

Thea Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0848-4 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-0796-8 (cloth)

Three candidates dominated the first round of the Ecuadorian presidential elections of 2021. In first place was Andrés Arauz of Union for Hope (UNES), the protégée of ex-president Rafael Correa, who from 2007 to 2017 had overseen the post-neoliberal “Citizens’ Revolution” in the country. In second place was Guillermo Lasso, a millionaire banker and unreconstructed neoliberal. But the great upset of the election was the strong polling of Pachakutik, the party of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Pachakutik’s candidate, Yaku Pérez, finished just a few thousand votes behind Lasso, dramatically exceeding all prior performances of the party. Given the radical leftist discourses of both UNES and Pachakutik, it might seem self-evident that Pérez would endorse Arauz against Lasso in the second-round run-off, and the strength of his vote would undoubtedly prove decisive. The stage was surely set for the triumphant return of the left to power in Ecuador, after four years of brutal structural adjustment under the presidency of Lenín Moreno, Correa’s chosen successor in 2017, who had subsequently lurched to the right. But instead of endorsing Arauz, Pérez advised his supporters to spoil their ballot papers. 17 percent of the electorate did so, and Lasso narrowly defeated Arauz. Rather than joining forces to vanquish the right, the leftist factions had divided and opened the path for the reconsolidation of the neoliberal project.

Published a few months prior to the 2021 elections, *Resource Radicals* provides a vivid and detailed account of the complex circumstances that gave rise to this seemingly incomprehensible scenario. In doing so, it tells a story with far broader ramifications in a time when much radical activism and critical academia – particularly in and pertaining to Latin America – is split between celebrations of a pluriverse of indigenous cultures and affirmations of the progressive capacities of the modernizing state. Drawing on extensive archival and ethnographic research undertaken over the course of the Citizens’ Revolution, Thea Riofrancos documents the increasingly acrimonious relationship between the Correa administration and the indigenous social movements – led by the CONAIE – that had helped

to bring Correa to power. She conceptualizes this relationship in terms of competing “resource radicalisms” – alternate visions of how the left should manage the hydrocarbon and mineral reserves on which the Ecuadorian economy is largely based. On one side, the “radical resource nationalism” invoked by the Citizens’ Revolution demanded the collective appropriation of these resources, which had been sold off to transnational capital by previous neoliberal administrations. On the other, the “anti-extractivism” of indigenous and environmentalist social movements insisted that the socio-ecological catastrophe of several decades of oil extraction in the Amazon, and the threat posed to Andean communities and ecosystems by the opening of the mining frontier, necessitated the abandonment of resource extraction and its replacement with a sustainable economic model rooted in the practices and beliefs of the multiple indigenous nationalities of Ecuador.

The debate between these two positions, both in Ecuador and more broadly, is polarized and polemical, with each side tending to caricature and vilify the other, while refusing to acknowledge the existence of any limitations or contradictions of its own. Riofrancos’ analysis is refreshingly open in this regard. Despite being unambiguous in her allegiance with the anti-extractivist movement in Ecuador, and documenting her participation in its struggles, she devotes equal ethnographic attention to the resource nationalism of the Correa administration, and seeks to understand this side of the struggle on its own terms, while highlighting some of the failures and inconsistencies of anti-extractivism itself. This not only results in an unusually nuanced and balanced analysis, but also provides a more powerful critique of the Citizens’ Revolution than many of the more frontal assaults mounted from the anti-extractivist left. In their eagerness to demonstrate the extractive evils of the Correa regime, such critiques are often unwittingly complicit in the self-representation of the post-neoliberal state as an omnipotent technocratic machine, meticulously implementing its modernizing plans. Drawing on extensive interviews with bureaucrats throughout the state apparatus, Riofrancos exposes the incoherence, self-doubt and conflicting agendas that lie behind this illusion of order, “revealing the state to comprise a multiplicity of bureaucratic practices rather than a unitary monolith” (p.110). But she equally acknowledges the tendency of anti-extractivism to romanticise an imagined pastoral past, and its failure to inspire popular mobilizations on the scale of the anti-neoliberal struggles that rocked the country in the years

leading up to the Citizens' Revolution, when indigenous movements and more broad-based subaltern forces were aligned in a potentially revolutionary articulation of radical "resource nationalism".

