

Pacification Meets Extraction: revisiting the Politics of Capital in Latin America

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Driving a new cycle of capitalist restructuring, over the last two decades extractive industries including gas, oil, minerals, industrial agriculture, logging, and crops for biofuel have remade entire economies, the environment, and conditions of living for hundreds of millions around the world.

With 240 percent growth between 1970 and 2017,¹ expansion accelerated since 2003, as China and India underwent dramatic economic growth and new technologies such as fracking made marginal territories productive.²

Overall, mineral extraction expanded 376 percent, the extraction of metals more than tripled, and agroindustrial activities and logging went up over 167 percent and fossil fuels 142 percent.³ The current extractive cycle has led to open new "commodity frontiers," from the poles to deep into the seas, forests, and jungles, not even sparing urban centers, as fracking extends underneath cities.⁴

And if China alone accounts for one-third of this expansion, extractivist activities truly reach all regions around the globe

If far less significant, Latin America stands as the second largest extractivist region behind Asia. Brazil contributes with 20 percent of the world's iron ore exports and Chile with 28 percent of copper, followed by Perú. Regarding agroindustry, 38 percent of soy bean exports come from Brazil, 6.5 percent from Argentina, and 3.7 percent from Paraguay, accompanying the rise of palm oil production in Colombia, and logging in Perú.⁵

Since the early 2000s, the land devoted to soy bean farming in Latin America expanded in a surface the size of Ecuador while logging incorporated half a million hectares per year, just as gold mining grew from 1 to 6 million hectares in Colombia alone.⁶

Extractive activities run deep in the history of Latin America, developing in consonance with changes in the world market.⁷ Established under colonial rule, as the "forced appropriation of precious metals, especially gold and silver, and of land,"⁸ relying on slave and other forms of forced labor, extractivism shifted after the early 19th century Independence.

As internal colonization expelled indigenous communities from their land, international trade under British hegemony brought new opportunities.

In this second phase, technology and foreign investment made the extraction of raw materials and food staples, including minerals, rubber, oil, guano, sugar, coffee, and cereals more efficient. "Extraction states" came into existence, entrenching local oligarchies into power such as the Bolivian "tin barons,"⁹ with their fates subjected to the world market boom and busts.¹⁰

Following the 1929 crisis and the end of liberal capitalism, as prices and external demand for raw materials went down, nationalizations of oil and other strategic resources followed, as extractive revenue supported modernization and import substitution industrialization. On the steps of Venezuela's discovery of oil in 1922, Mexico, Argentina,

Brazil, Chile, all followed variants of this model. Since the mid-1960s, however, having never become internationally competitive, substitutive domestic industries showed signs of decline. Trial and error, tentative modalities of natural resource governance developed since the mid-1970s were eventually displaced by the neoliberal, corporate extractive industries still dominant.

International financial institutions were pivotal to the rise of this last modality of extractivism.

Through conditionality loans, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund pushed reforms to deregulate and privatize mining and oil fields since the 1980s.

By the early 2000s, these institutions had advised new mining regulations in over 110 countries, many of them in Latin America.¹¹ Governments -both conservative and progressive- relaxed environmental and land protections and offered financial and legal incentives to corporations, regardless of whether companies accessed the land legally.¹²

In the meantime, hundreds of ports, dams, waterways, roads, and other infrastructure and energy projects accompanied the regional extractivist expansion and supported new trade routes.¹³

If extractivism may have started with colonial conquest, the speed of the transformations, the widespread presence of electoral democracies, and the scope -and success- of resistance seem new. The entrance of extractivism started gaining visibility a couple of decades ago, in the form of regional, isolated occurrences affecting local communities and indigenous groups (e.g., Alumbra mine, in Catamarca).

It was then that usage of the term extractivism first peaked,¹⁴ though only in the last few years it has gained extra-regional currency.

The environmental and social toll of extractivism are pronounced. It includes water depletion and pollution linked to open air mining, rising illnesses, birth defects, and cancer in areas of industrial agriculture and mineral extraction, land grabs and forced displacements.¹⁵

One-third of the land occupied by extractivist industries belongs to indigenous communities,¹⁶ under pressure as governments make lands "available for transnational corporate exploitation,"¹⁷ a trend that does not spare indigenous reservations or protected areas.¹⁸

Taking place far from the urban centers, where 80 percent of Latin Americans live, problems surrounding extractivist production may have seemed initially distant. It was only in recent years, with the crisis and the too obvious environmental and social impact, that they have come close to home.

