

Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

Beyond Conflict and Struggle: The Continued Appeal of Extractivism in Latin America

Book Review Essay by Into A. Goudsmit

- *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia*, by Michael Cepek. University of Texas Press, 2018.
- *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*, edited by Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- *Governing Extractive Industries: Politics, Histories, Ideas*, by Anthony Bebbington, Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, Denise Humphreys Bebbington, Marja Hinfelaar, and Cynthia A. Sanborn. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- *Naturaleza, extractivismos y corrupción: anatomía de una íntima relación*, by Eduardo Gudynas. CLAES, La Libre, 2018.

In its recent July-December 2018 issue, ERLACS celebrated its first Special Collection with a timely compilation of articles on ‘Mega-Projects, Contentious Action, and Policy Change in Latin America.’ Many mega-projects are directly or indirectly related to the extractive industries. The guest editors of this issue assert local protest and resistance against these projects and extractivism have generated abundant scholarly interest, arguing for the need of a shift of attention. While a previous ERLACS review article on natural resource extraction in Latin America discussed three books that had either ‘struggles’ or ‘conflict’ in their titles (Hogenboom, 2015), the guest editors suggest focusing on what impact such social resistance may have had on national policies and government institutions regulating mega-development projects, and why this impact has varied in Latin America (Silva, Akchurin & Bebbington, 2018).

The four books that are presented here, each in their own way, also look beyond protest and resistance addressing extractivism in Latin America. Such an approach, though, does not necessarily mean following the often-expressed

theoretical urge to scale up analysis from the local to the national and international levels to fully comprehend the workings and effects of the extractive industries. In his beautifully crafted monograph, *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia*, Michael Cepek shows resistance against extractivism can only be understood by taking the local even more seriously; that is, by studying the encounter between local groups and the extractive industries without an analytical framework that is necessarily defined by conflict, dominance and resistance. Similarly, the chapters collected by Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía in the book *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*, aim at providing insights into local understandings of extractivism, nature and land to recognise the complex local engagements with these industries resulting in both resistance and collaboration.

On the other hand, Anthony Bebbington and his colleagues (in *Governing Extractive Industries: Politics, Histories, Ideas*) and Eduardo Gudynas (in *Naturalaleza, extractivismos y corrupción: anatomía de una íntima relación*) take their studies beyond protest and resistance by leaving the local level, presenting intriguing research on the dominant groups in Latin America that have been able to take advantage of the booms in natural resource extraction. Bebbington and his fellow authors focus on the political and ideational strategies of subnational and national elites, while Gudynas uses the study of extractivism to shine new light on corruption in Latin America.

Life in oil, rather than against or with oil

Michael Cepek's *Life in Oil* centres on the Cofán people of Amazonian Ecuador, living close to the urban centre of Lago Agrio (Nueva Loja). This city grew out of the Texaco base camp (Texas Petroleum Company) since the early 1970s and became the centre of Ecuador's oil industry. The Cofán people are probably best known for their participation as plaintiffs in a transnational lawsuit against Chevron – which bought Texaco in 2001 – that has moved back and forth between Ecuador and the United States since 1993, seeking compensation for the billions of gallons of oil that leaked onto their lands and into their rivers, and the additional pollution by toxic substances and billions of cubic feet of burned natural gas. In 2016, a US Courts of Appeals judged in favour of Chevron but the case might well go to the US Supreme Court.

Life in Oil graphically starts with the author himself experiencing a major oil spill contrasting his own feelings of disgust and outrage with Cofán people bathing in a crude-tinged river. This experience instantiates a local attitude that is vitally different from external activist (and scholarly) perceptions of a place ravaged by oil conflict. Oil is usually far removed from Cofán people's minds, ignoring its dangers and lessons learnt. One of the most illuminating scenes of the book is Cofán men discussing hunting in the forest: "Although Cofán people have trouble remembering how many oil spills they witnessed on a certain

river, they can report with certainty how many animals they killed on a single hunting trip that occurred fifty years earlier. They can also remember the sexes and ages of the animals, their reproductive states, and the taste and thickness of their fat” (pp. 134-135). Hunting is central to what the Cofán people think make them into full (human) beings; not oil or the resistance against it. Because of the oil industry they may not be able anymore to sustain the intensity and frequency of valued practices such as hunting, fishing, collective house-building and the weeding of gardens, but they still have a strong sense of themselves expressed in a vibrant native language.

