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# Urban extractivism. Contesting megaprojects in Mexico City, rethinking urban values

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## ABSTRACT

Urban extractivism is an emergent concept increasingly discussed within Latin America-based scholarship but less known in anglophone urban geography. The devastating social and environmental impact of large-scale natural resource extraction, usually accompanied and driven by infrastructure megaprojects, is the main domain to which activists and scholars are currently applying the concept of extractivism. However, extractivism-related accumulation also applies to urban contexts, as for instance, scholars argue using this lens to analyze the production of exclusive urban territories in central Buenos Aires. In this contribution, I suggest to broaden the concept of urban extractivism to address pressing challenges of urban transformations in the peripheries of Mexico City, particularly concerning urban infrastructure megaprojects and Indigenous socio-territorial movements that advocate for a more sustainable use of natural resources. Critical reflection on the extractivism of knowledge reveals the need for more collaborative research methods in urban geography and beyond.

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Ecoterritorial turn; socio-territorial movements; infrastructure megaprojects; accumulation by dispossession; urban values; Latin America

## Introduction

In March 2022, the new Felipe Ángeles International Airport (AIFA) of Mexico City, located on a military air base in Santa Lucía, was inaugurated. The pueblos originarios (Indigenous Peoples) of the affected municipalities Zumpango and Tecámac in the north-eastern periphery of Mexico City opposed the construction of the airport for reasons of water protection. They mobilized against this large urban infrastructure project forming the Frente de Pueblos Originarios por la Defensa del Agua (Indigenous Peoples Front for the Defence of Water, FPODA) because the project would drastically aggravate the water shortage in the area by damaging the underground Cuautitlán-Pachuca aquifer and the community's wells while also exacerbating the rapidly increasing, chronic water shortage in the north-eastern metropolitan area. Moreover, AIFA-related transport and highway infrastructure affects the everyday life of the pueblos originarios by accelerating urbanization on communal land and threatening endangered

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species, particularly birds and mammals (Castillo & Hernández, 2020). Since 2018, the resistance movement against the AIFA has become part of a wider urban socio-territorial movement to defend water, forests, air and land (Bastian & Jairath, 2019; Durán & Moreno, 2021).

In the last two decades, many similar urban socio-territorial movements have been emerging across Latin America (Cúneo & Gascó, 2013). They are often framed as struggles as for environmental social justice rather than as urban conflicts. These movements are mainly led by Indigenous Peoples or Afrodescendants to defend their communities against displacement due to extractive industries like mining and oil extraction, agribusiness or hydroelectric dams (e.g. Bebbington, 2009). Whereas such debates on extractive megaprojects framed as extractivism are widely known, a focus on extraction in an urban context is only recently emerging and barely noted in anglophone urban geography. In this contribution, I introduce and expand the concept of urban extractivism to address current socio-territorial struggles in Mexico City as described above. Before I delve deeper into the pressing issue of urban extractivism posed in Mexico City, I briefly introduce and review the concept of extractivism more in general to historically and geographically situate it. To conclude, I will then draw some possible links between urban extractivism and current debates in urban geography.

## Situating extractivism

Extractivism is not new to Latin America. European colonizers established extraction and export of natural resources on a massive scale as an economic strategy half a millennium ago. (Neo-)Extractivism, however, is a concept that Latin America-based scholars (e.g. Acosta, 2011; Gudynas, 2010; Massuh, 2012; Svampa & Viale, 2014) have introduced recently to grasp the expansion of the extractive economy and the colonial continuities of the latest commodities boom during the early twenty-first century (2000–2014), which was based on high world market prices and propelled enormous economic growth: an economic supercycle that has left Latin American governments, regardless of their political ideology, to rely substantially on the extractivist export model. Coined as a “commodities consensus” (Svampa, 2015), this large-scale exportation of raw materials by a significant number of Latin American countries has sparked a variety of socio-environmental conflicts. Inherently linked to the appropriation and dispossession of territories and natural resources, these conflicts are fueled by increasing economic, social and ecological inequalities. Maristella Svampa (2019, p. 7) sees these current contestations across the region not least as the result of an ecoterritorial turn, which has emerged from an intersection between Indigenous-communitarian and environmental discourses and practices to defend territory. This turn is materializing in a growing resistance against the current neo-colonial development model of extractivism, led by Afro-Latin American organizations, Indigenous communities and a broad feminist movement (see also Ulloa, 2016).

