

# Resource Extraction and Conflict in Latin America

John Andrew McNeish  
Norwegian University of Life Sciences

## HOW TO CITE:

McNeish, John Andrew. 2018. "Resource Extraction and Conflict in Latin America". *Colombia Internacional* (93): 3-16. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint93.2018.01>

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint93.2018.01>

*Cuando el barreno se abrió paso  
hacia las simas pedregales  
y hundió su intestino implacable  
en las haciendas subterráneas,  
y los años muertos, los ojos  
de las edades, las raíces  
de las plantas encarceladas  
y los sistemas escamosos  
se hicieron estratas del agua,  
subió por los tubos el fuego  
convertido en líquido frío,  
en la aduana de las alturas  
a la salida de su mundo  
de profundidad tenebrosa,*

*encontró un pálido ingeniero  
y un título de propietario.  
Aunque se enreden los caminos  
del petróleo, aunque las napas  
cambien su sitio silencioso  
y muevan su soberanía  
entre los vientres de la tierra,  
cuando sacude el surtidor  
su ramaje de parafina,  
antes llegó la Standard Oil  
con sus letrados y sus botas,  
con sus cheques y sus fusiles,  
con sus gobiernos y sus presos.*

First and Second Stanza of Standard Oil Co. Pablo Neruda 1940.  
In *Canto General*. University of California Press (2011).

## Introduction

In this edition of *Colombia Internacional* analysis is made of the current wave of socio-environmental conflicts that has resulted from natural resource extraction in Latin America. Recent reports by the media and academic studies throughout the region have discussed the tendency towards conflict and controversy caused by an expanding frontier of extraction. The Environmental Justice Atlas is perhaps the best known international effort to map those issues<sup>1</sup>. However, while there are now increasing reports on the growing intensity of these socio-environmental conflicts, in-depth analyses of their causes, impacts and responses remain limited. This special edition seeks to add to a growing literature that fills this gap in analysis through grounded research in the region.

---

1 See: <http://www.ejolt.org>

In contrast to most other writing on the political economy of resource conflict the special edition integrates, an understanding that: 1. The extractive political economy is multi-scalar in nature 2. The agency expressed by different communities to claim environmental justice 3. The Latin America extractive complex stretches well beyond hydrocarbon resources. 4. Violence and injustice are expressed and experience not only as physical attacks but also as epistemological, structured and institutional forms of marginalization and erasure. These points open the way for broader reflections on the political and historical foundations of the violence associated with extractive technologies in Latin America. This is a subject that is of particular interest to Colombia. Media reports suggest that a serious conditions of violence persists in the country despite the guarantees of protection to civil society found in the peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla in November 2016. Indeed, Colombian and international human rights organizations have voiced their concern about this new wave of violence<sup>2</sup>. They recognize that it is caused in part by the efforts of paramilitary and organized criminal groups to fill the power vacuum left by the guerrilla in areas where there are rich reserves of minerals. These dynamics have led to further forced displacement<sup>3</sup> and a rising death toll, a subject discussed in more depth below in a number of articles which focus on Colombia.

## 1. Localizing Underground Resources

Pablo Neruda's poem (above) —written in 1940 about the Standard Oil Company in Latin America, owned by the Rockefeller family— has won renewed attention in recent years. Recent studies (Appel, Mason & Watts 2015; Szeman & Boyer 2017) have cited the poem to speak about the impact of a new wave of natural resource extraction across the world, mostly stimulated by the rise in international commodity prices between the late 1990s and 2011. In Latin America, governments on the left and right have tried to cash in on this boom. Responding to this context a wealth of new research on the topic has been published, focused on its socio-economic impacts (e.g. de Castro, Hogenbloom & Baud 2016; Gudynas 2012; Haarstad 2012; Li 2015; McNeish, Borchgrevink & Logan 2015; Veltamayer & Petras 2014; Bebbington & Bury 2013). Neruda's poem makes clear reference to a political economy that draws together resource extraction with physical impacts, corruption and geo-political

---

2 Dickinson, Elizabeth. 2016. "Colombia's War Just Ended. A New Wave of Violence Is Beginning", *Foreign Policy*, August 25, URL: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/25/colombias-war-just-ended-a-new-wave-of-violence-is-beginning/>; "Denuncian que "paramilitares" están retomando los territorios dejados por las FARC en Colombia", *CNN*, 14 de febrero de 2017 URL: <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2017/02/14/denuncian-que-paramilitares-estan-retomando-los-territorios-dejados-por-las-farc-en-colombia/>

3 There are now over 6 million people who have been displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia.

interventions. In recent writing it is used as an appropriate literary vehicle to re-imagine the political and environmental violence of oil and energy extraction.

