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Introduction to the Special Issue: "Water and (neo)extractivism in Latin America"

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It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

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Introduction to the Special Issue: "Water and (neo)extractivism in Latin America"

This is the first time Alternautas devotes an entire issue to the theme of water, a natural resource which is at the core of the debates on the kind of development model Latin American countries engage into. Indeed, water resources are at the core of numerous conflicts in which antagonist visions of development are revealed. To name just a few among those that have received extensive international scholarly attention are the 'Water War' against the privatization of drinking water in Bolivia (Olivera & Lewis, 2004; Perreault, 2005), the mobilizations against the mega-projects of hydro-electricity in Brazil (Fearnside, 2006, 2013, 2014) and those against the pollution of the Cajamarca water basin by the mining company Minera Yanacocha in Peru (Bebbington & Bury, 2009).

Historically and up until today, the different perspectives on water adopted in national public policies have often echoed international trends (Gentes, this issue). The "technical" understanding of water management promoted through dam construction in the 1980s (Biswas & Tortajada, 2001) was complemented with a trend towards economic liberalization of water rights in the 1990s (McKenzie & al. 2003; Conca, 2005). In parallel, these trends often disregarded the livelihoods of local populations (Delmotte, this issue), who in many occasions organized opposition movements and associated with environmental and human rights activist groups (Castro, 2008), although such coalitions were not always possible (Travieso; Nicolas Artero, this issue). Some of these movements are claiming water as a common good

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associated with collective management, and as a human right (Bakker, 2007; Boelens, 2008). They are also defending the plural natures of water resources beyond its biophysical characteristics (Roca-Servat, Bonelli & Bueno de Mesquita, this issue). Tensions from the past have crossed with contemporary struggles against the consolidation of water as part of the 'commodities consensus' (Svampa, 2015).

Indeed, in the last years, the Latin-American region has experienced rising pressures from nation-states in a (neo)extractivist tendency on water resources (Ávila-García, 2015). This tendency reconnects and deepens patterns of extractivism from the past. We understand here (neo)extractivism as referring to the Latin American states' justification of the exploitation of natural resources on the need to finance social development programs (Acosta, 2013; Andrade, 2015). This tendency consolidates natural resources marketization implemented by states beyond the private sector (Swyngedouw, 2005), turning the perspective into a quasi-consensual one, as Svampa (2015) points out. However, some authors point to "the end of the progressive cycle" in Latin America (see the Dossier in Alternautas), partly due to the failures most left-wing governments faced to implement sustainable development policies, and to go beyond extractivist models from the past.

At the same time, several countries in the region now count with participatory instances for water management that open up new opportunities of inclusion for populations traditionally excluded from water policies. Additionally, various governments have recognized customary rights, giving more space to traditional uses over water, as Seemann (2016) discusses (Tejada, this issue). Moreover, the up-scaling of water community networks has contributed to generate legal reforms in the water sector and to increase autonomy for local populations (Romano, 2016; Hoogesteger & al. 2016). These institutional reforms have been influenced through multi-scale mobilizations led by water activist movements, conducting to victories over extractivist mega-projects, for example in Brazil (Da Rocha & Oliveira, this issue).

We are happy to share with our readers a series of seven articles from diverse disciplinary perspectives – including anthropology, archaeology, political science,

development studies and critical sociology and geography – showing the diversity of existing approaches to study water (neo)extractivism. Moreover, the special issue covers a large geographic area, with two cases from Central America – Honduras and Guatemala – and five cases from South American countries – Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia.

In addition to their common focus on water related topics, several parallelisms can be drawn between the different articles. On the one hand, the works of Gentes, Nicolas Artero, and Tejada's review of Seemann, discuss the distinct effects of legal reforms on water movements and organizations' inclusion in decision-making policies as well as on the movements' internal cohesion. While Seemann explores the issue of legal pluralism in Peru, Gentes focuses on "political extractivism" in Honduras, and Nicolas Artero analyses the new spaces for political participation created by water reforms in Chile. On the other hand, the works of Roca-Servat, Bonelli & Bueno de Mesquita, Delmotte, Travieso, and Da Rocha & De Oliveira, explore the existence of diverging imaginaries on water resources and the resulting conflicts in a context of (neo)extractivism. While Roca-Servat, Bonelli and Bueno de Mesquita analyse the diverse natures of water in environmental conflicts, Delmotte focuses on the conflictive uses on water for artisanal gold mining or forest conservation in the Peruvian Amazon, Travieso explores the opposed visions of environmental protection and development on the Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, and finally, Rocha and Oliveira go beyond the myth of the virgin Amazon forest used to justify mega-infrastructure building in Brazil. In general, all the authors highlight both the attempts to establish durable alternatives in water management, and the difficulty to profoundly change the (neo)extractivist structures.

We open this special issue with a translation from Portuguese by Louise Cardoso de Mello of Bruna Cigaran da Rocha and Vinicius Honorato de Oliveira's work (2016), *Virgin Forest? The Long Human Past of the Tapajós Valley*. From an anthropological and archaeological perspective, the authors explore the long pre-colonial history of the Tapajós River and its legacies in the Amazon region of Brazil, which are understudied. Instead, the government reproduces the myth of a virgin forest without history to justify the building of a hydroelectric complex without previous

consultation. To give the full context of this case it is important to highlight the recent victory of the indigenous communities Munduruku over the Brazilian government, leading to the cancelation of the project[3]. The authors finally call for the official recognition of the archaeological heritage in the region.

