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The incursions of extractivism: moving from dispersed places to global capitalism

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ABSTRACT


The commonplace notion of extractivism relates to the production of value through physically extractive processes (mining, oil extraction, certain kinds of agriculture, etc.) where value generation is necessarily temporary and generally followed by barrenness and an inability to sustainably reproduce livelihoods in the affected habitat. In this article we aim to rethink extractivism in more general, politico-economic terms, i.e. as a particular way of structuring the processes of production and reproduction. This allows us to ask if extractivism is limited to the sectors mentioned above or a pattern that could, actually or potentially, emerge in other sectors of the economy. This paper also aims to contribute to the debate on the rise, and current problems, of emerging economies and how they relate to global capitalism. It develops the hypothesis that at least some of the BRICS countries have operated as laboratories in which extractivism has been developed into a wider politico-economic system that is now also being applied outside the BRICS countries.

KEYWORDS

Extractivism; production and reproduction; resistance; BRICS

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a remarkable move towards centralized control over natural resources (land grabbing being an illustration *par excellence* [Borras et al. 2011])¹ and the intensified exploitation of these resources, often resulting in their complete exhaustion. Extractivism lies at the intersection of the two: it implies (if not requires) monopoly control over specific natural resources (minerals, oil, gas, fertile land, aquifers, woodlands, etc.) and it results in their ruthless exploitation. After the resource in question has been extracted, only 'negative externalities' remain: pollution, impoverished populations, exhausted resources, etc. The value entailed in the particular resources is mined – leaving a void. The mined products are exported and the value obtained transferred to other places. All this is clearly highlighted by the rise and downfall of some major countries that export agricultural commodities and/or mining products (such as Brazil, Russia, South Africa and, to a lesser degree, Angola, Ecuador and Bolivia). Until the crisis that began in

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¹Borras et al. (2012), 850 typically refer to land grabbing as 'control grabbing'.

2008 they showed economic growth rates of up to 10%, only to see them collapse in the following decade (Anderson 2016).

This paper is a *discussion paper*. It links debates that so far have only been marginally connected and, in doing so, it aims to bring forward some hypotheses. Within the context of this paper these hypotheses cannot be proven to be true – instead, we present them as an invitation to explore new lines of inquiry and arenas for debate. The paper aims to explore the commonalities of, and dissimilarities between, extractivism and capitalism generally. This inquiry partly resides in debates about the BRICS countries whose particularity lies in that they have ‘upgraded’ extractivism from single and dispersed activities towards a structural feature of the politico-economic system as a whole. It also draws on some of the major structural changes that have been occurring in capitalist economies as an effect of deregulation and globalization. Finally, it tries to understand the significance of new forms of social struggle that are emerging in response to extractivist activities.

Rethinking extractivism

Extractivism cannot simply be equated to mining (and/or destructive forms of farming, logging, rubber tapping, fishing, etc.). It is mining (or farming, etc.) that is *patterned in a particular way*. It is an economic system that shows the following features:

- (1) It includes the creation of a monopoly over the resources that are (to be) extracted. As a consequence, the benefits obtained are concentrated and appropriated in the hands of a limited number of beneficiaries, whilst the costs are externalized (Veltmeyer and Bowles 2014, 5).
- (2) It depends upon close intertwinements between state and private capital groups (be they national or international).
- (3) It is made possible by the availability of the required infrastructural elements (harbours, transport systems, electricity, security, a docile labour force, etc.).
- (4) There is an ‘operational centre’ that is able to tie different infrastructural elements together into a well-functioning series of connections (a ‘chain’) that allows the extracted products to be transported from places of poverty to places of richness, where high prices can be obtained for them. The control over these connections constitutes the monopoly position (see point 1 above).² Other actors (not linked to the operational centre) do not have access to the resources to be extracted, or networks needed to transport the obtained products to places of richness.
- (5) The wealth obtained through these processes is accumulated in the operational centre and by capital groups participating in it. The obtained wealth is definitely not channelled towards the people negatively affected by the extractivist activities nor to the people (and/or institutions) who could legitimately claim a share.
- (6) The previous points (notably 1, 4 and 5) imply that extractivism is constituted by, and through, inequalities, and that it creates and deepens such inequalities.³

²There are examples of small-scale mining that follow a completely different pattern and which result in a significantly different distribution of the obtained wealth. See e.g. Donaldson (2011) on small-scale mining in Guizhou, which he contrasts with large-scale and centralized mining in the neighbouring province of Yunnan.

³In the literature this is known as the resource-curse. The wealth of available resources translates into widespread marginalization, deprivation and poverty (Ross 1999; Melhum, Moene, and Torvik 2006; Zhang et al. 2007).

- (7) In particular instances, the obtained wealth is partly used by the state for social distribution⁴ and/or development-oriented investments. This is referred to, in the literature, as 'progressive extractivism' or 'neo-extractivism' and is claimed to feed 'developmentalism' and redistributive policies (North and Grinspun 2016).
- (8) In terms of the process of production *in senso stricto*, extractivism represents *production without reproduction*. We are not referring here to the reproduction of the social relations of production (like wage relations) but to the *material* reproduction of the resources involved. In the case of mining, such reproduction is, to a degree⁵, impossible. However, when it comes to activities such as forestry, fishery and agriculture, the separation of production from reproduction and the neglect of the latter set extractivism apart: resulting in deserts, empty seas and 'dustbowl-agriculture' (Steinbeck 1939). Extractivism centres on the use of the already available resources, it does not invest in the material reproduction of these resources. The neglect of reproduction turns extractivism into a destructive phenomenon.
- (9) As a consequence, extractivism creates huge windfall profits. This also explains the 'boom-like' nature of extractivism, which Veltmeyer and Bowles refer to as the 'boom–bust cycle' (2014, 14).
- (10) It results in barrenness: the destruction of landscapes and biodiversity, widespread pollution, the depletion of important resources, unemployment, a degrading quality of work, displacement of indigenous peoples and 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004). It might bring as well complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Production and reproduction

Every process of production uses (and therefore 'consumes') resources – be they natural and/or social ones. In order to be continued over time, these resources need to be materially reproduced, so as to allow for new cycles of production. These resources can be reproduced through productive activities geared specifically to their construction (production and reproduction occur in separated enterprises) or they may be reproduced within the productive process in which they are used and consumed (production and reproduction are combined and located within one and the same enterprise). This will depend on the social, spatial and/or temporal divisions of labour. Reproduction is necessary for the continuity of production. Without the former, the latter runs dry. Beyond this, well-cared for reproduction is often the carrier of progress: resulting in the *improvement* of resources.

Within this framework, extractivism stands out as an exception. Extractive activities use resources *without reproducing them*. The resources needed are not reproduced – neither within the enterprise that consumes them nor obtained, through market exchange, from other enterprises that produced them. Extractivist activities are built on resources that have been provided by nature and/or previous generations⁶ – resources that are, as it were, 'awaiting' exploitation and which, through such exploitation, are depleted

⁴This is notably the case in Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia. For a critique see Gudynas, (2009 and 2013).

⁵To a degree, because the restoration of the landscape (especially after open-cast mining), compensation, medical care and pensions for ex-miners are possible (although in practice often lacking). More generally, in the case of mining, (some of) the profits obtained can be used to explore for, and invest in, new resources. This implies a kind of reproduction. However, in truly extractivist activities all this is absent.

(instead of being reproduced). Extractivism turns resources (be they natural or social) into finite products. All this is well illustrated, by the example of the Brazilian *cerrado*.

The *cerrado* belt, in the heart of Brazil, is one of South America's most dynamic agricultural regions. The export-oriented agricultural boom (that predominantly, but not exclusively, centres on soy) is a relatively recent phenomenon. The *cerrado* has been long known as an inhospitable area with little value for agriculture. If there was any wealth it was well-hidden. Until the 1980s, the Cerrado was occupied by small farmers who produced for both subsistence and markets (Helfand, Rada, and Magalheas 2017). In the 1980s, after EMBRAPA (the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation) had adapted soy beans to tropical conditions and introduced no-tillage techniques, a real rush started: the once hidden wealth could now be explored. Whilst it embraces only 25% of the national territory, it now produces 50% of all grains. The *cerrado* is now dominated by highly mechanized large farms that employ relatively few workers (Cabral and Shankland 2013, 13).

