ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter

Vol.4 – Issue 2 [December 2017]

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How to cite:

Köppel, J. (2017), The imperial rationality within BioTrade: A contribution to the neoextractivist debate, *Alternautas,* 4(2), 76-91. URL : http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2017/10/14/the-imperial-rationality-within-biotrade-a-contribution-to-the-neoextractivism-debate

Editor : Alternautas
http://www.alternautas.net
London, UK.
ISSN - 2057-4924

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The imperial rationality within BioTrade: A contribution to the neoextractivist debate[2]

In this article I address a recent debate on neoextractivism in Latin America by presenting ethnographic research on BioTrade[3] in Peru. While biodiversity conservation is usually not associated with extractivist projects, such as open-pit mining or industrial monocultures, the case study on Sacha Inchi[4], presented hereafter, reveals the same basic patterns of resource extraction: a logic that places the requirements of global markets over local realities; that chooses the needs of exporting firms over the concerns of the rural populations; and that favors the perspective of the capital over that of its hinterland. My basic findings lead me to interpret BioTrade, in this case, as a form of neoextractivism. It claims to pursue goals of social equity and environmental sustainability, while in practice adopting the same imperial rationality as the century-old extractivist project, characteristic for Latin America. Thus, this article contributes to the debate by reminding of the social, or "cultural", preconditions for (neo)extractivism, namely the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 1992), and thus the construction, subordination, and

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[2] This article was originally published in http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2017/10/14/the-imperial-rationality-within-biotrade-a-contribution-to-the-neoextractivism-debate on October 14th, 2017.

[3] BioTrade is a global conservation policy that aims to establish incentives for preserving biodiversity by promoting its sustainable economic use (see below for more information).

[4] Sacha Inchi is a plant native to the Amazon region that produces a seed with a high content of essential fatty acids (particularly Omega-3) for which it is marketed globally as a "super food".

exploitation of the Other. In a post-structural reading it suggests that, in the contemporary arena of sustainable development, the neoliberal rationality constitutes a mechanism that reproduces colonial lines of social differentiation by creating difference along the lines of the ability to live up to its emblematic figure of the entrepreneur.

The term *neoextractivism* describes a contemporary political-economic reality in many Latin American countries, which in recent decades have experienced a renewed economic focus on extractive and rent-based activities. Driven by the growing global demand for natural resources, and the rising prices for raw materials since the turn of the millennium, both so-called progressive and conservative governments have been following strategies of a "developmentalist neoextractivism" (Svampa, 2012), which promote state-led social and economic development by employing the rents obtained from commodity exports. In response to these new, and in many ways contradictory realities of contemporary political economy in Latin America, a debate around the implications of this "new extractivism" has emerged since Gudynas (2009) introduced the term. On the one hand, some see neoextractivism as a valuable means to fight the still menacing neoliberal policies of the political Right by strengthening the role of the state in national development (see Dávalos, 2013; or García Linera, 2012). On the other hand, critical observers have challenged the model's ability to overcome the fundamental contradictions they regard as inherent in the capitalist model as a whole. Much of the critique concerns the externalization of the social and environmental costs of these strategies, which are "characterized by large-scale enterprises, a focus on exportation, and a tendency for monoproduction or monoculture" (Svampa, 2015, p. 66; see also Gudynas, 2013; Brand & Dietz, 2014, pp. 132–133).

Initially, my research was not about neoextractivism at all. I set out to study the interactions between a global policy for sustainable development (BioTrade) and its declared local beneficiaries (smallholders growing Sacha Inchi). I followed a "new ethnography of development" approach (Mosse, 2005; see also Mosse & Lewis, 2006) to study BioTrade as a social practice from a number of different

perspectives. In 2016, I conducted four months of field research on several levels – from international Geneva to metropolitan Lima and rural villages in San Martín – interacting with a variety of actors – from local smallholders to government officials and international cooperation staff.

