



# Imaginaries of development through extraction: The ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ and the present view of the future

Lorenzo Pellegrini\*

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX The Hague, The Netherlands  
 Instituto de Geografía, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Quito, Ecuador



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## ABSTRACT

This article offers a reading of the ideas expressed in Walter Solón Romero Gonzales’ mural, the ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ from 1956, and juxtaposes these ideas to the current public discourse that emerges from speeches of high officials and from policy documents of President Evo Morales’ government. The objective is to investigate the understanding of the role natural resources vis-à-vis development in Bolivia at these two points in time and show the striking resonance between ideas depicted in the mural more than half a century ago and ideas expressed in contemporary official discourses. These ideas concern the foundational elements of a development model that envisions a central role for natural resources, and especially hydrocarbons, in the development of the country. The elements of this model, that include a prominent role of the state in the extraction of natural resources, expansive social policies, strategies to diversify the economy, neatly overlap with the central tenets of the neoextractivist model. It transpires that the novelty of neoextractivism can be fundamentally questioned. This model also provides the rationale justifying the promotion of extractive activities ‘at all costs’ in Bolivia and beyond. However, history has shown that it produces fantasies of development rather than actual development.

Oil kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation. It is the temptation of ease, wealth, strength, fortune, power. It is a filthy, foul-smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money. To discover and possess the source of oil is to feel as if, after wandering long underground, you have suddenly stumbled upon a royal treasure. Not only do you become rich, but you are also visited by the mystical conviction that some higher power has looked upon you with the eye of grace and magnanimously elevated you above others, electing you its favorite.

[...] [O]il is a fairy tale, and like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, 1982

## 1. Introduction

In February 2011 I went for a meeting at the headquarters of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), the state-owned hydrocarbon company of Bolivia based in La Paz. While waiting for my appointment, I was captivated by the large mural decorating the entrance hall, the ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’. The mural depicts, from left to right, an historical progression from Pre-Columbian, to colonial

times, independence, struggle over the appropriation of hydrocarbons and nationalization, and culminates in a vision of future development for Bolivia. The mural offers a striking representation of the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary Bolivia, of the way the pre-colonial past is idealized, how colonial powers are seen as usurpers of national natural resources and how, now that these resources are nationalized, they can provide for the citizen’s immediate needs and fund the investment needed to build the future of the country. The powerful impression made by the mural was heightened when I noticed that the date next to the author’s signature is 1956. This paper, starting from this striking observation, interrogates the ideas expressed in the mural by juxtaposing them to the contemporary discourse of government officials and public policies. The objective is to explore the historical roots of the current understanding of the role of natural resources in general, and hydrocarbons in particular, in the history, the present and in the future of Bolivia.

Murals in Latin America are a form of art that has been used to re-interpret history, educate and direct secular hopes through the ‘decoration’ of large spaces in public buildings. The Mexican muralist movement –and most prominently the works of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros– exemplify the political and pedagogical functions of muralism (*muralismo* in Spanish) within the context of the building of a

\* Address: International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX The Hague, The Netherlands.  
 E-mail address: [pellegrini@iss.nl](mailto:pellegrini@iss.nl).

modern post-revolutionary nation/state (Paz, 2002; Coffey, 2012). This article focuses on one outstanding example of the less-known Bolivian *muralismo* and proposes a reading of Solón's "History of Bolivian Petroleum" which itself is an overt instance of the role that popular art can serve in representing and shaping national imaginaries (Fundación Solón, 2010). The mural can be read as a reflection of broadly shared ideas of its time and, most notably, as the embodiment and expression of an enduring development model that understands extractive activities as instrumental to socio-economic development. The model, based on the potentialities of natural resources, and hydrocarbons in particular, to drive the progress of the country holds currency in contemporary Bolivia.

Historically the Bolivian economy has been based on the export of raw commodities. These commodities –that include silver, tin, and hydrocarbons– have shifted over time as a consequence of price changes in the international market and have determined the fortunes –marked by periodic boom and bust– of the national economy (e.g. Klein, 2011). In fact, from a social metabolism perspective we can see the Bolivian economic history as a process of intensification of extractive activities, expansion of the extraction frontier and of insertion in the global economy through increasingly skewed physical trade imbalances (Dorninger and Eisenmenger, 2016; cf. Schandl et al., 2017). This process continues to this day and hydrocarbons can be seen as the latest commodity animating a development model based on extractive industries. However, the extraction of hydrocarbons is presently being promoted as a breakthrough because of their potential role as a source of energy for other sectors of a diversified economy and because of their prospective 'industrialization' –the Bolivian shorthand for development of a commodity-processing industry in order to capture higher value added when compared to the sole extraction and export of raw commodities.