It also reminds us that the current situation is part of a much longer history in which not only the land but what lies beneath it has been commodified by global capitalism. As Neruda recognized this is a history that link the present with the region's deeper republican and colonial past. Both Szeman & Boyer (2017) and Appel, Mason & Watts (2015) draw a line between Neruda's insights and the more recent work of Mitchell (2011) who convincingly argues that energy helps to organize politics. Mitchell suggests that it does so in such way that the political, economic and social relations needed to guarantee the flows of energy are engineered to make their use more palatable to Western consumers.

The extraction of natural resources, and energy resources in particular, link together local social and political changes with capitalism and the global economy—the setting of the interventionist interests of the great powers. In line with Neruda, academic analyses recognizes that there are synergies between energy and social development, and that this relationship relies not only on systems of value, but systems of violence. War and military intervention have often been the result of governments' efforts to secure energy resources—either within or beyond their national boundaries.

Thus, there is a growing awareness of past and present synergies between energy and society, energy politics and class formation, and economic value and violence. Such insight is invaluable to an understanding of the full extent of the political economy of energy extraction and the intertwined dynamics of resource-rich and resource-reliant economies. However, whereas these insights are important they are not comprehensive. They falsely create the impression that local contexts and communities are powerless in the face of imperialist and corporate interests. Mitchell is brilliant in his recognition and description of the political significance of material dependencies and the development of energy systems. However, whilst rich details of local histories and political dynamics are included in his analysis, the force of geo-politics and dominant expressions of governmentality appear utterly hegemonic. Indeed, whilst far more nuanced in a consideration of historic dynamics including the meeting of international and national ambitions, Mitchell's work does little to question the reductionist lens of earlier arguments of a resource curse. Academics (Auty 1993; Collier 2000; Humphreys *et al.* 2007) and policy-makers alike have commonly observed that the discovery of natural resources wealth does not lead to increased wealth for all, but the inevitably—rational actor—stimulation of violent competition between political elites intent on the capture of extractive rents. The resource curse thesis has, however, been under increasing critique and scrutiny by more grounded empirical international study in recent years (McNeish & Logan 2012).

Whilst there is clearly an imbalance of power between local and international interests, and public and corporate interests, the notion of a resource curse ignores the active responses and resistances of local communities and the civil society organizations. Whilst often facing threat or open violence many communities in Latin America have determined political and legal means to protest against and minimize the impacts of the unchecked extraction of resources. Drawing together case studies from across the region, this special issue not only makes it evident that Latin America is a quintessentially extractive region in terms of its history and positioning within center-periphery economic and political relations as Neruda's poem on Standard Oil suggests. Rather, as this collection of articles focusing on a series of case studies drawn from across the region make evident, Latin America's particular regional and national histories have led to powerful expressions of organization and political agency by communities threatened by, or wishing to participate in the control of, extractive processes.

As this collection of essays makes clear that a lot has changed in Latin America since Neruda's poem was written. Whilst early Latin American history is marked by periodic war between countries over territory and resources, there has not been a major international incident since the skirmish between Peru and Ecuador in the 1990s. Conflicts no longer occur according to earlier rules and logics. Indeed all of the articles included here give a grounded account not only of a complex and multi-scalar political economy, but one where despite power imbalances there are clear expressions of agency and attempts to respond to extractive development from below. Expressions of agency have to large degree been fostered and encouraged by a particular history of political liberalism in Latin America. This has encouraged the expansion of particular understanding of citizenship and identity in the region —either in line or in tension with political liberalism. Recent transformations in political culture, law and rights — following year of military role from the late 1960s to the early 1990s— have further fostered claims and opportunities for social mobilization. Indeed, as will be evident in the articles included in the edition particular spaces and opportunities have been opened as a result of democratic reform and legal expansion for the contestation of, and political participation and consultation in environmental and extractive development projects. The Latin American energy boom did not only encourage the persistence of existing social divisions and economic conditions, but acted as the catalyst for a series of radical transformations in wider political conditions and thinking. These diverging conditions help to explain the current extractive system and prevailing conditions of both legal and political claims that accompany the persisting occurrence of violence.