The analytical categories of a broadly defined political ecology framework helped me make sense of the case I was investigating, starting with the fundamental insight that issues of "nature" are inseparable of the social realm, and of the power relations that reign within it. In a post-structural reading, I conceived of development as a form of (neoliberal) "governmentality" (Foucault, 2007, 2008), and as a way of "improving" the colonial Other (Li, 2007). Yet other political ecology perspectives helped me understand the "environmental histories" of the places I was visiting – histories that are deeply marked by a "coloniality of nature" (Alimonda, 2011, p. 47). Following this approach, and maintaining a focus on the smallholders throughout the whole process, I discovered the same imperial rationality in the realm of sustainable development that one would usually expect in emblematic cases of (neo)extractivism such as open-pit mines or the soy frontier. These points will become clear once I develop my argument further below. First, I will set the stage by sketching out the broad lines of the case study on Sacha Inchi promotion in San Martín.

Biotrade and Sacha Inchi in the Peruvian Lowlands of San Martin

BioTrade is an UNCTAD[5] initiative, founded in 1996, that aims at conserving biodiversity by promoting trade in its products. It originated in response to the questions posed by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and is thus closely related to the concept of sustainable development. Peru was among the first countries to adopt BioTrade as a policy tool in order to achieve the novel targets of the national biodiversity strategy. The framework promises to reconcile the goals of

[5] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

economic growth, poverty reduction, and conservation of biological diversity. Efforts have mainly consisted in creating value chains destined for export markets for so-called natural ingredients and products, originating from native plants. The economic use of these resources, and the higher income for the rural producers, would provide incentives to conserve the country's natural wealth.

As a native plant from the Amazon region, Sacha Inchi was one of the first products promoted by this initiative. Its name originates from the Quechua term *Sacha Inchik*, which translates literally to "peanut of the mountain", or more adequately to "wild peanut". It has been known to the native populations for hundreds of years but local consumption has practically disappeared. Instead, it entered recent history in the 1990s as a valuable foodstuff in the eyes of researchers, and as a promising export product for business men from the capital city. Its seed has an extraordinary high content of essential fatty acids (particularly Omega-3) and proteins, which qualifies it as a "super food". More recently, it has been promoted as a sustainable export crop for smallholders, perfectly suited as a promising value chain for the promotion of BioTrade.

San Martín was selected as a priority area for the national BioTrade program. It is in this part of the Peruvian lowlands (*selva alta*) where the commercialization of Sacha Inchi originated, and it has been maintained for more than fifteen years. The region has a long history of interaction with global markets, consisting basically in a series of economic cycles or "booms" starting at the end of colonial times (Maskrey et al., 1991). In the middle of the 20th century, it was incorporated into the Peruvian economy as a national land frontier – as an area that should serve as the "national pantry" (*despensa nacional*). Large-scale corn and rice monocultures partly displaced the diverse, intercropped fields of the smallholders, who were further

driven up the hitherto wooded hills. After commodity prices had collapsed in the 1980s the coca economy[6] dominated the region until the end of the century.

In response to the wide-spread cultivation of this illegalized plant, projects for "alternative development" (*desarrollo alternativo*) have been present in San Martín, promoting alternative commercial crops[7] to discourage coca production. More recently, these efforts have adopted a *green*logic that is directed at making San Martín into a shining example of sustainability. According to the predominant discourse, this has transformed the "former[ly] unproductive region [that] was populated by scattered subsistence farmers, drug cartels, and terrorist groups [into] a world-class example of sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation, and social inclusion" (de Pereny, 2015, p. 159). Evidently, BioTrade and the promising export crop Sacha Inchi – native of the region and produced organically by local smallholders – fit perfectly into these recent dynamics.

