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# Neo-Extractivism in Latin America

Maristella Svampa

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## NEO-EXTRACTIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA

*Socio-environmental Conflicts, the  
Territorial Turn, and New Political  
Narratives*

**Maristella Svampa**

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# Neo-extractivism in Latin America

## Socio-environmental Conflicts, the Territorial Turn, and New Political Narratives

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**Abstract:** This Element analyzes the political dynamics of neo-extractivism in Latin America. It discusses the critical concepts of neo-extractivism and the commodity consensus and the various phases of socio-environmental conflict, proposing an eco-territorial approach that uncovers the escalation of extractive violence. It also presents horizontal concepts and debates theories that explore the language of Latin American socio-environmental movements, such as *Buen Vivir* and *Derechos de la Naturaleza*. In concluding, it proposes an explanation for the end of the progressive era, analyzing its ambiguities and limitations in the dawn of a new political cycle marked by the strengthening of right-wing governments.

**Keywords:** neo-extractivism, *Buen Vivir*, eco-territorial turn, Anthropocene  
Anthropocene, commodity boom, progressivism

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## Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century, Latin American economies were highly favored given the high international prices of commodities (leading to a commodity boom), which began a period of economic growth. This new conjuncture was preceded by a change in the region, characterized by intense anti-neoliberal mobilizations, leading to the denaturalization of the relationship between globalization and neoliberalism. In political terms, as of 2003, this process was crowned by the emergence of progressive governments (left or center-left, depending on the case) that, above their differences, combined heterodox economic policies with the expansion of social spending and increased consumption. Thus commenced the so-called Latin American progressive cycle, which would spread until 2015.

Likewise, the dynamic of economic growth created a transitional and conflictive situation wherein one of the major factors would be the *commodities consensus*, which expressed the distinction between neo-extractivism and a new version of development. The increased pressure on natural goods, lands, and territories added a dimension of dispute and conflict between, on the one hand, current indigenous organizations, socio-territorial movements, and new socio-environmental groups and, on the other hand, governments and large economic corporations. Indeed, over the years, past all of the ideological differences, all the Latin American governments implemented the return of a *productivist* vision of development and sought to deny or conceal discussions regarding the implications (impacts, consequences, damage) of the extractive export model. Moreover, in the heat of extraordinary profitability, the number of large mining enterprises and the construction of mega-dams multiplied, while the oil and agrarian frontier expanded, the latter through monocultures such as soybeans and African palm.

To denote this phenomenon, a unifying concept was coined: *neo-extractivism*. It is true that this not a completely new development, since the origins of extractivism trace back to the conquest and colonization of Latin America, at the dawn of European capitalism. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the so-called phenomenon of neo-extractivism was acquiring new dimensions, not only objectively – by the number and scale of the projects, the different types of activities, the national and transnational actors involved, and the dimension of the ecological crisis, but also for its political and symbolic aspects. This new phase introduced various dilemmas and gaps within the field of mobilized social organizations and leftist political parties. This demonstrated the limits of existing progressivism, visible in its link with authoritarian and imaginative hegemonic political practices of development.

By 2013, the fall in commodity prices was a far cry from signifying a weakening of this model. Rather, it led to a deepening and exacerbation of neo-extractivism. A process of reprimarization would accompany the advancement of the commodification of economies. This process would not only affect South American countries, but it was also associated with the increasingly prevalent presence of China in the region, which served as both the main partner and the raw material demander.

In this Element, I propose a dialectic synthesis explaining the expansion of neo-extractivism in the Latin American region, especially in South America. I additionally account for the dynamics of socio-environmental conflicts as well as the emergence of new counter-hegemonic narratives associated with the defense of the land and territories. I will argue that above the specific markers (which depend, in large part, on local and national scenarios), the dynamics of the socio-environmental struggles gave rise to what can be called an *eco-territorial turn*. This is illustrated by the convergence of different matrices and the vernacular, that is, by the innovative crossroads between the indigenous-community matrix and autonomic narrative, in an environmentalist key, to which would be added, by the end of the cycle, the feminist key.

Based on this, I first present some of the critical concepts such as *neo-extractivism* and the *commodities consensus*. Then I address the various phases of the socio-environmental conflict. Section 2 presents a summary of the development of extractive violence in the territories. In Section 3, I expand upon some of the topics of the eco-territorial turn, including *Buen Vivir* (BR), the Rights of nature (*Derechos de la Naturaleza*), common goods (*bienes comunes*), and the ethics of care (*etica del cuidado*). I also refer to the debates regarding the development of alternative methods, including post-extractivism, which is a transition and exit from neo-extractivism. The Conclusion proposes the consideration of these issues in terms of the end of the progressive political cycles and its ambiguities and limitations, in light of the opening of a new political cycle, marked by the strengthening of regional rights.

### Various Preliminary Conditions

Before moving forward, I would like to provide some preliminary considerations and definitions concerning the theoretical and epistemological assumptions that guide this Element. The first consideration refers to the type of conflict that our societies are experiencing today. We live in complex societies, where the risks and uncertainties caused by industrial dynamics and exponential and unlimited economic growth produce systematic and irreversible damage to ecosystems. This affects and threatens the necessary functions of nature and