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The ‘Commodities Consensus’ and Valuation Languages in Latin America¹

The ‘commodities consensus’ underscores the incorporation of Latin America into a new economic and political-ideological global order, sustained by the international boom in prices of raw materials and the continually increasing demand for consumer goods in both central and emerging economies. This order is consolidating a neo-extractivist development style that generates new comparative advantages — visible in economic growth — at the same time that it produces new asymmetries and social, economic, environmental and politico-cultural conflicts. These tensions signal the opening of a new cycle of struggles, centred on the defense of the territory and the environment, as well as on the discussion of development models and the boundaries of democracy itself.

Introduction

Over the last decade Latin America has shifted from the Washington Consensus, with its focus on finance, to the commodities consensus, based on the large-scale export of primary products. In this article, we will use the term ‘commodities’ in a broad sense, as ‘undifferentiated products whose prices are fixed internationally’² or as ‘products of global production, availability and demand that have an international price range and do not require advanced technology for their

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² Andrés Wainer: «Inserción argentina en el comercio mundial: de la restricción externa al desarrollo económico» in *Realidad Económica* No 264, 11-12/2011, p. 77, available at <www.iade.org.ar/uploads/c87bbfe5-d90c-6211.pdf>.

production and processing'.³ Both definitions range from raw materials to semi-processed or industrial products. In the case of Latin America, the demand for *commodities* is concentrated in food products such as corn, soybeans and wheat, as well as fossil fuels (oil and gas) and minerals and metals (copper, gold, silver, tin, bauxite and zinc, among others).⁴

While it is true, then, that the exploitation and export of raw materials are not new activities in Latin America, it is evident that in the last years of the twentieth century — and in a context of a changing accumulation model — the expansion of mega-projects aiming at the control, extraction and export of raw materials without major value added has been notably intensified. Thus, what we generally term here as the 'commodities consensus' underscores the incorporation of Latin America in a new economic and political-ideological global order, sustained by the international boom in prices of raw materials and the continually increasing demand for consumer goods in both central and emerging economies. This generates indisputable comparative advantages for economic growth and the increase of monetary reserves, at the same time that it produces new asymmetries and profound inequalities in Latin American societies.

In terms of its consequences, the commodities consensus is a complex and rapid process that must be analysed from multiple perspectives at once: economic and social, political and ideological, and cultural and environmental. For this reason, to illustrate this problem we offer here a presentation in three parts. In the first place, we advance a conceptualisation of what we understand by 'commodities consensus' and the different styles of neo-extractivist development. Secondly, we propose a quick tour of what we have called 'the eco-territorial turn' as an expression of the new *valuation languages* that permeate the socio-environmental struggles in the region. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges that the majority of the critical Latin American social movements and organizations face.

Towards a conceptualization of this new phase

³ «Los commodities» en Mundo Finanzas, 12/6/2012, <www.mundofinanzas.es/finanzas/los-commodities/>.

⁴ It is interesting to see how, on a global scale, 'the geography of extraction is very different than the geography of consumption'. For example, Latin America produces 26.2% of the world's bauxite, but consumes only 2.9%; as for copper, it produces 45.1% and consumes 6.1%; and it produces 15.2% of gold and consumes 3%. Quote and data from Horacio Machado Aráoz: *Naturaleza mineral. Una ecología política del colonialismo moderno*, PhD Thesis, Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de Catamarca, Catamarca, 2012.

In the first place, from an economic and social point of view, the demand for commodities has originated an important process of ‘re-primarization’ of Latin American economies, accentuating their orientation towards primary extractive activities or *maquiladoras* with little value added.⁵ This regressive dynamic is aggravated by the new involvement of emerging powers such as China, which is quickly becoming an unequal partner in the trade exchanges with the region.⁶ At the same time, this process of ‘re-primarization’ is accompanied by a tendency toward the loss of food sovereignty, linked to the large-scale export of food products for animal consumption, or, increasingly, for biofuels production, which includes soybeans, palm oils and fertilizers.

