

# Ecology and Indian Movements: “Diversity with Inequality is Not Social Justice”

A Class Perspective

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Global Research, October 14, 2008  
14 October 2008

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

## Introduction

There are two opposing approaches to the analysis of ecological destruction and the emergence of Indian movements in Latin America: the liberal and the Marxist.

The liberal approach emphasizes ‘universal responsibility’ for the destruction of the environment – rich and poor, mining companies and miners, factory owners and factory workers, auto manufacturers and drivers, governments and citizens, real estate speculators and slum dwellers. The liberal ecologists claim the negative consequences adversely affect everyone: “We all suffer from the destruction of the environment.”

The liberal approach to the development of Indian movements and politics follows a similar approach, using the non-class categories of ‘community’, ‘culture’ and religion, to discuss Indian social structure as a ‘homogenous’ social phenomenon.

The Marxist approach to ecological destruction and Indian social movements focuses on the inequality of power and control over the means of production and destruction, unequal exposure to contamination in the workplace and neighborhoods, inequality in access to land and use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides and other contaminants and unequal access to state power. Marxists focus on the class structure, class inequalities and the class nature of the environmental disasters which take place. Marxists view ethnic and contemporary Indian movements, policies, leadership and relationships in relationship to the larger class system through the lens of class analysis. Marxists do not accept the liberal rhetoric and indigenous identity or ‘indigenista’ ideological assumption that Indian society is made up of homogeneous ‘communities’ bound together by harmonious undifferentiated ethnic interests without class divisions and conflicting class interests.

Today, even more than in the past, the deepening penetration of capitalist expansion and market relations, capitalist and socialist ideology and political parties, imperialist funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by US and European governments and the World Bank, have created class-polarized and divided Indian societies. ‘Communalism’ and communitarian ideology is the ideology of the rising Indian economic and political petit bourgeoisie articulated to subordinate the impoverished Indian peasantry to their struggle to share power with the established ‘European’ or mestizo bourgeoisie.

## Case Studies

To demonstrate the validity and relevance of the class analysis approach to ecology and the Indian movements, it is essential to empirically examine concrete contemporary cases of major environmental issues and existing Indian movements.

We have chosen several cases of environmental disasters, which have large-scale, long-term negative impacts, which are familiar to world public opinion. These include: Fish depletion in the waters off Eastern Canada, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the world wide food crises and global warming.

### **Fish Depletion**

Maritime scientists have published numerous studies documenting the catastrophic decline in fish stocks, the destruction of livelihood of millions of small-scale fishermen and the loss of maritime high protein food for tens of millions of poor people. The causes, according to liberal ecologists are 'over-fishing', 'contamination; and state subsidies - without identifying the class character of those responsible.

Over-fishing is the result of the concentration and centralization of the fishing industry in large-scale capitalist enterprises, which operate massive factory ships with 3-mile drag nets that drag the bottom of the sea, indiscriminately destroying fish habitats and pulling in undersize fish thereby undermining the reproductive process.

Contamination of fishing waters is the result of large-scale fish farms, the massive use of chemical fertilizers and the run-off of animal waste which destroy the delicately balanced coastal water ecology, as well as oil spills by big petroleum and shipping companies.

State subsidies financed the growth of large fleets with high technology fishing gear, while state de-regulation policies, favored big fishing companies over the interests of the small local artisan fisherfolk. In summary, the world-wide depletion of fishing stock is the result of environmental conditions induced by the operation of the capitalist system - namely the concentration of fishing industry in a powerful capitalist class, subsidized and promoted the state under capitalist control.

