Viewpoint
Global extractive imperative: from local resistance to unburnable fuels

Since the early 2000s, there has been an ‘extractive imperative’ in Latin America that made intensified extraction the policy solution to all socioeconomic challenges. More recently, a similar consensus has emerged in a diversity of political, economic and geographical contexts – such as Turkey, India and the United States – that makes it possible to speak of a ‘global extractive imperative’. The imperative is especially evident in settings also characterised by authoritarian neoliberalism and the burden of resistance against extractivism is suffered overwhelmingly by marginalised communities at extractive frontiers. Emerging efforts to declare a share of existing reserves of fossil fuels ‘unburnable’ would not only help make progress towards tackling the climate crisis, it would also broaden the societal bases of societal struggles against capitalism’s extractive excesses.

Keywords: extractivism, capitalism, Latin America, unburnable fuels, environmental justice

Introduction
The intensification of the social metabolism has ushered in the Anthropocene and a growing consciousness that the prevailing capitalist mode of production is in need of radical change (de Molina and Toledo, 2014, 44). As Escobar has argued, it was especially in Latin America that this sentiment found concrete manifestation in ‘counter-hegemonic processes [...] at the level of the State’ in the election of progressive governments that came to be known as the ‘left-turn’ or the ‘pink tide’ (Escobar, 2010, 1; also see Cameron, 2009; Arsel et al., 2014). The turn was rooted in widespread popular discontent over the performance of the neoliberal regimes that dominated the region since the 1980s (Silva, 2009) and was also supported by movements struggling for (varieties of) environmentalism, the empowerment of indigenous people, alternative development strategies as well as alternatives to development. Surprisingly, instead of turning away from extractivist development, these progressive governments created the conditions where extractive industries would prosper and increase their operations even in the face of local, national and transnational resistance motivated by socioenvironmental concerns and underpinned by alternative development models. We have called this phenomenon the ‘extractive imperative’ (Arsel et al., 2016), a
characterising feature of Latin American development ideology and policy in the early twenty-first century.

At the time, the ‘extractive imperative’ seemed to be mainly a Latin American phenomenon, one that was particularly pronounced within a certain left-wing statist approach to development. However, the extractive imperative is in fact far more generalised and can be observed in policies across the political spectrum in different geographies and points in time. The heavy reliance on extractives-led economic growth transcends the left–right spectrum in countries such as Turkey and India and escapes the ‘developing country phenomenon’ characterisation, for example becoming prominent in the United States during the Trump administration. This global extractive imperative is notable not just because it defies – as it did in the case of Latin America – growing signs that environmentalism is gaining stronger foothold in electoral democracies especially in relation to climate change. It is also noteworthy that the latest turn to extractivism around the world has often been underwritten by a concomitant authoritarian turn that brought to power leaders such as Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines and Trump in the United States. These leaders have deployed increasingly authoritarian measures in support of intensified extractivism and against civil society actors challenging them (Arsel et al., forthcoming).

As with Latin America, the global extractive imperative has resulted in oppositional struggles pitting a variety of movements against authoritarian governments. Some of these – such as the movement against Keystone and Dakota Access Pipelines in the United States (Whyte, 2017) and the Gezi Park uprising in Turkey (Özkaynak et al., 2015) – have gone on to achieve national, regional and even international recognition. While they have had considerable impact both in terms of their efficacy to overturn or at least delay projects and in terms of galvanising stronger progressive networks, global extractivism is continuing mostly unabated (Steffen et al., 2015). The challenge and apparent inability of these movements to reverse extractivist dynamics is rooted in the ideological embeddedness of extractive industries and the persistence of extractivist development models (Pellegrini, 2018).

This ideological dimension is a function of political economy dynamics created by the opportunity to generate, capture, redistribute and invest rents engendered by extraction. These dynamics themselves are shaped by a number of interlinked factors, such as the rise of China, intensified automation of production, energy transitions and their attendant changes in production and consumption (cf. Arboleda, 2020). While these reflect the deepening of global capitalist relationships – by connecting more and more disparate spaces together and opening up new frontiers of accumulation – they also continue to strengthen the power of nation-states that act as an interface between global capital and frontline communities.

