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# LATIN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING REVISITED: THE POLYPHONY OF BUEN VIVIR

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## Abstract

Following the guiding thread of recent Ecuadorian economic history, this paper aims to mirror the evolution of environmental discourses across the Latin American region. During the last decades of the twentieth century, increasing social environmental awareness added up to the penetration of environmental thinking into the states' developmental policymaking. For Ecuador, this cocktail resulted in the long-run in a particular discourse: Buen vivir. Central to rationalize buen vivir was its socioecological dimension, founded on a harmonic relationship between society and nature. Buen vivir was meant to materialize in a plan to save part of the Ecuadorian Amazonia from oil drilling by leaving a significant portion of the country's reserves under the ground in exchange for an international monetary compensation: The Yasuní-ITT initiative. Despite the fact that the plan mobilized state and society, it succumbed to forty-years of oil dependence of Ecuadorian economy, politics, and society. The termination of the initiative unveiled two antagonist environmental discourses. Whereas the state held the notion of natural resources available for commodification in the global market, society bet on alternative meanings of nature such as natural heritage and ancient peoples' habitat and means of existence.

As outcomes of the foreseeable divorce between the environmental discourses, buen vivir turned into a polyphonic concept and the struggle over a hegemonic environmental discourse resumed. It is argued that during the twenty-first century, one of the consequences of such a struggle is the construction of different meanings of development alike.

Keywords: Ecuador, good living, neo-extractivism, environmental discourse, nature, development

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# REVISITANDO EL PENSAMIENTO AMBIENTAL LATINOAMERICANO: LA POLIFONÍA DEL BUEN VIVIR

## Resumen

Siguiendo el hilo conductor de la historia económica reciente del Ecuador, este artículo pretende reflejar la evolución de los discursos ambientales en la región latinoamericana. Durante las últimas décadas del siglo veinte, la conciencia ambiental de la sociedad se combinó con la penetración del pensamiento ambiental en la formulación de las políticas estatales. En el Ecuador, este coctel resultó en el largo plazo en un discurso específico: el buen vivir, cuya dimensión socio-ecológica se fundamentó en la relación armónica entre la sociedad y la naturaleza. La materialización del buen vivir debió plasmarse en la iniciativa Yasuní-ITT, un plan para salvar parte de la Amazonía ecuatoriana de la actividad petrolera, renunciando a extraer una porción significativa de las reservas del país. El plan movilizó al Estado y a la sociedad, pero sucumbió a cuarenta años de dependencia del petróleo. La terminación de la iniciativa develó dos discursos ambientales antagónicos. Mientras el Estado justificaba la noción de los recursos naturales para la mercantilización, la sociedad defendió visiones alternativas de la naturaleza relacionadas con el patrimonio y el hábitat de grupos originarios.

El divorcio previsible de los dos discursos reveló la polifonía del buen vivir y reanudó la lucha por un discurso ambiental predominante. El artículo argumenta también que una de las consecuencias de esa lucha es la construcción semiótica de distintos significados de desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Ecuador, buen vivir, neoextractivismo, discurso ambiental, naturaleza, desarrollo

## INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES, LATEST GUESTS ON DEVELOPMENT THINKING

During the last decades of the twentieth century, Latin American states embraced the official environmental discourse of sustainable development (United Nations, 1992; United Nations, 1987). Inspired by the United Nations, the discourse relied on the utopia of combining the polar opposites of natural resources extraction and environmental protection on the basis of the “vital forces” of capitalism, namely, technology, capital, and international cooperation (Escobar 1995a, p. 36). As consequence of the adoption of the discourse of sustainable development, Latin American states advocated for natural resources and environmental management.

Along with the state’s construction of an official environmental discourse that rested on green capitalism, society’s awareness of the negative consequences of natural resources extraction mushroomed. Increased social environmental awareness was central to the denouncement of the destructive impacts of extractivism, i.e. the “intensification of natural resources extraction for commodification in the global market” (Burchardt, Domínguez, Larrea & Peters, 2016, p. 7). Hence, the rise of social environmental awareness in Latin America stacked up a strong critique of the region’s prevalent outward-oriented development model, which is based on exports of raw material and imports of manufactured goods.

The construction of the antagonist environmental discourses of the state and society, an official discourse that stemmed from green capitalism and other that was rooted in the critique of the prevalent development model, was founded on different meanings of nature. Whereas the state held the notion of natural resources available for commodification in the global market, society bet on alternative meanings of nature such as natural heritage and ancient peoples’ habitat and means of existence.

The irruption of environmental discourses into development thinking had a twofold impact on the approach of the prevalent development model. On one hand, the official environmental discourse of sustainable development further legitimized the reliance on natural resources. On the other hand, widespread social environmental awareness was central to the incubation of the critique against the natural resources-led development model.

### **The irruption of nature into development thinking: from the environment to nature**

Before the emergence of the sustainable development discourse<sup>1</sup>, discussions on development included *natural resources* rather than the *environment*. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm: member states agreed upon a give-and-take relationship between natural resources

and development. Development was considered a requisite to preserve the environment (United Nations, 1972). Twenty years after Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro hosted the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the so-called Earth Summit), where representatives from 172 nations signed their adherence to the environmental imperative outlined in the discourse of sustainable development. The Agenda 21 action plan (United Nations, 1992), a main outcome<sup>2</sup> of the summit, placed the imperative of environmental policymaking at national and subnational levels.