The absence of theoretical explorations in the book draws attention, as Cepek has actively contributed to (the critique of) the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. It stands in contrast to the theoretical ambitions of the books by Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía, and Anthony Bebbington and colleagues that I will discuss. It is almost as if Cepek wants to avoid theoretical discussions, for the reader to take the Cofán people seriously; to try to listen to what they have to tell, detached from academic frameworks and interests. In doing so, he has produced a convincing and beautifully nuanced ethnographic study of an indigenous people who have suffered tremendously because of the oil industry, who have been internationally celebrated as one of the most vociferous opponents against extractivism, yet who at the same time have managed to continue their ‘life in oil’, without oil dominating their social experiences and cultural expressions.

Cepek tries to understand why it took the Cofán people nearly thirty years from the arrival of Texaco to organise their first act of resistance as they learned to experience oil as a threat that warranted a collective response (p. 169). More than pollution and exploitation, the Cofán experienced the oil industry as a social invasion by the *cocama*, nonindigenous Spanish speakers, since the rainforest was opened up by oil infrastructure, outboard motors and roads that facilitated the spread of agricultural settlements. And the Cofán people had good reasons to fear the *cocama* as soldiers, priests, rubber workers and Texaco employees brought violence and illnesses throughout Cofán history. What is more, resistance against oil required a radical experiential transformation because the Cofán language A’ingae does not have concepts for material ‘contamination’ and ‘protest’, and the Cofán conception of property of the land is alien to permanent claims and the ability to sell it: “How could anyone own the land per se? No one made the land. It would be like owning air or rain” (p. 114). It took a while for the Cofán to realise illness and death could be truly material phenomena caused by oil, and that the forest exists because people can and must protect it.

The historical relations with *cocama* also explain why the Cofán people have a very hard time accepting that nonindigenous settlers, living around the Texaco (Chevron) oil spills and contamination, may receive compensation from the Chevron court case. This suit has been filed on behalf of thirty thousand Amazonians, the majority of whom are *cocama*. “To think that *cocama*

suffering is equivalent to Cofán suffering makes little sense to most... [Cofán] residents” (p. 194). For the Cofán, oil is *cocama*. Similarly, Cofán experiences of *cocama* undermine political alliances with outsiders such as NGOs that fight oil and try to save the rainforest. Progressive, goodhearted and well-willing or not, these outsiders are invariably *cocama* whose ulterior motives the Cofán people distrust. Accordingly, social mobilisation and national alliances will always be fraught hampering national policy change and state reform. It could not have come as a complete surprise that in 2013 the Cofán decided to allow oil exploration on their lands.

Remaining local

Michael Cepek is a source of inspiration for the authors of *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*, edited by Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía. He is cited in six of the book’s ten chapters, almost exclusively his relatively recent article criticising the turn to ontology in anthropology (Cepek, 2016). *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism* is a self-proclaimed exploration of the ontological differences between the propagators of extractivism (in the widest sense) and the local groups faced by the extractive efforts, mostly but not exclusively indigenous peoples. The editors make the case that such ontological differences inform native responses to the extractive industries (p. 27), urging scholars to focus on the micropolitics and perspectives that emanate from the local level. The introduction to this edited volume (chapter 1) provides a refreshingly clear summary of the ontology debate. Subsequently, the book turns to one of the central tenets of this debate: a reconsideration of the relationship between humans and the material world (nature) whose dualism is inherent to Western capitalism and which might differ from the ‘world- and life-making projects’ indigenous people (re)produce. The different ways in which they interact with the nonhuman environment determine local engagement with the extractivist enterprise, and complicate or facilitate wider political alliances.

Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism performs a successful balancing act presenting a series of rich and well-written chapters on local experiences of extractivism in Latin America whose analysis is deepened by ontological reflections, without becoming overburdened by theory. In one of these chapters, *In the Spirit of Oil*, Stine Krøijer directly addresses Cepek’s critique of the anthropological interest in ontological questions whose intellectual pursuit, according to him and others, overemphasises alterity, romanticises indigenous resistance and leads to a disregard of the subtleties and complexity of ethnographic research material (pp. 7, 106). Krøijer has conducted research among the Secoya (or Sieko-pai) in Ecuadorian Amazonia, an indigenous people that lives downriver from the Cofán and whom Cepek mentions in *Life in Oil* as sources of shamanic powers. In contrast to Cepek’s arguments, she finds that menstrual blood, oil, and other unintended flows (such as contaminated pro-

duction water, money, people, and other beings) show the same characteristics of leakiness, according to the Secoya, and therefore need to be handled with equal diligence. “Unintended and uncontrolled flows can, in the case of oil and blood, have disastrous effects...” (p. 107). It is this extended experience of leakiness, Krøijer argues, that shows ontological differences between outsiders and indigenous research participants, explaining the Secoya people’s particular engagement with the (Chinese) oil industry. It would be interesting to know whether Michael Cepek could agree.

Juan Javier Rivera Andía’s *The Silent ‘Cosmopolitics’ of Artefacts* is probably the most fascinating chapter and, for its schematic approach, maybe also most prone to be queried. As a photo of a large, old, impressive adobe church suggests (p. 176), this Catholic temple, *Iglisya*, has been at the centre of indigenous history and community in the Cañaris area of the Peruvian Andes. Indigenous people built it clandestinely in the eighteenth century as one of their strategies to control and defend their lands against large-scale local landowners. During these struggles *Iglisya* became a local experience of a nonhuman entity that actively reproduces the relations between indigenous people and their lands. It is a material device that administers the distribution of land among indigenous communities (e.g., the distribution of the church’s roof surface is analogous to the distribution of land among kinship groups); it is a living being that generates life (e.g., in lands); and it is an infant figure in need of human care (e.g., as shown by the roofing rituals of the church, similar to those of an indigenous child’s first haircut). Rivera Andía argues that these mutually constitutive relations in which the lands are engaged, contrasts with notions of ‘ownership’ of the land that are usually involved in natural resource extractivism.

The book ends with two chapters discussing ‘indigeneity’ which, interestingly, distance themselves somewhat from the ontology debate by focusing on particular instances of indigenous resistance to extractivism. Fabiana Li and Adriana Paola Paredes Peñafiel study the internationalisation of the successful resistance against the extension of the huge Peruvian Yanacocha mine in northern Peru (the Conga project), through the international media, documentaries and activist networks. In line with critique on the scholarly attention to ontological difference, they argue that the respect for nonhumans (nature) – as fellow living beings – that is often expressed by indigenous leaders and international spokespersons does not reflect indigenous or peasant cosmology. “Rather, it exemplifies the coproduction of knowledge – influenced partly by local practices, indigenous practices from other parts of the country (such as the Southern Andes), and widespread discourses on indigeneity – in response to the threat of extractive activity” (p. 226). It is national and international coverage of major extractive conflicts that promotes such ‘indigeneity’, presenting protestors and communities as indigenous which might normally not identify as such (p. 238). Eventually some leaders may do so filling the ‘indigenous peoples’ or ‘tribal slot’ enhancing (inter)national networks and political possi-

bilities (Li, 2000). In the case of Bolivia, Nicole Fabricant and Nancy Postero argue, in the last chapter of the book, that the self-proclaimed indigenous government of Bolivia and indigenous movements present competing performances of the ‘virtuous’ or ‘good Indian,’ creating opposing conceptions of indigeneity that go beyond the life experiences in local communities and wider environmental concerns. Studying the TIPNIS protests, they reveal the performative details of contested Bolivian indigeneity, suggesting an alternative theoretical framework in the process.

Theoretical inspiration

Governing Extractive Industries: Politics, Histories, Ideas is one of the latest research projects in which Anthony Bebbington has been involved, and shows the versatility of the study of national resource extraction for theoretical explorations. This scholarly venture could hardly have been more distinct from *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism*, yet both ably steer their research clear from an analytical framework restricted by a focus on social and political resistance against extractivism. Where Vindal Ødegaard, Rivera Andía and co-authors remain mostly local, understanding the encounter with the extractive industries in indigenous terms (except for last two chapters on indigeneity), Bebbington and colleagues draw attention to subnational and national elites, and transnational actors. Their understanding of the politics of resource extraction takes them to a ‘political settlements’ approach informed by economists such as Douglass North and Mushtaq Khan. Such an approach examines the competition and shifting coalitions between elites, and suggests that the state of these political struggles defines the quality and capacities of the institutions they create or undermine, to deliver national development, including social inclusion and economic diversification and transformation. Bebbington *cum suis* eloquently enhance this theoretical framework based on their intricate knowledge of the extractive industries in Latin America and Africa.

