

## Book Review

– *Resource radicals: From petro-nationalism to post-extractivism in Ecuador*,  
by Thea Riofrancos. Duke University Press, 2020.

The 2007 election of leftist President Rafael Correa in Ecuador signalled a fundamental break from the economic policies of the past. Neoliberalism was immediately jettisoned in favour of a comprehensive set of progressive reforms that were designed to reduce the country's endemic poverty and extreme inequality. The fierce opposition to these reforms that quickly emerged among the domestic elite and foreign interests came as no surprise. What was surprising, however, was the equally fierce resistance that coalesced among many of the same left-wing social activists who had helped bring Correa to power. In *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*, Riofrancos recounts the escalating political conflict between the Correa Administration and the left opposition that unfolded over the next decade, a conflict that largely centred around use of the country's natural resources.

Riofrancos labels the position of the Correa Administration "Radical Resource Nationalism." Under this paradigm the proceeds from the export of Ecuador's hydrocarbon and mineral resources would be channelled into expansive social welfare programs and public infrastructure projects, with the poor, working class, and peasantry being the primary beneficiaries. For Correa, the social debt accumulated from decades of austerity and economic crisis would be paid off and the "long night of neoliberalism would end" (p. 15). The opposition position, which Riofrancos labels "Anti-Extractionism," rejected all forms of natural resource extraction. Hydrocarbon and mineral extraction, it was argued, undermines rural livelihoods, intensifies inequalities, violates collective rights, distorts local land use, and displaces indigenous communities. Resource extraction also causes massive environmental damage, including air pollution, water contamination, soil erosion, and deforestation. For indigenous communities, especially in the central and southern Amazonian provinces, the threat posed by the Correa Administration to their health, well-being, and way of life was little different from the many threats they have endured from outside forces since the Spanish conquest and colonization.

*Resource Radicals* draws upon a wide range of sources. Riofrancos conducted research in Ecuador during a fifteen month period, dividing her time between Quito and some of the rural communities most impacted by resource extraction. She conducted over one hundred interviews with administration officials and members of various indigenous, environmental, *campesino*, labour, and human rights organizations. Riofrancos also undertook extensive research at the Library of the National Assembly and participated in numerous meetings, protests, marches, and public events that were organized by the anti-extraction opposition. *Resource Radicals* demonstrates how the Correa Administration sought to mitigate protest and promote natural resource extraction at the community level. At the same time, Riofrancos goes beyond a traditional state-centric, top-down analysis to examine how the processes of resistance also conditioned and constrained state policy. Popular mobilization, she argues, slowed the development of new oil exploration and limited large-scale mining. By studying the dialectic relationship between opposing forces Riofrancos offers a complex and nuanced understanding of the praxis of politics in Ecuador during this time-period.

Riofrancos pays particular attention to the divergent “discourses” or “narratives” that framed the political conflict. Drawing upon the ideas and methods of critical theorists, most notably Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Fredric Jameson, Riofrancos demonstrates “how discursive formations circulate, gain momentum, and shape the policy debate.” (p. 144) The opposing discourses regarding resource extraction are linked to fundamentally different visions of what constitutes the nation, authority, legitimacy, citizenship, popular sovereignty, and democratic decision-making.

Riofrancos is clearly sympathetic with the anti-extractionist left. Much of her ethnographic research involved direct participation in the resistance movement, including a 700 kilometre march from Pangui to Quito. Although Riofrancos repeatedly questions and refutes the arguments advanced by Correa and members of his administration, she does not subject the views expressed by indigenous, *campesino*, environmental, and other opposition leaders to the same critical lens. Riofrancos’ allegiance to anti-extractivism may at least partially explain why she presents the two positions on the use of natural resources as diametrically opposed with no room for compromise. She gives little attention or credibility to the argument frequently advanced by the Correa Administration that a substantial portion of the proceeds from natural resource extraction can be channelled toward aiding indigenous communities, improving socio-economic conditions in the countryside, and preserving local ecosystems.

*Resource Radicals* offers a remarkable first-hand account of the internecine conflict within the left during the ten years that Rafael Correa was in power. Riofrancos carefully describes how this conflict unfolded during a unique historical moment and places this moment within the context of a much longer struggle over resources, territory, and indigenous rights in Ecuador. Riofrancos also demonstrates how the Ecuadorian experience exemplifies the continued

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struggle for democratic governance, economic justice, and environmental sustainability throughout Latin America.

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