Therefore, as the global extractive imperative continues to dominate, the challenge is to imagine new strategies towards the achievement of environmental justice that
do not see resistance to extractivism as the domain solely of frontline communities. Rather there is need to reorient environmental justice struggles by broadening and generalising them with a view to supporting frontline resistance in the economic peripheries with efforts to abolish the primacy of extractivism at the centre.

In the following section we summarise the extractive imperative in Latin America and suggest that it is a continuing condition. We then turn to its global manifestation, discussing some of its key features and its distinguishing characteristics. While these two sections treat extractivism as a broader phenomenon – including fossil fuels, minerals and even agro-commodities – the penultimate section focuses more narrowly on fossil fuels as part of a discussion of supply side initiatives (Lazarus and van Asselt, 2018; Piggot, 2018) that can be the basis of multi-scalar attempts at confronting climate change in particular and global extractive imperative in general. The concluding section underscores the necessity to articulate nuanced scholarly analyses of the motivations underpinning extractivism and to develop political strategies that can respond to capitalism’s inherent unsustainability while recognising the material needs of local communities.

**Extractive imperative in Latin America**

The extractive imperative in early twenty-first-century Latin America was generated within a very specific context: high commodity prices, a wave of left-wing electoral victories marking an arguably radical departure from two decades of neoliberal hegemony, and geopolitical transformations (especially but not limited to the rise of China (Mohan, 2021)) that created the possibility of new forms of South–South cooperation (Arsel et al., 2016). The combination of these conditions presented progressive governments, for the first time since the 1970s, with an opportunity to capitalise on high commodity prices and to implement ambitious changes to extractive contracts to increase the state’s share (including, in some cases, outright nationalisation of non-renewables) (Pellegrini, 2012; 2016; Revette, 2017). Opportunity and ambition came together in attempts to change the productive structure of the commodity-centred economies towards higher value-added activities through public infrastructural programmes and sectoral investments to expand the productive base of the economy. The infrastructural programmes also served to improve life quality of the citizens and were matched by social policies, especially in the relatively novel form of conditional cash transfers and more traditional investments in health and education (Pellegrini, 2018; Fischer, 2020). These were the dynamics that marked the imperative since the opportunity to fund these transformative projects were generated primarily by the rents generated by extractive industries.

The extractive imperative is an ideological phenomenon with political consequences: it is a constitutive element of a development theory that envisages lever-
aging on natural resources extraction to fuel socioeconomic development. Taking this possibility and considering the ‘unique’ window of opportunity offered by the context, together with the need to fulfil many societal needs, development through extraction becomes a necessity. One implication of this development model is that extraction is functional to development, and the two become essentially conflated. Former president Rafael Correa’s exhortation that Ecuadorians should not be like ‘beggars sitting on a sack of gold’ and should exploit their natural resources to fuel the development process illustrates this sentiment (Dosh and Kligerman, 2009; Morley, 2017). Opposition movements, questioning extraction itself, or the way it takes place or the way rents are redistributed (Pellegrini and Arsel, 2018) have been met with ridicule and criminalisation with resistance to extractive projects often getting treated as a terrorist activity (Calapaqui, 2012; Dosh and Kligerman, 2009; Zibechi, 2011).

The birth of the imperative set in motion a political economy dynamic that became independent from its initial enabling conditions. The decline in commodity prices that started in 2014 reined in to a certain extent the ambitions of radical economic transformation, and austerity programmes again resurfaced in the Latin American political landscape together with the predictable corollary of unrest and resistance (Papyrakis and Pellegrini, 2019). Nevertheless, the imperative persisted and became manifest through a regional race to the bottom. The changes introduced included reduced taxation, relaxed socioenvironmental regulations and generally a decreased role of the state in managing and appropriating rents (Ballón et al., 2017). Thus, the decline in commodity prices was met with policy changes that attempted to make extraction still attractive by reducing costs for public and private companies operating the extractive sector, often at the expense of implementing regulations aiming at reducing the negative impacts of extractive activities on society and on the environment.