When it comes to present-day development models and policies, significant changes have taken place during the post-neoliberal period that has coincided with the presidency of Evo Morales –since 2006– and two competing development discourses have coexisted (Pellegrini, 2012; Tockman and Cameron, 2014). One discourse is the 'living well' (*buen vivir*) based on indigenous cosmology and emphasizing the satisfaction of individual and collective rights and living in harmony with nature over the achievement of ever-increasing material wealth. The other discourse links back to a developmentalist idea of an extractivist state that can use the revenues generated by natural resources and their industrialization to power economic development and finance social policies –a model that has been called 'neoextractivist' (Gudynas, 2012). An extensive literature has been engaging with the interpretation of the post-2006 changes, the ensuing tensions between development models and continuities and discontinuities with existing socio-economic structures; some authors single out revolutionary breaks with the past, while others have emphasised continuity and adjustments that are functional to the recreation of the neo-liberal order (e.g. Escobar, 2010; Webber, 2010). In this study, the focus is on the neoextractivist model that motivates and is reflected in most policies enacted by the Bolivian government after 2006.

In this policy context, the process of nationalization of hydrocarbons has gained prominence, reflecting neatly the tensions between the living well and the neoextractivist model (Pellegrini, 2012). In fact, on the one hand, the nationalization process has greatly increased state revenues that are used to strengthen state intervention in the economy, finance infrastructure development, and expanded social expenditures. On the other hand, the extraction frontier is advancing continuously, especially within indigenous territories, straining the relationship between the government and (at least some) indigenous organizations that see their territories encroached and their autonomy undermined (e.g. Fontana, 2013, 2014; Kohl and Farthing, 2012; Pellegrini and Arismendi, 2012; Pellegrini, 2016; Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler, forthcoming).

In relation to the Bolivian development model, the mural offers a powerful depiction of the role that natural resources, and especially

hydrocarbons, have played in the history and are envisioned to play in the future. This paper explores the scenes and the ideas expressed in the mural placing them side by side with the current public discourse to investigate continuities in the understanding of the role natural resources vis-à-vis development. That is, the starting point is the mural, which is juxtaposed to present-day discourses to analyse the role of hydrocarbons in the Bolivian development model and relate these insights to the discussion on neoextractivism. The analysis has a bearing beyond Bolivia and, to a certain extent, applies to the Latin American region.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it introduces a new method to underscore the relevance of past ideas to the present by way of juxtaposing a piece of art from the past with the contemporary discourses of policy makers. Second, it highlights an enduring and important ideological motivation –the development model sketched here– contributing to the formulation of public policies governing the extractive industries. Third, it shows that the main features of the neoextractivist development model are hardly new and that development through extraction is an elusive quest that marked the Bolivian *Zeitgeist* already in the 1950s.

The next section discusses art in general and murals in particular as instruments for the creation of official narratives, taking Mexican *muralismo* as a departure point towards a more general discussion. Section 3 turns to the 'History of Bolivian Petroleum' and after a brief description of the scenes that are part of the mural, these scenes are juxtaposed to public statements and policies that mark the current Bolivian policy debate. Section 4 engages with the role of ideas, expressed in the mural and in the current discourse, in imagining the role of natural resources in development. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Muralismo, art, and interpretation

The most influential examples of *muralismo* come from the Mexican school that generated masters such as Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros. The Mexican *muralismo* is a complex movement that has produced images to make sense and interpret colonial history, the revolution and to sanctify the indigenous roots and *mestizaje* of modern Mexico (Paz, 2002). Much of the muralist production has focused on and depicted the past, but with intents that clearly refer to the present and the future. Giddens, while highlighting the function of history in the formation of modern nation-states, observed that "the reflexive monitoring of all states involves the invention of 'history' in some sense or another — the documented interpretation of the past that provides an anchorage for anticipated developments in the future." (1985: 220). Indeed, the works of the *muralismo* have also explicitly promoted visions of the future where Marxist ideology and technological progress feature prominently –as masterfully depicted for example in Rivera's 'The man at the centre of the universe'. These works have been at the same time so eminently political and influential that they have been described as 'the most important example of art on the Left in the history of modern art' (Coffey, 2012: 1).

Art co-evolves with culture since they are both a reflection and a constitutive element of the cultural milieu.<sup>1</sup> In the Mexican revolution, often described as 'a revolution without an ideology', the muralists have been trying to create such ideology *a posteriori* and have actively engaged in the struggle to shape the national identity that emerged from the revolution (Paz, 2002; Azuela de la Cueva, 2005: 89–91). The version of nationalism depicted and shaped in the murals expressed an indigenous historical heritage that had the potential to contribute to the construction of a great *mestizo* Mexican nation (Azuela de la Cueva,

<sup>1</sup> Culture is defined here as a set of broadly shared beliefs. The use of the singular form does not imply that at specific point there are no alternative, and to some extent incompatible, cultures, however our focus is on 'common sense' as naturalized categories of thought shared by a large part of a population (Gramsci, 1992).

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