### **Hurricane Katrina**

In August 2006 Hurricane Katrina hurled winds of over 100 miles an hour through the Caribbean, hitting both Cuba and the Southern Gulf Coast of the United States, especially Louisiana and Mississippi. The consequences for the people of Cuba and those of the two southern states were vastly different: Several thousand poor, mostly black, United States citizens were killed, while in Cuba there were fewer than ten deaths. The difference in mortality was a product of the different social systems: Socialist Cuba has a highly organized and effective, centrally planned civil defense system which puts the highest priority in diagnosing, anticipating and mobilizing tens of thousands of civilian and military personnel and sending thousands of public buses and trucks to transport people and their farm animals to safety. The country is mobilized to prevent even a single Cuban death. In contrast, the capitalist United States Government placed higher priority in creating a repressive political apparatus (Homeland Security) which failed to anticipate the impact of the storm, abandoned hundreds of thousands of low income residents to the raging storm surge and flood waters and provided inadequate mobilization of transport, water supplies and food for the destitute. The results were catastrophic. In the aftermath of the hurricane, Cuba gave highest priority to rebuilding the homes of the displaced people; whereas in the

US, the capitalist state displaced the poor and rebuilt the urban landscape to suit the interests of multi-millionaire real estate speculators, commercial interests and the tourist elite.

While the hurricane was a 'natural' disaster, the unprecedented destruction in New Orleans was a consequence of the capitalist priorities in political repression (Homeland Security and the Patriot Act) over basic civil defense, commercial expansion and speculation over environmental safeguards and individual forced to survive on their own over state planning.

### **Food Crisis**

Liberal ecologists argue that natural disasters, excess state intervention in the market and over exploitation of land by peasants and farmers are responsible for the 'food crisis', defined as 'excess demand over supply' leading to rising prices. Marxists argue that 'free market' policies have resulted in the bankruptcy of millions of food producing peasants and farmers, the concentration of landownership in the hands of giant agro-business consortiums which specialize in exports of staples, thus decreasing the production and increasing the price of food for local popular consumption.

Neoliberalism has accelerated the normal capitalist process of concentration and centralization of the means of agricultural production (land, fertilizers, marketing, farm machinery); the profit motive has led to agro-business converting land use from food for the people to the production of agricultural commodities (sugar and corn) for automobile fuel (ethanol).

The conversion of food to ethanol has led to a massive invasion of finance capital into agriculture, and the demise and destitution of peasants and small farmers, lowering the purchasing power of food and creating large-scale hunger.

The over-exploitation of land is the result of the expansion of agro-exporters and their displacement of peasants into precarious laborers. The high price of agricultural inputs and the low income of peasants producing in low production regions means that small producers have few financial resources to rejuvenate the productivity of their land. The 'food crisis' is a direct consequence of the expansion of capitalist agriculture which determined what is produced (supply), the target market (demand) and the cost of reproduction (the price of inputs/profits).

### **Global Warming**

Liberal ecologists blame 'human consumption' of fossil fuel, the failure of state regulation, the private transport (automobiles) and manufacturing industries.

Class analysis provides a more comprehensive and specific diagnosis. In the first place it was the capitalist owners of the auto-industry in control of state transport policy which destroyed public transportation, eliminating subsidies and lowering budgetary funding for electric light rail while channeling billions of dollars into highways, bridges and road maintenance for private vehicles. The massive increase in CO<sub>2</sub> was a result of the power of privately owned automobile industry over publicly owned railroads. The widespread use of highly contaminating private auto was a result of advertising which promoted the purchase of big gas-guzzling automobiles depicting them as status symbols. The bigger the car, the higher the profit, the greater the contamination.

Private and public manufacturers who operate on the market principle of higher production, lower costs and higher returns have been the driving force of industrial pollution. It is not manufacturing per se that leads to pollution; technology, productive and organizational processes exist which can substantially reduce or eliminate pollution but they increase immediate costs and lower profit. State policies, which deregulate control over pollution levels, are the result of capitalist power. The problem of climate warmth is not the result of individual car owners or workers in polluting factories. The responsibility of pollution and high CO2 levels leading to climate change rests in the capitalist class and its state, which own and 'regulate' the means of pollution.

