The Embera Chamí of this territory and specifically of the Indigenous Reserve of Cañamomo Lomaprieta have a model of development and economy based on ancestral forms of agriculture, artisanal and traditional production. In this way, the exploitation of traditional Indigenous artisanal mining of the territory’s resources forms part of this system, its model for life, of development, of economy and future existence.

Federico Herrera & Andres Felipe Garcia Pineda (2012: 20–21)

Introduction

The severe impacts of extractive development on Indigenous peoples are evident in the global historical record of colonialism and contemporary projects of state-building and corporate-led development. Summarizing elements of this record, I highlight in this chapter the physical impacts and diverse responses made by Indigenous peoples in response to the threats to their lands and livelihoods caused by projects of resource extraction. I also make evident the competing, and at times overlapping, ontologies and imaginaries of development revealed by resource extraction. Drawing on examples from Latin America and elsewhere, I demonstrate that Indigenous peoples’ experiences and responses to extraction vary. They have been at the forefront of resistance to destructive extractive projects, they have been forcefully drawn into labor for extraction, and they have in some cases participated in extractive practices. This requires us to consider an important distinction between extraction (a practice) and extractivism (an operative logic). Rejecting the logic of extractivism, Indigenous communities have advocated practices that integrate the sustainable use of the local environment, respect for the agency of nature, and respect for custom and tradition and self-determination. This moderated participation in resource extraction suggests Indigenous peoples’ common desire to avoid destructive extractive logics. It is also this moderation, I suggest, that makes Indigenous peoples a valuable source of inspiration to scholars and policymakers at a time when there is need for more critical definitions of sustainable development.
Resource Extraction and the Threat of Erasure

Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that Latin American history corresponds entirely to a story of extraction, it is nonetheless striking how many of the key moments in the region’s history and the development of its states relate to attempts to directly exploit or remotely control its rich natural resource base for political and economic gain. It is also striking that although some of the details are distinct, Latin America’s colonial experience would connect and lay the foundations of patterns to be followed in other later colonial experiences. Africa, India, the Pacific, and Asia share histories tightly connected to European capitalist accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004) and of state formation wedded with enclaves and frontiers of extraction and the formation of commodity markets.

The impact of these global patterns of pillage and settlement on local Indigenous peoples has been severe. During the first century following the Spanish conquest of the Americas, up to 56 million Indigenous people died, primarily because of the spread of Afro-European diseases in a series of events that have been described as the first large-scale act of genocide in the modern era (Koch et al. 2019). The story of the 15th century conquest starts with the landfall of Columbus on a small island in the Bahamas in search of new trade routes for the Spanish Crown and the subsequent discovery of natives wearing jewelry of hammered gold and tales of an island made of gold. Following this encounter, the rest of Columbus’s five-month voyage became a restless quest not for geographical exploration, but for golden treasure across the islands now known today as Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic (Markham 2019). Columbus never discovered what he was looking for during this or his subsequent three voyages, but edited versions of his account were widely read across Europe in the sixteenth century. European royalty and explorers would be significantly motivated by this to support the subsequent conquest of the Aztec and Incan civilizations.

