Neoextractivism: any good to analyse Latin America today?

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse the growing consensus that the recent trend of 'pink-tide' governments in Latin America have been favoring different sorts of 'extractivism', despite their progressive politics in other fields. This new type of extractivism (somehow different from the colonial one) is named *neoextractivism* and is understood as exploitation of oil and minerals, sometimes extended to the intensive use of natural resources (such as in exports of paper pulp or soya beans). Sometimes, this is equated to the idea of an 'extractive mode of accumulation', that is capital accumulation stemming mainly from the extraction and export of natural resources.

This paper presents and analyses the available empirical evidence of what has been identified as the key aspects of neoextractivism. Despite the considerable weight of neoextractivism in politics and in academic debates in the past few years, such systematic empirical accounts are not yet available. This serves as a contribution towards a more nuanced assessment of the claims of this new concept as well as a more proper account of the role of this tendency within Latin

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American history. It also puts a limit to the widespread claims in this literature of the "lack of proper indicators".

In the past five to eight years the term *extractivism*, a category traditionally used to account with situations of mining and oil extraction in the context of colonialism has slowly began to gain a new meaning as a way of describing a new development model for Latin America in the twenty-first century. In this paper we analyse and dissect the main claims of this trend that has emerged from the region in an attempt to assess the "challenge" it poses for development theory more broadly (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014; Svampa, 2013).

These theorisations stem from the evidence of an apparently contradictory corroboration: the support of extractive industries (particularly mining) by the so-called 'pink-tide' governments in Latin America (Gudynas, 2009) and the proliferation of socio–environmental conflicts in Latin America (Giarracca and Teubal, 2010; Svampa, 2011; Reboratti, 2012). Highlighted as the consequence of the upsurge in commodity prices, the growth of importance of extractive industries in the dynamics of growth is understood as more prominent since the beginning of the century (despite many investments and changes in legislation began more than a decade earlier than that), with its share in exports, fiscal income and FDI being the key indicators of this change (Cypher, 2009). Thus the developmental, social and ecological implications of the recent 'commodity boom' is back to the fore, with a renewed literature that is indebted to dependency theory, new institutional economics, ecological economics and marxism in different ways.

In this paper I will discuss whether there is enough evidence to support the idea that we are witnessing the (re)birth of a "resource-dependent development path" a "consolidated development project" or even the successor to Washington Consensus in the form of the "Commodities Consensus" in Latin America (Svampa, 2012a), where the claim is that current phase of capital accumulation in the region has moved from the hegemony of financial capital

to one of rentier or extractive capital. To this end I will examine thoroughly the evidence that supports the idea not just of a predictable and proportional rise in the share of primary products in the production profiles of Latin American countries as a consequence of the surge in commodity prices after 2001, but rather of the contention that they have become dominant in determining the development-paths in the region. First I will briefly summarise the main claims behind the (somewhat heterogeneous) concept of neoextractivism [1], identifying what is the empirical evidence deemed relevant by the idea of a resource-based development path. I will then structure the paper analysing the long term trends of these indicators, mainly the importance of primary production as a share of countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the relevance of these products in their export profiles and the impact in fiscal income. We conclude by showing that a close scrutiny (as the one done here) of neoextractivism's material foundation shows the compound nature of the phenomena in terms of being appropriate to describe specific countries of the region during some periods of the past one and a half decade. Its use as a "developmental model" is thus dismissed.

1 What is neoextractivism?

The idea that extraction-based paths of development, or *outward-looking development (desarrollo hacia afuera)* are prone to crises, unsustainable, tremendously limited and bursting with social drawbacks has a longstanding tradition in Latin America and can be traced back at least to the early days of the ECLAC in 1950s (Saad-Filho, 2005). One of the cornerstone ideas behind the characterisation of this model as one of "wrongdevelopment" (*maldesarrollo*) was that of the secular decline in terms of trade (the Prebisch/Singer hypothesis, named after (Prebisch, 1949; Singer, 1950)). Defined as the ratio

[1] A more detailed mapping of the different theoretical tendencies can be found in [references removed in favour of anonymity of the paper].

between the unit prices of exports and imports, the hypothesis sustained that the peripheral countries (characterised as exporters of primary products and importers of manufactured commodities) suffered a sustained deterioration of its terms of trade, that is to say of the relative price of their imports.[2] During the past decade (but not only) the idea of declining terms of trade has been empirically challenged and lead to the idea that a re-primarization of the region could be an opportunity for successful development under the new conditions of this boom.

During the hegemonic growth of Washington Consensus, ECLAC-inspired warnings against primary export-oriented development became less fashionable and the auspices of neoclassical discourse included the blessing of taking advantage of Latin America's "comparative advantages". However, this should not lead us into concealing that neoliberal thought has contributed to one of the three strands of neoextractivism.

