

Major Latin American contributions to global political ecology and environmental justice

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Abstract

This article examines Latin America's critical contributions to global political ecology through concepts such as extractivism, ecological debt, ecologically unequal exchange, epistemic equity, body-territory, and political ontology. Drawing on decades of grassroots struggle and political and intellectual production, it traces how movements across the region have reframed environmental conflicts as ecological and ontological distribution conflicts and defended territories of life against extractivist and sacrificial logics. Examples – including Yasuní-ITT in Ecuador – illustrate the grounded practices of autonomy, care, and re-existence that challenge capitalist valuation systems. The article does not claim to be an exhaustive meta-analysis or an official genealogy of Latin American political ecology, rather it offers a selective review of contributions from different intellectual, activist, feminist, Indigenous, and environmental justice traditions in order to show how Latin American debates have expanded global political ecology conceptually, politically, and methodologically. The article proposes a renewed research agenda for political ecology centered on the growth and changes in social metabolism, ontological plurality, epistemic justice, and the co-production of knowledge. The article argues that Latin American political ecology offers concrete pathways for socio-ecological transformations in other territories of the Global South that demands

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that alliances across North and South – as geographical designations– be built on mutual recognition, historical accountability, and pluriversal horizons.

Keywords: Extractivism, ecological debt, epistemic equity, political ontology, environmental justice

Résumé

Cet article examine les contributions critiques de l'Amérique latine à l'écologie politique mondiale à travers des concepts tels que l'extractivisme, la dette écologique, l'échange écologiquement inégal, l'équité épistémique, le corps-territoire et l'ontologie politique. À partir de plusieurs décennies de luttes populaires, ainsi que de production politique et intellectuelle, il retrace la manière dont les mouvements de la région ont reformulé les conflits environnementaux comme des conflits de distribution écologique et ontologique, tout en défendant des territoires de vie contre les logiques extractivistes et sacrificielles. Des exemples, dont l'initiative Yasuní-ITT en Équateur, illustrent les pratiques situées d'autonomie, de soin et de ré-existence qui remettent en cause les systèmes capitalistes de valuation. L'article ne prétend pas constituer une méta-analyse exhaustive ni une généalogie officielle de l'écologie politique latino-américaine; il propose plutôt une revue sélective de contributions issues de différentes traditions intellectuelles, militantes, féministes, autochtones et de justice environnementale, afin de montrer comment les débats latino-américains ont élargi l'écologie politique mondiale sur les plans conceptuel, politique et méthodologique. L'article propose un agenda de recherche renouvelé pour l'écologie politique, centré sur la croissance et les transformations du métabolisme social, la pluralité ontologique, la justice épistémique et la coproduction des savoirs. Il soutient que l'écologie politique latino-américaine offre des pistes concrètes pour des transformations socioécologiques dans d'autres territoires du Sud global, exigeant que les alliances entre Nord et Sud – entendus comme désignations géographiques – soient fondées sur la reconnaissance mutuelle, la responsabilité historique et des horizons pluriversels.

Mots-clés: Extractivisme, dette écologique, équité épistémique, ontologie politique, justice environnementale

Resumen

Este artículo examina las contribuciones críticas de América Latina a la ecología política global a través de conceptos como extractivismo, deuda ecológica, intercambio ecológicamente desigual, equidad epistémica, cuerpo-territorio y ontología política. A partir de décadas de luchas populares, así como de producción política e intelectual, el artículo rastrea cómo los movimientos de la región han reformulado los conflictos ambientales como conflictos de distribución ecológica y ontológica, al tiempo que han defendido territorios de vida frente a las lógicas extractivistas y sacrificiales. Ejemplos como la iniciativa Yasuní-ITT en Ecuador ilustran prácticas situadas de autonomía, cuidado y re-existencia que cuestionan los sistemas capitalistas de valoración. El artículo no pretende ser una meta-análisis exhaustivo ni una genealogía oficial de la ecología política latinoamericana; más bien, ofrece una revisión selectiva de contribuciones provenientes de distintas tradiciones intelectuales, activistas, feministas, indígenas y de justicia ambiental, con el fin de mostrar cómo los debates latinoamericanos han ampliado la ecología política global en términos conceptuales, políticos y metodológicos. El artículo propone una agenda renovada de investigación para la ecología política, centrada en el crecimiento y las transformaciones del metabolismo social, la pluralidad ontológica, la justicia epistémica y la coproducción de conocimiento. Sostiene que la ecología política latinoamericana ofrece caminos concretos para transformaciones socioecológicas en otros territorios del Sur global, lo cual exige que las alianzas entre Norte y Sur – entendidos como designaciones geográficas – se construyan sobre el reconocimiento mutuo, la responsabilidad histórica y horizontes pluriversales.

Palabras claves: Extractivismo, deuda ecológica, equidad epistémica, ontología política, justicia ambiental

1. Introduction

This article examines some of the main contributions of Latin American political ecology to wider debates on political ecology and environmental justice. Rather than offering an exhaustive genealogy, it provides a selective review of key concepts, struggles, and intellectual traditions that have emerged from the region since the 1970s, especially around extractivism, ecologically unequal exchange, ecological debt, territorial defense, and the critique of development. These debates can be broadly situated within what Galeano (1971) famously called the "open veins of Latin America," while also extending toward frameworks such as Indigenous agroecology, bioculturality, social metabolism, ecological rationality, postdevelopment, and, more recently, political ontology and the pluriverse (Toledo & Barrera Bassols, 2008; Gonzalez de Molina & Toledo, 2014; Leff, 2021; Illich, 1980; Escobar, 1988; Esteva, 2022; Kothari *et al.*, 2019; Blaser, 2025). Drawing as much from grassroots struggles and territorial praxis as from academic debates, the article argues that Latin American political ecology is distinctive not because it offers a singular body of work or a regional "school", but because it has articulated with particular force the links between colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and socioecological conflict, while also generating concepts and practices that open pluriversal horizons for thinking and acting otherwise. Comparable chronological overviews have recently been attempted elsewhere (Lehner *et al.*, 2025; Hincapié, 2024; Correia & Galeana, 2025), but our aim here is to foreground how these contributions emerged through a situated and heterogeneous field of thought and praxis rather than through a single intellectual lineage.

By the 1990s, a powerful current of the "environmentalism of the poor" (Blanco, 1991) had become increasingly visible across Latin America. One early event that drew international attention to these struggles was the assassination of Chico Mendes in Brazil in 1988, which helped foreground the defense of forests, land, and livelihoods as central political and environmental questions (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2023). Since then, violence against land and environmental defenders has continued and, in many cases, intensified across the region, as reflected in the murders of Betty Cariño in Mexico in 2010, Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016, and Samir Flores Soberanes in Mexico in 2019, among many others. Data compiled by the EJAtlas and organizations such as Global Witness (2025) and Front Line Defenders (2025) point to a persistent and systematic pattern of violence against those defending land, territory, forests, rivers, and communal life.

The 500th anniversary of the colonization of the Americas in 1992 intensified debates among Indigenous Peoples across the continent, culminating in the campaign *500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra y Popular* [500 years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance] in October 1989 (López Bárcenas, 2011; Leon, 2020). This resurgence of Indigenous activism (including Afroamerican *quilombolas*, *palenques*, *raizales* and maroons) also deepened discussions on the origins and consequences of the ongoing planetary crisis, which has been framed as a product of Western capitalist modernity – what Lander (2020) describes as a "crisis of civilization," encompassing the interconnected crises of climate, energy, poverty, inequality, food, and meaning (see also Escobar, 2021). Among this article's central arguments is that contemporary green financialization often rearticulates rather than transcends extractivism, while initiatives such as the Yasuní in Ecuador have helped position Latin America at the forefront of globally influential struggles to leave fossil fuels underground and rethink climate justice beyond managerial transition frameworks. This resurgence of Indigenous activism also deepened debates on the origins and consequences of the ongoing planetary crisis, understood in much Latin American political ecology as rooted in the intertwined histories of capitalist modernity, colonial expansion, and productivist development, while recognizing that ecological destruction has also been intensified through state-socialist and other industrial projects.

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 brought renewed attention to the challenge of a "One-World World", disrupting the dominant narrative that neoliberal capitalism was without alternatives or that it marked the so-called "End of History" (Esteve, 2015). Over the past 30 years, struggles, experiences and practices coming from Latin America have played a crucial role in articulating the deep interconnections between capitalism, racism, extractivism, and environmental injustices. These critiques have been framed through the concept of the "Coloniality of Power" (Quijano, 2000) and the expansion of a "Colonial Matrix of Power", which extends across knowledge, gender, nature, and being (Mignolo, 2018; Lugones, 2010; Alimonda, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). During this period, Latin America has also been at the forefront of struggles for environmental justice, developing new conceptual tools (Correia, 2022). For instance, the notion of resistance and re-existence (Porto-Gonçalves, 2006) builds on the concept of multiple territorialities (Agnew & Oslender, 2010; Haesbaert, 2013) to highlight how grassroots communities navigate and transform spaces under conditions of colonial and capitalist expansion. Political proposals such as "Yasunization" and the "Rights of Nature" have similarly emerged from these Latin American perspectives (Acosta & Viale, 2024), challenging dominant paradigms of socioecological governance. In parallel, feminist political ecology has gained significant traction in the region, particularly through communitarian feminism and the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory). This framework underscores how the violent extraction and dispossession of communal territories translate into direct violence against the bodies of local people, especially women (Segato, 2015; Cabnal, 2018).

The emergence of a Latin American variety of political ecology, a current of thought and practice in the last four decades, can be seen as part of a continued expansion of political ecology as an interdisciplinary field concerned with the relations of power and domination over nature. By interdisciplinarity we refer to dialogue among academic fields such as geography, anthropology, ecology, agroecology, industrial metabolism, history, sociology, and ecological economics. By transdisciplinarity we mean forms of inquiry and concept formation carried out with communities, movements, and territorial actors whose knowledge does not enter merely as "data," but as constitutive of the research process itself. In Latin America, political ecology has often developed through both, but one of its distinctive features is precisely the strength of this second dimension (Martínez-Alier, 2002; Escobar, 2020). While environmental justice movements were proliferating in the eighties and nineties in the United States from a history of settler colonialism and slavery, and as a legacy of environmental racism under the shadow of the Civil Rights movement (Bullard, 1990, 1993), in Latin America, political ecology was taking hold as a means to challenge capitalism's structurally negative commercial relations ("the open veins") as well as the recurring waves of neoliberalization that foreground the role of capitalist markets and state forces in processes of local dispossession and environmental disruption (Roberts, 2020).

Latin American insistence on the ecological debt from the global North to South and on the existence of ecologically unequal trade, and on the damage done by transnational companies, had little echo in the US environmental justice movement. However, an emerging dialogue between environmental justice movements in the north as well as other radical currents of thought such as postdevelopment and decoloniality coming from Latin America has enriched political ecology through a series of concepts, ideas, and the practice of resistance and re-existence that now characterizes much of the discipline's focus (Huezo, 2025). Drawing from human geography, human and cultural ecology, ecological economics, and postdevelopment and post/decolonial studies –to name a few disciplines–, political ecology has become central in the critique of capitalist modernity and the ensuing crisis of civilization, as to the economic rationality behind it (Gorz, 1989; Martínez-Alier, 1995). In Latin America, the proliferation of eco-political conflicts led to grassroots inventories such as that by OCMAL (*Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de America Latina* [Observatory of

Mining Conflicts of Latin America]) born in 2007 or the Fiocruz map of environmental injustices in Brazil launched in 2010 (Porto *et al.*, 2013). Latin American movements have helped shape the expanding global field of environmental justice struggles and political ecology.

Furthermore, political ecology has also been key in challenging the conception of adaptation as a functional, unidirectional social response to an environment conceived as ontological prior to and separate from society (McCarthy, 2017: 1), by analyzing political-economic structures dialectically and highlighting the embeddedness of power and economic relationships (McCarthy, 2012). This perspective became essential in understanding environmental problems as much more than absolute, quantifiable and discrete variables and limits, but as relational, power-prone and political. The political ecology that took hold in most of the Global South rejected the "common sense" of development, placing much more emphasis on the colonial nature of the development enterprise (Esteva, 1992; Tornel, 2026). A clearer focus was placed on non-economic languages of valuation and in the knowledges born in/from struggles, as grassroots communities and multiple groups engaged in Ecological Distribution Conflicts (EDC) (Temper *et al.*, 2015).

