

Report on the MA Thesis of Aarin SHAPIRO, MDev

Under the title *The Nature of Ontological Conflicts between Indigenous Peoples and Extractivism in Latin America: The Struggle for Wirikuta*, Aarin Shapiro presents an excellent MA thesis that deserves our highest commendation.

Aarin Shapiro's interest lies with the effects of large-scale mining projects in indigenous territories from the vantage point of conflicting ontologies and what these mean for possible policy reorientation. She focuses on a particular case, namely the territory of Wirikuta in San Luis Potosí. The situation of Wirikuta is symptomatic for that of other indigenous peoples targeted by extractivist mega-development projects in the Americas and beyond, which makes her endeavour particularly relevant for Development Studies.

Aarin Shapiro spent an exchange semester at the Colegio de México where she followed classes and conducted research. This has allowed her to familiarise herself with literature and approaches that she may not have been able to engage with otherwise. Enriched by this additional input mainly from the Mexican and more largely Latin American scholarly traditions, her focus on the issue of conflicting ontologies allows her to undertake a study that departs from mainstream – and especially policy-based – approaches in several ways.

She seeks to understand how the people of Wirikuta (Wixaritari, or Huicholes as per the Spanish denomination) act against but also think about the incursions of the mining companies, thus placing their cultural universe on an equal footing with that of the dominant society. In this manner, she moves away from the still prevalent romanticised preconceptions (of the “noble savage” kind) regarding indigenous peoples, and hence their alleged victimisation. In taking proper account of the situation of the Wixaritari within the dominant economic, political and social context they have to contend with at present, while reminding the reader of the specific representations and values that inform their strategies and actions (as these relate, for example, to conceptions of “nature” largely defined, as well as their relationship with the territory and its resources), she offers original insights likely to serve as an inspiration to address the ongoing conflicts over subsurface resources in indigenous territories.

Although not trained in anthropology, Aarin Shapiro has shown particular aptitude in engaging with the conceptual and theoretical problems of “nature” beyond the classic – and reductionist – nature/culture divide, and more specifically the cosmivision of the Wixaritari and possible alternatives in “development” that move beyond dualisms.

On a final note, both evaluators enjoyed reading this thesis very much. Aarin Shapiro writes well, and presents a well-structured and well-informed analysis offering a fresh look at a complex and vexing issue. She submitted a finely crafted but also most

engaging thesis, the latter due to the manner in which she argues the choice of her topic, her approach, and her positioning.

co-signed :

José Luis Lezama, Colegio de México, second reader
Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff, supervisor

Geneva, 25 July 2017