Secondly, if we analyse it from the point of view of the logic of accumulation, the new commodities consensus entails a deepening of the dynamic of dispossession of land,⁷ resources and territory while producing new and dangerous forms of dependency and domination. Amongst the most common elements of this dynamic we can highlight the large scale of the projects undertaken, the tendency to monocultivation and scarce economic diversification, which demonstrate a clearly destructive logic of territorial occupancy. In fact, following an efficiency and productivity seeking notion of development, other logics of territorial valuation are discouraged, and these territories are considered as socially expendable or simply as ‘sacrificial areas’, in pro of selective progress.

It is not insignificant that an important part of the Latin American critical literature considers the result of these processes to be the consolidation of an accumulation pattern based on the over-exploitation of natural resources⁸— in large

⁵ As Ariel Slipak points out, the concept of ‘re-primarization’ refers to a complex process. ‘There seems to be a consensus on the idea that *re-primarization* means the reorientation of the resources of an economy, or of its productive matrix, towards activities with reduced value added, primarily the primary-extractive ones, although we can also include here assembly processes and others with scarce knowledge use.’ A. Slipak: «De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de reprimarización», 2012, mimeo.

⁶ Nowadays Latin American exports to China are concentrated mostly around agriculture and mineral products. “In this way, for the year 2009 the exports of copper, iron and soybeans represented 55.7% of the total exports of the region to China. At the same time, the products that China brings to the Latin American markets are mainly manufactured products with an increasingly higher technological content.” A. Slipak: «Las relaciones entre China y América Latina en la discusión sobre el modelo de desarrollo de la región. Hacia economías reprimarizadas» in *Iberoamérica Global* vol. 5 No 1, in press.

⁷ David Harvey: «El ‘nuevo imperialismo’: acumulación por desposesión» in *Socialist Register*, 2004, available in <bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/social/harvey.pdf>.

⁸ Eduardo Gudynas: «Diez tesis urgentes sobre el nuevo extractivismo» and Jürgen Schuldt and Alberto Acosta: «Petróleo, rentismo y subdesarrollo. ¿Una maldición sin solución?» in aavv: *Extractivismo, política y sociedad*, caap/claes, Quito, 2009. Maristella Svampa: «Néo-‘développementisme’ extractiviste,

part non-renewable ones — and at the same time on the expansion of the frontiers towards territories formerly considered 'unproductive'. Neoextractivism establishes a vertical dynamic that invades the territories and de-structures regional economies, destroys biodiversity, deepens the process of land concentration evicting or displacing rural, indigenous or peasant communities, and violates processes of citizen decision-making.

With these characteristics, we can consider as developmentalist neoextractivism activities traditionally associated with it (like mining and oil) as well as the ones linked to the new agriculture and food system, such as agribusiness and biofuel production.⁹ It also includes the infrastructure projects proposed by the Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA), a program initiated by several governments in Latin America in 2000 that includes projects related to transportation (waterways, ports, bi-oceanic corridors, among others); energy (large hydroelectric dams) and communications. Its main strategic objective is to facilitate the extraction and export of raw materials to their destination ports.

The scale of these initiatives warns us of the large magnitude of the investments (they are capital-intensive activities rather than labour-intensive ones) as well as the type of actors involved and their economic concentration (large multinational corporations).¹⁰ For these reasons and in a way similar to the past, these initiatives tend to consolidate exporting enclaves associated with a neo-colonial logic with little or no connection to local production chains. These operate under a strong social and regional fragmentation and configure socio-productive spaces that are dependent on the international market. In this way, the open-pit mega mine projects, the expansion of the energy and oil frontier (including shale gas exploitation and the controversial method of fracking), the construction of large hydro-electrical dams, the expansion of forestry and fishing frontiers and the

gouvernements et mouvements sociaux en Amérique latine» in *Problèmes d'Amérique Latine* No 81, verano de 2011, pp. 103-127; Raúl Zibechi: «Tensiones entre extractivismo y redistribución en los procesos de cambio» in *Aldeah*, < www.aldeah.org/es/raul-zibechitensiones-entre-extractivismo-y-redistribucion-en-los-procesos-de-cambio-de-america-lat>, 20/1/2011; G. Massuh: *Renunciar al bien común. Extractivismo y (pos) desarrollo en América Latina*, Mardulce, Buenos Aires, 2012.