The early debates on social metabolism (flows of energy and materials) in the late 1980s and early 1990s and ecologically unequal exchange as a catalyst of eco-political conflicts are more pertinent than ever. Quantitative analyses of material flows show that Latin America has maintained and, in many cases, deepened its physical trade deficit, with exports of materials far exceeding imports in terms of tonnage (Infante-Amate *et al.* 2022; Samaniego, *et al.* 2017; Hanbury Lemos & Hickel 2026). Infrastructures geared to exports, deforestation, open-pit mining (and therefore, tailings dams) have proliferated across the region (Infante-Amate *et al.*, 2022; Vilela *et al.*, 2020; García-Chevesich *et al.*, 2025). An EDC framework might apply in most cases where multiple incommensurable valuation languages come into contact and are debated. In other conflicts, particularly those where Indigenous and peasant communities are involved, political ontologies are asserted more than a dialogue between valuation languages (de la Cadena, 2015; Blaser, 2025). A new generation of political ecology has emerged opening a space for debate over whether a divide between nature and culture is universally applicable. Some propositions such as those of Dunlap, Verweijen and Tornel (2024) look beyond EDC towards Ecological *Destruction* Conflicts, reevaluating non-western knowledges that emerge through a relational ontological approach, as we will discuss in the following sections.

By Latin American political ecology (LAPE), we do not mean simply political ecology scholarship whose empirical focus is Latin America, nor a body of work defined exclusively by the nationality or institutional location of its authors. Rather, we use LAPE to name a situated and plural field of thought and praxis forged through the encounter between critical scholarship, activist networks, and Indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendant, feminist, and popular struggles across the region, as well as through their dialogues with other geographies of resistance. LAPE's specificity lies less in a closed regional identity than in the way it has politicized socioecological conflict from the historical experience of coloniality, dependency, development, extractivism, ecological debt, and territorial dispossession. Following Leff (2015), LAPE can be understood as an epistemic and political project that deconstructs the modern rationality through which nature, labor, territories, and knowledges are rendered objects of appropriation, while advancing an environmental rationality grounded in the social reappropriation of nature, the politics of difference, and the dialogue of knowledges. Similarly, recent work stresses that Latin American perspectives do not only analyze ecosocial devastation, but also make visible transformative alternatives already materialized in the everyday practices of historically marginalized peoples, generating a critical rationality centered on the Earth, territory, care, and the regeneration of life rather than on the figure of Man or the authority of the expert (Lehner *et al.*, 2025). LAPE is therefore constituted through the cross-fertilization of

concepts, practices, and worldviews – including multiple languages of valuation and ontological differences – rather than through a single canon, method, or official genealogy.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section we recount the Latin American origins of the concepts of extractivism and the claim for an Ecological Debt after 1992 –in the context of Earth Summit in 1992–, meaning that the socio-environmental damages that the extractive industries cause in their pursuit of Ecologically Unequal Exchange (EUE) should be acknowledged and repaired. Section 2 engages with other recent contributions coming from Latin America to Political Ecology. We focus on six themes: the influence of the Political Ecology working group in CLACSO (*Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales*), and the development of concepts such as *communitarian entanglements*, *epistemic equity*, *comunalidad*, *political ontology* and *cuerpo-territorio*. This article does not seek to offer an exhaustive meta-analysis of all Latin American political ecology. Rather, it provides a selective and interpretive review organized around two main entry points – extractivism/ecological debt and environmental justice/territorial defense – while also engaging with related debates on epistemic equity, *cuerpo-territorio*, *comunalidad*, and political ontology. The selection is guided by concepts and struggles that emerged from, or were decisively reshaped through, socioecological conflicts in Latin America that have had broader resonance within political ecology particularly in the Global South. This means that other important strands, including urban political ecology, environmental health, and additional regional traditions, are acknowledged but not necessarily treated here in equal depth.

In section 3 we focus on the idea of *Yasunization* – that is, the call to leave fossil fuels underground, inspired by the Yasuní-ITT initiative in Ecuador – and the "Rights of Nature" that similarly emerged from Latin American perspectives (Acosta & Viale, 2024). We also detail other struggles and alternatives coming from the Global South, challenging dominant paradigms of socioecological governance (Bassey, 2019; Kothari & Bajpai, 2026). These are key moments for understanding the role of Latin America in global political ecology, also providing examples relevant for the Global South. Finally, in the conclusion we point towards the future of political ecology as well as some research agendas for it. These sections address how Latin American political ecology emerged, how its concepts traveled, and how they inform wider political ecology debates.

2. Extractivism and ecologically unequal trade

In his studies of the Amazon, sociologist Steve Bunker (1984, 1988, 1990) defined extractivism as a mode of production that consisted of taking raw materials for export in large quantities without replenishment, such as bauxite for aluminum making or iron ore found in that region. Extractivism was really not a mode of production but a mode of extraction. The concept applies to a country or to a region within a country. As defined by Gudynas (2015), an extractivist economy is characterized by the appropriation of natural resources in large volumes and/or high intensity, where half or more are exported as raw materials, without industrial processing or with limited processing. The word "intensity" refers to toxicity, for instance the use of mercury in the export of Potosi silver in what is now Bolivia, or alluvial gold. Martínez-Alier (1991) drew attention to the ecological content of popular struggles in Latin America, arguing that conflicts over land, water, forests, pollution, and subsistence could be understood as ecological struggles even when they were not expressed in explicitly environmental language (see Martínez-Alier, 2002, 2005, 2023). This line of argument helped establish a crucial point for Latin American political ecology: that the region must be read not only as a supplier of raw materials, but also as a historical terrain in which the defense of livelihoods, commons, and territorial autonomy reveals the socioecological costs of capital accumulation. From this perspective, the environmentalism of the poor and the language of ecological distribution

conflicts did not emerge from nowhere, but from a longer history of struggles against the shifting of environmental costs and the unequal appropriation of nature.

"Extractivism" is closely related to ecologically unequal exchange, since it refers to the large-scale appropriation of nature for export under asymmetric conditions that displace environmental and social costs onto the territories of extraction. For this reason, it constitutes a central component of ecological debt. It also overlaps with the notion of "commodity frontiers" (Moore, 2000), which captures the territorial expansion of capitalism in search of new sources of raw materials, energy, and cheap nature. Expanding extractive economies and the proliferation of ecological distribution conflicts are interlinked phenomena (Temper *et al.*, 2015). While initially describing the physical removal of natural resources, the meaning of extractivism has expanded to capture a broader development model rooted in the systematic appropriation of nature (Gudynas, 2009). Grounded in Latin American dependency theory (Lang & Mokrani, 2013), the term highlights how resource extraction – particularly of biomass, minerals and hydrocarbons – links local economies to global economic circuits through asymmetrical exchanges (D'Angelo & Pijpers, 2022). For instance, Argentina's rapid soybean expansion since the 1970s has helped economic growth while causing environmental impoverishment, particularly in the form of soil nutrient loss (Mejia, 2025) and widespread contamination by glyphosate. Much research has been done with tested methods on the metabolism of the economies of Abya Yala and the world – from Russi and colleagues (2008) to Schandl and colleagues (2024).

This perspective was later deepened by authors who linked extractive expansion more directly to social metabolism, territorial dispossession, and the multiplication of actual or potential socioenvironmental conflicts. Bonelli and Pavez (2025) introduced the expression "entropic omissions" for the threatening mine tailing dumps in Chile. In Mexico, Delgado Ramos (2013) has been particularly important in connecting extractivism to broader debates on social metabolism, mining conflict, biopiracy, and resistance, helping to widen political ecology beyond sectoral analysis toward a structural critique of capitalist appropriation in Latin America. Tetreault and colleagues (2019) show how the acceleration of domestic extraction rates under neoliberal restructuring is closely associated with the proliferation of social environmental conflicts, while also insisting that this relation is not automatic but mediated by state policy, territorial conditions, and the organizational capacities of affected communities (see also Tetreault, 2022). At the same time, extractivism in Latin America has also been analyzed as a colonial, racialized, and gendered process. Sacher's (2019) work on large-scale mining foregrounds the technological, geopolitical, and territorial violence through which mining expansion is legitimized and normalized. Likewise, Cariño's reflections on Indigenous women's struggles in Abya Yala (2019) stress that the defense of territory is also a defense of the conditions of the reproduction of life, as women mobilize around *tierra-territorio-vida* [land-territory-life] against forms of dispossession that threaten communal worlds and relational ontologies.

Gudynas (2009) identifies four defining features of "extractivism": large-scale extraction, intense ecological impacts, an export-driven orientation, and concentrated control by elites, whether foreign or domestic. Acosta (2013) pushed the definition further, noting that extractivism applies to industries like industrial agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. This expansion blurred the boundary between renewable and non-renewable resource use, recognizing that when extraction occurs at an industrial scale, even so-called renewable resources – like forests, soil fertility, and water – can become degraded beyond recovery (Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014; Kröger, 2016). Recent scholarship builds on this by highlighting how industrial agriculture erases the complex life of soils (Hokkanen, 2024). Extractivism does not apply only to metal mining and fossil fuel economies. In Argentina and Brazil today, soybean monoculture exports require greater transport volumes and expanded logistics infrastructures.

The Parana-Paraguay *hidrovía* [waterway] reaches 100 million tons per year from Cáceres to Nueva Palmira (Bolsa de Comercio de Rosario, 2022). The Madeira and Tapajós rivers transport soybean to the Amazon River that serves as another outlet for exports to the Atlantic. Compared to metal mining or fossil fuels, crops can grow again and again, but soil fertility is lost. The exported materials can be measured as energy, materials, land use (hectares), hours of labor, and water footprint. Famous instances of wholesale timber extraction are, today, Balsa trees in Ecuador, and one hundred years ago *Quebracho colorado* for tannin in Santa Fe and Chaco in Argentina by the British company *La Forestal* (Gómez Lende, 2020). A similar dynamic can be seen in Colombia's sugarcane economy. As Pérez and Álvarez (2009) show, the agroindustry of sugarcane in the Valle del Cauca has been sustained not only through land concentration and export orientation, but also through state-backed ethanol expansion, making labor precarious, and the externalization of social and environmental costs. In this sense, sugarcane, no less than soy, exemplifies how agro-extractivism in Latin America operates through the large-scale appropriation of land, water, and labor while shifting its ecological and social burdens onto workers, surrounding communities, and ecosystems.

The "commodities consensus" that Maristella Svampa (2018) denounced requires analysis of the commodities in question, old and new, and therefore needs research on industrial ecology, that is, the old *Warenkunde* or *Merceologia* (the science of commodities) (Nebbia, 1981). Commodities are not simply produced by other commodities but by biochemical processes. Political ecology is not only a field of the social sciences and the humanities, it comes together with knowledge of agronomy ("traditional" and modern), systems ecology and biology, industrial metabolism, social metabolism, chemical engineering and the elements of the Periodic Table such as lithium and Rare Earths that are now "valorized" in the electrical transition pushed by a "decarbonization consensus." Social metabolism complements dependency theory, highlighting Latin America's subordinate position within a hierarchical world economy. Wallerstein's (2004) world-systems perspective helps situate that position within an ongoing division of labor (and nature) structured through relations between core, semi-periphery, and periphery rather than through self-contained national economies alone. Arrighi (1989) adds an important historical dimension here, showing that these hierarchies are periodically reorganized through shifting cycles of accumulation and hegemonic transitions, rather than remaining static. From this perspective, the environmental impoverishment associated with development in the South cannot be reduced to a simple external imposition by the North, even if it remains structurally uneven. It is mediated by states in both the North and the South, by national and local elites, by corporations, and at times by communities themselves under highly unequal conditions.

In this sense, social metabolism reveals the material and energy flows through which unequal development is reproduced, while Brand and Wissen's (2021) notion of the imperial mode of living clarifies how the appropriation of cheap nature, labor, and sinks is stabilized not only through world trade and indebtedness, but also through state structures, dominant consumption patterns, and hegemonic notions of the good life that are increasingly generalized beyond the Global North. This also requires analytical precision: not all environmentally destructive activities are directly tied to global export markets, and not all such activities should be collapsed into extractivism, which, following Gudynas, is better reserved for high-volume or high-intensity forms of appropriation primarily oriented toward commodity export.

Furthermore, Latin American decolonial feminisms (Ulloa, 2016; Cabnal, 2018) add another layer, showing how violence against land translates into violence against bodies, especially those of Indigenous and rural women. This *cuerpo-territorio* [body-territory] framework (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) insists that bodies and territories are inseparable: harm to land is embodied in illness, trauma, and fear (Cruz Hernández, 2016). At the epistemic level, Grosfoguel (2016) emphasized

epistemic and ontological extractivism, pointing to the colonial logic that treats knowledge systems and diverse lifeways as raw materials to be exploited, commodified, and erased. This extractive gaze, as Gómez-Barris (2017) puts it, frames nature and certain peoples as expendable, ultimately legitimizing ecological destruction (Kröger, 2022; Simpson, 2017). As Chagnon and colleagues argue (2022), extractivism is not just a practice but an entire web of mentalities, power structures, and social norms that naturalize this violence.