The five authors of *Governing Extractive Industries* have produced an intriguing comparative analysis of the extractive industries in Bolivia, Ghana, Peru and Zambia, each covering a separate chapter. The final chapter brings the four case studies together, providing an instructive discussion of political settlements framework in light of research on natural resource extraction. Acknowledging the common lack of a historical perspective in political settlements analyses, the authors present the experiences of extractivism in the respective countries from the end of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries onward. They show how elites in countries with abundant natural resources become powerful and decline over time, explaining changing political settlements. They emphasise the analytical importance of ideas (both national memories and globally circulating development ideas), the materiality of extractivism, its scale and its geographical place. Natural resource extraction is bound to a specific place that may foster the power of the respective subnational elites of

these places to bargain with other elites buttressing their position at the national level. As the introductory chapter of the book states: "... there is nothing inherently 'national' about 'national' elites" (p. 13). Moreover, as the complexity and scale of the specific extractive projects increase, transnational companies, institutions, norms and ideas are more likely to be involved in the extractive activities, which will have effects on the political settlements of the countries where these actions take place.

Researchers who apply a political settlements approach tend to distinguish two distinct settlements. On the one hand, they identify 'competitive clientelist' settlements in which no elite pact manages to dominate the national state. This implies, it is argued, that elites are inclined to distribute the spoils of natural resource extraction to secure clientelist alliances. In this situation, investments in structural social and economic transformations are irregular and mostly inconsistent. On the other hand, political settlements can be clearly dominated by a specific elite (leader, party). Here, such an elite pact does not feel the need continuously to distribute extractive industry revenues and can focus more productively on strengthening institutions to implement its vision for development. However, the data from the four country studies do not sustain a causal link between type of political settlement and (lack of) systemic transformation. The book shows that in Bolivia, Zambia and, to a lesser extent, in Peru, the competitive clientelist political settlements of the second half of the 1980s to the mid-1990s have resulted in coherent transformational policies in the extractive sector and the economy as a whole (p. 212). Furthermore, major increases in social spending by a progressive government in Bolivia and conservative administrations in Peru in that period, successfully reduced poverty rates in both countries (pp. 213-214). The authors conclude, therefore, that a political settlement framework is descriptive rather than explanatory.

As Bebbington and collaborators discover that the principal productive structures over the past century or so, did not change much in countries that have historically relied on the extractive industries despite shifting political settlements, they explore, what they call, the 'meta-settlements' that express this continuity (pp. 217-218). The experiences of the four studied countries indicate that these meta-settlements are above all explained by a national 'imaginary of subsoil wealth' that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as elites become obsessed with capturing these rents instead of imagining alternatives of economic diversification. In addition, the shifting geographical centres of major extractivist enterprise (e.g., from silver mining to tin mining to gas in Bolivia) empower everchanging subnational elites. This process obstructs the formation of stable, powerful national coalitions of elites that may share a coherent national development strategy. "Natural resource-dependent economies may tend to foster political splintering more than alliance" (p. 218).

If there were anything the authors may have been able to disentangle with more attention, it might have been the specific relationships among elites, the tools of their mutual bargaining, and their capacities to form alliances (which

are at the heart of political settlements approaches); to make the (sub)national methodologically local as it were, with the aim to gain a better understanding of the shifting political settlements. In the case of Peru, critical elite struggles seem to be hidden from view by homogenising terms such as ‘technocrats,’ ‘private business,’ ‘private capital,’ ‘certain private interest groups,’ ‘industrialists,’ and ‘private sector elites.’ In the Bolivian case, a short analysis of contemporary emerging elites could have generated interest in the illegal drug trade and the commercial success of sections of the Aymara population in the city of El Alto. A focus on the extractive industries restricts such analysis although elites related to these sectors are critical to the present political settlement in the country.