Three have been the main theoretical influences behind the growing literature on neoextractivism. First, a recovery and freshening up of the ideas of ECLAC though more accurately of some of these ideas as through the filter of dependency theory. The strong remarks about the international division of labour and the ultimately disadvantageous effect of natural resource extraction (even despite the limited validity in this context of the declining terms of trade debate), the idea of the limited nature of this sector backward and forward linkages and the denunciation of the role of foreign capital that are frequent in the literature seem to stem from this influence. In second term, neoextractivism has also been associated with the widespread use of the idea of the continuous character of primitive accumulation mostly after Harvey's rephrasing as "accumulation by dispossession". The reception of this idea is associated to explaining the displacement of indigenous peoples as direct consequences of the expansion of the agricultural frontier or large scale mining projects. In some cases, dispossession is also used to refer to

[2]Unequal exchange generalised this idea as one of *any* product of the periphery...

the extraction of natural resources.[3] Finally, a third important influence is the one stemming from neoclassical economics. The idea of "resource curse" (as an expansion of the limited idea of the Dutch disease, associated with the foreign exchange rate dynamics) that emphasises the political consequences for countries rich in natural resources (corruption, conflict, price volatility, etc.) has also made its place into the literature of neoextractivism.[4] (I should mention that more recently a somehow isolated but different strand is slowly arising, that of ecological sociology.)

In sum, the wide variety of theoretical influences makes it difficult to identify a single set of ideas behind the idea of neoextractivism. One can, though, isolate a number of core concepts that are common to this otherwise heterogeneous set. First of all it should be noted that the definition of "extractive" activities is usually done by extension (i.e. an enumeration of activities) rather than by an analytically specific treat or characteristic. Thus, the usual mention includes mining, oil extraction and in most cases agricultural production, thus making a parallel of extraction to any mining, pumping or harvesting. Sometimes the idea that there is involved an "intense use of natural resources" is also attached. In economic terms, this is then understood as the primary sector.

If the term extractivism strongly resounds and refers to colonial times, dominated by enclaves and foreign political rule, and "epitomizes the unfair and asymmetric integration of Latin America to the world economy at the end of the 19th century" (Nadal, TripleCrisis) then it might be fair to wonder what is new about neoextractivism. Briefly summarized, the literature identifies the novelty in the scale of the projects (dominated by big, capital intensive, foreign capital), in the lack of forward linkages (and thus

[3]For a distinction of these two influences and how they are intertwined, see (Grigera and Alvarez, 2013).

[4]For instance: "An economy exclusively based on the exploitation of natural resources will deepen underdevelopment and generate democracies of low quality." (Giarracca, 2012, page 232) For a review of this literature, see Rosser (2006).

no local value-added), to new technological improvements mainly in mining (open pit mining, new lixiviation/leaching methods) and to in agrobusiness (e.g. paper pulp or GM soya beans)[5]. Finally, the novel political dimension of neoextractivism as identified early by Gudynas (2009) is that 'progressive' governments redistribute a small share of the (easily taxable) profit of these sectors in the form of social programs.

What are the economic indicators used to back up the assessment of a "new developmental model"? The identification a material base to identify the process varies between mentions of either the rate of growth of primary activities, or the share of primary products (or sometimes agricultural-livestock manufactures) on total exports. In what follows, we will review the most important economic indicators to allow for a renewed discussion of the importance of this tendency.

2 Examining the evidence: GDP share

As Burchardt and Dietz (2014) note "few systematic empirical accounts of (neo-)extractivism as a development project are available". This is an attempt at this, overcoming most of the limitations of the statistics there mentioned.

The first indicator used as quantitative evidence of neoextractivism is the rise of primary production as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Despite it could be argued that such a growth would be more properly called "reprimarization" rather than neoextractivism (in the sense that the former would capture more properly the increasing importance of one sector over the others while the latter seems to refer to the role of the external sector),

[5]For instance: "this extractivist style of development ... is based in the over-exploitation of natural resources ... that consolidate export enclaves without local productive linkages that operate a strong social and regional fragmentation that configure socio-productive spaces dependent of the world market and its price volatility".(Svampa, 2012b, page 21)