As national states assimilated the mainstream environmental discourse of sustainable development into domestic political institutions, the Latin American region experienced a wave of creation of environmental national authorities, such as ministries and agencies, and the promulgation of new environmental legislation during the 1990s. With the incorporation of the environment into the state's logic, national states accepted the necessity of investing in 1) environmental protection and 2) natural resources management. The green economy and the circular economy<sup>3</sup> promptly outlined narratives in order to convey that investing in the environment is certainly a good investment (in monetary or chrematistic terms).

While Latin American states adapted to the environmental discourse of sustainable development, environmental movements claimed a permanent place in national politics and embodied society's increasing awareness of the negative socioecological consequences of natural resources extractivism. The discourse of the environmental movements was rooted in a cultural critique of modern society<sup>4</sup> (Hajer & Fischer, 1999, p. 3) since it aimed at criticizing 1) the instrumental perspective, which considered nature as mere natural resources required for development and 2) the dialectic subject-object that deemed nature to be subjugated by a detached subject: Man<sup>5</sup>.

Central to the construction of such discourse that highlighted nature (as opposed to natural resources and the environment) was the defense of land and peoples' cultural rights (as opposed to capital investments in environmental protection and natural resources management). According to Leff (1999, p. 94), the values defended by socio-environmental movements<sup>6</sup> are capable of "driving new social actors and conducting political actions towards the construction of a new social order". Further, environmental discourses became central to the construction of new meanings of development, which in turn acquired the capacity to shape the relationship between state and society in the twenty-first century (Alarcón, Rocha & Di Pietro 2018, p. 66).

## **Towards the new meanings of development**

The construction of a social environmental discourse, opposed to the state's official discourse, decisively contributed to erode the apparent hegemonic<sup>7</sup> stance on the centrality of natural resources extraction to the achievement of developmental goals.

Since the 1970s, the position of the Latin American states transited from the hegemonic discourse on the central role of natural resources in economic development to the dominant<sup>8</sup> discourse of sustainable development. The hegemonic discourse considered natural resources as essential to trigger the social and cultural changes of modernization (the modernization imperative). Once the hegemonic discourse was eroded, Latin American states embraced the discourse of sustainable development, which advocated environmental protection and natural resources management (the environmental imperative).

During the twenty-first century, particularly during the commodities boom (2003-2014), contemporary scholars and authors approached aspects of the process of development in natural resources-rich countries, mainly in Latin America, through the lens of neo-extractivism. According to Svampa (2013, p. 30), the reigning “economic and political-ideological” order in Latin America during the twenty-first century commodities’ boom, was the “*consenso de los commodities*”. Under such a regime, Latin American neo-extractivism was the favored developmental strategy of states across the region.

The dissection of Latin American neo-extractivism shows a socioeconomic ingredient that stresses on the leading role played by the state in 1) the appropriation of swollen natural resources rent and 2) its distribution among society, on the one hand. On the other hand, the assessment of the neo-extractivist development strategy reveals a politico-ideological component, which emphasizes the states’ struggles to impose the natural resources-led developmental model on society. These struggles manifest in socio-environmental conflicts on natural resources in territories affected by extractivist activity.

Hence, the end of the youngest commodities’ boom unveiled a disputed discourse, which rests on the central role of neo-extractivism in economic and social development. The discourse is disputed since the state aims to impose it on society. According to Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini (2016, p. 880), natural resources extraction “needs to continue and expand regardless of prevailing circumstances, with the state playing a leading role and capturing a large share of the ensuing revenues”. The authors referred to this particular situation as the “extractive imperative”.

Social movements departed from the official discourse and denounced the negative socioecological consequences of natural resources extraction (the ecological imperative). On the basis of a critique of modernity, social movements condemned development as the cause of the global environmental crisis and advocated for less utilitarian forms of relationship between nature and society. Table 1 depicts the evolution of the developmental and environmental discourses held by the Latin American state and society from the 1970s until present day.

TABLE 1

Developmental and environmental discourses in Latin America  
since the end of the Second World War: An evolution

	ISI CONSENSUS (UNTIL THE 1970S)	WASHINGTON CONSENSUS (1980-2000)	COMMODITIES' CONSENSUS (2003-PRESENT)
<b>State</b>	Hegemonic discourse: Modernization imperative The role of natural resources in economic development	Dominant discourse: Environmental imperative Sustainable development (Environmental protection, natural resources management)	Disputed discourse: Extractive imperative Legitimation of neo- extractivism on the basis of economic and social development
<b>Social movements</b>	Hegemonic discourse: Modernization imperative The role of natural resources in economic development	Dominant discourse: Ecological imperative Environmental awareness of socioecological consequences of extractivism	Disputed discourse: Search-out imperative Quest for alternative meanings of development

Source: Own diagram

## NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT: THE ECUADORIAN DISCOURSE OF *BUEN VIVIR*

Ecuador and Bolivia are certainly the Latin American natural resources-rich countries, which most accurately portray the evolution of state's developmental and environmental discourses across the region. Self-styled *progresista* governments led the drafting of new political constitutions meant to contest previous visions of developmental and environmental discourses. Whereas Bolivia remains under Evo Morales' presidency, the change of administration in Ecuador in 2017 marked a watershed. Facing low international oil prices, the new government announced a set of policies that in many ways was meant to set up some distance from the previous ten year-lasting administration that mostly profited from the twenty-first century commodities boom.

