# Is it Really Different This Time?

The political ecology of Bolivia's state-led lithium industrialization for post-carbon futures

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## Background

Mainstream discourse favors market-led solutions to the climate crisis. Lithium-ion batteries are essential for decarbonization. Bolivia, one of the poorest nation-states in Latin America, possesses the world's largest reserves of lithium in its Salar de Uyuni. The Bolivian "eco-socialist" state plans to exploit lithium under a state-owned framework as a means to break from its (neo)colonial history.

## Research Questions

- At what social and ecological cost will the global capitalist economy decarbonize, and what does that entail politically?
- Will exploiting the world's largest lithium reserve be reminiscent of a long history of extraction, which has left the majority of Bolivians impoverished and ecosystems depleted?

## Methods

Analysis through the field of political ecology, focusing on the relationship between power structures, ecology, and production.

Theory and literature to build on political ecology and contextualize natural resource (lithium) extraction in the global South (Bolivia).

Use a blend of reports, academic work, and expert solicitation via semi-structured interviews to inform case study.

## Key Takeaways

Socio-Environmental impacts:

1. Industrial-scale water consumption may disrupt the water balance.
2. Chemical waste produced and discharged may pollute the ecosystem and impact neighboring economic activity.
3. These impacts threaten livelihoods of surrounding Indigenous communities

Due to the historical conditioning of Bolivia's political economic infrastructure, its "100% state-led industrialization of lithium" has been compromised by the need to rely on foreign capital and technology.

The commodification of lithium has led to intra-communal conflict pertaining to unequal distribution of economic benefits. Further, local grass-root movements find themselves fighting multinational corporation once again.

**500K GALLONS**

It is estimated that around 500,000 gallons of water are needed for every ton of lithium extracted

**EVERY 1% INCREASE**

It is also estimated that for every 1% increase in electric vehicles sales, demand for lithium increases by 70,000 Mt per year

## Conclusions

- For global North environmentalists & sustainable development pundits, lithium is the linchpin of a post-carbon future; in Bolivia, it's the next resource promising economic growth & development.
- Bolivia's position in the world-system compels it to engage in extractivism: it's a reconciliation of ecological degradation on the one hand & economic growth to fund social policies on the other.
- Sustainable development needs to engage critically with capitalist production, economic growth, & colonial history; otherwise, it risks reproducing the same systems that led to the climate crisis.

**References & Further Readings**


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