⁹ E. Gudynas: op. cit.

¹⁰ Colectivo Voces de Alerta: *15 mitos y realidades sobre la minería transnacional en Argentina*, El Colectivo / Herramienta, Buenos Aires, 2011.

generalization of the agribusiness model (soybeans and biofuels), are the most emblematic features of developmentalist neoextractivism.

Further, the expression ‘commodities consensus’ has not only an economic but also a political-ideological connotation. It alludes to the idea that there is an agreement — tacit, although with the passing of the years ever more explicit — on the irrevocable or irresistible nature of the contemporary extractivist dynamic. This is particularly so considering the concurrence of the increasing global demand for primary goods and the current wealth levels, amplified by the ‘*eldoradista*’ vision of Latin America as a place with abundant natural resources *par excellence*. This concurrence, which in economics falls under the traditional notion of ‘comparative advantages’¹¹, has laid the foundations of a developmentalist illusion that can be traced, despite nuanced differences, throughout all the countries in Latin America.

We are therefore interested in highlighting that, despite the differences in the political regimes existing today, the ‘consensus’ on the irresistible character of the extractivist approach ends up working as a historical horizon or threshold annulling the possibility of a debate on alternatives. The acceptance — tacit or explicit — of such a ‘consensus’ contributes to consolidating a new ideology of scepticism or resignation that strengthens, on its limits, the ‘sensitivity and rationality’ of a progressive capitalism, imposing the idea that there are no alternatives to the current style of extractivist development. Consequently, every critical discourse or radical opposition is ultimately perceived as anti-modern, a negation of progress or simply in irrationality and ecological fundamentalism.

Nonetheless, this period can be read both in terms of its continuities as well as its ruptures with the previous period of the Washington Consensus. In terms of rupture, there are important elements that allow us to distinguish it from the 90s. If we recall, the Washington Consensus focused on recovering the financial agenda, promoting austerity and privatization policies that redefined the state as a meta-regulatory agent. At the same time, it operated under a sort of political

¹¹ We should remember that currently, there are many who defend the extractivist model that avoid the traditional critique by the ECLAC of the declining terms of international trade as the end of the economic cycle (Cepal, v. Raúl Prebisch: *Capitalismo periférico. Crisis y transformación*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, DF, 1981). This critique is rejected as no longer valid in light of the increasing demand for raw materials and the rising prices of commodities, as well as the consolidation of a determined energy and civilizational matrix built upon the consumption of fossil fuel. Others argue that the export of primary products is what generates the foreign currency necessary for income redistribution and promotes growth based on an internal-market focused strategy, or re-orientes the activities towards those with a greater value added.

homogenisation of the region, marked by its identification with neoliberal recipes. In contrast, the current 'commodities consensus' concentrates its agenda around the mass implementation of extractive projects destined to increase exports, opening a more flexible space in which the state defines its role. This allows for the coexistence of progressive governments that question the orthodox version of the neoliberal consensus with those that continue deepening a neoliberal conservative political matrix.

However, continuities can be found in different areas where connecting trends between the 90s and today can be traced. On the one hand, the maintenance of the normative and legal framework that allowed for the expansion of the current extractivist model that guarantees legal security to financial capital and high profit margins for businesses. At the same time, even in cases where the state has recovered an active role (particularly in the expropriation of companies), during the 'commodities consensus', the new regulations tend to confirm the association with transnational capital.

