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The Politics of Extractivism

- Reviews section -

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Geopolítica de la Amazonia: Poder hacendal-patrimonial y acumulación capitalista (Geopolitics of the Amazon, Landed Hereditary Power and Capitalist Accumulation, 2012) is the latest defense of the politics and policies of Evo Morales' leftist government by its premier intellectual, vice-president Alvaro Garc a Linera. As the eloquent public spokesman for Morales' governing strategy since the election of the Movement towards Socialism (MAS) in 2005, Garc a Linera has made a name for himself in Latin American leftist thought and political theory.

The eminent Brazilian political scientist Emir Sader presented this latest publication in a splashy event at the Bolivian Central Bank in the capital La Paz, unequivocally stating that Garc a Linera is the most important intellectual living today in Latin America, impressively able to unite both practice and theory in the overseeing the workings of state while producing critical works of academic scholarship. (His glowing review of the book is at Sader 2012).

Garc a Linera's work is most certainly an expression of the dramatic changes in Bolivia and the "cultural and democratic revolution" Morales and his MAS party claim to have inaugurated. And Garc a Linera's intellectual abilities are impressive. When was the last time in Bolivia (or perhaps anywhere in the world), that an official government publication justified state policy with authoritative references to V.I. Lenin's treatise on counterrevolution, the semiotic coloniality of representation, and Marx's metabolic theory of nature and capitalist production?

The need to invoke these radical origins is not simply the result of Garc a Linera's genius or the desires of a committed leftist intellectual-turned-head of state. Geopolitica is the third in a trilogy of books produced by Garc a Linera to counter the mounting criticisms of Morales government by former leftist coalition allies since Morales and Garc a Linera's reelection in 2009.

As he did in his previous books *Las Tensiones Creativas de la Revoluci n* (The Creative Tensions of the Revolution, 2010), and *El "Oenegismo," Enfermedad Infantil del Derechismo* ("NGOism," Infantile Illness of the Right, 2011), Garc a Linera accuses dissident critics of fomenting counterrevolution that will benefit the lurking rightwing elite.

Unlike previous books, however, his target here is not just a small group of dissident intellectuals and former cabinet ministers, but the entire lowland indigenous confederation (CIDOB, the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia).

The Resource Extraction Strategy

CIDOB staged two marches in 2011 and 2012 with the highland indigenous organization (CONAMAQ) against a proposed Amazonian highway through the Isiboro S cure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS). Government attempts to rebuff the march in 2011, culminating in violent police repression, momentarily turned popular opinion against Morales and his agenda of state-led resource extraction.

According to Garc a Linera's analysis here, however, this "hysterical" dramatization of the TIPNIS march is actually a strategy of colonial domination that takes advantage of the internal contradiction at the heart of the revolutionary popular-bloc that brought Morales to power. (14)

Geopolítica surveys the social and political history of the Bolivian Amazon to buttress García-Linera's claim that the TIPNIS march and CIDOB are the tools of what he calls "extraterritorial environmentalism," the materialization of "environmental capitalist accumulation."

Real power in the Amazon, he says, rests with foreign companies, the governments of developed capitalist countries, regional bourgeois-seigniorial landlords, and NGOs. Lands collectively titled to indigenous communities, like the TIPNIS (one of the main victories of the indigenous movement in the 1990s), actually serve to subsume indigenous territory and natural resources under the control of what he terms a feudal, or patrimonial-hacienda, "arch of power and domination."

The "pseudo-environmentalism" rallied by the TIPNIS march and its supporters against state extractivism, he says, is a paternalistic "environmentalism for the poor," that divides in Manichaean colonial fashion Bolivia's popular indigenous-peasant bloc between romanticized "good" lowland indigenous communities living in harmony with nature and vilified "bad" highland peasants out to ravage nature for illicit drug markets. (75-76).

García-Linera's theoretical acuity shines in this section, as he rightly points out that indigeneity is not as simple as people often assume. Indigenous people do not only live in communal lands, and many people in the cities and in zones of colonization also self-identify as indigenous. The literature on the TIPNIS controversy initially, at least, tended to oppose lowland peoples to the coca-growers, characterizing the TIPNIS communities as authentically indigenous. (But see McNeish 2013.)