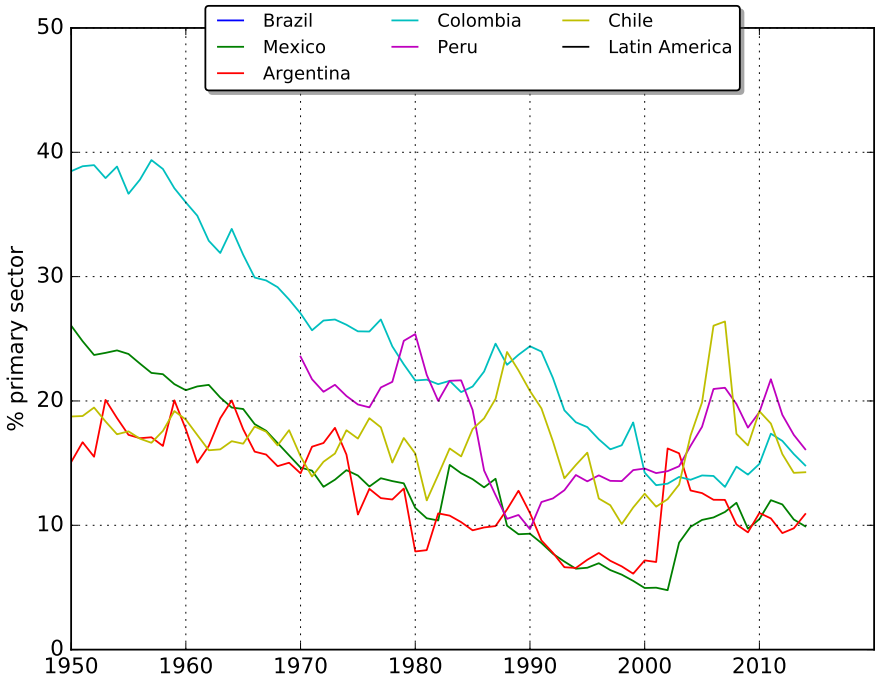
the assumption is that one is the (local) reflection of the other and thus that they must be understood together.

The share of GDP is certainly to be taken as one of the key elements in the context of the (bold) statement that natural-resource extraction is *dominating the dynamics of capital accumulation*. In other words: for the above to be true, the primary sector must become the driving force of a national economy and thus represent a large share of GDP and not just the external sector. For despite the interest in analyzing a country's integration to the world market one could easily be deceived by the results. As we will show below in the next section, Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) is agreed as a period dominated by the growth of the manufacturing sector, despite exports being heavily dominated by primary products. In other words, GDP share has usually more analytical weight than other indicators to characterize the dominant dynamics of capital accumulation.

Alternatively, one could also attempt at an account of reprimarization or neoextractivism by looking at the *rate of growth* of the primary sector rather than at the absolute magnitude of its share of the GDP. A sharp tendency of growth of this branch of the economy above the national average could be a symptom that it has become the "dynamic sector", either attracting most of investment or the new employment or driving a new process of growth/economic recovery. A similar argument has been made to identify other sectors' dynamism (e.g. employment in the case of manufacturing or investment in the case of financialization). Thus, the relative trend of growth should be considered as well as part of the assessment of the importance of this sector.

Let us then consider the evolution of the GDP share of the primary sector first. Figure 1 represents the data of this trends since 1960s for the largest six economies of the region (that encompass altogether 85% of the region's GDP), and a simple and a weighed average of those shares for the region since 1960s.Despite the convenience of data availability since 1960s, this is

Figure 1: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Current Prices in National Currency, Big 8 economies



Source: `CEPALSTAT` "Annual Gross Domestic Product (AGD) by Activity at current prices in National Currency". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying"

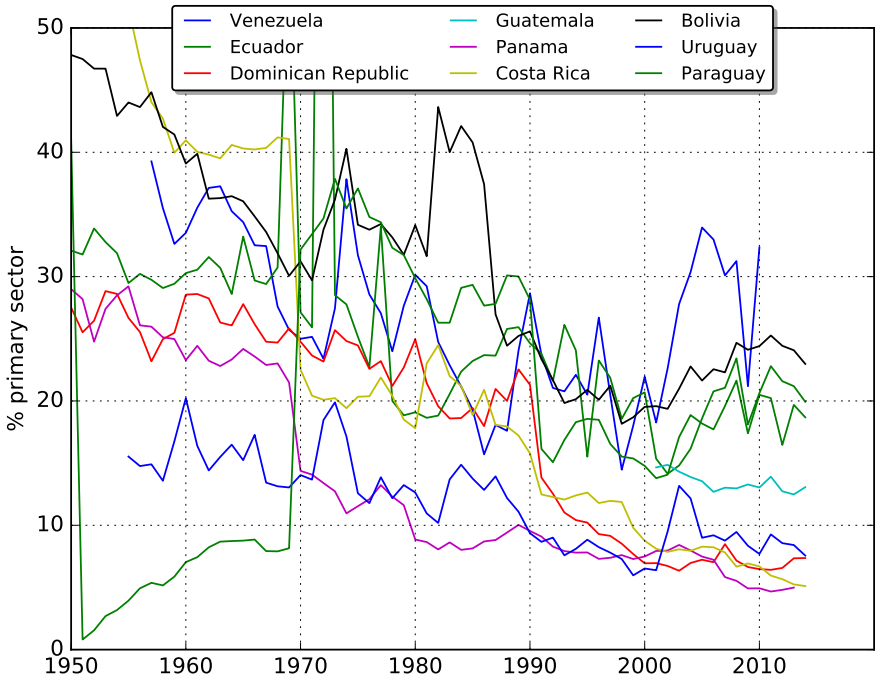
available as current prices in national currencies. These leads to two main problems that should be noted. First, the simple splicing together of different methodologies (i.e. by only averaging data with different base years) introduces extra volatility to the figures. But then and most relevantly, currency shocks (such as large devaluations) have an unequal effect on the relative prices of the sectors, thus amplifying the effect of crises in the real economy. As a notable example of this, the figure shows the steep increase of primary sector's GDP share for Argentina between 2001 and 2002 from 7% to 16%.

