

AnthropoSouth: Latin American Oil-Based Futures in the Development Century

(1920-1975)

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Could oil be the energy of the future, helping emancipate humans and avoid the squandering of natural resources? This question sounds absurd in the Anthropocene, characterized by the destructive impact of human activities, in particular fossil fuel consumption, on the planet's ecology. However, it makes sense if we want to understand how humanity got there in the first place, given that most people before the 1970s did not know the causal link between carbon emissions and climate change. Because they were interested exclusively in the capitalist logics of the industrial world's elites, historians of energy so far have assessed past transitions along a cost/benefit analysis. Yet authors looking at the rise of coal, oil, or electricity in the Global South reveal deeper ethical motivations to these processes, such as the construction of strong post-colonial states, a sense of collective property of resources, and popular tales of energy flows as drivers of democratization or even revolution. A nonjudgmental approach that consists in reconstructing the future of the past can help understand what collective imaginaries drove these energy transitions.

Through the example of Latin American oil, the aim of my project is to research the role of fossil energies in designing the future of the developing world. How did patterns of fossil dependence emerge and develop in Latin America and how does this qualify the latter's contribution on a global scale to energy development, the exhaustion of mineral resources, and ultimately climate change? These issues will be addressed by using several scales of analysis to compare and connect the history of different national projects of petroleum development. The project will also reconstruct the transnational circulation of ideas, practices, and people involved in petroleum technology and politics throughout Latin America, and draw a general, statistically informed panorama of Latin American oil transitions. This way, the research will expose the historical construction of a regional model which, in spite of national exceptions, uneven chronologies and local oppositions, generally came down to strengthening resource sovereignty. The timeframe is a short "Latin American development century," which covers processes of oil-fueled national development from the first nationalization debates in the 1920s to the global oil shock in the mid-1970s.

Following the discourse of resource sovereignty that molded energy ideas in the region, my project addresses the history of political emancipation, economic decolonization and nation-making that underpinned the rise of oil markets. It focuses on the concept of self-sufficiency, which Latin Americans often used to justify the increase of oil extraction and technologies, implying that oil should be given priority for domestic industrialization. I argue that oil in this post-colonial context was embedded in a form of early "sustainable development" thinking, being meant here as the idea that Latin American countries should rationalize the use of natural resources to build a prosperous future as independent nations over time. Understanding the popularity of petroleum in 20th century Latin America requires an exercise of cultural empathy for an emancipatory vision of the national future, in which self-sufficiency, economic progress, industrialization, and conservation were intertwined values.

This approach should help to build a place for Latin America as a continent in the Anthropocene narrative. By shedding light on the representation of past energy futures by anticolonial ideologies, this new geographic perspective should be of considerable help in pluralizing the historical narratives of human-induced geological and climatic change.