

Environment, Politics and Governance in Latin America

Review Essay by Karen M. Siegel

- *Environmental Governance in Latin America*, edited by Fábio de Castro, Barbara Hogenboom, and Michiel Baud. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-50572-9>
- *Environmental Politics in Latin America: Elite Dynamics, the Left Tide and Sustainable Development*, edited by Benedicte Bull and Mariel Aguilar-Støen. Routledge, 2015.
- *A Fragmented Continent: Latin America and the Global Politics of Climate Change*, by Guy Edwards and J. Timmons Roberts. MIT Press, 2015.
- *Ecuador's Environmental Revolutions: Ecoimperialists, Ecodependents, and Ecoresisters*, by Tammy L. Lewis. MIT Press, 2016.

Environmental governance in Latin America is not a topic that is particularly high on policy agendas in Latin America, Europe or elsewhere, but it deserves the attention of researchers and policy-makers for at least two important reasons. Within Latin America environmental governance is closely related to one of the region's most fundamental questions and policy dilemmas, that is, how to achieve inclusive and sustainable social and economic development. In addition, how Latin American countries address environmental concerns is also highly relevant outside the region.

As several of these authors remind us, a large part of the world's natural resources are found in Latin America, including about a quarter of the planet's arable land and just over a fifth of its forest area as well as considerable fossil fuel reserves (Edwards & Roberts, pp. 17, 169, in *A Fragmented Continent*; Sejenovich, p. 186, in *Environmental Governance*). How these natural resources are managed is a crucial factor in terms of whether global climate targets can be achieved, but at the same time natural resource governance is strongly shaped by consumer demands in Asia, Europe and North America.

Environmental governance in Latin America is therefore the outcome of complex and often contradictory domestic and global political, social and eco-

conomic factors, which are examined in the four books reviewed here. The first two books focus on the domestic politics of environmental governance in the current political context while the third book examines how Latin American countries position themselves internationally in the climate change negotiations. The fourth book analyses the evolution of environmental movements in Ecuador, arguably one of the most complex and contradictory cases in the region, over a time period of four decades.

Four different perspectives on environmental governance

Of the four books, *Environmental Governance in Latin America* edited by Fábio de Castro, Barbara Hogenboom and Michiel Baud has the broadest scope in bringing together the findings of a four-year research project on environmental governance in Latin America and the Caribbean (ENGOV) involving a team of experts from ten academic institutions in Latin America and Europe. This open access book provides an excellent overview of different debates, approaches and conflicts that shape environmental governance in Latin America through a collection of different case studies from various Latin American countries as well as discussions of overarching topics, such as the evolution of environmentalism in Latin America (chapter 1), the nature of resource conflicts (chapter 2), the strategies that Latin American countries have adopted towards REDD, the contested global mechanism designed to reduce deforestation by offering economic compensation for forest conservation (chapter 8), or community consultations in response to large-scale metal mining projects (chapter 11).

The introductory chapter provides the context by setting out the social and political developments that have shaped recent trends in environmental governance in Latin America. The editors outline how this has been shaped by two contrasting models. The first is a trend they call *neodesarrollismo* (new developmentalism) which is prevalent amongst policy circles of most Latin American governments and which focuses on technological solutions and market-based mechanisms. This is closely related to the globally dominant ‘green economy’ approach and seeks to work within the existing economic structures. Opposing this is a radically different model which the authors capture under the label of ‘buen vivir’ (good living). Drawing on indigenous ideas this includes alternative conceptions of nature and relations between humans and nature. This view is highly critical of the hegemonic capitalist model which it regards as the origin of environmental problems and injustice. This framework is helpful to position and compare various approaches to environmental governance in Latin America, but as the authors also note, reality is often more complex and in practice Latin American governments have often adopted aspects of both models.