Ecuador has traditionally been a natural resource-based economy, and since 1972 an oil rent-dependent state. It provides three remarkable conditions for scholars to approach the relationship between nature and development. First, Ecuadorian recent economic history mirrors Latin America successive (re)insertions into the capitalist world-system based on natural resources. Three "consensuses" steered the region's development policymaking since the end of the Second World War and imprinted the domestic circumstance in Ecuador: 1) a consensus around the idea of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) as a way to depart from the natural resources-led

developmental model, which historically linked the region with the rest of the world; 2) the Washington Consensus, which regarded natural resources (comparative advantages) as Latin America's key to neoliberal globalization; and 3) the *consenso de los commodities* (Svampa, 2013), which displayed an apparent general agreement among society around the centrality of natural resources in the development process and highlighted neo-extractivism as the prevalent development strategy across the region.

Second, during the last half-century, the country underwent two oil booms: 1) The 1972-1980 oil boom, which coincided with the two global oil shocks and marked the beginning of the Ecuadorian oil era, and 2) the 2003-2014 oil boom that overlapped the twenty-first century commodities boom. During periods shaped by high international oil prices, state's agency (i.e. its capacity to intervene in the national development process) was significantly boosted. As the Ecuadorian state ruled over the economic sphere, governments declared the intention to prepare the leap beyond dependence on oil rent by promoting other economic sectors. With hindsight, the Ecuadorian state reaped a meager harvest in economic diversification in the long term. Transient achievements in economic diversification contrast with the prevalence of the traditional natural resources-led developmental model, which signalizes an unmistakable position within the international division of labor.

Third, throughout the last half of the century, Ecuador accurately exemplified Latin America's sociopolitical processes. Domestic sociopolitical processes connected with the three Latin American "consensuses" (the ISI consensus, the Washington Consensus, and the *consenso de los commodities*) might not completely be understood through the approach to a higher or lower degree of state's intervention in the national development process or through the analysis of the region's position within the international division of labor. Increasing social environmental awareness was epitomized by the irruption of the environmental movement, which increasingly influenced domestic politics since the 1980s (Lewis, 2016, p. 55).

The global oil shocks of the twentieth century (1973 and 1979) provoked a worldwide increase of crude prices in benefit of exporting countries and triggered the first Ecuadorian oil boom (1972-1980). Short after the beginning of the new century, international oil prices skyrocketed again due to the increasing demand from non-industrialized countries, particularly China (World Bank, 2018, p. 52): The second Ecuadorian oil boom concurred with the global twenty-first century commodities' boom (2003-2014). As the new bonanza period gathered, the environmental movement already exerted a certain influence over the political arena, then it accompanied a self-styled *progresista* coalition to win the presidential election of 2006.

*Buen vivir*, which was built upon the indigenous *weltanschauung* of *sumak kawsay* (good living), was central to the development proposal of the new government. The discourse entailed an influential socioecological dimension inspired by the quest for a harmonic relationship between nature and society. The Yasuní-ITT initiative, launched in 2007, epitomized the socioecological dimension of *buen vivir*:



The prohibition to extract oil in bio-diverse and cultural-sensitive territories as the Yasuní National Park in the Ecuadorian Amazonia. In line with the adoption of the discourse of *buen vivir*, nature or *pachamama* (mother nature) was accorded rights in the 2008 Constitution<sup>9</sup>.

The adoption of the Yasuní-ITT initiative as a state policy suggested the convergence of the antagonist environmental discourses of the state and society although the government unilaterally terminated the initiative in August 2013, short before the end of the second Ecuadorian oil boom and plead for natural resources' rent to fight poverty. The announcement of the initiative's termination not only unveiled antagonist meanings of nature and development held by the state and society, but also sent a strong signal that the Ecuadorian state succumbed to Latin American neo-extractivism. The failure of the Yasuní-ITT initiative also epitomized the fall of *buen vivir*. Concurring with its inclusion in the constitution and the state logic, *buen vivir* was despoiled of its "critic and transformer potential" (Peters, 2014, p. 140) and gradually faded away by suggesting development alternatives (instead of alternatives to development) such as sustainable development (Alarcón & Mantilla, 2017, p. 101) and human development (Cortez, 2014, p. 338).

The unilateral termination of the initiative revealed a conflict-prone juncture in which the state struggled to impose its neo-extractivist developmental project on society. Such circumstance triggered the renaissance of the Ecuadorian environmental movement by the hand of social movements that incarnated society's critique of the natural resources-led developmental model. The Ecuadorian state dipped principally into corporative mechanisms, but also into outright repression<sup>10</sup> in order to deal with diverse forms of social resistance against the imposition of the neo-extractivist developmental model. The spearhead of the state's latent repression apparatus was the government's co-optation of moral, cultural, human, material, social, and organizational resources (Jima & Paradela, 2019, pp. 8-15).

