



Imaginaries of development through extraction: The ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ and the present view of the future

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a reading of the ideas expressed in Walter Solón Romero Gonzales’ mural, the ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ from 1956, and juxtaposes these ideas to the current public discourse that emerges from speeches of high officials and from policy documents of President Evo Morales’ government. The objective is to investigate the understanding of the role natural resources vis-à-vis development in Bolivia at these two points in time and show the striking resonance between ideas depicted in the mural more than half a century ago and ideas expressed in contemporary official discourses. These ideas concern the foundational elements of a development model that envisions a central role for natural resources, and especially hydrocarbons, in the development of the country. The elements of this model, that include a prominent role of the state in the extraction of natural resources, expansive social policies, strategies to diversify the economy, neatly overlap with the central tenets of the neoextractivist model. It transpires that the novelty of neoextractivism can be fundamentally questioned. This model also provides the rationale justifying the promotion of extractive activities ‘at all costs’ in Bolivia and beyond. However, history has shown that it produces fantasies of development rather than actual development.

Oil kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation. It is the temptation of ease, wealth, strength, fortune, power. It is a filthy, foul-smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money. To discover and possess the source of oil is to feel as if, after wandering long underground, you have suddenly stumbled upon a royal treasure. Not only do you become rich, but you are also visited by the mystical conviction that some higher power has looked upon you with the eye of grace and magnanimously elevated you above others, electing you its favorite.

[...] [O]il is a fairy tale, and like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, 1982

1. Introduction

In February 2011 I went for a meeting at the headquarters of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), the state-owned hydrocarbon company of Bolivia based in La Paz. While waiting for my appointment, I was captivated by the large mural decorating the entrance hall, the ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’. The mural depicts, from left to right, an historical progression from Pre-Columbian, to colonial

times, independence, struggle over the appropriation of hydrocarbons and nationalization, and culminates in a vision of future development for Bolivia. The mural offers a striking representation of the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary Bolivia, of the way the pre-colonial past is idealized, how colonial powers are seen as usurpers of national natural resources and how, now that these resources are nationalized, they can provide for the citizen’s immediate needs and fund the investment needed to build the future of the country. The powerful impression made by the mural was heightened when I noticed that the date next to the author’s signature is 1956. This paper, starting from this striking observation, interrogates the ideas expressed in the mural by juxtaposing them to the contemporary discourse of government officials and public policies. The objective is to explore the historical roots of the current understanding of the role of natural resources in general, and hydrocarbons in particular, in the history, the present and in the future of Bolivia.

Murals in Latin America are a form of art that has been used to re-interpret history, educate and direct secular hopes through the ‘decoration’ of large spaces in public buildings. The Mexican muralist movement –and most prominently the works of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros– exemplify the political and pedagogical functions of muralism (*muralismo* in Spanish) within the context of the building of a

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modern post-revolutionary nation/state (Paz, 2002; Coffey, 2012). This article focuses on one outstanding example of the less-known Bolivian *muralismo* and proposes a reading of Solón's "History of Bolivian Petroleum" which itself is an overt instance of the role that popular art can serve in representing and shaping national imaginaries (Fundación Solón, 2010). The mural can be read as a reflection of broadly shared ideas of its time and, most notably, as the embodiment and expression of an enduring development model that understands extractive activities as instrumental to socio-economic development. The model, based on the potentialities of natural resources, and hydrocarbons in particular, to drive the progress of the country holds currency in contemporary Bolivia.

Historically the Bolivian economy has been based on the export of raw commodities. These commodities –that include silver, tin, and hydrocarbons– have shifted over time as a consequence of price changes in the international market and have determined the fortunes –marked by periodic boom and bust– of the national economy (e.g. Klein, 2011). In fact, from a social metabolism perspective we can see the Bolivian economic history as a process of intensification of extractive activities, expansion of the extraction frontier and of insertion in the global economy through increasingly skewed physical trade imbalances (Dorninger and Eisenmenger, 2016; cf. Schandl et al., 2017). This process continues to this day and hydrocarbons can be seen as the latest commodity animating a development model based on extractive industries. However, the extraction of hydrocarbons is presently being promoted as a breakthrough because of their potential role as a source of energy for other sectors of a diversified economy and because of their prospective 'industrialization' –the Bolivian shorthand for development of a commodity-processing industry in order to capture higher value added when compared to the sole extraction and export of raw commodities.

When it comes to present-day development models and policies, significant changes have taken place during the post-neoliberal period that has coincided with the presidency of Evo Morales –since 2006– and two competing development discourses have coexisted (Pellegrini, 2012; Tockman and Cameron, 2014). One discourse is the 'living well' (*buen vivir*) based on indigenous cosmology and emphasizing the satisfaction of individual and collective rights and living in harmony with nature over the achievement of ever-increasing material wealth. The other discourse links back to a developmentalist idea of an extractivist state that can use the revenues generated by natural resources and their industrialization to power economic development and finance social policies –a model that has been called 'neoextractivist' (Gudynas, 2012). An extensive literature has been engaging with the interpretation of the post-2006 changes, the ensuing tensions between development models and continuities and discontinuities with existing socio-economic structures; some authors single out revolutionary breaks with the past, while others have emphasised continuity and adjustments that are functional to the recreation of the neo-liberal order (e.g. Escobar, 2010; Webber, 2010). In this study, the focus is on the neoextractivist model that motivates and is reflected in most policies enacted by the Bolivian government after 2006.

In this policy context, the process of nationalization of hydrocarbons has gained prominence, reflecting neatly the tensions between the living well and the neoextractivist model (Pellegrini, 2012). In fact, on the one hand, the nationalization process has greatly increased state revenues that are used to strengthen state intervention in the economy, finance infrastructure development, and expanded social expenditures. On the other hand, the extraction frontier is advancing continuously, especially within indigenous territories, straining the relationship between the government and (at least some) indigenous organizations that see their territories encroached and their autonomy undermined (e.g. Fontana, 2013, 2014; Kohl and Farthing, 2012; Pellegrini and Arismendi, 2012; Pellegrini, 2016; Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler, forthcoming).