Environmental Politics in Latin America is another edited volume that is an outcome of the ENGOV project. However, it seeks to examine a more specific

aspect of environmental governance and offers a valuable and topical analysis of how elite dynamics and sustainable development have evolved with the election of a wave of leftist governments across Latin America during the 2000s. As the editors Benedicte Bull and Mariel Aguilar-Støen set out in the first chapter, elite dynamics are closely related to environmental governance because since colonial times elites have maintained their position in part by securing control of land, minerals, water, oil, gas and forests. At the same time elites have had close ties with foreign companies and organizations and elite control over key natural resources has been closely related to Latin America's insertion into the global political economy as an exporter of raw materials to other parts of the world. As a result distribution and access to natural resources are often at the heart of socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America and have frequently pitted indigenous peoples, small farmers and other marginalized groups against local, national and transnational elites. Not surprisingly then, the election of leftist governments across Latin America, in many cases emerging from social movements, raised expectations that natural resource governance would change significantly. It is against this background that the book analyses the role of different types of elites in relation to the production of social order through the environment and natural resources.

Following two introductory chapters setting out the context and framework the book is structured by different resource sectors and examines agriculture and biotechnology, mining and forestry. The findings are also highly relevant for those interested in Latin American politics more generally and uncover how old and new domestic and international elites have shaped domestic politics in various countries under progressive governments. The editors conclude in the final chapter that 'the picture is very mixed' (Bull & Aguilar-Støen, p. 206) regarding the extent to which new ways of relating to nature and finding more sustainable forms of production have been realized. On the one hand, new elite groups with an environmental background have emerged and there has also been an elite reorientation with more attention paid to the views of subalterns. Yet, these positive changes are limited by the capitalist economy, the need for new state elites to strengthen states and the history of elitist politics.

A Fragmented Continent offers a shift away from domestic politics to an analysis of the engagement of Latin American countries with the international climate change negotiations. Based on the authors' attendance of the UN climate change negotiations over a period of more than ten years as well as conferences on climate change held in Latin America and over 60 formal and informal interviews with negotiators from nearly every Latin American country, the book provides a unique and insightful analysis of the often unpredictable and inconsistent ways in which Latin American countries have shaped the global negotiations on climate change and sought to address climate change domestically.

The authors Guy Edwards and J. Timmons Roberts argue that in particular four key factors have been crucial in shaping climate policies; nature, that is

the natural resources of the region, but also the region's vulnerability to climate change; approaches to development; foreign policy including regional cooperation as well as international alliances and trade; and civil society initiatives in relation to climate change. As the title of the book suggests, Latin America has not presented a uniform approach to climate change. Instead the region has been marked by fragmentation and often unpredictable and inconsistent climate policies. Different and sometimes contradictory approaches are evident between distinct countries and regional blocs within Latin America presented in chapters 3-5. Regional power Brazil has often displayed a 'bewildering behaviour at the negotiations' (p. 69) and the authors conclude that, notwithstanding some efforts to the contrary, Brazil is more of a climate spoiler than a climate leader. The position of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Alba) examined in chapter 4 contrasts with the approach taken by Mexico and the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC) presented in chapter 5. In many ways this reflects the division noted by de Castro, Hogenboom and Baud in terms of working within existing capitalist structures, which is the position taken by the AILAC group and Mexico, and a strong criticism of these structures, a position taken by Alba.

The book also makes an important contribution to the emerging research agenda on the domestic origins of approaches to climate change in countries in the global South that have historically received little attention or been analysed mostly as a bloc in opposition to the global North. The different and sometimes conflicting positions between Latin American countries highlight the importance of looking beyond the North-South divide to develop a more nuanced analysis of various countries and contexts.

The fourth book, *Ecuador's Environmental Revolutions* is the narrowest in scope and examines one of the most puzzling cases of the left tide countries. Based on three periods of fieldwork and interviews between 1994 and 2013 as well as document analysis and an organizational survey of environmental NGOs, the author Tammy L. Lewis examines the evolution of environmental movements in Ecuador since the late 1970s. For a better understanding of changes over time and differences between groups, she develops a typology of environmental organizations. This distinguishes 'ecoimperialist', 'ecodependent', 'ecoresistant' and 'ecoentrepreneur' groups with key differences in sources of funding and organization, main actors, objectives and types of projects and relationships with the state and the Ecuadorian public. The first group describes professional conservationists with their home offices situated in the global North, which are often viewed as foreign intruders imposing their will and agendas and interfering with domestic policies and approaches to development. The second group includes professional environmental organizations that receive funding from the global North, and for this reason they are sometimes viewed with scepticism by Ecuadorians. The third group, 'ecoresistants', are very different in all of these respects and oppose the dominant development