As Dunlap and colleagues argue (2024), debates persist on whether extractivism should be limited to large-scale, export-oriented resource extraction or expanded to capture the global supply webs that link extraction to manufacturing, finance, and consumption (Gudynas, 2021; Dunlap, 2023; Artiga-Purcell, 2024). The supply-web approach emphasizes how extraction depends on infrastructures, technologies, and global financial flows that enable and sustain extraction well beyond the physical site of removal (Tetreault, 2020). This framing connects extractivism to the deep entanglements between capital, nature, and technology that define contemporary capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019; Arboleda, 2020). Extractivism has always involved value grabbing – the seizure of value through dispossession and rent rather than productive labor (Andreucci *et al.*, 2017). This process intensified with neoextractivism, where states took on a leading role in capturing and redistributing rents (Lang & Mokrani, 2013). In today's context, this logic is said to be increasingly driven by green financialization, where carbon markets, biodiversity offsets, and eco-tourism transform nature into speculative financial assets (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015; Sullivan, 2023). However, economic value flows (as rents or profits) are not ecologically so crucial as the sociometabolic flows of energy and materials, land, water and human labor. This "green" turn does not mitigate extractivism but multiplies it across new frontiers – from deep-sea and outer-space mining (Childs, 2022; Klinger, 2017) to so-called "renewable" energy infrastructure and digital technologies (Dunlap, 2021; Dunlap & Marin, 2022). However, expanding the notion of "extractivism" (as defined by Gudynas and Svampa) into financialization, epistemic, ontological and other dimensions should not diminish the metabolic relevance of the transfer of energy and materials, and labor, from the Global South to the North (Hornborg, 1998; Amin, 1974; Alonso-Fernández & Regueiro-Ferreira, 2023). This transfer may be enforced not only financially but through militarized territorial control and counterinsurgency that secure extractive and infrastructure projects (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Dunlap, 2018; Feeney, 2024). Militarization is itself ecologically destructive: military operations, logistics, weapons production, destroyed infrastructure, and reconstruction carry large and frequently undercounted carbon costs (Belcher *et al.*, 2020; Neimark *et al.*, 2025). Recent work on the "military green transition" further shows how decarbonization can preserve warfighting capacity and extend extractivist relations rather than demilitarize climate politics (Edwards, 2026; Dunlap & Edwards, 2026). Militarization can therefore be understood as part of extractivism's expanded metabolic infrastructure, producing "militarized ecologies" in which military actors, logics, and investments increasingly organize responses to climate, biodiversity, and territorial crises (Lamain *et al.*, 2026).

Ultimately, extractivism can be characterized by three interconnected dynamics. First, it entails appropriation and legibility, whereby lands, resources, and beings are mapped, classified, and made extractable through processes that render them visible to capital (Fairhead *et al.*, 2012; Moore, 2015). Second, it produces irreversible socioecological harm, severing relations of reciprocity between human and more-than-human worlds (Kröger, 2022). This damage, shifted to local communities and ecosystems, fuels ecological distribution conflicts (EDCs). Extractivism functions through a hegemonic worldview, built on ontological violence that reduces nature and peoples to exploitable objects, erasing relational ways of being (Blaser, 2013; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). As Gómez-Barris (2017) notes, this gaze is not just ideological but institutionalized, shaping how states,

corporations, and even social movements come to see development itself. In sum, extractivism is more than a particular economic sector or activity, however it should not be understood as a synonym for all human appropriation of nature. Human societies have transformed nature in historically diverse ways, not least because humans are themselves part of nature rather than external to it. Rather, following Gudynas (2010, 2015), extractivism refers to a historically specific mode of resource appropriation characterized by high-volume and/or high-intensity extraction, limited processing, and orientation to export of primary commodities. What distinguishes extractivism, then, is not appropriation per se, but the rationale, scale, and territorial organization through which lands, waters, forests, minerals, and energy are rendered extractable for accumulation and long-distance trade (Dunlap *et al.*, 2024). From this starting point, it becomes possible to analyze how contemporary extractivism is sustained by infrastructures, states, valuation regimes, and forms of epistemic and ontological violence without collapsing the concept into capitalist modernity as a whole.

Latin America as a raw material exporting continent (similarly to Africa or Southeast Asia) fits together with world-systems theory as practiced by Wallerstein (1996) and others. We follow on this line by focusing on the materiality of the exports (whether bulk commodities or preciousities) and on the conflicts that their extraction and transport cause, awakening environmental justice movements of the poor and Indigenous peoples against extractivism. Historically, this is older than the "neoliberal" wave of the last forty years, and it continues beyond it.

At this point, we may remember the Brenner vs Wallerstein debate in the 1970s on the role played by trade as opposed to class struggle in the history of capitalism. One critical evaluation of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems perspective came from Marxists who disliked the dominant role played by trade in his analysis as opposed to class structure and interaction (Denemark & Thomas, 1988; Morozov, 2022). According to Brenner (1977), Wallerstein exaggerated the importance of market forces and international trade at the expense of the internal "relations of production" of peasants against landlords under feudalism (and, later, factory workers against capitalists as also plantation slaves in colonial territories such as Haiti and elsewhere). Brenner said that Wallerstein was more Smithian than Marxist. Now, however, the social metabolism of the capitalist system, and the accumulation and dissipation of energy and materials is globally carried out by transnational private or state companies against the livelihoods and values of downtrodden peasants, Indigenous people and urban poor dispossessed of their land, water and clean air. Ecologically unequal exchange causes local environmental and social damage (Hornborg & Martínez-Alier, 2016; Morozov, 2022). People resist by defending the commons, boycotting the foreign companies, going to court, marching and blockading the roads for which they are often criminalized or killed.

The idea of Ecological Debt appeared in paragraphs 51 and 52 of the *Encyclical Laudato Si* in simple language taken by Pope Francis from publications by Latin American academics and activists:

Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations. A true "ecological debt" exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. ... There is a pressing need to calculate the use of environmental space throughout the world for depositing gas residues which have been accumulating for two centuries and have created a situation which currently affects all the countries of the world. There is also the damage caused by the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries, and by the pollution produced by companies which

operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home... The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned (Francis, 2015: 51).

The Vatican has never championed the idea of "epistemic justice" since the days of its campaigns of "extirpation of idolatries" after the conquest of America. It has also been consistently unfriendly to feminist and anti-patriarchal positions. It has never shown much concern about rapid population growth. Nevertheless, Leonardo Boff (1995) made a call for ecology from the ranks of Latin American Liberation Theology with his book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, and Pope Francis' Encyclical "Laudato Si" followed suit. One main point was that Ecological Debt is not compensated for, while the External Debt is a mechanism of control of economies, forcing them into an extractivist pattern (Francis, 2015). This idea was clearly brought to light by Jacobo Schatan (1998), a Chilean economist, in the mid 1990s in a book which is not well known. He calculated the material balance of the external debt, in tons. Schatan asked, how many tons of materials must be exported per year from Latin America to service the growing external financial debt? Drawing on his method we can argue that behind Latin America's external debt in dollars, lies a reality of material and human resource extraction. Debt repayment is not just a financial transaction; it entails the transfer of physical goods and labor abroad. Latin American countries have historically relied on natural resource extraction to generate foreign exchange for debt servicing. The volume of these exports fluctuates based on commodity prices, export composition, interest rates, and overall debt levels. However, these terms of trade have consistently deteriorated to the detriment of the region, as financial costs rise while commodity prices decline. Given that Schatan's text (1998) has never been translated into English we offer a brief summary:

The problem of Latin America's external debt is often approached in purely monetary terms, but behind each dollar remitted lies a transfer of real material resources and human labor. Since most Latin American countries have limited exports of manufactured goods, they are forced to export natural resources to obtain the foreign exchange needed to service their debts. Over time, the terms of trade worsened: the prices of commodities fell relative to the cost of money (interest rates and financial charges), deepening economic and ecological losses. This dynamic mirrors the colonial conquest, with Northern financiers exchanging overpriced industrial goods for cheap raw materials, while encouraging Latin American nations to borrow to sustain these unequal exchanges – a modern form of looting. To illustrate this dispossession, the concept of "MAPRAL" (Raw Materials Latin America), reveals that the average "ton" is composed of 17 main exports from the early 1980s. The concept is calculated through debt and interest payments in terms of MAPRALES, showing that while debt values rose, the real quantity of resources extracted tripled between 1980 and 1995, due to falling commodity prices. Despite some changes in export composition over time, the method starkly exposes the material magnitude of the ongoing extractive dynamics tied to external debt. (own translation, Schatan, 1998: 133-139)

Drawing a parallel with the colonial conquest, 20th-century "*conquistadores*" – merchants and financiers from the Global North – exchanged overpriced manufactured goods for Latin America's undervalued raw materials. Worse, they encouraged these countries to take on debt to purchase these imports, exacerbating economic dependency. This process has devastated both economies and

ecosystems, perpetuating resource depletion. Between 1980 and 1995, the average value of a MAPRAL unit plummeted from US\$217 to US\$162, causing external debt to triple in physical terms. Consequently, the volume of resources exported to service debt soared from 106 million tons in 1980 to 255 million in 1995 – highlighting the scale of dispossession that continues to increase to this day. In Schatan's socio-metabolic approach, these 255 million tons were the yearly tonnage that he calculated was needed to pay for the external debt of Latin America. Moreover, there was the (badly paid) tonnage of exports in the current account to pay for the imports. Later, the calculations of the terms of trade (price of one ton of imports/price of one ton of exports) have been done several times for South American countries (Perez-Rincon 2006; Samaniego *et al.*, 2017; Infante-Amate *et al.*, 2022). The financial obligation to pay the external debt forces indebted countries into exporting larger and larger quantities of raw materials. Thus, the impacts of the external debt can be calculated as the millions of tons of materials that must be exported to pay for it, as Schatan did. This was a reality (in tons) more revealing than measurements in money. It implied a lot of social-ecological damage and conflicts.

Schatan (1998) was saying that countries specialize in the exploitation and export of nature to access core currencies to pay for the external debts they have accumulated. This brings us to a monetary dimension of ecologically unequal exchange that lies in currency hierarchy (Olk, 2024). Hornborg (1998) insisted not only on the physical aspects of ecologically unequal trade but also on the role of general-purpose money in pushing commodification. Is there a "monetary explanation" to ecologically unequal exchange? This explanation would be the hierarchy between currencies. Countries that issue internationally acceptable currencies create net inflows of embodied labor, land, energy and raw materials from countries whose currencies lack international acceptability. This might be so, but the main causes of ecologically unequal trade are political power and the art of "adding value" to mobilize the inputs from the Global South towards the Global North to maintain the per capita levels of social metabolism in the importing countries. Or, in other words, to maintain their "imperial mode of living" (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Ecological Debt: An activist term

The notions of ecologically unequal exchange and extractivism are important and internationally relevant contributions to political ecology from Latin America. The concept of an Ecological Debt emerged in the early 1990s, introduced by environmental justice organizations in Chile and Colombia to highlight the ecologically unequal trade between the Global North and South and also the destruction caused by climate change (Robledo & Marcelo, 1992; Borrero, 1994). The occupation and disproportionate use of the atmosphere by overdeveloped countries to dispose of greenhouse gases began to be discussed, as also the exports of solid waste from Global North to Global South.² At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, an alternative treaty was proposed outside the official discussions to address this debt. Around the same time, Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain (1991/2019) published *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism*, exposing the injustice in greenhouse gas emissions, where vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, with minimal

² In the literature, there is some inconsistency over whether the terms "Global North" and "Global South" refer to geographical regions or to geopolitical, economic, and epistemic positions within the world-system. We use them in the latter sense (except when noted as otherwise). Thus, the "Global North" includes privileged and powerful actors, institutions, and classes located in the geographical South; conversely, the "Global South" includes oppressed, racialized, Indigenous, migrant, and marginalized peoples and struggles located in the geographical North. The distinction therefore names a relation of power rather than a fixed cartographic boundary.

emissions, would suffer disproportionately from climate change. In 1997, Acción Ecológica of Ecuador took up the term, publishing various booklets defining Ecological Debt.

The concept gained further traction within the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which linked demands for financial debt relief to claims against wealthy nations disproportionately exploiting natural resources and carbon sinks without compensating the Global South (Simms *et al.*, 1999). The profits that corporations make are in part attributable to the use of the environment as a source for resources or as a pollution sink without any or little compensation. Market prices and political power ensure the transfer of biological and physical resources from the Global South to the Global North (Hornborg, 1998; Dorninger *et al.* 2021; Hanbury Lemos, 2025). The Global North refuses to acknowledge the Ecological Debt, even as methods to quantify it continue to evolve. Warlenius (2016) proposed measuring how much wealthy nations have saved over decades by failing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to necessary levels. The expansion of global social metabolism further exacerbates this debt, as capitalism's demand for resources leads to continuous extraction of fossil fuels and other minerals, with little to no recycling. The coloniality of power (since Potosi and Zacatecas in present-day Bolivia and México respectively, to today) constantly opens up new extractive frontiers, and the social and environmental damages remain uncompensated. As Frederick Soddy (1926) had observed, there is an inherent conflict between economic time, driven by profit and rapid capital circulation, and biogeochemical time, governed by nature's rhythms. This clash results in irreparable ecological destruction and the displacement of local cultures that historically valued their environments differently. Overexploitation worsens when extractive economies are burdened with external debt and deteriorating trade conditions, as seen across Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Muradian & Martínez-Alier, 2001).

