

## Re-contextualizing Anti-Extractivism: Buen Vivir and the New Left in the Andes

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A new and unique tempest has been haunting Latin America and is gaining loads of attention in numerous publications covering Latin America and the Environment. “Anti-extractivism,” which some have called a movement, others have called a new politics, and others have called reactionary, has come to the forefront of the social reality of Latin America. Two countries in particular—Ecuador and Bolivia—have been in the spotlight for the disputes over “extractivism” largely because unique concepts such as the rights of nature and mother earth have been included in their constitutions of 2008 and 2009.

Despite the onslaught of publicity, one thing remains certain: “anti-extractivism” continues to be misunderstood and/or misrepresented by many in the west. Contributing to this is the fact that the most potent anti-extractive movements have risen in resistance to the leftist governments of Ecuador and Bolivia, thus much of the Left in the west remain hesitant to critique these governments. Subsequently the “anti-extractive” resistance has been regularly misinterpreted in order to defend the governments that are the only hopeful bastions of leftism in the hemisphere.

Part of this non-critical interpretation, not surprisingly, comes from the governments themselves, which have become quite popular among the environmental and Left community of the west. Publications and interviews from Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and Bolivian Vice President and leftist intellectual Alvaro Garcia Linera have elaborated a defense of extractivist policies and cast their opposition as lackeys of the right wing or infantile environmentalists. These arguments have been carried in some of the most read Left/Green publications of the west and have garnered little to no criticism.

More surprising is that similar arguments—which indirectly defend the destruction of indigenous and subsistence cultures, as well as pristine ecosystems—have come from the Green/Left community. Despite the fact that governments who support drilling oil in the amazon or leveling cloud forests in order to mine metals and commodify earth have never been popular to anybody within a serious environmental movement, because the Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments have joined the ranks of the anti-neoliberal Left, they are being defended.

Most recently, and in a rather indirect fashion, this surfaced in an article by Federico Fuentes, published in NACLA, Green Left Weekly, and Climate and Capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The article, which will loosely guide the following essay, illuminates many of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the “anti-extractivism” that has spread throughout Ecuador, Bolivia, and the rest of Latin America.

To be sure, the defense of extractivism has been largely limited to the propagandists of the extractivist governments and a few of their supporters. However if we look to the global south, many intellectuals, writers, and activists (some of which Fuentes names) have elaborated a more accurate account of the anti-extractive movement. These include Pablo Davalos, Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, and Carlos Zorrilla. Furthermore, some intellectuals of the global north such as Jeffery R. Webber, Nancy Postero and Devin Beaulieu have broke ranks with the popular trend of uncritical praise for the Bolivian and Ecuadorian governments and shown how extractivist policies closely resemble the neoliberal paradigm which they claim to be dismantling.<sup>2</sup>

### **The False Dichotomy**

Two positions guide Fuentes' article. The first, is that framing the South American social reality as one between "anti-extractivist social movements" and "extractivist governments" is false. In this, Fuentes is absolutely correct. This dichotomy is a vast oversimplification and indeed false. There are, as there always have been, supporters of extraction in the communities where mineral or oil extraction has been proposed. Often, as has been documented by Carlos Zorrilla and others, these supporters have been bribed with promises of money, jobs, cellphones, televisions, alcohol, and other trappings of western modernity. Foreign companies such as Corriente Resources are often behind these pro-extraction segments of communities.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, as history shows us, extractive industries rarely—if ever—better the lives of communities. Most often, they destroy indigenous and subsistence cultures and replace them with a destructive, non-harmonious western culture of mining or oil. The boomtowns of history, plagued a host of social problems, should not be something we defend or encourage today. In fact, these problems (eg: alcohol, drugs, prostitution) have been among the main reasons why communities oppose extractivism, as will be mentioned later in the communities of Colombia. Thus, the defense of supporters of extractivism is not only ahistorical, but closely resembles the apologists of cultural imperialism.