Between 2000 and 2014 production increased another 84% and soy now occupies 90% (15.6 million hectares) of the farm land of this region. Currently the soy rush extends, inside Brazil, to the states of Maranhao, Piauí, Tocantins and Bahia (together referred to as MaToPiBa) (Sauer and Leite 2012, 2013) and, outside of Brazil, to Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay and Colombia (Gudynas 2008; Wilkinson and Pereira 2014; Wesz Jr 2016; Craviotti 2018). This is how 'Soylandia' is created: data presented by Oliveira and Hecht (2016, 257) indicate that presently the South-American soybean-producing countries account for 58.3% of global exports.

Tapping off hidden wealth is a telling metaphor for extractivism – a metaphor that indirectly indicates that extractivism does not *produce* wealth, it explores the world for already existing, but still hidden wealth and then exploits it till it is exhausted.

At first sight, the notion of extractivism seems to be associated with clear demarcations on the time horizon. Extractivism is not only supposed to be a temporal phenomenon – it is often related to 'primitive accumulation' as well: a process that feeds into, and is subsequently replaced by, capital accumulation. Extractivism is thought to stop when the resource base is depleted. The exploitation of a particular resource base might (and will) indeed come to an end – but this does not apply necessarily to extractivism as a *particular mode of resource-use*. In actuality, once a particular resource is exhausted (or is coming close to it) extractivism shifts to new domains and new locations. The economies of countries as Brazil and South Africa (and, to a lesser degree Russia and China) are dependent on extractivist activities. At the same time, they are exporting the extractivist model to other countries in order to drain their resources. Bunker and Cicantell (2005) discuss this as the dialectics of economies of scale and diseconomies of space. Examples include the massive investments in land located in Africa and Eastern Europe by China, which is also importing Burmese and Vietnamese workers, who are even cheaper than Chinese workers. The same applies for South Africa, which is massively investing elsewhere in Africa (mainly, but not only, through land-grabbing) and Brazil, which is exporting its large-scale soy bean farmers to Uruguay, Paraguay and parts of Argentina and Colombia and starting to control large tracts of land in Mozambique and Angola. The Vale Company, which is involved in a

⁶Hobsbawn (1995) gives a detailed analysis of how capitalism in the late 20th century built on, and exploited, values delivered by previous generations.

multiplicity of extractive activities in Brazil, is now one of the main land grabbers in Mozambique. EMBRAPA (the Brazilian state agency responsible for agricultural R&D) has shifted a considerable part of its activities to Africa, especially Lusophone Africa. Brazil and China are emerging as powers in trading and processing agricultural commodities in Zimbabwe. In addition,

a private investment firm, Green Fuels, has set up a US\$ 600 million ethanol processing plant in Chisumbanje, South East Zimbabwe, as a joint venture with the Agricultural and Rural Development Authority, a quasi-state institution on whose estate the plant is located [...] The Brazilian private sector provided the expertise in building the plant [...] Sugarcane is supplied primarily by the estate and is supplemented through out-grower arrangements with surrounding communal farmers. (Mukwereza 2013, 8)

In the meantime, Brazil, Japan and Mozambique have developed a triangular partnership called ProSavana. This programme, led by EMBRAPA on the Brazilian side, will try to replicate the transformation of the *cerrado* in the north of Mozambique. It claims to envisage providing support for both commercial large-scale agriculture and smallholder farms (Cabral et al. 2012; Cabral and Shankland 2013, 16).

Apart from showing the strong intertwinement of state agencies and private interests (see point 2 above), these cases clearly point to extractivism being able to travel to new locations in order to exploit resources that, as yet, have been left untouched. Extractivism represents a politico-economic formation that is constantly on the move: on the one hand, it is feeding itself by ruthlessly exploiting (and depleting) the resources it controls; on the other, it is grabbing new resources in order to continue its operation. Ongoing conquest is a material need here: instead of reproducing resources, new ones need to be conquered.

Extractive value capture

The foregoing examples illustrate that the extractive capture of value⁷ has developed from initially dispersed extractive activities into *extractivism* – an organized, and internally coherent, system for ongoing value extraction. These previously dispersed activities have been moulded into a ‘development path’ (Veltmeyer and Bowles 2014, 7; see also Chigumira 2018) that makes natural resource extraction into a model of national development that has definitely expanded beyond the borders of the mining sector and crossed the boundaries between the centre and periphery (it can, as discussed by Veltmeyer and Bowles (2014), operate in both Canada and Brazil). Thus, extractivism has become a central feature of ‘global production networks’ (Radhuber 2015, 2). This means that extractive value capture has developed from a feature that was limited to disconnected places that were dispersed in time and space, to a characteristic that is now central to growing parts of global capitalism. Extractivism now embraces (and occurs through) considerable parts of food processing, finance, industrial production, trade and service provision. It has grown into a new and consistent mode of ordering large parts of our societies, the more so since it quickly travels to spaces previously barely touched by ‘classical’ extractivist activities.

⁷The extractive capture of value might be defined as value appropriation that occurs and proceeds without securing the material conditions that allow for the continuation of such value appropriation. Therefore, mobility and conquest (jumping towards and taking over new locations and domains) are inherent to extractive capture. At the same time it leaves behind barrenness.

One intriguing example is the Danube Soy project that aims at the large-scale introduction of soy cultivation in Eastern Europe. This project is driven by Cargill (which currently controls large parts of soybean production, processing and trading in Brazil and the USA). The project centres on the production of non-GMO soy bean varieties (for a long time a banner of radical movements all over the globe). This is less surprising than it might seem at first sight. In Europe, the market for non-GMO soy is growing quickly. Combining the GMO-pillar located in the USA and Brazil with the non-GMO pillar in Europe will help Cargill to maintain its hegemony and enlarge itself. Countries such as Romania and Ukraine have large, extensive plains that are apt for non-tillage soy bean cultivation. The idea is to combine these areas with those of family farms from countries such as Hungary and Austria (all 'Danube countries'). An important additional feature is that this plan for soy-bean cultivation (wherever located) will also benefit from the European farm income payments that are linked to each cultivated hectare.

Although the dangers inherent to this project are clear,⁸ it has to be admitted that Danube Soy really represents *enterprise* (in the classical sense of the word) in that it cleverly combines the resources of *others* in order to generate considerable private value flows. It combines land leased from individuals and/or state agencies, with income payments from the CAP, the banners of social movements ('non-GMO', 'zero-tillage', 'ending protein dependency') and large societal concerns such as climate change.⁹

Extractivism is not linked to specific locations – it is able to move through time and space in often unexpected ways (the proposal of Danube Soy was a complete surprise for everybody). It is neither bound to mining or rough types of farming and logging. It can easily jump over such (initial) delineations and extend itself into a far wider range of both natural and social resources (as shown, again, in the example of Danube Soy that includes the 'mining' of resources that are part of the Common Agricultural Policy).

The essence of extractivism is not located in the *type* of resources involved. It resides, instead, in *control*, and in *resource-mining*. Extractive capture is characterized by monopolistic control over a wide range of resources that is exerted by, and through, an operational centre (see Figure 1). Through their control over resource-combination and resource-use, extractivist systems are able to generate a huge value flow towards the operational centre. The value that comes with resource-use is shifted towards the centre: it is appropriated. This value shift is structured as *resource-mining*; the resources used are not developed by the operational centre: they are taken over, mined, and after exhaustion, they are replaced by resources located elsewhere. The resources are not reproduced: they are literally *mined*.

When minerals (for example) are obtained in an extractivist way, the damaged landscapes, polluted rivers and aquifers and uprooted communities are not restored (i.e. reproduced). When agriculture, forestry and fishing are organized in an extractivist way, this results in a more-or-less definitive exhaustion of resources that could well have been reproduced over time. The same occurs when social resources are exploited in an

⁸See e.g. Beste and Boeddinghaus (2013). One of these dangers is the widespread use of herbicides (notably glyphosate). There are, though, agronomic alternatives (see Altieri et al. 2011) although these do not fit well with large scale approaches of the Cargill type. Other negative effects reside in strongly reduced employment, weakening of the regional economy, reduction of biodiversity and destruction of scenic landscapes.

⁹Danube Soy claims that this project will put an end to the deforestation of the Amazon and thereby contribute to the mitigation of climate change.