The Unstable Course of a Commercialised Crop

However, not all the promises that were made with the commercialization of Sacha Inchi have been kept. An apparently paradoxical finding of my field research in San Martín is that smallholder producers have been adversely affected by producing Sacha Inchi, although they are the stated beneficiaries of the BioTrade projects that have been promoting it. The regional market for Sacha Inchi seeds has been characterized by a very high volatility in both price and demand, with three

[6] During its peak period, approximately 55% of Peru's coca was cultivated in San Martin while the country was the main producer worldwide. Roughly half of the region's economic value was produced through its cultivation and processing into coca paste, the main intermediate product for cocaine (Cabieses, 2010, p. 3). The coca economy and its violent control measures through the state and international actors dramatically transformed the livelihoods of the rural population.

[7] The currently most important crops include coffee, cocoa, oil palm, or palm hearts, among others. They all share the common ground of being destined for extra-local markets (national or export) (Cabieses, 2010, p. 6).

recurrent downturns in the last fifteen years. The attractive properties of this newly commercialized plant excited entire villages and within a year or two production rose rapidly. But demand could not keep pace and eventually became saturated. Similar to a traffic jam, market outlets were limited while agricultural production kept increasing. The result was a flooded informal market where the prices dropped to almost zero in just a few months, inducing an outright depression in the local economies. Farmers abandoned their Sacha Inchi fields and shifted (back) to other crops, effectively destroying the productive base of the value chain. After about a year, the resulting scarcity gave rise to a new price surge, thus reproducing the unstable market dynamics. Many rural families did not possess the resources to properly weather these turbulent developments. Their livelihoods being rather vulnerable, they were affected quite heavily by the downturns – up to the point of food scarcity.

One main reason for the fragility of the regional raw material market can be found in the fact that, through the novel value chain, smallholders were incorporated quite directly into global markets. The exporting firms passed on the pressures of the fluctuating global environment to the very beginning of the chain. For instance, as a consequence of a decline in demand following the global financial crisis in 2007/08, most intermediary firms stopped buying Sacha Inchi seeds for several months. The rural households in turn rarely disposed of the resources necessary to absorb and endure these pressures. The risk they were taking exceeded their financial capabilities, but the comparatively high profit margins of the crop had led many to abandon their corn fields and plant Sacha Inchi instead. Thus, the interaction between the global market environment, uneven relationships between the main actors of the value chain, and local decision making and resource endowments resulted in regional dynamics that were dramatic for the smallholder producers, while at the same time hindering the commercial success of Sacha Inchi as a novel product.

In order to stabilize the market and finally consolidate this seemingly promising product on the global market, BioTrade promotion strategies have been focused on

a hand full of "responsible"[8] processing firms as the "critical juncture" of the chain. The sector has been managed through Public Private Partnerships, initiated and financed by the international cooperation[9]. The latter convinced the regional authorities to accept Sacha Inchi as a valuable resource, and to adopt its commercial promotion as an official strategy for the (sustainable) development of San Martín. Through the arising projects and activities, a rather small group of urban "professionals" formed around the common goal of establishing Sacha Inchi as a new product. As "trustees" (Cowen & Shenton, 1996) they are supposed to bring about "improvement" for San Martín, and especially for its rural population. The implementation of BioTrade policies thus has given rise to a set of diverse actors with a seemingly common purpose – and yet with rather diverging perspectives.

The national government officials, project managers, and decision-makers in Lima are hardly aware of the turbulences in the regional market. Export figures for Sacha Inchi products have been on a constant rise over the past decade. Thus, from the viewpoint of the actors in the capital the market presents itself as a promising vehicle for sustainable development. In the regional arena, awareness is only marginally higher. Relatively seen, I would argue, farmers risked and lost more than any other actor in this value chain by betting on Sacha Inchi. However, their risks and losses are hardly ever recognized by the other actors involved. Put starkly, the raging ups and downs of the raw material market are dismissed as mere supply chain issues, hindering the commercial consolidation of the value chain.