model. They consist of volunteers and relatively few paid staff and do not receive much international funding which gives them more autonomy over their agendas. Finally, operating within market-based structures, ‘ecoentrepreneurs’ are funded locally through service fees and include technicians and financial professionals as the main actors.

Over the four following chapters Lewis traces the evolution of environmental movements up to the period that she fittingly calls the ‘rise of the paradoxical state’ (p. 163) since President Rafael Correa came to power. Lewis’ in-depth analysis of the struggle between development and conservation and the tensions between groups and priorities from the global North and those based in Ecuador is highly relevant also for other parts of Latin America and beyond and her typology of environmental movements provides a valuable tool to make comparisons between different cases.

Achievements, challenges and contradictions

Taken together the four books clearly demonstrate two key issues; first how environmental governance intersects with economic, and more importantly, social development in Latin America; and second how closely the complex issues of achieving sustainable development in Latin America is tied to the region’s position in the global political economy and recent changes in relation to this. The first issue became particularly thorny when it became clear that in the context of the commodity boom of the first decade of the millennium, leftist governments expanded natural resource exploitation and used the more favourable economic context for putting in place social programmes that were important in reducing poverty and social exclusion (de Castro, Hogenboom, & Baud, p. 8; and Sejenovich, p. 187, in *Environmental Governance*; Edwards & Roberts, pp. 33-34, in *A Fragmented Continent*; Lewis, p. 166, in *Ecuador’s Environmental Revolutions*).

The 2000s were thus termed the ‘Latin American decade’ (Edwards & Roberts, 2015, p. 33), but the reprimarization of economies is a risky strategy as recent decreases in commodity prices have already demonstrated, and increasingly intensive and extensive resource exploitation has come at the cost of a rise in socio-environmental conflicts and environmental degradation affecting disproportionately poorer and marginalized communities (Martinez-Alier & Walter, p. 79, in *Environmental Governance*). The contradictions of this neo-extractivist development model are evident in all four books, whether in Alba’s emphasis on climate justice and simultaneous reliance on fossil fuels (Edwards & Roberts, pp. 101-134, in *A Fragmented Continent*), the extension of GM production under progressive governments in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador (Andrade & Zenteno Hopp; Høiby & Zenteno Hopp; and Zenteno Hopp, Hanche-Olsen, & Sejenovich, in *Environmental Politics*) or the suppression of environmental activists by the Ecuadorian government which simultaneously maintains a discourse of ‘buen vivir’ (Lewis, pp. 163-194, in *Ecuador’s Envi-*

ronmental Revolutions). The neo-extractivist development model constitutes an important overarching factor in environmental governance in Latin America over the past 15 years and ‘accounts for hopes dashed’ (Silva, p. 328, in *Environmental Governance*). With the election of centre-right Mauricio Macri as president of Argentina at the end of 2015, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil in 2016 and an ongoing political and economic crisis in Venezuela, the left tide in Latin America is suffering a series of setbacks, but we can expect intensive resource exploitation to continue.

However, beyond these general trends the four books also uncover a diversity of experiences in different locations, including many encouraging examples. Costa Rica has often been praised as a leader on conservation and climate change due to its track record in reforestation and its energy matrix with 90 per cent of its electricity coming from renewable sources, although tensions with economic growth are also evident in this Central American nation (Edwards & Roberts, pp. 152-157, in *A Fragmented Continent*). Moreover, there are important differences within countries and between different levels of governance which indicate that Latin American states cannot be regarded as unitary actors. In Brazil and Argentina for example, the federal system gives significant autonomy to the federal states or provinces. In this context innovative environmental policies have gained ground in the Brazilian states of Acre and Amazonas despite a series of setbacks in environmental policy at the national level in the same time period (Toni, Villarroel, & Taitson Bueno, in *Environmental Politics*). In Argentina, Guatemala, Colombia and Peru local governments have often played an important role in supporting community consultations on mining (Walter & Urkidi, in *Environmental Governance*).