However, most importantly, what the dichotomy misses is that "anti-extraction" is not merely an "anti" movement, but part of the larger philosophy of Buen Vivir. At the heart of Buen Vivir is a critique of western modernity and development, both of which are absent from Fuentes' article. Another integral part of Buen Vivir is the idea of social and environmental harmony, which was at the heart of many pre-Columbian American cultures. Because this harmony is destroyed by extractivism, "anti-extractivism" is a part of Buen Vivir. This contextualization is important for many reasons. Most importantly, is because simply framing movements or struggles in the global south as "anti" (and thereby reactionary), to some degree, we succumb to the colonial mindset that many of us claim to reject.

### **Recycling the legacy of Populism**

Fuentes' second position partly resembles the traditional ecosocialist argument of the 1980's and 90's, and has also been rehashed by the Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments. The first part of the argument is that extraction is the result of "imperialist governments and their transnationals." The second part, is that when analyzing extractivism, we should differentiate between 1) "governments that do the bidding of transnationals and imperialist governments" and 2) "peoples' governments trying to

use their country's resources to break imperialist dependency and improve living standards for the majority.”

Historically, it is indisputable that the legacy of destructive extraction has been the result of imperialism, like many of today's problems in Latin America. However, today this differentiation simply ignores the fact that the wave of populism which swept Latin America starting in the 1940's noticeably changed the extractivism of “imperialist governments and transnationals” and gave a much larger role to the State with the intention of “improving living standards for the majority.” Juan Peron, Getulio Vargas, Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra, the leaders of the 1952 Bolivian Revolution, and the populist military regimes of Ecuador and Peru in the 1970's all employed similar rhetoric to describe their political platforms. Surely the “New Left” governments of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela have furthered this process by giving a larger role to the State in extractive industries and distributing the monetary benefits in a more just and egalitarian fashion. However, this should not be mistaken as a new phenomenon for Latin America, which is why some have—quite accurately—called these governments “neopopulist.” Furthermore, this distinction cannot be completely clearly made, as many of the contentious extractive projects (eg: Quimsacocha and El Mirador mines in Ecuador) foreign owned.

Secondly, although the difference that Fuentes highlights does in fact exist, it merely amounts to a difference in who receives the trappings of extraction. Certainly, the second category, where the “majority” receive the benefits of extraction is better than the first, but both categories continue the same paradigm of commodifying the earth and destroying natural and social environments for monetary gain. Buen Vivir differs markedly from the western idea of “using resources” and has a wholly different conception of “improving living standards.” Thus, the distinction completely misses the underlying principles of Buen Vivir.

Furthermore, if we analyze the extraction that does fit into Fuentes' later category, we hardly see a meaningful difference in the level of social and environmental damage caused by extraction. The nationalized oil industry of the populist military regime in Ecuador in the 1970's destroyed the Amazon and its communities in much the same way as Chevron did. In Bolivia, the nationalization of many of the mines after the 1952 revolution did not change the lives of the miners in any meaningful way (which is why the miners struggle has never ceased). This is precisely why Buen Vivir not only transcends critiques of imperialism and capitalism, but also critiques the concepts of western development and modernity.

### **The Benefits of Buen Vivir**

Finally, Fuentes also falls short in understanding that the contextualization of the debates and conflicts currently occurring in South America is more important than simply having an informed—albeit nearly nonexistent—“solidarity movement.” The most important reason for us in the west to understand what is occurring in Latin America, especially in the social movements of Ecuador and Bolivia, is not only to extend solidarity but to learn from their resistance. As the roots of the current environmental and social catastrophes which plague the globe have originated in the global north (e.g.: capitalism, industrialism, etc.), us in the west have an obligation to look to the global south for answers to the problems that we have caused. This requires transcending the Eurocentrism that has plagued Western thought for centuries, and apparently continues to do so. In fact, one of the great aspects of Buen Vivir is that it attempts to transcend western notions of development and modernity, and affirms the perspectives of the victims of western modernity (which also resembles the philosophy of Enrique Dussel).