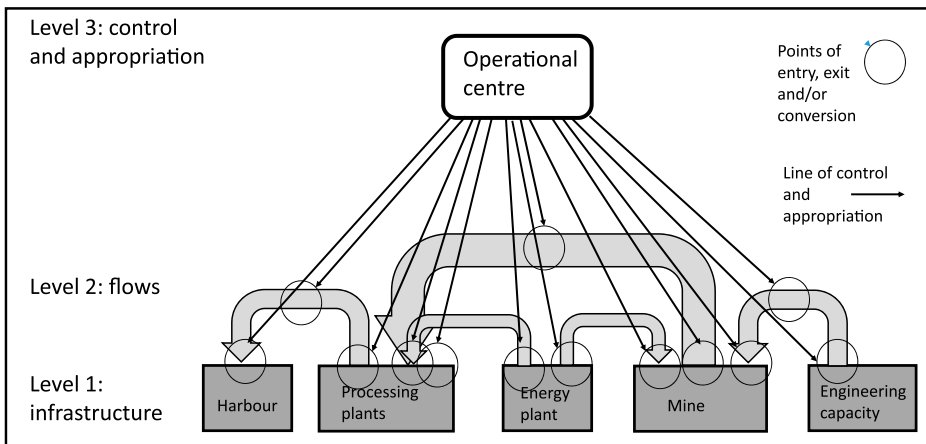


Figure 1. The three-tier structure of extractivist systems.

extractivist way. In this respect, China is a typical example. The huge labour force that is employed in the ‘global factory’ that supplies the world with a bewildering range of cheap commodities is not reproduced by the involved capital groups. Rather, it is reproduced by the rural economy from which the labour force emerges and to which it returns when its industrial employment finishes (Ye 2011; Van der Ploeg and Ye 2016). India is another example: it provides Western companies with cheap call centres, sweatshops, and a continual flow of ICT experts who migrate to the West. Instead of oil or scarce minerals, India exports brains (and cheap labour). The pattern, though, remains the same. It is extractivist. Those using these social resources do not care for their reproduction – let alone for being responsible for organizing it.

The architecture of extractivist systems

Figure 1 shows the three-tiered architecture of extractivist systems. Level one shows the socio-material infrastructure, which includes the required infrastructural elements and the resources to be exploited. These resources and infrastructural elements are obtained through take-overs (that sometimes show up as ‘grabs’) and/or made available by state agencies. The resources – and the use of the infrastructural elements – are tightly controlled by, and through, the operational centre (i.e. the extractivist enterprise) and they are combined in a way that allows for the smooth transfer of the extracted products towards external markets. Level two is the level of flows that run through the ‘bedding’ provided by the specific infrastructural elements. It is about, e.g., iron ore being transported to refineries and then exported through the harbours to faraway markets for conversion into steel; technologies being brought in, etc. This is the level that, in everyday life, is seen as the ‘market’. It is important to point out here that the different flows are far from random or undirected. They have to pass through particular points of exit (iron ore cannot leave the mines in random ways and directions – it can only pass through ways defined, allowed and controlled by the operational centre). The same applies to the points of entry. Engineering capacity, for instance, does not (or barely) enter(s) the world of small and medium scaled mines. It is too expensive for them. It only enters into the large units

that are part of extractivist constellations. Finally, the points of conversion, the points where say iron ore is refined in order to be exported and subsequently converted into steel. Control over these points allows for control over the main flows.

The third level shows the operational centre, which exerts control, appropriates value and actively engages in obtaining new resources and discarding exhausted ones. This operational centre is usually a node in a wider network made up of capital groups that invest in the extractivist enterprise and state agencies that assist in getting the infrastructure right (and which are often linked to the operational centre through corruption). It represents a kind of *empire* (Van der Ploeg 2008) in as far as it controls extended domains of the social and natural worlds that are tied together through often-aggressive take-overs.

This infrastructure connects places of poverty to places of richness (bringing in resource-seeking extractivist capital and returning massive flows of cheap commodities) allowing the extractivist model (summarized in Figure 1) to drain off considerable tranches of wealth. This is facilitated since no substantive and ongoing investments in the reproduction of resources are needed and, because financialization is now the main mechanism for funding: the required capital is obtained on the capital markets (banks and stock markets). This means that costs are lower and, due to leverage, the rates of return are higher. All this makes for windfall profits. Bunker and Cicantell (2005) interpret this process as reiterative and self-reinforcing: production economies of scale create material diseconomies of space that in turn generate large-scale transport economies that, by supplying more and better raw materials, enable further economies of scale in production.

The specificity of extractivism. In general terms, it might be argued that the capitalist mode of accumulation is inherently 'draining' as it is foundationally based on the extraction and appropriation of surplus value by a class that is not involved in producing it. Viewed in these general terms there is nothing specific to extractivism (apart from being grounded in physically extractive activities in which value generation is necessarily temporary and generally followed by barrenness). However, there are major differences (that come to the fore as soon as the analysis moves to more concrete levels). First, in the case of extractivism accumulation is no longer rooted in owning and direct controlling factories, mines, forests or plantations.¹⁰ Extractivism is based on *control-over-flows* (as illustrated in Figure 1). As we will argue further on, the resources and infrastructural elements are not necessarily the property of the operational centre. They might very well be owned and operated by others – as long as they operate according to the prescriptions of the operational centre and make their products and services flow according to the extractivist logic.¹¹ Within this pattern, not having properties brings huge benefits: it avoids 'sunk capital' and makes it easier for the constellation to move on to other locations as soon as these turn out to be more promising than the current ones.¹²

¹⁰This feature evidently relates with the ease with which reproduction (of the factories, the fields, the buildings, the plantations or the next generation of trees in the forests) can be ignored.

¹¹Outsourcing fits, in a seamless way, into the extractivist pattern (partly because it shifts all responsibility for reproduction to others).

¹²In practice, extractivist enterprises normally sell a property as soon as they have obtained it and lease it back for temporary use. This enlarges their potential mobility and cash-flow and, in economic terms, there are no 'sunk costs'.

A second, and theoretically highly meaningful, difference is related to the draining of the obtained value, which is not re-invested but is instead channelled to other places. The main investments are in *take-overs*: the conquest of new stocks of resources and the expansion of the network that allows for control over these resources and associated activities. Consequently, extractivist networks no longer develop the productive forces. This is what turns them into a parasitic phenomenon: they drain but this appropriation is not combined with and does not feed into the development of the productive forces. It is often the other way around: it comes with the regression and degeneration of the productive forces (and with often rampant levels of pollution). *When extractivism becomes dominant, the historically progressive role of capital (in developing the productive forces) no longer applies.* To paraphrase Buroway (2007, 4): ‘the mode of exchange [embodied in extractivism as the control over flows] oppresses the mode of production’.

Extractivism is becoming a generalized feature

Many features of today’s capitalism have been developed in the margins and, if they have shown themselves to be applicable, effective and profitable, have subsequently travelled to the core of the capitalist system. A typical example is outsourcing.¹³ One of the ‘non-regulated’¹⁴ spaces within which it was developed was under the sphere of influence of the Italian Mafia. Through controlling the main *connections* (between e.g. regional authorities, building companies and banks) the Mafia managed to complete projects for far lower prices than those specified in the original contracts (they were, indeed, outsourced¹⁵), and the differences in value were effectively channelled to the *cupola*, i.e. the centre of control (or operational centre) as shown in Figure 1. If anything, the hallmark of the Mafia was, and is, its control over connections and flows and the use of extra-economic power to reproduce and expand this control. In this respect, it strongly resembles, and perhaps even provides a template for, the extractivist activities described above (see also Walker 2006 on ‘gangster capitalism’).

The thesis we want to propose here is that, in a similar way, *extractivism has travelled from de-regulated spaces at the margins* (where extractivist mining, agriculture and logging could take place), *to become a main feature of global capitalism as a whole.* More and more economic sectors are (re-)constructed in extractivist ways.

Oligopolistic networks play a central role in old, but especially in new forms of extractivism. Such networks increasingly structure the production, circulation and consumption of products and services (just as they impose a strong imprint on the factor markets), and in so doing, they centralize the wealth resulting from it within the centres of the networks.

These networks, which can be referred to as imperial networks¹⁶, basically control *flows* (of commodities of whatever type). This *control* may reside in the ownership of the infrastructure through which these commodities flow; it may reside in the legal or *de facto* ownership (no matter how established) of specific resources; it may also reside in the

¹³Other examples are the artificial (i.e. illegal) creation of capital and hostile take-overs of enterprises.

¹⁴This wording is, in a way, a bit non-sensical. Clear rules applied: those of the mob. What we want to single out here is that, in the first place, state regulation was not applied here and secondly that the overall deregulation (that followed later on as part of the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalist economies) paved the way for similar practices in other places.

¹⁵Often not just once, but many times. Thus, on top of the ‘real work’ a whole system of extractiveness emerged.