Of course, none of this is natural. If, borrowing from Jacques Rancière, politics involves giving visibility and voice to beings and things that are not supposed to be seen,¹⁹ it was movements, the resistance and struggles against the violence of predatory capitalism that gave visibility and a name to this -extractivist- modality of capitalist accumulation in Latin America

One trait that stands out in Latin America is the rise of an extractivist strand, described by some as "new" or neo-extractivism.

Advanced by left-of-center "Pink Tide" governments, in the 2000s, in this variant the state imposed "stricter rules" on corporations and collected higher tariffs and taxes to fund cash transfers and other programs for poorer citizens.²⁰

Until 2008, oil, mining, and agricultural exports showed a solid performance, and governments across Latin America welcomed extractive industries for increased revenue.

If for different reasons, extractivism gained legitimacy under conservative and progressive governments alike, in what Maristella Svampa called a "commodity consensus."²¹

The extractivist consensus developed into split politics, however. But they still shared a common ground. The latter seems helpful to understand the recent turn to the right of governments in countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, or Argentina. For the expansion of extractive capital relies on some common modalities of what Mark Neocleous describes as pacification.²²

Both conservative and left-of center governments embraced the agendas of extractivist investors while criminalizing dissent and repressing protests from Argentina to Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Colombia, or Venezuela. The style may have been different; the results were the same. Moreover, forms of violence that initially targeted protests in marginal locations seem to be gaining center stage. In what follows, I draw on the concept of pacification to share main strokes about extractivist accumulation and the modalities of pacification accompanying them in Latin America.

Pacification I

The term pacification, used by the U.S. during its invasion of Vietnam, as Neocleous shows, has older roots. In fact, pacification and extractivism first came into existence together, in the conquest of the Americas over 500 years ago.

Coming together in the 15th century, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the police power helped bring together and reproduce, or “fabricate” the social order of capital, Neocleous has previously argued. Pacification, in turn, is the term that he uses to characterize this process as it reaches the status of state policy, through which the ordering police rationale gains maximum reach.²³

Not unlike policing, pacification campaigns destroy as much as they are productive, in the endeavor to produce “a new social order as well as the crushing of opposition to that construction,”²⁴ Neocleous observes. In this regard, pacification describes the politics -or anti-politics- of capital, that seek to stabilize, make secure, the population, and social territories for accumulation.

Attuned to the rhythms of capital, pacification proceeds through campaigns that make no distinctions between -and proceed simultaneously to and through- the domestic and the foreign, lawless violence and the law.

Soaking in the dynamics of warfare and policing, pacification involves laws, culture, ideas, and a variety of policies to gain the people’s “hearts and minds” and the collaboration of at least part of the population. This seems clear in Latin America, where the extractivist consensus defines distinct modalities of pacification, with neoliberal and “progressive” twists.

The extractivist universe in the region exposes sophisticated modalities of pacification that combine law, political discourse, (even a progressive) imagination, affective appeals, emergency rule, and violence.

Delving into these modalities is important to better understand nuances in the governance of capital, in Latin America and beyond, considering the recurrence with which the region has served as an experimental policy field. Let us revisit the more conventional side of pacification to then explore its “progressive” self.

The violence of accumulation

Extractivism has made apparent the lengths to which capital can go to destroy social relations, disorganize territories, redefine the limits of the commodifiable, and displace populations, as technological changes and crises make industries and workers obsolete while pushing new governmental modalities, forms of state violence, and legitimation.²⁵

While numbers for the entire region are not readily available, for 2018 UNHCR documents 8,374,890 people among the internally displaced, refugees, and others in a similar situation in Latin America.²⁶

Forced displacements have been reported in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina.²⁷ The case of Colombia is of a different order, however, with over 7.7 million of the internally displaced, the highest number in the world, and over 8 million hectares taken from the dispossessed.²⁸ If official accounts blame the 5-decade long armed conflict between the government, the FARC, the paramilitary, the ELN, and drug lords for these displacements, extractivist accumulation throve through the conflict since the early 2000s²⁹ and is responsible at least for half the cases (noteas well that land distribution has been at the roots of the conflict, to begin with).

Already the most unequal region on earth, access to land in Colombia and the rest of Latin America is now worse than it was when leading to reforms and revolutionary movements back in the 1960s.³⁰

As suggested by these trends, extractivist expansion accelerates the cycle of dispossession and forced separation of people from their means of life that Marx first described as "primitive accumulation" at the birth of modern capitalism. Does the ongoing wave of extractivism constitute a new iteration of these processes?