In relation to the Bolivian development model, the mural offers a powerful depiction of the role that natural resources, and especially

hydrocarbons, have played in the history and are envisioned to play in the future. This paper explores the scenes and the ideas expressed in the mural placing them side by side with the current public discourse to investigate continuities in the understanding of the role natural resources vis-à-vis development. That is, the starting point is the mural, which is juxtaposed to present-day discourses to analyse the role of hydrocarbons in the Bolivian development model and relate these insights to the discussion on neoextractivism. The analysis has a bearing beyond Bolivia and, to a certain extent, applies to the Latin American region.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it introduces a new method to underscore the relevance of past ideas to the present by way of juxtaposing a piece of art from the past with the contemporary discourses of policy makers. Second, it highlights an enduring and important ideological motivation –the development model sketched here– contributing to the formulation of public policies governing the extractive industries. Third, it shows that the main features of the neoextractivist development model are hardly new and that development through extraction is an elusive quest that marked the Bolivian *Zeitgeist* already in the 1950s.

The next section discusses art in general and murals in particular as instruments for the creation of official narratives, taking Mexican *muralismo* as a departure point towards a more general discussion. Section 3 turns to the 'History of Bolivian Petroleum' and after a brief description of the scenes that are part of the mural, these scenes are juxtaposed to public statements and policies that mark the current Bolivian policy debate. Section 4 engages with the role of ideas, expressed in the mural and in the current discourse, in imagining the role of natural resources in development. Section 5 concludes.

2. Muralismo, art, and interpretation

The most influential examples of *muralismo* come from the Mexican school that generated masters such as Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros. The Mexican *muralismo* is a complex movement that has produced images to make sense and interpret colonial history, the revolution and to sanctify the indigenous roots and *mestizaje* of modern Mexico (Paz, 2002). Much of the muralist production has focused on and depicted the past, but with intents that clearly refer to the present and the future. Giddens, while highlighting the function of history in the formation of modern nation-states, observed that "the reflexive monitoring of all states involves the invention of 'history' in some sense or another — the documented interpretation of the past that provides an anchorage for anticipated developments in the future." (1985: 220). Indeed, the works of the *muralismo* have also explicitly promoted visions of the future where Marxist ideology and technological progress feature prominently –as masterfully depicted for example in Rivera's 'The man at the centre of the universe'. These works have been at the same time so eminently political and influential that they have been described as 'the most important example of art on the Left in the history of modern art' (Coffey, 2012: 1).

Art co-evolves with culture since they are both a reflection and a constitutive element of the cultural milieu.¹ In the Mexican revolution, often described as 'a revolution without an ideology', the muralists have been trying to create such ideology *a posteriori* and have actively engaged in the struggle to shape the national identity that emerged from the revolution (Paz, 2002; Azuela de la Cueva, 2005: 89–91). The version of nationalism depicted and shaped in the murals expressed an indigenous historical heritage that had the potential to contribute to the construction of a great *mestizo* Mexican nation (Azuela de la Cueva,

¹ Culture is defined here as a set of broadly shared beliefs. The use of the singular form does not imply that at specific point there are no alternative, and to some extent incompatible, cultures, however our focus is on 'common sense' as naturalized categories of thought shared by a large part of a population (Gramsci, 1992).

2005: 91). This function of art situates murals within institutional and governmental programmes to shape citizens through a shared understanding of modernity and nationalism (Coffey, 2012: 17; cf. Bennett, 1995). In other words, murals are part of the ‘production-of-truth-process’ supporting the creation of a national identity and legitimizing the modern state through the didactics of murals contents, technique, and location (Coffey, 2012: 19, 77). These purposes of murals are common to many art projects, but murals stand out because the technique itself is associated with the positioning of the murals in grand public spaces and this creates a clear link with (state) patronage. Furthermore, given the technical potential, and often the need, to realize murals on large surfaces, the pieces also lend themselves to develop complex storylines with pedagogical content.

This content is expressed through the images depicted in the mural, that together form a ‘discourse’, a group of statements in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1972; Peet, 1996). This discourse needs to be seen as a function not only of what emerges from the art piece itself but also in relation to the significance of the art piece in context. In the case of murals, the context refers to the institutions hosting the piece and to the patrons financing the work, but also the context of the public discourse framing the art pieces. In fact, examining the exercise of government power beyond the use of force, we can interpret muralist art as part of the ‘governmentality’ of the state shaping citizens as subjects that become functional to the state’s grand objectives (Foucault, 2008).

This study juxtaposes a mural dating from 1956 with various forms of contemporary discourses. Words and discourses have been investigated because the same word can have different meanings over time and, conversely, the same concept has been described through different words in different historical moments (Koselleck, 1972). This way of studying the evolution of language offers insights into cultural development since through language we record and also shape our perceptions. In a related fashion, this study proposes the reading of a discourse presented through a mural and explores its contemporary meaning showing its continuing poignancy. In fact, the ideas underpinning this discourse continue to inform the political narrative and the formulation of public policies more than half a century from its depiction in Solón’s mural.

The focus of this paper is on discourses rather than on the policies themselves, which would require going beyond the normative and formal enunciation to include actual implementation and outcomes of these policies. The methodological point of departure is that these discourses are expressing ‘governmentality’ and are consequential to development models and policies (Andreucci and Kallis, 2017).² The discourses themselves have different sources ranging from policy documents to speeches of top government officials. These sources have different standings and the Bolivian government itself is not a monolithic entity, but a site where ideas are contested and evolve over time (cf. Silva, 2017). However, taken together, the discourses coming from these different sources offer insights into the ideas and models of development that are used to legitimize and are shaping the policies issued by the government.

Providing a reading of an art piece poses methodological challenges associated with the process of interpretation and over-interpretation (Eco and Collini, 1992). My choice is to give a ‘conservative’ interpretation of the mural and try to provide the most apparent interpretation of the images; that is, the most obvious reading of the piece is provided trying to avoid the temptation of ‘forcing’ interpretations on the mural. On the one hand, a more liberal approach to interpretation –and the associated risk of over-interpretation– would imply that I could easily introduce a bias and read the mural in a fashion that is

² Here a development model is understood as a conceptual framework used to define development, interpret reality and formulate policies to achieve the objective of development. The ideas concerning development that emerge from the discourses studied here are the essential blocks of this framework.

instrumental to my hypotheses –e.g. I could further interpret the mural to underscore continuities with the discourse on the Bolivian development model. On the other hand, I am cognizant that other interpretations, alternative as well as complementary to the ones presented here, are always possible and most likely some nuances of the mural are missing by the focus on the most incontrovertible meanings.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the images and ideas expressed in the mural are the result of the intent of the patron as well as of the artist. In the case of all commissioned art there is some degree of tension between the commissioning party and the intents of the artist and often times it is possible to read alternative meanings in the murals as more or less veiled attempts of the artist to express herself autonomously. The strategy of interpreting the mural focusing on the most apparent message and avoid over-interpretation might direct the interpretation towards the intents of the commissioning party since the artist expresses more liberally her ideas through the details of the commissioned piece. While the caveat that the multivocality of the mural can be somewhat muted should be kept in mind, the focus here is on the ideas that more clearly emerge from the images depicted in the mural. Apart from being more likely to express the intentions of the patrons, these ideas are also more likely to be visible to the audience visiting the YPFB building.³

3. The History of Bolivian Petroleum

Walter Solón Romero Gonzales was an adroit and prolific artist whose visual production expressed political commitment towards the emancipation of oppressed people (Ceaser, 2000). While Bolivian *muralismo* is relatively unknown, Solón is one the most famous contemporary artists in the country and his oeuvre included numerous murals (Calderón, 1991).⁴ His work reflected on the history and on the potentialities of the country with a constant focus on the injustices imposed on the Bolivian population (Fundación Solón, 2010). Given the social and political nature of the messages conveyed by the works of the artist, much of his production was prepared for public spaces that include educational institutions and government buildings (Ceaser, 2000).