¹⁶In the sense that they nearly always operate globally and, more importantly, are operated as if they represent ‘mastership of the universe’.

ownership of non-material features (such as images, brands, reputation, knowledge, etc.); it may even reside in the properties of products that were intentionally built into them (GMOs, flex-crops, etc.). The point is that these networks (through which the accumulation of capital occurs) are no longer factory-based (as was the case in classical capitalism) (Castells 1996, 171). The factories, plantation or mines (wherever located) still exist but they are no longer the centres of the regimes. Today they are interchangeable. The inclusion of some and the exclusion of others critically depends on the centres of the imperial networks. These networks exert control over the factories, etc., and appropriate the value that was once centralized within them (i.e. by the owners). *Nike* is an illustration par excellence: it is an emblem (a brand) and a network (an emblem-centred network) that embraces design companies, shoe factories in places such as India or the south of Brazil (that produce according to contracts), shipping companies, shops, advertisement agencies, etc. Within this network, there are many interconnected flows that are directed and controlled from the centre. This centre also appropriates the value generated within and throughout this network. The point here is that this network is, as it were, non-material. Its primary elements are non-material. From the point of view of consumers, these networks allow for connections – and this is a feature that is currently being explored, applied and institutionalized by a new generation of network-based enterprises. AirBnB, for example, connects consumers and suppliers of bed and breakfast facilities; Über connects consumers and suppliers of transport and thus allows the former to ‘flow’ to their desired destiny – just as Amazon.com makes prepared food flow to your house. These networks do not own the cars, or houses, or restaurants, or whatever. They make things flow through privileged networks and in doing so they ensure that substantial value flows to the operational centre.

In the world of consumer services, imperial networks often consist of an emblem and a (digitalized) platform that makes connections and allows the subsequent flows. They align the points of entry, conversion and exit which gives them far-reaching control over flows. In the not too distant past power and control were grounded and dependent on material elements (such as the factory, the hacienda, the railway company, etc.). Today power is grounded in control over flows – and through this control material resources are also controlled.

Imperial networks typically grow through take-overs (Franzini 2004, 93–101; Colás 2007, 6). There hardly is any organic growth (based on the production of profits that is re-invested in order to expand the enterprise). Expansion and growth occur through the use of another flow: credit. Growth becomes a debt-driven phenomenon.

This now generalized type of extractivism might be (loosely) defined as seeking to extract as much as possible of a resource that is in high-demand, for the minimal cost, in as short a time as possible. A central feature of extractivism is constructing privileged relations between supply and demand, which often comes down to creating relationships between spaces of poverty (where costs are as low as possible) to places of richness (where there is high-demand and high prices). This gives rise to activities such as cultivating asparagus in the Peruvian Costa to sell in the USA and the EU (Van der Ploeg 2008, 76) or using cheap Chinese labour to produce the electronic gadgets so in demand in the global North or contracting jobless car-owners who urgently need money to transport those who are able to pay for it. But these imperial networks (or platforms) do not only *link* already-existing spaces of poverty and richness; they also *create* new spaces or

instances of poverty. Liberalized international trade plays a central role in this. It is through the world market, dominated by large commercial and financial empires,¹⁷ that price levels are shifted from the spaces with the lowest possible cost levels to potentially all other places of production – wherever located. If an internationally operating network, such as Parmalat, is able to obtain unprocessed milk in Ukraine and/or Poland and process and sell it as ‘fresh milk’ in Italy, this will inevitably exert a strong downward pressure on farm-gate milk prices in Italy (Van der Ploeg 2008, 101–105). In this way new spaces of poverty are actively created.

What applies to extractivist networks that centre on mining (Veltmeyer 2013; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014, 10) also applies to extractivist networks that centre on food processing and trading (Van der Ploeg 2008, 93–96). They are *void* (their debts often are higher than their assets). They do *not contribute anything new* (they take over and combine already existing resources and apply already existing technologies, etc.), they do *not produce value* – they just drain value that is produced by others or is lying dormant in the subsoil and they do so through the application of extra-economic power and/or financialisation.

Capital increasingly operates through extractivist networks that *appropriate* value produced elsewhere or otherwise (i.e. by nature). These extractivist networks themselves *do not add value*. This evidently applies to mining, but also, increasingly, to other realms of today’s deregulated economies.

The thesis forwarded here – that extractivism is becoming a central ingredient of today’s capitalism – can be sustained, we believe, by following two additional lines of reasoning. The first regards the original niches where extractivism has been developed beyond singular extractivist activities. In these niches extractivism has been developed into a *system* that entails the promise of being applicable, effective and profitable if applied on a larger scale. The second line of reasoning specifies the conditions that have allowed for extractivism to become a generalized and central feature of current global capitalism. And once it is a generalized feature, extractivism reproduces global capitalism by cheapening labour, capital, land and nature (Patel and Moore 2017).

The BRICS countries and extractivism

It is not too adventurous to argue that the shift from single extractivist activities to extractivism as a system for generalized extractive value capture initially occurred in countries such as Indonesia and Chile. After the defeat of the strong popular movements (in 1965 in Indonesia and 1973 in Chile), the authoritarian governments of the time transformed (often with the help of North American expert-systems) resource-mining and export into the axis of national development. It neither is too adventurous to assume that the model elaborated at this time was subsequently applied, tested and further developed in what later became known as the BRICS countries. The newly emerging economic powerhouses from the Global South (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have been the

¹⁷One third of all international trade takes place *within* transnational companies, e.g. Cargill Brazil selling soy to Cargill Europe (Chen 2015). As a consequence, ‘market power’ is obtained: considerable impact can be exerted on the ‘world market’ as a whole.

seed beds in which extractivist systems (as depicted in Figure 1) were further improved and strengthened. This is reflected, amongst others, in the growing share in the global exports of agricultural products between 2000 and 2016. The share of Brazil in the total export value of agricultural products grew from 3.2% to 5.7%; China's share grew from 3.0% to 4.2%; India's share from 1.2% to 2.2%; South Africa's share from 0.6% to 0.7% and the one of Russia from less than 0.6% to 1.1%. Taken together, the share of BRICS in the total value of agricultural exports grew, between 2000 and 2006, from 8.5% to 13.9% (FAO 2018, Table 1.2). Similarly, de Carvalho, Milanex, and Guerra et al. (2018) point to the reprimarization of the main economies of Latin America, and of Brazil specifically.

All BRICS countries had access to large and, as yet, unexploited or not yet fully exploited resources (an unparalleled 'economic opportunity' according to the World Bank 2005) that met two conditions: they were sufficiently large for large-scale exploitation and their nature allowed for establishing exchange-relations between spaces of poverty and places of richness (fast-growing agro-exports of high-value products being one of the new axis linking the two). Moreover, these societies allowed for an intensified exploitation of the work force and social and environmental regulations that were less demanding than elsewhere (if they existed, or were applied, at all).

Brazil and Russia have enormous amounts of natural resources (notably oil, gas and nearly unlimited areas for agricultural exploitation). India and China are extremely rich in labour reservoirs: A low-paid, mostly docile and well-regimented labour force in China (whose reproduction is secured by the countryside from which they depart and to which they return), and a cheap highly educated, English-speaking, labour force in India (that is often working in call centres) have become the carriers of activities that have been out-sourced from the Global North. Alongside this, China has enviable reserves of scarce minerals and ample stretches of land for growing high-value agricultural exports and commodities. South Africa, for its part, has a seemingly unlimited supply of gold, diamonds, wood, and agricultural land. In short, in all of these countries, there was/is an enormous supply of natural and/or social resources that are/were ripe for extraction on a massive scale. In addition, they all showed a neat intertwinement between the state and national and international capital groups which allowed for the monopolistic exploitation of these resources (see points 2 and 1 in the introduction of this paper). In Brazil, this intertwinement took the form of the *Bancada Agraria* (the powerful parliamentary group that represents the interests of large landowners specifically and of the extractivist model generally). In Russia, it emerged as an *oligarchy* of former state and party officials who became private owners of resources previously owned by the state. In India, it shows up through the strong ties between large national capital groups and state agencies. In China, it is embodied in the Communist Party, in which business interests and the state meet and intermingle. In South Africa, it comes to the fore through black entrepreneurship and the highly corruptive circles that surround the Zuma regime. Thus we meet, alongside the presence of large reservoirs of social and/or natural resources, a second condition: the strong intertwinement of state and market (allowing for the application of all kinds of extra-economic power) and a simultaneous absence of a strong civil society (this is sometimes due to a recent history of dictatorship but might, in the cases of India and South Africa, be traced back to other colonial historical trajectories). A third condition (see point 3 in the introduction) is that the preceding authoritarian state regimes (often of a

'developmentalist' nature) had already established a well-developed infrastructure that was made available (under the aegis of the export-oriented model) to extractivist capital.