What can the concept of pacification contribute, in this regard?

Revisiting discussions about primitive accumulation in light of the ongoing extractivist cycle matters both for conceptual and political reasons.

In Marx's original formulation, in 14th and 15th century England, the so-called "primitive accumulation" consisted of the brutal separation or "divorcing" of people from their means of life through land enclosures.

According to the established interpretation, primitive accumulation describes this early historical phase of "separation between people and means of production" that gave birth to capitalism. Giving rise to a significant mass of wealth -the product of theft - and to a group of people who had to sell their labor force to survive, the initial, violent process launched the ideal conditions for the expansion of capital.

It was on this basis that mercantile social relations flourished, individuals turned into free legal subjects bound to capital through contracts and regular, expanded accumulation took off.

Surely, capitalist accumulation has relied -and continues to rely- on various forms of direct appropriation. But capital's distinctive trait is expanded reproduction, the genuine surplus value added through the labor process, as Marx highlights.

For regular, expanded capitalist accumulation to take place, stability is needed. Thus, while acknowledging various modalities of direct, primitive accumulation, Marx focused on explaining expanded reproduction and its socio-historical preconditions. In contrast to the open, brutal violence of primitive accumulation, regular accumulation proceeds through the "silent compulsion" embedded in the labor contract.

As the recurrence of direct appropriation and open violence have seemed more than episodic, over the years alternative interpretations developed. First, it was noticed that "extra-economic" force-driven methods of accumulation can prevail in areas where non-capitalist social relations prevail.

Not just pre-capitalist spaces, however, but within capitalist societies new layers or spheres of life open possibilities for commodification and the expansion of capital. Intensifying from time to time, especially during crises, "bouts of accumulation by dispossession" typical of primitive accumulation accompany capitalist expansion as such, David Harvey observes (2004).

In the end, rather than geographically and temporally distinct, modalities of both "primitive" and regular capitalist accumulation can coexist, complement each other, and advance at the same time. In these views, primitive accumulation seems recurrent, if not a continuous dimension of life shaped by capital.³¹

If taking a different approach, Neocleous' work on pacification seems close to the latter perspective, considering his characterization of the continuum war-police developing in parallel to the transition from feudalism to capitalism and having accompanied capital since then. The predatory aspects of capitalism, the idea of pacification suggests, are just part of its constitutive, ever present dimensions. Or at least this is the case with modalities and uses of violence, which perhaps, the idea of pacification may also suggest, may not be related to modalities of accumulation at all.

Pacification II

"Making the country safe for business," Neocleous notes,³² calls for neutralizing or disposing of the lives and lifestyles that obstruct or threaten the expansion of capital.

If at the micro level, on a one-on-one basis this is the task of policing, at the macro level the endeavor calls for pacification.

Materializing forms of social order conducive to the reproduction of capital, pacification secures the conditions for accumulation, reestablishing order after the destruction and (in)security brought by capital, as we see in the forced displacements, pollution, and illnesses caused by extractive industries in Latin America.

Disciplining the population and treating non-capitalist groups and lifestyles as security threats are classical tools in the fabrication of social order conducive to capitalist expansion, a defining state task.

As exploitation and dispossession converge, so does resistance against them.

Current forms of extractivist exploitation confront environmental, social, political, and gender equality agendas at the same time, in ways that threaten to bring together a critical mass to resist its expansion.³³ Across Latin America, tensions mounted with the end of the commodity boom, with a new cycle of protests erupting in 2009, and then again in 2013-2015. Hundreds of conflicts developed, with opposition to pollution and displacement caused by mines, plantations, fumigation, deforestation, or infrastructure.

Out of the 2,548 environmental conflicts documented on EJATLAS, 788 are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Through thousands of protests and campaigns, roughly in 1 out of five cases, mostly across Latin America and Western Europe, protesters have succeeded in their demands, whether by having projects interrupted or regulations passed.³⁴ On its part, OCMAL reports that protests have "paralyzed" 30 billion dollars' worth of mining investments in the region. And it is the work of pacification to undermine and criminalize resistance to capital.

