

We Cannot Entrust Our Dreams to the Ballot Box

Article by Omar Felipe Giraldo

May 14, 2020

Colombian philosopher Omar Felipe Giraldo, a researcher in Mexico, paints a portrait of Latin American political ecology. The decision to safeguard the rights of nature in Ecuador and Bolivia in the early 2000s is often cited as an example elsewhere, but what were the effects? In this interview on eco-social struggle in Latin America, Giraldo highlights the importance of social movements and warns against the illusion of change from above.

***Le Comptoir:* In what context did Latin American political ecology emerge?**

Omar Felipe Giraldo: The main feature of Latin American political ecology is its deep links to social movements: “*en defensa de la vida y del territorio*”, as we say in Spanish – “in defence of life and land”. With a few exceptions, the development of an abstract theory of political ecology did not precede these movements. Instead, intellectuals and academics have taken them as inspiration to rethink their political and philosophical categories.

To understand the reasons that led certain groups to mobilise, we need to be aware of the offensive of extractivism and the processes of accumulation by dispossession seen across Latin America since the beginning of the millennium. These followed the wave of neoliberal privatisation that began as early as the 1980s.

What exactly is extractivism? What has this extractivist offensive involved in practice?

Extractivism, as its name suggests, refers to the extraction of large quantities of resources and raw materials in order to fuel the accumulation of capital. Specifically, from the 2000s onwards, there has been an increase in investment in mining projects, largely due to the extremely high prices of resources such as gold, coal, platinum, phosphorus, copper, manganese, nickel, and coltan, not to mention the staggering oil prices in the early years of the 21st century. Numerous hydroelectric dams were also built.

Land grabbing is another important phenomenon in the region. To give just one example, the so-called “United Republic of Soybeans”, which straddles Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia, covers an area that increased from 17 million to 46 million hectares between 1990 and 2010. Within this area, 20 million hectares of forest were felled for agriculture between 2000 and 2010. These examples give an idea of the serious tensions convulsing the regions inhabited by indigenous peoples and small farmers. They also show why these groups have played such a fundamental role in Latin America’s socio-ecological struggles.

Mexican sociologist Armando Bartra argues that after the financial crisis of 2008, capital was forced to “come back down to earth” – to rediscover the materiality that is at the source of economic cycles – so as to avoid a new crisis. Has the extractivist offensive you just mentioned intensified in the past decade?

After the financial bubble burst in 2007-2008, speculative capital moved from “fictitious” money to the unbridled exploitation of oil, unconventional hydrocarbons, minerals, and monoculture agriculture and forestry in the countries of the Global South. Here in Chiapas, Mexico, where I live and teach, the area of the state allocated to mineral exploration increased from 3 per cent to 30 per cent between 2008 and 2013. In short, we might say that

there was a share of capital that turned away from financial speculation and rediscovered the materiality on which economic cycles depend. It “came back down to earth”, to use the phrase coined by Armando Bartra that you mentioned, and it did so in many “megadiverse” regions where nature is particularly rich and abundant.

Latin America shows that neoliberalism does not mean the withdrawal or absence of the state, but rather a shift in its role from redistribution to repression.

In France, we still live largely with the myth of a protective, regulatory state. What role does the state play in the ecocide wrought by capital in Latin America? Are they trying to control or regulate it?

Almost without exception, the governments of Latin American countries, whether of Right or Left, have promoted these investments. They have allocated land, offered tax incentives, changed institutions and legal frameworks, built infrastructure, preserved low wages and, when necessary, used force – regular police and military, and irregular paramilitary groups (mainly in Mexico, Central America, and Colombia) – to bloodily put down resistance.

They have also pursued a “dark” strategy of co-opting the leaders of social movements and obtaining clientelist loyalties, particularly through the construction of infrastructure in health and education. Latin America shows that neoliberalism does not mean the withdrawal or absence of the state, but rather a shift in its role from redistribution to repression. The state plays an important role in the neoliberal phase of capitalism in that the conditions for capital accumulation depend on an alliance between governments and capital.

How have these policies affected the lives of people and the regions they live in?

The main effect has been land appropriation and forced displacement, typically through the purchase or grabbing of land for the construction of hydroelectric dams. The displaced are forced to migrate to cities, including ones abroad, in search of work. But there are also forms of land appropriation in situ, without physical displacement, in particular when people lose control of their means of livelihood to large corporations. Although the inhabitants continue to live in the same places, they are now often trapped by these mega-projects, condemned to survive amid the spoliation.

These dispossession phenomena sometimes adopt particularly perverse forms, especially when they take place within the framework of “sustainable development” projects such as wind farms, nature-based climate projects or eco-tourism sites. But, one way or another, there is a rupture in the material and symbolic conditions of people’s lives.

In France, there is a tenacious myth that ecology is a luxury for the middle classes, for the rich. On the contrary, the Latin American experience seems to prove the economist Joan Martinez Alier right, with his concept of the “environmentalism of the poor”. Can you explain this idea and tell us what forms resistance takes in Latin America?

The brutality of neoliberal capitalism within the context of the recent extractivist offensive has certainly given strength to the struggles of popular movements to defend life in the face of these death-dealing projects. For these people, to fight for land is not only to fight for places of aesthetic, symbolic or scientific value; it is to fight for their lives and their livelihoods.

In the face of privatisation and monopolisation, resistance groups have regularly proposed the rehabilitation of community spaces and collective forms of regulating social life.