In their establishment of the Americas as a colony, the Spanish implemented the encomienda system in 1503, placing Indigenous peoples under oversight to foster cultural assimilation and the imposition of Catholicism. This also led to their legally sanctioned exploitation as forced labor in the colonial mining and plantation economy. The genocide against Indigenous populations would also become global as the Portuguese and Spanish initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade to supplement the labor force of the mines, plantations and expanding settlements in the New World with people more resistant to disease. As well as one of the largest forced displacements of population in history (10–12 million people), 1.2–2.8 million people are estimated to have died during the middle passage (Eltis and Richardson 2015: 2). The vast majority of those who were enslaved and transported in the trans-Atlantic slave trade were people from the Indigenous populations of Central and West Africa. The North American “English” colonies would also become one of the central hubs of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The first Africans kidnapped to be sent to North America were classified as indentured servants with a similar legal standing to workers transported from Britain and Ireland (reflecting a longer European history of internal division and prejudice). However, by the middle of the 17th century, slavery had hardened as a racial caste, with African slaves and their future offspring becoming the legal property of their owners. From the 17th to the 19th century, ideas of racial difference and hierarchy would become the basis of a European theology and science justifying the continued expansion of colonial power, settlement, resource extraction, and claims of social improvement. European “possessions” of places, peoples, land and resources in Africa, India, Asia, Australasia, and Oceania, whilst with some significant nuance, would all be given reason and direction by these systems of thought.
In 1807 the UK Parliament officially introduced the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, but the imperial powers’ reliance on slavery as labor and in the colonial extractive economies persisted beyond the end of the century. Indeed, although legal bans would be introduced during the 19th century, scientific racism, and legal justification (such as the US Jim Crow and Indian Reservation Termination Laws) for the continuance of earlier patterns of abuse would continue into the 20th century (with obvious links to the ideological basis and genocidal actions of two world wars). The North and South American Wars of Independence, and the gradual collapse of European empires, would generate ideas and hopes of the expansion of universal rights. However, in post-colonial and even post-“revolutionary” societies, logics and practices of racial exploitation to secure land and resources did not disappear and Indigenous peoples continued to bear its brunt. 20th-century Modernism, for all its claims of radicalism, expressed a disdain for the primitive, a fear of “degeneration” (Coletta 2018), fetishized technology and the machine (Hornborg 2001), and on both the right and left of the political spectrum embraced industrialization and economic globalization (Rostow 1960 2017). Indigenous peoples and their lands were now targeted in the name of development and action against “underdevelopment” (Escobar 2011).

Fast-forwarding to the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, the de facto persistence of colonial thought and its patterns of exploitation remain striking. At the end of the 20th century there was a general swing toward neoliberalism. This was in broad strokes a form of market-based economics, which, despite the very different context of technology and law, bears similarities to mercantilism’s veneration of unhindered growth and expansion. With the end of the Cold War and the reorganization of geopolitics, a new group of so-called emerging powers (central amongst them Brazil, Russia, India, China – the so-called BRIC countries) have added to the planetary thirst for raw materials and energy resources to feed the growing industrial bases of their economies. With the resulting global demand for commodities, prices have risen (and fallen) in international markets and new frontiers of resource extraction have been established across the world. In this context, expressions of racial superiority and ideas of “manifest destiny” have been reworked by both national and international elites, and by legal and illegal (cartels, paramilitaries) business actors, to justify the requirement of extractive development for the national “good” and the removal or indenture – by force if necessary – of Indigenous peoples. Initial data from global campaigns to monitor attacks on Indigenous peoples’ rights defenders characterize a disturbing situation caused by the global rush for land and natural resources. In 2020 monitoring by Global Witness (2020) revealed the highest number of land and environmental defenders murdered on record in a single year. Violence against land defenders, a large proportion of them Indigenous peoples, is shown to be related to their work in investigating and protesting mining, logging and agribusiness projects that pollute and encroach on protected land, or land that should be protected.

Indigenous Contestation of Extraction

Although perhaps not at the same scale of rebellions in earlier history, Indigenous peoples are visible today as protesters in both the national and the international media. These protests reflect similar concerns to earlier confrontations in the 20th century (e.g., the Mohawk Oka Confrontation 1990; the Alta Dam controversy involving the Sámi in Norway in 1978), as the defense of land and self-determination in the face of large-scale development projects. However, the recent spread and frequency of these protests is notably different in its planetary scale. Vastly different places and geographies are now connected at the global level by cases of Indigenous socio-environmental contestation. Cause célèbre examples include the Canadian
protest against the CoastalGas link; the US Standing Rock protest against the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline; the Ecuadorian Chevron Case; the Brazilian Belo Monte Dam protest; the Peruvian confrontations at Bagua and Cajamarca; the Bolivian TIPNIS protests; the protest against Rio Tinto’s destruction of aboriginal sacred sites in Australia; protests against Barrick’s Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea; and the Sámi protests against the Nussir mine and Fosen wind power project in Norway.