Accordingly, declarations of the state of emergency have been on the rise across Latin America surrounding resistance to extractivist projects. Between 2000 and 2010, Claire Wright counts over 300 declarations of emergency in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador alone, as "need and urgency" presidential decrees expanded in Argentina since the 1990s into the Kirchnerista decade.³⁵

Through new modalities of environmental emergencies and localized emergency interventions, governments have found renewed ways to disregard laws and to treat citizen protests as criminal and seditious under expanding "anti-terrorist" laws.

Besides allowing for continuous police abuses, as CORREPI has thoroughly documented for Argentina, also in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela "Pink Tide" governments authorize the use of the military or border patrols to maintain public order, to police protests, or both, while thousands of protesters have been criminalized, many of them charged under expanded anti-terrorism laws, civilians tried in military tribunals in Venezuela, and activists targeted with criminalization and military and paramilitary violence, including killings.³⁶

In 2014, 80 out of 116 documented murders of rights defenders around the world took place in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru, over half of them activists of indigenous background.³⁷

In 2015, Global Witness documented 185 killings of land and rights defenders, the highest number up to that point that only increased 25 percent the following year, not sparing even high profile human rights figures such as Berta Caceres, murdered in Honduras. In turn, in 2017, 212 out of 312 rights defenders killed worldwide, or 67.9 percent were from Latin America.³⁸

Initially implemented in isolation, in remote mining areas, the emergency regimes and modalities of criminalization and violence targeting resistance against extractivism have been extended to other groups, to the policing of urban protests and the policing of the poor.

Thus the technologies of extractivist pacification are gaining center stage.

If violence has persistently escalated, with increasing emergency situations and the display of military and militarized forces, the study of pacification campaigns shows that the war-police continuum is one of the oldest, primal patterns, as warfare and policing, the law and lawless violence, have been brought together to secure the conditions for accumulation since early in the history of capitalism.

Yet when over 135 million workers, half of Latin America's labor force, see themselves forced to survive in the informal sector, amidst the highest income and land inequality in the world and persistent poverty and social exclusion, imposing extractivism just through violence may not be wise.

State repression can suppress resistance only temporarily, not beyond the point where the state's legitimacy is shaken.

And, other than for some of the elites, liberal ideologies have been historically discredited in Latin America. This is where pacification strategies bring care, or the semblance of care on the part of the state, accompanied with leftist narratives.

To the liberal strand of pacification extensively discussed by Neocleous, in which wars of accumulation are justified by the assimilation of rights and freedom to the right of private property, the ongoing struggle over extractive capitalism in Latin America adds a recent "progressive" twist.

Progressive Pacification

"For the poor, the marginalized, the excluded, the 'rule of law' means the targeted assassinations and collective massacres that we have endured," Evo Morales expressed in 2005.

Coming from a poor, indigenous Bolivian community suffering from various forms of dispossession and exclusion, Morales would have agreed with Neocleous' critique. Liberal arguments on the rule of law neglect and conceal the violence of the capitalist order, embedded in its economy, laws, and institutions.

Only what seems potentially disruptive of that order gets characterized as violence, together with normalized state's display of force in "just wars" "necessity," or "justice administration.

Most definitively, Morales and most of his peers would agree.

Originally a cocalero union leader, Morales rose to power as expression of a series of mass anti-neoliberal protests in Bolivia, which made the MAS alliance go from getting 3.3 percent of the vote in 1999 to 53.7 percent with Morales' presidential election, in merely six years.

Not unlike the 2000 and 2003 Bolivian water and gas "wars," massive grassroots, anti-neoliberal mobilization movements, protests, and uprisings such as mobilization of the

indigenous peoples in Ecuador in the 1980s, the 1989 Caracazo, the Sem Terra in Brazil, or Argentina's 2001 mass protests and popular assemblies gave workers and the poor voice and visibility.

Political movements born out of these protests won elections and sought to give their worldviews legal, constitutional status.³⁹

Starting with Ecuador, back in the late 1980s, in a short period 18 governments across Latin American changed their constitutions, introducing collective, cultural, identity, and environmental rights, deliberative and participatory mechanisms and institutions. In Venezuela, the 1998 constitution, written through a participatory process,⁴⁰ besides ample rights recognition also adopted participatory mechanisms and institutions to protect citizens from abuses, from the ombudsman to the Republic's prosecutor.⁴¹ In Ecuador, a new branch of government was introduced, in charge of the people.