By understanding the roots and meanings of the concept of Buen Vivir, we can more effectively answer some of the questions and contradictions raised by Fuentes and others. Furthermore, contextualizing the concept of Buen Vivir for those in the global north can also answer some of the recent pleas to the Left to engage more seriously with the environmental crisis.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Buen Vivir, if it continues its continuous process of evolution, has the potential to transcend the boundaries that have been set by the traditional Left and environmental movements, which have furthered engrained what Herbert Marcuse called “One Dimensional Thought” and “One Dimensional Society”.

### **Buen Vivir: More than “Anti-extractivism”**

To some extent, the revolts against neoliberalism that swept Latin America in the last decades of the 20th century gave birth to the concept of Buen Vivir. However, Buen Vivir is an amalgamation between the various segments of the anti-neoliberal struggle and the resurgence of indigenismo of the 1990’s. In the Andean region—and specifically Ecuador and Bolivia—the indigenous movements often led the anti-neoliberal struggle, and through this combination, Buen Vivir was born.<sup>5</sup> By exposing the “myth of modernity” through the affirmation of the lives, experiences, and perspectives of the victims of western modernity, it resembles the idea of “transmodernity,” developed by Enrique Dussel.<sup>6</sup>

Buen Vivir is a broad platform that incorporates multiple indigenous notions of social and environmental harmony, including Sumak Kawsay (Kichwa), Suma Qamana (Aymara), Nandereko (Guarani). While all of these concepts are different, they share similar notions of harmonious living (between and within social and environmental communities) that are clearly distinct from western thought. However, as noted by Eduardo Gudynas, Buen Vivir “should not be understood as a return to a distant Andean past...[because] it is not a static concept but an idea that is continually created.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Buen Vivir encompasses not only these indigenous notions of social and environmental harmony, but also critical perspectives originating in the west. Among these, Gudynas includes deep ecology and the work of Arturo Escobar on development.<sup>8</sup> Although unmentioned in the scholarship, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School can and should be used by those in the west to understand the reasons for which Buen Vivir opposes western modernity and “advanced industrial society.” Finally, the Philosophy of Liberation and the “transmodernity” of Dussel can and should also be incorporated into the platform of Buen Vivir, but has yet to be done.

Escobar’s study of development illuminates one aspect of Buen Vivir which Fuentes and many others misunderstand. Whereas many claim that the “anti-extractivist” campaigns seek “alternative development models,” Buen Vivir, in contrast, seeks “alternatives to development.” This distinction should not be underestimated, as it is at the root of Buen Vivir. Throughout Latin America and the global south, “alternative development models” have largely been re-incarnations of the western idea of development, of which Buen Vivir attempts to transcend. Alternatives to development require a thorough reevaluation of prevailing concepts of development (including “sustainable development,” “green development,” etc.)

### **Trapped in the West**

Many, including Fuentes, have also criticized the anti-extractive alternatives. Among these, Fuentes includes rejecting “extractive ‘mega projects’” and handing over “ownership of natural resources to local communities.” The criticism is based on the notion that these alternatives fail to 1) “eradicate poverty” and 2) offer a viable alternative for people in urban areas. This critique has come from the most ardent defenders of the new post-neoliberal model of extractivism such as Garcia Linera, and is epitomized in Rafael Correa’s often repeated catch phrase, “we can’t be beggars sitting on a sack of gold.” This critique, once again, fails to understand the concept of Buen Vivir in many ways.

First, Fuentes, Correa, Garcia Linera, and others conceptualize the notion of “poverty” in a wholly western manner, which is defined in monetary and material terms closely tied with consumption. Buen Vivir, in contrast, values social and environmental harmony instead of monetary and material gain, or consumption that extends beyond harmony. Thus, a local community’s decision to not mine precious metals will never “eradicate poverty” if poverty is defined in monetary or material terms. However, by making the decision to not extract the metals, which the west has commodified, the community re-defines notions of “rich” and “poor” in ways that can benefit the world.

