EXTRACTIVISM

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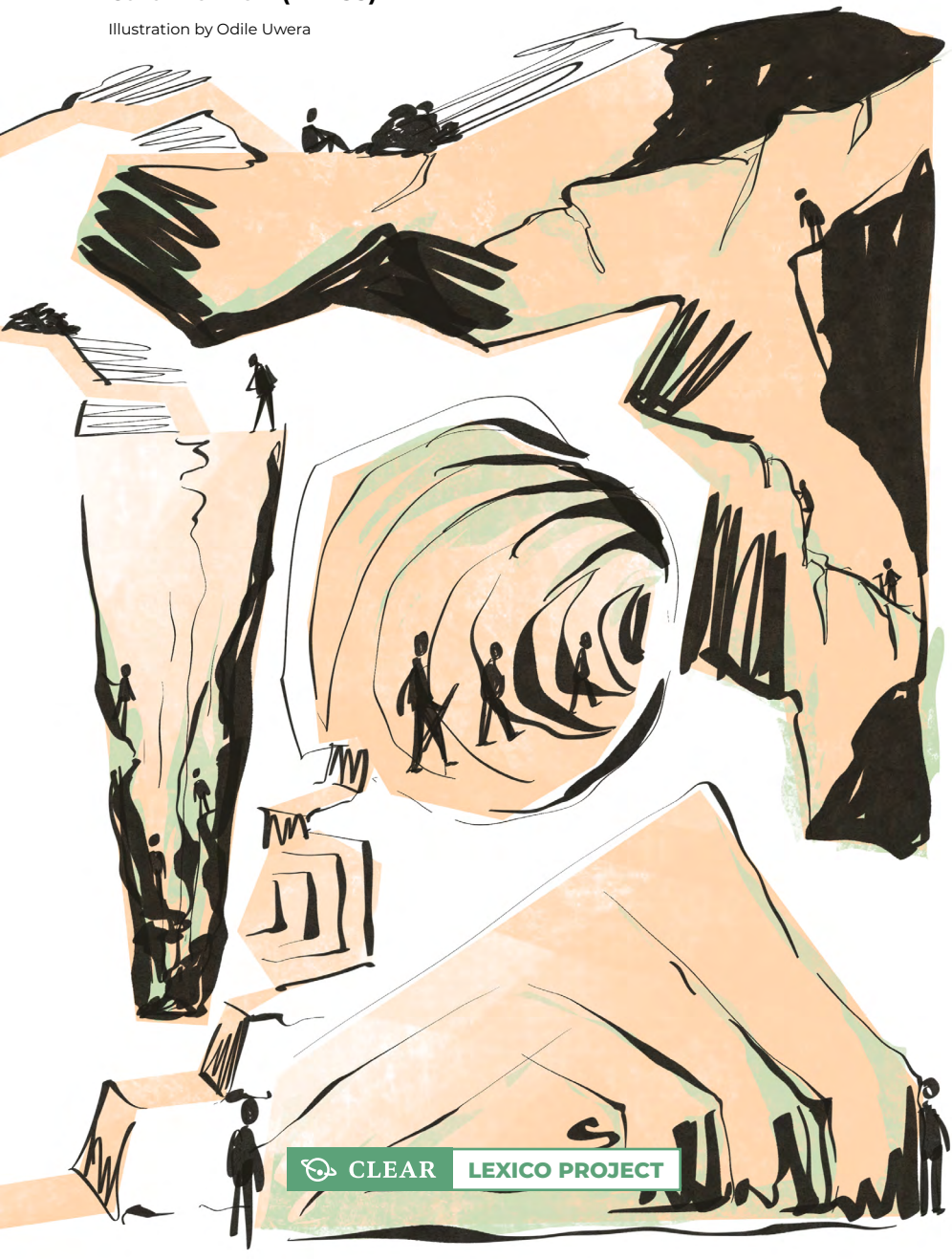

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EXTRACTIVISM

Maria Eugenia Robles Mengoa and Caroline Weill

The concept of extractivism, which originated in political ecology and decolonial studies, refers to a model of development based on the large-scale and intensive extraction of natural resources, often exported with minimal processing. For its proponents, extractivism is seen as inevitable and linked to the world's growing demand for raw materials. Critics, however, emphasize its major socio-economic impacts, such as the forced displacement of entire communities and severe environmental degradation in a context of asymmetrical globalization. Nevertheless, numerous ethnographic studies highlight the importance of clarifying this all-encompassing concept, to better understand the contradictions and heterogeneous dynamics of extractivism at the local level.

Concept

In 2018, Uruguay's Eduardo Gudynas defined extractivism as the "appropriation of natural resources in large volumes and/or high intensity, where half or more are exported as raw materials, without industrial processing or with limited processing". It involves the extraction, exploitation, and export of non-renewable resources (ore, oil, gas, agribusiness) as commodities. In some cases, it also includes the large-scale power generation projects that supply electricity to extractive companies.

