

CHAPTER 17

Extractivisms

Markus Kröger, Sophia E. Hagolani-Albov
and Barry K. Gills
University of Helsinki

Abstract

Unsustainable extraction of natural resources has come under increasing criticism since the 2000s, as global commodity prices have risen, and new waves of land grabbing and investing have put resource politics in the limelight of global development. The concept of extractivism has been gaining scholarly and policy relevance and is becoming more widely used as an organizing concept to explore a range of unsustainable practices. The study of extractivism and its impacts extends to the deeper historical and structural features that underlie unsustainable practices, including economic models and ideologies. The concept of extractivism is useful for highlighting the deeper and systemic roots of unsustainability. The phenomena surrounding resistance to extractivism

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are highly useful for understanding the often-overlooked struggles of local communities. It is through such local struggles that communities may pursue more sustainable land-use practices, and more just socio-ecological conditions. This resistance often involves a deep critique and rethinking of the ways of understanding and conceptualizing nature, through which alternatives to extractivism, as a basis for sustainability, can be developed.

Mother Earth is the source of life, not a resource.

Chief Arvol Looking Horse, 19th Generation Keeper
of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe Bundle
(Lakota and Dakota nations)

Introduction

The concept of extractivism has a considerable history, especially when referring to increasingly widespread practices of overexploitation and appropriation of natural resources. The extractivist attitude or mentality is characterized by taking too much, too destructively, and too quickly, with too often a wanton disregard for giving back, or even considering the arguably necessary establishment of balance with ‘nature’ via sustainable reciprocal relations. Thus, the concept, mentality, and practices of extractivism are in direct contrast with the concept of sustainability. Genuinely sustainable practices of human relations with ‘nature’ (or preferably ‘the web of life’; see Moore 2015) require balanced reciprocal relationships. Extractivism, therefore, may be understood as embodying the antithesis of sustainability, in both theory and practice.

Serious critiques have now emerged, centred on certain areas or vectors of extractivism—for example, extractive approaches in agriculture, commercial forestry, and the mining sector. Studies and critiques of land grabbing and global resource rushes have emerged. These patterns have increased radically since 2005–2007, when global financial markets started to pour over-accumulated capital into land and resource acquisition, leading to a commodities supercycle in which prices and projects of extraction increased

dramatically. Primary commodity extraction has been and remains at the core of world politics and the global political economy. Extractivisms today, whether ‘local’ or ‘global’, are among the key causes of global climate change and the ecological breakdown crises, as greenhouse gas emissions and other severe problems for socio-environmental sustainability continue to increase as extractivist practices expand. Solving these global crises and problems requires not only understanding extractivism(s), but also actively resisting and devising actionable alternatives to extractivism(s). This chapter proceeds with a situated example of the impact of extractivism, engages in a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings, introduces forms of resistance to extractivism on a global and local level, and closes with a call to action.

Lived Experiences of Extractivism

Fieldnotes from a resource frontier:

The air was heavy with dust and smoke. Flames lapped at the trees and vegetation. The hot air quickly grew thick with flying debris and pieces of ashy leaves, blown here and there with the changes of the wind. A lady appeared by the roadside with kids in tow on their way to school. A normal day in the Amazon, fires behind you as you step into the school bus, not caring at all about putting them out. The lady said that the fire will rage until it has burned all it can, and only if it jumped the road would they try to quell it. The land had been set on fire for speculative reasons, to sell it to the would-be land buyers from the south, hungry for new areas to plant soybeans. This land was certainly one of those where the person who burned it did not have the right ownership papers. With the forest burned, the land will quickly become badly eroded, yet it seems no forests can hide from greedy eyes looking to turn them into plantations and grasslands. Through the smoke clouds, we could see the soybean silos, and vast open fields amid degraded rainforest.

—Brazilian Amazon, by Highway BR163, November 2019
(Adapted from Kröger 2020a).

