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Latin America

# Would Marx be an extractivist?

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**In Latin America strategies are still being advanced focused on mining, hydrocarbons and monoculture, despite the fact that this means repeating the role of suppliers of raw materials and of civic resistance.**

This extractive mode of being is expressed both in conservative and progressive governments. But as the latter hope for another type of development this emphasis has become a political knot of enormous complexity.

Extractivism is appealing to new political justifications. One of the most striking is to invoke the old thinkers of socialism, arguing that they would not oppose extractivism in the 21st century, and would indeed promote it.

Surely the most notable example has been the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, who to defend extractivism launched two challenging questions: “where does the Communist Manifesto say no to mining? What socialist theory said no to mining?” (interview in May 2012).

Correa redoubled his bet, since in addition to quoting Marx and Engels, he told his own assembly that it cannot go unnoticed that “traditionally the socialist countries were miners”. The message that is displayed is that the theoretical basis of socialism is functional extractivism, and that in practice, the countries of actually existing socialism implemented it successfully. If his position is correct, today, and in Latin America, Marx and Engels would be encouraging mining, oil holdings or monoculture plantations for export.

## Dreaming of an extractivist Marx

Let's start by weighing the validity of Correa's question. One can't expect that the Communist Manifesto, written in the mid-19th century, would contain the answers to all the problems of the 21st century.

As noted by two of the most renowned Marxists of the twentieth century, Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, both Marx and Engels considered that the principles of the manifesto were still correct, but that the text had aged. “In particular, they acknowledged implicitly that the means by which capitalism would be extended and introduce new countries and regions into the mainstream of modern history, would necessarily lead to the emergence of problems and forms of development that are not considered by the Manifesto”, they say [\[1\]](#). Without a doubt this is the situation of the Latin American nations, where it would be necessary to contextualize both the questions and the answers.

It is then necessary to verify if the socialist countries were really miners. That is not entirely true, and in those sites where mining increased in importance, we now know that the environmental, social and economic balance sheet was very negative. One of the most striking examples occurred in the mining and steel areas of Poland under the Soviet shadow. Today equally terrible situations with regard to mining exist in China.

We cannot forget that many of those enterprises, given their high social and environmental cost, only become viable when there are no adequate environmental controls or civic demands are muted by authoritarian means. It cannot go unnoticed that extractivism, Soviet-style, was unable to generate the economic and productive leap that was predicted by those same plans.

Currently, progressivism defends extractivism, aiming to take advantage of its economic income to finance various social plans and changes in the productive base to create another economy.

The problem is that, in this way, a dependency develops between extractivism and social plans. Without taxes on exports of raw materials possibilities would be reduced to fund, for example, monthly monetary aid to the poorest. This means the state itself becomes extractive, becoming a partner in various projects, courting investors of all kinds, and providing various facilities. Without doubt there are changes under progressivism, but the problem is that the social and environmental impacts are repeated and reinforce the role of national economies as subordinate suppliers of raw materials.

The claim that emergence from dependency is possible through more extractivism has no chance of being realized. It creates a situation where the promised transition becomes impossible, through the consequences of extractivism at various levels, through economic policies (such as the displacement of local industry or the overvaluation of national currencies, and a tendency to combat civic resistance). The use of instruments of economic redistribution has limited scope, as demonstrated by the repetition of social mobilizations. But it is also expensive, and ends up with governments needing still more new extractivist projects.

It is precisely all these perverse relationships which should be analysed by looking to Marx. Correa's message, although challenging, is in fact not applying those principles of Marx that still remain for the 21st century.

## Listening to the warning of Marx

Marx did not reject mining. Most of the social movements do not reject it, and if their claims are heard carefully it will be found that they are focused on a particular type of enterprise: large scale, with huge volumes removed, intensive and open-pit. In other words, don't confuse mining with extractivism.

Marx did not reject mining, but was very clear where there should be changes. From that perspective there are answers to Correa's question: Marx distinguished "vulgar socialism" from a substantive socialism, and that differentiation should be considered attentively today.

In his "Critique of the Gotha Programme" Marx recalls that the distribution of the means of consumption is, actually, a consequence of the mode of production. Intervening in consumption does not transform modes of production, but it is at this last level where the real changes must occur. Marx adds: "vulgar socialism (...) has learned from the bourgeois economists to consider and treat distribution as something independent of the mode of production, and, therefore, to consider socialism as a doctrine that revolves mainly around distribution" [\[2\]](#).

Here is the answer to Correa's question:

Marx, in Latin America today, would not be an extractivist, because that would mean abandoning the goal of transforming the modes of production, becoming a bourgeois economist. On the contrary, he would be promoting alternatives to production, and that means, in our present context, moving toward post-extractivism.

For sure the vision of Marx is not enough to organize the end of extractivism, since he was a man immersed in the ideas of the progress of modernity, but it identifies the sense that there must be alternatives. Indeed, it becomes clear that instrumental adjustments or redistributive improvements may represent progress, but it is still imperative to transcend the dependence on extractivism as a key element of the current mode of production. This issue is so clear

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that Marx himself concludes “once the true relation of things is clarified, why go backwards”? So, why continue to insist with extractivism?

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[1] Huberman, L. and Sweezy, P. 1964: “The Communist Manifesto 116 years later”. *Monthly Review* 14 (2):42-63

[2] Marx, K. 1977. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Progress Publishers, Moscow