



## ***The enforced expansion of extractive frontiers: struggles over power, meaning and knowledge***

5<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the Working Group “Nature, Resources and Conflicts”  
German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies,

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*Workshop report by Dr. Cristina Espinosa & Fabricio Rodríguez*

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## 1. Background and Scope

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The 5<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the Working Group “Nature, Resources and Conflicts” of the German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies took place at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 2016. Titled “The enforced expansion of extractive frontiers: struggles over power, meaning and knowledge”, this interdisciplinary event engaged with a longstanding yet very actual topic. Natural resources and the extraction of these have played a pivotal role for the human endeavour throughout history (Dougherty 2016). Large quantities of minerals and hydrocarbons have been extracted from the Earth’s crust, large swaths of forests have been harvested and converted into agricultural sites, and dam building and river diversion have enabled the use of water for irrigation, sanitation and energy generation. These events have produced significant patterns of imbalance between socio-economic gains and environmental risks.

Extractive activities expanded and intensified since the 1990s, resulting in large-scale modifications to the planet (Hogenboom, 2012). Particularly, transnational corporations and state actors have been at the forefront of these developments across Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast, and Central Asia, and in Latin America (Dougherty 2016). Far from being a historical continuity, the contemporary expansion and intensification of extractive activities has been influenced by a set of interrelated factors. These include, among others, the establishment of highly liberalized foreign direct investment policies across the Global South, connected to the Washington Consensus; technological advances enabling the extraction of natural resources at more profitable rates; the rise in the global demand for commodities accompanied by an increase in the price of natural resources; and stricter regulatory policies in the Global North raising the operation costs of extractive industries in those countries (Bebbington 2012, Dougherty 2016, Hogenboom 2012, Latorre et al. 2015, Walter and Urkidi 2016). Taken together, these factors have triggered the spatial shift in contemporary extractive activities significantly towards rural and remote geographies of the Global South. A rapidly increasing academic literature explores and assesses these developments.

The workshop sought to contribute to this lively scholarly debate by foregrounding issues of meaning, knowledge, and power underpinning people’s experiences of and responses to processes of change connected to extractive activities. In doing so, the workshop organizers drew inspiration from Foucault’s theoretical elaboration of discourse which – despite being developed through the analysis of issues with little or no connection to the appropriation of natural resources – offers the possibility of capturing the nuances of struggles arising with the recent expansion and intensification of extractive activities. As part of his archaeological work<sup>1</sup>, Foucault argued that knowledge about reality is not a reflection of truth, but truth itself is a discursive construction. He referred to discourse as a ‘regime of truth’ which, in a given historical epoch, determines what is true, what is false, who can speak, about what and in which way (Foucault, [1970]1994). In his genealogical work<sup>2</sup>, Foucault developed a theory of power/knowledge. Rather than concentrating on agents or structures, he focused on power perceived as permeating all aspects of social life and not solely as the attribute of individuals, the state, or groups with particular interests. As Fischer (2003) notes, the latter proposition is strongly linked with modern political and social theory that explain politics in terms of institutionalized state power and law, principally intended to constrain or enable actions of individuals and citizens. From a

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<sup>1</sup> *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault, [1961] 1988); *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault, [1963] 1994) and *The Order of Things* (Foucault, [1970]1994). Foucault introduced a method of analysis he referred to as archaeology which is explained in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, [1969] 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For example: *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, [1975] 1995) and *Die Sorge um Sich* (The Care of the Self) (Foucault, [1984]1989).

Foucauldian standpoint, power as both oppressive and productive to the extent that it constitutes discourse, knowledge, bodies and subjectivities. In arguing that power is always intertwined with knowledge, Foucault established a link between power and discourse. As power is multiple and ubiquitous, it subsists in a complex assemblage of 'micro powers' that permeate all aspects of social life and it is *exercised* rather than *possessed* per se (Fischer, 2003). Therefore, beyond repression, power emanates from practices of signification and re-signification through which reality or elements of it can be vested with novel meanings that make certain, perhaps formerly unthinkable, subjects, utterances and practices thinkable.

