

Reciprocal Shaping or Conditioning? Debating the Materiality and Discourse of Natural Resources in Ecuadorian Development Policies

Western Modernity was built on stocks and trade of cotton, tea, sugar, opium, spices, gold, silver, saltpetre, and many other resources that shaped global markets, structures and dynamics that are pretty much still standing and determine the contemporary global capitalism, now fuelled by flows of coal, oil and lithium to keep its machinery functioning. Modern capitalism and the origins of global trade based on colonial settings cannot be thought of without the (natural) resources that were discovered, produced, and traded, and which fed, dressed, and fuelled the emerging Western societies originating from the unequal exchange during early-stage global capitalism. At the same time, capitalism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism are not only economic phenomena but necessarily social, cultural, and political forces that have forged concepts and idea(l)s such as development, progress, advancement, and welfare which have accompanied the institution of the “modern” world. The forces that shape global social, political, and cultural dynamics produce concepts, norms and values which dictate the functioning of the world to this day. The role of natural resources in this constellation is not trivial: Natural resources and the processes that enable their incorporation into global markets become intrinsically entangled in this web of trade flows, political settings, social arrangements, economic indicators, and normative expectations we called “Modernity”.

Natural resources do not only *materially* feed the processes responsible for the advent of “modernity” through chemical, physical or physiological (re)actions; natural resources fuel economic plans, political decisions and social expectations impacting a multitude of actors and spheres. When dealing with questions concerning the *development* and progress of societies, natural resources *materialise* as vehicles or instruments intended to achieve specific goals, *substantiate* as conditions for progress and *crystallise* the hope and promises of a better future. To approach this phenomenon, it is necessary to *equate* the representation of natural resources in the language and the concept of development from a common analytical perspective allowing for the consideration of its *material* as well as the *immaterial* connotations. The (Foucauldian) notion of discourse appears suitable to address the construction and production of meaning and knowledge, considering the *power* that gives structure to the produced collective logic. Natural resources can therefore be *represented* by a set or series of *discursive elements* which interact with and relate to the notion of development. During this interaction, both instances, natural resources and development, co-construct each other *discursively*: on the one hand the discourses surrounding natural resources often act as and shape the conditions of *development*, and on the other development serves as justification of the *material* exploitation of natural resources and the political decisions and social costs attached to it.

Many nations in the Global South evince a great degree of *dependence* on the exploitation and export of natural resources to keep their economies afloat and finance basic and social welfare programs. The intrinsic discursive but also material relation between the exploitation of natural resources and the pathways of and to development becomes in these cases even more tangible. In this case study, Ecuador and its dependence on the export of crude oil to finance the state’s economy, serve as example to showcase the interaction between a specific natural resource, in this case crude oil, the role of its materiality and discursive representation, and the discourses around and about *development* as a core tenet in Ecuadorian history and the national political debate about extractivism.