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Old extractivism and new questions?
Slow paths towards agrarian change in Colombia's coal
complex.

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Old extractivism and new questions? Slow paths towards agrarian change in Colombia's coal complex.

*Sergio Coronado*¹

1 Introduction

During the last decade, a significant number of studies analyzing the politics of the new extractivism in Latin America was released. Many of the current studies focus on the impacts and contested politics in which the commodities' supercycle (De Echave, 2016) took place on the materiality of rural settings. Others, emphasize on the politics behind the design of extractivist public policies, which are influenced by foreign governments, international financial institutions, and transnational mining companies. Paradoxically, the implementation of such policies matched with the transition towards progressist governments in the region.

Nevertheless, territorial conflicts caused by mining extraction already existed in Latin American rural settings but were not as visible as they are now. Probably, one of the outcomes of new-extractivism related to struggles, research, advocacy, and literature, is the creation of a window of opportunity for the expression of contentious politics of previous territorial conflicts that were not visible years before. However, the frames used by activist and advocates for addressing the conflicts caused by neoextractivism: territorial rights, Free, Prior and Informed Consent - FPIC, popular consultations, among others, are not always suitable for understanding previous mining conflicts and advocating for people and communities affected by them. At the beginning of the 80s, when such disputes arose, the frame used to analyze was related to the agrarian question of land and labor; currently, after 30 years of extraction, such conflicts could be understood by using the analytical tools from the field of political ecology.

That is the case of territorial conflicts occurred within the agrarian transformation context of the Colombian Caribbean region, where one of the largest complexes of coal mining in the world is located. Colombia is the fifth coal exporter in the world. In 2016, the country sold to international markets USD 4.4 billion, which represents 5.9% of the global extraction. 89% of such production, representing 80.965 thousands of tons, were extracted from a very localized rural cluster composed of around ten municipalities of the Cesar and La Guajira province and inhabited by mostly indigenous and peasant communities. The most substantial extraction is performed by multinational companies which are now facing new demands from affected and displaced villagers that lost their lands and livelihoods in a slow and violent process, during the last 30 years. Such claims include environmental compensation and reparation, rural resettlement, guarantees of non-repetition, among others. The labor question, used by the communities at the beginning of the extractive projects, is now absent within the discourse and frame used by affected communities.

With this paper, I attempt to track the transitions and permanencies from the classic questions of land and labor into the new questions of territory and environment, issues that are intertwined with the modern development discourses. I will do this by analyzing the agrarian transformation process and the contestation trajectories deployed by peasants, black and indigenous communities affected by mining projects in the Colombian Caribbean region, but also by considering the transformation of

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worker's contestation. First, I'll provide a general overview of the mining sector in Colombia, analyzing the transformations. Secondly, I will explore how social scientists have used the notion and categories such as neo-extractivism to analyze emerging environmental and territorial conflicts caused by mining activities in the Latin American context and to what extent such debate is suitable to understand not-so-new but similar disputes in the Colombian Caribbean region. Thirdly, I will contrast such theoretical notions with the transformation of the frames of contention deployed by several social groups regarding the impacts of coal mining in the studied region. Finally, I attempt to analyze how the accumulation of socioenvironmental effects caused by large-scale coal mining also brought transformations of the demands from social movements and created new agendas, which are more closely connected with those by political ecologist during the last decade.