Just by using this data we could conclude that the overall picture in the past five decades shows a steeply decline of the share of the primary sector since 1960s that is only reversed in the case of Chile in 1981 and again in 1999, partially in the cases of Mexico 2001–2008 and Peru between 1990 and 2010. After 1990s the overall average shows that the primary sector is comfortably below the 20% of GDP share.

The image is not that different for the nine economies that follow in ranking, even when these include Venezuela and Ecuador that are oil producers. As Figure 2 shows, these two are the only considerably large economies whose primary sector represents more than 15% of the total GDP after the 1990s. Paraguay has the sharpest differences due to splicing together of different national accounts in the 1950s. Together with Venezuela, Uruguay and Ecuador these are the countries that appear to have experienced a considerable surge of the primary sector in 2000s.

A somehow different picture emerges when we consider GDP in US dollars, where ECLAC publishes data with proper splicing together. The time period of data availability is significantly shorter, beginning in 1990, but the image of "reprimarization" after 2000 is also considerably less dramatic. As the figures 3 and 4 show, reprimarization seems to be a tendency relevant in only a few countries: it amounts for a growth in the share of 10 or more points of GDP in the cases of Venezuela (14 points between 2001 and 2010), Chile (11 points between 2002 and 2007), Ecuador (9 points between 2002

Figure 2: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Current Prices in National Currency, 'Next 9' economies



Source: `CEPALSTAT` "Annual Gross Domestic Product (AGD) by Activity at current prices in National Currency". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying"

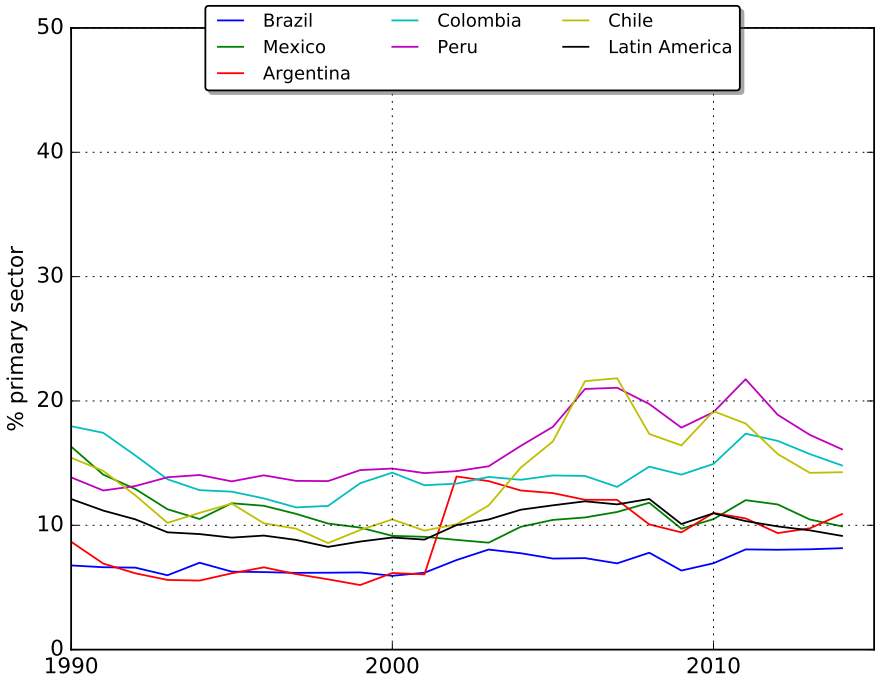
and 2008, though highly volatile if compared with the previous decade) and Paraguay (8 points between 2001 and 2008), Peru (7 points between 2002 and 2011). For the region as a whole, the weighed average shows that the cycle represented only 2 points of GDP share between 2002 and 2008, a tendency that was quickly reverted thereafter.

Looking at GDP shares, it is apparent that reprimarization then can be identified as a tendency in some specific economies rather than the region as a whole. For those cases though, it is fair to point out that a rise in the share of primary sector's value added in GDP of roughly 10 percentage points in a decade is important enough to require analytical attention. After all deindustrialization has been identified as one of the largest transformations of contemporary economies since 1970s and it is mainly identified by a shrinking share of manufacturing employment and GDP share of roughly 10 points over a period of 20 years (Rowthorn and Ramaswamy, 1997; Palma, 2005).

But thus, as much as in the deindustrialization debate, a key question to address (particularly if we witness a phenomena in a shorter period of less than a decade) is the effect of prices in this change in national economic structures. Because the growing current price share of primary products in value could be mainly due to the relative prices of this sector. The fact is that when output of this sector is measured in constant prices, there does not appear to be evidence of *any significant shift* in the structure of GDP share. Figures 5 and 6 bear this stylized fact out: the share of primary sector value added in GDP is roughly unchanged between 1990 and 2010, in contrast to the current price share of the countries mentioned above, with the sole exceptions of shorter, 5-year cycles in Venezuela, Ecuador and Uruguay.