Solón’s creations resonate with the Latin American experience in that the murals have a revolutionary character, while at the same time they are a result of institutional patronage and are permanently embedded within the institutional setting that frames them. This tension is what Octavio Paz referred to when mentioning the oxymoron of revolutionary institutionalized art in the Mexican context (Coffey, 2012). Considering the historical evolutions of these institutional frames and the paradoxical contrast that can develop over time between the frames and the political message delivered by the art pieces, we can think of the irony of the times when Solón’s work was decorating YPFB while the company was privatized and the ambitions depicted in the mural were dramatically scaled back.⁵

The framing of ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ relates to the post-revolutionary Bolivia and specifically to the nationalization of hydrocarbons. In this context, the mural appropriated, recreated and

³ An example of an interpretation underscoring the multivocality of the mural is offered by the fact that in the first scenes working class characters are always wearing blue trousers and seem to be suffering even in the brightest moments of Bolivian history. That is, exploitation and social subordination were pre-dating ‘the discovery’ and class differentiation was a feature of pre-Columbian America. If correct, this interpretation would introduce an ironic and profoundly critical note to the heroic and nationalist reading of the idealized Bolivian past.

⁴ In fact, the Bolivian *muralismo* is so little known that there is a paucity of publications on the matter, something that is reflected also in the literature and sources cited in this study.

⁵ The irony, but also the risks of these frames did not escape the artist that, for example, painted his ‘Portrait of a People’ (Retrato de un pueblo), on display at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), on panels that it could be moved in case an hostile government would decide for a crack-down on left-leaning displays of art.

developed the extractivist project and the developmentalist programme of post-revolutionary Bolivia (cf. [Dunkerley, 1984](#); [Kohl and Farthing, 2012](#)). More broadly, the post-revolutionary state-building project at the time was in need of instruments contributing to the formation of new Bolivian citizens that could be subjects of and served by a modern state –that is, the building blocks of the governmentality. Such instruments included a (potentially) hegemonic discourse marked by hope, prosperity, and inclusiveness. The combination of nationalism and the envisioned use of nationalized natural resources that –in contrast to the colonial and neo-colonial past– would play a role in the development of the country are the main themes of the mural and are apposite to the construction of this hegemonic discourse.

The mural ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’ develops from left to right from pre-Colombian Bolivia to an indefinite future, providing progressively a reading of history, a re-interpretation of contemporary times and a vision for the development of the country. Altogether Solón provides an overview of past and present challenges together with future hopes centred on hydrocarbons. The piece starts with the discovery and use of oil by indigenous people, moving to the re-discovery of petroleum during colonial times, to the moment when Standard Oil gained a concession in the country and the ensuing Chaco War (1932–1935), the creation of YPFB in 1936, the first nationalization of hydrocarbons in 1937, the development of industrial activities related to hydrocarbons and culminates with an envisioned great future for Bolivian people. I now comment on the images showing the details of the sequence in the mural, introducing an interpretation and statements coming from contemporary government officials and policies.⁶

To organize the argument and show details of the mural, I divided the mural into six scenes ([Figs. 1–6](#)) –the whole piece is reproduced in [Fig. 7](#). While moving from one scene to the next, we have to remember that the mural is designed as a whole and the narration is a continuum with interrelated subjects that does not allow a clear-cut division in separate themes. As a consequence, some of the explanations and the accompanying quotes could be associated with more than one scene, or are appropriate for the transition from one scene to the next, or for the mural as a whole.

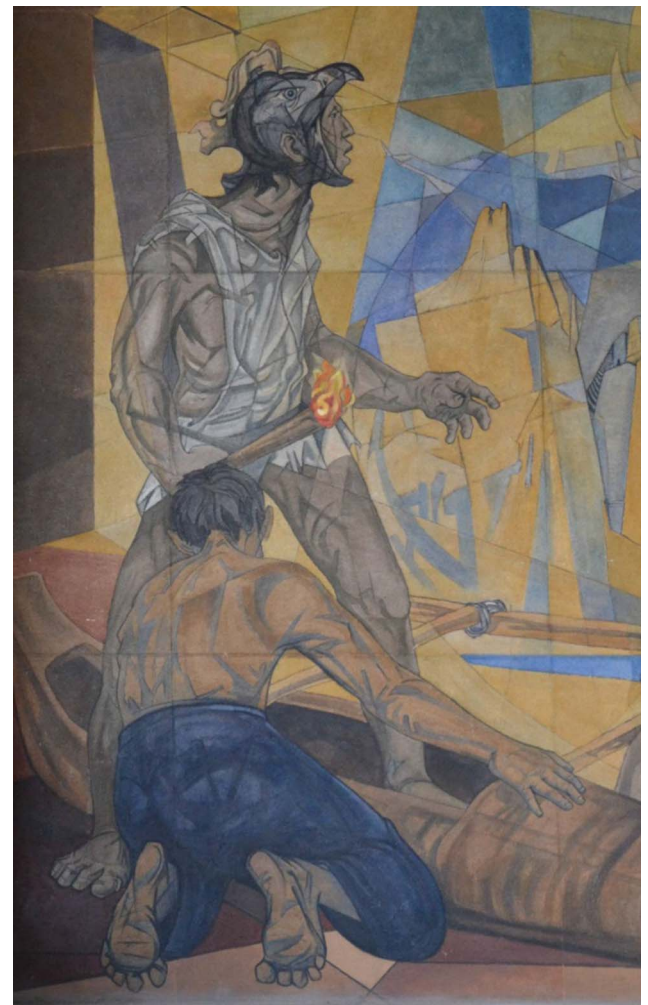
The first scene in the mural depicts an idealized pre-Colombian past with an Aymara indigenous man holding a torch ([Fig. 1](#)). The light coming from the torch indicates both vital energy and energy from petroleum. The scene takes place on the shore of Lake Titicaca, a significant location for indigenous cosmology and one of the natural landmarks of the Bolivian highlands.