Today, Latin America is in a new phase of extractivism. Extractivism is becoming ever more destructive and aggressive in the current planetary ecological crisis, mainly due to intensification and refined techniques such as fracking to explore and exploit unconventional hydrocarbons and rare minerals (such as lithium). These techniques severely over-exploit and therefore jeopardize fundamental renewable natural resources such as water,

forests, air and land (Composto & Navarro, 2017, p. 51). This intensified resource exploitation is occurring alongside an increase in state and para-state violence, which is expressed in threats to and numerous murders of mainly Indigenous and Black environmental activists (Global Witness, 2022). Moreover, the geopolitical context plays a central role in this most recent phase of extractivism, mainly due to increasing economic dependence on Chinese foreign investments, particularly for new large infrastructure projects such as ports, roads, and hydroelectric dams (Jenkins, 2022).

Mexico's long-standing trajectory of extractivism mirrors in large part the pervasiveness of a neo-colonial development model that regimes have been implementing since the 2000s (e.g. Tetreault, 2020). The political and economic reforms of the last decade clearly show state involvement in promoting extractive industries, although various governments use fundamentally different rhetoric. In 2001, the *Puebla-Panamá Plan* was implemented by then-president Fox on a Mesoamerican scale for regional development through the construction of large-scale energy and transport infrastructures. The program had to be stopped after widespread protests in 2006 yet was re-launched as *Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project* by the equally conservative successive government of Calderón in 2008. A watershed event for infrastructure-based development in Mexico was the 2013 national energy reform by Peña Nieto, which laid the legal basis for the realization of many of today's major infrastructural projects (Bastian & Jairath, 2019). This policy is continued by the current left-populist government of López Obrador, who was elected in 2018. He officially prioritizes infrastructure investments in the political and economic reform project called the Fourth Transformation (known as 4T). This project echoes well-known developmentalist ideas of progress and economic growth through infrastructure and has led to another boost in large-scale infrastructure projects (e.g. wind energy parks, mines, tourism infrastructure projects like the so-called Tren Maya, or the far-reaching development plan for the Istmo de Tehuantepec, among others). All these projects entail significant state support and investment, are strongly linked to a wide variety of transnational investors and are frequently highly contested in their local environments (Azamar & Rodríguez, 2020; Linsalata & Navarro, 2020). Developmentalism still provides a powerful narrative for governments and corporations for appropriating specific territories and extracting value. The López Obrador administration points to infrastructural investment as a source of jobs, market access, and capital accumulation to obtain broader legitimacy for megaprojects and to obscure the massive social and ecological consequences of many such projects.

### **Extracting urban value?**

Such large-scale resource extraction in an allegedly rural context resulting from an escalating international demand for raw materials, usually accompanied and driven by infrastructure megaprojects, is the main domain in which activists and scholars are fruitfully applying the concept of extractivism. However, scholars are increasingly engaging with this term to study urban transformations in and from Latin America. For instance, Martín Arboleda (2016) suggests to view such spaces of extraction as particular expressions of market-driven processes of extended urbanization – understood as the broader landscapes of urbanization, which extend far beyond megacities, metropolitan

regions and peri-urban zones and supports the everyday activities and socioeconomic dynamics of urban life (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). In this view, extractivism is deeply linked to planetary urbanization processes, yet still tied to the extraction of raw materials. Another approach is using the concept of extractivism to look at inner-city renewal and squatter redevelopment in cities, particularly in Buenos Aires (Vásquez, 2017). Based on Latin American experiences and drawing on David Harvey's notion of "accumulation by dispossession" (2010), Enrique Viale, together with Maristella Svampa, coined these processes as *urban extractivism*, making the link between (neoliberal) urban development and extractivism even more explicit by emphasizing the extraction of urban land value: "extractivism has also reached the big cities. But it is not the big landowners producing soybeans, nor the mining megacompanies, but the real estate speculation that in this case causes dispossession and displacements" (Svampa & Viale, 2014, p. 248).<sup>1</sup>

Taking these two main approaches into account, Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra (2017, p. 580) suggest expanding the concept of extractivism not only because the extractive cannot be unilaterally associated with the rural or nonurban landscape (as also Arbolada argues), but also because the extractive economy includes more than raw materials and refers to a broader understanding of extracting value. Thus, they conclude, it is necessary to highlight the circuits in which extractive operations take shape and accelerate, undoing the city–country binary. Moreover, they propose to include urban dynamism of the urban peripheries, which is different from the gentrified city that is linked – when usually speaking of "urban extractivism" in a narrower sense as exemplified above – to extractive rent and the transformation of use value into exchange value by realizing the rent gap.