Yet García-Linera substitutes this essentialist regional dichotomy with his own dualism, executing a cunning inversion. García-Linera argues that "in the Amazon, it is not the indigenous peoples who have taken control of territorial power, as occurred years ago in the highlands and valleys where agrarian unions and communities performed the role of indigenous micro-states with a territorial presence, and in reality were the material foundation for the construction of the present Plurinational State." (25)

In contrast to the virtuous highlanders, the oppressed lowland indigenous people are portrayed here as the passive victims of patrimonial-hacienda power (internal capitalist accumulation), on the one hand, and foreign corporations (external capitalist accumulation), on the other. Without any apparent agency to defend their lands or their livelihoods, they can only be saved by the State.

For García-Linera, the Plurinational State, whose foundation is the "syndical capture of State power," is historically poised to defeat the reactionary "arch of power" in the Amazon. (9)

This statist argument completely denies the existence of lowland indigenous resistance against domination. CIDOB's thirty years of struggle for territory and self determination receive scant attention — only a one-line reference to the 1990 march for Territory and Dignity. (37)

There is no mention of their critical role in the recent Constituent Assembly, where as part of an alliance with other groups, they proposed the fundamental architecture of the plurinational state and indigenous visions for sustainable development called *vivir bien* (or living well) (Beaulieu 2012, Schavelzon 2012).

This lapse is a striking reversal for García-Linera, who previously claimed, notably in debates with Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and others in 2008, that Bolivia was witnessing the emergence of a new revolutionary subject in the "multitude form," whose egalitarian horizontal structure overcomes prior hierarchies of syndical organizing (see Negri et al 2008). It also reduces the lowlands peoples to the status of children, a sad reprise of the tropes of colonialism.

Self-determination or State Supremacy?

When Bolivia's first indigenous President was elected in 2005, skeptical observers cautioned that Morales would only inaugurate a new cycle of ethnic domination based instead on highland "Aymara hegemony" or "Andean centrism." While the TIPNIS case certainly demonstrates a privileging of highland demands over lowland communities' expressed desires, what this book demonstrates more powerfully is the fact that the state is not advancing anything close to indigenous hegemony, Aymara or otherwise.

On the one hand, as spectacles like the state-sponsored 2010 "Collective marriage of Our (Indigenous) Identity" demonstrate, the MAS is promoting symbolic forms of decolonization, like the folklorization of Andean culture, rather than meeting indigenous peoples' desires for self-determination.

On the other hand "and this is the crucial point" Garc a Linera makes clear that all indigenous demands must be subsumed to the state and to the hegemony of its continued capitalist development model.

This becomes clear in Garc a Linera's arguments against protestors' claims that the contested highway project is a part of continental infrastructure development (the so-called IIRSA Plan) imposed by foreign Brazilian capital.

Instead, he sees the highway as the crucial means of wresting control from foreign powers by extending the sovereign reach of the state. "OUR State... the Amazon is ours, it belongs to Bolivians, not to North Americans or Europeans, nor to the companies or NGOs that claim to be "teaching us to protect it." (66)

To legitimate the highway, he traces the project to a historic demand going back more than 300 years, to 1763 designs by the Spanish Viceroy in order to protect the colonial frontier from Portuguese invaders. (53) In a revival of an older national security doctrine, he points to the government's tripling of military presence in the Amazon (95) and creation of a new "Ecological Regiment" (74) as proof of the state's sovereign intentions.

Garc a Linera envisions this sovereign aim as a Hegelian synthesis: "with the highway, the real geography and the ideal geography of the State (present in maps and treaties) tend to coincide"(emphasis in the original: 96).

It is telling "and deeply troubling" that Garc a Linera justifies the MAS government's actions by invoking colonial plans. Yet perhaps more troubling is Garc a Linera's continued return to dualistic argumentation to silence opposition.

Declaring that the Bolivian state will take sole responsibility for protecting Mother Earth, he asserts: "We will never accept the principle of shared sovereignty in any piece of Bolivian territory. Whoever at this point is opposed to the presence of the state in the Amazon is in fact defending the presence in it of the United States. There is no in-between position..." (Ibid.) Apparently, the state will not share the Amazon even with the indigenous peoples who live there.

From "Live Well" to Extractivism

Finally, Garc a Linera argues against anti-capitalist critiques of natural resource extractivism, the rents (revenues paid to the state "ed.) which form the basis of Bolivian state finance and national economy. Rehearsing an argument he made previously in a widely debated 2012 *Le Monde* article, he insists that extractivism is not the

fundamental issue for the transformation from capitalism to socialism.