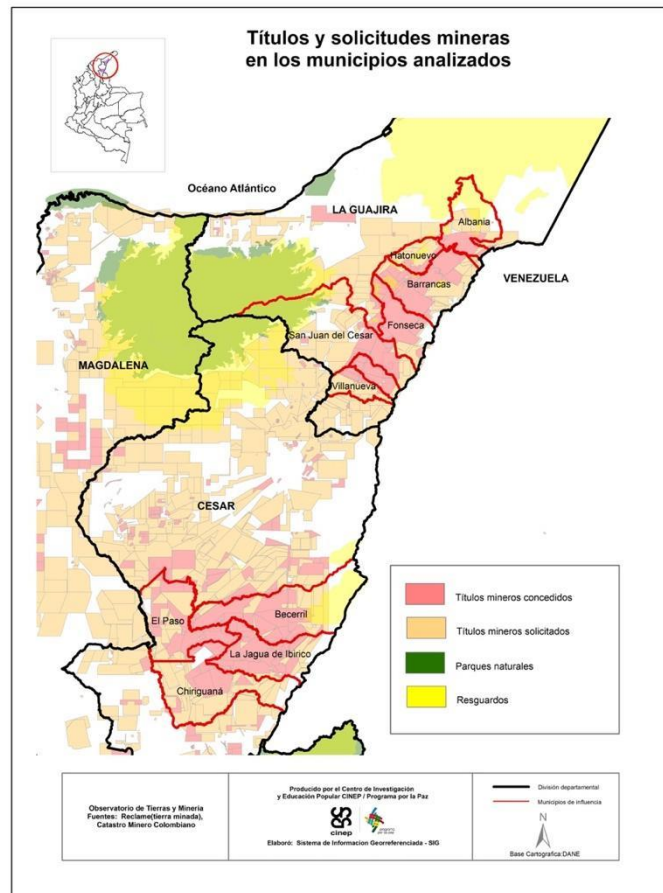
2 Mining sector in Colombia: an overview

The mining sector in Colombia is experiencing a significant momentum. Country's commodities exports rose from 66% of the total exports in 2000 to represent over 82% of the total exports in 2011 (Burchardt & Dietz, 2014). In 2016 Colombia's thermal coal exportations reached its highest peak by rising to 88 million tons². The country is the 5th largest exporter of thermal coal by selling in 2016 US\$4.4 billion, representing 5.9% of the world extraction³. As mentioned before, the vast majority of this coal is extracted in a very localized territory located in Colombia's Caribbean region: the provinces of La Guajira and Cesar, as shown in map 1:

² <https://www.platts.com/es/latest-news/coal/london/colombian-thermal-coal-exports-rise-9-in-2016-21624989>

³ <http://www.worldstopexports.com/coal-exports-country/>

Map 1: Mining concessions in La Guajira and Cesar, Colombia



In Colombia, mining concessions and extraction had increased significantly during the last 15 years. In general terms, from 2002 to 2010, Colombian expanded to 1089% its area granted with mining concessions. At the end of this year, the nation counted with 5'856.000 hectares under mining concessions, representing 5,13% of the national territory⁴. Although a similar situation could be founded with regards concession for coal mining, the phenomenon is slightly different.

In La Guajira, thermal coal mining dated back to the end of the 70s. At that time, exploration works started with little information given to the local population, mainly indigenous communities and afro-descendant rural villages. Rapidly, “Cerrejón” the former State-owned mining company bought more than 12.600 land hectares to ensure the provision for the expansion of the mining project. Such land concentration process was not exempt of irregularities, mainly because of the procedures deployed by the company and public authorities to transform the legal nature of the land to facilitate its appropriation and further selling to the Company. Furthermore, in some cases, results clear how the Company undermined the current Agrarian legislation to buy those lands and affecting the rights of landless peasants (Cinep, 2016).

Compared with La Guajira, coal mining in Cesar province is more recent, regardless of that the extraction process had increased considerably, and impacts are similar to those already described. Coal mining in Cesar date back to the end of the 80s, when several foreign companies arrived in the region with the expectation to develop mining projects. Currently, almost 50% of coal exports proceeds from

⁴ El Espectador, "Títulos mineros aumentaron 1.089%". Date: 1/12/2011. Available at: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/actualidad/vivir/titulos-mineros-aumentaron-1089-articulo-314536>

this area, and the extraction is carried out by three large companies: Drummond, Glencore-Xstrata and Goldman Sachs.

In coal mining regions, the increase of the area for mining concessions occurred before the expansion that took place in the rest of the country during the decade of the 2000s. Furthermore, while in the rest of the country in such period mining concessions arose, in La Guajira and Cesar, mining concessions declined, with the exemption of a significant mining concession granted in La Guajira in 2008 (Cinep, 2016).