The concept of extractivism was forged in the 1970s with the expansion of the mining and oil industries in the Latin American subcontinent. On the one hand, it was inspired by neo-Marxist

literature, especially David Harvey's concept of accumulation through dispossession. On the other hand, it is part of the decolonial movement. Horacio Machado, for example, analyzes colonial mining as a crucible for the development of the nation-state and modern capitalism. The concept also echoes historical works such as Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*, which traces the historical continuum of wealth appropriation by Western countries. Finally, it also aligns with the political ecology trend (Merino, 2019) by focusing on the socio-environmental consequences of extractive activities.

The relevant academic literature theorizes two main types of extractivism. The first is the "conservative" type, implemented by neoliberal regimes, in which companies are constrained only by the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The second is the "progressive" type, often referred to as neo-extractivism, implemented by left-wing governments such as that of Correa in Ecuador or Morales in Bolivia. The differences between the two types of extractivism can be seen at several levels, such as the role of the state, the profits generated by extractivism, and the methods of political legitimization.

However, the two types of extractivism share a number of common features. In both cases, local communities bear the brunt of the negative social and environmental consequences. These include the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity, pollution of soil, air, and water, and the depletion of water sources (Bebbington et al., 2007; Naoufal 2016). At the social level, extractivism leads to forced displacement, fragmentation of the social fabric, increases in crime, prostitution, drug trafficking, and corruption, and widening socio-economic inequalities (Downing, 2002; Farfan and Mamani, 2020). The erosion of democratic practices is another consequence of extractivism: these projects are often imposed without the consent of communities, and social control by transnational companies promotes the establishment of a corporate citizenship that distorts local democracy (Gustaffson, 2012).

Whether neo-liberal or progressive, the same rhetoric prevails in politics and the media: extractivism is said to be inevitable because the global demand for raw materials is constantly increasing and their extraction is therefore at the heart of national interests. As a result, any criticism or questioning of extractive activities is stigmatized as anti-modern or anti-national. The number of conflicts related to extractivism and its socio-environmental consequences is increasing. Social movements, peasants, and trade unions now face protean criminalization (police violence, arrests, prosecutions, assassinations of social leaders, etc.).

Maristella Svampa (2015) argues that there is an "extractivist paradigm" that serves as a development model. This model creates an "asymmetrical globalization", in which the export of low-cost raw materials from the global South and the import of manufactured goods from the North create an asymmetry in trade.

Given these common characteristics between neoliberal and progressive extractivism, Maristella Svampa (2015) argues that there is an "extractivist paradigm" that serves as a development model. This model creates an "asymmetrical globalization", in which the export of low-cost raw materials from the global South and the import of manufactured goods from the North create an asymmetry in trade (Svampa, 2015). For example, while the "energy transition" of high-income countries is based on "green" technologies (wind turbines, electric vehicles, etc.), the exploitation of natural resources to produce these technologies is increasing in the global South. At the same time, extractivism creates a series of imbalances for Latin American economies: it is the "resource curse" (Acosta, 2009) and the "Dutch disease" (Gudynas, 2018). Against this background, theorists of extractivism have tried to formulate "alternatives to development" and "post-extractive transitions" by exploring concepts such as Sumaq Kawsay or Buen Vivir, the rights of nature, common goods or spaces, the feminist economy of care, and so on.

However, several researchers have criticized this theoretical framework of extractivism. They argue that it fails to capture the nuances and specificities of certain local forms of extractivism, such as artisanal gold mining (Verbrugge and Besmanos, 2016). This overly generalized critical framework risks oversimplifying the socioeconomic dynamics and diverse perspectives within communities engaged in extractive activities. The focus on environmental issues and indigenous worldviews does not adequately address the economic needs of communities who often rely on informal mining as a livelihood strategy (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006). This theoretical framework therefore requires further refinement through fieldwork and empirical ethnography to better grasp the diverse realities of extractivism.

Case study

Peru is a perfect example to shed light on neoliberal extractivism (Merino, 2019), its complex socio-environmental and economic impacts, and the forms of protest against this model of development. Many researchers have studied how extractivism shapes Peru's economy, society, and natural environment (e.g., Bebbington *et al.* 2008, 2010; Dargent and Urteaga, 2016; Cisneros, 2016; de Echave, 2017; Merino 2019).

The government of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) marked a neoliberal turning point with structural adjustments inspired by the Washington Consensus and focused on liberalization, privatization, and deregulation (Bos and Lavrard-Meyer, 2015). These policies led to increased pressure on natural resources, positioning Peru among the world's leading mineral exporters (Neyra, 2017). According to Merino (2019), dependence on the export of raw materials means that the Peruvian economy is vulnerable to fluctuations in international prices, which limits the possibility of diversifying the economy in favor of sustainable development. It also means that the economic benefits of the mining boom cannot be equitably redistributed.