## THE YASUNÍ-ITT INITIATIVE AND THE POLYPHONIC CONCEPT OF *BUEN VIVIR*

By the beginning of the second oil boom in 2003, the domestic circumstance was shaped by two social settings that were highly unlikely during the 1970s oil boom. First, indigenous people were firmly entrenched in national politics as opposed to the 1970s decade when they were doomed to social invisibility<sup>11</sup>. Indigenous people irrupted in national politics during the 1990s as the spearhead of the protests against the enforcement of Washington Consensus' neoliberal policies. In 2000 and 2005, their role was decisive in the overthrow of President Jamil Mahuad (1998-2000) and President Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005) respectively. In forty years, the indigenous voice passed from being silenced during the 1970s to be the guiding thread of the state's developmental project in the 2008 Constitution through *buen vivir*<sup>12</sup>.

Second, the environmental discourse of sustainable development was rooted in the Ecuadorian sociopolitical arena in contrast with the 1970s decade when any allusion to the environmental factor was absent from the discussions on the national development project. The establishment of the Ministry of Environment in 1996 and the inclusion of five articles regarding “environmental protection and the right of Ecuadorian citizens to live in a healthy environment” in the 1998 Constitution (Fontaine & Narváez, 2007, p. 25) signaled the embracement of the Ecuadorian state of the environmental discourse of sustainable development.

The state’s adoption of the environmental imperative (Table 1) contributed to invigorate the Ecuadorian environmental movement. With the involvement of new social actors, the twenty-first century turned into the scenario of “semiotic struggles” (Escobar, 1995b) aimed at revisiting the relationship between nature and society. Oil extraction was increasing under social scrutiny. Negative socioecological consequences of oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon region provided concrete motives to draft a moratorium proposal on oil exploration (Acosta et al., 2000); “local and global ecological impacts” wielded as principal reasons for such proposal (Martínez-Alier, 2000, p. 12).

The idea of “leaving oil in the ground” gained supporters among the domestic environmental movement<sup>13</sup>, and the stance echoed in the *Government Plan of the PAIS Movement 2007-2011* (PAIS, 2006). The PAIS Movement (now Alianza País) added up support of the environmental movement as well as of the indigenous movement to win the 2006 presidential election. The historical demands of the Ecuadorian environmental movement promptly converged into the stream proposed by the socioecological dimension of *buen vivir*. As mentioned before, one of the pillars of *buen vivir* was the imperative of a harmonic relationship between society and nature. It is argued that if there was a possible way to materialize such a relationship, it might have been through the Yasuní-ITT initiative.

The Yasuní-ITT (Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini or ITT) initiative was meant to withdraw the exploitation of about a quarter of the country’s total oil reserves (i.e. circa 850 millions of barrels<sup>14</sup> contained in field 43). Besides its contribution to avoid global impacts of fossil fuel consumption or 407 millions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> (Larrea, 2010, p. 10), the initiative was central to the conservation of the Yasuní National Park (YNP), created in 1979, and since 1989 within the World Biosphere Reserves of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The reserve is the “habitat of various indigenous nationalities, including uncontacted peoples” (Narváez, de Marchi, & Pappalardo, 2013, p. 9); therefore, a portion of the national park was marked off in 2006 as Intangible Zone Tagaeri Tarome-nane in recognition of these peoples’ ancestral territory. Extraordinary biological and cultural diversity are found within areas meant to oil activity: about 80 percent of the area of the YNP overlaps with six oil fields, including field 43.

In exchange for leaving oil in the ground *sine die*, the Ecuadorian state applied for an international compensation based on “the principle of differentiated co-responsibility” (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, February 12, 2016),

corresponding to “at least US\$ 3,600 million or half of the amount the state would obtain in case of oil exploitation [i.e. US\$ 7,200]” (Larrea, 2010, p. 8). Hence, Ecuador appeared as the first contributor to the initiative by assuming up to half of the opportunity cost of leaving the oil underground.

Correa’s government launched the Yasuní-ITT initiative as a state policy in June 2007 on World Environment Day. The project was introduced to Correa’s cabinet by Alberto Acosta even before he was appointed Minister of Energy and Mines. The counterpoint between antagonist positions inside the government mirrored in the March 2007 Resolution of the Board of Petroecuador (the state-owned oil company), which comprised two options for field 43. The Yasuní-ITT initiative was option A: “[the Board] accept[s] the option of leaving oil unexploited under the ground [...]”. Option B was oil exploitation (Empresa Pública de Hidrocarburos del Ecuador, 2007). It was remarkable that the national authority responsible for conventional oil policy<sup>15</sup> (i.e. the Minister of Energy and Mines) supported option A. The president, instead, supported option B (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, February 12, 2016).

A couple of days after, the Ministry of Energy and Mines<sup>16</sup> (MEM) released the Energy Agenda 2007-2011 in which option A was explicitly highlighted (Acosta & Villavicencio, 2007, p. 51). After its initial thrust in MEM, Correa moved the initiative to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The chosen platform for the international promotion of the initiative was the climate change forum. Even though the alternative-to-development vein<sup>17</sup> of the Yasuní-ITT initiative originally breached the liberal epistemic pattern of sustainable development and its master narratives as the Kyoto Protocol, the Ecuadorian government strove to fit the initiative into mainstream schemes.