This particularity of the Caribbean coal mining cluster in Colombia allows researchers to develop contrasts and comparisons with what is happening in the rest of the country. Firstly, when analyzing coal extractive industries in Colombia researchers found out that to understand better the conflicts caused by mining its roots must be searched for at least 30 years ago, in the case of La Guajira and 20 years ago in Cesar. Secondly, the responses deployed by social movements and its organizations regarding dealing the impacts of mining throughout more than three decades, challenges new frames constructed to understand current social forces contesting neoextractivism.

Social movements and grassroots level organizations in La Guajira and Cesar had settled during the last decade claims to the State and mining companies demanding compensation for the environmental and social damaged caused by coal mining for over 30 years. Such claims have transformed with the pass of the ages. During the first years of the establishment of those extractive projects, the interest of the social organization was not the protection of the environmental richness or the security of water sources, or even more the compensation for environmental liabilities caused by mining. Current discourses and repertoires deployed by activist differ widely from the demands expressed by local population when the companies started to dig on the ground looking for coal.

Boquerón is a rural village located in Cesar province and inhabited by closely 2.000 persons. In 1995, villagers celebrated an outstanding event: Drummond, a North American mining company, inaugurated the first open-pit coal mine in the region. For the villagers, such an event meant that finally, they would have an opportunity to transform their lives and overcome poverty by having access to a formal and stable job, they expected that all the wealth that the mine planned to produce could benefit them and their village⁵. Similar episodes occurred in different locations within this region. However, although the wealth has been produced and the territory transformed, this not carried positive change in the lives of the rural inhabitants of Boquerón. Currently, given the environmental liabilities caused by open-pit coal mining, this rural village must be resettled because of the air and soil pollutions, the loss of arable land and water sources among other impacts, which added make unsustainable human life in that territory (Cardoso, 2015.).

In coal-mining regions, territorial transformations are the result of more than two decades of extractive activities. Territories, and consequently, livelihoods, forms of social organization, environment, and natural resources and other aspects have experienced severe changes as consequence of the installation and development of large-term mining projects. In La Guajira province, at least 12 rural communities have been displaced or resettled because of the expansion of mining pits (Cinep, 2016).

The particularities of such cases challenge the study of the emergence of new territorial and socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America. On the one hand, the experience of affected villages in Cesar and La Guajira is often used as an example of the liabilities of large-scale mining by activist, scholars, advocates, and politicians to prevent other villages and communities from accepting the entrance of mining companies into their territories. Therefore, in many conflicts and social struggles that arose recently in different parts of the country activist are referring directly to the impacts of

⁵ El Tiempo, "Los pueblos que se tragó el carbón," Date: 23/06/2013. <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-12890273>

mining in Cesar and La Guajira as an undesirable and inevitable outcome of mining activities. On the other hand, the communities affected by mining are demanding reparation for the damage caused by mining activities, and such claims are not necessarily met with other demands and repertoires of mobilization carried out by social movements contesting neoextractivism. I will delve into this issue subsequently.

3 Neoextractivism, labor and land questions in environmental conflicts

In Colombia, the social struggles linked with socioenvironmental conflicts, particularly those caused by mining extraction, had increased significantly during the last decade (Cinep, 2014). However, this is not an inherent characteristic of Colombia as a country, but a tendency confirmed across borders in Latin America. Although many of these struggles are related to the most recent wave of mining concessions and conflicts, the protest that took place in Cesar and La Guajira in Colombia are rooted in extractive endeavors that started almost 30 years before the consensus of the commodities. This concept is employed to explain how Latin American countries questioned financial valorization and moved into large-scale exportation of raw materials (Svampa, 2015).

However, at the end of the 70s when the concepts and notions such as neoextractivism and the consensus of the commodities were not available in the academic literature neither in the political activism. Furthermore, what was behind the claims of local communities at that moment were the classic labor and agrarian questions. In the affected villages, at the end of the 80s, the dwellers' interest was to have access to work opportunities, and the arrival of mining companies to their territory was perceived back then as an alternative to overcome poverty. Contrastingly, after more than 20 years of exploitation, the promise of job creation was not sufficiently delivered, and in the meanwhile the natural resources on which their other livelihoods relied were deprived, privatized or polluted.