Together, these three conditions (together with the upswing of the prices paid in the international markets for energy, minerals and – later on – for agricultural products) created the privileged spaces (the 'niches') where already existing extractivist *activities* could be developed into more or less coherent extractivist *systems* that made for huge profits, high and initially sustained economic growth and, in some instances, for expanded social redistribution and large development projects. One could probably defend the thesis that the 'Washington consensus' made this leap from dispersed activities to a generalized and systematic approach possible. In turn, the combination of initially singular, time-and-place-bounded activities into a comprehensive model allowed for the export of the extractivist system from the initial sources to other destinations around the globe (as shown by the activities of Vale Company and EMBRAPA in Mozambique and the Danube Soy case, both documented previously in this article).

At a theoretical level, this move from dispersed activities towards a more or less coherent, and publicly praised, model was reflected in the concept of 'neo-extractivism'. This was understood as a step ahead of the formerly dispersed or, at best, loosely connected extractive activities. The difference resides in the contribution it was assumed to make to national development. Leftist regimes (such as those of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and to a lesser degree, Lula in Brazil) embraced and further elaborated this new model (Acosta 2011; Burchardt and Dietz 2014), although social movements started to develop critical positions (see for example Bernáldez 2017).

There is something peculiar about the fact that extractivism is strengthening in a context of crisis and reduction of the role of the State in capitalist economies. There is no doubt that neoliberal belief has been successful in spreading the ideology of the minimal state. Nonetheless, a closer look reveals that extractivism presupposes the active presence of the State as guaranteeing the institutional structures of private property, commercial and financial rules, the monopoly on violence, as well as securing the required conditions of access to, and exploitation and appropriation of resources. There are abundant examples of this collusion between the State and the interests of extractive corporations. These range from access to the oil resources in the North Sea, via the exploitation of the Amazonian forest, to the exploration for minerals inside the Yasuní National Park in Ecuador. Another expression resides in the dispossession resulting from protection schemes for knowledge, either through intellectual property rules negotiated in the WTO or through the payment of royalties for seeds and other innovations, which create insurmountable barriers to poor countries or groups of the most vulnerable producers to compete or participate in economic exchanges.

Extractivism implies a development model which David Harvey (2003, 154) characterized as accumulation by dispossession and which counts on strong support of the state. It is not uncommon for large extractive corporations to use the power of the state – or even its weakness or absence – to introduce the mechanisms of legitimized plundering of resources. In practice, large international companies leave little room for manoeuvre or alternatives to national states. In many cases, corporations use the state to legitimize their actions, either because they argue that there are no alternatives to the 'use' of the resources or that their action will bridle the beneficiaries with positive results from which the whole population shall benefit. There are not a few governments that surrender

to this logic, as revealed by scholars like Sauer, Balestro, and Schneider (2018), Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017), Martinez Valle (2017) and Clark (2017).

The generalization of extractivism

Within the privileged spaces composed by BRICS countries (and others such as Chile and Angola), the extractivist model was made ready for a wider application. The attractiveness of the model soon become apparent: the rates of return on invested capital increased and seemingly endless segments of the markets could be conquered through such an approach. There were four conditions that allowed for the subsequent generalization of the extractivist model beyond the boundaries of the BRICS countries, into growing parts of the *global* economy.

Firstly, there has been a widespread *deregulation*, that started with Reaganism and Thatcherism and was tested (at a devastatingly high social price) in countries such as Chile. Under the aegis of the World Bank, the OECD and the WTO, deregulation rolled on (especially when social democrats such as Blair made it look like a progressive ‘third way’) until its impact was felt in nearly every corner of the globe. Deregulation allowed for massive transfers of capital from one place to another, unlimited exports (supported by export-oriented economic models and ideologies) and unhindered take-overs of enterprises by imperial networks: the Barbarians appeared at the gates (Burrough and Helyar 1989).

Secondly, from the end of the 1980s onwards enormous and continuously *increasing amounts of freely floating capital* appeared in search of high returns. Deregulation allowed this to flow all over the globe. This freely floating capital was strategic in the many take-overs that started to occur from the 1980s onwards, which resulted in the creation of the oligopolistic (or imperial) networks discussed earlier. Private equity and hedge funds played an important role. They made capital float ‘freely’ and were unfettered by local or regional codes of conduct, ethics or cultural repertoires. Only one thing mattered: the highest possible shareholder value had to be squeezed out of the new activities.¹⁸

Thirdly there was the emergence and wide dissemination of *information and communication technologies (ICT)*. ICT allowed for control-at-a-distance without which control over extended networks, flows and millions of transactions would have been fairly impossible. ICT is a *conditio-sine-qua-non* for extractivist systems that operate worldwide. It is for the current extractivist systems what the (then new) book printing techniques were for the Spanish Empire (Kamen 2003).

In the fourth place, we have to refer to the *enlarged inequalities* between spaces (and instances) of richness and poverty. These increased inequalities make the flows of products and services produced in spaces of poverty to places of richness where they are sold, highly attractive. Beyond that, they exert (through the increased connectedness) a strong downward pressure on the prices of social and natural resources (and the extracted raw materials) elsewhere, which allows for additional squeezing and draining. In short, once extractivism is generalized it actively creates new and additional spaces of

¹⁸The enlarged availability of capital (and the relative scarcity of opportunities to realize a high return) also triggered strong speculative drives (strengthened by fears of inflation and recessions) that have nurtured the waves of land grabbing.

poverty. In addition, we should not ignore the huge differences in land prices around the world, which trigger specific forms of extractivism.¹⁹

Once these conditions were secured, extractivism went, as it were, through a process of ‘upscaling’. It developed into a new, and increasingly favoured, *modus operandi* of capital generally. As a consequence, capital is now less factory (or plantation) based. *Capital now resides in the control over flows and the capacity to capture value from them.*

An example: Parmalat

Parmalat is a textbook example of extractivist structures established within the domain of food production, processing, marketing and consumption. It grew, in a relatively short period, from a small trading company in Collecchio (a small village in the province of Parma in the north of Italy) to one of the major global players in the dairy industry (Lang and Heasman 2004, 154) whose sales amounted, in 2003, to 7.6 billion Euros. By then the group as a whole embraced 260 different commercial societies with, in total, 36,000 dependents. It operated internationally – Tanzi, the owner, once claimed that ‘the sun never sets in my Empire’. Parmalat collapsed in 2003 and was taken over, a few years later, by the French Lactalis group.

Parmalat grew through take-overs, by acquiring *already existing* production facilities, trading companies, distribution system and technologies. Between 1998 and 2002, Parmalat invested 2.1 billion Euros in ‘shopping enterprises’, as Franzini (2004) called these seemingly never-ending takeovers.

Parmalat’s rapid expansion resulted in high debt levels – basically because every take-over was financed with credit. At the end of 1998 overall debts amounted to 2.1 billion Euros, which was more than the value of Parmalat as a whole (Franzini 2004, 61). Thus, Parmalat did not represent any value. It was void – a feature that is shared by many agribusiness groups (Globo Rural 2009).

Figure 2 shows the overall structure of the Parmalat group in its heyday. At the bottom, they are the many enterprises around the world that were taken over (processing units, distribution systems, etc.) and the production areas of milk and fruit juices *de facto* controlled by Parmalat. At the top is the operational centre (legally known as *Parmalat Finanziaria*). The different units (and production areas) of the first level could not operate independently of the operational centre at level three: this was an impossibility for legal, economic and material reasons – for one reason because they depend on the centre for working capital.

The operational centre directed and controlled the activities at level 1. These resulted in the flows located at level 2, which were directed and controlled by level 3. Through this control, the operational centre was able to siphon off a large proportion of the value

¹⁹In the case of agricultural land there are two additional dimensions of considerable importance: speculation and the pursuit of anti-inflationary policies. These have a specific relevance when considering the similarities between extractivism in general and land grabbing in particular. Land grabbing gives capital groups far more control than when they have to engage in ongoing negotiations with (possibly unwilling) local producers. When these local producers are semi-subsistence peasants or nomadic herders or slash-and-burn farmers (or, ironically, incompetent state-agencies or tired landlords) it is relative easy to claim that ‘these lands are empty; that there is nobody here’, and to organize a massive shift in land-tenure (Borras et al. 2011). This establishes direct control, the basis for establishing extractivist forms of agriculture (or forestry). This process is more intense when there are fears about inflation: investment in land then becomes a much more interesting speculation (especially when prices of agricultural products are booming).