## 2. Counter-working Extraction

In Latin America thinking about development and modernity has become increasingly more nuanced and complex. Governments across the political spectrum in Latin America remain wedded to a developmental approach that is based on economic gain from the exploitation of non-renewable resources. There is now a broad consensus amongst analysts about the instability of the extractive economy in Latin America, based on economic data gathered over the last forty years<sup>4</sup>. Civil society, academics and political activists question the macro-economic orthodoxy of professional economists who call for the increased liberalization of markets, (McNeish, Borchgrevink and Logan 2015). Moreover, in contrast to the macro focus of political economic writing on regional resource governance seeking increased market liberalization or state regulation, there is also increasing contestation coming from below and beyond state institutions (McNeish, Borchgrevink and Logan 2015).

Throughout the region intellectual discourse, political mobilization and policy debates have put forward alternative proposals for development that question Latin America's historical reliance on natural resource extraction. Over the last decade, influential alliances —albeit temporary and temperamental— have been formed between indigenous communities, environmentalists, peasant farmers and landless movements, urban poor and middle classes, and students organizations. New “green” parties —with support largely drawn from the urban middle classes— are also on the rise in many of the cities of Latin America and have exploited new information technologies to mobilize their followers. They frequently receive training, financial and logistical support from international NGOs.

It is worth remembering here that Latin America is the origin of dependency theory and of world-systems analysis as well as the historic site of revolution, military governments and foreign intervention. The long shadow of these ideas and events provide the backdrop for a desire to think differently about the future. Popular political and academic suggestion has also been made of the need to create post-extractivist alternatives in the face of the current neo-extractivist boom (Acosta 2016 y 2011; Gudynas 2009). Inspired by indigenous ideas of harmony between nature and society, or the “good life” (expressed by *suma qamaña* in Aymara and *sumaq kawsay* in Quechua, two of the largest language groups in Andean area) proposals have been of the need for national development models that seek to avoid untamed environmental exploitation.

---

4 “Latin America's Commodity Dependence: What if the Boom Turns to Bust?”. 2011. *IMF Blog*, November 1<sup>st</sup>, URL: <https://blogs.imf.org/2011/11/01/latin-americas-commodity-dependence-what-if-the-boom-turns-to-bust/>

In recent years, these coalitions have gone beyond protests to the use of legal and illegal and political mechanisms to check the expansion of extractive projects, often by resorting to the rights of local communities to play a major role in the governance of their environmental resources, a movement which some call the “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez Alier *et al.* 2014), and part of a broader phenomenon of grass-roots activism in Latin America which, in turn, is linked to global environmental organizations which call for distributional justice (a fair share of benefits) and the right of the affected parties to participate in government decisions about the environment through such mechanisms as public consultations. Implicit in their approach is the notion of ecological justice, in which the rights of nature as well as human society must be respected in all such decisions —the ideal of “socio-nature”— (Schlosberg 2004).

The results of this has been movement towards legal and constitutional reforms. Whilst constantly opposed by governments and the private sector these movements have changed the nature of political debate and formally challenged developmental policies. Kristina Dietz’s article, for example, highlights the successful formation of a social movement in Tolima, Colombia, based on the right to popular consultation, to oppose the government’s plan to grant a multinational a concession to exploit a major gold mine. It is worth noting that this resort to a popular consultation forms part of regional efforts to achieve local democracy, and to test the use of popular protest in other contexts (McNeish 2017), as can be seen in the articles by Salas Carreño & Diez Hurtado and Ciro Rodríguez.