El Hatillo is one of those rural communities, like *Boqueron*, where its dwellers must be resettled because of environmental damage and the high risk of acquiring breath diseases. Although we are talking about a small rural village with no more than 600 inhabitants, the impacts suffered by this community are well disseminated and recognized by activists and politicians. One of the claims of the people from El Hatillo is the lack of job positions offered to their inhabitants. After 20 years of mining, no more than 20 adults had access to jobs and were hired by mining companies under the modality of non-permanent positions. At the same time, people from El Hatillo witnessed the transformation of their territory: one of the most dramatic changes was the decrease of arable land in their village. In 1990, the people counted with more than 120 hectares of food crops, in 2013 no land with food crops was available, and many of the soils formerly used to grow food now overlaps with mining pits. Conversely, coal mining operation in Cesar increased 74% between 2000 and 2012 (Cardoso, 2015).

Therefore, land and labor disputes are still at the core of these conflicts caused by coal mining in La Guajira and Cesar, and shouldn't avoid explaining its further developments. Hence, a new question could be raised. To what extent the conceptual and theoretical frames developed to understand the current stage of extraction and trade of natural resources, commonly labeled as neoextractivism, are relevant to analyze the emergence and evolution of conflicts caused by mining extraction that dated back to the 70s? Are there any other appropriate analytical frameworks to understand the appearance and development of such disputes?

During the last decade, neoextractivism became a popular concept among Latin American social scientists. Apparently, one of the reasons explaining such acceptance within academic community is its applicability to frame conflicts emerged after 2000, the age dated for the consensus of the commodities. Principal authors like Eduardo Gudynas, Maristella Svampa, and Alberto Acosta denote the differences between extractivism and neoextractivism. The first concept is used to describe the predominance of extraction of natural resources and nature valorization without distributive

politics: “Extractivism is a mode of accumulation that started to be established on a massive scale 500 years ago” (Acosta, 2013). The second is used to highlight how current governments are using revenues from resource extraction to fight poverty and increase well-being levels among a country’s population (Brand, Dietz, & Lang, 2016).

The debate to what extent both notions are just another expression of an expanded stage of capitalist accumulation remains open. The repeated use of both concepts to address the expansion and evolution of local conflicts caused by disputes over natural resources in Colombia and Latin America is opening the field for more profound theoretical reflections on the links between this recent phenomenon and the evolution of capitalistic structures during the XX Century. My point here is that those conflicts that emerged before the boom of the commodities could be addressed by researchers to understand the bridges between the dynamics of capital accumulation and the expansion and the features of the most recent disputes over natural resources. The agrarian transformation caused by coal mining in La Guajira and Cesar dated back from the increase in foreign investment and the change of mining policies and legal frameworks that took place in Latin America since the beginning of the 90s (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Hence, a new question arose: what are the specific inputs that such newly constructed frame brings for the analysis of previous mining conflicts. The answer is provided by both activists from social movements and scholars: the incorporation of notions, concepts and frameworks from Ecology and environmental sciences to achieve more complex understandings regarding the accumulated impacts of mining and the emergence of new claims by affected communities and social movements.

Although environmentalist movements started to act openly in the global scene since the 50s and pursuing sustainability was already an essential concern at international institutions, many of the most critical and challenging questions regarding the environmental impact and liabilities of coal mining where not raised back then. For instance, in Colombia, one of the most massive open-pit coal mining project does not count with an environmental license because when such project started the environmental legislation didn't exist.

Therefore, it could be stated that the newest and most compelling input brought by scholars using neextractivism as a frame to address mining conflicts is the inclusion and interaction with variables from the field of environmental studies. Once again, this is not only visible in the literature, but also in the struggles and protest deployed by different actors, particularly social movements. In the next section, I'll delve into this issue by using the case of La Guajira and Cesar coal mining complex again.

4 Social protest and new claims in old scenarios

As mentioned before, protest caused by mining increased in Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, during the last 15 years. From the end of the 70s to the first years of the new millennium, an increasing number of conflicts caused by extractive activities were registered in several databases (official and non-governmental) across the region. In Peru, for instance, in 2005 were identified 33 conflicts related to mining and such increase accompanied the rise of investment in this sector (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, mobilizations against mining are not only an expression of the reactions deployed by different actors and stakeholders to the expansion of extractive frontiers. During the first years of mining in La Guajira and Cesar, workers from the mining companies used social mobilization as means to express their claims (Coronado et al., 2014). However, what results interesting is the transformation of the protesting actors, the interaction among them, and the nature of their claims.