Although ecological debts and environmental liabilities (*pasivos ambientales* in Spanish) are easy to identify, they remain difficult to quantify economically. Many resource-exporting countries lack power to demand fair compensation, to impose natural capital depletion taxes, or to diversify their economies. For instance, oil extraction in the Niger Delta occurs under conditions where local communities cannot incorporate environmental and social costs into the price of oil. Similarly, in Peru, where gold and copper exports cause extensive ecological and human harm, Peruvians lack political power to avoid this.

In mainstream economics, externalities are often ignored in pricing models, but what matters most are not their hypothetical market values, but their real-world physical and social consequences. This is captured in terms like "sacrifice zones" or *zonas de sufrimiento ambiental* (Auyero & Swistun, 2009; Castillo-Gallardo, 2016; Castan Broto & Sanzana Calvet, 2020; Navarro & Barreda, 2022; Bolados *et al.*, 2024; Tornel, 2024), as also in the term "entropic omissions" that brings together the metabolic and the social aspects. The assessment of Ecological Debt should move beyond economic valuation and instead focus on social and physical indicators, as argued by Schatan (1998), who suggested measuring damages in tonnage. Some aspects of Ecological Debt, such as biopiracy, cannot be reduced to tonnage or to monetary terms. Biopiracy refers to the appropriation of biological resources and Indigenous knowledge through property-rights regimes that deny recognition, compensation, and protection to the communities that have developed and sustained them (Jimenez, et al., 2022; Schwartz-Marin & Fiske, 2022). In Latin America, this has been especially visible in bioprospecting and pharmaceutical research, where patents over medicinal plants and organisms have enabled proprietary colonial uses of biodiversity. The *ayahuasca* plant case is emblematic, revealing how patent law privileges scientific codification and novelty while excluding longstanding Indigenous uses and knowledge practices (Schwartz-Marin & Fiske, 2022; Jimenez *et al.*, 2022).

Calculations of ecological debt

The Ecological Debt debate centers on how to quantify and assess the environmental burdens imposed by the Global North on the Global South. Some propose measuring it in tons of materials, CO₂ emissions, hectares, or energy units (Hornborg, 1998). Others have attempted to monetize it as "unpaid externalities" (Cabeza & Martínez-Alier, 2001); however, such monetary cost-benefit analyses are widely and rightly criticized for their reliance on arbitrary discount rates and failure to capture non-economic damages. The IPCC's 1995 report provoked significant controversy because its economic damage assessments drew on literature that assigned lower monetary values to statistical lives in developing countries (see: Asayama *et al.*, 2022); the report explicitly acknowledged that "developing country statistical lives have not been equally valued at the developed country value," a formulation that triggered objections from several Global South delegations during review of the Summary for Policymakers document (IPCC, 1996). This approach ignores the fundamental principle that human dignity should not be determined by economic reasoning, and decisions about CO₂ limits should not be based on cost-benefit calculations.

Movements across the Global South have long fought to keep fossil fuels underground and hold wealthier nations accountable for their disproportionate use of environmental resources. These campaigns emphasize Climate Justice, arguing that the Global North should compensate for the destruction caused by extractive industries and their excessive use of the atmosphere as a carbon sink. The idea of Ecological Debt gained political traction when Fidel Castro (1992) declared at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro: "Do not pay for the external debt, claim instead the ecological debt." Similarly, Virgilio Barco (1989) had already introduced the term in Colombia and reiterated it in a speech at MIT. The concept is not radical; it aligns with existing environmental liability frameworks, such as the U.S. Superfund (CERCLA) law, which mandates corporate accountability for pollution, and restoration ecology seeking to repair environmental harm.

Despite these demands, the Global North has consistently refused to treat climate change as a matter of liability, reparation, or ecological debt. From the 1992 Earth Summit – where wealthy countries displaced demands for historical responsibility by privileging technology transfer and technical assistance – to the Paris Agreement of 2015 where loss and damage was recognized while liability and compensation were explicitly excluded, the dominant tendency has been to manage the crisis without confronting its colonial causes (Hickel & Slameršak, 2022; Sultana, 2022). This refusal has been sustained not only through diplomacy, but also through a broader epistemic regime that naturalizes false solutions. As Larry Lohmann (2026) argues, neoliberal climate governance combined what he calls "white science" – forms of knowledge such as climatology and thermodynamics that are not fraudulent but are historically structured to avoid confronting racial capitalism and white supremacy – with what can be understood as a bankrupt pseudo-neoliberal science of offsets, biodiversity accounting, circular economy discourse, and the technocratic fictions embedded in many environmental impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses (see also, Lohmann, 2024). In this way, climate politics has repeatedly converted the demand for accountability into a managerial problem of molecules, prices, and risk, thereby obscuring the historical relations of power through which emissions were produced in the first place.

The empirical record reinforces this critique. High-income countries continue to present weak decoupling or market-led mitigation as evidence of progress, yet these claims collapse under scrutiny. Vogel and Hickel (2023) show that the achieved rates of emissions reduction in high-income countries fall dramatically short of Paris Agreement-compatible and equitable pathways: at recent rates, those countries would take more than 220 years to reduce emissions by 95 percent and would emit roughly 27 times their remaining fair shares of the 1.5°C carbon budget. In that sense, so-called "green growth" does not resolve ecological debt; it deepens it, while allowing affluent countries to continue

appropriating atmospheric space and shifting the burdens of adjustment onto poorer countries and communities (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). Ecological Debt, then, should not be treated as a narrow financial transaction, but as a historical, political, and moral claim rooted in unequal appropriation, unpaid destruction, and the continued externalization of damage (Parikh, 1995; Simms *et al.*, 1999; Warlenius *et al.*, 2015).

This is especially important when loss and damage is viewed from the perspective of Indigenous peoples. The problem is not only that Indigenous peoples are now facing disproportionate climate harms, but that settler states and industrial societies have long structured political relations in ways that undermine Indigenous capacities to adapt. Whyte (2021) distinguishes between impending responsibility – the obligation arising from the role of states in historic and ongoing industrialization and their exclusion of Indigenous peoples from climate decision-making – and pending responsibility, which refers to the older, unresolved colonial relations through which treaties, imposed boundaries, jurisdictional limits, and other institutions have already constrained Indigenous self-determination and adaptive capacity. Loss and damage, from this perspective, cannot be reduced to emergency finance or insurance mechanisms. It concerns threats to cultural, economic, and political self-determination, including the loss of culturally significant species, landscapes, ceremonies, and territorial relations (Whyte, 2021). This is why narrow compensation frameworks remain insufficient: without confronting the colonial political relations that produced vulnerability, loss and damage policy risks reproducing the very injustices it claims to address.

In Latin America, these dynamics are inseparable from what Sultana (2023) calls climate coloniality and from the proliferation of sacrifice zones. Climate coloniality operates through ecological degradations that are "overt and covert, episodic and creeping," while sacrifice zones make visible how certain territories, bodies, and worlds are rendered expendable. As Tornel (2024) argues, climate sacrifice zones entail the temporal and spatial displacement of harm: the discourse of climate mitigation and green transition conceals dirty supply chains, infrastructural colonialism, indirect or grey extractivism, and the ongoing sacrifice of marginalized territories in the name of sustainability. Gonzalez (2021) makes a parallel point when she argues that the sacrifice zones of carbon capitalism exploit, dispossess, and render climate-vulnerable poor, Indigenous, and racialized communities, even as the Paris Agreement regime continues to privilege carbon markets, offsets, REDD+, and insurance-based approaches over reparation and fossil fuel phaseout. Seen from this angle, the issue is not only that the Global North pollutes more, but that climate governance itself has often become a mechanism through which the coloniality of power is reproduced across Latin America, turning territories into carbon sinks or "carbonized nature," extraction frontiers, and zones of managed abandonment (Ulloa, 2024).

From a post-development perspective, loss and damage cannot be reduced to a technical problem of financing climate impacts after they occur. It must be situated within a broader critique of development, green economy narratives, market remedies, and technofixes that leave intact the structural roots of ecological collapse (Demaria & Kothari, 2022). At recent COP negotiations, some Latin American governments prioritized the operationalization of loss-and-damage finance over stronger demands for liability, compensation, and historical accountability. The problem, however, is that the gains secured have remained institutionally narrow and politically limited, while environmental justice organizations continue to demand not only finance, but recognition, reparation, territorial protection, and the rejection of false solutions (Tornel & Montaña, 2023). If Ecological Debt is to be addressed seriously, climate negotiations must move beyond voluntary funds, insurance logics, and market mechanisms. They would need to confront the historical drivers of climate change, restrict further fossil fuel expansion, strengthen Indigenous and frontline communities' territorial rights and decision-making power, and recognize that loss and damage is not only about money after

disaster, but about repairing the long colonial histories that made some peoples and places sacrificial in the first place (Whyte, 2020; Ulloa, 2021; Lang *et al.*, 2023).

Ecological Debt and "Degrowth in Practice"

In the regions of the Global South, which are creditors of an Ecological Debt, poverty and lack of power often compel governments or communities to sell their environmental goods and health cheaply. This, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of environmental awareness, but rather a reflection of structural inequalities and the absence of economic and political means to defend territory and life. Under extractivist regimes, the geobiological and ecological time required to produce exported raw materials from the South is vastly longer than the time needed to manufacture and import goods in the North – highlighting the temporality of unequal ecological exchange. This asymmetry places the Global North in a debtor position, having historically profited from an ecologically unequal trade system. The concept of Ecological Debt thus articulates many of the concerns central to the environmentalism of the poor and the broader environmental justice (EJ) movement in the Global South. It also foregrounds the question of language – how these conflicts are expressed, narrated, and translated across movements and geographies. In this context, there appears to be an opportunity to bring together the demands of EJ movements in the South with the degrowth discourse that has emerged in the North. Both frameworks critique the dominance of growth-driven models, oppose extractivism, and seek alternatives to capitalist development. Moreover, discourses around sustainable degrowth and postdevelopment (Escobar, 2015; Hanaček *et al.*, 2020) have attempted to build bridges with struggles rooted in the South. There are attempts to join the ecological debt ("reparations") and degrowth under a common decolonial, global justice framework (Nowshin, 2025).

Nevertheless, as several authors caution, the convergence between these movements is far from straightforward. Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.* (2019) highlight that despite shared critiques, significant epistemic, semantic, and political tensions remain between degrowth and environmental justice struggles in the South. For communities experiencing scarcity, the notion of voluntary downscaling can appear not only detached from lived realities but also dismissive of longstanding demands for justice and redistribution. Moreover, degrowth frameworks are often rooted in Eurocentric imaginaries and metrics, privileging Northern academic and political perspectives while insufficiently accounting for the ontological diversity and political strategies of grassroots movements in the South (Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.*, 2019; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). Southern activists also raise concerns about the individualistic and economistic framing of degrowth, which contrasts sharply with the collective, territorial, and intersectional nature of their struggles. Others continue to highlight the rootedness of degrowth in the nation-state and public policies (Kallis & D'Alisa, 2020) and its often-dismissive approach to anarchist and other liberation movements (Dunlap, 2021). Degrowth must move beyond abstract economic critique and public policies to actively engage with issues of coloniality and sovereignty, particularly the role of the state in reproducing forms of internal colonialism and expanding sacrifice in the name of development, as well as the politics of place (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025; Tornel, 2026).

Echoing Escobar's (2015) warning against bifurcated solutions – degrowth for the North, development for the South – Lang (2024) insists on confronting the asymmetrical relations of exchange and imperial appropriation that continue to shape the global political economy. As Nirmal and Rocheleau (2019) state, many degrowth approaches overlook colonial histories, territorial struggles, and the ontological and epistemological diversity of the Global South. The notion of degrowth in the North giving space to the South to "develop" for example, reaffirms the same imaginary and teleological notion of progress embedded in Northern and eurocentric modernity.

Concepts such as ecological debt or sustainable degrowth must therefore be articulated not as frameworks imposed from the North, but as tools to support grassroots claims to autonomy, reparation, and re-existence. This requires degrowth movements to relinquish their universalist aspirations and instead participate in the pluriversal task of weaving solidarities that are ethical, political, and grounded in concrete struggles for justice. Crucially, Lang (2024) argues that the epistemic foundations of degrowth must be pluralized and decolonized. Drawing from pluriversal visions such as *sumak kawsay*, Lang calls for a redefinition of well-being that transcends material abundance and reconnects with spiritual, relational, and territorial modes of living. A decolonial degrowth must engage in material struggles against "brown" and "green" colonialism, co-producing strategies with movements resisting extractivism and building alternatives grounded in autonomy, reciprocity, and the commons. Earlier formulations of degrowth often argued that reducing material and energy throughput in the North would "make space" for the South to develop. While this claim was important for naming overconsumption, ecological debt, and unequal exchange, it has also been rightly challenged for leaving the developmental imaginary largely intact. More recent decolonial and movement-based debates shift the emphasis from a "right to development" toward alternatives to development: territorial autonomy, self-management, re-commoning, communitarian energies, food and water sovereignty, and other practices that refuse both brown and green colonialism (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019; Burkhardt *et al.*, 2020; Lang, 2024). In this sense, decolonial degrowth should not simply redistribute development's promises, but help unsettle the common sense that makes development appear as the only horizon for the South.