By September 2007, Correa presented the Yasuní-ITT initiative to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and referred to “climate justice international policy” (Acosta, Gudynas, Martínez & Vogel, 2009, p. 450), which, in turn alluded the “common but differentiated responsibilities” made explicit in article 10 of the Kyoto Protocol (United Nations, 1998, p. 10). In December 2007, the Minister of Foreign Affairs presented the initiative during the thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 13) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in a further attempt to harmonize the Ecuadorian proposal to official climate change mechanisms.

By the beginning of 2008, Correa issued two Executive Orders meant to outline an organizational chart for the Yasuní-ITT initiative. On one hand, he established the Energy Transition Trust Fund in order to “allocate the contributions of the international community for investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy plans” (Executive Order No. 847, published in the Official Gazette No. 253, January 16, 2008). On the other hand, the president created the Technical Secretariat of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to “foster the initiative and outline international negotiation strategies” (Executive Order No. 882, published in the Official Gazette No. 269, February 9, 2008).

Only six months after, the Administrative and Directive Council of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative (ADC) was established to supervise the Technical Secretariat (Executive Order No. 1227, published in the Official Gazette No. 401, August 12, 2008). Until November 2009 the ADC outlined the proposal of a trust fund for the initiative's contributions to be administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The agreement with UNDP was to be signed during the COP 15 in December 2009, but Correa argued that the mechanism was "not aligned with the sovereignty principles" of the Ecuadorian government and vetoed it (Álvarez, 2013, p. 92).

The cancelation of the agreement provoked the resignation of the members of the ADC and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. After the impasse, the resurrection of the initiative was to come by the hand of the Ministry of Coordination of Natural and Cultural Patrimony (MCP)<sup>18</sup> in 2010. The memorandum of agreement between the Ecuadorian government and UNDP was finally signed in August 2010 (Executive Order No. 596, published in the Official Gazette No. 356, January 6, 2011), thereby establishing an additional mechanism to manage contributions to the initiative besides the national trust fund created in 2008. The new UNDP-administered trust fund was meant to bankroll sustainable development and human development strategies, mainly conservation and reforestation, and social development in the Amazon region (UNDP, 2010, p. 5).

The MCP guardianship of the initiative was imprinted by the creation of an Administrative Negotiation Commission (ANC) with the key duty of fundraising under the direction of Ms. Ivonne Baki (Executive Order No. 241, published in the Official Gazette No. 132, February 19, 2010). Under this scheme, the initiative was to be bankrolled with 1) contributions of governments, private and public entities (including intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations) and individuals, and 2) the issuance of Yasuní Guarantee Certificates (CGYs) (UNDP, 2010, p. 6).

Yasuní Guarantee Certificates were meant to add to the long list of emission permits such as carbon credits and other mechanisms that refer to emissions *reduction* although CGYs strictly denoted *avoided* emissions (i.e. emissions that would never take place whilst oil is kept in the ground). Since the logic of CGYs differed from UNFCCC's schemes, the Yasuní certificates could not be traded in carbon markets. Thus, CGYs acted only as guarantee provided by the Ecuadorian government of keeping the oil underground. In the event of oil exploitation, CGYs entitled the holders to be reimbursed by the Ecuadorian state (UNDP, 2010, p. 13).

By December 2010, during the COP 16 in a further attempt to comply with the logic of UNFCCC, Correa plead for the inclusion of ampler compensation schemes and introduced the concept of Net Avoided Emissions (*Emisiones Netas Evitadas*, ENE) as "the emissions that could be released by a country, but are not produced, or the emissions that exist in a country that are reduced". The Ecuadorian president further stated that the Yasuní-ITT initiative was based on ENE and advocated for the adoption of the mechanism under the Framework Convention on Climate Change since existing instruments, as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+), were "insufficient, inefficient, and inconsistent" (El Ciudadano, December 8, 2010).

REDD+, which aims to compensate developing countries for the “environmental service of reducing deforestation” (Lovera, 2009, p. 46), was a principal incentive being discussed during COP 16.

The “erratic wander-around” (Martínez, 2009, p. 36) of the initiative through different government dependencies and chairpersons seemed to come to an end by the beginning of 2011. The budget of the initiative was transferred to the Office of the President, and Mrs. Ivonne Baki was appointed “Plenipotentiary Representative of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative” and chair of the negotiation team in charge of fundraising (Executive Order No. 648, published in the Official Gazette No. 391, February 23, 2011). One year later, in 2012, Mrs. Baki was appointed “Secretary of State for the Yasuní-ITT Initiative” (Executive Order No. 1030, published in the Official Gazette No. 637, February 9, 2012).

Since her first designation in 2010 until August 2013, Mrs. Baki and her team of fifteen persons spent US\$ 7.3 million in the fundraising campaign around the world (El Universo, August 22, 2013). By that time, the contributions in the international trust fund amounted for about US\$ 11 million and US\$ 2 million in the national Energy Transition Trust Fund (Executive Order No. 74, published in the Official Gazette No. 72, September 3, 2013). The minimum threshold to be reached by 2011 was established in US\$ 100 million (UNDP, 2010, p. 13).