The depiction of an idealised pre-colonial Bolivia, where the indigenous population was living in harmony, was part of the ‘autoctono’ and the ‘indigenist’ paradigms that were common throughout Latin America ([Svampa, 2016: 64–65](#)). The view of an idyllic indigenous past was instrumental in highlighting the developmental potentialities of indigenous groups and reject racialized discriminatory views that would make the indigenous population impossible to integrate in a modern nation ([Svampa, 2016: 74](#)). The theme of colonization interrupting an harmonious history is recurrent in the Bolivian public discourse and has found its way also in the new Constitution (2009). This celebratory narrative of the pre-colonial past is often contrasted with the gloomy process of colonization, which is itself contrasted with the revolutionary process of ‘decolonization’ of the state that has started in 2006 with the administration of President Morales.

“Our continent in the past was called Abya Yala, it had no borders dividing it. We had access to the Atlantic and the Pacific. (...) The word poor did not exist (...) nor the word race that arrived in 1492.”⁷

⁶ The interpretation of the mural is based on personal communications with the staff of the “Fundacion Solón”, resources from the foundation’s and YPFB’s websites: <https://fundacionsolon.org/> and <http://www.ypfb.gob.bo/>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

⁷ In: Speech by David Choquehuanca, Telesur TV Multimedia, <https://videos.telesurtv.net/video/30,729/bolivia-y-venezuela-impulsan-integracion-bilateral/>, accessed on 27/09/2017.



[Fig. 1](#). An Aymara indigenous person, with a torch signifying vital energy and petroleum, and a worker. ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’, Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.

David Choquehuanca, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2011

“In ancient times mountains arose, rivers spread out from one place to another, lakes were formed. Our Amazonia, our wetlands, our highlands and our plains and valleys were covered with greenery and flowers. We populated this sacred Mother Earth with different faces, and since that time we have understood the plurality that exists in all things and in our diversity as human beings and cultures. Thus, our peoples were formed, and we never knew racism until we were subjected to it during the terrible times of colonialism”

Preamble to the Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 2009

The Pre-Columbian elements of the mural are followed by the process of colonization in the second scene, where the Spanish priest and metallurgist Alonso Barba appears as a central figure ([Fig. 2](#)). Barba developed new techniques of amalgamation for the extraction of silver ores, combining indigenous and European technology and improving technical efficiency and profitability of mining by the Spanish colonial administration ([Barnadas, 1986](#)).⁸ Barba’s knowledge of minerals,

⁸ The techniques presented by Barba are in fact a result of an hybridization of indigenous and Western knowledge that was influential in continental and Northern Europe, while the Spaniards had to re-learn the methods from metallurgists from other European countries ([Barnadas, 1986](#); [Bigelow, 2015](#); [Platt, 2000](#); [Salazar-Soler, 2002](#)). Attempts, dating back to the end of the 19th century, to ‘reform’ American metallurgical practices and base them solely on Western/European knowledge met resistance and did not succeed in changing the theory nor the practice of metallurgy ([Platt, 2000: 6–8](#)).

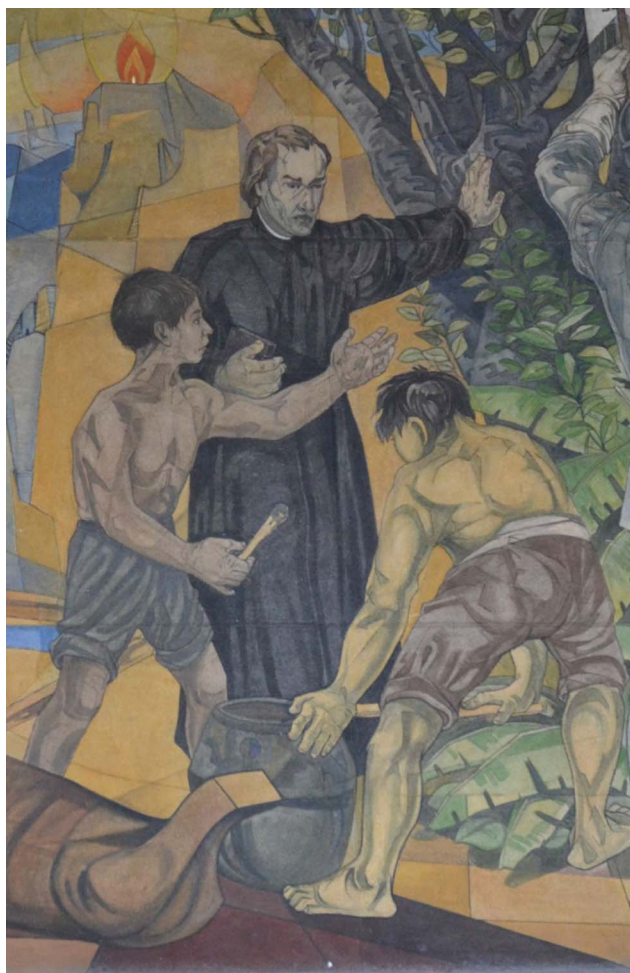


Fig. 2. The priest and metallurgist Padre Barba with two workers. 'History of Bolivian Petroleum', Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.

mining and metallurgy was recorded in his 'The Art of Metals' (*Arte de los Metales*, 1640) a document which was classified as confidential by the Spanish crown and contained also the first written reference to 'bituminous substances' in Bolivia.⁹ The episode epitomizes the colonial processes of expropriation and accumulation together with the development of extraction technologies that are rooted in a melange of knowledges (local and colonial) but serve solely the interests of colonial powers. At the same time, the mining enterprise and especially Potosí, through its massive mobilization of technology, capital and human resources to extract rent, can be seen as a defining feature of the colonial model that still informs our understanding of development and underdevelopment (Machado Aráoz, 2014; cf. Tutino, 2011:36–43).

The lack of national technical capacities to emancipate the extractive industries from the need of foreign companies and capital is an integral part of the contemporary narrative of colonial expropriation of national/natural resources and intersects with the objectives to construct a national industry and achieve sovereignty –as forcefully depicted also in Fig. 5 and discussed below. The need to develop of a 'Bolivian technology' for lithium extraction from the Uyuni Salt Lake is only the latest intent to expand and leverage on domestic technology in the quest to extract and 'industrialize' natural resources, and is expressed in several speeches by government representatives.

