Agrarian Extractivism in Bolivia

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Summary.—The expansion of Bolivia’s agricultural frontier fueled by the development of a soy complex has become part of the state’s three-pronged “neo-extractivist” development model based on minerals, hydrocarbons, and soybeans. While Bolivia has a long history of mineral and natural gas extraction, the agricultural sector’s highly mechanized and capital-intensive character are relatively new developments. Referred to here as “agrarian extractivism” this paper reveals the very extractive nature of soybean production in Bolivia based on four interlinked dimensions: (1) large volumes of materials extracted destined for export with little or no processing; (2) value-chain concentration and sectoral disarticulation (3) high intensity of environmental degradation; and (4) the deterioration of labor opportunities and/or conditions. It is argued here that “agrarian extractivism” is a politically and analytically useful concept for understanding new dynamics and trajectories of agrarian change as it reveals the very extractive nature of capitalist agriculture, particularly in the context of contemporary land grabbing, flex crops, and the increasingly corporatized agro-food system. Rather than a form of industrial agricultural development which implies value-added processing, sectoral linkages, and employment generation, agrarian extractivism challenges this dominant discourse, revealing the various dimensions of social, economic and environmental exploitation and its negative implications for rural development.

Key words — agrarian extractivism, new extractivism, industrial capitalist agriculture, soy complex, Bolivia

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Bolivia’s agricultural frontier fueled by the soy complex has become part of the state’s three-pronged extractivist development model (minerals, hydrocarbons, soybeans). While Bolivia has a long history of mineral extraction, the agricultural sector’s highly mechanized and capital-intensive character are relatively new developments. The penetration of new forms of capital into agriculture in Bolivia’s lowlands is transforming the rural landscape, altering social relations of production, property, and power, and threatening present and future land and resource access by the rural majority, principally small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples. This type of agricultural expansion—which is referred to here as agrarian extractivism—is characterized by four interlinked dimensions: (1) large volumes of materials extracted destined for export with little or no processing; (2) value-chain concentration and sectoral disarticulation (3) high intensity of environmental degradation; and (4) the deterioration of labor opportunities and/or conditions. It is argued here that “agrarian extractivism” is a politically and analytically useful concept for understanding new dynamics and trajectories of agrarian change as it reveals the very extractive nature of capitalist agriculture, particularly in the context of contemporary land grabbing, flex crops, and the increasingly corporatized agro-food system. Agrarian extractivism is not used synonymously with industrial capitalist agriculture, nor is it only in reference to soybean production. It characterizes the very extractive dimensions of certain types of capitalist agriculture which have developed unevenly around the world. Rather than a form of industrial agricultural development which implies value-added processing, sectoral linkages, and employment generation, agrarian extractivism challenges this dominant discourse, revealing its negative socio-economic and environmental implications for rural development.

This paper is organized as follows: the next (second) section provides a conceptual distinction among the conventional “extractivist” discourse, the new or “neo-extractivism in Latin America and the more recent emergence of agro-, agricultural, and agrarian extractivism. The third section analyzes Bolivia’s soy complex with regard to four interlinked dimensions of agrarian extractivism, revealing the economic, social and environmental extractivist dynamics which characterize soybean production in the eastern lowlands of Santa Cruz. The fourth section concludes the paper by re-iterating the main arguments put forth and the need to challenge dominant discourses of industrial agriculture by revealing their extractive dynamics.

2. EXTRACTIVISM, NEO-EXTRACTIVISM, AND AGRARIAN EXTRACTIVISM

(a) Extractivism

By means of both colonial coercion and post-colonial “consent” via political-economic institutional arrangements, “extractivism” has broadly characterized the relationship between the industrialized “North” and developing “South”—that is, the exploitation, control and export of raw materials from the latter to fuel the industrial development of the former. Natural resource extraction has generally come to plague the industrial development of raw material export economies by means of economic distortions such as the “Dutch disease” and the Natural Resource Curse (Paradox of Plenty). Indeed, extractivism has been central to “Latin American theories of development and underdevelopment” from export-oriented to import-substitution industrialization (ISI) strategies (see Kay, 1989).