As recent social science research has revealed, Indigenous conflicts with extractive companies do not only reveal differing opinions about the social, environmental, and economic value of projects for resource extraction. They reveal more deep-seated cultural differences of ontology and understanding. Conflicting perspectives on the meaning of development have, of course, been with us throughout history. Confrontations, including struggles for freedom from colonial rule and revolutions, have reflected these differences at the global level. In the 1970s, diverse experiments in culturally appropriate development were funded and supported by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Indigenous organizations (Apfeel-Marglin 1998) before they were adopted and celebrated by states and international agencies in the 1990s (Andolina et al. 2009). In recent decades, Indigenous confrontations with states regarding land ownership, autonomy, and the socio-environmental consequences of various forms of resource extraction and related energy and infrastructure projects have made different understandings of development highly visible.

An extractive boom was kicked off in the late 1990s by a commodities price hike driven by emerging economic powers. The boom inspired a flurry of research on the global features of the extractive boom and its impact on local communities (Logan and McNeish 2012; Kirsch 2014). Particular attention was given to the intensity of extractive activity in Latin America and its coincidence with Indigenous militancy (see Haarstad 2012; Bebbington and Bury 2013; McNeish et al. 2015). A series of ethnographies highlight the underlying ontological differences and moral landscapes of communities – in which water is repeatedly implicated as not only a resource but also a spiritual force (Rasmussen 2015; Cepek & Guerra 2018). Indeed, as several writers emphasize, contemporary environmental conflicts do not simply concern competing interpretations of nature, but struggles over the enactment, stabilization, and protection of multiple socio-natural worlds (Blaser 2009; Li 2015: 110). For De la Cadena (2010), Indigenous people’s recognition and promotion of ‘earth beings’ (such as the apus or other nature spirits) in their current struggles against mining and extractive operations not only put into question the separation of nature and culture that underpins the prevalent notion of politics and its according social contract. It also reveals the agency of new actors in the political arena (De la Cadena 2010: 354).

The intensity of socio-environmental conflicts and their expression of Indigenous ontologies have importantly also had an impact on national political debates. Following the turmoil of the Water and Gas protests in Bolivia in the 2000s and the militancy of the Indigenous movement in Ecuador starting in the 1990s, both countries experienced dramatic shifts in political leadership and changes to their constitutions and laws ostensibly reflecting a national acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous perspectives. In 2008, Ecuador passed a new constitution that included the protection of the rights of nature, and in 2010 Bolivia adopted a constitution and “Law of Mother Earth” with similar protections. In these cases, nature’s rights were positioned to reflect Indigenous cosmologies and to advance Indigenous ideas to advance the good life (buen vivir) and to live in harmony (sumak kawsay) with Mother Earth (Pachamama). Unfortunately, the Bolivian Morales and Ecuadorian Correa governments would contradict and circumvent these innovations through actions to significantly expand extractive activities and ignore rules they had set for prior consultation. Despite these setbacks, the changed atmosphere of politics
and law in Latin America has persisted – as reflected in the 2018 Escazú agreement. Because of constitutional and legal changes, the extractive agendas of these countries are now more easily challenged in court. Indeed, in recent years there has been a push for eco-centric law (i.e., distinguished from anthropocentric law in its focused intent to protect both peoples and planet) inspired by these experiences of the legal expression of the rights of nature. In 2017 court cases resulting in rulings in defense of the rights of rivers have taken place in Colombia and New Zealand. In both contexts, specific Indigenous claims against extractive activity and ontology lie at their foundation (Macpherson 2019). These river rights cases have also set precedent for a wave of other rights of nature cases that now span the world.