In light of these developments, I would argue that in this case BioTrade adopts an extractivist logic on its way of implementation. It starts with the supposedly harmonious balance between conservation (Bio) and economic use (Trade) shifting towards the latter end: biological diversity is merely seen as a natural resource to be

[8] Firms for Public Private Partnerships are selected according to certain criteria of social and environmental responsibility, defined within the global and national BioTrade frameworks.

[9] In particular the German GIZ and the Swiss SECO.

used for national or regional development. As a consequence, instead of starting from the local level of the smallholders as the central actors for conserving biodiversity, efforts are concentrated on the intermediary firms as the "critical juncture" for getting Sacha Inchi into far-off markets. Ultimately, the commercial promotion of the plant, which was regarded as the means at the outset, becomes an end in itself: BioTrade is merely about bringing a valuable resources out of the Peruvian hinterland to promising green markets at the other end of the globe. In this process, the smallholders get reduced to their functional attribute: providing raw material.

The Neoextractivist Face of Biotrade

Not only is there a lack of recognition for the realities of the local populations in the rural villages of San Martín. Smallholders are also seen as a major cause for the turbulent course of the raw material market, and thus as culprits for the instability of the value chain as a whole. Their behavior is met with incomprehension and depicted as "irrational". For instance, they are accused of being reluctant to invest in the crop, of refusing new farming techniques, or of being unreliable and disloyal to their buying firm. However, within the project of sustainable development, and particularly BioTrade, they are effectively unavoidable – being the declared beneficiaries and central actors for conserving biodiversity in the field. Thus, they assume the role of a "necessary evil". It is here, I argue, where we have to look for explanations to grasp the neoextractivist face of BioTrade in Peru.

In order to better understand the smallholders' role as "necessary evils", we have to consider the social realities of neoliberalism in Peru, and their interaction with colonial lines of social differentiation. In a post-structural reading, neoliberalism is to be seen less as a distinct set of (economic) policies or the corresponding ideology. Rather, it is conceived as a political *rationality* that places the entrepreneur at the center of contemporary Peruvian society (Comité Editorial Revista Anthropia, 2014). That is, we are talking about "specific mechanisms of government, and

recognizable modes of creating subjects" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 171). More specifically, neoliberal rationality is about "making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 132). One important set of these "mechanisms" – or "technologies" in Foucaudian terms – have been the social policies increasingly applied since the "second-wave" (Ewig, 2011) of neoliberal reforms in Latin America. These have implied a redefinition of poverty where the "poor" are "those excluded [...] from effectively participating in the market and becoming masters of their own destiny" (Schild, 2000, p. 286). The so-called beneficiaries are conceived, and thus constructed, as entrepreneurs of themselves, as capitalists who invest in themselves and live off their profits – and cope with their losses. That is, neoliberal rationality acts upon the individual as such, as a technology for producing and configuring subjectivities that correspond to the emblematic figure of the entrepreneur – an economic-rational actor responsible for the consequences of his or her own behavior (Sacchi, 2016, p. 29).

What does all this mean for the smallholders producing Sacha Inchi in San Martín? To make a long story short, the prevailing entrepreneurialism leads to the expectation for them to act "rationally". They ought to strive for more, for a better future, in order to surpass themselves and their supposedly miserable condition. They ought to invest in their business, take risks and adopt novel technology, in order to "modernize". The vibrant, highly lucrative, green export market promises benefits for all; an opportunity for everyone, ready to be grasped. But the turbulent course of the regional market clearly reveals that the material realities contradict the neoliberal discourse of win-win and equal opportunities for all. The typical smallholder livelihood in San Martín does not follow the same logic as a capitalist enterprise. Often, the very survival of whole families depends, quite directly, upon the farming activities of its members. The resources that rural households possess, in turn, are usually not sufficient to weather the risky undertaking of being directly integrated into global markets. It is in this contradiction where the perfidy of neoliberal rationality lies: it obscures the material inequities with its discourse of

equal inequality and thus attributes the inevitable failure to the realm of self-responsibility.