Accumulation through dispossession is an invasion not only of physical space but also of people's ways of being and living. It is therefore not necessarily an "environmentalist" struggle, as if it were in the essence of these peoples to defend and protect nature, but rather often the only choice for survival. It is important to take into account that, as the hegemony of the neoliberal model gains strength, the crisis in the modern project of domination of nature and peoples becomes more visible. In this context, we are witnessing a reinvention of identities and a re-appropriation of the nature and culture of each people, as the Mexican environmentalist thinker Enrique Leff rightly points out. As for concrete strategies, the repertoire for collective action has numerous possibilities: direct action (such as blockades and confrontations), legal action, the creation of popular assemblies or community police forces, and so on.

Beyond mere resistance, what are the concrete alternatives? You often say that we need to relearn how to live in this world that we have "disinhabited". What are these other forms of "living" and collective organisation that peoples in the Americas intend to defend and promote?

In the face of privatisation and monopolisation, resistance groups have regularly proposed the rehabilitation of community spaces and collective forms of regulating social life. This takes various forms: solidarity economies via peasant or indigenous organisations, based on principles of reciprocity and redistribution; community currencies and barter; the revitalisation of community assemblies and the creation of village police forces and sometimes militias; and the re-appropriation of previously abandoned vernacular languages, agricultural practices that had fallen into disuse, or local knowledge. There has also been an increase in the exchange of local seeds to escape the monopolies exercised on the seed market by large agribusiness firms. In short, threatened groups are seeking to defend the "commons", or reinvent it.

All this has led to a renaissance in the thinking and practice of autonomy. Many communities have decided to organise themselves as much as possible on the margins of the state and its structures, focusing instead on directly transforming the social fabric outside established institutions.

The resistance of Latin American peoples has also been manifested in more conceptual ways, notably through the idea of "*buen vivir*" or "good living". This found canonical expression in the Cochabamba Declaration and its recognition of the rights of Mother Earth, the Pachamama. Can you outline this idea and its origins?

Buen vivir is a patchwork heuristic concept, the ambition of which is to bring all these struggles together under the same banner. The idea came from various principles held by the indigenous peoples of Latin America, be they Andean, Mesoamerican or Amazonian. If I had to summarise it, I would say that *buen vivir* is the art of living a full life. For these peoples, this involves the understanding that it is only possible to live well if others live well too. The understanding that the community is not only composed of human beings – that it also includes animals, forests, rivers, mountains, and so on. Within this philosophy, there is no one-size-fits-all model that can be applied in all circumstances. It is, however, essential to have a spirituality that recognises the relationships that unite all the entities of the world. It is also necessary to have a large measure of creativity, allowing humans to find ways of living without harming ecosystems.

I would say that buen vivir is the art of living a full life. This involves the understanding that it is only possible to live well if others live well too.

Is this really a “traditional” idea or does it refer more to a phenomenon of invented tradition and strategic essentialism (peoples claiming that it is in their tradition to respect nature in order to assert their rights at the political level)?

Undeniably, this phenomenon exists – even if it is without common measure to any political project in the classical sense. We should not idealise the situation: these peoples, like all peoples, live with their virtues and their vices. In our age, the after-effects of capitalist “development” can be seen wherever it has taken place. There are no virgin cultures endowed with a “pure” identity, and indeed these population groups are particularly vulnerable and often exhibit the worst sides of modernity. Nevertheless, a difference exists. Activists have drawn inspiration from the wisdom of these peoples, but they have often done so excessively, thus creating the image of a “good green savage”. This must be avoided at all costs. Fictitious narratives have also been created to legitimise utopias that are alien to these peoples and their practices in order to identify an “outside” of modernity that no longer exists, for better or for worse. The practices and concepts of indigenous and rural populations depositaries can offer alternatives to the ecocidal trajectory of capitalist modernity, but they cannot be expected to hand us a neat package containing all the solutions we need.

Several governments, notably in Ecuador and Bolivia, have claimed this idea of *buen vivir*, to the point of constitutionalising the rights of Mother Earth. What is the real environmental balance sheet of these governments?

Various social movements, often of peasant and indigenous origin, supported the “progressive” governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Initially, this helped to bring about changes in these countries’ constitutions. Valuable elements were introduced, for example collective rights (which amplify the rights of the classic citizen-subject), including the right to autonomy and self-determination of peoples, recognition of the multicultural character of the nation, and so on. The new constitutions also made it possible to break with certain anthropocentric conceptions of law. For example, the human right to a healthy environment has been complemented by new rights granted to nature itself, now recognised as a subject in law.

Nevertheless, this constitutional and political reconfiguration quickly showed its limits – and its dark side. In practice, these major principles have almost always remained a dead letter, and they have sometimes even been denied by the governments that initially defended them. Governments have often implemented “neo-extractivist” practices, consisting of nationalising and profiting from oil and mining rents, in order to implement redistributive policies and finance social programmes, without ever calling into question the previous development model and its ecocidal trajectory. At times, the remedy has been worse than the disease, since the financing of such programmes is often based on an intensification of natural resource exploitation. The social movements subsequently distanced themselves from these governments, gradually realising that the state is part of the organisation of international capitalism, from which it is structurally incapable of escaping.

The hope raised by these governments was real, but the hangover that followed was grim. If there is one conclusion to be drawn from the political experiments carried out in Latin America over recent decades, it is that it is impossible to escape from capitalism “from above”, relying on the levers of state power. We cannot wait for alternatives to emerge from state institutions, much less entrust our dreams to the ballot box.

This interview was first published in Le Comptoir.



Omar Felipe Giraldo is a CONACyT researcher and professor in the Agriculture, Society and the Environment Department of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) in Chiapas, Mexico, and author of the book *Utopías en la era de la supervivencia. Una interpretación del Buen Vivir* (Itaca, 2014).

Published May 14, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/we-cannot-entrust-our-dreams-to-the-ballot-box/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.