Making Dispossession ‘Ethical’: Modern Maya-Q’eqchi’ Land Struggles, Canadian Mining & the Role of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

In Guatemala, Maya activists and their supporters describe the growing presence of Canadian mining interests as the ‘4th conquest’ – after the 1524 Spanish invasion, the 19th century establishment of the plantation economy, and the 1960-1996 internal armed conflict that culminated in state-directed terror and genocide in the countryside. The transformation of land to ‘property,’ through the violent dispossession of indigenous people, is central to these ‘conquests.’ Contemporary neo-liberalized mining law and development strategies continue the trend through the granting of mineral and property rights without consultation with, or consent of, affected communities. In this presentation, based on field work in Guatemala in 2008 and 2010, we examine the various legal and illegal ways in which the Guatemalan state, companies, and transnational organizations strip Maya indigenous communities of title and access to land as well as the ongoing resistance to such incursions. Using Goldcorp, Inc. and HudBay Minerals, Inc. operations as illustrative cases, we draw from critical development studies to examine the ways in which the community’s right to say ‘no’ is excluded from modern corporate- and government-sponsored negotiations over dispossession through the discourse of ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR) and ethical investment. These cases reveal a gulf between affected communities’ conceptions of property rights, including the right to free, prior and informed consent over mining development, and the interests of Canadian mining companies whose interests lie beneath their feet.

Keywords: Guatemala; Canada; indigenous; natural resources; development; property; corporate social responsibility

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