The fact that "reprimarization" is explained in almost all cases by the "price-effect" is certainly striking. First, it leads to a strong relativization of the impact of the commodity boom in terms of the economic structure (despite its short-term effect on valorization). Second, if this trend is also paralleled with no significant changes in investment then it could flag that

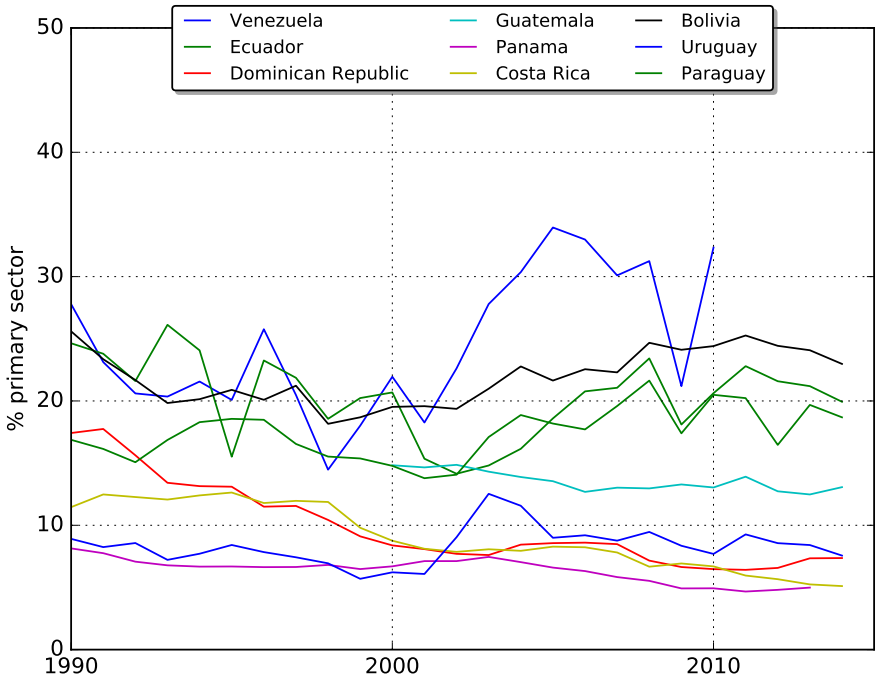
Figure 3: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Current Prices in current US Dollars, Big 8 economies



Source: *CEPALSTAT* "Annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by activity at current prices in US Dollars". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying"

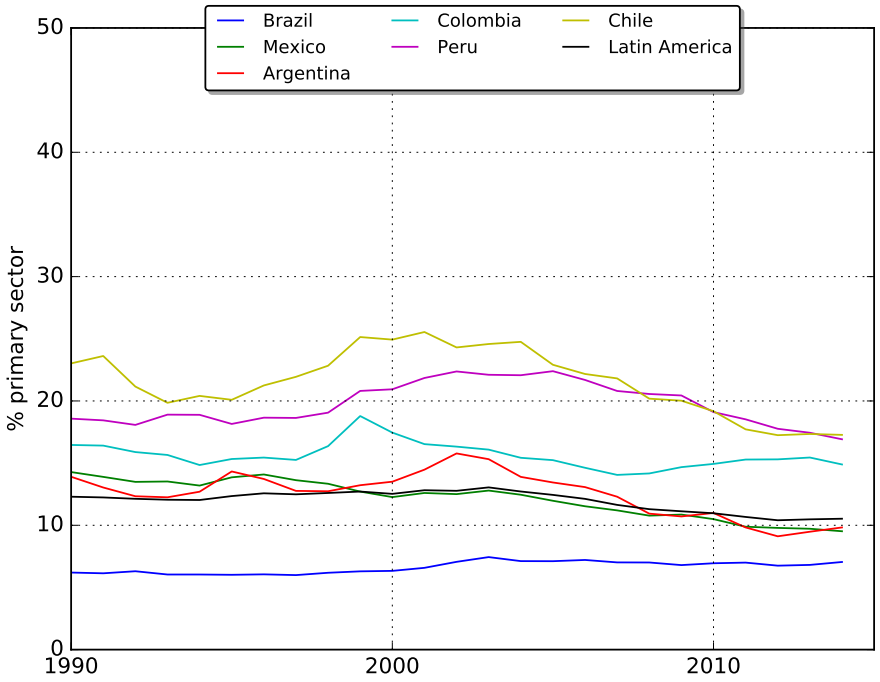
Figure 4: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Current Prices in current US Dollars, "Next 9" economies



Source: *CEPALSTAT* "Annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by activity at current prices in US Dollars". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying".