"A pending task is to liberate ourselves on the technological side,

and how can we do that? I do not know if there is a debate on 'technological liberation'. At some point, at this rate, if the economy continues to improve, it is not so difficult to buy American, European or Asian technology [...]; what cannot be bought is scientific knowledge".¹⁰

President Evo Morales, 2013

In a speech President Evo Morales praised the work of national scientists for their dedication and commitment to the country, while there was little solidarity from industrialized countries, "they have a lot of experience, scientific knowledge on the subject of lithium. I told them you can operate in Uyuni with all necessary guarantees. The answer was that they do not want to share scientific knowledge, do not want to transfer scientific knowledge." [...] "Comrades, this industry should continue, but in the hands of the Bolivian ... so we have to develop, with effort, with sacrifice, with the participation of students, managers, workers, social movements because these are our resources and should be for us; this the task, this is our commitment"¹¹ President Evo Morales, 2013.

The third scene shows a *conquistador* holding a banner with the eagle from the USA coat of arms together with a representation of the Chaco War and the related suffering (Fig. 3). While the real reasons for the Chaco war are subject to a contentious debate, the consensus view is that the conflict was engendered by multinational companies that wanted to capture the rents generated by hydrocarbon extraction and that Standard Oil played a pivotal role in the process leading to the war (cf. Mesa Gisbert, et al., 2003: 573). The Chaco war itself embodies, in the Bolivian historical imaginary, the conflict, and suffering of the nation generated by foreign interests wanting to appropriate the national natural resources. This interpretation is an integral part of the natural resources nationalism rhetoric that is hegemonic in the Bolivian political discourse (Kohl and Farthing, 2012; Pellegrini and Arismendi, 2012).¹² The representation of the war and its combination with a conquistador highlights continuity between the colonial and neo-colonial appropriation of Bolivian resources and the suffering that the process generates for the population that sees its own riches transformed into a curse.

The relation between colonialism, foreign interests, and natural resources is often discussed in the political discourse and the Chaco War is still considered a defining moment of this relationship. Indeed, the colonial past is often stigmatized in the public discourse and the Presidential Decree nationalizing hydrocarbons on May Day 2006 is called 'The Chaco's Heroes'.¹³

President Evo Morales commemorated the Chaco War as an 'unjust oil war' for the 74th anniversary of the end of the Chaco War: "This anniversary is not only to homage those who lost their lives", but also for remembering that those deaths [have been caused] by "the interests [...] of transnational companies and of empires such as the United States and England [...] this is something that should not happen again in the history of our country and of South America".¹⁴

¹⁰ <http://www.comunicacion.gob.bo/sites/default/files/media/discursos/DISCURSO%20DEL%20PRESIDENTE%20EN%20EL%20LXXV%20ANIVERSARIO%20DE%20LA%20ESCUELA%20DE%20COMANDO%20Y%20ESTADO%20MAYOR%20MARISCAL%20ANDR%C3%89S%20DE%20SANTA%20CRUZ%20%202023.08.13.pdf>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹¹ <http://www.evaporiticos.gob.bo/?p = 968>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹² This view of foreign interests pitted against national interests concerning natural resources is expressed in several ways in Bolivian culture. For example, in the lyrics of the popular song 'Rojo amarillo y verde' of Juan Enrique Jurado: [Foreigners] would like to have our forests, our rivers, our mountains and plains, our stunning highlands and the air we breathe. [...] You see my dear brothers? This wealth is immense and that is why the foreigner is interested in my land. See <http://oruro777.blogspot.nl/2011/08/canciones-para-el-aniversario-de.html>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹³ See: http://www.yfpb.gob.bo/index.php?option = com_content&view = article&id = 126&Itemid = 126, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹⁴ See: <http://eju.tv/2009/06/morales-y-lugo-piden-ms-integracin-en-recordacin-de-firma-de-paz-del-chaco/>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

⁹ See <http://www.minrec.org/libdetail.asp?id = 68>, accessed on 27/09/2017.



Fig. 3. On the left, a conquistador holding a banner with the USA coat of arms; on the right, the Chaco War and the ensuing suffering. 'History of Bolivian Petroleum', Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.

President Evo Morales, 2009

"The government of the United States never allowed Latin American nations to define their own future because it has always considered us their backyard; we are the collection centre of natural and social riches. Any dissent to this colonial approach places the insurgent nation under attack. The people's sovereignty is the enemy number one of U.S. policy."¹⁵

Vice President Álvaro García Linera, 2012

"According to someone more than 500 years ago there was the discovery of the Americas, for others, it was an assault of Europe against our continent, according to some historians it was an invasion. It is not important to agree on the specific terms used, but certainly, there has been a permanent plunder of our natural resources as a consequence of the European discovery or invasion"¹⁶

President Evo Morales, 2012

The transition from the third to the fourth scene is well-represented by the following two statements.

"500 years after the invasion that started the looting of our natural resources, we decided to shift from resistance to the seizure of power through the participation of the different social sectors; this is the commitment of the indigenous movement of America"¹⁷

President Evo Morales, 2012

"We are considered a threat because of the inclusive democracy that we practice every day, we are a threat because we are controlling our oil, gas, water and lithium. There can be no sovereignty and

economic independence while natural resources are in someone else's hands."¹⁸

President Evo Morales, 2013

The fourth scene of the mural embodies the primeval state of agriculture and ideas and characters who defended national ownership of natural resources (Fig. 4, starting bottom left and continuing clockwise). Small plots are frequently depicted in the murals of Solón; they represent subsistence agriculture and limited food supply for a growing population. The Andean condor symbolizes the defence of natural resources that have been appropriated by the Bolivian state through nationalization. The condor is a Bolivian native symbol of the continuous search for unlimited horizons¹⁹ and is embedded in the national coat of arms. The Unknown Soldier represents the rank and file of the army that fought heroically in the Chaco war. Abel Iturralde, Germán Busch and David Toro are prominent figures in the Bolivian history and defenders of national independence. Abel Iturralde was a member of the parliament, who stood out as for his opposition to foreign oil companies and for his proposal to extract natural resources through state-owned companies (Mesa Gisbert et al., 2003: 563–565). On the face of Iturralde's opposition, Standard Oil became a major player in the embryonic hydrocarbons industry and in the 'construction of Eastern Bolivia' (Cote, 2011). Eventually, in 1937 the company was the first oil firm in Latin America to be nationalized through a decree of President David Toro (Mesa Gisbert et al., 2003: 589). The decree declared all oil concessions expired and turned all properties of Standard Oil to the state without compensation. Yacimientos Petrolíferos Bolivianos (YPFB) was created in December 1936 in order to exploit hydrocarbons through a national company.²⁰ President German Busch, elected in 1938, in June 1939 enacted a decree establishing that all foreign currency generated by mineral exports should be sold to the state through a process that would generate public revenues and raised taxes over mineral exports (Mesa Gisbert et al., 2003: 596). Taken together Iturralde, Toro and Busch represent key actors in the history of Bolivia embodying the defence of national interests and state sovereignty over natural resources. On the front of the scene, there is an indigenous man with the emblem of YPFB symbolizing the re-appropriation of hydrocarbons through a state-owned company. The ideas represented here, ranging from the promotion of an 'agricultural revolution' to the need to re-appropriate natural resources by the Bolivian state, are still central to the public discourse as evidenced by policies and speeches of government officials.