However, the failure of the smallholders to expand their economic activities, their inability to bring about personal development, is not confined to the sphere of the individual. Trustees themselves are conceived as neoliberal subjects, as entrepreneurs that ought to self-responsibly bear the risks that life entails. Agricultural extensionists, for instance, are remunerated according to their performance of bringing about measurable progress towards achieving the targets of development projects. Thus, they depend upon the success of those they are expected to "improve" – their own livelihoods rely on it. On a more abstract level, too, the discourses of sustainable development and social inclusion connect the fate of the urban "professionals" to that of the rural populations in quite a peculiar manner. In the drive of bringing progress to the region on its path towards modernity; on the rise out of the provincial insignificance of a national hinterland, those who do not follow the prescriptions are not only left behind. Rather, they are depicted as the backward Other, as an obstacle on the path towards improvement.

Thus, the smallholders face the social imperative to act like entrepreneurs as a condition to be recognized as citizens, as valuable members of modern society. At the same time, their material position hardly allows them to do so because they lack the resources for bearing the risks of global market integration. By denying these structural inequalities, neoliberal rationality attributes blame to certain societal groups and thus reproduces existing lines of social differentiation. Particularly, in Peru indigeneity has long served as an explanation for poverty, or the lack of modern development. During the *state indigenism*[10] of the 20th century, for instance, being indigenous was effectively conflated with a poor socio-economic

[10] State indigenism was a set of political strategies to integrate the indigenous population into the modern nation-state. Specific socio-economic and educational policies aimed to overcome the indigenous condition in order to transform the "backward" indigenous into "modern" citizens (see Tuncay, 2015, pp. 5–6).

condition, while cultural backwardness served as an explanation for this condition (Tuncay, 2015, p. 5). As Tuncay (2015) demonstrates in the case of a conditional cash transfer program, contemporary policies still follow the same rationale. In relation to natural resources, emblematic discourses like *the beggar sitting on a bench of gold* suggest that Peru has been blessed with an abundance of natural resources but so far has failed to "transform itself from a beggar into a king". They thus picture the country's population as "incapable of using that wealth to raise itself out of poverty" (Drinot, 2006, pp. 12–15). As former president Alan Garcia not long ago demonstrated with his "dog in the manger" discourse[11], the indigenous and mestizo populations are still blamed for the country's failure to bring about national development (Drinot, 2014).

From a political ecology perspective, these social structures of race-based subordination have been "co-produced" (Grimmig, 2011) with the predominant conceptualization and use of "nature" as a resource to be exploited: The historical project of extractivism, which has been based the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 1992), has also implied a "coloniality of nature" (Alimonda, 2011; see also Brand & Dietz, 2014, p. 142). The case of BioTrade in Peru reveals striking parallels to the century old pattern of extractivism. Biological diversity is identified as a national resource, as San Martín's comparative advantage, and as an opportunity for sustainable development. Thus, along its way of being "translated" (Mosse, 2005) into practice, BioTrade adopts a logic that places the requirements of global markets over local realities; that chooses the needs of exporting firms over the concerns of the rural populations; and that favors the perspective of the capital over

[11] In his essay series published in 2007 and 2008, Garcia lamented the unused potential of the vast resources hidden in Peru's hinterlands and called for a more productive use for national development through privatization, capitalization, and mechanization. Referring to an ancient Spanish play about "the gardeners dog" that doesn't want to eat but doesn't let others eat either (*no come ni deja comer*), he implicitly referred to the rural (and particularly to the indigenous) population supposedly refusing to develop but at the same time refusing to sell their land for more "productive" use.

that of its hinterland. As the case of the Sacha Inchi farmers in San Martín demonstrates, the "neoliberal rationality" (Foucault, 2008) divides the regional population according to their ability to live up to the emblematic figure of the entrepreneur. It thereby reproduces the century-old structures that separate the "modern" from the "backward", the "urban" from the "rural", the "white" from the "indigenous".