Against the background of these Foucauldian insights, the motivations for the conceptualization and organization of the workshop were threefold:

First, the renewed intensification of extractive activities across the globe has reactivated academic debates on how the profit-oriented, transnational, and multi-scalar appropriation, commodification and financialization of nature has affected the social, political and environmental conditions in different institutional, geographic, and territorial contexts across the globe. As a result, the concept of the 'extractive frontier' has become part of the vocabulary used by scholars working in this field, without it being explicitly defined or raised to a more formal category of analysis. In view of the inchoate academic use of the term 'extractive frontiers' the interdisciplinary format of the workshop provided for a fruitful setting to grasp the analytical and empirical connotations attached to the term 'extractive frontier'. The call for papers thus first sought to attract scholarly work addressing the cognitive, linguistic and symbolic dimensions of this polyvalent term. One of the keynote speakers, Dr. Peter Larsen, from the University of Luzern, stimulated this discussion by outlining the 'post-frontier' as a more enlightening conceptual stepping stone to problematize and study contemporary resource extraction and associated political, societal, and environmental change.

Second, while critical scholars would generally agree that resource conflicts are entangled in discursive struggles, there is still much room to conduct a deeper discussion about the symbolic, linguistic, representative, and interpretive elements leading to, and shaping such tension in the Global South and in the Global North alike (Adler & Bernstein 2005). Thus, the workshop was grounded on the assumption that resource conflicts are not only affected and determined by material (i.e. use of physical force, and money flows to secure and enable access to resources) but also on non-material aspects. In other words, resource conflicts can be understood as importantly grounded in competing, and often incompatible or irreconcilable systems of signification, which define whose knowledge prevails as legitimate in the eyes of the state, the market, and other social audiences. At the same time, so called non-scientific kinds of knowledge are discarded as ontologically inferior, illegitimate, and even dangerous, which for instance explains why non-state indigenous forms of resistance against resource extraction are criminalized and prosecuted under the flagship of the rule of law. The way actors generate knowledge from and about nature thus lays at the core of social relations entrenched in local, national, and transnational structures of power. Especially when dominant discourses determine whose position is stronger in the struggle to gain or retain access to nature and its resources and draw benefits from these. The workshop therefore extended an invitation to explore, differentiate and interconnect the concepts of power, meaning, and knowledge as a particular perspective on the analysis of resource conflicts.

Third, besides situating the dialog on the interpretive side of social science, the workshop had the objective of stimulating empirically grounded contributions while focusing on the analysis of resource conflicts through the lens of power, meaning and knowledge. In fact, the expansion of extractive activities is largely determined by transnational actors and historical conjunctures that oftentimes reduce the negotiating capacities of traditionally weak actors to an overwhelming minimum. However, it is at the local (oftentimes transnationally articulated) levels, that systems of meaning and signification become socio-politically mobile and empirically graspable. In this context, Dr. Mariana Walter from the Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA) - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), contributed a keynote lecture on the potential of non-binding participatory mechanisms to settle resource conflicts in accordance with the interest of local communities resisting the establishment and or expansion of extractive activities in their territory.

## **2. Contributions**

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Emerging narratives about new complex realities in the spaces where the extraction of natural resources takes place were sketched out by the first keynote speaker Dr. Peter Larsen in reference to his publication "*Post-frontier Resource Governance*" (2015). Whereas the 'frontier' concept brings to mind ideas of uncharted territory out of sight and control, the 'post-frontier', as argued by Larsen, it evokes narratives which more appropriately depict territories inventorized, visualized and managed. References to the 'post-frontier' shed light on the mosaic of institutional and governance arrangements that interconnect local and indigenous peoples, companies involved in extractive activities, government actors from local to national levels, and international organizations. These panoply of actors raise clashing demands about rights, participation and conservation connected to universalized, yet contested, conceptions of citizenship and sustainability. Hence, the 'post-frontier' provides important hints about how beyond economic values, multiple social and ecological meanings are at stake in arising struggles connected to the extraction of natural resources. This concept also highlights different ways of experiencing and knowing increasingly complex realities.

Nevertheless, ways of knowing are not equally valued in societies and are ordered into hierarchies resulting from dominant discourses. This was one of the key arguments advanced by Dr. Nick Buchanan from the University College Freiburg/ University of Minnesota in his contribution "Which Fish? Knowledge, Articulation, and Legitimization in Legal Claims about Endangered and Culturally Significant Animals". Buchanan highlighted the ways in which the United States Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) authorize scientific discourses rooted in environmental law as the prevailing parameter to understand environmental issues. In an effort to gain legal authority, indigenous peoples make reference to scientific knowledge in conjunction with traditional or historic indigenous knowledge, which other scholars also describe in terms of local knowledge. Through the combination of knowledge from different domains, indigenous groups are more likely to succeed in making claims about culturally significant animals at the risk of reproducing a system of partial exclusion.