### **Indian Movement in Class Perspective**

Liberal writers on 'Indian movements' and 'Indian communities' wrongfully conceptualize them as homogeneous social phenomena, understating the degree of capitalist penetration, class differentiation and subsequent political polarization. Liberal writers adopt a simplistic bi-polar view in which homogeneous classless 'Indian communities' are compared to an undifferentiated 'white society'. On the basis of this classless conception, liberals argue in favor of so-called 'communitarian' politics in which micro-projects, based on class collaboration in which religion and tradition are treated as 'bonds' that link upwardly mobile petit bourgeois Indian political and business leaders to the mass of landless and impoverished subsistence peasants.

The Marxist analysis is based on several key theoretical assumptions and historical cases backed by empirical observations.

Capitalist penetration of Indian communities deepened pre-existing social differences, leading to the formation of multi-class society. A small group of Indians become 'intermediaries' between the masses of poor Indians and the local, regional, national and international markets. These intermediaries, speaking in the name of the 'Indian communities', in fact became the owners of transport (trucks), local commercial buyers and sellers, moneylenders, commercial farmers. Rather than sending their children to public schools taught in regional indigenous languages, their children went to private schools taught in Spanish in order to become professionals, politicians, lawyers and heads of NGOs specializing in 'indigenous' issues and linked to foreign foundations, government agencies and the World Bank.

These linkages between the upwardly mobile Indian petit bourgeois with national and international capital were not without tension, conflict and competition. Two sets of conflict emerged:

- 1) At one level between the mass of impoverished Indians exploited by agro-business through violent dispossession of communal/individual lands, exploitation of semi-serf (and even semi-slave) and wage labor and repression by the capitalist state;
- 2) at another level, the rising Indian petit bourgeois competed and confronted the mestizo/European national and international ruling class, which imposed limits on their access to economic resources, finance, credit, markets and land and limited and marginalized their political role. The goal of the bourgeois Indian elite was to share power with the 'white' oligarchy, not to overthrow them. Evo Morales provided the exact formula for class collaboration by declaring his intention to interact with the oligarchs as 'partners not bosses'. To open the doors to social mobility and sharing of wealth and power, the

marginalized petit bourgeois Indian minority needed organized mass power to threaten, pressure and force political negotiations with the intransigent ruling class. The politics of the Indian social movements reflect the dual class basis of Indian society: a revolutionary impoverished peasant mass base and an electoral-reformist petit bourgeois leadership.

Political influence and government office had two different meanings for each: For the Indian masses it meant a comprehensive integral land reform, public ownership on banking, trade and strategic economic sectors; for the petit bourgeois Indian it meant collaboration with the 'productive' agro-business sector and distribution of marginal, less fertile public lands, profit sharing between the Indian/Mestizo elite in the private sector and foreign-owned extractive sectors.

The class differentiation of Indian society and the overt and covert conflicting interests became clearer with the electoral advances of the Indian parties in Ecuador and Bolivia.

### **Ecuador: 2000-2003**

In 2000 the Ecuadorian Indian movement (CONAIE) played a leading role in the overthrow of the bourgeois government of ????. Three years later, in 2003 the Indian political party, Pachacuti, together with CONAIE formed an electoral alliance with a retired military officer, Lucio Gutierrez, and won the presidency. The ascendant Indian petit bourgeois leaders gained several ministries and many lesser positions under Gutierrez, including the Foreign Ministry and Agriculture. Within a year, the Gutierrez regime proceeded to privatize the oil fields, repress labor, defend and extend support to large agro-business exporters, foreign MNCs and banks and sign an intrusive security pact with the US. Pachacuti leaders in the government were forced to resign from office; CONAIE lost significant membership and was severely demoralized and fragmented. The mass of poor Indians felt betrayed by the political deals their petit-bourgeois leaders had made with the oligarchs.