As egalitarian marriage and expansive gender identity laws became law in 2010 in Argentina, Ecuadorians consecrated "rights for living well," and guaranteed access to food, water, and nature, while both the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions listed environmental and collective rights, and recognized rights to non-sentient beings and to nature itself.⁴² Connecting through networks, cultural exchange, and institutions, this dynamism gave support to the idea of a "rights revolution" materializing the experience of a Latin American Patria Grande which, aware of the shortcomings and dark side of liberalism, took an anti-liberal (post-liberal?) form.

Yet contrary to the pro-environmental, anti-neoliberal discourse of Pink Tide leaders, their governments encouraged extractivism in all its forms.

"No real break with neoliberalism" ever took place in Venezuela, Bolivia, or Ecuador, Jeffery Webber observes.⁴³ All so-called "Pink Tide," progressive governments embraced extractivism.

In more moderate (Correa, Lula, Kirchners) or radical (Morales, Chavez) stances, or proclaiming "socialist" and even "revolutionary" standpoints, leaders claimed to be restoring "sovereignty, the exercise of more control (and internalization) of capital flows, and redistributive, anti-poverty, and public investment policies."⁴⁴

To contain a situation in which the extractive model leaves out up to two thirds of the population, cash transfers and other anti-poverty programs were implemented throughout the region during the boom years, in ways that complemented the countries' corporate-driven, export-oriented extractivist models of mega-mining and farming.⁴⁵

In some perspective, it seemed as if one could negotiate with corporations to fund "socialism" in the cities.

Left unsaid, however, as Valdivia notes, behind all celebratory accounts of inclusion, this progressive version of extractivism (or neoextractivism) assumed a biopolitical stance that it was just to sacrifice "the lives and environments of some in the name of a better future for others"⁴⁶ - namely the indigenous and those caught in the environmental destruction brought by extractivist capital.

If the extra revenue at the peak of commodity prices made possible to fund cash transfer and other social programs, resources dwindled as prices went down. In any case, such programs did not substantially change income distribution, as the environmental, health, and social costs of extractivism became manifest.⁴⁷

In Brazil, peasants from the Sem Terra movement took distance from Lula, after he supported policies "with the same neoliberal foundation" than previous governments.⁴⁸

In Ecuador, denouncing the contradictions between the government's anti-neoliberal rhetoric, its extractivist alliances, and the repression and criminalization of protests by the authorities charging hundreds of indigenous protesters with terrorism, a number of indigenous groups distanced themselves from Correa in 2009, with some describing him as "an enemy of the Ecuadoran people."⁴⁹

In Venezuela, indigenous, environmental, and human rights activists were criminalized, and large mining projects approved "without consulting" indigenous communities as mandated by law.

"Despite 'the anti-capitalist discourse of Brother Evo',"⁵⁰ tensions heightened as private investors pushed for the exploitation of mineral resources in indigenous reservations and communities resisted the sacking of their rights and land, as mining's pollution and health consequences. In 2017, Morales signed laws stripping indigenous territory of protected status to build a 190-mile highway.⁵¹ Despite the spread of agendas centered on Pachamama or the environment "the social and environmental effects of mining...have not changed."⁵²

Across countries, indigenous, environmental, and other critics and activists were smeared as infantile, hypocritical, right-wing, secret U.S. agents, traitors, and terrorists (e.g., Qom in Argentina, Mapuches both in Chile and Argentina), in all cases blamed for sabotaging the only alternative to imperialism."⁵³ In this peculiar, progressive style of pacification, anti-corporate media laws helped to charge journalists for "crimes of insult" or defamation of the nation in Ecuador and Venezuela.

The strict regulations limiting NGOs in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, if allegedly seeking to neutralize foreign incursions, harmed indigenous, environmental, and human rights activists the most.

Promoted as a key to development and the expansion of wealth and revenue, this progressive strand of neo-extractivism stands as "a central expression of political domination, in which the material, cultural, and socio-political dimensions and conflicts of a new development model coalesce."⁵⁴

All in all, "benign" forms of pacification accompanying progressive extractivism were effective to neutralize and divide those involved in the struggle, with organic intellectuals drawing on tropes taken from the critical tradition, from the left.

Surely, the success of pacification campaigns is never guaranteed. There are multiple layers to these stories, as with the perspective of resistance, organization, and defiance of the order imposed through pacification.

But as pacification is deeply embedded in the culture, with tactics targeting "hearts and minds," it seems important to gain a better understanding of how and when popular struggles can get coopted, neutralized, and turned into instruments of pacification, in this case paving the way for the further accumulation of extractivist capital.

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