In 2007 a decree created EMAPA, a public institute to support food production and stated:

"[A]gricultural policies in recent decades have been discriminating against [...] rural people who constitute the basis of food production in the country. These policies have also increased the country's dependence on imported food products, which has limited the capacity of small and medium producers.

[...] The agricultural development of the country is a fundamental part of the National Development Plan, [...] to promote the agrarian revolution and structural transformation in rural areas, particularly creating conditions that promote improvement in food production systems.

Decree Nr. 29230, *Government of Bolivia*, 2007

In February 2009, during the ceremony for the enactment of the new Constitution, President Evo Morales commemorated the soldiers who fought in the Chaco war and German Busch and David Toro:

¹⁵ See: La Jornada, 7/2/2012 <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/02/07/politica/002e1pol>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹⁶ See: <http://www.eldeber.com.bo/nota.php?id=120401141925>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹⁷ Evo Morales at the Centro de Convenciones de Internacionales de Barcelona (CCIB), 9/12/2012.

¹⁸ <http://www.presidencia.gob.bo/fuente/noticia.php?cod=1065>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.consuladodebolivia.com.ar/2017/03/12/condor-andino-simbolo-del-horizonte-boliviano/>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

²⁰ See: http://www.yxfb.gob.bo/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=126&Itemid=126, accessed on 27/09/2017.



Fig. 4. A farmer tending her crop, the Andean Condor, an unknown soldier in arms is standing next to Abel Iturralde, Germán Busch and David Toro, an indigenous man holding the YPF banner, and a worker holding a paper with the date of the nationalization of Standard Oil, 13 March 1937. ‘History of Bolivian Petroleum’, Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.

“After 500 years of rebellion, invasion and permanent sacking; after 180 years of resistance against a colonial state, after 20 years of constant struggle against a neoliberal model, today, February 7, 2009, [...] [we are] meeting here to adopt the new Constitution. [...]”

“Our tribute goes to the heroes of the Chaco War [...]. [From the war] a sense of Bolivian military nationalism emerged, lead by Colonel German Busch, who was the first to implementing social policies based on the demand of marginalized sections of the population [...]. We cannot forget Colonel David Toro, who [...] was the first to nationalize the Bolivian oil industry in 1938.”²¹

President Evo Morales.

During the 1990s most public companies –including YPF– were privatized through a highly controversial process. “[The] privatization of YPF has meant not only a serious economic harm to the state, but also an act of treason and the delivery to foreign hands of the control of a strategic sector, in violation of sovereignty and national dignity. [...] It is the will and duty of the State and the National Government to nationalize and regain ownership of hydrocarbons, pursuant to the provisions of the Hydrocarbons Law.” Decree 28701, Government of Bolivia, 2006.

Taking the first four scenes together, the mural offers a ‘story’, or a ‘reading of history’, that is functional to the foundation of a modern Bolivian state: an idealized past is followed by the dark colonial times and a present of hope anchored on the potentialities of the natural wealth that is being re-appropriated by the Bolivian people. At the time of the mural, the opportunity of reappropriation was provided by the revolution of 1952. In the contemporary discourse, there is a similar sense of opportunity to break away from a colonial past through the (re-) nationalization of natural resources and the other political changes that coincided with the Morales administration since 2006.

The fifth scene represents the phases of extraction and transformation of hydrocarbons, from perforation of a well to refining (Fig. 5). The

1950s in Latin American were a time when the debate on Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) versus the export-oriented growth model was taking place and most countries were promoting ISI. Bolivia was an early adopter of ISI-oriented policies, and applied them especially in the agricultural sector; however, the small size of the domestic economy marked the domestic debate and Bolivia was commonly understood as an exception in Latin America: it would always need a strong export sector to stimulate economic growth (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003: 268–269; Pacheco, 2006; Young, 2017). Today, when the limits of extraction-led development are apparent also to many contemporary Latin American policy makers, many policies whose objective is to expand extractivist activities are justified because they are expected to generate the resources necessary to finance the transition to new economic structures and put an end to extractivism (Arsel et al., 2016). The paradoxes and challenges of diversifying the economy while increasing the dependence on the extractive sector have been neglected in the images of the mural and are similarly not explored in contemporary discourses on extractive industries. In fact, the expansion and intensification of hydrocarbon extraction are still priorities for the Bolivian government together with the increase of refining capacity. The refinery is a first step in the capture of value added created by the transformation of fossil fuels and part of a project known in Bolivia as the ‘industrialization of natural resources’, a pillar of contemporary industrial policies.

The National development Plan contains a section on hydrocarbons and emphasizes the role of extraction and industrial transformation of hydrocarbons. “The objective is to enable YPF to fulfil its new responsibility to operate up-stream [...]. For this purpose the following strategies are contemplated: develop, enhance and quantify hydrocarbon reserves through prospecting programs and expanding hydrocarbon extraction areas [...], and develop new fields in order to increase production and to ensure the production volumes required for the industrialization of hydrocarbons and the fulfilment of export commitments.

The objective of this policy is that hydrocarbon resources (oil and gas) be industrialized, seeking to capture a higher share of the added

²¹ See: <http://www.apoyobolivia.net/discurso-evo-morales>, accessed on 27/09/2017.



Fig. 5. On the background, the refinery and at the front the anonymous workers of the oil industry. 'History of Bolivian Petroleum', Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.

value. This implies greater economic and social benefits for the country, and constitutes an important step to change the export patterns of the country's economic history." *Gobierno de Bolivia 2006: 116-117.*

"The industrialization of natural resources is necessary to overcome the dependence on exports of raw materials and generate an economy of based on production in the context of sustainable development in harmony with nature."