Figure 5: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Constant Prices, Big 8 economies



Source: *CEPALSTAT* "Annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by activity at current prices in US Dollars". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying"

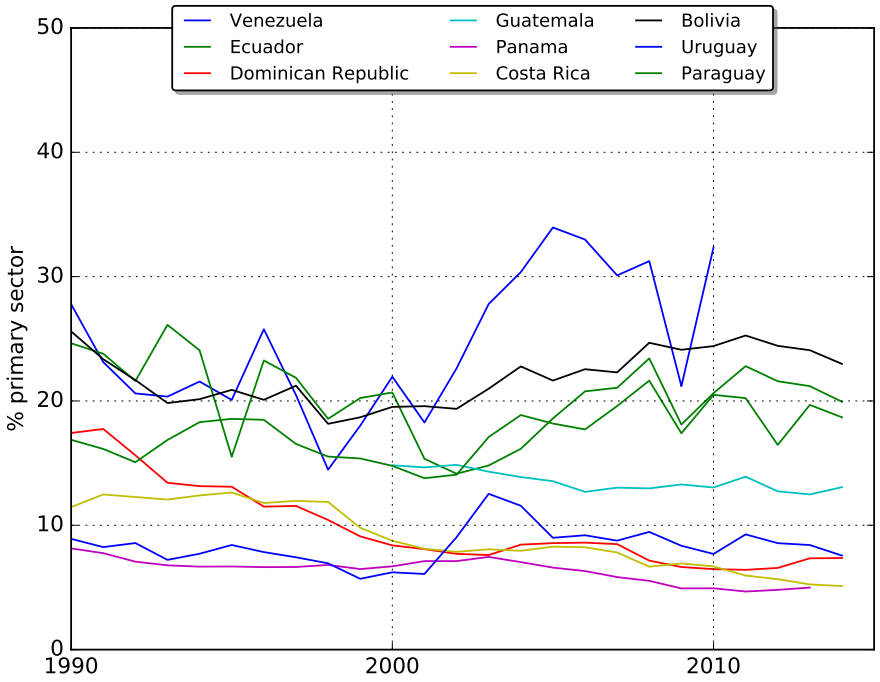
the commodities boom is perceived as a short-run cyclical phenomena of little long-term consequence. If we compare the short-run nature of the previous commodity booms (1950–54 and 1973–75)(Radetzki, 2006) the result looks less surprising: despite the fact this one was longer, one could expect no significant transformation taking place in what was expected to be another short cycle due to exceptional circumstances (Braun, 1975, see for the 1970s). But first and foremost, the "reprimarization" we are witnessing should not have an effect lasting longer than the boom itself, once the boom in prices comes to an end so will the share of value added of primary sector GDP. This seems to be confirmed in the data and trends of the past 5 years.

What does the evidence stemming from the structure of GDPs tell us? In sum, three key findings can be highlighted. First, that despite one can identify a growth in the share of primary GDP in the cases of Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile and Paraguay, overall this has not been rather than a tendency in the past decade *that does not reverse the long-term tendency of decline of the relative importance of this sector of the past five decades.* Second, the overall trends show that with a few exceptions of smaller economies, the primary sector does not account for more than roughly 10% to 15% of the national economy, with an average for the region as a whole of 10%, with outliers being the same few countries. But more importantly, the GDP figures show that this limited "reprimarization" is almost entirely driven by the soar of international commodity prices (and amplified in some cases by devaluations) and thus reduced to five year cycles in the two oil-exporting countries (Venezuela and Ecuador) and in Uruguay.

3 Integration to the World Market: Latin America's export profile

Turning back to the strict meaning of neoextractivism we should examine the issue of exports of primary goods. One strand of the argument is that

Figure 6: Value Added by Primary sector as a Share of GDP at Constant Prices, "Next 9" economies



Source: *CEPALSTAT* "Annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by activity at current prices in US Dollars". Accessed March 12, 2016

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the aggregates "Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing" and "Mining and quarrying".