Most researchers in Peru have focused on the environmental devastation caused by extractivism, which has led to numerous social conflicts (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2007). They see socio-environmental conflicts as an expression of opposition to a development model that tends to marginalize local populations despite the revenues it generates for the state (Cisneros, 2016). Figures such as Maxima Acuña, winner of the 2016 Goldman Prize for her opposition to the Conga project in Cajamarca, perfectly embody this resistance. In Peru, these mobilizations have been met with severe repression, with 289 people killed and 5098 injured in socio-environmental conflicts between 2006 and 2020 (Flores Unzaga, 2020). Repressive measures include abusive prosecutions, states of emergency, and the militarization of mining territories, particularly in the Andean South America (Weill, 2024).

There is continued interest in addressing the perspective of local communities vis-à-vis transnational corporations and the socio-environmental consequences of mining megaprojects. However, this perspective offers only a partial view of the reality of extractivism in Peru and overlooks other forms of mining activity, such as small-scale artisanal mining.

Thus, there is continued interest in addressing the perspective of local communities vis-à-vis transnational corporations and the socio-environmental consequences of mining megaprojects. However, this perspective offers only a partial view of the reality of extractivism in Peru and overlooks other forms of mining activity, such as small-scale artisanal mining. Although relatively localized and informal in nature, this activity presents different dynamics and challenges, but its impacts are just as widespread and multidimensional.

Two cases from southern Peru can help illustrate these dynamics: the first is the mining town of La Rinconada (Puno), and the

second is the province of Chumbivilcas (Cusco), where local communities have been exploiting the mineral resources of their community since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Weill and Layme Choqque, 2024).

In the Andes of southern Peru, peasant communities have long turned to informal mining as a source of income. In the cities, formal and dignified employment is rare, especially for people from rural and/or indigenous backgrounds who face racism (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008; Petrova et al., 2013); higher education is an expensive and often unprofitable investment. In this context, informal mining is a viable option: it does not require a university degree or work experience (Hilson and Potter, 2003; Verbrugge, 2015). Thus, in La Rinconada, the majority of informal miners have primary education, and very few have access to secondary education (Robles Mengoa and Sánchez, 2024). Economic exclusion particularly affects rural and indigenous women whose access to education is further limited by sexism (Mannarelli, 1993; Ames, 2013). As a result, for many single mothers, *pallaquera* work (feminized work in the rock extracted from tunnels, searching for ore in the rubble) is an important source of income. Mining areas also attract activities such as prostitution which, despite significant gender-based violence (Lahiri-Dutt, 2011), also provide income for particularly vulnerable women, such as teenage victims of domestic violence or Venezuelan migrant women (Weill and Layme Chocque, 2024).

As such, informal mining activities can be seen as a form of protest against globalized extractivism.

Informal mining activities are often perceived by those involved in the sector as a source of *encroachment*. In La Rinconada, the "*cachorreo*" system, which involves working for several days without a fixed wage and then exploiting the tunnels for a day or two for one's personal profit by extracting as much gold as possible, by no means guarantees a stable income. However, it is often preferred to a salary because of the feeling of being

able to control the fruits of one's labor (greater agency) (Robles *et al.*, 2022) and the prospect of a lucky day when an exceptional amount of gold is extracted for oneself (Geenen, 2018). In Chumbivilcas, Cabrera and Castro (2024) and Weill and Layme Chocque (2024) have shown how this economic activity transforms power relations between historically marginalized communities and local elites (*hacendados*), the state, and transnational mining companies. The exploitation of gold, copper, and silver on their territories allows these communities to reduce power asymmetries and improve their bargaining power. As such, informal mining activities can be seen as a form of protest against globalized extractivism (Lahiri-Dutt, 2018).

The advantage of this concept is that it provides an analytical framework that allows us to consider the role of formerly colonized countries in the globalized economy. However, it tends to obscure the specific configurations of different mining contexts at the local level and fails to take into account the capacity for autonomous action of the populations involved in these dynamics.

However, these forms of extractivism share many of the characteristics of mega mining projects. The use of chemicals such as mercury for gold amalgamation pollutes essential water sources for surrounding communities and wildlife. For instance, mining activities in La Rinconada are a major contributor to the pollution of Lake Titicaca (Cornejo Olarte and Pacheco Tanaka, 2009) and pose significant risks to human and animal health. Moreover, the ultra-masculinized mining economy consistently develops at the expense of women's social and economic autonomy, reproducing severe forms of gender violence (Weill 2020; Weill and Layme Choqque, 2024). Finally, geographic isolation, lack of regulation, and corruption in both formal and informal mining sites breed crime and human trafficking, creating an environment

in which illicit activities and violence thrive (Cortés-McPherson, 2020; Hilson, 2002; Fisher, 2007; Verbrugge and Geenen, 2020; Werthmann and Gratz, 2012).

Thus, the consequences of extractivism vary depending on the type of actors involved, the scale of extraction, and the level of state involvement. The advantage of this concept is that it provides an analytical framework that allows us to consider the role of formerly colonized countries in the globalized economy. However, it tends to obscure the specific configurations of different mining contexts at the local level and fails to take into account the capacity for autonomous action of the populations involved in these dynamics.

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