Constitution of 2009, Article 311

The sixth scene depicts the future and could itself be divided into several scenes covering various aspects of development, but taken together they offer a broad sketch of the future. At the forefront, Bolivia is personified in a woman that holds her child in the same way the country holds its natural resources. The remaining elements of this scene represent aspects of 'progress': students with study material, the land tilled by a farmer on a tractor, the presence of the sea with a fisherman showing a rich catch, a boat, a plane and a bus.²²

The related objectives of improving land management and upgrading agricultural productivity, promotion of education, regaining access to the sea and in general making progress towards sovereignty are refrains in the public discourse and underpin many public policies.

"In tribute to the struggle of our ancestors today [August 2, Day of Indigenous People] we are advancing the Agrarian Revolution for mechanization, the search of produce markets, credit delivery and redistribution of land at the national level"²³

President Evo Morales, 2006

"The Fatherland occupied militarily, stripped of its sea and under the threat of the resumption of hostilities against the Bolivian people was forced to sign a truce and then sign the shameful Treaty of 1904.

The unfair Treaty was imposed by Chile. Bolivia demands and expects from Chile the right to an own and sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean. Our country has the right to resort to all possible scenarios to demand the restitution of its maritime quality that will allow integration with the world without the restrictions caused by the centenary landlockness."²⁴

Speech of President Evo Morales, on 'Sea Day', 23/03/2012

"We want to make the public schools of Bolivia in the twenty-first-century schools, schools that are educating the best men and the best women of our country, and that depends on you (teachers). Your government, your state will make the financial and technical efforts; the rest of the work you do, you are the builders of the future generations."²⁵

Vice president García Linera, 2012

The images represented in the sixth scene are the 'onetime future of past generations', or 'former future' (Koselleck, 2004:11). The mural itself reflects past ideas about the future, or former future, and the currency of these ideas is underscored by the juxtaposition of images from the past with contemporary discourses about the 'present future'. These ideas about the future represent the ultimate objective of development through the exploitation of hydrocarbons and lend legitimacy to the policies that promote and facilitate the operations of extractive industries. Overall, 'History of Bolivian Petroleum' provides a powerful discourse about the past, present and future of Bolivia (Fig. 7). The comparison of the mural scenes with current discourses emerging from public statements and policy documents shows how the ideas emerging from the mural are still embodying the public discourse. In fact, the centrality and the promise of impending hydrocarbons-based development are a crucial feature of Bolivians contemporary models of development and the associated public policies.

²² It is with noting the glaring absence to any obvious reference to symbols of indigeneity in the future.

²³ <http://www.bolpress.com/art.php?Cod = 2006080215>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

²⁴ See: <http://www.diremar.gob.bo/node/735>, accessed on 27/09/2017.

²⁵ See <http://www.vicpresidencia.gob.bo/Garcia-inicia-entrega-de-19-553>, accessed on 27/09/2017.



Fig. 6. On the foreground a woman holding a child, two students, a fisherman and a farmer on a tractor. In the background a bus, a plane, and a boat. 'History of Bolivian Petroleum', Solón 1956, detail. Picture by the author.



Fig. 7. The complete 'History of Bolivian Petroleum' 'History of Bolivian Petroleum', Solón 1956. Picture by the author, reproduced by permission of the Fundación Solón.

4. Natural resources and development in Bolivia and beyond

In the vein of Bonnet's classic on museum theory (1995), art pieces have to be interpreted in context: the original frame of Solón's mural is YPF, the state-owned oil company, and the broader setting is post-revolutionary Bolivia. Frame and setting together provide both meaning and function to the 'History of Bolivian Petroleum'. The adherence of art to a project – in our case its functionality to the post-revolutionary state – should not overshadow the potential that art has to mirror the culture of the time it was made (Folgarait, 1998). The juxtaposition of the meaning of the discourse emanating directly from an art object to the current policy/public discourse shows how the function of the art piece is still current and, conversely, how the current political discourse is still represented by this piece. While this method was bound to underscore continuities and the cautious interpretation of the mural leans towards the most official reading of the mural, the reach and relevance of these continuities go to the heart of the political project shaping contemporary Bolivia. The reading of Bolivian history as a process colonial and neo-colonial dispossession of natural resources by imperialist forces is functional to the characterization of revolutionary Bolivia in the 1950s and again in President Morales' time as a country in a 'unique' position to break with the past and take advantage of the window of opportunity afforded by the process of nationalization of natural resources (cf. Giddens, 1985).

Looking at the ideas embedded in the mural it emerges that there is a recurrent hope of hydrocarbon-based development dates back (at least) to the 1950s. Specifically, both the mural and the current discourse on natural resources express faith in the promise that

development can be ignited by the extraction of these resources. In fact, in the Bolivian context this promise has been linked to the narrative of a modern *El Dorado* (Zavaleta, 1986) and internationally to the illusions generated by the 'fairy tale' of wealth achieved through luck in oil-rich countries (Kapuscinski, 1992; cf. Nixon, 2011: 72). The ideas expressed in the mural and in contemporary discourses over natural resources can be interpreted as exercises of governmentality: the Bolivian people have a 'unique' opportunity to undertake development following the re-appropriation and industrialization of natural resources through the state (Foucault, 2008).

These ideas are of consequence because they provide the intellectual tools to think about the desirable future and the instruments to (attempt to) realize such future; i.e. they constitute the foundational elements of a development model. The study of these ideas and this development model can help identifying the 'final cause' of the policies we see in place, where "[t]he 'final cause' of an occurrence is an event in the future for the sake of which the occurrence takes place [...] things are explained by the purposes they serve" (Russell, 2013: 64). The event in the future is the development of Bolivia and the occurrences serving this purpose are the policies promoting extractive activities. The examination of the 'final cause' stands in contrast with the mechanistic explanation regarding the circumstances leading to an event (Bromley, 2006). For example, explaining the 'unfulfilled promises of the consultation approach' in the Bolivian extractive industries (Flemmer and Schilling-Vacaflor, 2016) or the reason why mining has not become post-neoliberal (Andreucci and Radhuber, 2017), the 'final cause' would be the idea that the development of Bolivia is promoted through

extractive industries. An answer to the question ‘why the Bolivian state embraces extractive industries?’ that examines development models is grounded on a different ontological plane when compared to mechanistic explanations of concrete policy measures shaping the outcomes of interest. Thus, the hegemonic and persistent ideas and model of development based on extractive industries explain why policies that promote extraction activities continue to dominate Bolivian policy-making, regardless of post-neoliberal turns and espousals of *buen vivir*. In fact, extractive industries are promoted because of a development model showing that development is possible and extractive activities are instrumental to achieve it.