Despite the duration of the project was indefinite (Executive Order No. 1572, published in the Official Gazette No. 530, February 17, 2009) and the term to materialize the international compensation was agreed in thirteen years beginning in 2011 (Executive Order No. 74, published in the Official Gazette No. 72, September 3, 2013), in August 2013, the Ecuadorian government announced the unilateral termination of the Yasuní-ITT initiative and the start of oil extraction in the YNP.

“The world has failed us”, stated the fresh reelected<sup>19</sup> President Correa as announcement of the end of the initiative while dozens of protesters gathered in front of the Presidential Palace. Correa further argued that the opportunity cost of oil exploitation raised to US\$ 18,000 million (i.e. US\$ 11,000 million more than initially expected). Such fresh oil revenues were meant to fight poverty as the president offered (El Universo, August 15, 2013). Thus, the beggars realized the sack of gold they were sitting on.

The president petitioned the National Assembly to declare of national interest the exploitation of oil fields within YNP (as mandated in the 2008 Constitution). In order to support the request, Correa ordered the ministers of environment and of non-renewable natural resources to assess the feasibility of oil drilling in the YNP within five days (Executive Order No. 74, published in the Official Gazette No. 72, September 3, 2013). The approbatory resolution of the National Assembly, with majority of Alianza País, was issued in the first days of October in record time: “[...] declare of national interest the exploitation of oil field 43, [...], in order to accomplish fundamental tasks of the state, assure individuals’, peoples’, and nature’s rights, to achieve *buen vivir* [...]” (Asamblea Nacional, 2013).

## DISCUSSION: RESUMING THE STRUGGLE OVER A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

As an “empty significant” (Laclau, 2014, p. 256), *buen vivir* could successively be filled in with diverse meanings. Once, it echoed in nature’s rights (granted in the 2008 Constitution) and in the prohibition to extract oil from sensitive territories. Then, coinciding with the government’s termination of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, *buen vivir* was related to a milestone of neo-extractivism: strategic resources extraction to fight poverty. Hence, *buen vivir* turned into a “vague and polyphonic concept” (Alarcón & Mantilla, 2017, p. 99) and signalized the state’s capitulation to Latin American neo-extractivism. The meaning of nature shuttled back from natural heritage and ancient peoples’ habitat to strategic resources, a more functional concept to address economic growth and material welfare.

The inclusion of *buen vivir* into the state’s official documents during Correa’s government signalizes what might be regarded as “conceptual co-optation” since the concept was used in a different role from the initial one. Moreover, the transit of the Yasuní-ITT initiative (as epitome of *buen vivir*) through the state logic, and further through ministries and bureaucratic agencies, speaks for a “bureaucratic co-optation” in which the concept of *buen vivir* was successively appropriated, legitimated, and politically manipulated by the government. As a result of this co-optation, the bureaucratic apparatus vomited a distorted image of *buen vivir*.

However, the cancellation of the Yasuní-ITT initiative not only “highlighted government’s hostility toward its own constitutional principles” (Conaghan, 2016, p. 115) but also disclosed the 2008 Constitution as a straitjacket against neo-extractivist policies, which can be activated by civil society. Article 407 of the Constitution mandates, regarding non-renewable natural resources located in sensitive territories, that “exceptionally, these resources can be tapped at the substantiated request of the President of the Republic and after a declaration of national interest issued by the National Assembly, which can, if it deems advisable, convene a *referendum*” (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008). A “handful of people”, which met during the protests against the government’s cancellation of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, decided to undertake the petition of a referendum in order to prevent oil drilling in the Yasuní National Park: “as convened in the Constitution... this was the beginning of Yasunidos”, a group of activists originated in urban middle classes (Pato Chávez, spokesperson Yasunidos, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

The petition of a referendum entailed the presentation of about 600,000 supporting signatures (i.e. five percent of the national electorate) to the National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, CNE). The task implied the countrywide mobilization of the novel collective of the Yasunidos. The collective undertook the enterprise successfully with the backing of other social movements, but the CNE alleged fraud and disqualified the signatures, rejecting the petition.

The significance of Yasunidos as a domestic social force, which contested the government's neo-extractivist strategy, was sealed with the decision to seek a referendum on the Yasuní-ITT initiative (O'Connell, 2016, p. 50).

Yasunidos nurtured from the rupture between the government and the environmental movement, which supported Correa's election in 2006, and embodied a new generation of urban activists, who moved beyond the representation of society's concerns related to nature (i.e. a generation of activists for whom the meaning of development is indissoluble from that of nature). Voices of social movements, indigenous and peasants' organizations, and groups of intellectuals who advocate for a post-oil era converged into its critical vision of neo-extractivism<sup>20</sup> (Alarcón, Rocha & Di Pietro, 2018, p. 70). In this logic, Ortiz (2016, p. 61) advocated a "qualitative leap in the character of social movements opposed to government" and argued that a "polycentric social movement" emerged.

