

Stefano Tijerina: “The image of Canada as a benevolent, diplomatic, humanitarian and pacifist nation is now at risk”

An interview with Stefano Tijerina, adjunct assistant professor of history, political science, and economics at the University of Maine, on the history of Canadian extractive industries in Colombia.*

Since Stephen Harper arrived to power, Canada has become the site of practices that undermine the production and dissemination of scientific evidence that is not aligned with the economic objectives of the government (Tiki-Toki.com 2015). In particular, the Harper government is suspicious of all research that questions the goal of making Canada an energy superpower. Throughout the country, academic institutions have been shut down, research programs have been discontinued, and scientists working in federal government institutions have been dismissed. Likewise, the research budget has been significantly cut back, and restrictions have been applied to the dissemination of results through policies that seek to control the access of the media and the public to federal scientists (Cheadle 2010; Nature.com 2012). Many have seen these actions as violations of academic freedom and expression, which has led to the mobilization of scholars (Politics of Evidence 2015) and the circulation of vast amounts of related information through the press, the Internet (Dupuis 2014), radio (CBC Radio 2014), and television (*The fifth estate* 2014).

But to what extent are these practices exclusive to the Canadian context? And what has been the role of Canada in exporting them to other parts of the world? To address these questions, I interviewed Stefano Tijerina, professor at the University of Maine,

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who has done extensive research on the relationship between Canada and Colombia, primarily shaped by private sector interests and matters of political economy. In his forthcoming book entitled *In Business We Trust: Canada and Colombia 1809–2002*, which will be published by the University of Toronto Press, Tijerina shows that mining and oil, as in the late 19th century, are once again shaping the bilateral relation between Colombia and Canada. Throughout his research, Tijerina has become familiar with the strategies currently used by Canadian corporations in Colombia—companies registered on the Toronto Stock Exchange, such as the Vancouver-based Eco Oro projects, the Toronto-based corporation Gran Colombia Gold, and the company Anglo Gold Ashanti, which partnered with Vancouver-based B2Gold (Gutierrez 2015)—that involve the use of local military and paramili-

tary forces and other intimidation tactics as means to secure resources and displace local populations from strategic geographical areas (Tijerina 2014).

Lina Pinto: Since 2006, in front of different international audiences, Harper has referred to Canada as an energy superpower. What has this meant internationally?

Stefano Tijerina: Under Harper’s administration, Canada has been declared an energy superpower not only on a hemispheric level, but globally. The government has supported and given green lights to Canadian extractive companies to “conquer the world,” channeling revenues from businesses in Africa, South America, Central America, and Asia. In the US, the energy company Transcanada is leading the extractive agenda. There, Canadian industries have projects in the state of Maine, in the midwest, and in Alaska. Today, Canada is one of the top five suppliers of foreign investment to the Colombian economy; and today Canadian mining, oil, paper, and telecommunications companies control a large part of the Colombian economy. However, with the recent decline in oil prices in the international market, the interests of Canada in Colombia have begun to be reassessed, showing the utilitarian nature of this bilateral relationship. If the prices of gold and oil become insignificant, Colombia will become insignificant to Canada, leaving behind abandoned infrastructures, devastated ecosystems and ruined communities, without any kind of accountability. Canada is washing its hands of it, and leaving.

LP: In Canada, the government is said to be waging war against sci-

ence through the muzzling of scientists. On the streets, protest signs read “No science, no evidence, no truth, no democracy.” Why are people saying this?

ST: This is, in my view, the reality of an energy policy supported by an institutional, academic, and curricular agenda, where everything that does not align with the government’s project ends up being stigmatized as “non-science.” It is almost a copy of the neoliberal model developed by the United States, seeking to put an end to academic work that does not directly serve the economic and industrial development envisioned by Harper’s government. For example, the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS), the main academic organization specializing in Canadian studies in the US, became a victim of Harper’s policy after making a critical analysis of Canada from the outside. Its budget was cut after 22 years of full support from the Canadian government, which forced the organization to reinvent itself in order to survive. In general terms, I think we can speak of a model that was generated in the United States and has been imported and adapted to Canadian interests.