Recognizing the empirical nature of resource politics the inevitability of the resource curse can no longer be sustained. Current transformations in the systems of law and justice in Latin America, the expanding room for political participation, changes in corporate ethics and practice, and the abilities of civil society to not only protest but counterwork i.e. to pragmatically engage with law and state institutions, suggests that the assumption of a curse is overly-simplified. The landmark decision by the government to ban all forms of mining in El Salvador in 2017 because of the knock-on effect of legal action in the Pacific Rim case is perhaps one of the strongest examples of the shift in governance caused by a combination of popular protests and legal action<sup>5</sup>. Resource rich countries do not all conform to static fragile and failed stereotypes. Contexts of extractions should rather be studied as belonging to a sliding scale and in which they can move up and down over time between good and disastrous conditions of resource governance (McNeish &

---

5 “El Salvador makes history as first nation to impose blanket ban on metal mining”. 2017. *The Guardian*, March 30, URL <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/30/el-salvador-makes-history-first-nation-to-impose-blanket-ban-on-metal-mining>

Logan 2012). This is largely due to the movement of politics that is often as much determined by movements and actions from below as they are from above.

### 3. More than Oil

Oil extraction has had an enormous impact on the politics and economic aspirations of many Latin America countries. However, to focus exclusively on oil (or alternatively mining) as representative of extractive technologies blinds us to the full extent of underground resources in Latin America. Whilst there has been a significant rise in academic research and writing on extractive politics in Latin America this has largely limited its focus to the treatment to one or other resource field. Research has also tended to regard the exploitation of hydro-carbons or other non-renewable sources in isolation from other economic developments. This has helped to establish an understanding of the important role of “political ecology” of the sub-soil can play (Bebbington & Bury 2013, 3). However, it can also blinds us to the full extent of the extractive economy, and the important inter-connections that exists between the exploitation of one set of resources with others, between non-renewable and renewable resources, or with related development processes such as infrastructure development.

The boom in the extraction of hydrocarbon resources (oil, gas and coal) has been at the center of political and economic debates in Latin America for the past decade or so. However, it should also be acknowledge that a full understanding of the current dominance and impact of the extractive model in the region must trace the expansion of other extractive resources and related infrastructure projects. For example, there has been a parallel expansion in the mining of non-energetic minerals (gold, silver, copper, platinum, coltan, lithium, etc). A growth in renewable energy has also occurred in the region, i.e.: solar, geo-thermal and hydro-electric energy projects. These developments are in turn linked to the massive expansion of infrastructure in the region, such as the building or expansion of roads, bridges, electricity lines and ports. With funding from the Inter-American Bank, The South American Initiative for Regional Integration (IIRSA) was approved by 12 countries in 2000: its aim is to “conquer the geographic space” of the region through multiple inter-linked infrastructure projects and the transport of both primary commodities and manufactured goods to coastal sea ports. Infrastructure projects have led private-sector developers to increasingly exploit forests, nominally protected reserves and isolated territories, including those where indigenous populations enjoy collective property rights to the lands and their resources.

Agro-industry has also expanded. Environmental organizations have pointed out that, together with logging, the production of soya, sugar cane and palm oil involve the same environmental degradation caused by other extractive

industries<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, with their relationship to recent large-scale land grabs, government corruption, and threats to communal systems of land tenure, they have had similar social impacts and caused the same kind of protests. The same applies to renewable energy projects.

Due to its rich water resources, Latin America is the region where a high percentage of electricity is generated by dams (McNeish, Borchgrevink & Logan 2015). While the world average is around 16 per cent, Latin America owes roughly 65 per cent of its electricity to hydropower. Moreover, the potential for further development remains huge, and new mega-projects are under way in Brazil, Chile and Venezuela, among other countries. Yet these developments have caused considerable environmental and social harms. Large-scale dams displace local populations and/or destroy the ecosystems they depend on, without any compensation for their losses. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) documents a consistent pattern of ruthless exploitation and has published a set of recommendations for ensuring that the affected populations are consulted and compensated, and the environmental consequences are properly assessed. This has made governments, multilateral agencies and investors more wary about sponsoring such projects, though they continue to be controversial. The Belo Monte project in Brazil aptly illustrates this (Klein 2015). It has pitted local populations —indigenous and non-indigenous— and national and international environmental and human rights organizations against energy companies and a government focused on economic development.