However, the considerations made above also point to change. Through the project of sustainable development the Other seems to have assumed a new role: that of a necessary evil. The beggar sitting on a bench of gold, then, might again have changed its shape in contemporary neoliberal Peru. The underlying logic – the social relations of power – however, have remained the same. Thus, what the case analyzed here has made visible are the workings of century-old colonial patterns in the contemporary guise of sustainable development, or in other words: a form of new extractivism. It discursively puts the Other center stage, while in practice reproducing the exclusionary and subordinating patterns of its classical equivalent.

Conclusion

In the paragraphs above, I presented research on the commercial promotion of Sacha Inchi in the Peruvian lowlands of San Martín. The case study reveals the transformation of BioTrade policies into an undertaking that reduces biological diversity to its exchange value, and those who are supposed to cater it to raw material providers. Taking a closer look at the role of the smallholder producers, I argued that their inability to act like neoliberal subjects – as entrepreneurs that grasp the opportunities of global markets – lets them assume the role of an obstacle within the project of regional development. Thus, the contemporary neoliberal rationality interacts with colonial lines of social differentiation, reproducing them through the very denial of their existence. My interpretation of these findings is that, in this case, BioTrade policies and practices have adopted a (neo)extractivist logic.

Thus, (neo)neoextractivism affects areas one would hardly expect at first. Sacha Inchi has been explicitly promoted in the name of conserving biological diversity and of reducing rural poverty: as an alternative crop for sustainable smallholder agriculture. Within the logic of value chain promotion, national transformation processes have been at the forefront BioTrade policies, in order to ensure that value added stays within the Peruvian economy. In fact, it has been officially prohibited to export Sacha Inchi as a raw material. Nevertheless, taking a closer look at how BioTrade policies have been implemented in San Martin – paradoxically a region without any "classical" natural resources – I find the same basic patterns of resource extraction and the corresponding social relations that have characterized the country's history for centuries.

Accordingly, I contest Gudynas' (2013) endeavor to delimit the term to phenomena that imply the overexploitation of natural resources (the externalization of environmental and social costs), and their export as raw materials to global markets (in contrast to *national* economies). In my view, it implies too much a narrowing to an overtly materialist perspective. Rather, I would follow Brand and Dietz (2014) who, in an attempt to theorize the phenomenon from a political ecology perspective, conceive of (neo)extractivism quite broadly as an historically contingent form of capitalist resource appropriation, and thus as an expression of prevailing relations of power, intrinsically linked to the continent's colonial past. It is a crucial insight from the political ecology perspective that (neo)extractivism is not only problematic because of its (destructive) effects on the environment, or its political-economic consequences, but at least as much because it implies a specific "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 1992); that is, a particular formation of power relations that has been "co-produced" (Grimmig, 2011) throughout the long history of extractivism in Latin America.

In a way, then, I would argue that this case study reveals a crucial precondition for (neo)extractivist projects such as oil extraction, open-pit mining, or industrial agriculture. In a field distant from these emblematic manifestations it reminds us of the imperial rationality that these undertakings have always implied: extraction

requires the existence – or rather the construction – of a passive, unproductive Other to be exploited; be it in the realm of nature or that of society. As I have been arguing, neoliberal entrepreneurialism might constitute one contemporary mechanism that contributes to this process of (re)producing difference. Understanding how these social power structures and their relation to nature have come about and are reproduced in different contexts, I suggest, is crucial for grasping the phenomenon that has been termed neoextractivism; and even more so if nature is to provide a basis of life for all humans – including those yet to be born. In particular, this implies shedding more light on "extractivist cultures" (Gudynas, 2013, p. 7) – how they emerge, are reproduced, and disseminate; for they have been crucially shaping world views and policy prescriptions in Latin America for centuries. As in the case of Sacha Inchi in San Martín, they might still be transforming ideas and practices, including in areas we may not expect at first.

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