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The Ambivalences of Success: Discourses on Development, Progress, and Extractivism

In 2007, under the Presidency of Rafael Correa, the Ecuadorian government made a ground-breaking proposal to the international community. The Ecuadorian State was willing to impose a permanent ban on oil drilling in the Yasuní National Park. The Yasuní-ITT (Ischpingo-Tiputini-Tambococha) initiative would not only promote conservation in one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth; it would leave856 million barrels ‘worth of oil underground, preventing the release of about 407 million metric tons of CO2into the atmosphere. All this in exchange for 3.6 billion USD—half the value of the oil reserves—to be raised from public and private contributions from the international community. However, after six years of campaigning and advertising, the government terminated the initiative owing to inadequate financial results.

The Yasuní-ITT Initiative sparked a politically fierce national debate on the productive future on the verge of a post-extractivist economic catastrophe and worldwide controversy. Although the initiative was ultimately unsuccessful, with its proposal, Ecuador opened an ongoing discussion about concepts like “development,” “growth,” “progress,” and “success. “These are not only meaningful terms to describe and analyse the societies we live in; they are also part of powerful discourses governing our ways of living, individually and collectively, locally and globally. We all have notions of what a prosperous society looks like, but at the same time, there are no concrete qualities or standards that can render our approaches any less vague.

Not for Publication

This project focuses on (neo-) extractivism, a set of policies and practices aimed to further the exploitation (often at any cost) of available natural resources. I will consider the economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural implications of the conditions in countries where extractivist practices account for a large portion of the national income.

The goal of this project isn’t to describe the right pathway to success but rather to deconstruct the notion of successions very core. Questioning the role and meaning of the concepts mentioned above, I aim to reveal the dominant discourses on how societies think they should act to achieve a certain status. How does a society build its understanding of success and development? How is this understanding reproduced? How does it influence other aspects of societal life?

To address these questions, this project combines theories of development, extractivism, and discourse analysis. In addition, I will also consider social and technical practices. To understand the extent of such discourses and their implications, it is crucial to scrutinise actual oil extraction practices, their impact on the environment and society, and the role of politics and economics. Only through a critical understanding of the technical, political, and economic practicalities is a reasonable analysis of the social outcomes and mechanisms possible.

Ultimately, this project seeks to gain an insight into the construction and reproduction of such discourses, taking into consideration more recent developments like the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. However, it will also consider Ecuador’s environmental, economic, and political history and its implications, thus allowing us to assess the Ecuadorian case within a regional and international comparison framework.

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