In general, the confirmation of Latin America as an 'adaptive economy' in relation to the different accumulation cycles, and thus the acceptance of the place of the region in the world's division of labour, is located at the core of both the Washington Consensus and the commodities consensus. This remains the case regardless of the industrializing and emancipatory rhetoric of progressive governments in the region asserting the economic autonomy and national sovereignty or the construction of a political Latin American space. In the name of 'comparative advantages' or the pure subordination to the global geopolitical order, depending on the case, progressive and conservative governments alike tend to accept the 'destiny' of the 'commodities consensus'. This has historically relegated Latin America to the role of nature-exporter, turning a blind eye to the enormous environmental and socio-economic consequences (the new dependency frameworks and the consolidation of the export enclaves) and their political implications (disciplining and coercion of the population).

Finally, and despite its attempts to become a *Pensée unique* the *commodities consensus* appears fraught with ambivalence, contradictions and paradoxes. These are linked to the enormous and growing socio-environmental conflicts that the extractivist dynamic generates, as well as to the multiple tensions and disputes between neoliberal dynamics, the notion of development, the Left and progressive populism. In fact, traditionally in Latin America, a large part of the Left and

progressive populism sustains a vision of development focused on production, offering a reading that privileges the conflict between labour and capital and tends to neglect the new social struggle around the defence of the territory and the commons. In this political and ideological framework, blinded by its focus on production and staunchly opposed to the principles of the environmental paradigm, the current dispossession dynamic becomes a blind spot, impossible to conceptualise. As a consequence, socio-environmental conflicts are considered a secondary problem or one that could simply be sacrificed, in light of the grave problems of poverty and exclusion in Latin American societies.

In the progressive vision the ‘commodities consensus’ appears associated with the action of the state as a producer and regulator and with a number of social policies directed towards the most vulnerable sectors, based precisely in the extractivist profits (oil, gas and mining). Certainly, the recovery of certain tools and institutional capacities from the state, which has again become a relevant economic actor and in certain cases a redistributive agent, should not be disregarded. Nonetheless, framed in the global governance theories that seek to consolidate a new institutionalisation from supra-national or meta-regulatory frameworks, the tendency is not for the nation state to become a mega-actor or for its intervention to guarantee profound changes. On the contrary, the maximum goal points towards the return of a moderately regulatory state. Here, it is expected that the state will be able to work in a changing space within a multi-stakeholder scheme (of an increasingly complex civil society, with the emergence of new social movements, NGOs and other stakeholders) but in close association with private multinational capital whose effect in national economies is ever increasing. This creates clear boundaries to the actions of national governments and a threshold to the democratising demands for collective decisions that the communities and peoples affected by large extractive projects voice.

We should also not forget that the return of the state to its redistributive functions is built upon a very vulnerable social fabric — a vulnerability that was accentuated by the social transformations during the neoliberal years — and that the current social policies are often an overt or veiled continuation of the compensatory policies of the 90s that followed the recipes of the World Bank (WB). In this context, progressive neo-developmentalism shares with liberal neo-developmentalism common features and frameworks even if it seeks to establish marked differences in terms of democratization.

The most paradoxical contexts of the 'commodities consensus' are those of Bolivia and Ecuador. This is not a minor topic, given the fact that these are the countries where — amidst strong participatory processes — new 'horizon-concepts, such as decolonisation, plurinational state, autonomies, 'buen vivir' and nature rights have emerged. Nonetheless, and despite the praise of Indigenous peoples' vision in their relation to nature ('buen vivir') written into the constitution, in the new century and with the consolidation of these governments, other aspects related to extractivist neo-developmentalism became more central. Framed in the crude language of dispossession (liberal neo-developmentalism) or in the one that points towards the state's control of surplus value (progressive neo-developmentalism) the current development style rests upon an extractivist paradigm. This paradigm emerges from the idea of 'economic opportunities' or 'comparative advantages' put forward by the commodities consensus and opens up a social imaginary (particularly around nature and development) that transcends the political and ideological boundaries of the 90s. In this manner, beyond the differences that we can find in political and ideological terms, these positions reflect the consolidation of a model based on the appropriation and exploitation of the commons. This model proceeds in a top-down approach, putting the advances of the participatory democracy in a quagmire and inaugurating a new cycle of criminalisation and violation of human rights.