**Counterwork and Mining**

Indigenous protests opposing resource extraction projects have had a powerful impact on understandings and practices of Western development. However, the legal trajectory of what has occurred in recent years is also indicative of Indigenous peoples negotiating an “art of not being governed” in subtle ways (Scott 2011). Indeed, in Latin America and other parts of the world there is clear evidence that the act of not being governed – or governance according to their own understandings – has frequently required not only confrontation and escape of the state, but direct, pragmatic, and proactive engagement with the state and private sector. Negotiation of land, resources, cultural, economic, and political rights with government departments and legal institutions demand an effort by Indigenous communities to come to terms with the logics of the nation-state and national market economy. However, this process of engagement is not the same as full acquiescence with the terms and logics of state sovereignty and expectations of a capitalist market.

Whilst neoliberal politics have had a debilitating effect on Indigenous struggles for autonomy and sovereignty, Hale has warned of only seeing one side of the story. The debilitating effect of this is to discourage awareness of the ‘creative articulation’ that persists between utopian sensibilities and the always compromised, always urgent struggles for relief from oppression and for modest well-being in the here and now (Hale 2011). Indigenous peoples have often responded to ‘technologies of invited participation’ (Leifsen et al. 2018) in pragmatic and strategic ways as means to access recognition and material support. Recent Indigenous participation in aspects and different scales of extractive governance such as public hearings on environmental impact assessment (EIA), prior consultation, and environmental inspections, international summits on business and human rights, etc., cannot simply be understood based on the norms of deliberation formulated in formal and legalistic discourse. Rather, as recent research has detailed, these actions can represent means to “counterwork” (or transform) existing structures and paradigms (Arce and Long 1999; Escobar 2008; Leifsen et al. 2018), or to “visualize alternative routes” to development and change (Leifsen et al. 2017: 3). As such, the state’s monopoly over and understanding of sovereignty are questioned anew (McNeish 2021). Also importantly, research reveals that successful actions of counterwork involve Indigenous people operating in coalition with other social sectors (peasant organizations, farmers, neighborhood organizations, student organizations, unions and NGOs) as well as with expert groups and representatives (academics, lawyers, ombudsmen) to increase the impact of their efforts to transform law, regulation and policy (McNeish 2017).

In addition to the engagements of Indigenous peoples with states and the private sector, it is important to recognize that Indigenous peoples are themselves involved in various forms of resource extraction. Many Indigenous communities in both the Andean highlands and lowlands have strong traditions of small-scale ancestral or artisanal mining. These practices
cause substantially less environmental damage than state and corporate projects and there is, of course, a link to be made with the conscription of Indigenous peoples into the work of colonial mines. However, it is also important to note that in the Andean region, this system of labor was founded on a system of enforced “public service” known as the mita system put in place by the Incan Empire. It is also clear that many Indigenous (and Afro-descendent) communities have voluntarily continued a tradition for mining in their own communities, such as the Embera Chamí in Colombia quoted at the start of the chapter.

Indigenous participation in resource extraction also takes place at larger scales. Cooperative and even industrial-scale mining has long been a means in the Andes and elsewhere to supplement incomes and continue cultural tradition. In the case of Bolivia, the scale of this involvement of the Highland indigenous community in mining is such that it is even conflated with national identity. Indeed, the organization and spiritual beliefs of these communities have developed to enable what is often seasonal labor alongside other pastoral and agricultural activities, and to respond practically and spiritually to the clear dangers, damage to the Earth, and exploitation that such work incurs (Taussig 2010; Nash 1993). Importantly, in addition to providing labor, there are also some recent examples of Indigenous people’s ownership of industrial-scale resource extractive activities. In addition to Indigenous owned mining companies such as Carey Mining and Gulkula in Australia or the Denendeh Exploration and Mining Company (DEMco) in the USA, there are also Indigenous-owned companies involved in the oil and gas sector, such as Backwoods Energy Services in the USA, Keyano-Pimee Exploration/Amazon Gas in Ecuador, Metis DMC and the Steel River Group in Canada.