Wind power is another green form of energy that is being opposed by local populations in some circumstances. A recent attempt to establish the largest wind power project in the world on the Tehuantepec peninsula in Oaxaca, Mexico recently failed because of local opposition (Boyer, Howe & Barrera 2015). The peninsula is known to be one of the world's best locations for this kind of energy production owing to the natural current of air that blows across it from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific. While foreign companies had a key role in this project, it was strongly backed by the Mexican federal government, keen to develop an alternative to its reliance on the oil industry. However, the local population saw that the project as the forced and little compensated takeover of common and agricultural land. Protests by the local population have resulted in the loss of millions of invested dollars and a series of physical confrontations between local communities and the federal police.

This special issue recognizes that the subterranean estates of Latin America stretch beyond oil and hydrocarbons. Whilst most of its articles focus on the

---

6 Rhett A. Butler. 2011. "Greening the world with palm oil?", *Mongabay*, January 26 2011, URL: <https://news.mongabay.com/2011/01/greening-the-world-with-palm-oil/>

aggressive nature of extraction, others point out that it encompasses a broader set of resources. Extractive developments are shown here to extend to renewable energy and infrastructure projects.: e.g. Ortiz-Riomalo and Rettberg on gold mining in Colombia; Fornillo on lithium mining in Argentina and Bolivia; Vasconcelos Rocha and Barbosa Jr. on agro-industry in Brazil.

#### 4. The Nature of Violent Conflicts

There is now an ample bibliography on the violence associated with the extraction of fossil fuels (Auty 1993; Collier 2000; Humphreys *et al.* 2007). The existing literature explores in detail the opening of new frontiers and the links between the extraction and use of fossil fuels and civil war (Auty 1993; Collier 2000; Humphreys *et al.* 2007). Kwe works have introduced widely recognised terms such as “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2009), “the environment as a security threat” (Homer-Dixon 2001), “violent environments” (Peluso & Watts 2001), and the “paradox of plenty” (Lynn Karl 1997). Recent anthropological (Coronil 1997; Strønen 2017) and ecological studies (Robbins 2011) have also traced the links between resources and violence. Dominic Boyer’s (2017) recent proposal of “energopower” as means to express an alternative genealogy of modern power is also significant in that it assists a visualization of the bio-political inter-twinning of our bodies with the pipes, duct-work of energy installations and the logic and expression of energy politics. Past analysis has then expanded our understanding of the connections between extraction and violence, and of what this violence consists. However, in this special edition it is suggested that there is still need to consider the particular expression of violence and its causes in the current moment, and that this is of particular importance to the study of political change in contemporary Latin America. Here we need to understand violence not only as multiple physical actions, but also as a force with a plurality of expressions and consequences.

Despite attempts at regulation, the production of oil and petro-chemicals has dumped a cocktail of millions of barrels of toxic chemicals, drilling fluids and formation waters into our seas, rivers and forests. Mining, including that of rare earths, has shifted the courses of rivers and leached heavy metals and chemicals into drinking water. Beyond the diversion of water courses and persistent spills of toxic substances into rivers and oceans (e.g. the Rio Doce disaster in Brazil), large-scale mining and oil drilling threaten sensitive bio-diverse areas and make local inhabitants the victims of industrial development. They also involve the construction of supporting infrastructures (roads, pipelines, hydro-electric dams, pylons and cable networks, ports and storage facilities).

We need not only an assessment of the violent impact of extractive technologies on nature, but its impact on society as well, which includes the direct physical violence against individuals and communities which protest against such projects. This is clearly a central focus of this special issue and all of the contribution made to it. All of the articles focused on Colombia highlight that there are clear connections between expanding extraction and a new wave of violence in the country (see Ortiz-Riomalo & Rettberg; and especially, Ciro Rodríguez). These expand on previous indications of the links that exist in Colombia between the end of armed conflict and the constitution of a formal peace, a development model predicated on energy and mining as locomotive of economic growth, community displacement and the assassination of civil society leaders involved in campaigns to protect their land (McNeish 2016). According to journalists and researchers, the apparent end of the armed conflict has simply shifted such violence to new venues. According to the Human Rights Ombudsman in Colombia, 186 leaders of the civil society were assassinated between the 1st of January 2016 and the 5th of July 2017.