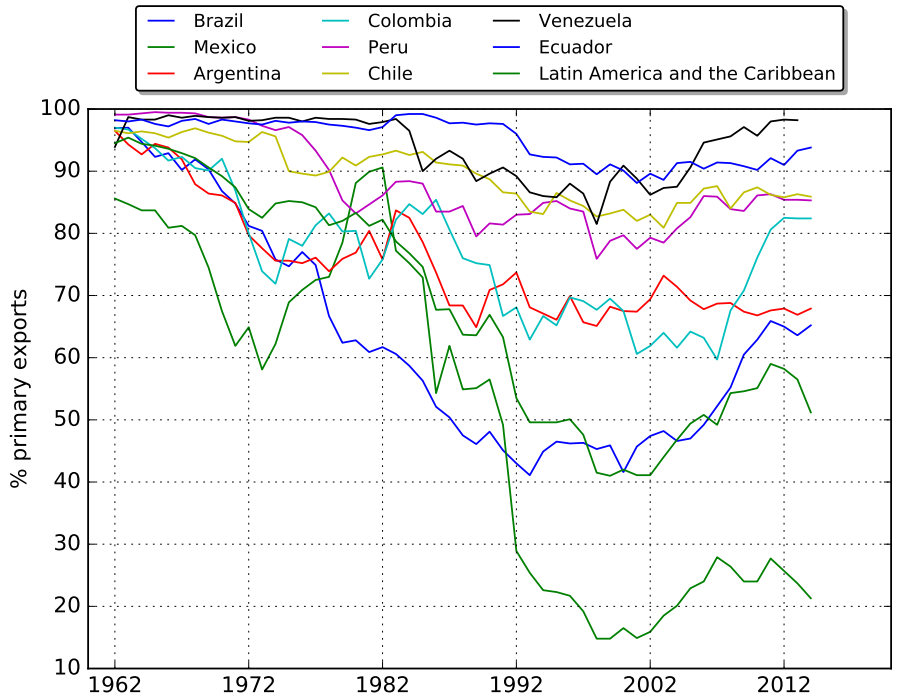
the integration to the world marked has been marked by the provisioning of primary sources. Stemming from the first characterisations of ECLAC and dependency theory, this idea has been updated in the new context of contemporary neoextractivism. Thus [peripheral countries] "have become predominantly provisioners of primary sources that are then part of the accumulation process in central areas, and the whole third world [...] is once again nothing but an offer of spaces and rural land to extract oil, minerals, biodiversity and food under the classic formula of the international division of labour" (Galafassi, 2009).

Following (at this stage uncritically) the categories of ECLAC[6] a presentation of the evolution of the composition of trade since 1962 for the largest eight economies is presented in figure 7. The peak for Latin America and the Caribbean considered as a whole for the decade of 2000s is reached in 2011, with primary products encompassing a share of 59% of the exports. It must first be noted that this is still lower than the figures for the whole period 1962–1992.

Such a long-term view does however open a source of question in the nature of the 'national exports'. After the large regionalisation of production within Latin America (and the world), it is fair to question if *the growth in manufacturing exports is only intra-regional trade*. This is a difficult data to gather, since the publications of intra-regional trade of ECLAC only include total intraregional trade without specifying the nature of this trade. Using UN detailed COMTRADE data, we have been able to distinguish the component of manufacturing intra-regional trade. This data is presented in Figures 3 and 9 where the primary share is presented with and without trade done to partner Latin American countries.

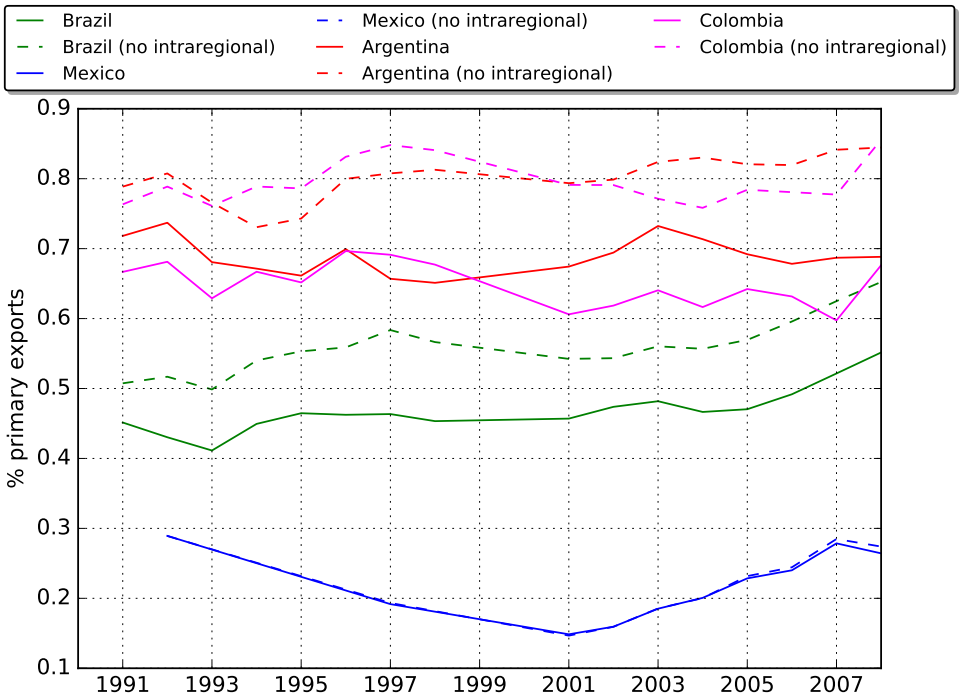
[6]That is to say primary goods are defined as chapters 0–4 and 9 of SITC rev 2 (Food and live animals; Beverages and tobacco; Crude materials, inedible, except fuels; Mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials; Animal and vegetable oils and fats and Commodities and transactables Not classifiable according to kind) and chapter 6, subitem 68 "Non ferrous metals".