We use these fieldnotes as a mechanism to offer a glimpse of a lived experience on a resource frontier where the consequences of extractivist practices are most keenly felt (Kröger 2016a). Our world is facing unprecedented socio-ecological crisis and breakdown on multiple fronts. Modern societies are reaching a breaking point, as they have transgressed planetary boundaries that would ensure the maintenance of sustainable interactions with ecosystems (Steffen et al. 2015). Each breach of these thresholds is a deterioration and destruction of life on this planet in all its different forms, including the life of human beings (Hosseini and Gills 2020). Considering these alarming realities and deep challenges to sustainability, scholars and practitioners have been searching for new ways to make sense of these crises. The social scientific concept of extractivism, which in practice is a form of natural resource extraction premised on destructive use and abuse of natural resources, has emerged to fill this void (Kröger 2020b; Ye et al. 2020). The concept of extractivism is a useful description of processes wherein more is taken in an interaction than is returned, but extractivism also has a role as an organizing concept and a way to comprehend the overarching processes that drive our current world-system, which is a capitalist world-ecology (see Moore 2015). The idea of extractivism as an organizing concept is rooted in development and globalization studies. It is a concept that brings new understandings and new sense-making to what drives these global-level processes of accumulation and depletion. Employing extractivism as an organizing concept allows us to interpret the form of these processes, assess what is happening on the ground, and determine what can be done about it. Extractivisms span several different sectors, global production networks, and ever-more intensely interlinked global value webs (Kröger 2016b).

The term 'extractivism' was born in Latin America, used initially to describe the mining sector. However, the extractivist conceptualization lends itself well to describing several other sectors on a global level. A particularly startling example of the aggressive nature of the extractivist paradigm is the expansion of agro-extractivism (McKay 2017). This mode of agricultural production

includes the monoculture plantations of soybeans, oil palm, sugarcane, and corn, which have expanded around the globe to supply the burgeoning feed-fuel-fibre-food markets within new so-called bioeconomies based on the replacement of fossil-fuel sectors. In addition, there has been rampant growth in forestry extractivism of eucalyptus, pine, and other large-scale tree plantations that have systematically displaced natural ecosystems such as biodiverse forests and grasslands. Discreet extractivisms happen on the local level, but the extractivist mindset has grave implications on the world-system level. The increasingly pervasive and aggressive extractivist paradigm is now a global phenomenon.

Extractivism indicates types of intervention by human beings into what we have traditionally, and reductively, called 'nature'—non-human species, and soils, water, and minerals (see Moore 2015). A precondition of extractivism is the (de)valuation of life and life forms in a given area to 'natural resources' that can and should be extracted anthropocentrically (Kröger and Nygren 2020). Under extractivism, concepts of value are deployed in converting materials, found freely in the web of life and extracted from the earth, into commodities (see Moore 2015). Extractivism intrinsically revolves around mass commodification. Those commodities are often placed into the global circuits of capital, and thus serve capital accumulation. In this way, it also has a specific meaning around capitalist(ic) extractivism, or what could be termed extractivist capital accumulation. It is important to note, not all resources that are taken from the earth fall into what could be considered an extractivist practice. Extractivism is explicitly linked to the concept of depletion, ecological degradation, or blatant destruction (Ye et al. 2020). In other words, extractivism is a relationship with the web of life premised on depleting the ability of life to renew itself. It involves entropy, depletion, pollution, ecocide (the destruction of ecosystems to the point of total collapse), and the transformation of ecosystems into a radically altered state that has been brought about by human activity and that often destroys the previous ecosystem (see Moore 2016; Escobar 2020). This has direct and increasingly dire consequences for ecological systems and myriad species, and for communities and

their lifeworlds (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 2018). Extractivist expansions displace and dispossess human beings as well as driving out multiple species from their original habitats. Therefore, from a critical development studies and post-development perspective, one cannot separate the critique of extractivism from a critique of capitalist modernity.

Extractivism: A Global and Historical Process

The roots of extractivism as a practice might go back millennia, but for the purposes of sustainability science, the concept is most useful in understanding the processes and practices that create the material structures of the contemporary period. When we discuss ‘global extractivism,’ this implies that it is becoming an ever-more prevalent practice globally, primarily by capitalist enterprises. However, in finance and other areas of the corporate sphere, we can also see an expansion. Extractivism expands through changing physical, social, and symbolic spaces on ever-faster and larger scales, in increasingly remote areas of the globe (Kröger 2016a; 2020b).