LP: How is this reflected in other countries—for example, in Colombia, where there is a large presence of Canadian extractive industries?

ST: Recently, for example, the news reported (Caracol Radio 2015) that the Canadian government will start funding and working directly with the Colombian National Service of Learning (SENA) on generating a curriculum to train technicians for mining and other operations that Canadian companies are doing in Colombia. The SENA is only relevant to Canada as long as this institution contributes to advancing the Canadian agenda. In other words, Canada is working to develop the in-country human capital needed to exploit Colombia’s natural resources. There is also the case of the EAN University, which now has a direct link with the province of Que-

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bec to develop academic programs that support the economic and industrial interests of Canada in Colombia, mainly, mining and petroleum extraction (University of Quebec at Chicoutimi 2015). Another example is a periodical on bilateral relations between Canada and Colombia, *Perspectivas Colombo Canadienses*, published by the University of Rosario. This publication is sponsored by Harper’s government and seeks to support the mining activities of the binational agenda. All this has been emerging in the last 15 or 16 years, since people started talking about a free trade agreement between Colombia and Canada, which was signed in 2011. These examples show that there is a systemic, long-term policy to intervene in the Colombian system so that it meets Canadian needs and interests.

LP: At the international level, Canada is generally seen as a “benevolent” nation. Do you think this image is being questioned with the presence and the *modus operandi* of Canadian extractive industries in countries like Colombia?

ST: Yes, definitely. The idea of the “benevolent nation” based on which Canada became an economic power during the 20th century is at risk because its international policies increasingly resemble the imperialistic strategies of the United States. The image of Canada as a benevolent, diplomatic, humanitarian, and pacifist nation, which was built in the minds of academics, the media, and multilateral institutions, is now at risk. Today, in rural areas of Colombia, where people have become victims of forced displacement by Canadian companies, Canada is seen not as a benevolent

nation but as a quite aggressive and violent one. I think Harper has not realized yet that his policy is putting in danger Canada’s reputation, which nourished Canada internationally for almost a century.

LP: In Colombia there is public concern about the negative impacts that extractive industries have on the environment and health. However, the troubled relationship between these economic activities and the production of knowledge is usually not taken into account. What can be done in the Colombian context to cope with the crisis of evidence?

ST: The best way to fill the gap between economic activity and knowledge production is to investigate and disseminate our findings widely. In Colombia, research funds to investigate these issues are scarce and, if funding is available, it only supports uncritical works that back extractive agendas. There should be more funding for academics to do research and write about the cultural, economic, environmental, social, and health consequences of extractive activities in Colombia. Another problem is that the NGOs that try to do this kind of work are often branded as anti-systemic or anti-state institutions.¹

LP: In Canada, the public is aware of the negative impacts that extractive industries have on the environment and health within the Canadian territory. However, little is said about the international impacts of Canadian industries around the globe. How should the concerns

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and mobilizations around evidence in Canada integrate an international dimension?

ST: As a first step, awareness has to be raised. If Canadians could be made more aware of Canadian international policy, people would mobilize more forcefully against the international strategies that are jeopardizing Canada's "benevolent" nation image. Just as Americans are experts at hiding their imperialist agendas from their own people, restricting school education to domestic and local subjects, Canadians know very little about what Canadian industries do outside the country. 🍁

NOTES

- * Professor Stefano Tijerina, Department of Political Science, University of Maine <http://umaine.edu/polisci/faculty-and-staff/stefano-tijerina-2/> (accessed July 23, 2015).
- 1. In the Colombian context, this has a special connotation because of the 50-year-long armed conflict between the Colombian state and leftist guerrilla groups. Scholars and NGOs producing works that go against the interests of extractive industries –and other types of industrial projects affecting rural communities and the environment– are often stigmatized as partisans of guerrilla groups, even though they are unrelated.

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