The paper by Chloé Nicolas Artero, *Chilean Water Conflicts Making New Water Territories: The End of Extractivist Modes of Accumulation?*, focuses on the case study of the Elqui River watershed in Chile, and the system of water rights distribution, which is paradigmatic of the commoditization and privatization of water resources in Latin America. The author analyses the process of "accumulation by dispossession" of small farmers and shows how the neoliberal water management framework leads to the concentration of water rights in extractive industries. Using an analysis inspired in Simmel (2010) and his positive view of conflicts, the author explores how water community organizations in rural areas have tried to generate new spaces for collective action. However, the author also mentions the difficulties faced by community organizations to bridge their social struggles and impulse a significant change in the dominant development paradigm in Chile.

Focusing also on water rights, Laura Tejada offers an insightful review of the book of Miriam Seemann (2016), *Water Security, Justice and the Politics of Water Rights in Peru and Bolivia*. Based on the comparison between two countries with radically different institutional frameworks, Peru and Bolivia, Seemann highlights the inequalities and potential conflicts associated with water rights formalization processes, from which peasant and indigenous communities have traditionally been excluded. The reader might expect a better inclusion of water customary rights in the Bolivian institutional framework, due to the implementation of intercultural reforms in the country; yet, both Peru and Bolivia are confronted with the limited integration of water rights and the resulting loss of local diversity. The formalization of water rights is often associated with (neo)extractivist policies on water resources, with states seeking to increase their control on the rural sector. Laura Tejada goes along with the

[3] http://amazonwatch.org/news/2016/0804-brazilian-government-cancels-mega-dam-on-the-amazons-tapajos-river

conclusion of the book stating that the legal recognition of water rights doesn't automatically lead to the reduction of water conflicts and instead, reproduces the status quo in development models.

With the paper by Céline Delmotte, *Small-scale gold mining, mercury exposure and the Struggle for the Right to Water in the Peruvian Amazon*, we focus on the particular Amazonian region of Madre de Dios in Peru. This work takes an original approach by focusing on artisanal gold mining – as opposed to the traditional focus on large-scale mining companies. The study uncovers the conflicts between several interest groups: the miners on the one hand, and a consortium of forest, ecotourism and conversation concessionaries on the other. The author uses the concept of "livelihood-based environmentalism" introduced by Bebbington (2009) to go beyond the traditional divide between development and conservation. Indeed, in this case study, there is no organized resistance of communities, who prefer dealing directly with miners to obtain financial compensations.

In the next article, *Lake Atitlán, Guatemala: "The Possibility of a Shared World"*, Emilio Travieso explores the conflicts around the options for the treatment of sewerage in Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, where around 300.000 people from different ethnic groups live. The lake has suffered from eutrophication problems in 2009 and 2015, as the settlements around it possess no sewerage treatment. The territory is divided among different actors defending conflictive views on the solutions to provide for the preservation of the lake. A few wealthy, non-indigenous populations, as well as vacation homeowners, control the hillsides and develop monocultures based on fertilizers. They take advantage of their links with the government to impose a technical solution in the form of a wastewater plant. Yet, indigenous peoples and social movements are suspicious of this project, in a context where the government is highly corrupted. These groups demand decentralized – although different – models. The author discusses the power dynamics and struggles involved in the reproduction of dominant structures for profit and power in the case of large-scale infrastructures, and the emergence of counter-alternatives by "hope movements".

We continue with an article by Denisse Roca-Servat, Cristóbal Bonelli and Mourik Bueno de Mesquita, *The many natures of water in Latin-American neo-extractivist conflicts*. The authors start their reflection with the illustration of the Standing Rock movement led by the Sioux in United States against a pipeline project, in which some leaders consider natural resources as "relatives". The authors bring to the discussion the important ontological debate on "nature" as one and singular, and "culture" as plural. Inspired by the works of Annemarie Mol (1999), they argue for the plural natures of water, as an object playing a central role in environmental conflicts. They defend a "multi-natural" framework that goes beyond the "multicultural" approach often adopted. Additionally, they bring an important contribution to research practice: during the venue of a workshop in Colombia, they asked students to enact different roles, including the lake affected by potential oil exploitation in the case of the U'wa conflict. The authors conclude on the importance of participatory action research to enhance dialogue at the encounter of different worlds, which often constitutes the core of water conflicts.

Finally, we close the special issue with an article by Ingo Gentes, *Fields of "Political Extractivism" of Human Rights to Water and Sanitation: the Case of Honduras, 2014-2015*. In this study, Gentes analyses the impacts of an institutional reform to implement the National Plan for Water and Sanitation (PLANASA), inspired by the New Public Management framework, on local communities and within the Honduran government. The author uses a Bourdieusian approach, to delimitate political and social champs in the building process of the reform. He analyses the limits of the process in terms of disarticulation between the central government and local governments, and the lack of effective inclusion of local populations, illustrated by the concept of "political extractivism". Finally, the author highlights that the law is a collective construction that requires deliberation to be accepted.

We take the opportunity of this special issue to encourage our readers to enter into a dialogue with the authors and make comments on the blog. Alternautas seeks to be a space for dialogue and exchange of ideas, and we believe this special issue presents a good opportunity to do so.

We wish you a very happy reading!

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