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Letter to the Editor

Reply to Orihuela et al's "Extractivism of the poor"

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ABSTRACT

According to the EJAtlas, of 97 environmental conflicts in Peru, 20 are deemed as successes, generally meaning « stopped projects ». Violence in Peruvian environmental conflicts is much higher than the average in the EJAtlas. However, not all investment projects in the extractive industries or infrastructure are conflictive. We discuss the sources of information on investment projects and on those which are conflictive, to give a stronger background to our findings.

« SUCCESS » IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS IN PERU

1. Introduction

Here we defend the findings in the EJAtlas, in particular those relating to Peru, against some of the strong arguments by Orihuela et al. (2021) against «statistical analyses backing Joan Martinez-Alier (2002)'s thesis on the environmentalism of the poor. In their collaborative Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), their Peru sample reports a success rate of 24% in stopping projects ». Orihuela et al. contend that successful resistance represents not 24% but only 2.5% of the total universe of Peru mining conflicts. Their claim « is built on the study of 517 conflicts in Peru between 2005 and 2019, as registered by the Ombudsperson's Office. The evidence suggests, moreover, that contentious collective action commonly subordinates environmental justice causes to conventional economic concerns and resolutions, resulting in mining conflicts unfolding into compensation schemes and better deal settlements. »

Four main points are made by Orihuela et al. (2021). First the rate of « success » is much lower than what we say (rather 2% than 20%) because there are many more conflictive projects than we allow for. Second, the relevance of extractivism is measured in money terms by Orihuela et al., and not in physical terms. Third, conflicts are often stopped by monetary compensation while we tend to exaggerate the « valuation contests », i.e. the display of incommensurable valuation languages in such conflicts (Martinez-Alier 2002). This article replies mainly to the two first contentions. The third one is easily disputed by looking to the narratives of the conflicts in the EJAtlas, but we do not deny that monetary compensation (particularly after « battles » have been lost) contributes to stop conflicts. A fourth point of disagreement relates to counting the mortal victims.

Some factual corrections to Orihuela et al. are needed in our view.

2. The "success" rate

We calculate how many extractive industry ***conflictive*** projects are stopped. For instance, in Peru (which is the main topic of Orihuela et al's article) of 97 conflicts in the EJAtlas by September 2021, 20 are deemed as "successes" in environmental justice, generally meaning (though not always) projects stopped. Assume there are one hundred projects, and that forty are conflictive, if 20% are "blocked", this means 8 projects blocked, not 20. In other words, the percentage of "successes" is calculated over the number of conflictive projects in the EJAtlas, not over all projects. In the 97 conflicts from Peru registered by September 2021 in the EJAtlas, 20 are deemed as "successes", 49 as "failures" and the rest are "not sure, don't know". We agree with Orihuela et al. that the "success" cases deserve special analysis. "Success" in the EJAtlas very often coincides with project stopped (Ozkaynak et al., 2021). No social movement can long survive unless it obtains a success from time to time but the failures and "don't knows" are also important for any social movement.

3. Growth in social metabolism and environmental conflicts as two sides of the same coin

We would like to have all conflictive projects in the EJAtlas. But we have only some of them, and we obviously lack the new ones from 2021, 2022, 2023… The number of conflicts tends to increase around the world at the frontiers of commodity extraction and waste disposal. Our argument is that rapid increases and changes in the social metabolism (in physical terms, joules of energy and tons of materials) are one factor explaining the environmental conflicts in Peru and anywhere else. Fig. 1 in Orihuela et al. is not wrong but it is misleading. It gives export figures from Peru 1990–2019 in percentages by sector (mining, oil and gas, fishmeal) calculated in money terms showing a rather stable situation while extraction of materials was increasing rapidly. The increase in tonnage (that causes the local conflicts) is disguised by the calculation of percentages in money terms. Biophysical data are appropriate for estimating environmental pressures because they provide evidence of the pressure on environment from material extraction. Figures on metabolism in tonnage for Peru both the internal consumption and for exports are given in Perez-Rincon et al. 2019, Samaniego et al., 2017, and in two sources left aside by Orihuela et al., Minaya 2018, and Raquel Neyra's doctoral thesis and book (2019, 2020) on environmental conflicts in Peru. Also in UNEP, *Recent trends in material flows and resource productivity in Latin America,* the multiplication of social environmental

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conflicts and the expanding and intensifying extractive activities are two sides of the same coin in Peru as elsewhere. (Martinez-Alier and Walter, 2016; Tetreault, 2022).