Nevertheless, crucial questions remain in particular with regards to access to decision-making and the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. This mirrors broader debates over economic and political inequality in Latin America. Some Latin American leaders, particularly in the Andean countries of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, have made efforts to embed alternative approaches to nature in new constitutions and, often vociferously, stressed the need for environmental and climate justice and a different approach to development (Andrade, p. 129, in *Environmental Governance*; Edwards & Roberts, p. 103, in *A Fragmented Continent*; Lewis, pp. 176-180, in *Ecuador’s Environmental Revolutions*). However, the main impact of this has been more to highlight the weaknesses of market-based mechanisms within the green economy approach, than in transforming the practices of environmental governance within Latin American countries.

This is perhaps not surprising given the region’s position in the global political economy, a position that, as several authors point out (Barkin & Lemus, p. 257, and Silva, p. 328, in *Environmental Governance*; Edwards & Roberts, p. 36, in *A Fragmented Continent*; Lewis, p. 3, in *Ecuador’s Environmental Revolutions*), is for the most part a subordinate and comparatively weak position although there are important differences between different Latin American

countries. The colonial conquest not only established Latin America as a provider of primary commodities for other parts of the world, a position that is highly vulnerable economically and has significant socio-environmental impacts, but also shaped social and racial relations for centuries (Bull & Aguilar-Støen, p. 1, in *Environmental Politics*) as well as perspectives on environmentalism (Martinez-Alier, Baud, & Sejenovich, in *Environmental Governance*). Relations with countries outside the region are of course evolving and all books draw attention to this, highlighting in particular the impact of the rise of China. In many sectors rising demand from China has driven commodity prices up and led to increased resource exploitation in Latin America, but politically the new trading partner and investor has also provided Latin American governments with a greater room to manoeuvre and decreased the dependency on North American and European institutions and governments (Bull & Aguilar-Støen, p. 211, in *Environmental Politics*). Whether and how Latin American countries can achieve sustainable development is therefore determined not only by domestic politics, but is also closely linked to decisions and approaches taken by political and economic actors in other parts of the world. This also means that contradictions are evident not only in Latin America, but also on the part of governments, consumers and corporations outside the region, many of whom are concerned about socio-environmental problems and climate change, but slow in adapting their economies, business models and lifestyles accordingly.

The findings from the four books thus point to the impacts of political and economic changes at the global level on environmental governance in Latin America as an important avenue for further research. Taken together the books also demonstrate gaps in the geographical coverage of existing research that are also reflected in other edited collections (Bebbington, 2012; Haarstad, 2012; Latta & Wittman, 2012; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014). In particular, it is noteworthy that there are very few studies on environmental governance in Venezuela. As Edwards and Roberts point out (Edwards & Roberts, p. 104, in *A Fragmented Continent*) it is intriguing that an oil exporter should take a radical stance on climate justice, yet there are hardly any academic or policy discussions about this. Similarly, reflecting the country's longstanding isolation, Paraguay is rarely mentioned. Yet, the impeachment in 2012 of the country's former president, Fernando Lugo, uncovered how significant and contested environmental governance and land rights in particular are in Paraguayan politics. Moreover, the murders of a number of Honduran activists, including winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize Berta Cáceres in March 2016, clearly demonstrate that socio-environmental justice is an urgent concern in the Central American country that deserves more attention. Without a doubt these are challenging topics to research, but hopefully future research can build on the excellent contributions of the recent studies reviewed here in order to further advance our understanding of Latin American environmental governance.

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 — 'Conclusion: with or against elites? How to move towards more sustainable environmental governance in Latin America' (pp. 206-213);
 Høiby, M., & Zenteno Hopp, J., 'Bolivia: emerging and traditional elites and the governance of the soy sector' (pp. 51-70);
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