Corruption

In *Naturaleza, extractivismos y corrupción: anatomía de una íntima relación*, Eduardo Gudynas leads us to one of the less productive mechanisms for elites to distribute the rewards of extractivism when competing for allies and political power: corruption. The book scrutinises the connection between extractivism and corruption in Latin America, studying a total of 139 cases. Less and well-known instances of corruption are discussed and clarified, such as Petrobras (*lava jato*), Odebrecht and Soquimich, but also the Uruguayan state oil company ANCAP, Barrick Gold in Argentina and the Indigenous Fund in Bolivia; to name but a few. He distinguishes ‘progressive extractivisms’ (in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela) and ‘re-adjusted conservative extractivisms’ (in Colombia, Chile, Paraguay and Peru). The former is differentiated by more government regulation, some progressive tax reforms and direct involvement of state companies, while the latter continues promoting foreign investment and market friendly laws and regulations. However, the adjustments by more conservative governments have included the implementation and extension of public social programming and corporate social responsibility schemes. As progressive and conservative regimes have prioritised economic growth that includes – or is dominated by – the export of extractive resources, Gudynas concludes that practices of corruption under both types of extractive development are similar (p. 40). The author’s disillusionment is most evident when he discusses the corruption of left-leaning governments and parties, and some social and indigenous leaders. Indeed, analysing corruption he does not find substantial differences between social actors either, or between stages of extractivist development, public or private ownership, and provenance of foreign companies.

The intimate relation between extractivism and corruption has a long historical trajectory in Latin America. All the same, some new trends have become apparent. Gudynas suggests the systemic involvement of political parties in practices of corruption is one such trend, channelling funds to party structures, political campaigns, bribes for legislators etc. Previously, a single politician,

mayor or company might have been corrupt, generating money for personal or commercial gain. More recently, corruption has become a regular and organised form of revenue collection by state agencies and political parties to maintain political control (pp. 76-77, 111-112). Subsequently, the recent fall in world prices of several primary goods – after a relatively long spell of abundant wealth generation – has increased the competition for scarcer revenues among the state, political parties, shareholders, construction companies etc. generating conflicts that may have led to the revealing of ever more and bigger corruption scandals (pp. 67, 130). Gudynas argues the huge capital investments that the latest mega-projects need, the extremely high profits they generate, and the extraordinary social and environmental problems they cause, makes such enterprises most prone to corruption. The high number of corruption cases that have been revealed for large open-pit mines and intrusive oil exploration and exploitation activities in the Amazon, seem to show that such projects can only be approved with the help of illegal flows of money (pp. 177-178). Accordingly, a vicious circle is created in which extractivisms create increasingly extensive networks of corruption that need ever more funds to be sustained, which require ever larger extractive investments creating opportunities to syphon off the swollen finances of corruption (pp. 180-181).

In her ethnographic chapter in *Indigenous Life Projects and Extractivism*, Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard describes the experiences of small-scale smugglers in Peru who trade contraband fuels which they bring in from Bolivia. In a short but graphic discussion of local practices of corruption, she explains how these smugglers associate bribes with gifts (e.g., to mountain gods) and how they perceive as disrespectful public functionaries who refuse to accept bribes (p. 130). One will not find such cultural analysis in Gudynas' book. One will not find many answers to questions about the peculiarities of corruption in the extractive industries either, and whether or how this corruption may differ from graft in other sectors. *Naturaleza, extractivismos y corrupción* is an elegant, straight forward study of the politics and economics that explain the close relationship between extractivism and corruption in Latin America.

Beyond conflict and struggle

As they manage to go beyond mere conflict and political struggle, the four books here presented, show the study of natural resource extractivism is extremely productive in uncovering key societal dynamics and challenges in Latin America. On the one hand, the books provide evidence of the theoretical versatility extractivism engenders, enriching analytical frameworks as diverse as political settlements approaches and the ontological turn in anthropology. On the other hand, extractivism inspires empirical research that covers a wide variety of critical topics in Latin America today, from local perceptions of nature and minerals, to the impact of transnational ideas of development; from local incomprehension of capitalist exploitation, to elite manipulation of global

resource flows. As Sally Babidge argues for mining, the social analysis of extractivism addresses “many of the most compelling socio-ecological debates of our time” (2014).

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Into Goudsmit is an anthropologist at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has explored the ethnography and theory of ritual, cognitive models, mining, indian movements, development policy, land reform and the shifting relations between the state and its indigenous subjects resulting from decentralisation reforms and the politics of indigeneity.

Address: Goldsmiths College, University of London, 8 Lewisham Way, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom.

E-mail: i.goudsmit@gold.ac.uk

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