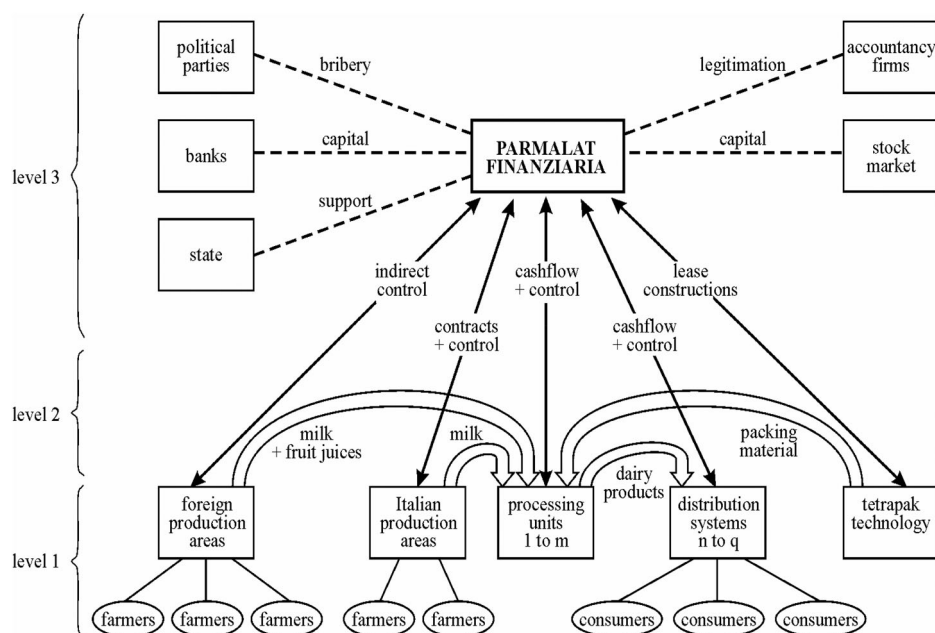


Figure 2. The three-tiered structure of Parmalat.

generated by producing and commercializing these products and services. It is telling that extra-economic power was used to enlarge this value flow. Farmers were paid relatively low prices and consumers paid a relatively high price – Parmalat was able to do so because farmers and consumers became increasingly dependent upon it as it came to control more and more market segments. Beyond this, much production was outsourced to areas with very low producer prices (such as Poland and Ukraine); Parmalat also made ample use of the black market for milk that existed at that time;²⁰ and payments to farmers were delayed by up to 250 days. Italian researchers calculated that through these mechanisms Parmalat probably accumulated the astounding sum of around 12 billion Euros over a 25 year period (Van der Ploeg et al. 2004).

It is important to note that the profits realized by the operational centre were not grounded upon new ways of organizing production. They were squeezed out of already existing productive and commercial activities. *Parmalat did not generate new economic activities – it subordinated existing economic activities that it had taken over in order to capture value.*

In food industries such Parmalat (the same applies to other food empires as VION, JBS, Nestlé, Unilever, etc.; see also Von Schönfeld and Dilger 2018) and large retail chains as AHOLD, Carrefour and Walmart, there is a clear *extractivist imperative*: conquer growing market segments in order to (1) create market power (extra-economic power that helps to augment rates of return) and (2) enlarge the commercial value of the enterprise as a whole (and consequently the share-holder value).²¹ Within this view, the world generally,

²⁰This was related to the quota system in place at the time

²¹The stock-holder value reflects the value the enterprise is expected to have in the future and is critically related with the possibility of sell the enterprise in its entirety.

and the market specifically, is perceived as 'awaiting exploitation': it represents value that is to be grasped.

There is a remarkable resemblance between the structure of food empires and that of extractivist activities (summarized in [Figure 1](#)). Both represent hierarchical and captive structures (Radhuber 2015, 3; for a general discussion of market architecture see Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005) that control commercial flows. Neither the extractive mining companies nor food empires add anything by themselves. They simply combine and recombine already available resources. Parmalat did not develop new technologies, nor did it produce any new value. It grasped the value produced by the units that it had taken over (just as the mining company extracts the value contained in the resource-rich areas they control).

Parmalat exemplifies the 'new extractivism' that currently permeates large parts of today's economies. It adds nothing new, it just extracts value from already existing (but now repatterned) activities. This is possible because extractivist enterprises control, through a combination of political and economic power, the multilevel entrances, throughput facilities and delivery systems that are closed to others, thereby creating extra-economic coercion. In this respect, Lang and Heasman argue that 'corporate power is now so great within and between national borders that it is redefining what is meant by a market' (2004, 127).

In synthesis: extractivism is no longer limited to the periphery where outrageous types of mining and/or extensive forms of large-scale farming that destroy both people and soils are located. There is a *new extractivism* that is now at the heart of contemporary global world capitalism. Extractivism has become a generalized feature of capitalism as we know it today. It is associated with the bifurcation of the economy into a 'real economy' (where things are produced and exchanged) and a 'virtual economy', superimposed upon the real one and simultaneously extracting value from it. It is also part of the reason for the ongoing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the simultaneous impoverishment of the many.

New resistances

The emergence of a new and generalized type of extractivism creates completely new arenas of, and for, social struggles. By subordinating the real economy (within which workers, peasants, traders, cabdrivers, etc. are operating) to a virtual one (i.e. to centres of control that operate at the third level), capital moves to a place that seems to be *beyond* the reach of those who are directly engaged with the processes of production: and when it is affected it can easily move to another place where it cannot be touched.

In this section, we briefly discuss three instances of resistance and struggle: new markets, local arenas and economies of opposition. They all indicate that struggles within new extractivist realities are far from impossible. Yet the examples also show that such struggles are definitely new, primarily because they are locating themselves within the sphere of circulation (markets), which are now both the *locus* and the object of social struggle. This is not accidental: it is a reflection of the real and the virtual economy being tied together through markets, market-relations and their governance. As we will show further on, some orthodox Marxists are uneasy about this shift to the

sphere of circulation as the main domain of social struggle – this shift indeed ‘pose[s] serious difficulties of interpretation and analysis’ (Harvey 2003).

Central to the new resistances and struggles is the endeavour to construct and defend what the dominant economic system no longer provides: employment, a minimum income, the basis of a livelihood and some sparks of hope. New struggles are occurring in both the cities and in the countryside²² and they focus on both production and circulation. Autonomy, self-controlled resource bases, self-provisioning and direct linkages between producers and consumers (all of which allow people to ‘by-pass’ the imperial networks) are key features (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006).

Short-chain local markets

The first example concerns the now widespread phenomenon of peasants’ and farmers’ markets. Rural producers are currently separated from consumers by food processing industries and large retail organizations that operate as obligatory passage points. Therefore, producers increasingly try to *bypass* these food empires by constructing new market places (Shanin 1973) that directly link them to consumers (see Figure 3). The main parameters, rules and dynamics within these newly constructed markets differ significantly from those reigning in the markets governed by, and through, third-level centres of control. These differences reside in many different features: price levels, the distribution of value added, the quality and origin of the supplied products and services, the resources and techniques used to produce them, accessibility, the participating actors and their interrelations (Van der Ploeg, Ye, and Schneider 2012).

To some observers, these new peasant markets appear to be small and therefore irrelevant. And, indeed, most individual peasants’ markets are small. But taken together they arguably constitute a considerable socio-political and economic force.²³ To other observers (Goodman 2004; Bonnanno and Wolf 2018) they just look exotic. What they deny is the materiality that underpins the game: different prices, differently structured value flows and a different distribution of the value added, all of which are impacting considerably on the consumption and the production of food. Above all: by their simple presence these markets are showing that there definitely are alternatives.

Peasant markets (as schematically illustrated in Figure 3) are sites of resistance and struggle (Hebinck, Schneider, and van der Ploeg 2015; Jara 2017). They are about people, producers and consumers, who are trying to reduce their dependency on large retail and food industries. They are about products and services that food empires cannot, or are unwilling to, deal with. They are about different values and different value flows. They are about different modes to govern the markets. And finally, they

²²For a range of material reasons, agriculture and food production are arenas that are very amenable for the emergence of such countertendencies. This turns agriculture and food into one of the main arenas where labour and capital are engaged in multiple struggles. The construction of spaces where a labour income might be produced as opposed to being appropriated is a concrete expression of capital-labour relations. The encounter between the two is the current form of class struggle.

