

"Please Mr. Bebbington, don't come here and tell us what to do"¹

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Betsy Olson's and Andrew Sayer's article hits close to home. I have been, indeed am, deemed a modernist development geographer by colleagues, and in recent work in Perú have been criticized for ethnocentric meddling. When that comes in conjunction with our work having to run the gauntlet of legal review, with being denigrated in public interviews ("just because a gringo from Cambridge wrote something are we going to take it as being as sacred as the Bible"),² and with dismissive comments from senior public officials, I sometimes wonder whether "embracing the normative" is worth the candle. Of course, these hassles are minor in comparison with those faced by other friends and colleagues working on the same topics as us – a Jesuit colleague, researcher and friend was savaged by Peru's right wing press and elites and dismissed as nothing less than a "false prophet" by the Peruvian President as the (Opus Dei) Cardinal of Perú merely looked on, saying nothing. More recently (March 2008), Peruvian activist colleagues and local authorities involved in the mining conflict I discuss below, have been accused of being terrorists linked to Sendero Luminoso and the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru. Such accusations are, in Peru, very dangerous (as well as deeply pernicious and irresponsible) and put in due context any criticisms that the political right may have made of me.

The work in question addresses the relationships between mining, local development and democracy, and the thus-far most contentious part of this research has focused on a region affected by a mining project executed by a UK based "resource development" company. This specific part of the research has been conducted in conjunction with a UK based solidarity organization, the Peru Support Group as well as with Oxfam UK's office in Perú.³ The criticism of meddling came from the director in Peru of the Chinese consortium⁴ that in early 2007 acquired majority ownership of the mining company – the title paraphrases his challenge to me in a public meeting in Lima discussing our work.⁵ Meanwhile the criticism of ethnocentrism came from an economic advisor to the regional government of Piura, the department in which this project was to be developed – an administration that is controlled by the ruling party and fully endorses the expansion of

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² Antonio Brack, 2007: Interview on Intercambio Rio Blanco, 31 August, 2007.

³ See: www.perusupportgroup.org.uk

⁴ By his own account, the director had previously been Peruvian ambassador in China.

⁵ A meeting of the Grupo de Dialogo sobre Minería y Desarrollo Sostenible, meeting on May 30th, 2007.

the mineral economy in Piura, as a means (*inter alia*) of generating the tax revenue it requires for its proposed public works and infrastructural programmes.⁶ Our ethnocentricity lay, he insisted, in our use of an analytical framework that in large measure traced its origins to Sen's work on capabilities. The fact that we had done this constituted one more exercise of Northern power on the South.

Of the very many issues raised by these experiences I want to focus our attention on those that derive from viewing it as an attempt to, in the terms of Olson and Sayer's five closing questions, "relate the general ideas of normative theory to the particulars of concrete cases"?

In response to complaints registered by local organizations regarding conflicts and (what they viewed to be) abuses surrounding the implementation of this mining project, the Peruvian Ombudswoman's Office had opened an inquiry into the case. That inquiry concluded that the local population's constitutionally defined rights to secure property, to informed participation, and to a healthy and secure environment had all been infringed and put at risk (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006). In arguing this position, the Ombudswoman had not yet stepped into the terrain opened by Betsy and Andrew's paper – instead she was making a judgment about the effects of mining expansion in the highlands of Piura on the basis of constitutional and legal argument. Other actors, however, *had* moved the issue onto more explicitly normative terrain. In their efforts to counter such legally based views, parts of central government, the ruling party, the mining sector and national and regional elites insisted that mineral expansion should be evaluated above all in terms of its contribution to something called *development* – and on this basis, they argued, mineral led development was *better* than any form of development based on current forms of land use in the area. It would generate more wealth, reduce poverty more effectively, and would be able to do so while protecting the environment. The legitimacy of such arguments rested partly on their technical coherence (what was the quality of the evidence to suggest that mining would have such effects?) but mostly on their normative claims about what constituted a "good" form of development. Implicitly these positions suggested that this normative judgment trumped any legal argument about the project, because this variant of "good development" was worth more than legality.

Ploughing into this debate – a political choice on our part – thus required, in addition to technical analysis, the elaboration of a distinct, and reasoned normative argument from which to engage these ideas of "good development". Given that the discussion had been moved onto the terrain of *development*, the issue became an argument over what might be taken to constitute such development and whether the views espoused by elites were analytically and normatively defensible. In Olson and Sayer's terminology, whether or not we the authors felt that the mine companies' and state's behaviour had been oppressive (a point on which the lawyers would anyway have demanded our silence), there were dimensions of this experience which certainly did not enhance human "flourishing." If we were to argue and document this view, and engage elites, government and the company in a way that would not give them space to dismiss us as

⁶ Criticisms made at the public launch of our report in Piura, Perú, on May 18th, 2007.

leftist radicals (our Jesuit colleague has also been denounced as one of several "*curas rojos*," pinko-priests), we had to elaborate a conceptually argued normative position that would posit development as the pursuit of particular, albeit still generic and abstract, notions of well-being and in this way suggest that this specific experience of mineral expansion⁷ had not fostered something that could legitimately be called *development*.

So what is the point? Responding to Olson and Sayer's questions, the argument here is to agree with them that we cannot "identify anything as 'oppressive' if we cannot say what constitutes well-being or justice" and that radical geography *has* to be concerned with thinking about what constitutes human well-being. Olson and Sayer give a clear conceptual argument as to why this is so – the suggestion here is that concrete cases of real-world political debate on issues on which radical geographers work likewise demand such normative positions. The caveat, though – as Betsy and Andrew also argue – is that these positions must be carefully and analytically argued. In response to such an approach, elites and bearers of authoritarian practices might still end up calling us ethnocentric: but in this instance, might that not be a very good thing?

References

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⁷ We were not arguing that all forms of expansion in the mineral economy would necessarily have the same effects and lead to the same normative judgments.