Around 2012, different stakeholders from La Guajira province joined in an alliance named Civic Committee for the dignity of La Guajira (in Spanish, “Comité Cívico por la dignidad de La Guajira”).

The main objective of such alliance was to oppose and block the project of expansion of open-pit coal mines that implied the diversion of the most river "Ranchería," which is the most critical water source for region's population. In this alliance, the most diverse stakeholders joined forces against the enforcement of the enlargement project, including affected communities, urban dwellers' associations, worker's unions and the private sector. Finally, the mining company desisted from pursuing with this project, mainly because of coal's low prices in the international markets and the high social costs expressed in the strong opposition from the civil society.

However, this alliance established an important precedent regarding the transformation of the means of struggle deployed by its actors and specifically in the interactions among them. The most emblematic case is the interaction between mining workers and rural villagers affected by mining.

Regarding mining conflicts, the defense of water and rural livelihoods is usually a claim deployed by rural communities to protect their means of living. Several recent disputes caused by mining projects in Colombia include demands for the protection of water sources and the importance to prioritize the access to water for human consumption instead of industrial or extractive uses (Roa, 2013). Contrastingly, in the case of the social mobilization in La Guajira, the defense of water and the protection of livelihoods of rural dwellers was not only supported by rural villagers affected by coal mining. Also, such claims were incorporated in the request sheet presented by workers to their employers, the mining companies, and to the Colombian Labor authorities as the basis for a collective bargaining.

At the end of 2015, the petitions presented by the union "Sintracarbón" comprised four points: salaries improve, health, rights of outsourcing workers and environmental impacts. The last point directly addressed the environmental damages that enlargement projects could entail and the affectation of livelihoods of rural communities, and the demand for "Cerrejón," the mining company, to find alternatives for continuing mining without rivers and streams diversion⁶.

As a response, the company stated that given the fall in the commodities' prices at international markets, stopping the enlargement of coal mines was not affordable and it would entail the loss of 1.200 working places. Although the opposition of the union didn't prevent the enforcement of the enlargement project by the company, the inclusion of that environmental claim results significant for the struggles of other actors, mainly indigenous communities affected by the diversion of the rivers. Currently, the Constitutional Court ordered the company to stop the diversion project and ordered the company and the State authorities to develop a free and informed consultation with several affected indigenous communities.

This outstanding event not only highlights how different actors with different claims and struggles, apparently contradictory, could enhance their position by joining forces with the objective to contest the expansion of extractive frontiers. It also shows how the development of new extractive endeavors combined with accumulated environmental liabilities affecting rural communities generates a creative tension for the emergence of new claims, alliances, and repertoires of protest among working classes.

In other conflicts, notably involving resistance against the installation of new mines, other alliances are emerging. In such cases, the protection of water and the environment is the most important claim, and in such contestation, are taking part not only the sectors that traditionally participate in social mobilization, but also another stakeholder that oppose the installation of large-scale mining for diverse interests and reasons. That situation would be the case of social mobilizations that are framing their strategies by adopting the demand for fulfillment of the right of participation and, consequently carrying out popular consultations to prevent the installation of new large-scale gold mining projects in different provinces located in the Colombian Andes mountains (Dietz & Engels, 2017).

⁶ Portafolio, "Sindicato del Cerrejón dice que continúa en diálogo abierto". Date: 10.02.2016. <http://www.portafolio.co/economia/negociacion-sindicato-cerrejon-2016-491098>

Therefore, new questions are emerging in old contexts, for instance, the issue of agency and the capacity of social mobilization to block, transform or persuade companies and the State to pursue new mining projects or to enlarge existing ones. These further questions are enabling not only alliances across social classes but even more critical, are enhancing coalitions inside working classes that were not struggling together years before. The recent reflection leads to the question of what is new with neoextractivism in countries where redistribution policies are not necessarily being enforced. As a conclusion, I'll try to address the complexity of its extent.