Resource Radicals traces the development of this unified movement, which propelled Correa to power in 2007, and dissects its subsequent dissolution. Once in office, Correa retained the revolutionary discourse of radical resource nationalism. But instead of nationalizing oil and minerals, he took advantage of the global commodities boom underway at the time to renegotiate contracts with foreign capital, and invested the increased state revenues in welfare programmes and infrastructure projects, while cracking down on communities that opposed the expansion of the extractive frontier. Much of the Ecuadorian left sided with him, willing to compromise their principles in exchange for significant reductions of poverty and inequality. But confronted by an increasingly authoritarian regime that was mobilizing their discourse in the name of "commodity-fuelled, top-down leftist populism" (p.170), some leftist elements, particularly indigenous and environmentalist social movements, increasingly articulated their opposition to the state in terms of anti-extractivism. This discourse reflected the concerns of many communities living in the vicinity of extractive megaprojects, but lacked the universalizing power of previous anti-neoliberal mobilizations in defence of the nation's oil wealth.

Riofrancos grounds her approach in Foucauldian discourse analysis, according to which "language shapes the world, whether through its performative function or as a medium of political justification and critique, governance, and resistance" (p.19). This approach is mobilized through an eagle-eyed attentiveness to the ambiguity and mutability of discourse, and to the complex and dynamic ways in which opposing discourses become entangled with one another. The centrepiece of the book is a detailed and fascinating account of the contested formulation of the 2008 constitution, in which the two sides of the leftist divide clashed over the definition of central concepts, inscribing crucial ambiguities into the final text. These ambiguities were subsequently mobilized in constitutional reinterpretations in the midst of specific conflicts, which are depicted here in vivid ethnographic detail, leading Riofrancos to argue that the constitution "lived through its invocation and interpretation in the various sites of anti-extractive political struggle" (p.104). The ambivalent content of the

constitutional obligation of the government to conduct “prior consultation” with communities impacted by extractive megaprojects is shown to have played a particularly central role in a series of resource-based conflicts, leading to wider divergencies concerning the role of “information” in determining the rights of distinct parties to make claims to knowledge, and the contested definition of such fundamental concepts as democracy, the state, and the common good.

This attentiveness to discourse is one of the great strengths of the book, and its engaging prose and poetic vignettes succeed in breathing life into a Foucauldian approach that in other cases can be rather cold and technical. But the focus on discourse in general, and on the dichotomy between the twin “resource radicalisms” in particular, inevitably leads to the omission of certain elements that disrupt this dichotomy, and that exceed or are excluded from the discursive domain. The archival analysis of the Constituent Assembly, for example, is silent on the violent resource-related confrontation occurring at the same time in a remote corner of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The inauguration of the Assembly coincided with Correa dispatching 500 heavily armed soldiers to brutally crush the blockade of an oil road in the ramshackle frontier town of Dayuma. This blockade was being conducted, not by an indigenous community opposing oil extraction in the name of anti-extractivism, but by a ragtag gang of indigenous, black and mestizo peasants and oil workers demanding the paving of the road and the right to participate in the spoils of the resources being sucked from beneath their feet. Theirs was a radical resource nationalism that exceeded that of the post-neoliberal state, and that violated the anti-extractivist principles of the social movements participating in the Constituent Assembly. When a motion was tabled to address the repression in Dayuma, Correa threatened to resign if the issue was raised, and the Assembly decided that it would not be discussed (Aguirre 2008: 32). The neo-extractivist state and the anti-extractivist left, both of whose voices were sanctioned by the Assembly, thus conspired in silencing a third voice that did not fit within their dichotomy, and which was a threat to both of them, together establishing “an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise” (Rancière 1999: 29). Presumably, the crackdown in Dayuma therefore only fleetingly appeared in the archival transcripts reviewed by Riofrancos, who produces a deft

discursive analysis of the Assembly, but one that is consequently shorn of its constitutive antagonism.