These ideas concerning development through extraction are related to the broad discussion on the resource curse that has investigated the apparent paradox of abundant natural resources often coinciding with poor economic performance (e.g. Van der Ploeg, 2011); however, the role of natural resources in shaping development ideology is a neglected aspect of the curse literature. This neglect is all the more problematic since this role has key consequences for public policies: once the exploitation of natural resources is nested in development ideology and is understood as functional to purposes of higher teleological order it engenders an ‘extractive imperative’ (Arsel et al., 2016). That is, given the fact that extraction itself is seen as ultimately functional to the purpose of the country’s development, natural resources need to be extracted at all costs and under any circumstances (cf. Ballón et al., 2017). Under such unqualified commitment policies that promote extraction can prompt processes leading to immiserizing growth and provide direct and indirect subsidies that generate inefficiencies and might artificially create profitable conditions for extracting natural resources even when it would be economically rational to leave them in the ground (Bhagwati, 1958; Bhagwati et al., 1978). Most notably, indirect subsidies include provisions to operate regardless of socio-environmental costs, based on the (implicit) assumption that these costs are negligible if compared to the developmental potential of extraction (Pellegrini, 2012).

While this model of development through extraction is clearly identifiable in Bolivia, its remit reaches most of resource-rich Latin America. One of the crudest examples of the outcomes of the commitment to extraction is from Peru and relates to the ‘dog in the manger’ article by former President Alan Garcia and the way it justifies the decrees giving leeway to extraction in the Peruvian Amazon (Bebbington and Bebbington, 2012; Andreucci and Kallis, 2017). In the article, President Garcia compared indigenous populations resisting extraction in their territories to dogs guarding vegetable gardens: they cannot enjoy themselves the products they are defending against exploitation by others.²⁶ The decrees gave the opportunity to companies to access and extract resources in expedite manners doing away with socio-environmental concerns and indigenous rights. The ultimate objective of the decrees –later withdrawn due to the widespread indigenous mobilization– was the integration of the Amazon in the modern economy and the spearheading of development. Similar examples could be drawn from Mexico, Chile and Argentina (e.g. Walter and Martinez-Alier, 2010) and, within largely different contexts and politics but in the same vein, hopes of development through extraction are popular and influence policies to the point that some authors have identified an emerging ‘commodities consensus’ (Svampa, 2013). The ideas expressed in the mural and in the public discourse in Bolivia are underpinning this consensus.

Another common phenomenon, which is present in Bolivia in an accentuated form, concerning ideas about extractive industries is ‘resources nationalism’ (Haslam and Heidrich, 2016). Giddens’ definition of nationalism helps us to see how nationalism applies to natural resources: ‘the definition of practices, programmes and policies that are in

the ‘general interest’, as opposed to those that favour the sectional interests of groups or classes. The more the state becomes administratively unified, the greater the degree to which government must appeal to the ‘general interest’ (in some formulation or other) in order to sustain a basis for its rule.’ (Giddens, 1985: 220; cf. Folgarait, 1998, 120–125). In the case of Bolivia, the public discourse is replete of reference to the influence of foreign interests and their desire to exploit resources belonging to Bolivian people (see above the discussion in Figs. 2 and 3). That is, the public discourse reflects and strengthens a deep-seated belief that Bolivians are being robbed of their natural resources to the benefit of foreign and corrupt national elites (Revette, 2016). This nationalist discourse, that became particularly popular during the time of the Bolivian revolution in 1952, is a response to colonial history marked by the domination of foreign powers, foreign intervention (e.g. as in the Chaco War) and the xenophilia that characterized the first half of the 20th century, when, for example, the director of oil and mining department was from North America and commanders in chief of the Bolivian army were first French and then German (Zavaleta, 1986: 234–254). This nationalist sentiment had emerged as central to Bolivian politics, as epitomized by the event of the so-called ‘gas war’ when popular protest, following an agreement to export gas through construction of a pipeline in Chile, led to the resignation of President Sanchez de Lozada and continues to mark the discussion on natural resources and extractive policies (Dangl, 2007; Young, 2017).²⁷ In the case of the 1950s and the 2000s, Bolivia is pervaded by called ‘resource nationalism’ that, combined with revolutionary processes of (re-) nationalization, is conducive to create ‘unique’ windows of opportunity. When considering the developmental potential of extractive industries, the history of Latin America should provide a sobering prospect to those who bank on extraction-led development. A look at the development ideas from the 1950s Bolivia shows that doubts should apply specifically to the neoextractivist model: while radical political change, as seen in present-day Bolivia and in the left-turn in Latin America more broadly, provides a historical opportunity to promote the extraction of national/natural resources to the benefit of the country, my proposition is that this opportunity is recurrent in history.

In the Latin American context, an extensive discussion is developing on the concept of neoextractivism and the associated policies (Gudynas, 2012). Essentially, neoextractivism is seen as a continuation of the extractivist development model that is accompanied by a range of social policies, themselves financed by the revenues generated by extractive activities. My reading of the discourse on extractivism that emerges from Solón’s mural brings us to question fundamentally what is new in the neoextractivist model. This study highlights striking correspondences in development ideas of the 1950s and the current political discourse and policy framework of Bolivia; these correspondences include the link between extraction and policies regarding education, health, and infrastructure. In other words, the correspondences include the very policies that justify the current addition of the adjective ‘neo’ to extractivism and that should be the defining characteristic of the left turn.

5. Conclusions

The method of juxtaposing ideas emerging from a mural created in 1956 to the contemporary public discourse of the Bolivian government offers the opportunity to underscore the similarities between ideas and development models at these two points in time and shed light on the

²⁶ The original idea is from Aesop’s fable of ‘The Dog in the Manger’ describing a dog keeping straw from an ox even though the dog itself has no use for straw.

²⁷ It is worth noting the mismatch between policy outcomes and nationalist rhetoric. Already in 1956 –that is, the same year the mural was unveiled– the Bolivian congress passed a new oil code that allowed again foreign companies to operate in the country. Similarly, it has been noted that in the first 5 years in government the Morales administration oversaw the expansion of oil concessions in the hands of foreign companies from 3 million hectares in 2007 to 22 million hectares in 2012 (Pellegrini, 2016).

role of persistent ideas and development models in shaping current public policies in Bolivia and beyond. These similarities contradict the alleged ‘newness’ of neoextractivism and the rhetoric and the hopes concerning the ‘uniqueness’ of the contemporary opportunities afforded by the nationalization of hydrocarbons, the promotion of extractive industries, and the associated policies concerning public investment and social policies. It turns out that novelty of this political project has more to do with the oblivion of development ideas of the 1950s rather than with the newness of 21st century ones.

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