

Resource Fever

In recent clashes over mining, both Canadians and Peruvians look rapacious.

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**The Devil's Curve:
A Journey into Power and Profit
at the Amazon's Edge**
Arno Kopecky
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WHEN A YOUNG, UNEMPLOYED, leftist-leaning Canadian journalist—as Arno Kopecky describes himself—heads off to South America to investigate a shootout between the Peruvian military and native people protesting against foreign oil and mining operations, you know someone is going to get a serious drubbing. If a lot of the companies in question are Canadian, and if Canadian government fingerprints are all over the disaster—in the form of a free trade agreement and aid programs “helping” the government with its mining legislation—then you might well anticipate a protracted rant aimed at Canadian mining firms and Ottawa.

That, surprisingly, is not what you get in Kopecky's *The Devil's Curve: A Journey into Power and Profit at the Amazon's Edge*. Kopecky has, in fact, told several tales in a single book. One is about how a murderous clash on a stretch of Peruvian highway known as the Curva del Diablo came to pass. The second, interspersed with the first, is about Colombia, the FARC, the drug cartels, corruption, violence and the displacement of four million campesinos and Indians from their land in the name of peace and progress. Underpinning these are four themes. The first is the struggle for development in poor countries where there is a fast-growing spread between rich and poor. The second is about the clash between native people living in pristine, untrammelled lands and an outside world with very different ideas from theirs about progress. A third theme deals with the global rush for oil and minerals, the impatience of corporations and politicians with anyone who might thwart their ambition and the inevitable confrontation that has played out so many times in so many countries over the past century that one might be

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forgiven for expecting by now a more sophisticated approach to plunder.

And the fourth is Kopecky's own story about his travels through a series of South American jungles and towns and slums. It is the personal that makes what could have been a turgid polemic an adventure instead, populated by a cast of characters ranging from the exotic to the extraordinary. A police official in Peru: “The comandante had a voice like a coal mine and a headful of thick, greased-back mulatto hair you'd expect from a man in his position.” A gang member in Medellín: “James Richard sat against a wall. Half his head was shaved and the other half ran wild, a profusion of jet-black hair that reached to just above his right eye. His eyes—they were crossed, I realized with a start—were staring at me while seeming to look at the horizon. He, too, had been shot in the head, five years ago, at the age of fourteen.”

The Devil's Curve fits nicely into a genre of travel writing populated by books like Tim Cahill's *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh* and Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East*. It is also a kind of detective story in which Kopecky tries to piece together not only what happened at Devil's Curve in June 2009, but why.

The incident was part of a broader set of protests, the culmination of widespread anger and frustration at environmental damage caused by invasive oil and mining operations, without consultation

and without tangible returns in local services or infrastructure. For seven weeks, tens of thousands of Amazonian Indians had blocked roads and rivers across Peru, closing down an oil pipeline and calling for the repeal of decrees enacted as part of the country's free trade agreement with the United States. Indigenous communities under the leadership of AIDSESP (the Interethnic Association of Development of the Peruvian Rainforest) wanted an end to laws allowing the government to sell community lands for logging, oil and mining purposes. Although the Peruvian Congress did repeal two of the laws and promised to examine and vote on others, it never did.

In the case of the Awajun at Devil's Curve, who could see the devastation caused by gold mining in lands adjacent to theirs just across the border in Ecuador, it was about the cavalier attitude of a government that had ignored their concerns,

demonized their leaders, gutted their constitutional land guarantees and that, after 2008, simply parcelled out huge swathes of their territory to foreign mining firms and their Peruvian surrogates. Tensions grew, and on June 5 Peruvian president Alan García called in the troops.

Kopecky describes the results: “Once the smoke cleared and traffic resumed and those natives who weren't injured or in jail melted back into the jungle, the bodies left behind were counted and identified. Thirty-three people had died. Only three were Awajun. Six more were civilian rioters. The other twenty-four were soldiers.”

The Awajun claimed that many more of their people had been killed, and at first it seems that Kopecky's mission is to expose a cover-up. He talks to native leaders, politicians, the *policía*, a much respected *Defensoría del Pueblo*—an ombudsman. In the end, however, he accepts the official numbers while musing with one of his newfound Peruvian friends about the clash of civilizations. Misunderstanding is so commonplace that there are even problems with what seems like simple, straightforward translation. The word for 20 in Awajun, his friend explains, has nine syllables; it would take all day to pronounce a million.

“How do you conceive of something you don't have a name for?” Kopecky asks. “Small wonder the Awajun are so notoriously vague when the conversation involved quantities—distances, elapsed

time, crowd sizes all involved epic margins of error. Was this why so many insisted hundreds of their brethren had been killed at Devil's Curve?"

In the end, truth about the numbers is not what matters; it is something bigger, and Kopecky describes it without the rose-coloured glasses through which such issues are so often viewed. He describes, for example, the return to Peru of Alberto Pizango, the AIDESEP president who spent a year in exile in Nicaragua after the Devil's Curve incident. Now Pizango is back, making a speech on the very spot one year later. The throng is immense at what has become a fairground packed with food vendors, non-governmental organizations and "a handful of pontificators" denouncing the Peruvian army. Pizango appears at last on the main stage and speaks of the vision and philosophy of his people:

The West seeks to impose upon us its cult of the individual. This vision is one of permanent struggle, not only with our fellow men but against the natural world ... By contrast, our philosophy strives for harmony, seeking always to maintain the balance of a system in which the diverse forms of life, be they plant, animal or cosmic, do not fight or deny life to one another but support and complement each other ... Brothers and sisters! This is why the fight of the indigenous peoples is not just a national fight but a global one. We are fighting for the life of the planet.