When it comes to understanding the logic underpinning the persistence of the imperative, it is crucial to note that past policies made state budgets dependent on extraction rents. The practical market implication of this dependence is that the supply of commodities does not follow a standard upward slope, as a function of prices, but follows an upward trend as a function of time – that is, it needs to increase over time even if prices are declining. Paradoxically, the individual country contributions to uncoordinated increases of supply in the global market further accentuate the declining trend of commodity prices – a phenomenon known as immiserising growth (Arsel et al., 2019; Shaffer, 2016). Nevertheless, in Latin America the extractive imperative has survived the first generation of politicians that contributed to establishing it. The imperative continues to characterise ideology and concrete policy decisions of more moderate leaders, such as President Lenín Moreno, who followed Correa in Ecuador, and perhaps even more significantly, Alberto Arce, who was elected in 2020 as the president of Bolivia. Arce’s election represents the continuity of the extractive imperative not only because he was Morales’s minister of economics and ran for
president with Morales’s vocal support from exile in Argentina, but also because one of his central electoral promises was to continue with the ambitious project of industrialising Bolivia’s rich lithium reserves in order to create 100,000 new jobs.

**The global extractive imperative**

While the extractive imperative in Latin America took shape in a very particular set of circumstances, similar dynamics can be observed in a variety of other contexts, making it possible to speak of a ‘global extractive imperative’. The global extractive imperative has been discussed in the literature in a variety of different settings, including Turkey (Adaman et al., 2017), India (Adhikari and Chhotray, 2020), Brazil (Saes and Bisht, 2020), sub-Saharan Africa (Klosek, 2018), and, perhaps surprisingly, the United States (Fitz-Henry, 2018, Kojola, 2019).

The presence of an extractive imperative outside the Latin American context can be illustrated very clearly by the case of Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP in its Turkish acronym). While the AKP’s religious and sociocultural policies (e.g. the lifting of the ban on headscarves in public spaces and de-criminalisation of education and broadcast in Kurdish) distinguished it from its predecessors, its economic policies continued very much along the neoliberal model put in place during the 1980s. During the previous two decades, Turkey had already privatised much of its industrial sector. The AKP therefore turned its gaze on the rural sphere, demolishing both state support for agrarian livelihoods and existing legislative infrastructure for environmental protection.

The onslaught of extractive capital into the Turkish countryside has been met with strong resistance from local communities. In response, the AKP government has pursued several different tactics to overcome societal resistance. One approach has been to use the heavy hand of the state to subdue emerging movements whose peaceful protests were met with violence from the police and the rural military force, the jandarma. Another has been to accuse environmentalists and other social actors resisting extractive processes as working against national interests (Arsel et al., 2015). Activists have been represented either as unwitting peons or active, treasonous, participants in an international conspiracy that uses environmentalism and ethnic concerns as an excuse to undermine Turkey’s economic development. The ongoing imprisonment without trial of Osman Kavala, the director of an influential foundation promoting sustainability, democratisation and human rights, with fabricated charges of working to undermine the state is arguably the most prominent example of this tactic (Arsel et al., forthcoming). The third and possibly the most effective strategy has been to use the economic gains from extractive revenues to secure consent. To the extent that dislocation of peasants off their land and their agricultural livelihoods has created political grievances, the AKP was able to win these
communities over by creating jobs either in the extractive sector itself (e.g. working in coal mines) or in the construction sector (e.g. building the roads that carried the resources to ports and urban centres). This has resulted in a political system in which AKP was able to win a series of elections through the twin engines of extraction and construction, which has taken the form of an imperative as stopping (or slowing them down) would result in the AKP and Erdogan losing their political legitimacy (Adaman et al., 2019).