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The term “extractivism” is by no means a new or novel concept. Extractivism broadly refers to “those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export” (Acosta, 2013, p. 62). To be more precise, Gudynas classifies extractivism based on three dimensions: (1) high volume of resources extracted; (2) high intensity of environmental impacts; and (3) resources destined for export with little or no processing (Gudynas, 2013). Rather than measuring extractivism by the weight of the raw material (in tons, bushels, cubic meters or barrels), Gudynas argues for accounting methods which include material and energy flow analysis such as Material inputs per unit of service (MIPS) and the ecological rucksack (see Schmidt-Bleek, 1999). This definition distinguishes extractivism from other forms of natural resource appropriation by its high intensity of environmental impacts—toxicification, contamination, pollution, soil degradation, deforestation, etc. Finally, extractivism includes only those resources which are exported as a raw material or partially processed (Gudynas, 2013). As such, extractivism is not synonymous with mining or agricultural production, but has distinct characteristics in terms of quantity, intensity, processing, and destination. Furthermore, Acosta’s notion of extractivism as a “mode of accumulation” entails “the deep structural logic of production, distribution, exchange, and accumulation” (Chase-Dunn & Hall, 2000, p. 86) and is therefore not simply a technical system of processing nature through labor, as suggested by García Linera (2013). Similarly, Gudynas (2015), building off Bunker’s (1984) notion of “modes of extraction”, introduces the concept of “modes of appropriation” which describes the different ways of organizing the appropriation of distinct natural resources in specific social and environment contexts (Gudynas, 2015, p. 189). García Linera conceptualizes extractivism “as the activity that simply extracts raw materials (renewables or non-renewables)” and therefore does not distinguish between the small-scale pluri-activity of indigenous populations living in protected areas known as Extractivist Reserves (Reserva Extrativista, ResEx) in Brazil (see Fernside, 1989) with open-pit mining in Potosí or monocrop soybean production in Mato Grosso.

In the current phase of global capitalism guided by neoliberal economic principles of deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization, it is the multinational corporations who have come to monopolize extractive industries worldwide—whether mineral, hydrocarbon, or agrarian extractivism—continuing a “mode of accumulation and appropriation” that resembles that of the colonial era. During 1980s and 1990s, extractivism in Latin America was characterized by a limited role of the state, the liberalization of capital flows and flexible labor, environmental and territorial regulations (Gudynas, 2010b, p. 3). Whether foreign or domestic capital, investment in extractive sectors has rarely been effective at building forward and backward linkages for productive integration with other complementary sectors. As Acosta puts it, “an additional classical characteristic of these primary production exporting economies . . . is that they are enclaves: the oil sector or the mining sector, as well as many export-oriented farming, forestry or fishing activities, are usually isolated from the rest of the economy” (2013, p. 67). This is largely due to the fact that transnational corporations have come to dominate extractivist projects, bringing much needed capital investment and technology to capital-poor but resource-rich areas with little interest in building linkages with other sectors of the domestic economy since the extractivist mode of accumulation and appropriation is fueled by external markets in the “North” and emerging economies such as China and India. Extractivism is characterized by social and sectoral disarticulation from the rest of the economy, meaning that the capacity to consume is developed externally (demand for exports) and thus not dependent on a robust internal market or domestic demand (de Janvry, 1981, p. 34).

But after decades of resource and labor exploitation and continued impoverishment, social movements and a political left swept through Latin America during the past fifteen years promising redistributive reforms and a break with the logic of the neoliberal Washington Consensus. With an increased role of the state and variegated degrees of challenging neoliberal policies, a new type of extractivist project has emerged labeled as new or “neo”-extractivism.

(b) New or “neo” extractivism

The new extractivism refers to the increased role of the state in extractive sectors through the nationalization of key industries, public-private partnerships and increased collection of royalties and taxes in order to fund social programs and “ensure a more equitable sharing of the resource wealth” (Gudynas, 2013; Veltmeyer, 2013). With a particularly Latin American focus, new extractivism has sparked interests among many scholars as to whether or not it represents a break with conventional “extractivist” projects, altering exploitative relations of production, or maintains a similar productive and exploitative logic while funneling resources to the poor in a residual way in order to maintain legitimacy (Acosta, 2013; Bebbington, 2009; Bebbington & Humphreys Bebbington, 2011; Gudynas, 2009; Gudynas, 2013; Gudynas, 2015; Seoane, Taddei, & Algranati, 2013; Svampa, 2013; Veltmeyer, 2013; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014). Rather than the continued dependence on the export of raw materials by transnational corporations, the increased role of the state in extractive sectors was, and continues to be, promoted by progressive-left governments in Latin America as a means to reclaim sovereignty over the country’s resources, redistribute the rents in the form of social policies and initiate a process of value-added industrialization. However, the Latin American “Left” is not a homogeneous entity and these “new” extractivist dynamics play out differently in their own specific contexts, as can be said with conventional extractivist projects. However, the consensus among leading scholars mentioned above is that the “new extractivism” has not only continued resource extraction under a similar productive and exploitative logic as their predecessors, but is characterized by increased expansion into new frontiers and greenfield sites justified with popular discourses of social welfare. As Eduardo Gudynas, credited with coining the term “neo-extractivism” points out, “this (the promotion of new extractive sectors) is the case with mining in Correa’s administration in Ecuador, the support of new iron and lithium mining in Bolivia, the strong state advocacy in promoting the growth of mining in Brazil and Argentina, and, at the same time, the Uruguayan Left participates in prospecting for oil off its coast” (Gudynas, 2010b, p. 2). For Gudynas, the new extractivism has become, in large part, a component of the new Latin American left project based on a similar logic of accumulation and modernization as the neoliberal and neoclassical approaches, whereby “(the state) end(s) up reproducing the same productive processes, similar relations of power, and the same social and environmental impacts” (Gudynas, 2010b, p. 12).

This is a similar reading to that of Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington (2011) who find that the underlying
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