In sum, outside of any linearity, from this multiple perspective, the commodities consensus is configuring a space of variable geometry in which a dialectical movement synthetizing the continuities and ruptures of this new context operates embedded in what can be legitimately called a pos-neoliberal context without, however, implying the eclipse of neoliberalism.¹²

Territory and valuation languages¹³

One of the consequences of the contemporary extractivist turn is the explosion of socio-environmental conflicts where indigenous and peasant organisations are actively involved. These are accompanied by new forms of mobilisation and citizen

¹² Some speak of a 'neo-developmental post-neoliberalism'. M. Félix: «Neoliberalismos, neodesarrollismo y proyectos contrahegemónicos en Suramérica» en *Astrolabio* No 7, 2011.

¹³ We recover here the notion coined by Joan Martínez-Alier: *El ecologismo de los pobres. Conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de valoración*, Icaria Antrazo, Barcelona, 2004.

participation, centred on the defence of natural goods, biodiversity and the environment.

We understand by socio-environmental conflicts those that are linked to the access and control of natural goods and territory which presuppose diverging values and interests, in a context of power asymmetry. These conflicts bring to the forefront different conceptualisations of territory, nature and the environment and at the same time foster disputes about the understanding of development and, at a more general level, of democracy. Certainly, to the extent that multiple mega-projects tend to reconfigure the territory in a global manner, they not only jeopardise the existing economic and social dynamics, but the breadth of democracy itself. These projects are imposed without the consensus of the local populations, generating strong divisions in societies and a spiral of repression and criminalisation of resistance struggles.

In this context, the explosion of socio-environmental conflicts has corresponded to what Enrique Leff named “The environmentalisation of the indigenous and peasant struggles and the emergence of a Latin American environmental thought”.¹⁴ Within this social grid we can also find new environmental social movements, rural and urban (in small and medium-sized localities), which have a multi-class composition and are characterised by assembly-like types of governance and an increasing demand for autonomy. At the same time, some environmentalist NGOs — particularly small organizations that combine lobbying activities with a social movement logic, and cultural collectives, including those of intellectuals and experts, women and young people — play a significant role and accompany the actions of organisations and social movements. These actors should not be considered as ‘external allies’ but as stakeholders within this organizational and social grid.

In this context, what is particularly novel is the articulation amongst the different stakeholders (indigenous-peasant movements, socio-environmental movements, environmental NGOs, intellectual and expert networks, cultural collectives) which translates into a dialogue of knowledge and disciplines. This fosters the emergence of an expert-knowledge independent from mainstream,

¹⁴ E. Leff: «La ecología política en América Latina. Un campo en construcción» en Héctor Alimonda: *Los tormentos de la materia. Aportes para una ecología política latinoamericana*, Clacso, Buenos Aires, 2006.

dominant discourses and the valuation of local knowledge, many of which have peasant-indigenous roots.

These *valuation languages* of territoriality have promoted the approval of laws, even of legal frameworks, oriented toward the construction of *new environmental institutional frameworks* opposing the current extractivist public policies.

In general terms, and beyond specific differences (depending largely on the local and national contexts), the dynamics of socio-environmental struggles in Latin America have taken what we have called an 'eco-territorial turn'. This entails a common language that illustrates the cross-over between the communitarian-indigenous matrix, defence of territory and environmentalist discourse: the commons, food sovereignty, environmental justice and *buen vivir* are some of the terms that express this productive engagement. In this sense, it is possible to speak of the construction of common frameworks for collective action that not only work as alternative interpretive frameworks but as producers of a collective subjectivity.