Whilst this ‘extraction at any cost’ approach to development connects the Latin American experience with the rest of the world, there are also a number of significant differences. Chief among these is that the global imperative has manifested itself most prominently within countries experiencing the emergence of a new right-wing authoritarianism, which Arsel et al. (forthcoming) characterise as authoritarian neoliberal developmentalism. This trend is characterised by such leaders as Duterte in the Philippines (Ramos, 2020), Bolsonaro in Brazil (Saad-Filho and Boffo, 2020), Modi in India (Sinha, 2021) and Erdogan in Turkey (Adaman et al., 2019). While they have all been elected via democratic elections, their mode of governance has been characterised by anti-democratic and authoritarian practices. Among other examples, they have tried to quash the freedom of press, aggressively pursued and punished their critics in civil society through litigation, declared environmentalists and marginalised communities as agents of foreign interests. Not only did they explicitly promise such measures in their electoral campaigns, they have also justified them as necessary for the fulfilment of their promise of accelerated economic development. Similar to ‘left turn’ leaders of Latin America, these authoritarian leaders have interpreted development in a Rostowian way, both in the sense that development was seen as progression between different stages that took countries from ‘primitive’ underdevelopment to ‘advanced’ industrial production and that these steps were differentiated by the quantitative increase in a narrow set of material indicators. Intensified extraction has therefore been key to their development strategies.

Another key difference is that whereas the extractive imperative developed in Latin American countries can be characterised as ‘resource rich’ and dependent on primary commodity exports, the global imperative has seen the rise of extractivism in countries such as India or Turkey that are not historically associated with mining or hydrocarbon extraction. As such, the justification often used by Latin American leaders that intensified extraction as the only available option and/or as a necessary step toward structural transformation into higher value-added exports (e.g. Bolivian ambition not to simply export lithium ore but to produce batteries for electric vehicles) did not have similar purchase in other regions, and extractivism in authoritarian neoliberal contexts have been justified differently. While their potential to create economic growth has been important, extractivism in the authoritarian neoliberal states has played a particularly important symbolic political role. Specifically, the opening up of resource extraction
has been portrayed as a break from past practice, which leaders such as Trump used to differentiate themselves from their allegedly ‘overly environmentalist’ predecessors. Similarly, the moves towards intensified extractivism has worked as a political tool to confront progressive movements whose protests against them were used by authoritarian leaders as evidence of their anti-national character.

Finally, the global extractive imperative has not been limited to developing countries. The United States during the Trump years showed a similar approach to economic policy. Trump had not only promised to overturn modest attempts to phase out coal mining and coal power plants but also doubled down on oil extraction, as demonstrated by his administration’s position on the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines pipeline as well as potential drilling in Alaska. Similar to other right-wing authoritarian leaders, he too vilified environmentalists and marginalised groups, hectored and sought to intimidate them in public fora, and used the bureaucratic and legislative power of the state to override societal resistance. For Kojola (2019), Trump’s claims of defending coal mining can be seen as part of a broader populist project aimed at leveraging on class-based and racialised grievances of white working-class miners.

Just as the extractive imperative in the Latin American context, global extractive interactive is more than a set of policies and outcomes that emerged in multiple countries independently from each other. As such, it can be seen as a particular moment in contemporary capitalism where ever-present systemic necessity of extractivism is intensified. While there have been previous such moments, the current conjuncture is distinguished by a variety of factors, including its political legitimisation and its ability to defy concerns for ecological sustainability.

**Extractive imperative and resistance**

The above discussion shows that the extractive imperative is not simply an economic policy deployed to fit a particular set of conditions but rather an overall ideology of governance. Ideologies do not operate simply at the level of the state but can be internalised by communities at different scales. While many communities have resisted the extractive imperative – whether in Latin America or elsewhere – a surprisingly large number have not. While not engaging in conflict cannot automatically be equated to acceptance, it is also important to note that the binary between ‘miners [who] see ore bodies and development opportunities that render landscapes productive, civilized, and familiar’ and ‘indigenous communities [who] see places of ancestral connection and subsistence provision’ reproduces and oversimplifies a complex set of factors down to an ‘Avatar narrative’ (Bainton, 2020, 1). In other words, the fact that some communities do not reject extractive projects cannot be ascribed solely to their powerlessness in the face of global capital and national states. Similarly, the motivations of
those who welcome or initiate extractive projects require a nuanced analysis that goes beyond facile interpretations concerning greed, corruption or false consciousness.