International political economy has analyzed the worldwide spread of capitalist patterns through the concept of globalization, global supply chains, and global value chains. Dependency theory and world-systems theory have provided structural analyses of global political economy along with neo-liberalization on a universal scale. All of these are deeply entangled with extractivism and the extractivist mindset, and prompt conjoined critiques (Hosseini and Gills 2020). Related (sub-)concepts that are helpful in the systemic analysis of the conflict between extractivism and sustainability include: developmentalism, growthism, anthropocentrism, and coloniality (Gudynas 2015; Escobar 2020); commodity and resource frontiers (Kröger and Nygren 2020); and primary commodity export dependency, capitalist modernity, and underdevelopment (Bunker 1985). These processes have relegated much of the Global South to primary commodity extraction from natural resources for export to the Global North, for purposes of capital accumulation and wealth creation in the Global North, while

mainly extracting wealth from the Global South (Bunker and Ciccantell 2005).

Alternatives, Post-extractivism, and Local and Global Resistance

Extractivism is a concept that cannot be ignored and needs to be utilized and deployed. It is useful to understand the multiple and converging crises that threaten sustainability, and what drives them. Alternatives, and post-extractivism, can be pursued through this analysis. There are two levels of resistance or attempts to transform extractivism in theory and practice. Around the world, local social forces, local classes, communities, and Indigenous peoples, who have in some cases been situated in their own land for millennia, have relentlessly resisted extractivism (see Chapter 13 on *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* in this book). By local, we refer here to the areas that are the homes of the people in that area (some of these areas have also been targeted for extraction by other Indigenous groups—for example, in the case of highland Indigenous groups extracting gold from the rivers of Amazon Indigenous populations in Peru and Bolivia). When an extractivist project causes or threatens to cause entropy, depletion, pollution, ecocide, dispossession, and oppressive asymmetrical power relations, in many cases the locals have organized and politicized to understand these negative local land-use changes, and to create resistance (Kröger 2013; 2020b). There are many different forms of resistance to extractivism, types of tactics, types of collations, and different terrains of struggle—whether very local or globalized—and many mediascapes and global formations. Yet, so much of the character of extractivism ultimately is local and is experienced as local by real beings who are under either attack or threat from extractivism (Kröger 2020b).

Besides the local physical struggles, the other terrain where transformation is pursued is the global political level, which is currently dominated by transnational corporations, banks, and other financial actors, such as hedge funds and private equity firms. How these entities can be made to withdraw their support for extractivist

projects, and resisted, needs to be analyzed in greater detail (Global Campaign 2017). A whole array of different social actors, movements, and organizations already work to bring transnational corporations and financial institutions into some binding framework, a code of conduct that limits their destructiveness and sets up regulatory regimes (in the international-relations sense of rules, order, and norms). In short, many see an urgent need to create new institutions that can effectively control the conduct of the destructive elements of extractivism. A primary example is the human rights treaty approach, a growing international effort to try to bind transnational corporations into a new regulatory system in which they would be punished for human rights abuses around the world (Global Campaign 2017, also see Chapter 4 on *Human Rights* in this book). There is mounting evidence of corporations being guilty of human rights violations (up to and including the murder of protesters and activists) through extractivist projects and related practices, as well as causing other types of severe social and environmental injustices (Global Witness 2018). The Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas n.d.) presently documents over 3100 such cases around the world from a variety of sectors (Temper et al. 2018). The International Criminal Court has been approached to consider making ecocide a crime punishable under international law as a crime against humanity for which people could be arrested and prosecuted, including corporate, finance, and government leaders (Greene 2018). Corporate social responsibility is another common approach, intended to deepen responsibility and mitigate the most negative impacts of extractivist practices, but the results have largely remained insufficient (Banerjee 2018). The creation of ethical codes of investment for banks and corporations and other finance entities has been another approach of corporate self-regulation.

Large global campaigns have been organized around pressuring certain entities to adopt a rigorous ethical code of investment so they would stop certain kinds of extractivist behaviour: the global campaign to boycott oil palm coming from orangutan forests is one example. Particularly for palm oil extraction—as well as oil and gas, or coal and other types of fossil-fuel—many ethical

codes already exist. Global civil society plays a key role, but future demands could go beyond mere voluntary guidelines and certification schemes (whose results are highly doubtful). Courts could be used to force entities, corporate or finance, into new behaviour and punish them for past extractivist offences (Kröger 2013). There is also the conservation movement and measures for protection (as controversial as that can often be), and many kinds of projects that resist extractivism exist in this capacity. These measures can protect certain areas and the people and other species that live there, so that they will not be subject to wanton destruction. Of course, the option of ethical consumerism does exist (for those who can afford it). For many people, consumer activism and the related online campaigning by proliferating platforms for signing pledges is a very important, or central, element in global activism.

