



# The nature of post-neoliberalism: Building bio-socialism in the Ecuadorian Amazon



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ideology and materiality of 'bio-socialism', through which the Ecuadorian government is attempting to catalyse a 'post-neoliberal' transition from the 'finite resources' of Amazonian oil reserves to the 'infinite resources' of biodiversity and scientific knowledge. This experiment is embodied in Ikiam, a public university under construction in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Drawing on extensive field research, we argue that, despite its radical intentions, bio-socialism is functioning as a strategy for the real subsumption of nature to capital, which is being operationalized in Ikiam in ways that reproduce the neoliberal knowledge economy. However, the contradictions of this process imply that, in practice, Ikiam is only intensifying established patterns of the formal subsumption of nature, by commodifying the genetic wealth and indigenous knowledge of the Amazon, and legitimating the expansion of the oil and mineral frontiers. The case of bio-socialism demonstrates the paradoxical nature of actually-existing post-neoliberalism, and illustrates the tendency for utopian ideologies to reproduce the material conditions they are seeking to escape.

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## 1. Introduction

The planetary catastrophe of global capitalism has starkly exposed our collective inability to imagine the radical transformation of "the socio-ecological co-ordinates of everyday life and the production of new socio-natural configurations" (Swyngedouw, 2010a: 307). Under such conditions, the critical analysis of actually-existing experiments in the post-neoliberal production of nature becomes an urgent necessity. A rare example of such an experiment is currently underway in Ecuador. In 2006, Rafael Correa Delgado was elected President of Ecuador, following over two decades of neoliberal reforms that had plunged the country into a profound socio-ecological crisis. Correa's manifesto called for a 'Citizens' Revolution' that would halt "the devastating advance of neoliberalism" (Alianza País, 2006: 5). In 2008, a new constitution was ratified, in which Ecuador became the first country in the world to recognise 'the rights of nature', in response to the demands of indigenous social movements that had struggled for decades against the social and environmental consequences of the oil industry in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Becker, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012). These rights have inspired the state project of

'bio-socialism', which promises to replace Ecuador's dependence on the 'finite resources' of Amazonian oil reserves with a development model based on the collective ownership of the 'infinite resources' of knowledge and biodiversity (Ramírez, 2012; SENPLADES, 2009, 2013).

This paper presents a critique of bio-socialism, as a means of assessing the possibilities and limitations of post-neoliberal development, and as an opportunity to explore the relationship between utopian ideologies and material realities under conditions of global capitalism. We approach this task through a detailed study of Ikiam, a public university currently under construction in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which embodies the economic vision of bio-socialism. 'Ikiam' means 'jungle' in the language of the *Shuar* indigenous nationality, and the main campus is located near the Amazonian city of Tena, on the boundary of Colonso-Chalupas, a 93,000-hectare biosphere reserve that functions as a "living laboratory" for the new university (Correa, 2014; El Telégrafo, 2014). An inter-disciplinary team of international scientists is researching the potential industrial and pharmaceutical applications of the biodiversity of the Amazon, while training a future generation of scientists to work in Ecuador's nascent biotechnology industry.

Our analysis of Ikiam is based on extensive field research undertaken in Ecuador in 2015, as part of the National Centre of Strategies for the Right to Territory (CENEDET), a research institute funded by the Ecuadorian government and directed by the Marxist

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human geographer David Harvey. Our unusual position as critical scholars operating within the Ecuadorian state apparatus provided us with a unique possibility to conduct an internal investigation of an avowedly 'post-neoliberal' project, including participatory observation in the planning process, textual analysis of government policy statements and planning documents, and ninety-seven semi-structured interviews and focus groups with politicians, civil servants, academics and impacted communities.<sup>1</sup> However, our research on Ikiam also contributed to growing tensions between CENEDET and the Ecuadorian government, exacerbated by the dissemination of research findings that were critical of various dimensions of the Citizens' Revolution. While undertaking field research in the politically sensitive region of the El Mirador copper mine (discussed in section five below), the lead researcher on this project was fired without explanation, and CENEDET was closed down soon afterwards. Through the publication of our findings here, we aim to contribute to debates on the nature of post-neoliberalism in ways that unfortunately proved impossible within the confines of the 'post-neoliberal' state itself.<sup>2</sup>

The case of bio-socialism is of particular interest for the study of post-neoliberalism, not only because of the scale of its ambition, and its rapid materialization in the form of Ikiam, but also due to the profoundly contradictory dynamics of this ultimately failed process. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, an ideological formation not only conceals the material realities of capitalism, but also tends to "create what it purports to conceal, its own 'repressed' point of reference" (Žižek, 1997: 6). In this paper, we interpret bio-socialism as an ideological formation that has functioned in precisely this way, by simultaneously concealing and promoting a transition from the formal to the real subsumption of nature to capital, understood as a shift from natural resource extraction towards biotechnological interventions that result in "higher yields, shorter turnover times. . . Nature, in short, is (re)-made to work harder, faster, better" (Boyd et al., 2008: 19). Despite being framed in the discourse of post-neoliberalism, we argue that Ikiam has reproduced many of the defining features of the neoliberal knowledge economy, based upon close cooperation between academia and industry in the real subsumption of nature. The ideological complexities of bio-socialism, however, do not end here. In practice, Ikiam is failing to catalyse this disavowed shift towards real subsumption, and is only succeeding in reproducing existing processes of formal subsumption on an expanded scale, by transforming the genetic wealth and indigenous knowledge of the Amazon into fields of monopoly rent extraction, and by legitimating the extension of the oil and mineral frontiers, in the context of the collapse of the commodities boom, and the exhaustion of the post-neoliberal project.