**Extraction and Extractivism**

Recognition of Indigenous people’s involvement in large-scale non-renewable resource extraction requires us to acknowledge that indigeneity does not always comply with common Western expectations and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples – and especially their ascribed role as the “guardians” of nature and the forest. In criticizing the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, Redford (1991) coined the term “ecological noble savage” to highlight the deep roots of current imagery with older colonial imagery of ecological nobility. Despite aims to create positive connotations, the persisting “noble savage” perspective denies the complexities of Indigenous peoples’ lives and their histories of experience with colonialism and capitalism (McNeish 2012). Indigenous peoples and their cultures today are an outcome not only of the violence of colonization and global capitalism but also of their resistance, negotiation and pragmatic accommodation to the experiences and extractive dynamics touched on above. Indigeneity should therefore be understood as a process and not a fixed state (De la Cadena and Starn 2007).

These insights regarding indigeneity are important to consider when trying to understand Indigenous involvement in mining and extraction. It is also evident in the statements of Indigenous peoples themselves and corporate mission statements of Indigenous companies (i.e., Backwoods Energy Services, Gulkula, and Steel River Group). The choice to pursue such activities sustains specific concerns with territorial stewardship, cultural sensitivity and an opportunity to finance and support the healthy preservation of their peoples. This is important in evidencing a significant distinction between extraction and extractivism.

In a recent anthology, my colleagues and I have emphasized that extractive violence is not an accident or side effect, but rather a core operative logic of the 21st-century global experience (Shapiro and McNeish 2021: 2). Human populations have been involved in processes of resource extraction throughout their history on the planet, but we argue that a distinctive
extractivist logic justifying a logic of violence, removal and exploitation grew out of the colo-
nial experience and has found its fullest expression and scale in the present – sometimes even
cloaked in the language of “green development.” The statements and actions of Indigenous
people involved in extractive activities – even at the industrial scale – express an active counter
“geo-ontology” (Povinelli 2016) that, in addition to self-determination, express a deep respect,
and strategy for, the protection of the land.

Conclusions

In an era in which the global community is facing climate change and struggling to hold in
check the increasing degradation of the planet, Indigenous peoples have been singled out by
academics and international policymakers as essential contributors to the practical re-thinking
of human–nature relations. Academics from across the sciences now acknowledge the impor-
tance of considering different knowledge systems in climate change research (Petzold et al.
2020). Multiple international organizations suggest that answers to the problems of climate
change and environmental destruction can be found in Indigenous beliefs, knowledge and
practice. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognizes that the world
has much to learn from local communities and Indigenous peoples, whose knowledge and
practices constitute a major resource for adapting to climate change. A Local Communities
and Indigenous Peoples Platform was established by the UNFCCC in 2018 with the aim of
giving Indigenous peoples an active role in climate action and multi-stakeholder dialogue. This
increasing valuation of Indigenous peoples’ environmental knowledge has taken place in parallel
with an unprecedented recognition of human rights principles and the opening of global envi-
ronmental governance to the participation of non-state actors (Kuyper et al. 2018). However,
these new opportunities are in many cases undermined by the dramatically growing global
demand for land and natural resources, resulting in increasing frictions and power imbalances
in land-use and governance arrangements – further directly affecting Indigenous communi-
ties. They are also undermined by the persisting global reliance on fossil fuels and continued
expansion of non-renewable resource extraction – some of which is taking place under the
banner of green development and climate mitigation. Recognizing the glaring gap between
desired outcomes and continued extractive development, it is important to consider the varied
Indigenous experience of extraction. Resource extraction might well be an inevitable element
of human survival and adaptation – and one that will always engender damage and contro-
versy – but Indigenous experience and engagement is suggestive of a means to avoid the worst
consequences of extractivism through moderation and a deeper relationship with the earth.

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