Contemporary Extractivisms and Resistance in Different Contexts

Extractivism, in its different forms, has expanded globally because there has been a global commodities supercycle since around 2005–2007 (Bebbington and Bury 2013). This supercycle led many governments, including progressive Latin American governments, to focus their development policies on increasing the revenue from exports of natural resources. Discussion arose around this macro-policy as a form of neo-extractivism, which was conceptualized as a new type of political economic model through which progressive Latin American countries and governments could use the windfall gains from commodity exports to further progressive social welfare agendas (Gudynas 2015; Svampa 2019). These governments saw that they needed to first safeguard themselves from the ravages of global financial markets by building surpluses in current account balances. This goal was to be achieved by giving leeway to export producers to increase their commodity exports (Andrade 2019). The 2008 financial crisis led much transnationally mobile and domestic capital to search for safer options, which led to land investing, further increasing the extractivist drive. This created many problems with local communities in Latin America,

which had mostly been promoting these progressive governments (Kröger and Lalander 2016). As a countermovement to the support given by progressivist governments to extractivism, there has more recently been a backlash, with populist right-wing governments coming into power (Andrade 2019). The soybean, pulp, ethanol, and other agribusiness sectors based on monocultural production, as well as the mining sector, had all gained strength during the reigns of these progressive governments and the commodities supercycle, and started to promote the dismantling of progressive governments in order to be able to expand even further (Kröger 2012; Kröger and Nygren 2020). The role of the state became much more powerful during the progressive era—for example, during the Workers' Party regimes in Brazil. This intense extractivist period of global land grabbing has led to major political impacts, including the creation of new powerhouses, which are now being manifested in different political contexts.

On and in the frontiers of deforestation in the Amazon, extractivism is highly visible, temporally, and spatially, as illustrated by the fieldnote excerpt above. There are now seemingly endless soybean plantations, where just a few years ago, there was rainforest. What is new about extractivism, in contrast to simple natural resource exploitation, is that the scale and pace of changing the landscapes have accelerated. One can see an expansion of tens of millions of hectares of agro-extractivist monocultures taking over and destroying forests in a matter of only a few years. If one travels in these areas, in South America, it takes days on end to journey through vast expanses of soybean and eucalyptus monoculture-dominated landscapes. In many of these fields, one cannot even see the horizon. The scope, scale, and socio-ecological implications of these transformations is truly shocking. This type of ultra-destructive interaction with the earth needs its own concept to denote and distinguish it from simple resource exploitation or even conventional agricultural practices. Extractivism and *ecocide* are appropriate terms.

The production in these new contexts is intrinsically global. These are global spaces in the sense that the commodities go to markets all around the world. Most agro-extractivist expansion

goes to feed the global meat production complex, within the converging feed, food, fibre, and fuel markets (Jakobsen and Hansen 2020). The rise of biofuels, bioeconomy, and the green economy are closely related to this extractivist expansion, as well as the rise of flex crops and the return of plantations (Borras et al. 2016). The global meat production complex produces more greenhouse gas emissions than the entire transportation sector (Foer 2019). That makes sense when you look at the huge monocultural plantations and what they displace—for example, the Amazon rainforests and similar areas around the world. These systems of extractivism are inherently not ‘sustainable’.

Conclusions

Extractivism is in direct contrast with sustainability. However, capitalist modernity is premised on such extractivism, and highly destructive processes are currently more the norm than the exception. When there is a systems-level extractivist mindset imbued in multiple levels of practice, it is difficult to engage in truly sustainable transformation, locally or otherwise.

We contend that fighting global extractivism and fighting climate change and ecological breakdown are inextricably conjoined. Unsustainability and extractivist practices are inseparable; to resist one is to resist the other. We need a ‘deep restoration’ toward a post-extractivist and sustainable future; to think deeply and reflect on how to change ourselves and how to reorganize our lives, individually and socially (Gills 2020). Systemic change and radical transformation are now a historical imperative.

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