### **Bolivia: 2003-2005**

Between 2003-2005 the Indian movement formed with factory workers, unemployed and informal workers of the city slums and militant miners to overthrow two bourgeois regimes: Sanchez de Losada (2003) and Carlos Mesa (June 2005). In both uprisings the petit bourgeois leadership of the Indian-led electoral part, MAS, or 'Movement to Socialism', played no role in the mass struggle. Instead they intervened to block a revolutionary transformation, imposing a neo-liberal substitute (Carlos Mesa) in 2003 and a caretaker bourgeois regime (Rodriguez) in July 2005.

Evo Morales, his party - MAS and his followers in the Indian social movements channeled most activity into electoral politics culminating in his successful electoral campaign for the presidency. The social class, property and income inequalities between the 'white European' ruling class and the Indian majority in Bolivia has remained intact. What did change was the social inequalities within the Indian society as a whole new strata of former Indian social movement (NGO) leaders received second level government positions and subsidies for restraining and channeling their followers into supporting the Morales government. Numerous petit bourgeois Indian/mestizo lower level professionals occupied government offices and rose in wealth and influence. The mass of Indian peasants were demobilized from the streets and re-mobilized according to the tactical needs of the Morales' regime as it negotiated with the big bourgeoisie. Morales' accommodation of the traditional ruling class led to their rapid recovery of power following the insurrection of May/June 2005. It did

not lead to an agreement with the ruling class to 'share power' with the 'Indian President' Morales.

The issue was not inequality of land ownership, which was never questioned by the governing MAS regime: 100 'European' families still owned 80% of the arable land after 3 years of Morales' 'Indian presidency'. The question was one of sharing political power, state revenues and a recognition of co-government between the 'flexible' (often bent over) government of an Indian petit bourgeois leader and the 'intransigent' (thoroughly racist and brutal) European big bourgeoisie. It became a struggle between a petit-bourgeois Indian 'liberal democracy' and an oligarchic 'fascist' European regional government and middle class social movements.

Faced with fascist threats to eliminate political freedoms, liberal racial equality (constitutional citizen rights), access to individual social mobility and local autonomy and right to collective organization, the Indian peasants and working class masses overwhelmingly backed the liberal Morales regime against the advance of the fascist ruling oligarchs. As a result, the real divergence of class interests between the property-less and impoverished Indian masses and the upwardly mobile pro-capitalist Indian petit bourgeois professionals and leaders were subordinated to the common struggle against the racially exclusive fascist big capitalist regional power bloc.

Clearly the case studies of Ecuador and Bolivia demonstrate that 'communitarianism' is an ideology of the rising Indian petit bourgeois eager to undermine an intensive intra-Indian class struggle. The defining reality of Indian society in Bolivia and Ecuador is that it is class divided - one that poses a continual tension and conflict between a petit bourgeoisie struggling with the larger capitalist society to join the elite and share power and a mass of impoverished Indians without property or influence over state policy. In summary: There are two class struggles, which are intertwined, one led by the petit bourgeois Indian professionals to consolidate a liberal democracy backed by the masses mystified by religious and cultural symbolism and another led by independent, downwardly mobile, class conscious Indian workers and peasants against both the European ruling class and their own Indian petit bourgeois leaders.

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion suggests that both the ecology and Indian movements are not ideologically or socially homogenous. Underneath the veneer of common goals against ecological destruction and exploitation of indigenous peoples are two diametrically contrasting ideologies - liberalism and Marxism - based on competing and conflicting social interests and political strategies. Marxist class analysis highlights the centrality of property ownership, specifically the class nature of the ownership of the means of production and control over state power as central to understanding the destruction of the environment and the complex politics of Indian society. We reject the notion of a 'classless' approach promoted by liberal ecologists and ideologues of Indian communitarianism as intellectually limiting and politically disastrous. These cannot create a sustainable environment and cannot provide the material basis for the social liberation of the poor and Indian majorities in Latin America. Ecology and Indian liberation are essentially and inextricable part of the class struggle.

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