Thus, against the grain of the dominant vision, natural goods are not understood as commodities (as in language of the commodities consensus) but also not exclusively as strategic natural resources, as progressive neo-developmentalism sees them. Despite their differences, both languages impose a utilitarian perspective that implies a lack of awareness of other attributes and values that cannot be represented through a market price — even if some of them have one. Against this perspective, the notion of “the commons” refers to the need to keep outside the market those goods that — given their cultural, social or natural value — belong to the community and possess a value that exceeds any price.¹⁵

It would be impossible to make a list of the self-organised networks, national and regional, that deal with environmental issues in Latin America. To mention only a few examples: the National Confederation of Communities Affected by Mining (Concacami) founded in 1999 in Peru; the Union of Citizen Assemblies (UAC) that emerged in Argentina in 2006 bringing together grassroots organisations opposed to mega-mining projects, agribusiness and fracking; and the National Assembly of Environmentally Affected People (ANAA) from Mexico created in 2008 against mega-mining projects, hydroelectrical dams, savage

¹⁵ Plataforma 2012: «Por una verdadera estatización de los recursos energéticos: La crisis de ypf o el fracaso de una política energética» in *Plataforma 2012*, <<http://plataforma2012.org/2012/05/15/por-una-verdadera-estatacion-de-los-recursos-energeticos/>>, 15/5/2012.

urbanisation and industrial farming. Amongst the transnational networks is the Andean Coordination of Indigenous Organizations (CAOI) that links organisations from Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Chile since 2006 and advocates for the creation of an Environmental Criminal Court. Finally, there are several observatories dedicated to these issues. Amongst them we can find the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA) founded in 1991 and located in Chile, and the Latin American Observatory of Mining Conflicts (OCMAL) founded in 1997, linking more than 40 organizations including Ecologic Action from Ecuador.

Amongst all the extractive activities, the most controversial today in Latin America is large-scale metal mining. Indeed, there is no country in Latin America with large-scale mining projects that does not have social conflicts — that bring communities into conflict with both mining companies, on one side, and governments, on the other — associated with them: Mexico, several Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama), Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Chile.¹⁶ According to OCMAL¹⁷, there are currently 184 active conflicts, five of them cross-border, involving 253 affected communities across the region. This context of social unrest contributes directly or indirectly to the judicialization of social-environmental struggles and to the violation of human rights that in several cases, including Peru, Panama and Mexico, have ended in the murder of activists.¹⁸

In sum, what we are calling an eco-territorial turn refers to the expansion rights as well as a societal dispute as to what could or should be understood as ‘true development’ or ‘alternative development’, ‘weak or strong sustainability’. At the same time, it puts concepts such as sovereignty, democracy and human rights at the centre of the debate: in effect, be it in a language of the defence of the territory and the commons, of human rights, of the collective rights of indigenous peoples, of the rights of nature or ‘*buen vivir*’, the demand of the communities is inscribed in the horizon of a radical democracy. This includes the democratization of collective decision-making and, indeed, the rights of peoples to say ‘no’ to projects that

¹⁶ Colectivo Voces de Alerta: ob. cit.

¹⁷ V. «Sistema de información para la gestión comunitaria de conflictos socio-ambientales mineros en Latinoamérica», <http://basedatos.conflictosmineros.net/ocmal_db/>.

¹⁸ Ocmal: *Cuando tiemblan los derechos. Extractivismo y criminalización en América Latina*, Ocmal / Acción Ecológica, Quito, 2011.

strongly affect the quality of life of the most vulnerable sectors of the population and compromise the livelihood of future generations.