Co-management arrangements are a further example of institutionalized space for knowledge blending and negotiation as discussed in the presentation entitled "From Conflict to Collaboration: The influence of co-management on protected area conflicts and conflict management in the Mole National Park, Ghana" by Ophelia Soliku from the chair of Forest and Environmental Policy of the University of Freiburg. Soliku emphasized how trends to include local communities and incorporate

local knowledge in the management of nature protection areas such as the Mole National Park are relatively new and at the core of co-management arrangements. Co-management arrangements have varied results in terms of their efficiency; these results are crisscrossed by conflicts over different understandings of well-being, sustainable livelihoods, and conservation goals. Importantly, these conflicts are rooted in preceding centralized, top-down government decisions that ‘fence off’ local communities, in-line with a ‘conservation without people’ discourse.

In a similar vein, Cynthia Sosa from the chair of Silviculture of the University of Freiburg argued in her presentation with the title “Lost in the woods: Forest livelihood options for people in the protected areas of the Mayan jungle”, that participatory and inclusive management arrangements of natural resources, such as tropical forests, face major challenges in developing effective forms of collective action in order to balance and secure social, economic and environmental outcomes in the long-term. From Sosa’s perspective, acceptance and attractiveness of these management arrangements are key and should be studied in relevant contexts such as that of the Biosphere Reserve in the Mayan Forest, which stretches across Belize, Guatemala and Mexico.

The conflicts traversing the management and extraction of natural resources are not only between communities, NGOs, states, and companies. Conflicts over nature also exist among different parts of the state, among NGOs and among community members (Bebbington 2012). These conflicts trigger activisms and collective forms of action which encircle internal ‘contradictions’ as documented by Andrea Sempertegui from the GSSC Giessen. In her presentation entitled “Towards a gendered perspective on indigeneity and the indigenous fight for territory in Ecuador”, Sempertegui analysed the emergence of the group *Mujeres en Resistencia*, ‘women in resistance’, in response to the recent spread of oil activities in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Sempertegui discussed how ethnic and gender aspects become binding elements in situations of conflict, thus building common grounds for resistance and solidarity networks with *colono* (settler) female activists.

The configuration of activist networks was also a topic addressed by Dr. Cristina Espinosa of the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in her presentation entitled “The circulation of know-how and expertise in transnational anti-mining activism”. Espinosa criticized uneven hierarchies of knowledge that privilege technocratic and scientific expertise over that of local communities and activists engaged in anti-mining movements. She maintained that local communities and activists affected by large-scale mining activities raise claims concerning the pollution of air, soil, water, or bodies due to extractive activities, yet are not granted the same legitimacy to determine whether this is the case as scientists and technocratic experts. Accordingly, Cristina Espinosa proposed the analysis of processes through which activists incorporate scientific claims and technological arguments to make their knowledge legitimate, and thereby challenge official assessments of safety and risk, opening avenues for the incorporation of multiple types of knowledge in the governance of extractive industries.

The second keynote given by Dr. Mariana Walter provided an analysis of the diffusion of practices and innovations across mining-affected communities in Latin America connected to the research she has conducted with her colleague Leire Urkidi (2015). Walter focused on *consultas comunitarias* or community referenda as examples of hybrid institutions that conjoin formal and informal mechanisms of local participation in decision-making processes. *Consultas comunitarias* appeared for the first time in Tambogrande, Peru, in 2002 and have since then spread to Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia and Guatemala. Despite the lack of a legally binding character, Walter underscored how *consultas comunitarias* hold great symbolic power and are redefining international principles such as that of Free

Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which according to ILO convention 169 should be organized by the state, and not by communities. Furthermore, Walter stressed that *consultas comunitarias* prefigure participative democracy and dissuade the irruption of violent conflicts in communities experiencing threats from planned extractive projects.

Bottom-up initiatives and social movements have further shaped the discursive and institutional contexts in which contemporary extractive activities take place (Espinosa 2013; 2015). For instance, in Bolivia and Ecuador discourses have gained currency, which are not only critical to neo-liberalism, but additionally emphasize the importance of redistribution and equity, honour the rights and values of rural and indigenous peoples, and question unchecked growth, consumption, and environmental destruction (Chomsky & Stiffler 2014). The emergence and unravelling of one of these discourses was examined by Adriana Ballón from the chair of Silviculture of the University of Freiburg in her presentation entitled “What makes environmental discourse policy relevant? An Analysis of Buen Vivir in Bolivia”.