Unfortunately, despite these clear manifestations of violence in Colombia, it is not an exception to a broader rule. Sparked off by the killing of Berta Cáceres a human rights and anti-mining activist in Honduras in 2010, a growing number of articles in major international newspapers, including the *Washington Post*<sup>8</sup>, the *Huffington Post*<sup>9</sup> and the *The Guardian*<sup>10</sup>, revealing and condemning the killing of environmentalist throughout Latin America. Critical as such violence is in Latin America, the same media and international NGO's, like Global Witness, acknowledge that the problem extends to other parts of the world. Indeed, Global Witness reports that 200 people were killed last year across the world in an effort to defend their lands, forests and rivers against destructive industries<sup>11</sup> and significantly notes that Brazil, not Colombia, now tops the list. In September 2017

---

7 "Más de 180 líderes sociales han sido asesinados en Colombia en el último año y medio: Defensoría". 2017. *Noticias Caracol*, julio 13, URL: <http://www.noticiasrcn.com/nacional-pais/mas-180-lideres-sociales-han-sido-asesinados-colombia-el-ultimo-ano-y-medio-defensoria>

8 Fears, Darryl. 2016. "For Latin American environmentalists, death is a constant companion", *The Washington Post*, March 30, URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/for-latin-american-environmentalists-death-is-a-constant-companion/2016/03/25/85920f96-ec69-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ea1617fc6cad](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/for-latin-american-environmentalists-death-is-a-constant-companion/2016/03/25/85920f96-ec69-11e5-bc08-3e03a5b41910_story.html?utm_term=.ea1617fc6cad)

9 Jagger Bianca. 2017. "Stop The Murder Of Environmental Defenders In Latin America". *The Huffington Post*, September 11, URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stop-the-murder-of-environmental-defenders-in-latin-america\\_us\\_591345c4e4b0e3bb894d5caf](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stop-the-murder-of-environmental-defenders-in-latin-america_us_591345c4e4b0e3bb894d5caf)

10 "Environmental defenders being killed in record numbers globally, new research reveals". 2017. *The Guardian*, July 13, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/13/environmental-defenders-being-killed-in-record-numbers-globally-new-research-reveals>

11 "Defenders of the earth". 2017. *Global Witness*, July 13, URL: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defenders-earth/>

the *Guardian* newspaper reported that land rights defenders from 29 countries had written to the United Nations asking for action against corporate and state groups that threaten their lives. Together with Global Witness, it has also established a database to track such murders<sup>12</sup>.

In its 2017 report, Global Witness makes it clear that murder is only one of a series of tactics used to silence defenders of lands and the environment. Death threats, arbitrary arrests, sexual assaults, militarized policing and aggressive legal attacks are also used to silence the complaints of local communities and thwart their attempts to use legal means of protest against extractive projects. The articles in this issue also discuss the structural violence employed by governments against those who oppose extractive technologies. They highlight that current extractive violence is in large degree fed by the prejudices and legacies of earlier racial and class conflicts. In their account of protests against extractive projects and the legal interactions of communities and environmental movements with state and corporations, it also becomes evident that new expressions of structured violence are expressed. State and corporate bodies actively engage in PR exercises and media campaigns to discredit and criminalize civil society leaders and campaign platforms (see Vasconcelos Rocha & Barbosa Jr.).

For years, environmental and public health movements have been struggling to find ways to protect the environment and human health in the face of scientific uncertainty about the causes and effects of environmental contamination. The public has typically carried the burden of proving that a particular activity or substance is dangerous, while those who are responsible for these activities are considered innocent until proven guilty. This burden of scientific proof has posed a monumental barrier in the campaign to protect health and the environment (Beyerlin & Marauhn 2011). The problem of evidencing potential harm from environmental contamination is however not only an empirical one, of measurements and methodology. States and international corporations grant privileges to western science in its search for allegedly “definitive” answers, while other forms of experiential knowledge or cultural categories of nature, purity, protection and stewardship are challenged or erased. Here the impact of new expressions and technologies of governmentality are also applied to manage and control possible claims against industry (Li 2015).