²³In the Netherlands there are some 1,000 markets that function on a weekly, daily or in-between basis. Together they have 38,000 stalls. Their total yearly turnover is 3 billion Euro, 60% of which is spent on fresh food. This can be compared to Albert Heijn the largest supermarket chain in the country and part of AHOLD. Albert Heijn has some 1,000 shops and a yearly turnover of 3.3 billion Euro. Only part of this is for fresh food. This means that many markets together might be as large (or even larger) than the Netherlands’ biggest supermarket chain.

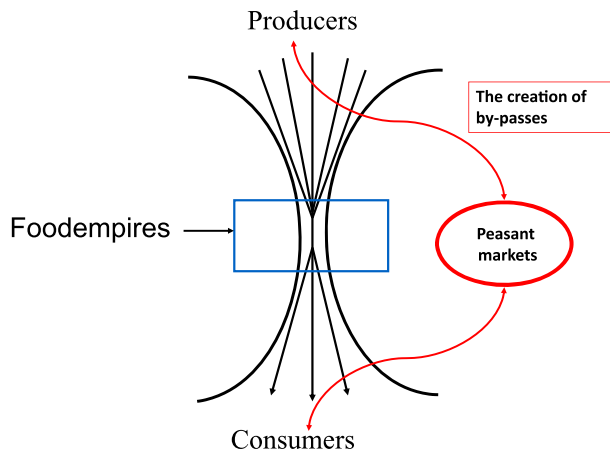


Figure 3. The structure and location of peasant markets.

involve a different architecture (the specific mix of infrastructural elements that makes commodities flow).

In Brazil there are 5199 farmers' markets in 1176 municipalities, most of them (83%) on a weekly basis plus another 1331 agro-ecological or organic markets in 624 municipalities. One of the features of the latter is that they are usually inserted in larger structures that embrace extended networks of producers that commonly sell their goods at specific points such as local fairs or deliver food in baskets (food box schemes or ordering by internet) or through formally organized consumer groups. There are several examples of such initiatives, as the ECOVIDA Network of Agroecology (Schneider, Salvate, and Cassol 2016) and the Association of Producers of the Porto Alegre Metropolitan Agroecological Network – RAMA (Cruz, Matte, and Schneider 2016) and also the Food Acquisition Groups (Fonte 2008; Preiss, Marquez, and Wiskerke 2017).

Local initiatives have a considerable reach, as shown by D'Odorico et al. (2014): 77% of the food produced in the world is commercialized (and consumed) at national level, mainly through local markets. There are several studies highlighting the importance of local food markets as spaces for (re-)valorisation of traditional knowledge and practices of food production and reconnection between producers and consumers (Witman, Beckie, and Hergesheimer 2012; Hebinck, Schneider, and van der Ploeg 2015).

The socio-political relevance (and strength) of peasant markets is rooted in two commonly shared rights (or 'commons'). These are, on the side of food producers, access to land, water, seeds or more generally: access to nature. Within the extractivist imperative such access is to be allocated to the 'big enterprises that can feed the world'. Peasant markets support the opposite position: that access to nature is an undeniable right and constitutes a common that is at odds with the monopolies that extractivist empires seek to impose. The other is the right to food, the right to enjoy food and the associated right to engage directly with the producers of food. These two commons, access to nature and the right to food, are central to civilization – and this gives peasant markets an enormous potential strength that simultaneously allows for coalitions between rural producers and urban consumers (Heinisch 2017).

Within the village

When discussing the bifurcation of the economy into real and virtual levels, it is important to take into account that such a bifurcation does not necessarily imply a *spatial* separation. Often the two co-exist *alongside each other*, as parallel (and interacting) realities. Thus, the ‘village’ can become an arena where the production of value and the draining of value co-exist, interact and exert differing effects on the local economy and local actors. Hence, *within the local arena* both productive and extractive activities become the object of comparison, contestation and social struggles.

Liucun is a village located in the Northeast of China (Van der Ploeg and Ye 2016). It is like thousands of other villages in China or, for that matter, in South America or Africa. There is agricultural activity and a range of supplementary economic activities. Some of the population is engaged in labour migration and there is considerable mining activity. This started some 20 years ago and has passed through different stages.

It started with mining iron ore. This is extracted from rocks that are excavated from the surrounding mountains, but it is also found in sandy layers beneath the agricultural fields (mostly at a depth of between 2 and 6 m). Evidently, the extraction of the sand containing iron ore ruins the fields (at least temporarily) although the fields might be restored. This is normally part of the informal contract established between peasants and the ‘bosses’ who represent the companies organizing the iron ore extraction (these contracts also include a cash payment), but often the bosses disappear or go bankrupt and the restoration does not occur. Whatever the case, the sand containing the iron ore is transported to a local ‘iron factory’ where the iron ore is literally washed out of the sand and caught by a huge electromagnet. Apart from the purified iron ore, this leaves a heavily contaminated river and a huge mountain of sterilized and slowly drying quicksand.

The mining of iron ore is often accompanied, or followed, by the mining of sand. Additional layers are excavated and the sand is filtered and sold to be used in urban building activities and/or for highway construction. Part of the sand is also used for brick making. There is now a small factory for this in the village. Thirdly, stones are collected and/or extracted and crushed (using powerful machinery) to be sold also to the construction industry.

A fourth stage brings us back to the sterilized sand that has accumulated alongside the ‘iron factory’ and which was never brought back to the fields due to the disappearance or bankruptcy of the bosses. This dried sand is now sold to other bosses involved in the ‘reconstruction of the riverbed’ (badly damaged through the earlier rounds of mining). This new ‘reconstruction project’ is funded by regional state agencies.

In the meantime, yet another group of bosses have started talking about a fifth stage that aims to convert several of the ‘recovered’ fields into recreational parks. If this were to occur the fields would no longer play any role in agricultural activities and would be permanently separated from the rural economy.

This sequence again shows that resource-mining is far from being just a one-off activity. Extractivism here is an *ongoing* process that repeatedly creates *new* opportunities for its own *continuation*. At the same time, it is clear that extractivism involves more than just extraction. It also involves a complex series of transactions involving land rights, transport, factories, labour, energy, knowledge, machinery, legal permissions, environmental problems, subsidies and political support.

Within *Liucun* village there are different factions that have been, and are, competing for control over different resources. Recent elections for the Village Committee (especially between 2003 and 2010) have mainly hinged around this struggle.

Resource-mining interacts with agriculture in different ways. It takes agricultural fields out of production – for longer or shorter periods. But it also introduces extra money into the peasant economy – which might be used for productive investments. Thus, potentially there are both negative and positive effects. Whether, and to what, degree these occur and especially, how they will interact and what the net balance will be, cannot be assessed beforehand. This will depend on many factors that are filtered through the prism of ‘local politics’ (understood here as peasant strategies, the interventions of bosses, local elections and local struggles between different factions, etc.). However, there are clear differences between the dynamics of mining and the dynamics of the local peasant economy. Mining follows the logic of extraction (it ‘takes value away’) and the investments made are solely to allow for the *extraction* of value. In the peasant economy, many investments occur (also in the form of ‘labour investments’)²⁴ which aim at *producing new value*. They contribute value, instead of just draining it away. This is not to say that extractive activities necessarily come from the ‘outside’ or that the creation of new values is essentially driven from the ‘inside’. There is no such simple dichotomy.²⁵ As a matter of fact, the mining in *Liucun* village has several ‘internal’ drivers (also linked to outside forces).

Table 1 summarizes the contrasting features of extractive and productive cycles, as exemplified by the mining activities described above, and the peasant production that exists alongside these mining activities.

The features summarized in the left-hand column of Table 1 describe *capital's* relationship with the countryside: it drains resources, taking them away without returning anything substantial. It impoverishes places. Equally the right-hand column informs us about possible countertendencies: it shows how *labour* (here represented by peasants) can create the foundations for self-sustained and ongoing growth.

This shows that, even at the level of a single village, we can find a highly diversified and complex economy in which different economic models (exemplified here by extractivist mining and peasant agriculture)²⁶ co-exist alongside each other.²⁷ Of course, the co-existence of differently structured economic systems does not imply that some of them (e.g. peasant agriculture) are ‘outside’ the capitalist system. What is important here is the

²⁴For an extended discussion see Van der Ploeg and Ye (2016), especially chapter 4.