5 Conclusion

The question regarding labor remains to be one of the central issues regarding development endeavors, including in such category mining and other extractive industries. The experience of the Colombian coal mining cluster is relevant to understand the role played by labor in the emergence and evolution of socioenvironmental disputes. Since employment opportunities remain as one of the most important promises of such projects, and the accumulative environmental liabilities are reaching unexpected levels that leads to alternatives such as resettlement, the experience of the cases described results useful to understand how new alliances among social actors are being wrought.

For the clear majority of the population living in mining territories, the promise of having access to job positions and consequently to witness an improvement in their living conditions remains undelivered. That is not only the situation of a small village surrounded by coal mines, like "El Hatillo," but a general trend that could be confirmed across provinces. Although mining companies are indeed creating job positions, only a few local villagers' results hired, and this is the people that claim for higher compensation because they are the most affected in their environment and rural livelihoods. Besides, corporative social responsibility programs enforced by companies results insufficient to attend welfare needs of the local population. Also, because of its narrowed offer labor is not fulfilling its redistributive role, and the environmental conditions are in a constant process of deterioration, affecting rural livelihoods.

The combination of these factors creates the situation that large-scale mining territories are one of the most problematic places to live concerning having access to social services and welfare policies on the one hand, and on the other side are one of worst places to live regarding air quality and other environmental conditions. Moreover, comparative studies had demonstrated how in Colombia living standards are better in coca-production municipalities compared with mining municipalities (Rudas, 2013).

Therefore, in such scenarios the apparent contradiction between the creation of more work opportunities and the protection of the environment and rural poor's livelihoods are currently nuanced, not only by objective conditions described above but particularly because social actors are embracing new positions, claims, and concerns. Nevertheless, local States highly depends on mining revenues for their operation, and that is one of the reasons explaining their passivity in terms of enforcing more significant control over environmental liabilities.

The situation experienced in coal-mining regions is not only promoting new strategies and repertoires of contention for social actors within such areas, but also in others. After the expansion of mining concessions carried out from 2002 to 2009 and the increase in foreign investment in this field, mining companies are arriving in new territories to expand the extractive frontier in places where large-scale mining was not present before.

In such areas, the contestation from social movements to these "neoextractivist" endeavors, is also triggered by the experience from regions like La Guajira and Cesar provinces, where large-scale mining has been present for more than two decades. The agrarian transformation occurred in such

regions caused by coal mining, is one of the arguments used by activists to protect food production, peasant livelihoods and the access to water. In Tolima province, a place on which the mining company "AngloGold Ashanty" expects to open a large-scale gold mine, social organizations are mobilizing to stop that project and to prevent their territory from becoming a new "Cerrejón". Therefore, the accumulative negative impacts of more than two decades of mining are triggering social mobilization not only in the affected areas but also in areas suitable for the expansion of mining frontier. Since development promises remain undelivered in mining regions (notably labor creation and welfare policies), companies and governments are unable to convince local population to accept the implementation of new mining projects. Moreover, in such regions even local authorities are taking the side of the social organizations opposing mining projects.

The effects of such situation are so enormous that currently in Colombia more than 44 municipalities are carrying out popular consultation process to ask the local inhabitants if they agree, or not, with the implementation of mining projects in their territory. Although the effects of such initiatives remain uncertain, the process for its construction is highly innovative, bringing together stakeholders that didn't join forces previously.

Neoextractivism is also about the enlargement of capitalist accumulation: opening new extractive borders and enlarge previous extractive endeavors. However, the expansion of the extractive frontiers is also challenging social actors that attempts to confront such process. The extent to which neoextractivism as a concept applies only for analyzing redistributive policies in extractive contexts remains still unclear. Several authors affirm that the idea is useful to understand new dimensions of mining policies and its social effects. With this paper, I tried to argue that despite classic questions of labor and land should not be avoided in the analysis of current conflicts, the most exciting characteristic of the notion of neoextractivism is the possibility to build bridges between classical political economy analysis and emerging questions, such as the ecological.

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