Ikiam and other spatial embodiments of post-neoliberal ideology have been largely overlooked in critical analyses of the leftist regimes that swept to power across Latin America in the first decade of the new millennium. An extensive literature questions the extent to which these regimes have succeeded in transcending the neoliberal paradigm, acknowledging their achievements in reducing poverty and expanding social programmes, but emphasizing their sustained commitment to export-led development; their continued dependency on mineral and hydrocarbon 'extractivism', and their reproduction of violent processes of accumulation by dispossession (Arsel et al., 2016; Burchardt and Dietz,

2014; Grugel and Riggiozzi, 2012; Gudynas, 2012; Kennemore and Weeks, 2011; Latorre et al., 2015; Macdonald and Ruckert 2009; Rosales, 2013; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014). These studies, however, have given less attention to the ways in which "space, power. . . and contestation are being made and remade through efforts to materialize post-neoliberal ideologies" (Elwood et al., 2016). This has led to calls for more nuanced analyses of "actually-existing post-neoliberalism" (Yates and Bakker, 2014: 2), and an emergent literature has now begun to address such questions (Billo, 2015; Boelens et al., 2015; Kaup, 2014; Perreault, 2012; Purcell et al., 2016; Webber, 2016; Wilson and Bayón 2015, 2016).

This paper aims to contribute to the study of 'actually-existing post-neoliberalism', through an exploration of the entanglement of space, power, and ideology through which an iconic post-neoliberal project has been conceived, constructed, and brought to ruin.<sup>3</sup> By tracing the twists and turns of this convoluted process, we aim to provide a vivid illustration of the ways in which utopian visions are distorted, inverted, and destroyed in the process of their realization. The following section deciphers bio-socialism as an ideological formation, which combines an explicitly anti-capitalist ideology with an implicit ideological commitment to a 'neo-structuralist' policy framework, and which functions as a disavowed strategy for the real subsumption of nature to capital. The third section locates Ikiam within this context, arguing that the ideological formation of bio-socialism, the febrile atmosphere of a commodity boom, and the enduring influence of neoliberal common-sense, have all contributed to the production of Ikiam as a 'utopia of spatial form' that houses a reproduction of the neoliberal knowledge economy. The fourth section argues that, far from catalysing a transition to the real subsumption of nature to capital, Ikiam is only contributing to the formal subsumption of nature, through the exploitation of genetic material and its associated 'ancestral knowledge', and the appropriation of the monopoly rents that can be extracted from these territorially exclusive commodities. The fifth section considers two further Ikiam campuses planned for the oil and mining regions of the Amazon. These campuses have been abandoned in the context of an expansion of primary resource extraction under conditions of economic crisis, through which an economic model based on 'finite resources' is being extended at the expense of the 'infinite resources' of the social and ecological commons. We conclude by reflecting on the paradoxical nature of actually-existing post-neoliberalism, and the tendency for utopian ideologies to reproduce the material conditions that they are seeking to escape.

## 2. Bio-socialism as an ideological formation

In order to understand the ideological formation of bio-socialism, it is necessary to begin with the material dynamics of formal and real subsumption that this ideology is structured to disavow. According to Marx, nature is not productive of value, which solely exists in capitalist society as a measure of socially-necessary labour time. Capitalism emerges with the formal subsumption of labour to capital, understood as the subordination of pre-existing forms of production under the reign of wage labour. Inter-capitalist competition, however, drives towards the real subsumption of labour, through which the labour process is transformed by

<sup>1</sup> Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, while a limited number were conducted in English. We have not identified those that were conducted in English, in order to protect the anonymity of our interviewees. All quotations from interviews in Spanish and from Spanish language texts have been translated by the authors.

<sup>2</sup> For further details of the CENEDET experiment, see Wilson (2017). CENEDET produced eight working papers, which can be downloaded at <https://cenedet.wordpress.com/publicaciones/working-papers/>.

<sup>3</sup> The paper also contributes to a growing literature that draws on Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology in tracing the perplexing irrationalities and paradoxical involutions of contemporary capitalist development (De Vries, 2007; Kapoor, 2014; Fletcher et al., 2014; Swyngedouw, 2010a; Wilson, 2014, 2016). We further aim to contribute to the literature on the subsumption of nature to capital (Birch et al., 2010; Boyd et al., 2008; Labban, 2014; Pellizoni, 2011; Smith, 2007), by drawing attention to the role of ground rent in reproducing established structures of formal subsumption, and tracing the dialectics of formal and real subsumption 'on the ground'.

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