Following Gago and Mezzadra, I suggest to further expand urban extractivism by adding yet another layer. Taking current struggles against prestigious urban megaprojects in Mexico City as a starting point, and particularly the claims made by the pueblos originarios, shows not only the importance of advancing the concept but also of rethinking established notions of use value and asking what is actually exploited by neo-colonial extractive operations in these cases. In the following, I provide critical insights on the urban impacts of the current boom of infrastructure supported by the Mexican government as part of its ambitious goal towards 4T. I focus particularly on AIFA, one of its flagship projects, to discuss what is at stake for residents living in places of such urban transformation and what defending water and life implies.

## **Por el agua y la vida: protests against the new airport in Mexico City**

Since 2000, various government administrations have declared building a new airport in Mexico City as a central piece of their territorial development. Initially planned in Texcoco, the current national government moved this infrastructure megaproject further north to Santa Lucía after serious protests against the previous intended location (Schwarz & Streule, 2016). However, relocating the project to the north-eastern peripheries of Mexico City did not solve the problems, as was demonstrated in the beginning of this paper. The pueblos originarios, organized under the FPODA, also object to the airport, namely for its environmental and social impacts. Moreover, they have claimed the president is denying people recognition as pueblos originarios in order to evade the International Labour Organization Convention 169 that requires the informed

consent of all the pueblos originarios of territories directly affected *before* construction can occur (Interview with X from a center of human rights, Mexico City, 23.1.2022).

The Mexican Secretariat of National Defence (Sedena) published an environmental impact assessment when starting the construction of AIFA. It stated severe environmental problems, mainly polluting emissions and the excessive use of the Cuautitlán-Pachuca aquifer, the main body of water that supplies neighboring municipalities (Sedena, 2019). To counter these negative impacts, Sedena suggests a mitigation plan. However, the expected population growth in the area and their future incremented water use makes scarcity of water even more pressing. In fact, the municipalities of Tecámac and Zumpango have experienced a massive increase of population since the early 2000s, when local authorities fostered the construction of mega conjuntos habitacionales (housing megacomplexes) – yet another urban megaproject for large-scale public housing developments (Kockelkorn et al., 2022; Salinas & Pardo, 2020). The unprecedented population growth has already caused a water crisis and led to the first instance of political mobilization of the pueblos originarios. Being aware of the water problem, Sedena proposes to secure the supply by importing water from further remote locations (Castillo & Hernández, 2020). Confronted with this situation, the FPODA decided to mobilize against the AIFA and denounce the devastating implications in terms of water supply (Interview with Y member of the FPODA, Mexico City, 3.2.2022). Moreover, the megaproject's increasing demand for water implies the extraction of water from local wells. This is opposed by the Sistemas Comunitarios de Agua Potable (SCAP): community-based water systems, which independently manage local potable water supply and distribution, particularly in the pueblos originarios. These systems are not from the municipal government, but run autonomously by a locally elected committee and relying on the community's contribution of money and voluntary work. The SCAPs are not for profit organizations and have a social motivation that includes the ecological protection of water and territory based on customary law (Ovando, 2014). In the affected area of the AIFA, there are 24 SCAPs (8 in Tecámac and 14 in Zumpango). The government is aiming to municipalize water management, which will disrupt the SCAPs' more ecologically accountable relationship with water understood as an ancestral heritage for the community and its access as a collective right (see also Chen & Bilton, 2022).

How does this case study of environmentally based protests against the building of the new airport in Mexico City relate to other cases and to the broader literature on urban extractivism? I identify three insights emerging from this case, inviting urban geographers to (i) revisit the understanding of urbanization, (ii) focus on continuities in struggles, and (iii) rethink urban values. The actual opposition is articulated around land expropriation, dispossession and the depletion of water resources not only of local communities but also of distant ones from whom more water will thus be extracted. This case is illustrative of urban extractivism, first, because it is about resource extraction: the literal extraction of water and the creation and capture of land value through urbanization processes which are materializing in urban megaprojects such as the new airport and the mega conjuntos habitacionales. In contrast to the established understanding, this case shows urban extractivism taking place in the peripheries, not in the city center thus adding a decentered perspective on accumulation by dispossession in an urban context. Second, the case study represents long-standing continuities of struggles against