Alongside, legal frameworks recognizing nature as a subject with legally enforceable rights have been adopted, as commented by Mario Bravo from the University of Göttingen in his presentation “Rights of Nature – A panacea for environmental protection? A study of the Ecuadorian case”. Bravo reflected about the difficulty of interpreting and implementing the novel rights of nature given that these are linked to traditional knowledge systems not (yet) accessible to mainstream environmental legal scholarship. Albeit these technical-judicial challenges, the constitutional recognition of rights of nature has altered the contours of the debates in which extractive activities are discussed. Laws and rights -in defining access, control, and exclusion to a natural resource- establish relations between social actors. Likewise, laws and rights craft relations between social actors and nature, given that specific components of nature are not ontologically ‘given’ as resources, but ‘become’ resources only in connection to human desires, social needs and practices (Watts 2000).

In connection with the previous assertion, it can be maintained that institutionalized natural resource management arrangements are power-laden; they are central in the configuration of context specific power structures embedded in historical processes (Robbins 2012). In her presentation “What is the point of having land when we cannot use it? The expansion of agro-extractivism and struggles around water in coastal Peru”, Laura Tejada from the University of Bern made this point clear through a detailed and contextualized account of how neo-liberal reforms in land tenure and access to water are entangled in political and economic dynamics across local and national scales and marked by pre-existing power asymmetries. These reforms reinforced the perception of natural resources as a means to foster economic growth and political modernization, which can be characterized as the dominant discourse and ultimate policy-goal across governments in different parts of the world.

While left-leaning Latin American administrations vocally opposing neoliberalism actively promote the extraction of natural resources in culturally and biologically-sensitive areas to fund ambitious social programs and reforms, African governments sponsor large-scale development projects by trumpeting the consequent benefits of progress, development and urbanization in what Benedikt Kamski (2016) from the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute denoted as the ‘peripheries of peripheries’. Kamski illustrated this trend by presenting a detailed case study of the ambitious Kuraz Sugar Development Project in Ethiopia’s lower Omo Valley, which, as argued by the author, not only represents an economic project but a political project to gain control of important territory on behalf of the government.

Such state-led schemes not only affect rural areas and remote territories with which imageries of extractive frontiers are easily associated, but also the urban spaces of world metropolis. This was illustrated by Dr. Aysem Mert from the chair of Sustainability Governance of the University of Freiburg with her recently published (2016) study of the Gezi Park protests in 2013 in Turkey. According to Mert, the discourse of ‘hyper-developmentalism’ legitimated plans of the central government and Istanbul municipality to build a shopping mall on a culturally relevant part of the city. Taking the name of this point of origin, Gezi Park protests evolved into a countrywide resistance movement against the hyper-developmental environmental and urban policies of the government, and the authoritarian tendencies of the administration in office lead by the current president Tayyip Erdoğan.

The governmental policies, in the case of China to gain access to subsoil resources in Latin America, and particularly in Brazil, were the focus of the contribution by Fabricio Rodríguez, research fellow of the BMBF- Research Group BioInequalities at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena and associate researcher at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute. Rodríguez maintained that through the rhetoric of ‘South-South’, ‘win-win’, ‘complementarity’, and ‘mutual development’ (Strauss 2012), perceptions of collective identities, such as that of the ‘BRICS’ (coalition of states at a similar stage of newly advanced economic development including Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have been forged, enabling the subordination of Brazil in the contemporary geopolitics of the fossil economy (Malm 2016). These processes provide hints about the productive capacity of language in the definition of identities and capacities, as well as in the articulation of interests between self and others (Barnett & Duvall 2005).

### **3. Conclusions**

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The contributions to this workshop were heterogeneous both in terms of analytical and methodological approach. Regionally, contributions covered North, Central and South America, East and West Africa, Eurasia, and, to some extent, East Asia. Although the workshop did not seek to bundle interdisciplinary and cross-regional knowledge in a systematic way beyond tracing the preliminary contours of a complex debate – this would have meant overstretching the scope of the format-, discussion rounds revealed a number of aspects worth mentioning as a way of conclusion.

On the one hand, it is evident that the analytical potential of ‘extractive frontier’ is mostly determined by a dominant shared notion that has become common sense and evokes the profit-oriented, capital-led spreading dynamics of extractive activities in a new historical context of resource extraction. However, the deconstruction of such imageries can in fact deliver a set of elements that make the analytical dimensions of this term explicit, and thus set the stage for fruitful academic discussions. In this regard, Larsen stressed central elements to consider in the study of contemporary extractive frontiers such as the complexity of governance arrangements in place, the heterogeneity of actor constellations, and the multiplicity of socio-ecological values concurring in the spaces in which often contested extractive activities are planned and eventually unfold. Larsen showed that adopting the heuristic of the ‘post-frontier’ enables an analytical move away from a somewhat underspecified category (i.e. ‘extractive frontier’) onto a set of relevant analytical foci that open new possibilities for research, and ideas for policy making.