From a socioecological standpoint, the degrowth movement implies the reduction of fossil fuel and redistribution of material consumption whilst also moving towards challenging the colonality of development and collectively defining limits and frugality. Many movements of the poor and the Indigenous in the South have managed to stop metal mining projects, disrupt gas and oil pipelines, stop deforestation and also uniform tree plantations, and delay the building of coal-fired power plants. This is "degrowth in practice" (Martínez-Alier, 2025). If the liabilities or "entropic omissions" from ecologically unequal trade and from climate change are not recognized by the governments and the corporations of the Global North, such drastic actions of "degrowth in practice" might help to put the Ecological Debt in the world political agenda. Proposals that include reparations that move beyond economic compensation and that shift focus away from the nation-state (Taiwo, 2022; Lang *et al.*, 2023) as we discuss below, or alternatives seeking to "delink" (Amin, 1974) and "degrowth" (Ricci, 2025) can act as complementary actions towards an overall redefinition and strategy of recognizing Ecological Debt.

3. Political Ecology and environmental justice born in Latin America

The environmental justice movement incorporates concepts from the lived experiences of resistance, activism and academia, with Latin America playing a key role in shaping its discourse. However, the academic discourse on environmental justice, along with its extensions into climate and energy justice, has often leaned towards overtly technocratic, top-down formulations (for critique, see Temper, 2019; Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Partridge, 2022; Tornel, 2023a). This shift has marginalized and erased the contributions of local, grassroots, and other societies in movements (Zibechi, 2013), which resist the reproduction of capitalist social relations across various territories. While Latin American experiences are vast and heterogeneous, this section aims to introduce a range of concepts, ideas, and knowledge born in struggle into political ecology debates by linking socioecological conflict to extractivism, ecological debt, colonality, and territorial defense in ways that emerged from the region's own histories and struggles. A particular focus is on advancing autonomy, defending the commons, and resisting capitalism and state power in the Global South.

Building on the discussions of extractivism, ecological unequal exchange, ecological debt, social metabolism, and ecological distribution conflicts, the section introduces several concepts that could contribute to eco-territorial internationalism (Bringel & Fernandez, 2023) and address the challenges capitalist modernity poses for the Global South. We explore how Latin American political ecology offers unique insights through further broad conceptual frameworks. LAPE has also been produced through participatory and counter-mapping, popular epidemiology, territorial observatories, activist bulletins, legal dossiers, assembly-based pedagogies, and other movement-generated forms of inquiry that are not reducible to academic mediation.

We do not define Latin American political ecology (LAPE) narrowly in terms of the nationality of authors, nor solely by whether they are institutionally based in Latin America, because the question is not reducible to identity alone but also the politics of knowledge production. As Grosfoguel (2016) argues, the geopolitics of knowledge is structured through forms of epistemic extractivism whereby ideas, experiences, and concepts produced in subaltern territories are treated as raw material: detached from the struggles, histories, and intellectual traditions that generated them, and then recirculated through metropolitan academic circuits as fully elaborated theory. From this perspective, noting that some emerging scholars were based in the Global North is relevant not because such location disqualifies their contributions, but because it highlights the uneven infrastructures of publication, citation, legitimacy, and visibility through which certain voices come to stand in for the field more readily than others. At the same time, this asymmetry cannot be addressed through an identity-essentialist criterion, as if Latin American origin alone were sufficient to define LAPE, or as if scholars based elsewhere were automatically external to it. The issue, rather, is whether knowledge remains materially and politically accountable to the conflicts, territorial struggles, and intellectual traditions from which it emerges, or whether it is abstracted from them and reinserted into hierarchies that reproduce the very colonial divisions the field seeks to challenge.

The decontextualization and depoliticization of knowledges produced in struggle, the key question is whether a body of work remains materially and politically accountable to the histories, conflicts, and territorial processes from which it draws. In this sense, LAPE is better understood as a situated, heterogeneous, and contested field of thought and praxis forged through socioecological conflicts, critical intellectual traditions, and movement-based forms of knowledge production in and about Latin America. It includes multiple schools and institutional nodes – CLACSO being only one among them – but it also exceeds academia, encompassing insurgent and autonomous processes such as *Zapatismo*, which are not merely objects of analysis but generative sites of political-ecological thought. In this regard, Wilson's (2023) discussion of *insurgent universality* enables a shift from the false choice between abstract universalism and fixed identity: what gives coherence to a field such as LAPE is not geographic location, or a closed cultural essence, but political articulation forged in shared struggles against capitalist modernity, its means of dispossession via extractivism, colonial domination and patriarchal structures. The *Journal of Political Ecology* has also been an important venue for debates connected to Latin America, publishing work on ecologically unequal exchange, urban nature and environmental justice, water governance, green extractivism, and most recently toxic dispossession and environmental violence in the region.

Political Ecology in CLACSO

What distinguishes Latin American political ecology is not the work of any single author, institution, or "school," but the dense articulation of concepts, struggles, and intellectual practices that emerged across the region in response to colonialism, extractivism, dependency, and territorial dispossession. In this sense, Latin American political ecology should not be understood simply as concepts of political ecology applied to Latin American cases, nor as a cannon structured around

names and individual contributions (See Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; González Gómez, 2022). Rather, it is a situated field of thought and praxis forged through dialogues among Indigenous and peasant struggles, environmental justice movements, critical scholars, and activist networks. Its distinctiveness does not entail a "regional exceptionalism" or particularisms, but in the way socioecological conflicts have been theorized through the intertwined lenses of ecologically unequal exchange, ecological debt, coloniality, territorial defense, and alternatives to development, among others.

The institutionalization of this field did not follow a single linear trajectory. One important node was the creation of the Political Ecology working group within the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (or *CLACSO* in Spanish) in 2000, which by 2026 bears the name *Grupo de Trabajo Ecología(s) Política(s) desde el Sur/Abya-Yala*. CLACSO is an articulating platform rather than the exclusive site of origin or consolidation. The field took shape through successive and overlapping waves of debate and organization, including earlier and parallel contributions from ecological economics, environmental history, postdevelopment, anti-extractivist critique, feminist and decolonial thought, and movement-based territorial struggles. In that broader genealogy, the interventions associated with Héctor Alimonda were undoubtedly decisive, but they formed part of a wider collaborative process rather than a singular founding moment (Alimonda, 2002, 2006, 2011, 2014, 2016; Delgado Ramos, 2013).

Seen from this angle, the importance of CLACSO lies in having gathered, amplified, and connected debates already underway across different countries and traditions. Earlier and parallel antecedents include Victor Toledo's efforts to politicize ecology, Enrique Leff's work on environmental rationality and the dialogue of knowledges, Martínez-Alier's contributions on ecological distribution conflicts and the environmentalism of the poor, and Arturo Escobar's elaboration of postdevelopment, place, and pluriversal politics (see: Martínez-Alier, 1991, 1995, 2002; Escobar, 1995, 2005, 2010, 2012; Leff, 1986, 2004, 2006). The Ibero-American journal *Ecología Política*, coordinated from 1990 by Martínez-Alier and James O'Connor, also provided an early and important space for these debates (the first article of the first issue was authored by Victor Toledo), as did later interdisciplinary and environmental history spaces such as SOLCHA. In this respect, it is more accurate to speak of a field constituted through multiple sites, languages, and moments of articulation than through a single institutional line of descent. Delgado Ramos' (2013) suggestion that Alimonda's work could help open a Latin American pathway for political ecology is especially useful here, because it indicates that such a pathway was still being identified and consolidated rather than already fully constituted.

The dialogue between Latin American political ecology and environmental history was particularly important in giving the field historical depth. Here again, Alimonda's contributions were central, especially in foregrounding how the destruction of ecosystems in the region cannot be separated from the *longue durée* of colonial domination and capitalist appropriation. But this historical sensibility was also cultivated collectively through the work of scholars such as Germán Palacio and Stefania Gallini, as well as through spaces like SOLCHA and, later, the journal *Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña* (HALAC), which helped connect environmental history to socioecological conflict, hydrosocial relations, and colonial transformations of territory (Palacio, 2006, 2012; Gallini, 2005, 2009; Garnero, 2018). If SOLCHA is relevant here, it is not simply as another institutional platform, but because it formed part of the wider environmental-history current through which Latin American political ecology deepened its understanding of colonialism as ecological transformation.

Within this broader process, one of the most influential conceptual moves was the elaboration of political ecology as the study of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts. This

formulation, associated strongly with Alimonda, expanded earlier definitions of political ecology by insisting that conflicts over nature are not only about access to material resources, but also about meaning, representation, knowledge, and territorial control (Martínez-Alier & O'Connor, 1996; Alimonda, 2014, 2016). Political ecology thus came to be understood not as a discrete discipline, but as an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of academic and non-academic knowledge and practice, drawing from geography, anthropology, ecology, history, literature, economics, traditional knowledge, and the knowledges produced in struggle. Its object is not "nature" in the abstract, but the power relations through which nature is appropriated, governed, valued, and contested.

Another major thread in this collective elaboration has been the attempt to understand Latin America as a privileged terrain for thinking about the colonality of nature. Here too, Alimonda's interventions are important, especially in showing how colonial domination in the region involved not only the subordination of peoples but also the violent reordering of ecosystems, landscapes, and human–nonhuman relations. The notion of the colonality of nature helps explain how the appropriation of land, forests, minerals, and waters under colonial rule persists under contemporary neocolonial forms such as monocultures, mining, and infrastructural megaprojects (Alimonda, 2019). But this problematic was also being developed in related ways through Leff's (2015) critique of modern rationality and environmental epistemology, Porto-Gonçalves' work on territory and re-existence, Escobar's analyses of autonomy and territorial difference, and Martínez-Alier's attention to ecological conflicts and valuation struggles. Taken together, these contributions helped define Latin American political ecology as a field attentive not only to exploitation and dispossession, but also to the historical and ontological conditions that make them possible. Alimonda also started "eco-criticism" in Latin America with his comments on the ecological contents of major literary works from famous contemporary Latin American novelists.

From these perspectives, Latin American political ecology emerged not merely as an academic specialization but as a space of reflection and action tied to social mobilization, critical historical thought, and the defense of territory. Its development has drawn from diverse currents, including decolonial thought, Indigenous and peasant struggles, liberation theology, ecological economics, environmental history, and critiques of development. What results is not a homogeneous school, but a heterogeneous field marked by friendly tensions, crossings, and partial convergences. This is why it is better to speak of a collective and uneven process of construction, in which figures such as Héctor Alimonda, Enrique Leff, Arturo Escobar, Joan Martínez-Alier, Carlos W. Porto-Gonçalves, Henri Acselrad, Giancarlo Delgado Ramos, Germán Palacio, Eduardo Gudynas, Maristela Svampa, Gabriela Merlinsky, Mario Pérez Rincón, Horacio Machado and many others helped open pathways, while social movements, territorial struggles, and non-academic forms of knowledge production remained equally constitutive of the field.

In that wider sense, the contribution of CLACSO was to offer one space where these debates could be named, connected, and projected. Its importance lies less in having founded Latin American political ecology than in having helped weave together a conversation that was already emerging across multiple territories and traditions. Recognizing this broader genealogy also helps avoid reducing the field to a handful of figureheads. The history of Latin American political ecology is better understood as a collective intellectual-political labor, produced through networks of scholars, militants, communities, and movements that have sought to understand and confront the socioecological violence of colonial and capitalist modernity while opening other horizons of justice, autonomy, and territorial life. Another distinctive feature of Latin American political ecology lies not only in its concepts, but also in its infrastructures of circulation. The field has often developed through relatively accessible regional journals, open-access publishers, activist observatories, conflict maps, and multilingual formats that allow ideas to circulate beyond paywalled academic spaces. This

includes not only journals such as *Ecología Política* and networks such as CLACSO, but also movement-linked platforms and public resources such as OCMAL and the Fiocruz-led *Mapa de Conflitos Envolviendo Injustiça Ambiental e Saúde no Brasil*, mapping environmental injustices in Brazil, (OCMAL, n.d.; Fiocruz, n.d.). These infrastructures have helped sustain a field that is not confined to academic specialization, but remains closely connected to territorial struggles, activist research, and broader public debate. This broader genealogy was articulated through Lusophone scholarship and activist infrastructures. The field's development has depended in important ways on Brazilian contributions to *ecologia política*, environmental justice, territoriality, and conflict mapping, as well as more recent reflections on *ecologia política* as a field of practice and insurgent defense of life.

