



Territorial partitions, the production of mining territory and the building of a post-neoliberal and plurinational state in Ecuador



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ABSTRACT

The Ecuadorian government currently advances large-scale mining as an economic activity to alleviate poverty and ultimately achieve a post-neoliberal agenda in the country. Three large-scale mining projects are planned in the Cordillera del Condor, a region of the Amazon basin, where local people have developed particular ways of living in close relation to their land. This paper claims that current mining projects create territorial partitions that transform socio-spatial relations in five inter-related ways: institutional hierarchies, governance frameworks, social imaginaries, politico-cultural identities and productive transformations. It is argued that territorial partitions aim to develop a particular state narrative in the Cordillera del Condor, the one of a mining territory. This narrative in turn, regroups territories into a unity that imposes state dominance over new meanings of territory. Ultimately, this paper challenges the state's rationality of using mining as a strategic activity for a post-neoliberal agenda while limiting Ecuador's ability to transition towards a plurinational state.

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1. Introduction

Since 2009, the Ecuadorian government has led a campaign to advance mining extractivism as an initiative for economic development in the country. The government supports three large-scale mining projects located in the southern Amazonian highlands, known as the Cordillera del Condor (Fig. 1) and include the 'Mirador', 'Panantza-San Carlos' and 'Fruta del Norte' mining projects. The Cordillera del Condor is a vulnerable ecosystem, historically inhabited by indigenous Shuar nationalities and subsequently landless settlers, henceforth called *colonos*, who established particular socio-spatial relations and unique cultural identities. These mining projects are planned to begin amidst an ever-evolving territorial transformation supported by the national government, which has taken a so-called post-neoliberal approach to development (Becker, 2011). This approach highlights efforts to generate economic revenue for social welfare and poverty alleviation while regulating mining influence in the locality and securing

environmental protection.

Several studies have shown how extractivism transforms territory in multiple ways (Bebbington & Bury, 2009; Bebbington, Hinojosa, Bebbington, Burneo, & Warnaars, 2008; Sawyer, 2004; Shade, 2015). In the Cordillera del Condor in particular, Warnaars (2013) depicts local transformations due to mining conflicts and illustrates how struggles are processes of local reaffirmation of autonomy. This paper advances her claims by studying the state-mechanisms to enact mining in the Cordillera del Condor. In doing so, it presents a territorially-based critique of the dependence of extractivism in transitioning towards a post-neoliberal and plurinational state. Indeed, socio-political processes that advocate for mining, while aiming for a longer-term objective towards post-neoliberalism, collectively challenge anti-neoliberal struggles and jeopardize plural worldviews in the country. In this manner, I contribute to the literature on post-neoliberalism and plurinationality by attempting to examine how state rationalities on mining produce new forms of territorialization in the Cordillera del Condor. I argue that these forms of territorialization are continuously dependent on the use of neoliberal practices on the ground and ultimately undermine the possibilities of building a plurinational state comprised of multiple embedded territories.

The objectives of this paper are twofold; first, I aim to examine

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Fig. 1. Map of the three mining projects in the Cordillera del Condor, southeast Amazon of Ecuador.

the transformations in socio-spatial relations in the Cordillera del Condor, which have permitted the state to produce a mining territory. In doing so, five main territorial partitions are highlighted to illustrate how mining territories are produced. These include the consolidation of institutional hierarchies, governance frameworks, social imaginaries, politico-cultural identities and productive schemes. Second, I use the analysis of territorial partitions to extend the discussion on post-neoliberal state-building to highlight the contradictory nature of these strategies in ultimately confronting neoliberalism and pursuing plurinationalism as advocated by the Ecuadorian constitution.