On the other hand, discussions revealed that the concepts of power, meaning and knowledge deserve careful unpacking, scrutiny and interlinkage. Nevertheless, these concepts provided for solid cornerstones to discuss research across a very diverse set of disciplines, topics, regions, and analytical levels. Additionally, it became evident, that the study of these three concepts is particularly promising, when conducted following an understanding of politics, not as the administration of government, but as a struggle for discursive hegemony in which actors, also those formally excluded from the halls of decision-making try to secure support for their specific definition of reality. Most contributions could in fact draw a clear picture, of how power relations and structures, interact with different struggles over legitimate and authorized knowledge, while engaging in a thorough argumentation about how, and why particular systems of signification collide but also connect at particular moments and stages of a conflict. Likewise, and maybe most importantly, discussions showed that it is insightful to approach power as exercised through practices of signification and re-signification and not necessarily of inescapable top-down repression through material resources (e.g. force or finance) wielded by a given actor. Such understanding of power directs the analytical gaze towards the contentious and contested interactions between multiple actors challenging state authority.

Another enlightening task is to approach and investigate local action as a transnationally linked space for socio-political movements searching to stop environmentally, culturally, and socially threatening extractive activities. This is not to say that research focusing on process unfolding from global to local arenas are less worthy of attention. In fact, a research agenda for the future may also seek to connect the two. This is also relevant from a horizontal perspective, that problematizes and analyses points of conjuncture and leverage between transnational social movements, and official policy making at the systemic level. Bridging this gap is not only analytically but also strategically relevant.

In conclusion, although important research on the topic of extractive frontiers and conflicts associated to extractive activities has been conducted over the last years, there is still significant room for scholarly discussion and avenues for future research. A future research agenda around extractive activities could be as ample as research conducted so far, and probably will continue with many of the themes around local communities, indigeneity, resistance, mobilization, governance and state building that have characterized research until now. More research could be conducted on topics which are starting to be investigated and include technology and science as sites of contestation, changes in urban dynamics linked to extractive activities, and the geopolitics of extractive endeavours. A multiplicity of perspectives, harnessing the potential of interdisciplinary efforts that take into account material as well as ideational aspects, will be fruitful in making sense of these complex phenomena which, as some argue, have entered a phase of 'post-commodities-boom' in which entanglements of power, meaning and knowledge may be reassembled.

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## 5. Workshop Contributions

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Aguilera, M. "Rights of Nature - A panacea for the environmental protection? A study of the Ecuadorian case", *University of Göttingen*

Ballón, A. "What makes environmental discourse policy relevant? An analysis of Buen Vivir in Bolivia", *University of Freiburg*

Buchanan, N. "Which Fish? Knowledge, Articulation, and Legitimization in Legal Claims about Endangered and Culturally Significant Animals", *University College Freiburg & University of Minnesota*

Espinosa, C. "The circulation of know-how and expertise in transnational anti-mining activism", *Arnold Bergstraesser Institute Freiburg*

Kamski, B. "The Kuraz Sugar Development Project in Ethiopia", *Arnold Bergstraesser Institute Freiburg*

Larsen, P. "Exploring the post-frontier: concepts and emerging lessons", *University of Luzern*

Mert, A. "The trees in Gezi Park: Environmental policy as the focus of democratic protests", *University of Freiburg*

Rodríguez, F. "The discursive production of identities and capacities in the fossil economy. The case of Sino-Brazilian relations in the oil industry of Brazil", *University of Jena & Arnold Bergstraesser Institute Freiburg*

Sempertegui, A. "Towards a Gendered Perspective on Indigeneity and the Indigenous Fight for Territory in Ecuador", *GCSC Giessen*

Soliku, O. "From Conflict to Collaboration: The influence of co-management on protected area conflicts and conflict management in the Mole National Park, Ghana", *University of Freiburg & Forest Research Institute Baden-Württemberg*

Sosa, C. "Lost in the woods: Forest livelihood options for people in the protected areas of the Mayan jungle", *University of Freiburg*

Tejada, L. & Rist, S. "What is the point of having land when we cannot use it? The expansion of agro-extractivism and struggles around water in coastal Peru", *University of Bern*

Walter, M. "Community mining consultations in Latin America", *ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*