Figure 7: Exports of primary products as a share of total exports, Big 8 economies



Source: `CEPALSTAT` "Exports of primary products as a share of total exports". Accessed March 12, 2016

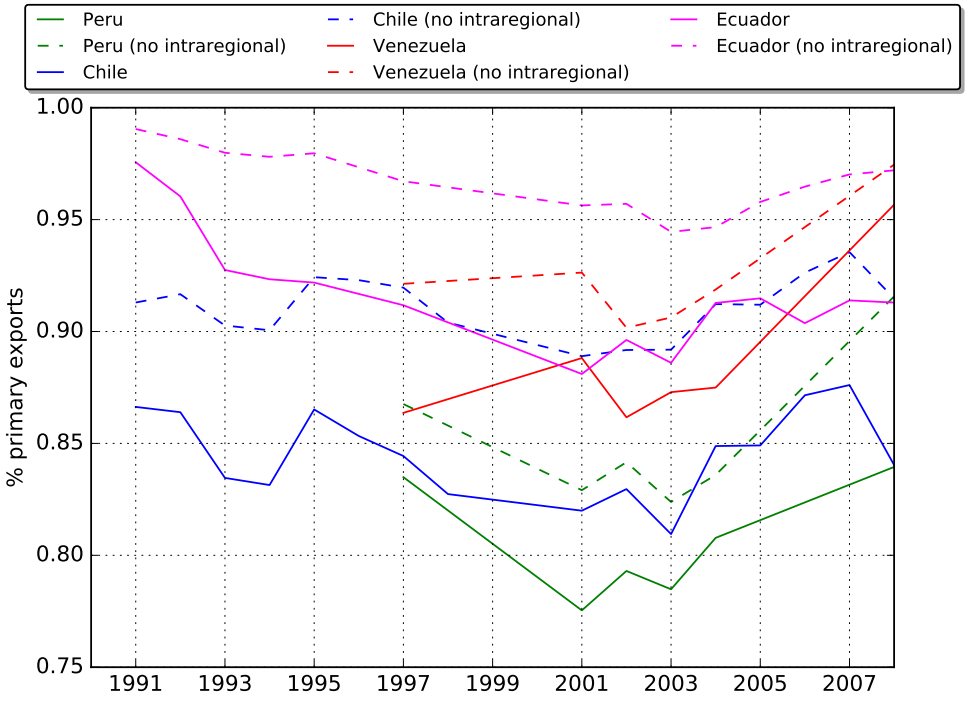
Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the Chapters 0–4 and 9 of SITC rev 2 and Chapter 6, subitem 68.



Source: UN COMTRADE. Accessed February/March 2016.
Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the Chapters 0–4 and 9 of SITC rev 2 and Chapter 6, subitem 68. The figures without intra-regional trade do not include the trade done within the 20 Latin American countries.

Figure 8: Exports of primary products as a share of total exports, with and without intra regional trade, Big 4 economies

Figure 9: Exports of primary products as a share of total exports, with and without intra regional trade, "Next" 4 economies



Source: `UN COMTRADE`. Accessed February/March 2016.

Notes: Following ECLAC standards, the primary sector is considered as the Chapters 0–4 and 9 of SITC rev 2 and Chapter 6, subitem 68. The figures without intra-regional trade do not include the trade done within the 20 Latin American countries.

4 Conclusions

This paper has summarised in some detail the existence of multiple empirical evidence that shows that the phenomena of neoextractivism, *as a dominant or key aspect of economic development* , despite its political importance is compounded to a specific period of a few years (certainly a cycle shorter than "post Washington consensus" as a whole) and to three to five countries of the region. The impact of the primary sector is also to be considered as a relatively important tendency only by comparing the rates of growth and by focusing on the past 20 years. Either by looking at the absolute figures or at a longer period of 40 to 60 years the contemporary weight of the primary sector seems to be less crucial.

By revising the composition of the GDP and exports we have been able to show that even relying on the somewhat fetichised definition of "primary sector" predominant in ECLAC (that, for instance, includes production of agricultural-livestock manufactures such as oil or flower) it is possible to distinguish the different trends present in the dynamics of accumulation of the countries in the region since the 1960s. For reasons of space we have not dealt with two other indicators that arise as relevant in the context of this literature, namely the impact of neoextractivism on fiscal accounts and employment. We can briefly state here that they do not change in any significant aspect the picture presented so far.

If the evidence presented here strongly suggests the limited nature of the process, then it could be fair to question why it has attained such a diverse and important attention in the academic literature. It must be stressed that despite the fact that this paper suggests this is not *a dominant phenomena*, this does not mean that there are no grounds to find spaces where neoextractivism is decisive in explaining the dynamics of social and political processes. It is equally true that it would be impossible to explain land dispossession or conflicts against mining companies all through Latin America without this concept, as well as to characterise the economic development of the region

just with neoextractivism. The political upsurge of conflicts and resistance to neoextractivism is certainly relevant, despite not the only one relevant nor even the dominant one.

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