

Mining in Latin America: Critical Approaches to the New Extraction

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Mining in Latin America: Critical Approaches to the New Extraction

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Latin America has experienced a real mining boom during the past 2 decades. Mining investment increased by more than 100% between 2002 and 2012, in spite of the 2008 recession. This growth has been due to the confluence of a number of factors, including the appearance of highly liberalized foreign direct investment regimes, technological innovations around mining, high industrial metal prices in the late 1990s, increased precious metal prices since 2002, and diminishing returns in the mining economies of the global North. This increased level of activity brought with it a great deal of controversy and conflict. The term “new extraction,” originally coined by Anthony Bebbington (2009), refers in this book to “industrial transformations in global extractive industries, which encourage the expansion of extractive activity across the Global South and elicit greater levels of resistance from civil society across scalar levels” (pp 5–6), purportedly placing the emphasis on the extractive industries themselves. The key contention in the book is that industrial change is the driving force for much of what characterizes the new extraction. The rest—political, territorial, and environmental struggles—all follows from changes in the global mining industry. The new extraction has already produced an extensive body of academic literature covering a wide range of issues, mainly focused at the community and host-state levels. This book presents itself as a response to the limitations in the existing literature by focusing on the

global and international dimensions of the new extraction, while keeping sight of the struggles of the residents of the host communities.

The book derives from a panel at the Conference of the Canadian Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, which explains its strong Canadian focus, somehow hidden in the generic title. It has a well-crafted introduction and 13 chapters that delve into specific features of the emerging landscape that is so far underexamined and cover a great deal of ground, both conceptually and geographically. The book is divided into 4 sections. The first, “Conceptual approaches to excavating the new extraction,” includes 3 chapters that provide an overview of the new extractive economies in Latin America, an application of the new historical materialism as a framework to make sense of them, and a rich historical analysis of the continuities and discontinuities in the regimes of extraction. The second section, “The role of Canadian capital in Latin American extraction,” has 3 chapters focusing on the global financing of Latin American mining spearheaded by the Toronto Stock exchange. They analyze the protective role of the Canadian state, the validity of an “imperialist” perspective in understanding this role and the increasing importance of the host states regulating capital flows. The third and largest section, “Innovations on the ground: privatization, people and governance,” provides a good description of the anti-mining movement in Latin America, the privatization of the human rights regime for business, a critical examination of the application of ethical certification schemes developed in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, and an incisive analysis of property rights as an instrument to reconfigure socio-natural relations in Peru. The fourth section, “Jurisprudence and the new extraction,” has 2 chapters

looking at the rise of corporate investment rights regimes and the difficulties of establishing civil jurisdiction in Canadian courts in the global extractive economy. A final concluding chapter identifies 2 missing dimensions to be further explored: the roles of women and of international nongovernmental organizations.

Typical of edited books based on the interest and strengths of panel participants, the content is a bit all over the place. However, the editors must be commended for keeping a tight control on the quality of the contributions and maintaining a certain level of coherence in such an ample landscape. Each chapter stands on its merits and is worth a good read, although chapter 10, with its Sub-Saharan focus, looks out of place. A very rewarding characteristic is how well honored the label “critical” used in the title appears to be. The authors do not share a common position. There is good cross-referencing and awareness of this critical tension. I found particularly enlightening the critique of the term “new extraction” itself provided by North, Grinspun, and Larrea in their analysis of continuities and discontinuities of extraction in Latin America. *Nihil novum sub sole*, the term “new” sounds naive in the context of 500 years of history.

Garrod and Macdonald remark in chapter 6 that Canadian Mining Imperialism literature “remains plagued with a certain *theoreticism* regarding the concept of imperialism” (p 111). Theoreticism is always a danger in social science; this book manages to avoid it. While conceptually strong, providing very good introductions to the relevant literature, the book is also firmly grounded in empirical research and a deep knowledge of the region and the topics it covers. In spite of its Canadian bias, it is full of examples from all over South and Central America and has a sharp awareness of distinctions and commonalities. I would argue that more importance

should be given to local mining, both private and state owned—and that the role of other large multinationals, and particularly the emergence of China as a regional player, has been sidelined. Besides that, I have 2 criticisms. First, academics engaged with anti-mining activists are often not able to take a step back from entrenched positions about mining. Although I found the introductory chapter well crafted, the final remarks, with their litany of the evils of mining, showed this underlying blinkered perspective. Is mining a curse or a blessing? It is complicated, conclude Ciccantell and Pattern in their analysis of Carajas, the largest mine in South America (p 58). Notwithstanding all the known drawbacks of mining, the reality is that, nowadays, the worst pollution

affecting communities comes frequently (but not always) from abandoned mines—and this pollution will only be addressed with new, better mines or appropriate use of mining revenues and know-how for restoration, since many communities depend on mining as an economic activity. As the Chilean example shows, there is potential for appropriate control of the revenues and the resource. This also links to my second criticism. If one wants to understand mining, one has to understand the miners. The book has an excellent analysis of the some of the mechanisms by which mining companies actively mobilize power: property rights, manipulation of standards, and preferential access to the legal system. The end of the book rightly identifies women and

international nongovernmental organizations as the unexplored dimensions. Yet, unless we also include understanding the miners, we will never have the whole picture.

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