In this study, a document analysis was initially conducted by mapping actors and examining existing laws, plans and assessments related to the mining debate, with particular attention given to stakeholders directly related to the 'Mirador', 'Panantza-San Carlos' and 'Fruta del Norte' projects. Secondly, extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with 64 participants between September 2014 and February 2015. Participants included high representatives from central and local governments (e.g. Sub-Secretaries, National Assembly Members, mayors, parish and community presidents in the Cordillera del Condor and technical coordinators of state agencies), indigenous organization presidents or representatives, members of civil society organizations, community members, peasants and representatives of NGOs and mining companies. The initial twenty-five participants were selected based on stakeholder mapping in order to ensure the greatest range of stakeholders. Following, an additional thirty-nine participants were selected through a snowball sampling technique. The resulting data permitted the development of a grounded framework of territorial partitions, in highlighting how mining activities transform socio-spatial relations in the territory. The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides a theoretical description of the political changes in the country in relation to the building of a post-neoliberal and plurinational Ecuadorian state. In section 3, a historical review of territorial changes in the Cordillera del Condor is provided. Section 4 explores five emergent territorial partitions that reshape local meanings of territory. In section 5, these partitions are discussed in line with strategies for state control that align with discourses of post-neoliberalism and plurinationality. Finally,

a conclusion highlights that mining decisions ultimately institutionalize more nuanced mechanisms for neoliberal practices associated to centralized state power. This also questions whether plurinationality can ever be build given hierarchical structures.

2. Territory in a post-neoliberal and plurinational state

The geographic character of a state is the territory under its control, where the state enforces the law, maintain integrity and protect all citizens and their rights. The state is then of crucial significance in regulating actions, defending national interests, supporting societies and regulating economies within its boundaries (Agnew, 2013; Asher & Ojeda, 2009; Cox, 2008; Scott, 1998). Conversely, territory is critical to the state as it represents possibilities to materialize national interests for development by processes of state territorialization (Braun, 2000; Sack, 1986; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995). State territorialization refers here to the distinctive strategies used by the state to regulate socio-spatial relations within a particular space. These strategies create differentiated new meanings of territory, define new regimes of land use and finally legitimize emerging economic activities (Agnew, 2013; Forsberg, 2003; Sack, 1986; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995). This understanding is used to explain how the Ecuadorian state is currently producing a mining territory in the Cordillera del Condor according to new state priorities and national post-neoliberal strategies for development.

While studies of state power and extractivism are common, only recently has there been an increase in literature concerning post-neoliberalism. Post-neoliberalism refers to the regulation of non-state rule over economic decisions in contrast to laissez-faire policies by neoliberal governments. Thus, post-neoliberalism is a marked departure from previous forms of state governance that have depended on market reforms, economic restructuring, elitist management and privatization (Andreucci & Radhuber, 2017; Davidov, 2014; Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2012; Svampa, 2013). The post-neoliberal agenda is not built under a dichotomy of state vs. market; instead, the economy is regulated by the state to secure social responsibility, yet it is responsive to global demands of the market economy (Bebbington & Humphreys-Bebbington, 2011; Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2012).

Self-proclaimed post-neoliberal countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia have intended to build a new form of state-society relationship based upon a more proactive state. This relationship reclaims the 'authority of the state' in greater alignment with social demands, in an attempt to rectify historical inequalities (Linera, 2012; SENPLADES, 2013). Post-neoliberal governments have expanded public spending based upon an underlying growth-driven economy (Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2012). Thus, state expenditures are heavily dependent on the exploitation of natural resources and rely substantially on primary commodity export. Meanwhile, critics have stressed that extractivism would only deepen the dependence on the global market and disregard economic diversification in the long term (Bebbington & Humphreys-Bebbington, 2011; Gudynas, 2010; Andreucci & Radhuber, 2017).

Bebbington and Humphreys-Bebbington (2011) argue that the political control of internal territories is more apparent in post-neoliberal regimes due to the fact that their economic policies have not effectively challenged the countries' dependence on extraction. Considering the future decline of oil reserves in Ecuador, the government supports the expansion of the mining frontier on par with social services offered by the state. Within this economic context, it is not difficult to imagine how the control of territory has been vital for maintaining the country's economic machinery, with support of centralized governance, territorial planning and resource management (Asher & Ojeda, 2009). Since a post-

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