Critics confuse a technical system with mode of production, he says. The capitalist mode of production is rather a fundamentally political problem of “planetary geopolitical dimension” beyond the scope of one country. Only worldwide communism can overturn this mode of production. (104)

Rather, seen as a technical form, extractivism can be “a point of departure” for overcoming capitalism. Critiques that “fill the mouth with injuries against extractivism” miss the point that it is a material means to generate wealth and distribute it with justice. (107) For Garc a Linera, the current task is in order to satisfy the basic and “urgent necessities of the population” (110), part of a much longer historical process.

There can be no doubt that this is a fundamental tension within the MAS government’s agenda. Morales came to power to accomplish two fundamental goals: to overcome the neoliberal system, which channeled the country’s patrimony to the rich and to transnational corporations, and to empower the country’s indigenous peoples and their values and practices. (Postero 2013a, 2013b)

These two goals come together in the significant cash transfers to the country’s poor and senior citizens that the MAS government has instituted since renegotiating oil and gas contracts in 2006. Yet the government’s choice to privilege extractivism has had significant costs to the environment (another critique which Garc a Linera brushes aside here), and to the lowland indigenous communities the government is apparently willing to sacrifice to the larger national goals.

Thus Garc a Linera’s approach here is heralded by some as the only pragmatic means to develop Bolivia, one of Latin America’s poorest countries. Yet in our view, this text betrays the tradition of Latin American socialist thought, from Jose Carlos Mari ategui to Rene Zavaleta Mercado, from whose insights he builds his geopolitical critique of capitalist landlordism.

Those thinkers did not look for the future promise of socialism in a technical system to satisfy basic human needs or a militantly sovereign state, but rather in indigenous struggles against ongoing colonial domination. This, alas, is missing in Garc a Linera’s apologetic text.

Instead, he returns to the tired arguments we hear these days across the planet, arguing that the aberrations of the Amazonian situation “can be ‘cured’ by mobilizing the very inner dynamics and logic” of the capitalist system he (rightfully) argues caused the problem in the first place (see Swyngedouw 2010: 223).

Are there alternatives to this re-embrace of state-led capitalism? Evo Morales gained international attention by staking a strong discursive claim that global climate change was the result of the sins of capitalism. He posed indigenous cosmivision as the alternative: he declared that by embracing indigenous notions of reciprocity and communality, societies could learn to “live well” and sustainably instead of trying to live “better” than others through increased consumption.

The 2009 constitution incorporates this language, making *vivir bien* one of the guiding principles for the new plurinational state (Art. 8,2). Yet, the new 2012 Framing Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development to Live Well makes clear that the Morales government is now subsuming the potentially radical “horizon” of *vivir bien* to a pragmatic state-led process of “integral development.”

For Eduardo Gudynas (2013), the new law is a sign that the Morales government has for all intents and purposes

silenced those hoping for real alternatives to extractive capitalist development. He says, “this restoration of the idea of development closes a chapter in the Bolivian process. Now it is possible to promote extractivism and defend it as a necessary form of integral development without falling into contradictions” (2013: 25).

For many indigenous people, however, the struggle for alternatives continues. In recent months, the government issued arrest warrants for three principal leaders of CIDOB, forcing them to find refuge in the offices of the TIPNIS in the Amazonian town of Trinidad for three months.

Indigenous activists perceive this ongoing repression as a cynical attempt to block the “real” actors of change from accomplishing their historic task. As one of them explained, “they came after us because they knew that we would make the ‘proceso de cambio’ (process of change) happen” (personal communication, August 2013).

This struggle has served to strengthen the convictions of many in the indigenous movement who hope to realize the full rights of autonomy and self-determination laid out in the 2009 constitution. That hard-won constitution, one activist insisted “should be like a Bible for us indigenous” (personal communication, September 2013).

Indigenous participation in the process of change “including reimagining the plurinational state during the Constituent Assembly” has created enduring expectations that go far beyond Garc a Linera’s pragmatic geopolitics. These demands for alternatives continue to shape the future, whether Garc a Linera recognizes it or not.

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[November/December 2013, ATC 167](#)

[1] An English translation by Richard Fidler is online at <http://links.org.au/node/3152>