Challenges for organizations and critical thinking

The current process of construction of territoriality takes place in a complex space in which different logics of action and rationalities with different valuations intertwine. In a schematic manner, we can affirm the existence of different territorial logics, dependent on whether we primarily refer to large economic stakeholders (corporations, economic elites), to the state (at its different levels) or to the different social actors organized or intervening in the conflict. The territorial logic of corporations and economic elites is framed in an economic paradigm of commodity production that highlights the importance of transforming the spaces in which the natural goods are found into efficient and productive territories. The state logic, at its different levels, is normally framed within a space of variable geometry that attempts to articulate the vision of natural goods as commodities, and, at the same time, as strategic natural resources (a vision linked to the state control of extractivist profit). This avoids any consideration that includes — as social movements, indigenous organizations and critical intellectuals propose — a perspective that understands them in terms of the commons.

Having said this, it is necessary to recognise the existence of different obstacles, linked to the difficulties associated with movements and spaces of resistance, sometimes fraught with competing demands, and to the persistence of certain social imaginaries in relation to development. One of the difficulties is associated with the persistence of an '*eldoradista*' view of natural goods, extending even into indigenous communities and some social organizations.¹⁹

Another challenge is the disconnect between networks and organizations that confront extractivism — more linked to rural areas and small communities — and

¹⁹ We take this expression from Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta, who stated that the *myth of the surplus* 'is one of the most fundamental and primary in Latin America'. Here Zavaleta, is referring to the '*eldoradista*' myth that 'every Latin American hopes in his soul' for the sudden material discovery (of resources or natural wealth) that would generate surplus like 'magic', 'that in the majority of the cases, has not been used in a balanced way'. While Zavaleta's worries had little to do with environmental sustainability, we believe it is legitimate to recover this thought to reflect on the contemporary return of this foundational and persistent myth of the abundance of natural resources and their advantages, within the framework of a new cycle of accumulation. Therefore, we understand this '*eldoradista*' vision of natural goods as an expression that captures the contemporary developmentalist illusion. See: R. Zavaleta *Mercado: Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia* [1986], Plural, La Paz, 2009.

the urban trade unions that represent important sectors of society and have a strong social role in several countries (Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, among others). The lack of connecting bridges between these movements is almost total, and this contributes to the strong developmentalist imaginary for the workers in large cities, generally unaware of the environmental problems of medium and small localities. In every case, the distance between the large urban centres has contributed to a deepening of the frontiers between rural areas and cities, between the mountains, the jungle and the coasts in countries such as Peru and Colombia; or between the small towns and the big cities in Argentina where the large projects (mining, agribusiness, dams and fracking, among others) only affect the cities indirectly. This is reinforced by processes of territorial fragmentation produced by the implementation of extractivist projects and the consolidation of export enclaves.

In this context, extractivism advances at a vertiginous pace and in many cases, the struggles become immersed in contradictory tendencies, which illustrate the complementarity between a traditional Left, progressive language and the extractivist model. Despite this, the confrontation between Latin American governments, on the one hand, and environmental movements and networks that reject the extractivist policies, on the other, has intensified. At the same time, the criminalization of these struggles and serious incidents of repression have notoriously increased in the region and include a large number of countries: from Mexico and Central America to Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile y Argentina. In this framework of acute social unrest, the dispute over development models has become the fork in the path of the contemporary epoch.

On the other hand, it is no less true that the commodities consensus has opened a gap, a profound wound in Latin American critical thinking, which presented much more unified characteristics in the 1990s amidst the monopolizing ideological tendencies of neoliberalism. As a result, Latin American today contains diverse political and intellectual tendencies, including those which propose a 'sensible and reasonable' capitalism, capable of coordinating extractivist and progressive politics, and critical tendencies that openly question the hegemonic model of extractivist development.