As already mentioned, Riofrancos does a superb job of deconstructing the internal inconsistencies of the discourse of the Correa administration. But her analysis grants greater consistency to the perspective of anti-extractivism, and her focus on discourse leads her to imply that the infrastructural megaprojects of the Citizens' Revolution, on which much of its legitimacy depended, provided a relatively unproblematic material support for its discourse, as "a potent display of state presence" (p.172). Yet as I demonstrate in my book on the infrastructural utopias of the Citizens' Revolution in the Ecuadoran Amazon, many of these megaprojects were just as contradictory as the discourses they supported (Wilson 2021). Take the case of the Millennium Cities, a network of new towns that were to be constructed throughout the region to bring the modern benefits of oil extraction to its indigenous communities. As with their conspiracy of silence over events in Dayuma, there was a strange complicity between the two competing resource radicalisms in this case. On one hand, Correa loudly celebrated the modernity of the Millennium Cities, while on the other, anti-extractivist intellectuals shrilly condemned them as totalizing schemes designed to destroy indigenous lifeworlds. But as my book explains – and as I have also discussed in the pages of this journal (Wilson and Bayón 2018) – the first two Millennium Cities were absurdist failures, falling apart and half-abandoned within two years of their construction. And far from being resisted in the name of anti-extractivism and the preservation of traditional lifestyles, they were enthusiastically accepted by their indigenous recipients, in exchange for abandoning their own extractivist project – a community oil company – and allowing the exploitation of local oil wells by the state. This had been the negotiated outcome of a pitched battle with the Ecuadorian military on a remote Amazonian river, which was excluded from all subsequent state and media representations of the Millennium Cities (Wilson 2021: 116-149; Wilson and Bayón 2018).

Like the battle in Dayuma, the struggle underlying the Millennium Cities was silenced at the level of official discourse, and both uprisings exceeded the discursive juxtaposition of the neo-extractivist state on one hand and anti-extractivist indigenous communities on the other. This illustrates how the frantic back-and-forth between such diametrically opposed

discourses can function “as the two complementary ideological gestures of resolving/obfuscating the underlying deadlock” (Žižek 2008: 13). The Foucauldian approach does not permit the exploration of such extra-discursive deadlocks, and Riofrancos concurs with Foucault’s methodological imperative to “question discourses ... not about the contents which they may conceal, but [only] about the transformations which they have effected” (p.16). But it is notable that *Resource Radicals* concludes by largely abandoning this discursive approach, and moving onto the terrain of materialist analysis, arguing that in small resource-rich states like Ecuador, the material constraint of “transnational capital ... binds more tightly due to the conditions of dependency and deep inequality” (p.167). Riofrancos convincingly demonstrates that the impressive reduction of poverty and inequality under the Citizens’ Revolution was achieved on the basis of booming oil rents, without challenging capitalist social relations, and shows how the end of the boom in 2014 signalled the rapid reduction of these gains, followed by the swift return of neoliberalism. The material constraint imposed by global capitalism is the extra-discursive deadlock that the discourses of post-neoliberal extractivism and a post-extractivist pluriverse mutually concealed, in their promises of what Riofrancos pithily describes as “a bright future of reclaimed sovereignty” on one hand and “a montage of imagined precolonial pasts and hazy extraction-free futures” on the other (p.75). For more than a decade they kept the Ecuadorian left at each other’s throats. Then, slipping out from beneath their mutually assured defeat in the 2021 elections, capital proceeded to reinforce its material domination, and to rearticulate its ideological hegemony.

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