Many communities throughout Latin America—and especially in Ecuador and Bolivia—are doing this. One of the many examples is the community of Junin, Intag in the northern cloud forest of Ecuador. In Junin, the community of subsistence farmers—which the western paradigm would label as “in poverty”—has resisted an open-pit copper mine since the 1990’s. The resistance, partly led by the Defensa y Conservacion Ecologica de Intag (DECOIN) and its leader Carlos Zorrilla, have repeatedly asserted their preference to preserve the social and environmental harmony rather than receive the trappings of the mine. By rejecting western development, the community of mining resistance in Junin is one of many living examples of Buen Vivir. Unfortunately, the Correa government has consistently harassed and jailed members of the community.

Another example is the communities surrounding the proposed Quimsacocha mine in the southern Ecuadorian Andes. While these communities would also be labeled as “in poverty” by the western paradigm, they have repeatedly voted down proposals for the mine. In October 2011, over 92% of the population voted against the mine.<sup>9</sup> The reasoning, which is similar to other communities, was elaborated by an elected representative of the community of Victoria del Partete: “we cannot put at risk sources of water that can sustain us over the longterm in exchange for a few short term economic benefits.”<sup>10</sup> Also of significance, is the Canadian ownership of the mine, which makes the aforementioned distinction between neoliberal governments and “peoples’ governments” even less meaningful.

Another example is the El Mirador mine in Morona-Santiago province of the southern Ecuadorian Amazon. The copper mine is on the ancestral lands of the Shuar, one of the most famed indigenous groups of South America and in a section of the amazon that is among the most biologically diverse and ecologically significant pieces of land on the globe. Disregarding both, Correa has invited Canadian and Chinese partners into the country to pry the metals from the soils. The Shuar, who live off the land in much the same way as they have since precolonial times—needless to say, in a way that meets the western definition of “poverty”—have declared that they will fight to

the death before allowing the mine. The Shuar have been repeatedly confronted with violence from the government, but nevertheless, continue in their resistance. Describing their anti-mining stance, one Shuar leader commented “Industrial mining is not sustainable...The gold and the copper will be gone in a few years, leaving behind nothing but poisoned earth for our people. We can have an economy here without destroying nature and the culture.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The City vs. The Country: The Age Old Battle**

Lastly, the assertion that anti-extractivism (or more accurately Buen Vivir) does not account for the host of problems faced by people in the cities has been made by many, and once again, is not entirely true. In Ecuador, the source of this argument has most often originated from urban Correa supporters who stand to benefit from the social programs funded by the revenue from extractive industries. In a 2012 march led by CONAIE (Ecuador’s largest indigenous confederation) and environmental groups, this critique was countered with the simple slogan, “the water we defend in the countryside, is also drank in the city.”

Besides the obvious fact that the effects of environmental devastation also harm urban residents, another way anti-extraction accounts for the problems of those in the city is by stemming the tide of rural migrants which flood the cities and often exacerbate urban problems of unemployment, poverty, and crime. Since the colonial era, the creation of extractive industries has always resulted in rural landlessness and is therefore a push factor for migration to the cities. Recently this has happened in dozens of communities throughout the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon where oil and mining extraction has destroyed ancient ways of living and people have been forced into the cities. By resisting the spread of extractive industries and preserving subsistence cultures in the countryside, Buen Vivir can also alleviate urban problems.

