



*Brújula*  
Volume 11 • 2017

## Travesía Crítica

---

### *The Role of Elites in Pink-Tide Environmental Governance*

**M. Mercedes Dollard**  
University of Pittsburgh

Bull, Benedicte, and Mariel Aguilar-Støen. *Environmental Politics in Latin America: Elite Dynamics, the Left Tide and Sustainable Development*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015. 219 pp.

Bull and Aguilar-Støen examine the dynamics of environmental politics in pink-tide governments in Latin America to better understand how they have dealt with the constraints of weak state institutions when confronting the economic interests of the traditionally powerful, nature-exploiting societal elites.

Presenting case studies in eight countries, all related to the exploitation of natural resources, the editors evaluate several issues: the degree in which the pink tide has shifted the elites, the contribution of that shift toward the

implementation (or not) of policies of sustainability, the nature of new alliances and rivalries between old and new elites, and the relation between those elites, non-elites and subaltern groups.

The editors' objectives for the book, as well as a concise summary of what the reader should expect in each chapter, are explained in Chapter 1, which serves as an introduction to the text. Chapter 2 restates the editor's hypothesis – i.e., that the degree of policy shift towards a sustainable development model depends on how elites changed and on how those changes affected the dynamics between elites and non-elite groups – in response to a specific question: “[W]hy, given the political shift experienced in Latin America over the last decades, has there not been a more profound policy shift towards a sustainable development model?” (15) Core concepts such as *elites*, *development*, and *institutions* are analyzed and defined to avoid any misunderstanding of their use in this project.

Chapters 3 through 6 conform Part I of the book, in which case-studies related to agriculture and biotechnology are analyzed. Chapter 3 exposes the difficulty of the Funes administration to implement new environmental agricultural governance in El Salvador due to its weak negotiating position in relation to potential investors in a context of deep structural inequality. Chapter 4 looks at the prevalence of large landholding and genetically modified soy production in Bolivia, in spite of Morales' discourse. Chapter 5 explores the link behind the Kirchner hostility in Argentina towards agricultural production and the farmers' move towards genetically modified soy, as well as the lack of public

discussion regarding GMOs and environmental issues arising from certain agricultural practices, such as the non-tilling of the soil and the use of glyphosate. Chapter 6 explains the reasons behind Correa's change-of-mind in Ecuador with respect to the use of genetically modified soy.

Part II, on mining, comprises chapters 7 through 9. Chapter 7 looks at the effect of new actors, such as Chinese companies, on how mining is carried out in South America – specifically in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Brazil – and at why the new discourse of the center-left is not reflected in new, sustainable environmental policies. Chapter 8 deals with a study on a mining conflict in Guatemala, which is not an analysis of the environmental performance of a pink-tide government (because Guatemala did not have one) but an analysis on the role of the elites in such cases. Chapter 9 presents a comparative analysis on mining in Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile, in which four different environmental discursive positions are identified among the elites: a) responsible mining without decreasing production, b) efficient use of water and energy, c) sustainable use, and d) a search for alternative options.

Part III, on forestry, encompasses the last three chapters of the book. Chapter 10 looks at how marginal groups have become outsiders in deforestation projects due to their lacking in technical knowledge. Chapter 11 refers to a case-study in Brazil that showcases the lack of continuity in the environmental policies of the last two pink-tide governments, which has reduced deforestation but has also fomented negative policies, such as the approval of GMOs, the lift of

the restrictions on land use, the creation of enormous dams. Chapter 12 is the final chapter, in which the editors present their conclusions.

Bull and Aguilar-Støen findings indicate that the arrival to power of the pink-tide governments has led to a shift in the Latin American elites, with a positive environmental side thanks to “the emergence of new elite groups with an environmental background (sometimes forming a technocratic elite) and an elite reorientation towards greater sensitivity towards the views of the subaltern” (206). However, they also point out that this shift has not been extensive enough to truly bring “the environmental concerns, visions, values and interests of marginalized or subaltern groups to the forefront” (212), due to power struggles that lie outside of the environment realm.

That “outside of the environmental realm,” then, continues to be crucial. *Environmental Politics in Latin America* shows the reader that, even under governments with strong socialist tendencies, Latin American state institutions keep failing at being a reliable force against elitist influence on policy making. In spite of the people’s will as expressed through their vote, and of a generally increased awareness of the current environmental crisis, the region’s exploitation of the non-human continues to be in the hands of those few with major economic interests at play, whose interests have been incompatible both with sustainable development and with the interests of the local, subaltern peoples since 1492.

In a system of environmental governance that continues to run without solid mechanisms of representation and accountability, Bull’s and Aguilar-

Støen's book may bring a bit of optimism by suggesting that the presence of new "environmentally friendly" elites could lead to the implementation of sound, lasting environmental policies. The skeptical reader, however, may wonder how much of that environmental friendliness is real and how much of it is just another marketing strategy – after all, the new elites also benefit economically from their "eco-friendly" position, which is often not as eco-friendly as they portray it to be. In response to that skepticism, it may be useful to compare the role of new elites versus the role of environment-advocating NGOs on environmental policy, as the latter (at least in theory) should have no economic interests of their own at stake. What degree of environmental protection does each group seek in the form of new legislation (or in the form of resistance to a change in legislation)? Are these groups in opposition to each other? Who benefits economically from their pressuring of state institutions, and who is relegated to the losing end? Are the environmental policies that they propose backed up by thorough research on their long-term effects? These and other similar questions should shed light on the true degree of the new elites' commitment to sustainability.

The case studies in *Environmental Politics in Latin America* are thoroughly researched, and the layman language in which they are explained makes the information accessible not just to the academic but to anyone who may be interested in Latin American politics and environmental issues. The book also clarifies many political issues and situations that have been prevalent in the

news, offering a perspective that is much more objective than what is usually found in mainstream news outlets.