The influence of Latin American political ecology has not been limited to academic debate or grassroots mobilization. In some cases, it has also entered multilateral and public-policy arenas. Enrique Leff (2017), for instance, played a significant institutional role through his work with UNEP/PNUMA in Latin America, while more recently Irene Vélez-Torres combined political-ecological scholarship with state office during her tenures as Colombia's Minister of Mines and Energy from 2022–2026. Fander Falconí and Alberto Acosta were known as ecological economists and political ecologists before becoming government ministers in Ecuador (when Rafael Correa became president of Ecuador in 2007) while Oscar Rivas, an activist with *Sobrevivencia en Paraguay*, became a government minister with President Lugo. These trajectories are not identical, but they do show that the field's concepts and critiques have at times traveled into formal institutions of environmental governance and policy (as in Colombia in 2023–2026 with Francia Márquez as vice-president and Irene Vélez as minister). A further point that should be made more explicitly is that in Latin America political ecology has often developed not only as an analytical framework for scholars, but as a praxis closely entangled with social movements, territorial struggles, activist research, and public pedagogy. This is one reason why the field has been shaped not only through journals and academic debates, but through observatories, movement networks, conflict maps, autonomous processes, and teaching spaces oriented toward socioecological transformation. In Ecuador, for example, political ecology is taught in explicitly transdisciplinary and movement-facing ways: the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar's master's program in *Ecología Política y Alternativas al Desarrollo* frames the field through actors and political subjects in Latin America, non-academic situated knowledges, collaborative methods, intercultural dialogue, and fieldwork.

Postdevelopment and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas

The postdevelopment critique, as articulated by thinkers like Ivan Illich, Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, and Arturo Escobar, exposes development as a modern myth with deep colonial roots rather than a neutral or benevolent project. Far from being a pathway to equity and progress, development became a geopolitical instrument designed to universalize Western ideals of economic growth, technological modernity, and institutional rationality. Sachs (1992) identifies development as a "ruin in the intellectual landscape" – an idea that once promised prosperity, but instead facilitated ecological destruction, cultural homogenization, and structural inequality. Esteva and Escobar (2017) reinforce this view by arguing that development imposes a singular, linear model of the good life, erasing diverse ways of being and living. Its guiding principle has been the fabrication of needs, which turned self-sufficient communities into needy, governable populations – *homo miserabilis* – dispossessed of their vernacular capacities and rendered dependent on the state, market, and expert knowledge systems (Esteva & Escobar, 2017).

The "Cuernavaca School" built on the foundational work of Ivan Illich. It refers to the intellectual milieu formed around CIDOC in Cuernavaca, animated by Ivan Illich and Valentina

Borremans. Beck (2016) describes this as a possible "School" with its own critical theory, whereas González Gómez (2025) treats the term more cautiously, as a useful label for a set of related authors rather than a formally constituted school – postdevelopment offers a powerful critique of the psychosocial dimension of this global project. Illich (2010) argued that the invention of 'needs' served as a philanthropic rationale for cultural devastation, allowing policymakers and professionals to justify intervention and control in the name of alleviating needs. Today, these "needs" have been updated to 'basic requirements', further institutionalizing Euro-American standards of life, consumption, and governance as universally desirable. Development thus functions as a standardizing apparatus, flattening local knowledges, ecological practices, and political autonomies in favor of a singular mode of capitalist modernity (Escobar, 2012). The material and energy intensity of this model not only exacerbates planetary ecological crises – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – but also accelerates medical, psychological, and communal breakdowns (Marya & Patel, 2022). In this way, postdevelopment now situates the ecological crisis within a wider civilizational crisis, rooted in the epistemic violence and ontological enclosure of modernity itself. Postdevelopment is a constitutive element of Latin American political ecology.

Ultimately, development must be understood not as a failed dream, but as a successful rebranding of colonialism. As Rahnema and Bawtree (1997) argue, it constitutes an immense geopolitical and psychological operation, systematically producing the Global South as "underdeveloped" and in need of intervention. This framing legitimizes endless forms of extractivism, displacement, and cultural erasure in the name of progress. Postdevelopment's radical contribution lies in refusing not only development, but also its institutional recuperation through statist, capitalist, extractivist, and patriarchal projects that claim to be decolonial while leaving the core structures of domination intact (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025). The postdevelopment perspective therefore rejects development alternatives and instead calls for alternatives to development: radical pluralism, autonomy, and what Escobar terms the pluriverse, where many worlds coexist without being absorbed into a single universal project. In this sense, the pluriverse is not merely an academic concept, but a field of struggle enacted through concrete practices such as autonomous urban communities, territorial defense, and networks which weave together grassroots practices without subordinating them to a centralized model (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025). In place of the homogenizing dream of "catching up," grassroots movements around the world are reclaiming autonomy, reviving commons-based practices, and articulating convivial forms of well-being that defy the dictates of capitalist modernity. As Esteva (2012, 2019) puts it, the task is no longer to develop, but to deprofessionalize, decolonize, and reexist – to rediscover the multiplicity of ways in which life can flourish beyond the grip of development.

The contributions of the *zapatista* thought and practice to political ecology – particularly as interpreted and amplified by Gustavo Esteva – provide a vital bridge between the postdevelopment critique and insurgent forms of autonomy grounded in lived experience (Tornel, 2026). As Esteva noted in the wake of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, the EZLN's rejection of imposed development – *No queremos que nadie venga a desarrollarnos* – resonated deeply with his own critique of the colonality of development (Esteva, 1994 [2025]). For Esteva, the Zapatistas embodied not only a resistance to neoliberalism and capitalist enclosure, but also an epistemic rupture with the modernizing logic of development (González Gómez & Tornel, 2023). Their insistence on autonomy, communal life, and re-existence marked a shift from the idea of *an alternative development* toward *alternatives to development* (Esteva & Escobar, 2017). In this way, the EZLN became a living example of postdevelopment's radical questioning of the development paradigm and its entanglements with the colonial state and capitalist modernity.

This connection also reconfigures political ecology itself. Esteva's long-standing critique of the economic mentality as a colonial imposition – especially its organizing principle of scarcity (Illich, 1980; Gorz, 1985; Esteva, 2022) – finds political and territorial expression in the Zapatista emphasis on subsistence, sufficiency, and communal reproduction. Their form of resistance is not merely about opposing environmental degradation, but about defending and regenerating vernacular modes of life – what Esteva, drawing on Gutierrez-Aguilar (2014) would later call "*entramados comunitarios*" – that challenge the universals of economic growth, institutional dependency, and representative politics. These communities are not just victims of ecological violence but active producers of pluriversal ecologies, where the relationship between people and territory is governed by autonomy, reciprocity, and dignity rather than technocratic logics of resource management. In that sense, Zapatismo, through Esteva's lens, extends the horizon of political ecology beyond its classical roots in ecological distribution conflicts, towards an ontological reimagining of life beyond capitalism and the state.

Moreover, Esteva's concept of *diálogo de vivires* – a relational, situated form of intercultural politics rooted in practice rather than abstract epistemology – mirrors the organizational logic of the EZLN and the broader *Congreso Nacional Indígena* [Indigenous National Congress] (Duran Matute & Moreno, 2022). These are not merely platforms for cultural representation but insurgent infrastructures for weaving resistance across difference without erasing it. Echoing the Zapatista question, "*¿Y tú qué?*" [what about you?], we are reminded of how insurrectionary and transformative processes arise from particular contexts, histories, and politics. This inquiry fosters a sense of solidarity through an emerging transterritorial internationalism – a network of territories in resistance and struggle (Durán Matute, 2023). As stated in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle:

To walk together to listen and organize indignation; not to create movements that are later negotiated behind the backs of those who built them, but to always consider the opinions of participants; not to seek handouts, positions, advantages, or public offices from Power or those aspiring to it, but to go beyond electoral calendars; not to attempt to solve our Nation's problems from above, but to build FROM BELOW AND FOR BELOW an alternative to neoliberal destruction. (EZLN, 2006)

This internationalist tone was further reinforced in the 2021 declaration announcing their intention to visit Europe: "We hear and see rebellions and resistances that understand, each in their own way, time, and geography, that solutions do not lie in faith in national governments, that they are not born protected by borders nor dressed in different flags and languages" (EZLN, 2021).

The Zapatistas' refusal to be defined by external categories (citizen, consumer, stakeholder) and their emphasis on dreaming "our own dreams" (Esteva, 2021) offers political ecology a path towards a decolonial politics of re-existence. Furthermore, the 30th anniversary of the uprising in 2024 marked a return of the Zapatista struggle to focus on the commons ("*el común*") as a lived experience and everyday form of resistance that moves beyond private property, to challenge the everyday reproduction of capitalism (Zibechi, 2025).

In doing so, they prefigure what Esteva called a "post-capitalist world already in gestation," one grounded not in ideological blueprints but in the rebellious dispersions of everyday life (Esteva, 2013). The Declaration for Life and the Zapatista Journey for Life / European tour in 2021 marked a new phase for global movements in open rebellion, a foundational process aiming to construct a new internationalism in the 21st century (De Parres, p. 12). Many of these groups identify with bottom-up movements against the "capitalists hydra." Various authors, collectives, and movements have

addressed this process under diverse terms: "eco-territorial internationalism" (Bringel & Fernández, 2023), "Globalization of Rebellion" (López & Rivas, 2023), "Civilizational Transitions" (Escobar, 2018), and "Pluriverse" (Kothari *et al.*, 2019: xii), as "...a broad transcultural compilation of concrete concepts, worldviews and practices from around the world, challenging the modernist ontology of universalism in favor of a multiplicity of possible worlds." The challenge for these "transition discourses" is not only rooted in its rejection of a universal, eurocentric and modern-imbued form of development, but a transition towards a universalism built of particulars (Césaire, 2000; Escobar, 2020; García-Arias, *et al.*, 2025) where *pueblos del color de la tierra* are leading the march. Through this lens, Zapatismo is not simply an Indigenous movement; it is a radical critique of the political, economic, and ecological foundations of modernity itself. This also explains their most recent political project: the recovery of *el común* and non-ownership of property. While the US environmental justice movement fights locally against the environmental racism endured by the BIPOC – black, Indigenous, people of color – Latin American political ecology identifies itself with the world majorities, *los pueblos del color de la tierra* [the peoples of the color of the earth].

Decoloniality of knowledge and epistemic equity

The decolonial turn in Latin America has been essential in challenging the myth of modernity as an (unfinished) emancipatory project (Habermas, 2000). Emerging from a group of researchers from Latin America mostly based in the geographical North in 2002, the modernity/coloniality group proposed a radical critique of the Eurocentric modern project, understanding that modernity is constitutively linked to coloniality. Its objective was to propose a decolonial-turn that opened spaces for forms of thought, knowledge and world "otherwise", based on the experiences, knowledge and struggles of subalternized peoples (Escobar, 2007). By locating the origin of modernity as post-1492 (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992), understanding colonialism as constitutive of both capitalism and modernity and acknowledging that the world-system is rooted in the subjugation and subordination of knowledge as a necessary condition for modernity (Escobar, 2010), decolonial scholars have pointed towards how eurocentrism has always depended on a configuration of its identity in a radical opposition towards others (Coronil, 1996; Said, 2018). Quijano added "coloniality of power" and racism to Wallerstein's history of the modern world-system. This was around 1990 when movements of Indigenous Latin America and the Black Caribbean against the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the European conquest were widespread. It became obvious that the birth of capitalism came from land grabbing, forced labor and depopulation of America after 1492, and from plantation-slavery.

The work of Gustavo Esteva (2022) has also been key in expanding what de Sousa Santos (2014) termed an "Ecology of Knowledges" or the intercultural epistemological dialogue that challenges universal and abstract hierarchies and the powers that, through them, have been naturalized by history. The argument here is that modernity has maintained a form of "abyssal thinking," where visible and invisible distinctions are made between one side of the line, where we can find modern thought, and another side with non-modern thought which is perceived as non-existent, non-valid or irrelevant. Santos and others have instead proposed an openness in political ecology to engage in an intercultural dialogue with other regions, bringing to the fore an insurrection of knowledge oppressed by that modernity (Foucault, 2003; Esteva, 2022). The result, as Leff (2017) argues, has been a proliferation of ecological knowledges revealing the possibility of other relational paths towards other ways of being, knowing, and doing in the world. The "dialogue of livings" emphasizes epistemic equity and the creation of pluriversal autonomies, fostering coexistence and mutual respect among diverse ways of being and living.

This is a foundational principle for confronting the colonial hierarchies embedded in dominant knowledge systems. Drawing on the work of Ambrosio Velasco (2016) and others, epistemic equity challenges the presumed superiority of Western science and calls for the creation of intercultural spaces of dialogue, where diverse knowledge systems can engage as equals. It argues that epistemic justice is not merely about inclusion but about recognizing the political and ontological rights of historically marginalized communities to define their own futures and ways of knowing. The current socio-ecological crisis is not only a manifestation of capitalism's structural contradictions, but also of the dominance of modern epistemologies that reduce the complexity of human and non-human life to homogenizing frameworks. From the perspective of Latin American political ecology, this is a crisis of knowledge and of ways of inhabiting the world. It entails a profound critique of Western techno-scientific traditions that claim universality and objectivity, while in practice enabling the commodification of nature and legitimizing colonial forms of appropriation (López-Gómez, 2024). Despite recent efforts to develop integrative, systemic, and interdisciplinary scientific paradigms, the diverse ontologies and epistemologies of humanity remain marginalized, subordinated to a dominant mode of knowledge that has historically enabled capitalist expansion and environmental degradation (Grosfoguel, 2016).