"And so on and so forth," Kopecky says. "Not a bad speech, despite the platitudes, and very well received, especially considering there were almost no natives in the audience." And yet, he asks, are the Indians really any better than the industrialized world when it comes to exploiting rather than revering nature? "Or were their numbers just so small they hadn't got around to devastating the natural world? They didn't hesitate to throw plastic chairs into the jungle or plastic wrappers onto the ground; their appreciation of the internal combustion engine was just as great as ours; their desire for money was every bit as keen."

Perhaps the difference between "them" and "us" he says, is their physical proximity to wells and rivers and mines where they are directly exposed to contamination and despoliation, where they are ideally placed to become spokespeople for the environment. "Maybe the *indigenas* had become what they claimed to be. Perhaps, through the power of the spoken word, they were defending the 'lungs of the world.'"

As the chapters sped by, I anticipated Kopecky's inevitable trip to a mine site, his discovery of arsenic or mercury poisoning, an interview with a venal—possibly Canadian—mine manager and perhaps a corporate confrontation back home. No such thing ever came, and as the last chapters unfolded, I realized that they were not necessary. In countries like Peru the oil spills and the pollution and the environmental disruption are so widespread, the violence so commonplace and the Canadian imprint so ubiquitous that they hang like a dark cloud over the entire story. Some 60 percent of the world's mineral companies are publicly listed or headquartered in Canada and more than 50 percent of all mining and exploration equity financing was raised in this country in 2011.

That is one side of the coin. Now the other: Peru has 70 million hectares of rainforest, the largest

part of the Amazon basin outside of Brazil, and at the time of the Devil's Curve encounter, 70 percent of it had been granted or offered as concessions to foreign mining, oil, gas and logging companies. The Cordillera del Cóndor, an isolated arm of the Andes, home to the Awajun and one of the most biologically diverse regions on earth, is also full of gold, and when the government gave vast exploration rights to a Canadian mining firm, conflict between the company and the local inhabitants led in a straight line three years later to the Devil's Curve.

In all of this, the Canadian government has been more than slightly complicit. In 2007, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade organized a series of roundtable discussions on the role of Canadian mining compan-

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ies abroad. The discussions were a response to growing concern about the increasing number of Canadian companies involved in violent labour disputes, environmental disasters and political unrest abroad. An ombudsman who could arbitrate disputes—perhaps not unlike the *Defensoria del Pueblo* in Peru—was proposed, but the Harper government ignored that idea and others. In 2009, a private member's bill proposed giving the Canadian government authority to investigate complaints against resource companies operating abroad, and to withhold public money from offenders. It was narrowly defeated during the last Harper minority government.

The challenge that the Harper government set for itself then and now was not how to rein in delinquent Canadian mining firms abroad; it was quite the opposite. In 2008, the Canadian International Development Agency cut off bilateral assistance to eight very poor African countries, along with Sri Lanka and Cambodia. The explanation was that it had been done on the advice of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and a need to focus Canadian assistance on fewer countries. At the same time, however, CIDA announced that it would be opening new programs in Peru and Colombia, the two fastest growing economies in Latin America. It was not lost, even on casual observers, that the Harper government was working to conclude free trade deals with both countries. And while the Peruvian government was parcelling out huge chunks of the country to foreign mining interests, CIDA's website—speaking in the High Church bureaucratise so beloved of aid agencies—stated piously that it "supports the Government of Peru's decentralization reform by strengthening the capacity of regional governments to plan and deliver equitable and inclusive public services to their citizens and to sustainably develop the extractive and natural resources sector (especially mining)."

At one point in *The Devil's Curve*, Kopecky quotes the explorer Hernán Cortés, who in 1519 told the Mexican Emperor Moctezuma that Spaniards suffered from "a disease of the heart for which gold is the only cure."

Speaking to the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada earlier this year, CIDA minister Bev Oda had nothing but praise for Canadian

mining companies abroad. "I know," she said, "that your companies are making significant investments in development projects and improving the quality of life for thousands in countries where you work. And I believe that all Canadians must be told of your work to reduce poverty, build schools, health clinics, new roads for the community and the many other ways that you are making life better for local communities." Building schools and clinics is a fine thing, no doubt, and perhaps many Canadian mining companies do this—and much more. But this is surely not the responsibility of mining companies. Their responsibility is to mine in ways that are developmentally, environmentally, socially and legally sound. The distance between Devil's Curve and the podium from which Oda spoke was so great that one of them might as well have been on Mars.

Time and again, Kopecky quotes local and native leaders who say they are not against development. "We know there is money to be made in our *selva*," one says, "and we are willing to work with corporations who have expertise. But they must teach us

what they know. They must come in good faith. Whether it is gold, or oil, or lumber they want, they must work with us in a way that doesn't ruin the jungle for our children. This is our home. Our demands are reasonable. We want to negotiate."

Kopecky's greatest scorn is reserved for the national leaderships of Peru and Colombia, which reserve all negotiating entirely to themselves, and in the process have repeatedly given away the farm, ruling for years through fiat and corruption, fear, murder and assassination. It is a leadership that seems to learn little from its mistakes, digging itself ever deeper into pits from which there is no longer any simple exit.

The Devil's Curve is—as tags in the bookstore sometimes say—a good read: fast paced, rarely dull, occasionally funny, sometimes uplifting, but, in sum, profoundly sad. LRC

Coming up in the LRC

Guaranteeing income
for the poor
HUGH SEGAL

Growing up with Bowie
IBI KASLIK

Chris Gudgeon's
Song of Kosovo
MODRIS EKSTEINS

Physics and humanism
MÉLANIE FRAPPIER

The Frog Lake massacre
MYRNA KOSTASH

Immigration panics
PHIL TRIADAFILOPOULOS