This has also manifested in the mountains of Antioquia, Colombia, where indigenous and campesino communities that subsist on small-scale coffee production and raising livestock have been threatened with a “new gold rush.” Maria Olga Panchi, a member of the community wonders, “If we allow the miners to come in, where will we grow our food? Where will we go?” The answer to her question, as history shows, is to the cities in search of jobs. However, community reaction in Antioquia reveals a unique resistance that rejects the destruction of western development. Porfirio Garces, another community member elaborates the overt rejection of western development: “we want to keep our culture based on coffee production, where honesty reigns. We do not want a mining culture based on destruction.” Furthermore, many in communities of Antioquia object to the culture of exploitation inherent to mining: “We have seen in other mining communities how the industry changes the culture. It brings drugs, prostitution. We need to cling to our culture with our teeth and nails.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is our responsibility to analyze the events occurring in Ecuador and Bolivia with a critical lens, even if this means critiquing “New Left” governments. The opportunity to transcend the destructive process of western development and modernity—which began with Columbus and continues today—has surfaced in Buen Vivir. It is our responsibility to understand the true meaning and roots of Buen Vivir and its byproduct, “anti-extractivism.” Despite the fact that the new leftist governments are a great step forward out of the neoliberal nightmare, we should recognize their policies for what they are. Extractive projects such as drilling oil in the amazon (eg: Yasuni) or mining copper in the cloud forest of Intag not only devastate indigenous and subsistence

cultures and destroy ecosystems, but they continue the paradigm that is destroying the social and natural world. If these policies were being carried out by a right-wing government, we can safely assume that many in the global north of the Green/Left would not hesitate to provide a critical analysis. However, this has not been the case for Bolivia or Ecuador, and both countries continue to receive uncritical praise in the western press.

Buen Vivir, if we support it and nourish it in its continuous evolution, can be a step toward putting an end to the destruction which slowly sweeps the earth and its people toward demise. Surely, as Fuentes noted, a complete reshaping of the global order is needed. As Marcuse noted fifty years ago, this includes a drastic lowering of the amount of consumption in the global north. If Buen Vivir succeeds, and Latin America ceases to provide the raw materials for the deadly machine to continue, this would represent a huge step toward the necessary reshaping of the global order.

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Fuentes, The Dangerous Myths of “Anti-Extractivism.” See: <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2014/05/19/dangerous-myths-anti-extractivism/>

<sup>2</sup> Jeffery R. Webber, “From Rebellion to Reform: Image and Reality in the Bolivia of Evo Morales,” *International Socialist Review*, 73; Nancy Postero and Devin Beaulieu, “Bolivia: The Politics of Extractivism,” <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/bolivia-archives-31/4536-bolivia-the-politics-of-extractivism>

<sup>3</sup> McGill Research Group Investigating Canadian Mining in Latin America (MICLA). See: [http://micla.ca/conflicts/mirador-proyecto-panantza-san-carlos/#\\_edn2](http://micla.ca/conflicts/mirador-proyecto-panantza-san-carlos/#_edn2)

<sup>4</sup> One of these came in the editorial “Toward Cyborg Socialism” *Jacobin Magazine*. See: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/toward-cyborg-socialism/>

<sup>5</sup> Marc Becker, “The Children of 1990” *Alternatives* 35 (2010), 291-316

<sup>6</sup> See: Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995)

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Gudynas, “Buen Vivir: Today’s Tomorrow,” *Development* 2011, 54 (4), 441-447

<sup>8</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995)

<sup>9</sup> McGill Research Group Investigating Canadian Mining in Latin America (MICLA). See: <http://micla.ca/conflicts/quimsacocha/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.miningwatch.ca/news/ecuadorian-communities-welcome-iamgold-s-retreat-warn-inv-metals-there-s-no-social-licence>

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Zaitchik, *Correa Sells Ecuador to Gold Mining, Indigenous Vow Fight to Death*. See: <http://www.popularresistance.org/correa-sells-ecuador-to-gold-mining-indigenous-vow-to-fight-to-death/>

<sup>12</sup> James Rodriguez, *Southwest Antioquia: Microcosm of Social Conflict in Colombia’s New Gold Rush*. See: <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/colombia-archives-61/4642-southwest-antioquia-microcosm-of-social-conflict-in-colombias-new-gold-rush>