²⁵Power relations should not necessarily be seen as asymmetrical. Timothy Mitchell's study of Egypt and the ‘Rule of Experts’ stresses the need for ‘thinking of power as something *local* in construction’. The essence of his argument is that ‘[although power is] drawing upon and shaped by larger logics, [it is] built out of the practical relations between farmers and labourers, landowners and middlemen, bureaucrats and merchants, men and women. The fields [or more generally: the spaces of production] that villagers own or rent, labour in or supervise, sell or seize control of, are the crucial sites for constructing and contesting rural power relations’. Mitchell underlines the need to reintroduce the spaces of production, or ‘the fields’ as he calls them into the analysis. ‘Seen from the perspective of the fields [...] the state becomes a [...] complex set of relations. These no longer appear primarily in the form of a central power intervening to initiate change, but as *local* practices of regulation, policing and coercion that [...] are themselves a site of struggle and reversal’ (Mitchell 2002, 167–168; italics added).

²⁶Shanin (1990, 91–92) discusses a far wider range of such models: the family production unit; the small specialized unit (based on skills); the interfamilial reproduction of labour; the ‘second’ economy (that operates as supernumerary source of income through the use of one's free time); the black economy, etc.

²⁷This echoes Chayanov's observation that: ‘we must take as an unquestionable fact that our present capitalist form of economy represents only *one* particular instance of economic life’ (1966, 24). This implies that ‘the validity of the scientific discipline of national economics [...] based on the capitalist form [...] cannot and should not be extended to other organizational forms of economic life’ (1966). They require their own, specific, theorization.

Table 1. Contrasting features of different economic systems in *Liucun* village.

Extractive systems (as exemplified by mining)	Productive systems (as exemplified by peasant agriculture)
Exhausts resources	Develops and improves resources
Drains value	Produces value
Occurs through the production (and unequal appropriation) of surplus-value	Occurs through the production of labour-income
Tends to be exclusive	Tends to be inclusive
'Consumes' and destroys places	Reproduces and develops places
Concentrates wealth	Distributes wealth more widely
Produces large amounts of losses and leaves a lot of waste behind	Tends to re-utilize remnants
Consumes large amounts of fossil fuels	Tends to economize on fossil fuels
Occurs in 'darkness' ^a	Transparent
Limited time-span (due to resource exhaustion)	Far longer time horizon, progressive

^aSeveral villagers are highly upset about mining, the unequal distribution of profits and the role of the Village Committee. They often summarize the last aspect by using the denunciative term: *heìàn*. Literally this translates as 'darkness' in the village.

interrelations that can vary from subordination and dependency to relative autonomy and symbiosis – or for from draining, being drained to resisting drainage. Such interrelations are historically contingent and are partly shaped by different class relations and different forms of class struggle.

The economies of opposition

Finally, there is the issue of control over the economy (including markets). In some instances, this control – now very much concentrated in the extractivist networks – is partly 'reconquered'. This has given rise to 'economies of opposition' (Pahnke 2015) that resist, oppose and sometimes threaten the reigning extractivist structures. Struggles that aim to construct such economies of opposition typically re-pattern productive activities and socio-economic relations in ways that significantly differ from those that are superimposed by and through extractivist structures. This is aptly summarized by a banner that hangs over the entrance to a MST settlement in Brazil, shown in Figure 4. It reads *occupy* (seize parts of the economy), *resist* (avoid delocalization and obtain the requisite rights and access to different networks), *produce* (in a way that differs from hegemonic schemes), and *cooperate* (build alliances with similar groups and elaborate comprehensive strategies for change). Together, these activities (and the implied interrelations) constitute new, distinctively different processes of production (Vennet, Schneider, and Dessein 2016; Berg et al. 2018; Oostindie 2018). The direct intervention of the workers in the organization of the economy is a crucial pre-condition for doing so.

Direct intervention in, and the alteration of, the processes of labour and production is widespread in today's agriculture. It can be found in the agro-ecological movement, in the creation of new family farms in Brazil, and it is also the main driver of the many forms of endogenous rural development found in Europe. Resistance occurs through a wide range of heterogeneous and increasingly interlinked *practices* through which the peasantry also constitutes itself as *distinctively different*. Resistance resides in the fields, in the ways in which 'good manure' is made, 'noble cows' are bred, 'beautiful farms' are constructed, and 'fresh milk' is delivered (Van der Ploeg 2008, 265). It resides in the sturdy endeavours to produce two spikes of grain where before only one spike was harvested (Chayanov



Figure 4. A political banner hanging outside a MST settlement in Brazil.

[1917] 1988, 115). As ancient and irrelevant as such practices may seem when considered in isolation, in the current context they are increasingly vehicles for expressing and organizing resistance. Resistance also resides in the creation of new peasant units of production in fields that would otherwise lie barren or be used for the large-scale production of export crops.

The economies of opposition also address another important social mechanism: they induce the capacity to appropriate the added value which is generated when products or services enter the sphere of circulation. Thus the capacity to generate a 'labour income' (to use Chayanov's term) becomes a social or collective good that brings benefits for a wider range of people. In this sense, these differently patterned economies generate wider benefits that encompass a process in which social groups are able to take advantage from individual activities.

Understanding the new resistances and struggles

This discussion of new resistances is far from exhaustive – it merely aims to show that the superimposition of new extractivist structures upon the real economies does *not* necessarily turn social struggles into ever so many 'missions impossible'. With the shift of capital to the 'third level' (that is, away from the fields and factories), a wide range of interstices and cracks (Holloway 2002, 35–68 and 2010, 17–45) have arisen at the interface of the real economy and the newly created extractive layer that increasingly governs, distorts, drains and paralyzes the former. And although not all cracks (or points of friction) generate protest (Freudenberg 1992 and Bell 2016), some of them might become sites where new resistances and new struggles are emerging, which tend to flow over the limitations imposed by extractivist modes of ordering and appropriation.

Just as control over the sphere of circulation has become central to extractivism, social struggle is increasingly addressing circulation – and is progressively located in it. In the case of *Liucun*, the Chinese village, the struggle centres on the shifting (or not) of usufruct rights to the land to outsiders. It is a struggle that is located in, and focusses on, the *land*

market. It also involves the role of the Village Committee in this market and the conditions under which transactions will occur. Such a struggle will have direct impacts on the fate of the peasants, the countryside and food production. Are they to be pushed aside in order to allow extractivist capture or will the space needed for autonomous production of value be successfully defended?

The peasant markets that are emerging in the Global North and the Global South (CFS 2015; CSM 2016; Loconto, Poisot, and Santacoloma 2016; Heinisch 2017) also focus on the sphere of circulation: they represent a deeply rooted and widespread contestation of the conditions of exchange imposed by extractivist networks in *food and agricultural markets*. This contestation materializes in market-places that effectively by-pass these networks, which have an impact that definitely differs from that of the markets controlled by extractivist networks.

Realizing different outcomes (more employment, improved incomes, better conditions for working and living, autonomy instead of dependency, etc.) is also what the 'economies of opposition' are effectively fighting for. In so doing they are profoundly altering the relations of both production and circulation. This allows for superiority (high and sustainable levels of productivity, resilience, increased well-being, etc.) which, in its turn, makes possible the fierce confrontation with the dominant regime.

In their negative assessment of these forms of resistance Bonnano and Wolf argue that 'many forms of resistance do not transcend the sphere of market relations' (2018, 215). They are caught in 'the vicious circle of employing capitalism to transcend it' (p. 215). The double mistake that is made here will be clear. Firstly, it is wrong to equate capitalism and markets. Secondly, Bonnano and Wolf critically miss the point that, in today's global and neoliberal capitalism, markets are centre stage (as the nexus between the real economy and extractivist networks) and therefore are the main arenas of social struggle.

It seems to be *en vogue* to suggest that there are no longer any resistances to, and struggles against, capital. '[R]esistance [is just] the illusion of opposition' (Bonnano and Wolf 2018, 220).²⁸ Balashova *et al* (2017) rhetorically ask: '[w]here have all the classes gone?' In this article, we have argued that such observations are myopic. There are possibly more social struggles than ever – what is important is the capacity to perceive and understand them as different from previous modalities of struggle – precisely because the nature of capitalism, out of which they emerge, and whose trajectory they try to modify, has deeply changed.

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²⁸The complete statement goes as follows: 'This mode of resistance gives the illusion of the existence of opposition, but in reality these critical expressions function as part of a process that supports the neoliberal corporate regime'

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