Although interest in Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems has grown, these are often appropriated in utilitarian ways rather than being recognized for their rationality and epistemic validity. This results in what Grosfoguel (2016) terms "epistemological extractivism" – a dynamic in which knowledge is appropriated without engaging in meaningful dialogue or co-creation. Efforts such as epistemological pluralism (Olive *et al.*, 2009) and the co-production of knowledge (Paneque, *et al.*, 2022) point toward more inclusive approaches. Yet, these must be accompanied by an ethical-political commitment to reversing the deep-rooted colonial and epistemic inequalities that persist. As Edgardo Lander (2000) argues, modern scientific thought has naturalized the social order, presenting liberal-industrial society not only as desirable but as the only possible trajectory of human development. In Latin America, the legacy of colonial rationality did not end with independence. On the contrary, newly established nation-states continued to repress Indigenous social organization, worldviews, and ways of life, which were seen as obstacles to political and economic consolidation (González Casanova, 2006; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Esteva, 2009; Turner, 2018; Romero & Salazar, 2026). This repression took diverse forms – from land dispossession and forced assimilation to policies of linguistic homogenization and eugenics, including forced sterilization campaigns against Indigenous women. Educational systems played a key role in institutionalizing epistemic hierarchies, defining literacy in colonial languages as a prerequisite for citizenship and dismissing traditional knowledge as "superstition" (Velasco, 2021). Many local languages that survived 500 years are now disappearing.

This historical process helped consolidate what Velasco (2021) calls *epistemocracy*: the institutional belief that a particular kind of knowledge – modern, scientific, and technocratic – is inherently superior and thus politically normative. However, the unfolding ecological crisis calls into question this presumption of epistemic authority. Instrumentalist science, marked by increasing specialization and disconnection from social and ecological realities, has not only failed to prevent environmental collapse – it has often been complicit in producing it. In contrast, Indigenous and local communities have sustained resilient, ecosystem-based practices that embody what Enrique Leff (2014) calls *sustainable social imaginaries*. These imaginaries are increasingly under threat from the violent territorial expansion of extractivist capitalism, generating widespread socio-environmental conflicts. In response, many communities are not only resisting, but *r-existing* [from *r-existencia*] – revitalizing ancestral knowledges, reclaiming territories, and articulating new forms of life that challenge colonial modernity (Porto-Gonçalves, 2002). Their demands are not limited to economic

reparations or environmental remediation, but include ontological claims: the right to *be*, to re-signify their existence, and to imagine alternative futures. These struggles often converge with broader movements, thereby forming the basis of *actual* sustainability.

Such transformations present a dual epistemological challenge. First, there is a need to deconstruct the monopoly of rationality granted to Western science and to challenge the scientistic authoritarianism that underpins it. Second, the plural ontologies and future imaginaries of humanity must be incorporated into knowledge production processes. Velasco (2016) proposes the principle of *epistemic equity*, which affirms the equal dignity of all culturally rooted knowledge traditions in the public sphere. Rather than validating traditional knowledge through scientific criteria, epistemic equity calls for public spaces of dialogue where diverse communities can deliberate as equals (López-Beltrán & Velasco, 2014). However, this principle must be more than theoretical reflection – it must become an ethical-political stance in defense of the right of all peoples to autonomy, self-determination, and political agency. As Ivan Illich, Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, Edgardo Lander and several others argue, the very discourse of "development" perpetuates exclusion by denying the legitimacy of alternative lifeways. Indigenous communities across the globe have created locally adapted systems of sustenance and care that are dismissed by dominant models as inadequate or irrational. Such reductionism not only deepens ecological degradation but also erodes cultural diversity and epistemic justice. Finally, the pursuit of epistemic equity must extend beyond participatory rhetoric and tokenistic consultation. It calls for the co-construction of knowledge across all stages – from problem identification to solution-making – rooted in mutual commitment and collective decision-making. Only through such practices, as Conde & Walter (2022) argue, can we confront the colonial-capitalist-patriarchal order and open pathways toward truly pluriversal and sustainable futures.

Body/Territory

A fuller account of Latin American political ecology requires recognizing feminist political ecology as a significant approach in its own right, rather than only through the later emergence of *cuero-territorio*. As Ulloa (2021) argues, a Latin American feminist political ecology has grown and consolidated itself through strong dialogues with diverse feminisms, feminist spatialities, feminist movements, and Indigenous women's movements. This matters because, although Latin American political ecology has been deeply critical of colonialism, development, extractivism, and territorial dispossession, it did not address gender inequalities or address ecofeminist activism in a sustained way, tending instead to privilege more general analyses of power, class, ethnicity, territory, or culture. From this perspective, gender is not an additional variable to be appended to environmental conflict, but a constitutive dimension of socioecological relations, shaping access, use, control, and decision-making over land, water, forests, and other commons, as well as the production of environmental knowledges and the forms of resistance that emerge in defense of life (Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996; Elmhirst, 2017; Ulloa, 2021). In a related but broader feminist critique, von Werlhof (2007) insists that no critique of capitalism is adequate without a critique of patriarchy, since capitalist accumulation depends not only on wage labor but on the systematic devaluation, appropriation, and expropriation of unpaid and feminized forms of labor and life. Read alongside Latin American feminist political ecology, this insight helps clarify why the defense of territory cannot be separated from the defense of social reproduction, embodied existence, and the conditions that sustain life.

Within this broader field of Latin American feminist political ecology, we draw on the burgeoning Latin American/Abya Yala concept of *cuero-territorio* as developed in communitarian and decolonial feminist praxis, especially through the work of Lorena Cabnal (2010), Rita Segato (2015), Tania Cruz Hernández (2016), and Sofia Zaragocin (2020), among others. The idea does not

claim that the entanglement of bodies, land, and violence is unique to Latin America in an absolute sense. Rather, the point is that *cuero-territorio* names a specific political and conceptual elaboration that emerged from Indigenous, popular, and feminist struggles in the region as a way of understanding how patriarchal, colonial, and extractive violence acts simultaneously on territories and on bodies. In that sense, the concept did not originate within political ecology narrowly defined, but in a broader field of Latin American feminist and territorial struggle; it has nonetheless become an important interlocutor for feminist political ecology and for wider LAPE debates on extractivism, territorial defense, and re-existence.

This framework, rooted in decolonial feminism and *feminismo comunitario*, brings into discussion key aspects of the territory and the role of women's bodies in relation to colonial-capitalism and extractivism. On the one hand, as Halvorsen (2019) argues, the notion of the territory in Latin America questions the simple idea of a fixed, sovereign "container," instead pointing towards a multiplicity of grounded practices that enable a particular political pursuit rooted in emancipatory politics (see also Leff, 2017). This approximation also highlights how different formulations of the body and the territory are also imbued by colonial and patriarchal relations of power that have historically exercised multiple forms of violence against women and nature (Segato, 2015; Cruz Hernandez, 2016). The grassroots notion of body-territory comes from Abya Yala although no doubt is also relevant to other latitudes and historical periods – it recalls the relationship between "primitive accumulation" of capitalism and patriarchy in Silvia Federici's work (2021). In a similar vein, Ariel Salleh's critique of the "Androcene" similarly identifies patriarchal-colonial-capitalist modernity as a single formation organized through dualisms such as Humanity/Nature, Masculine/Feminine, Production/Reproduction, and Mind/Body. Her notion of "embodied materialism" helps clarify why *cuero-territorio* is not simply a metaphor for the relation between women and land, but a political ecology of reproduction: a way of naming how extractivism, *machismo*, and colonial violence act simultaneously on bodies, territories, and the material conditions through which life is regenerated (Salleh, 2024).

The ontological turn within political ecology has been driven by a significant reformulation of terms like 'territory' in Latin America. The work of Latin American geographers such as Porto-Gonçalves (2003), Milton Santos (2022), and Rogério Haesbaert (2021) has been instrumental in developing the concept of territoriality. In this context, territories in Latin America transcend the colonial notion of space as an empty container to be appropriated. Agnew and Oslender (2010) introduced the idea of multiple territorialities, emphasizing how diverse political and life projects shape specific places. Expanding on this, Haesbaert (2022) argues that the defense of life constitutes a central axis in the conceptualization of territory, framing it as a lifescape. His work highlights how Latin American perspectives reveal the experiences of subaltern groups, challenging dominant spatial paradigms. This reconceptualization of territory also incorporates *cosmovivencias*, emphasizing the importance of a decolonial perspective that goes beyond mere epistemic disagreements. Territory, in this sense, becomes a site where spatial and power relationships are negotiated and contested. It is a space where subaltern groups not only resist hegemonic or universal formulations of territoriality but actively redefine these processes through their lived realities and struggles.

The work of feminist and ecofeminists has drawn on the notion of the territory – where the body and the territory become sites of contestation of power relationships. Seeing the territory as a form of re-existence, or as "spaces of life" or "difference" (Cabnal, 2010; Escobar, 2008), they point towards interdependence and relationality being placed at the center of the struggles for life, contesting the patriarchal forms of hierarchy and domination over nature. From this perspective, bodies (and territories) cannot be treated as neutral or universally empty spaces but must be recognized as sites that are 'crossed' by politics and power. The affirmation of seeing the body as a

site of political struggle is rooted in the perspective that the body and the territory are part of the same dimension of extractive acts of violence that shape the experience of women, where the body becomes the smallest space in a broader scale of violent forms of plunder, extraction, dispossession and violence (Segato, 2015; Isla, 2022). The body becomes the "first site of struggle" (Miotto, 2019).

Placing a community over the individual, a relational over a hierarchical worldview, interdependence over competitiveness, and caring for life over its extraction at the center of the political struggle operates as a response to the colonial matrix of power. It shifts attention to a change in scale and temporal rhythms that place the formulation of vernacular or other forms of value and valuation at its center (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2020). From the perspective of political ecologists, the body/territory framework becomes a critical way of understanding the lived experiences and the political ontologies that shape different forms of resistance and re-existence, most notably Indigenous women, who weave

...an inseparable relationship of their bodies/affections with the spaces of everyday life, breaking, relationally, with the dichotomous vision between materiality and spirituality, sensibility and conscience, nature and society and, obviously, body and spirit, since the conception of the body/corporeality incorporated in these 'body-territories' is also profusely shaped by a symbolic or, if we prefer, spiritual content. (Haesbaert, 2021: 295)

Understanding the body/territory framework as a tool for resistance and struggle broadens our understanding of a territory and embodies struggles as a burgeoning "terrain" within political ecology.

Feminist political ecology in Latin America makes visible how territory itself is organized through patriarchal, racialized, and colonial relations of power. In many contexts, women confront differentiated barriers to participation in assemblies, community governance, and decisions over land and natural resources, while extractive economies linked to mining, agribusiness, energy, and conservation intensify unpaid care burdens, precarious labor, sexual violence, and the devaluation of women's environmental knowledge (Ulloa, 2016, 2021; Bolados & Sánchez, 2017; Bolados *et al.*, 2017). These processes show that extractivism does not operate only through the dispossession of territory in an abstract sense, but also through the reorganization of everyday life, social reproduction, and embodied vulnerability. In this respect, von Werlhof's (2007) argument is also relevant: capitalist patriarchy is sustained through ongoing forms of expropriation that target women, subsistence, and the reproductive conditions of life, making visible how domination operates simultaneously through labor, violence, and the attempted control of bodies and nature. At the same time, women are not merely affected subjects within these conflicts. Across Latin America, Indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendant, and communitarian women have been central protagonists in territorial defense, anti-extractivist mobilization, and the articulation of alternatives to development, care, and collective autonomy (Cabnal, 2010, 2013; Ulloa, 2016, 2018, 2021; Walsh, 2015). It is within this broader field that *cuerpo-territorio* gains force: not simply as a metaphor of embodied connection, but as a political grammar for understanding how violence against land is simultaneously violence against bodies, care, memory, and the continuity of communal life.

The eco-territorial turn, communitarian entanglements and "comunalidad"

A more specific contribution of Latin American political ecology has been captured by what Maristella Svampa (2018) called the *eco-territorial turn*. This shift names the growing centrality of territory in contemporary struggles against extractivism, not simply as land, property, or

administrative jurisdiction, but as the material, affective, and political space through which life is reproduced. Across the region, Indigenous peoples, peasant communities, neighborhood organizations, civil society groups, and engaged scholars have woven networks of resistance that contest the reduction of territories to resource frontiers or spaces of managed inclusion (Tetreault *et al.*, 2019). The relevance of the eco-territorial turn for political ecology lies in that it has helped displace the analysis of socio-environmental conflict away from a narrow focus on resource control or institutional participation and toward the defense of territories of life, the reproduction of the commons, and autonomous forms of collective organization. In this sense, while the eco-territorial turn belongs directly to Latin American political ecology, some of the concepts that nourish it – such as *comunalidad* and *entramados comunitarios* – emerge from broader Indigenous, communal, and autonomous traditions of thought and struggle in the region. We bring them into dialogue with Latin American political ecology not to retroactively classify all such thoughts as political ecology, but to show how the field has been transformed through sustained engagement with these territorial practices and intellectual traditions.