Opposition to neo-extractivism had been cooking since the beginning of 2012, one year before Correa's reelection in February 2013. The "March for Water, Life, and the Dignity of the Peoples" (*Marcha por el agua, la vida y la dignidad de los pueblos*) was summoned by most heterogeneous opposition factions led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE) and local governments against mining. The *marcha por el agua* took place between March 8 and 22 through a 700 km journey from southern Ecuador, a region menaced by mining activities, to the capital.

About 70,000 persons participated in the *marcha* and in the demonstration held at its arrival to Quito on World Water Day (Ortiz, 2016, p. 51). Alberto Acosta, already separated from the government, was one of the head protestors and embodied popular support to the Yasuní-ITT initiative during the march. The opposition to neo-extractivism did not achieve to turn into an electoral platform as seen in the outcome of Acosta's presidential candidacy. Alberto Acosta, who stood against Correa in the 2013 election, obtained about 3 percent of the votes among eight candidates. He anticipated the end of the initiative after Correa's victory<sup>21</sup> as he stated that "the infrastructure needed to extract the oil is already in place" (*The Guardian*, February 14, 2013).

If not in electoral successes, the legacy of the *marcha por el agua* is to be found elsewhere, in the "organized critique" of the neo-extractivist developmental strategy (Pato Chávez, spokesperson Yasunidos, personal communication, April 13, 2016). Such critique outlived the polyphonic concept of *buen vivir* while the Yasuní-ITT initiative was evoked as a "breakpoint within the [current] development model, which devastates nature in order to usurp natural resources" (Fernando Fajardo, member Yasunidos, personal communication, May 6, 2016).

The critique of the neo-extractivist developmental strategy entailed a rejection of the discourse of sustainable development as well since the latter advocates for natural resources management and protection of the environment. The critique was built upon multifaceted meanings of nature assumed by social movements, indigenous and peasants' organizations, and groups of intellectuals, which opposed to

1) the utilitarian notion of strategic resources prioritized by the government and 2) the concept of the environment proposed by the discourse of sustainable development.

These antagonistic positions, defended by society and the state, were central to revisit the concept of development. Before the termination of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, nature was related to patrimony, and *buen vivir* alluded an alternative-to-development approach based on the necessity of a harmonic relationship between nature and society, on the one hand,. On the other hand, the end of the initiative reaffirmed the neo-extractivist paradigm, a renewed bet on natural resources' commodification to support the national development project led by the state.

By the end of this article, the balance seemed to be tipping in favor of the latter discourse. Field 43 ITT reported record oil extraction by August 2019, circa 80 thousand barrels per day or nearly one fifth of the extraction undertaken by the state-owned companies (*El Comercio*, August 17, 2019), which means crumbs from the rich man's table to deal with the budget gap left by the drop in international oil prices of 2014. Plummeting oil prices signified for Ecuador circa US\$ 7 billion less revenues in 2015 (i.e. about 7 percent of GDP) (former Minister of Coordination of Economic Policy, personal communication, October 7, 2015).

## NOTAS

- 1 The discourse of sustainable development was originally outlined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) of the United Nations. The Commission's Report, *Our Common Future* (United Nations, 1987) advocated a permanent place for the environment within the discussion on the development process of national states.
- 2 Outcomes of the 1992 Earth Summit were 1) the Agenda 21 action plan, 2) the Forests Principles, and 3) the Rio Declaration with 4) the Convention on Biological Diversity, 5) the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, and 6) the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Together, this arrangement encompasses the master narratives of the discourse of sustainable development.
- 3 Green economy and circular economy are strongly criticized in ecological economics. Herman Daly (2019, p. 9), a champion of ecological economics, argued that both, green economy and circular economy, are based on "growthism", i.e. the belief that economic growth is the costless solution or at least the necessary precondition for any solution to socio-environmental problems such as poverty, environmental destruction, climate change, etc. Ecological economics rather advocates the subordination of the economic system to the size of the ecosphere (Daly 2019, p. 10; Martínez-Alier & Roca 2001, p. 15).
- 4 Leff (1999, p. 94) recapped that the reasons for socio-environmental movements to mobilize not only stemmed from cultural and symbolic values, but also from material and social interests. Nonetheless, the agency of socio-environmental movements became central to the understanding that socioecological problems are eminently political, and hence any techno-economic treatment (based on the vital forces of capitalism) of the relationship nature-society is doomed to be insufficient (Leff, 1986, p. 145; Martínez-Alier & Schlüpmann 1991, p. 318).