Furthermore, it is important not to see the task of resisting the extractive imperative as the sole duty of marginalised communities at the frontlines of extractive frontiers. There are also highly significant movements that challenge the extractive imperative at other scales. For instance, there are movements that confront extractivism by opposing projects focused on the intensive utilisation of resources (e.g. opposition to the construction of coal-fired power plants, Arsel et al., 2015). There are also significant attempts to oppose infrastructural investment projects for the transportation of fossil fuels from extraction to consumption locations (e.g. opposition to the transport of coal, Harrison, 2020). Furthermore, there are grassroots attempts to alter overall consumption and conservation practices that shift the burden of resistance away from extractive frontiers by forming and contributing to larger international networks, as powerfully exemplified by the climate-motivated school strikes evolving into the ‘Fridays for the future’ movement (Kühne, 2019) and the YASunidos movement to promote the protection of the Yasuni in the Ecuadorian Amazon and of its inhabitants (Coryat and Lavinas Picq, 2016).

Overall, these movements have tackled the whole fossil fuel cycle through various forms of resistance and have anticipated the surge in interest over policy proposals on unburnable fossil fuels (Jakob and Hilaire, 2015; Leaton, 2012; Newell and Simms, 2020; Pellegrini et al., 2021). The issue of putting a cap on the supply of fossil fuels emerges from the logic of limits (Clark and Foster, 2010; Vira, 2015), a classic theme in environmental thought (Georgescu Roegen, 1975; Daly, 1991), and is common-sensical for environmental movements that have adopted the slogan ‘keep fossil fuels in the ground’ (Starr, 2019). Carbon budgets, understood as the amount of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions that the atmosphere can absorb before exceeding a certain level of warming (Meinshausen et al., 2009) are the embodiment of the concept of limits for climate policy. Given the amount of CO2-equivalent emissions that would be generated by the combustion of existing fossil fuel reserves, most of them must be left in the ground (Jakob and Hilaire, 2015). While the concept of unburnable fossil fuels puts a constraint on the ability of countries with fossil fuel reserves to extract them (effectively amounting to a non-extractive imperative) the total carbon budget has been depleted by accumulative emissions originating mostly from the developed world. The excessive use of carbon budget puts the rich nations in a condition of ecological debt vis-à-vis developing countries. This debt can form the basis for funding alternatives to extractivism (applied to fossil fuels) by providing compensation for foregoing extraction (Pellegrini et al., 2021).
Conclusion

The combination of capitalism’s insatiable demand for resources and the continuing strength of neoliberal authoritarianism suggests a bleak picture for the sustainability of the global economy. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while commendable for recognising the need for concentrated action, are serving mainly to extend rather than overturn the extractivist logic of capitalism (Hope, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to form a nuanced understanding of extractivism and its underpinning motives. For instance, the above mentioned plans of the new Bolivian administration to expand lithium extraction while struggling to gain a fairer share of global value chains need to be distinguished from cynical efforts of corporations such as Exxon from trying to squeeze as much profit from oil extraction as possible while continuing to deny the urgency of climate change.

The fundamental unsustainability of the capitalist system of production and its built-in socioeconomic inequalities requires a systemic transition away from the prevailing global imperative of ever expanding and deepening extraction. Within this context, there is an urgent need to build on existing environmental justice struggles to challenge the global extractive imperative. Taking climate change as a reference point, efforts to declare a significant portion of resources that have not yet been extracted as ‘unburnable’ would help redistribute the burden of resistance away from the shoulders of marginalised communities. Matched by carefully designed compensation mechanisms, they can not only disrupt the extractive imperative but also create the conditions of a just and sustainable development emanating from the margins.

At first glance, these two approaches – appreciating the importance of emancipatory development and contributing to the urgent task of opposing the global extractive imperative – might seem contradictory. The urgent task facing scholars aiming to productively engage the unburnable fuels agenda (as well as other similar attempts to establish moratoria of other extractive initiatives, for e.g. see Spalding, 2018) is to help develop and support political strategies that can respond simultaneously to local needs of autonomy, emancipation and justice and the global necessity to overcome capitalism’s inherent inability to operate within natural limits.

References


