



Alcida Rita Ramos. 2019. Book review of “Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía, *Indigenous life projects and extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 282”. *América Crítica* 3(2): 91-94, ISSN: 2532-6724, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13125/americanacritica/3992>.

**Abstract**

Book review of Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía, *Indigenous life projects and extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 282.

**Resumen**

Reseña de Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía, *Indigenous life projects and extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 282.

**Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard and Juan Javier Rivera Andía,  
*Indigenous life projects and extractivism: Ethnographies  
from South America.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave  
Macmillan, 2019, pp. 282**

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This volume makes a significant contribution to the growing literature on the disastrous impact of extractivism on the life of thousands of people in South America, both indigenous and non-indigenous, whether in the Andes or in the Amazon. Ten chapters distill with a wealth of detail the recklessness of the industrial world in search of raw materials, digging deeper and deeper into the entrails of the earth, accelerating entropy and leaving a trail of chaos, filth, diseases, deprivation, and death. How many more books like this do experts have to write before the humanity wakes up to the sobering calamity creeping up under our bewildered eyes? Is extractivism a new plague spreading over the New World? Plague it may be, but it is not new.

Extractivism, a long-familiar term to Spanish (*extractivismo*) and Portuguese (*extrativismo*) speakers, first referred to the acts of environmental vandalism beginning at the dawn of the sixteenth century, such as the ransack of Brazil wood to dye European cloth. Along the centuries came the extraction of Amazonian species called *drogas do sertão*, not to speak of the gigantic mining operations in the Andes and the genocidal rubber boom in Amazonia (Taussig 1980, 1987). Could we say that these earlier forms of extractivism were milder than the contemporary corporate extraction of oil, minerals, and water, as described in this book? Or are these new activities simply the logical consequence of accumulated plunder? Since indigenous peoples survived five centuries of unbridled bootie, will they successfully outlive the present-day high-tech devastation? Such are some of the questions this book evokes in the reader. Big questions!

The authors describe in detail the processes of encroaching in indigenous lands via the extraction of oil, minerals such as gold, and water often in the form of dams and hydroelectric plants. Land depletion, toxic leaks, infected waterways result in inevitable health problems in the local populations, both human and non-human (Kirsch 2006, 2014). Yet, many of the authors point out, in most cases, the people who suffer these abuses are not totally opposed to extractivism. Beyond the obvious damages, they glimpse certain positive prospects that may benefit them. What is intolerable to many is the loss of control over the decisions involved in extraction processes, the contempt for their agency as decision-making actors, and the disdain for their rights duly recognized by their nations and by international legal organizations.

Indigenous peoples are never passive receivers of whatever happens to come upon them. Even in the most unfavorable circumstances, they have learned from five centuries of enduring the Whiteman's follies to turn difficulties into advantages. What the editors state in their introduction – "how capitalist mechanisms work themselves out and are renegotiated in people's everyday working lives" (2019: 27) – is splendidly demonstrated in Chapter 5 that deals with the sagacity of oil smugglers. An echo of these strategies to reverse the perils of conquest appears in *Pacificando o Branco* (Albert and Ramos 2002). On the rough days of the military developmental assault on the Amazon, this book unveiled ways in which indigenous peoples deploy traditional wisdom to cleanse, detox Whiteman's products before consuming them. In so doing, they reiterate their capacity to control the evil consequences of conquest.

Another subtheme running through the book is the predicament of living under the logic of both gift and commodity. The awkward transit between these two modes of exchange (of goods, postures, beliefs, etc.) forces people to choose between adhering to market demands and observing obligations to kith and kin, between succumbing to the allure of wealth and respecting kinship codes of reciprocity. The outcome of such schizophrenic scenarios can be downright tragic (Pimenta 2006, Ramos 2014).

This book provokes thoughts about the vagaries of the market. Peaks of boom and bust can take a heavy toll on lives and resources. (A telling demonstration is dramatized in John Williams' novel *Butcher's Crossing*). In my view, the focus of analyses about industrial disasters should shift from capitalism to the market. Bruce Grant (1995) clearly shows that native peoples submitted to forced commodity production suffer social and economic devastation as much under communist regimes as in so-called capitalist "democracies".

My only discomfort with the book is the overuse of *ontology*, the new buzzword in social sciences, particularly in anthropology. Whether applicable or not, its repetition through most of the chapters, accompanied with a string of set phrases (earth-beings, other-than-human, etc.), has the unfortunate effect of diluting the powerful messages contained in the description and analysis of particularly severe political situations. The notable exception is the outstanding piece by Fabricant and Postero that closes the book. In plain language, they shrewdly disclose the contradictions of the Evo Morales administration. As they do it, they reinforce my perception that the state format of government is structurally incompatible with the way indigenous peoples conduct their lives. It takes much more than an indigenous president to indigenize a nation-state.

This last comment in no way reduces the value of this collection as a rich addition to the growing literature on the anthropology of disasters.

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