4. Counting the number of relevant conflicts and counting the mortal victims

Orihuela et al.. try to bring down the social significance of "conflictive projects stopped" by increasing the number of projects and conflicts. We accept that the number of relevant environmental conflicts in Peru in the last 30 years is higher than those registered in the EJAtlas. The EJAtlas (with 3520 entries by September 2021) is a sample of conflicts. In Peru, it is a good sample, with 3 entries per million inhabitants. We choose "emblematic" conflicts. "Emblematic" means representative, symbolic of the various sectors of the economy. They are representative in Peru of a worldwide movement for environmental justice. Going to Table 3 that summarizes Orihuela et al. findings, we accept their figures in the EJAtlas of two years ago, for total number (76) and cancelled projects (18). Both have increased in the last two years, but this does not matter here. Then we disagree for the following reasons. They provide two columns from the Defensoría del Pueblo DdP (Ombudsman) (2005–2019) for mining conflicts (349) and total environmental conflicts (517). We leave aside the 517 because they refer (Methods section, para 2) to environmental politics (and policies) in general (including local conflicts). We focus on the 349. We also appreciate and use the DdP information. However, there is a difference between the Defensoría and the EJAtlas. We name conflicts from the name of the project or the place (Antamina, Las Bambas, Grupo Melka, Pantanos de Villa) while the DdP includes as different conflicts those arising in the same project along time, and involving different communities around the mine or dam or oil palm plantation in question. Thus, Las Bambas (with many environmental victims, two different firms along time, many surrounding villages involved) is one conflict in the EJAtlas (with a rather long description and some updating) while DdP includes from time to time a new conflict case for Las Bambas (the last one in July 2021). In the methods section (end of second paragraph), Orihuela et al.. acknowledge that the 349 conflicts according to the DdP arise from only 175 mines. In the EJAtlas these 175 mines, if conflictive enough, would give rise to 175 entries and not to 349 entries.

So, to go back to point 1, let's assume there are 100 extractive industry projects, of which 40 are conflictive. Of these conflicts, 8 are "successful" (project cancelled). If you count twice the conflictive projects (because of a change in the company involved, or a second community is affected and complains), then the proportion of "success" goes down from 20% to 10% of all conflictive projects. This is what Orihuela et al's article do in a two-step reduction of "success" cases. Compared to the EJAtlas, they count all projects and not only the conflictive projects, and they count the conflictive projects at least twice. Therefore, the percentage of "blocked" projects registered in the EJAtlas in Peru goes down drastically, to 2 or 5%. Our rate of "success" was 18/76 (for two years ago) or 20/97 now. Orihuela et al. increase the denominator to 349, 517 and even more in the last column of their Table 3. We wonder how this could pass peer-review.

Regarding the forms of contention and the mortal victims, Orihuela et al. (section 3.2.4) report that the Defensoría del Pueblo counted only 30 environmental defenders killed between 2013 and 2019. Orihuela et al's article deals with the period 2005–2019 (second line, Methods section) but activists victimized are included only for 2013–19. Neyra (2020, p. 166–169). reports and maps 96 environmental victims (listing names, ages, gender, places and dates) between 2003 and 2019, to which 9 more have been added until July 2021. More than one hundred in less than twenty years, distributed in many conflicts. This is the tip of an iceberg of the wounded, displaced and frightened. Peru is a rather violent country against environmental defenders. This is clear in the statistics of Global Witness and in the EJAtlas. Taking the 97 conflicts recorded by September 2021, in 28 of them there was at least one environmental defender killed (by hitmen or by the police in demonstrations). This is twice the rate than in the EJAtlas as a whole.

5. The environmentalism of the poor and the indigenous

Orihuela et al. are misinformed about the origins of the notion of "environmentalism of the poor". It does not come mainly from Peru although it is indeed appropriate to Peru. It comes from Brazil (Chico Mendes' killing in 1988) and elsewhere in Latin America, but India was an earlier origin (with the Chipko movement) and Africa was important with the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and companions in 1995, because of their opposition to Shell in the Niger Delta. Academically, it comes from Ramachandra Guha's book on the Chipko movement (1989) and the international meetings we had around 1990 on the "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier, 1991; Martinez-Alier and Hershberg, 1992), where Victor Toledo of Mexico (another promoter of "the environmentalism of the poor") was present. None of these meetings was in Peru. I know well Peru since the early 1970s, so I agree that the notion of the "environmentalism of the poor and the indigenous" is very relevant to the country. Raquel Neyra's book (2020). has shown this in detail.

6. Conclusion

In the EJAtlas we do not study all projects in the extractive industries or waste disposal but only conflictive projects. Therefore, Orihuela et al's article is wrong on this point and should be corrected. Second, we do not apply the "measuring rod of money" to study the increase of social metabolism, we use physical measures. Third, we study "emblematic" environmental conflicts, and for the Andes and Peru, we have a good sample. This abundance of environmental conflicts has given rise to several articles, theses and books on Peru and also on Ecuador and Colombia apart from those quoted by Orihuela et al. (Chacón, 2003; Damonte 2008; Neyra, 2019, 2020; Minaya, 2018; Latorre et al., 2015; Pérez-Rincón et al., 2019; Samaniego et al., 2017; Silva Macher and Farrell 2013). Fourth, in future we are interested on increasing further the number of conflicts registered in the EJAtlas, and looking at whether they can be deemed as successes (often meaning project stopped), or failures or "don't knows". They are all part of world environment movements of the poor, the indigenous, the "subaltern", the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the peasants, citizens and neighbours, the local EJOs and sometimes the international EJOs, some trade unions, also some scientists and professionals, and in Latin America some clerics from Liberation Theology. Peru is a particularly violent country against environmental activists (Neyra, 2020; Global Witness 2021) in part because of long traditions of coloniality and racism (Quijano 2000), and nevertheless some conflictive extractive projects are being stopped. Perhaps only 20%, not yet reaching Argentina's rate (Walter and Wagner, 2021).

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