---

12 “188 environmental defenders have been killed so far in 2017”. 2017. *The Guardian*, URL : <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2017/jul/13/the-defenders-tracker>

## Conclusions

Each of the articles in this special edition adds significantly to our knowledge of current resource extraction in Latin America and the conflicts that result from its environmental and social impacts. Whereas each is valuable in its own right, their significance is greater when taken as a whole. Returning to Neruda's poem these articles collectively re-emphasize the relationship that exists between natural resources and political power. They remind us too of the place that natural and energy resources play in the international economy and in large-scale geopolitics. Together they also remind us of the direct relationship that exists between a large-scale political economy and much more localized ecological impacts on land, soil and air. I also suggest here that they together help to update and move beyond Neruda's poetic synthesis and some of the persisting assumptions of earlier approaches to Latin America's extractive political economy.

As a collection they inform us of the multi-scalar nature of subterranean estates. Indeed, they demonstrate that it is not only extraction that is multi-scalar but its political response and contestation. Local communities and social movements not only engage in protests, they often proactively exploit legal and political guarantees to challenge the governments and multinationals and place limits on the extractive projects they sponsor. Despite the power imbalances that persist, these actions put them in direct dialogue and negotiation with state institutions, courts and regulatory bodies, corporations and international organizations.

With this collection of articles it is possible to grasp with some depth the broad panorama of Latin America's extractive complex. This is a complex that involves more than a reliance on hydro-carbon resources. While minerals, oil and natural gas are still key elements of the region's economy, extraction encompasses a wide range of other resources. These include renewable resources, green technologies (hydro, solar, thermal and agro-industrial projects, lithium production, etc.) and their related infrastructure (often in the form of mega-development projects), such as dams, roads, bridges and ports. It is their totality which defines the extractive economy of the region.

The articles reveal together the complex nature violence experience by local communities and societies across Latin America. They reveal very direct destruction of the their natural environment on which people rely. They tell of the threats and murders of community leaders attempting to oppose extraction. They also reveal the subtle and structured nature of violence in these encounters. This is a violence sometime inherited from the past as a result of persisting social divisions and distinctions. It is also an experience of violence where age-old social and racial prejudices and efforts at social and epistemological erasure are

updated through new techniques. Despite the existence of laws that regulate the actions of the State and multinational corporations, governments obsessed with economic growth at any cost exploit legal loopholes, conventional science and the media to bend the rules and criminalize the opposition.

Latin America's underground wealth is complex. Efforts to exploit what lies beneath the soil cause different sectors of society to clash above the surface.

## References

1. Acosta, Alberto. 2016. "Post-extractivismo: entre el discurso y la praxis. Algunas reflexiones gruesas para la acción". *Ciencia Política* 11 (21): 287-332. DOI: dx.doi.org/10.15446/cp.v11n21.60297
2. Acosta, Alberto. 2011. "Extractivismo y neo-extractivismo: dos caras de la misma maldición. Más allá del desarrollo", grupo permanente de trabajo sobre alternativas al desarrollo, Fundación Rosa Luxemburg, Abya Yala, Quito, pp. 83-118.
3. Appel, Hannah, Arthur Mason and Michael Watts. 2015. *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
4. Auty, Richard. 1993. "Natural Resources and Civil Strife: A Two-Stage Process". *Geopolitics* 9 (1): 21-49. DOI: dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650040412331307822
5. Bebbington, Anthony and Jeffrey Bury. 2013. *Subterranean Struggles: New Dynamics of Mining, Oil and Gas in Latin America*. Austin: Texas University Press.
6. Beyerlin, Ulrich and Thilo Marauhn. 2011. *International Environmental Law*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
7. Boyer, Dominic, Cymene Howe and Edith Barrera. 2015. "Wind at the margins of the state: autonomy and renewable energy developments in southern Mexico". In *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development in Latin America*, edited by John-Andrew McNeish, Axel Borchgrevink and Owen Logan. London: Zed Books.
8. Boyer, Dominic. 2017. "Energó-power: An Introduction". In *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, 184-204. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
9. Collier, Paul. 2000. "Doing Well Out of War". In *Greed and Grievance. Economics Agendas in Civil War*, edited by Mats Berdal and David Malone, 91-112. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
10. Coronil, Fernando. 1997. *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela*. University of Chicago Press.
11. De Castro, Fabio, Barbara Hogenbloom and Michiel Baud. 2016. *Environmental Governance in Latin America*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Gudynas, Eduardo. 2009. "Diez tesis urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo. Contextos y demandas bajo el progresismo sudamericano actual". In: *Extractivismo, política y sociedad*, edited by Jürgen Schuldt et. al., 187-225. Quito: CAAP/CLAES.
13. Gudynas, Eduardo. 2012. "Estado compensador y nuevos extractivismos. Las ambivalencias del progresismo sudamericano". *Revista Nueva Sociedad* (237): 128-146.
14. Haarstad, Havard. 2012. *New Political Spaces in Latin American Natural Resource Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
15. Harvey, David. 2004. "The New Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession". *Socialist Register* 40: 63-87.
16. Homer-Dixon, Thomas. 1999. *Environment, Scarcity and Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

