the positions of the social actors regarding mining. At the local level, different socio-economic, political and environmental processes, lived experiences and identities underlie these conflicts and the responses to mining development. It is important to specify the actors included in these conflicts, and understand the logics behind their different positions and demands.

In this article, we compare two large mining projects in Ecuador, which are being developed in the same context of state-sponsored development of extractive industries but have produced different dynamics in terms of resistance and social mobilization. Most academic writing on conflicts around large-scale mining in Ecuador has devoted its analysis to either discussions on mining at the national level or to specific actors and discourses regarding individual cases around mining development (see e.g. Chicaiza, 2011; Davidov, 2013; Van Teijlingen and Hogenboom, 2016; Velásquez, 2012; Warnars, 2013a,b). While these studies have provided valuable insights, we argue that a comparative analysis can be particularly useful to identify the factors that shape diverse local responses and influence the balance of power. Pursuing such an analysis is important since, as Bebbington argues, in Latin America extractive industries are “at the core of the relationship between development and democracy in the region” (Bebbington, 2012: 1153), and the dynamics of particular local conflicts have much to do with how this relationship is re-configured.

We centre our analysis on the concepts of territory and territorial dynamics. We examine how territorial dynamics shape the local responses, and how territorial claims and identities are articulated in struggles over mining. To probe into these questions, we study comparatively the mining conflicts around the Project of Mirador in the southern Amazonian province of Zamora Chinchipe and in the Intag valley in the province of Imbabura in the northern highlands (see Fig. 1). The responses to mining development have been rather different in the two places: While in Mirador local actors are more fragmented and have rather ambiguous positions, in Intag the conflict has produced a more polarized situation in which a strong and persistent opposition has developed alongside clear support for mining. Our main purpose in this article is to understand how in Mirador the resistance to mining has remained rather weak and divided, while in Intag such a strong opposition has been constructed.

We put the concept of territory at the centre of our analysis for two main reasons. First, it provides an analytical lens to study the interactions between material practices, socio-economic structures, and cultural-political institutions (Boelens et al., 2016). It enables us to interrogate what are the power relations among the actors involved in struggles over territory, and the material impact of these relations on territory. Second, social actors often articulate their oppositional positions as defence of territory. They express different visions of territory that embody divergent and conflicting views on development and the local environment. Hence, it is necessary to examine these territorial imaginaries to understand positions of social actors regarding mining.

This article is based on extensive field studies.² In both field studies, we used qualitative research methods, combining interviews, group discussions, informal talks, and direct observation. The discussion is built on in-depth analysis of each case and a comparison between the patterns of similarities and differences across cases. In the next section, we explain our conceptual framework. In section three and four we analyse the case of Intag and of Mirador respectively, using this framework. In the fifth section, we discuss our results and conclude.

2. Territorial dynamics and power relations around mining

Since the 1990s, struggles over large-scale mining have become central in the landscape of social movements in Latin America, and in many of these struggles territory has become a key area of contestation and resistance (Bebbington et al., 2008b; Bebbington and Bury, 2013; Muradian et al., 2012; Svampa, 2008; Zibechi, 2012). Svampa (2008) argues that, in the context of extractivism, the state and the companies use a dominant and paradigmatic notion of territory. Extractive companies and the states usually create imageries of territories as empty spaces devoid of people but rich in resources to be exploited. This notion usually excludes other meanings ascribed to the territory, thus creating a tension of “territorialities” (Svampa, 2008: 7). Local communities and social movements, she emphasizes, contest this notion, and offer alternative understandings of territory as a space of resistance: a space to resignify and change the socio-environmental relations in it (see also Zibechi, 2012).

Several authors claim that in numerous contemporary social struggles territory (and place) has been crucial to the construction of collective identities and diverse forms of political action (see e.g. Bolaños, 2011; Li, 2000; Cheng et al., 2003; Escobar, 2001; Perreault, 2001; Sawyer, 2004). Escobar (2001) argues that even though the discussion in social sciences over space has shifted towards issues of de-territorialisation and how globalization shapes places and communities, place based practices and understandings still play a significant role in the production of identities. Asserting the continuing importance of place does not mean viewing places as “fixed, permanent, unconstructed or unconnected” entities, instead it calls for a critical conception of place that acknowledges its “global constructedness and local specificity” (Escobar, 2001: 147), and for a better understanding of how it is being mobilized in social struggles.

Several studies have demonstrated how territorial claims are used in struggles over large-scale mining (and more generally over extractivism) in Latin America. Particular attention has been paid to territory as a key element in the overall ethno-political agenda of indigenous political organizations and movements, as well as in their resistance against extractivist projects (Grey Postero and Zamosc, 2004; Perreault, 2003; Selverston-Scher, 2001; Valdivia, 2005; Warren and Jackson, 2002). It has also been shown how the defence of territory is used to build alliances among different groups (indigenous people, peasants, urban residents, local governments), especially around the demands for the right to participate in decision-making processes (Haarstad and Floysand, 2007; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Velásquez, 2012).

The role of territory in mining conflicts has also been discussed with respect to the ways previous territorial dynamics influence the current social struggles, and how mining projects set in motion particular local territorial and social transformations (Bebbington et al., 2008a; Warnars, 2013a,b). In her analysis of the dynamics

² The field studies in Mirador were conducted in October 2013–January 2014; June–August 2014 and January 2015; and in Intag from September 2011 to April 2012, with additional visits in March and December 2013.

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