- 5 Critical stances entail a gender perspective that also denounces patriarchy.
- 6 The movements that Leff (1999) refers to as “socio-environmental movements” are sometimes called in this article plainly “social movements” in order to emphasize the antagonism toward the official environmental discourse held by the state. However, the designation aims to stress on the social movements that embraced environmental awareness of the negative socioecological consequences of extractivism.
- 7 The term “hegemony” is used in this article in a Gramscian sense, which refers to an idea that is deeply anchored to society and confirmed and ensured by the state (Becker, 2008, p. 19); hence, it alludes to a type of centrality that transcends its tactical or strategic uses and places a concept in the center of the rationalization of the very unity existing in a concrete social formation (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 7). In this sense, it might be argued that the idea of the centrality of natural resources to the achievement of development had the characteristics of a hegemonic discourse, since it represented a general consensus among social actors. The evidence of the negative socioecological consequences of extractivism gradually charged up natural resources with a negative load and eroded the apparent hegemonic discourse. Nonetheless, it opened the gates to a wider debate on the concept of development.
- 8 The term “dominant” is used in this book for the most widespread and influential discourse among different social actors. Different from the hegemonic discourse, the dominant discourse might permeate the state, but it might not be confirmed and ensured by society or vice versa.
- 9 According to article 71 of the 2008 Constitution, “the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles” (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008).
- 10 Overt repression strategies enforced by the Ecuadorian state during the second oil boom included 1) deployment of the armed forces repression apparatus, 2) criminalization of environmental protest, and 3) imprisonment of activists by a government-controlled judiciary (Tibán, 2018; Pérez & Solíz 2014, p. 153).
- 11 In September 1972, during the dawn of the Ecuadorian oil era, former dictator General Rodríguez Lara asserted that “there is no more Indian problem, we all become white when we accept the goals of national culture” (Stutzman, 1981, p. 45). The negation of indígenas in the national modernization project converged with a widespread current of thought that linked indigenous people with backwardness and archaic societies (Stavenhagen, 1979, p. 23).
- 12 The indigenous cosmogony of *sumak kawsay* not only inspired the *buen vivir* of the 2008 Constitution, but it was also a leitmotif of the 2009-2013 National Development Plan nicknamed “Building a Plurinational and Intercultural State” (Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir 2009-2013: Construyendo un Estado Plurinacional e Intercultural) (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo, 2009).
- 13 The idea of “leaving oil in the ground” might be traced in the 1990s decade as a strategy to reduce greenhouse gases emissions. The “carbon budget” was thought as “a total amount of CO2 emissions computed for ecological goals’ achievement” in Greenpeace’s report *Fossil Fuels and Climate Protection: The Carbon Logic* (Hare, 1997, p. ix). In order to comply with the carbon budget, the report advocated a moratorium on exploration and exploitation of oil and gas. In the same line, during alternative negotiations of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, Oilwatch propositioned carbon credits as fair compensation for “leaving oil in the ground” (Martínez-Alier & Temper, 2007, p. 18).

- 14 At current rates of consumption, such amount of oil is only enough to satisfy one week of world's demand.
- 15 Conventional oil policy generally entails two main components: 1) increasing oil extraction and 2) at least maintaining (if not increasing) reserve levels through exploration of new oil fields.
- 16 Now Ministry of Non-Renewable Natural Resources.
- 17 An alternative-to-development inspiration of the Yasuní-ITT initiative became recognizable as it questioned the current development model based on the consumption of fossil fuels and the emission of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, i.e. the “conceptual foundations of development, as well as the institutions and practices that legitimate them” (Gudynas, 2014, p. 65). Though, the National Development Plan 2007-2010 (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2007-2010) incorporated the initiative within a national strategy of “alternative and sustainable use of biodiversity, with special attention to indigenous people and culture, [...]” (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo, 2007, p. 156). Hence, the official document placed the Yasuní-ITT initiative within an orthodox narrative that makes reference to sustainable development and human development (Alarcón & Mantilla, 2017, p. 101).
- 18 The Ministerio de Coordinación de Patrimonio Natural y Cultural (MCP) was inaugurated and disbanded during Correa's government. Its establishment in February 2007 responded to the need of coordination of “policies and actions regarding intangible capital” of various ministries (Executive Order No. 117-A, published in the Official Gazette No. 33, March 5, 2007). In May 2013, only three months before the termination of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, the MCP was dissolved. The bulk of its responsibilities, including the coordination of the Ministry of Environment, was transferred to the Ministry of Coordination of Strategic Sectors. The move later recalled the transit of the notion of nature from patrimony to strategic resources.
- 19 Correa was re-elected for a next four-year period in February 2013, only six months before the announcement of the cancelation of the Yasuní-ITT initiative.
- 20 Consequences of the government's termination of the Yasuní-ITT initiative were not only to be found in the domestic arena. The cancellation of the initiative led to an impasse between the Ecuadorian and the German governments. Germany has been a traditional partner in international cooperation; only with the special programme “Biosphere Reserve Yasuní” (Sonderprogramm Biosphärenreservat Yasuní), the German government channeled 34.5 million Euro to protection of the Yasuní National Park during a five-year period (BMZ, 2013, p. 2). Actors of the impasse were the Ecuadorian government, the German government through the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, BMZ), members of the German federal parliament (Bundestag), and the Yasunidos. For a detailed relation of the impasse see Alarcón, Rocha & Di Pietro (2018).
- 21 An additional spark to the announcement of the beginning of oil drilling in field 43 might be related to the hefty debt burden under the oil-for-loans scheme; just one month before the drop of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, “Ecuador obtained a \$2 billion loan from the China Development Bank in exchange for nearly 40,000 barrels a day [about 8 percent of national oil extraction] of oil from Ecuador over two years” (Kraus, 2013, p. 12). The new Vice-president, Jorge Glas, was in charge of big infrastructure projects, mostly bankrolled with Chinese funding, which accounted among the main concerns of the new Correa's administration. The assignment of the vice-president's duties confirmed the shift of government's priorities previously imprinted by social investment led by former vice-president (and current president) Lenín Moreno.

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