17. Humphreys, Macartan, Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz. 2007. *Escaping the Resource Curse*. New York: Columbia University Press.
18. Klein, Peter. 2015. "Engaging the Brazilian State: the Belo Monte Dam and the Struggle for Political Voice". *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42 (6): 1137-1156. DOI: [dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/03066150.2014.991719](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.991719)
19. Lynn Karl, Terry. 1997. *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*. Berkeley: California University Press.
20. Martinez-Alier, Joan *et al.* 2014. "Between activism and science: grassroots concepts for sustainability coined by Environmental Justice Organizations". *Journal of Political Ecology* 21: 19-60.
21. McNeish, John. 2017. "A Vote to Derail Extraction: Popular Consultation and Resource Sovereignty in Tolima, Colombia". *Third World Quarterly* 38 (5): 1128-1145. DOI: [dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/01436597.2017.1283980](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1283980)
22. McNeish, John. 2016. "Extracting Justice? Colombia's Commitment to Mining and Energy as a Foundation for Peace". *International Journal of Human Rights* 21. DOI: [dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/13642987.2016.1179031](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2016.1179031)
23. McNeish, John, Axel Borchgrevink and Owen Logan. (eds.). 2015. *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development in Latin America*. London: Zed Books.
24. McNeish, John and Owen Logan. (eds.). 2012. *Flammable Societies: Studies on the Socio-Economics of Oil and Gas*. London: Pluto Press.
25. Mitchell, Timothy. 2011. *Carbon democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso Publications.
26. Li, Fabiana. 2015. *Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism and Expertise in Peru*. Durham: Duke University Press.
27. Peluso, Nancy and Michael Watts. 2001. *Violent Environments*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
28. Robbins, Paul. 2011 *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwells Publishing.
29. Schlosberg, David. 2004. "Reconceiving Environmental Justice: Global Movements and Political Theories". *Environmental Politics* 13 (3): 517-540. DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1080/0964401042000229025](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0964401042000229025)
30. Strønen, Iselin. 2017. *Grassroots Politics and Oil Culture in Venezuela: The Revolutionary Petro-state*. New York: Springer Publications.
31. Szeman, Imre and Dominic Boyer. (eds.) . 2017. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
32. Veltameyer, Henry and James Petras. 2014. *The New Extractivism: A Post-Neoliberal Development Model or Imperialism of the 21st Century?* London: Zed Books.



**John Andrew McNeish** obtained his PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of London (United Kingdom). His research and publications are focused on the links between poverty and ethnicity, the politics of natural resources and the comparative study of social movements and development policy. He is associate professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. His recent publications include: "Extracting Justice? Colombia's Commitment to Mining and Energy as a Foundation for Peace". *International Journal of Human Rights* 21. 2016. DOI: [dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/13642987.2016.1179031](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2016.1179031). [john.mcneish@nmbu.no](mailto:john.mcneish@nmbu.no)