

Resource Radicalisms: The Conditions and Consequences of Popular Critique

Thea N. Riofrancos
Assistant Professor
Political Science Department
Providence College

The politics of hydrocarbon and mineral extraction are complex and conflictual. In Latin America, the politics of resource extraction are particularly charged. It is inflected by the incomplete construction of national and regional sovereignties, legacies of popular mobilizations, and persistent aspirations to transform the relationship between economy, society, and nature. Far from a deterministic relationship, the political significance of nonrenewable resources is mediated by resource imaginaries that are discursively-articulated in an agonistic field of conflict. Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic and archival research on resource-conflict in Ecuador, I focus on social movement actors as key protagonists in the development of new resource imaginaries. In the period under study (1990-2017), social movements shifted their critique from radical resource nationalism (demanding expropriation, nationalization, and the collective ownership of the means and products of extraction) to anti-extractivism (the militant opposition to all forms of resource extraction). I conceptualize these radical critiques as *resource radicalisms*: the ideological prisms through which resource extraction becomes a political-economic problem demanding a radical response. The concept of resource radicalisms trains our vision on the intellectual production intertwined with the variegated process of political mobilization. From rallying cries to animated debates to everyday reflection, activists craft critiques of the prevailing order and visions of a world otherwise. These are developed in dialogue with professional intellectuals, and—especially when the left is in power—may circulate beyond activist milieux to networks of state officials. But attending to the agonistic encounters in which militants retool their grievances, demands, and utopic horizons illuminates how particular discourses acquire political force, shoring up partisan commitment and provoking counter-arguments on the part of opponents.

In elucidating the dynamics of this particular trajectory of resource conflict and discursive innovation, I propose a more general theory of *discursive institutionalization*. I argue that, since situated actors propose, enact, or resist public policy and institutional change through the medium of discourse, the study of discourse gives us leverage on the micro-level mechanics of large-scale political transformations. Although actors craft discourses in particular historical conjunctures, under certain conditions these discourses may institutionalize. In what sense can a discourse become an institution? Discourse structures political conflict, and shapes actors' interests, and their definitions of policy problems and solutions. Discursive formations endure over time by circulating through networks of activists and state officials, through the conduits of print and electronic media, and face-to-face interactions. More generally, my work shows that discourse is subject to processes of institutionalization such as path dependency and endogenous change, and can therefore be studied using the analytical and methodological tools of institutional theory. But the conceptual framework of discursive institutionalization does not merely transpose the lessons of institutional analysis to the realm of discursive activity. Instead, understanding the conditions under which discourses institutionalize gives us insight into how and when political rhetoric shapes the design of institutions and public policy alike, and thus constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of politics.