In a context of the return of the notion of development as a meta-narrative, and in keeping with the challenges raised by indigenous thinking, the field of critical thinking has recovered the notion of 'post-development' (coined by Arturo

Escobar²⁰) and elements of a 'strong' notion of sustainability. Along these lines, the perspective of post-development has promoted valuations of nature that emerge from other registers and cosmovisions (Indigenous peoples, environmentalist, eco-communitarian, eco-feminist, decolonial perspectives, and eco-territorial movements among others). In this way, post-developmental thinking rests upon three main challenges: the first is to think and establish a transition agenda towards post-extractivism. In many countries in Latin America debates on alternatives to extractivism and the need to create transition hypotheses have begun, from a multidimensional matrix of frameworks of intervention.²¹ One of the most interesting and exhaustive proposals has been developed by the Latin American Centre of Social Ecology (CLAES), under the direction of Uruguayan thinker Eduardo Gudynas²², which argues for a set of public policies that would rethink the connection between environmental and social issues.

At the same time, Gudynas argues that a set of 'alternatives' within conventional development would be insufficient against extractivism. Therefore, it is necessary to think and create 'alternatives to development'. Finally, Gudynas stresses that it is a discussion that should be undertaken at the regional level, and following what Indigenous peoples call *buen vivir*. In an interesting exercise for the Peruvian case, the economists Pedro Francke and Vicente Sotelo²³ demonstrated the viability of a transition to post-extractivism through two main measures: a tax reform (higher taxes on extractive activities or to mining over-profit) to increase tax revenues and a moratorium on the mining-oil and gas projects that began between 2007 and 2011.

The second challenge refers to the need to look, at local and regional levels, at the successful experiences of alternative development. It is in fact well known that in the fields of social, community and solidarity economics in Latin America there is a range of possibilities and experiences to explore. However, this necessitates a

²⁰ Escobar: «El post-desarrollo como concepto y práctica social» en Daniel Mato (coord.): *Políticas de economía, ambiente y sociedad en tiempos de globalización*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 2005, pp. 17-31.

²¹ Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation: *Más allá del desarrollo*, América Libre, Quito, 2012

²² E. Gudynas: ob. cit.

²³ P. Francke y V. Sotelo: «¿Es económicamente viable una economía post extractivista en el Perú?» en Alejandra Alayza y E. Gudynas (eds.): *Transiciones. Post extractivismo y alternativas al extractivismo en el Perú*, Cepes, Lima, 2011.

previous valuation of these alternative economies and strategic planning to boost the potential of the local economic alternatives that can be found across the continent (agro-ecology, social economy, amongst others. Finally, it also requires a stronger role for local communities and a stronger intervention by the state (excluding any objective or pretence of political tutelage).

The third challenge is to advance an idea of transformation that creates a 'horizon of desirability', in terms of styles and quality of life. A large part of the appeal of the notion of development is related to the fact that the patterns of consumption associated with the hegemonic model are ingrained within the population. We are referring here to cultural imaginaries that are sustained by both the conventional idea of progress and the idea of 'quality of life'. That is, today the definition of what is a 'better life' has more to do with demands for the 'democratization' of consumption than with the need to undertake a cultural change in consumption patterns and our relation to the environment, based in a different theory of what social needs are.

In sum, post-development thinking today faces many challenges, paradoxes and tensions. These are linked to the process of the 'environmentalization' of social struggles, as well as, to be more precise, the more radical approaches of critical thinking. Nonetheless, the discussion on post-extractivism has been opened and will probably become one of the greatest debates not only in Latin American thought of the twenty-first century, but for the our societies as a whole.

Notes

Author's note: This article builds upon several ideas presented in the book edited by Gabriela Massuh: *Renunciar al bien común. Extractivismo y (pos)desarrollo en América Latina* (Mardulce, Buenos Aires, 2012) and in a text published in the journal of the Social Observatory of Latin America («Consensus de los *Commodities*, giro ecoterritorial y pensamiento crítico latinoamericano» en *osal* No 32, 9/2012). For the expression 'commodities consensus' I have been freely inspired by the title of an editorial of the magazine *Crisis* from July 2011, <www.revistacrisis.com.ar/El-consensode-los-commodities.html>.