extractivism. Beyond the protests against exploitative and unjust urbanization, this case study of urban extractivism also refers to the colonial legacy and the long history of protest against infrastructure megaprojects, which have at various points been articulated along similar lines (even if named differently) from colonial and postcolonial periods until today. In this way, the mobilization of the FPODA is in many ways connected to earlier protests framed around issues of class, race, gender and indigeneity, evident particularly in the denied recognition of pueblos originarios. Finally, the case also exemplifies current struggles for water and life taking place across the region and invites a reconsideration of urban values (Chan et al., 2016). In addition to the extraction of natural resources, the case study manifests productive and symbolic relations, creating urban values beyond economic parameters. The example of the SCAPs demonstrates the importance of common goods as a sustainable footing to provide adequate water services adopting communal, not municipal governance of water, the latter being notorious in Mexico City for its clientelistic and corrupt strategies (Chen & Bilton, 2022; Herrera, 2017). In a broader perspective, these struggles to defend urban territories envision a possible post-capitalist alternative that challenges conceptualizations and representations of what (neoliberal) urban development is and what kind of value undergirds it. An expanded definition of urban extractivism strives to gain new perspectives and possible other ways of relating to urban and natural values that allow the sustenance of life.

## Conclusions

Throughout this paper, I have offered a series of ideas and arguments about urban extractivism in Latin America-based scholarship. I particularly engaged with an extended concept of urban extractivism to reframe socio-territorial struggles as urban contestations. As the case of the pueblos originarios' resistance against the AIFA in Mexico City showed, this lens is useful for accounting for the social practices, self-management and communitarian strategies that Indigenous urban movements mobilize (Tzul Tzul, 2019), particularly Indigenous environmental thinking and initiatives for more responsible and accountable relationships with the urban natural environment (Acosta & Decio, 2012; Leff, 2004). In a broader perspective, megaprojects cause the loss of material and immaterial common goods of the pueblos originarios, who often claim and live relationships with territory and nature differently (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2014). These different relations also refer to horizontal concepts that have emerged from critical analyzes, languages and practices of social movements across Latin America – including *buen vivir* (good life), rights of nature, commons or the ethics of care. Despite the differences that certainly exist, all these concepts share a focus on different forms of human and non-human relationships. Relating to urban values otherwise generated by the pueblos originarios through everyday practices and ecological imaginaries as well as by self-management and communitarian strategies is crucial since they signal alternative routes for a more socially just and ecologically balanced urban transformation. Different lived practices and social relations mark a turning point in current Latin American debates on (urban) extractivism (Gómez-Barris, 2017).

These lively debates around notions of extractivism reverberate with at least two main current debates in anglophone urban geography on extraction of land value (Robinson & Attuyer, 2021) and on decentered notions of accumulation by dispossession (Leitner &

Sheppard, 2018). The extended concept of urban extractivism might be useful in both cases because it provides a frame to rethink urban value, which usually is abstracted from its socio-territorial, experiential and embodied underpinnings (Gutiérrez et al., 2016; for a detailed discussion on the production and commodification of urban values, see Hanakata et al., 2022). Value, then, continues to play a key role for understanding urbanization processes, but economic value does not govern and condition all social relations (see also Buller, 2022; Graeber, 2013). Instead, as George Henderson (2019, p. 271) aptly points out,

value [...] is the full round of activities through which societies produce and reproduce themselves, think themselves, feel themselves, change themselves, and alter the world in so doing. Understanding what capitalism is requires a value framework, and so too does thinking about what post-capitalist value could be like.

Finally, this extended conceptualization of urban extractivism also refers to an extractivism of knowledge (e.g. Streule & Schwarz, 2019), and questions a well-known yet still persistent and highly problematic North–South division in academic knowledge production, where Southern knowledge and memories, as well as practices and experiences, are reduced to empirical cases to be studied, or data and local expertise to be extracted, to be inserted into EuroAmerican theoretical models. Instead, scholars and activists call for more collaborative methods, a crucial shift in current Latin American geography clearly exemplified by numerous collectives such as GeoComunes, Geobrujas, or the Colectivo de Geografía Crítica de Ecuador.

## Note

1. All non-English texts and excerpts from interviews were translated by the author.

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