Capitalist modernity can be understood as a war against the subsistence of peoples: a long process through which development, industrialization, and modernization destroy the vernacular capacities through which communities sustain life with autonomy and dignity (Illich, 1981; Robert, 2021a; 2021b). Subsistence here does not mean mere survival, but a concrete, relational, and territorialized way of inhabiting the world. What modernity attacks, then, is not only land or "resources," but the capacities, knowledges, proportions, and forms of autonomy through which peoples reproduce their worlds (Millan, 2024). The notion of communitarian entanglements (*entramados comunitarios*), developed by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2020) and expanded by authors such as Navarro (2015), Tzul (2016), and Linsalata (2015) among others, helps clarify what is at stake in these struggles. Against readings that treat primitive accumulation as a completed or foundational moment, these authors insist that expropriation is continuous, expansive, and constitutive of capitalist accumulation in the present (Navarro, 2015). The capture or destruction of communal conditions of life – land, water, labor, care, memory, and forms of collective decision-making – is not an exception to capitalist development but one of its ordinary mechanisms. *Entramados comunitarios* names the dense relations through which communities materially and symbolically reproduce life while resisting those processes of separation. Its importance lies in shifting attention from resistance understood only as reaction or opposition toward the practices through which collective life is sustained under conditions of patriarchal, colonial, and extractive violence (Segato, 2015). What is defended is therefore not only access to "resources," but the very fabric of interdependence that makes communal life possible.

From this perspective, the commons is not a pre-given object but an ongoing social and political labor. As Gutiérrez Aguilar (2020) argues, producing the commons entails cultivating, regenerating, and defending the conditions necessary for collective existence, while confronting the fragmented relations imposed by dispossession and by the liberal state. This is where the dialogue with *comunalidad* becomes especially important. Rooted in Oaxacan Indigenous thought and elaborated by Floriberto Díaz (2014) and Jaime Martínez Luna (2010; 2015), *comunalidad* does not refer to an abstract principle but to a lived organization of existence grounded in community, work, nature-territory, and a collectively defined sense of well-being (Tornel & González Gómez, 2022). Its importance for political ecology lies in showing that territorial defense is inseparable from concrete forms of social reproduction, collective obligation, and shared decision-making. *Comunalidad* resists the individualization and generalized competition imposed by market society by affirming that value is produced and sustained in common rather than through commodification. As Guerrero Osorio (2019) notes, it also names a stubborn capacity to incorporate what comes from outside without

allowing it to dissolve what is one's own. In that sense, *comunalidad* is less an identity label than a political practice of continuity, sufficiency, and defense of life. This communitarian horizon can also be expressed through the image of a "sociopolitical milpa," in which different forms of governance, knowledge, justice, and care coexist without being reduced to the monocultural logic of the nation-state (Aguilar Gil, 2025). From this perspective, autonomy and plurality are practices already cultivated through communal forms of organizing and reproducing life.

These practices should not be romanticized as pure ornaments to modernity. Their force often lies precisely in how they negotiate heterogeneity without surrendering the collective horizon of life. Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012; 2018) notion of the *ch'ixi* is useful here insofar as it names the coexistence of heterogeneous elements that do not fuse into a homogeneous synthesis. Something similar appears in Esteva's (2022) formulation of "changing tradition traditionally," that is, the capacity to transform without dissolving the communal project into developmental or statist logics. Dussel's (2015) notion of transmodernity points in a related direction, not as a new universal model, but as an opening through which multiple histories and ways of being confront eurocentric hierarchies without merely reproducing them. The relevance of these formulations for political ecology is not only philosophical. They help explain why many territorial struggles in Latin America are not organized around a return to a purified past, nor around simple inclusion within dominant models of citizenship and development, but around the active reproduction of collective life on different terms. This is also why these struggles often exceed the language of recognition: they are oriented toward sustaining a *proyecto de vida* rather than securing a place within the dominant order.

Seen in this light, the eco-territorial turn is not only a shift in discourse but also in political practice. As Navarro and Barreda (2022) argue, struggles to defend life and the commons emerge both from the denunciation of socio-environmental devastation and from the construction of practices, imaginaries, and narratives capable of sustaining territories of life. This double movement is crucial. The literature on sacrifice zones in Latin America has especially developed in Chile, where the concept has been examined through feminist political ecology, environmental justice, urban energy landscapes, and historical geography (Bolados & Sánchez, 2017; Castán Broto & Sanzana Calvet, 2020; Valenzuela-Fuentes *et al.*, 2021; Bolados *et al.*, 2021; Arriagada, 2023; Astudillo Pizarro *et al.*, 2024). Related discussions have also expanded in Argentina and Mexico through analyses of agribusiness, territorial meaning, and extractivist state policy (Saccucci, 2024; Tornel, 2024), alongside the more directly eco-territorial reading developed by Navarro and Barreda (2022). Communities do not merely resist the expansion of sacrifice zones; they also generate situated forms of know-how, valuation, and organization that exceed the grammar of loss alone (Navarro, Barreda & Carmona, 2024; Tornel, 2024; Juskus, 2023; Lerner, 2010). For Latin American political ecology, this marks an important displacement. Territory ceases to appear primarily as a site of extraction, management, or cultural recognition, and instead becomes legible as a space of collective reproduction, political autonomy, and material defense of life. The contribution of this section, then, is not to restate the broader arguments on pluriversality, epistemic plurality, or body-territory already addressed above, but to specify how, in Latin America, territorial struggles have generated concepts and practices that relocate the commons, interdependence, and the reproduction of life at the center of political ecology.

Political ontology and ontological conflicts

A more recent contribution to political ecology, closely associated with debates emerging from and through Latin America, is the turn toward so-called "political ontology" (Blaser, 2013; de la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2020; Blaser & Escobar, 2023). This perspective argues that many socio-environmental conflicts cannot be understood only as disputes over the distribution of costs, benefits,

resources, or compensation. In some cases, what is at stake is more fundamental: conflicts over what exists, how territory is constituted, which beings count as political subjects, and what kinds of relations sustain life. Political ontology thus expands the field opened by ecological distribution conflicts by showing that struggles over extraction, infrastructure, conservation, and territorial control may also involve forms of epistemic and ontological destruction (Dunlap *et al.*, 2024). Its relevance for political ecology lies in shifting the analysis from conflict over "resources" alone to conflict over worlds.

This shift does not replace earlier work on environmental justice, situated knowledges, or languages of valuation, but rather builds on it. Latin American political ecology has already made decisive contributions by showing how ecological conflicts are expressed through plural valuation languages and through historically unequal relations of power (Temper *et al.*, 2013; Martínez-Alier, 2015; Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). Research on ecological distribution conflicts, including the EJAtlas, has demonstrated that communities mobilize heterogeneous claims: livelihood needs, health, territorial rights, sacredness, ecological values, memory, cultural survival, and sometimes economic compensation. Yet political ontology insists that some conflicts exceed the register of competing incommensurable valuations. They are exclusively or very predominantly struggles over what is there and how it should be understood: whether a river is at the same time water, resource, ecosystem service, ancestor, living being, or territory; whether land is simultaneously commodity, an investment frontier, or the material and spiritual condition of collective existence – this must be excluded (Blaser, 2013; Blaser & Escobar, 2023). In this sense, political ontology sharpens political ecology's critique of the nature/culture divide by criticizing the ontological assumptions embedded in modern governance, extraction, and expert knowledge and placing in their place the communities' "political ontology." Their realities or cosmovisions is what really exists, what should be politically relevant.

This perspective has also helped widen debates on valuation and knowledge beyond utilitarian and strictly monetary frameworks. Rather than treating environmental conflict as a problem solvable through technical optimization or compensation, political ontology points to the limits of frameworks that reduce human-nature relations to commensurable values. This is one reason why Latin American debates have been important in broader international discussions, including those around valuation pluralism and the recognition of multiple knowledge systems in environmental governance. It is more accurate to say that processes such as IPBES moved away from an exclusive reliance on monetary valuation and toward a more plural consideration of values, knowledge systems, and human-nature relations, rather than monetary valuation being rejected outright (Pascual *et al.*, 2017). From this perspective, the critique is not simply against prices, but against the reduction of territorial life to a single ontology of management, utility, and exchange. Hence the growing call to move beyond anthropocentric, dualist, and narrowly utilitarian approaches in environmental governance (Muradian & Gómez-Baggethun, 2021).

At the same time, the political ontology approach should not be universalized. Not all conflicts generated by the growth and transformations of social metabolism are ontological conflicts in the same sense. Martínez-Alier (2023) is right to caution that many eco-political struggles remain disputes over pollution, compensation, labor conditions, public health, or environmental damages without necessarily involving cosmological or ontological incommensurabilities. The tragedy of Brumadinho in Minas Gerais, Brazil in 2019 (the collapse of a tailings dam and the killing of over 200 employees of the Vale company), for example, cannot be reduced to a conflict over sacredness or world-making; it is also a working-class and environmental disaster shaped by corporate negligence, class power, and preventable violence. The same applies to suburban and urban conflicts such as Riachuelo-Matanza in Argentina (Merlinsky, 2022), or to the struggles of the Madres de Ituzaingó against the health impacts of glyphosate fumigation near Córdoba, also in Argentina (Smith

& Smith, 2025). These cases remain central to political ecology, but they show that "political ontological" conflict is not the only, nor always the most useful, interpretive frame. A more careful formulation, then, is that political ontology illuminates a subset of conflicts particularly well: those, very numerous, in which the defense of territory entails the defense of irreducible ways of being, knowing, and inhabiting the world. This caution does not make political ontology less useful; rather, it requires attention to what de la Cadena and Escobar (2023) call "pluriversal contact zones": spaces where divergent worlds meet, form alliances, and sustain "interests in common" that are not necessarily the same interest. In these zones, an environmental struggle may be fought through apparently shared claims – against a mine, a dam, or toxic exposure – while still containing an "excess" that exceeds the language of rights, resources, compensation, or environmental protection. Political ontology is therefore most useful when it helps political ecology remain attentive to these moments of divergence without forcing all conflicts into an ontological frame (see also Behn & Bakker, 2019; May, 2022).

Where political ontology is most analytically powerful is in struggles over land, water, forests, and territories in which subaltern communities are not only opposing extraction or dispossession, but defending life projects that do not fit within the dominant ontology of capitalist modernity. In such cases, conflicts are not merely about access to resources or fairer distribution, but about the right to persist as distinct worlds. This becomes concrete on Colombia's Pacific coast, where Afro-Colombian communities inhabit what has been described as an "aquatic space," constituted through relations among rivers, tides, mangroves, livelihoods, and forms of political organization (Oslender, 2019). Conflict over territory therefore concerns not only access to land or resources, but the defense of a relational way of being against the homogenizing pressures of capitalist modernity. This is why Escobar (2020) describes many contemporary territorial struggles as ontological struggles, and why Leff (2017) argues that political ecology in the Global South has increasingly moved toward the defense of re-existence: the reappropriation of nature, territory, and meaning against an imposed universality rooted in modern rationality. Blaser's (2025) frames extractivism as a conflict between displacement and emplacement: infrastructures of extraction, development, and state planning operate by making beings, places, and relations mobile, commensurable, and disposable, whereas emplaced collectives defend ways of being that emerge with and through place rather than above or outside it. Political ontology therefore does not simply add "culture" or "belief" to environmental conflict; it asks whose reality is allowed to count as real. Burman's (2017) analysis of climate change in the Bolivian Andes for example, shows how the demand for climate justice must be joined to cognitive and ontological justice, since treating Indigenous understandings of climate, mountains, weather, and relational obligation as mere cultural representations reproduces what he calls the "coloniality of reality." This resonates with Hesketh's (2025) notion of the "coloniality of space," understood as both a material project of territorial dispossession and an epistemic project that negates Indigenous spatial imaginaries and territorial forms. The coloniality of reality and the coloniality of space show how Indigenous worlds are first rendered as mere belief or culture, and then materially reorganized as resources, frontiers, concessions, or national development spaces. In this sense, ontological denial and territorial dispossession are mutually reinforcing dimensions of extractivism. Thus, extractivism is not only materially destructive; it is also ontologically flattening, insofar as it erases or subordinates relational ways of inhabiting territory. The result is well captured by what Mapuche activist and thinker Moira Millán (2024) names "terricide", the destruction of life in all its forms through continuous aggression against the conditions that sustain collective existence, including its epistemological, spiritual, oneiric, and ontological dimensions.

This also clarifies why political ontology remains closely linked to, but distinct from, discussions of epistemic plurality and dialogue. Leff (2017) sees political ecology as a space where

different rationalities and languages of valuation can encounter one another. Esteva, however, pushes this further by warning that dialogues of knowledge can become abstract, condescending, or merely procedural if they do not emerge from shared practice and lived coexistence. Drawing on Panikkar (2000), he insists that no culture occupies a neutral, supra-cultural position from which others can be judged or translated without remainder. A meaningful encounter therefore requires more than tolerance or inclusion; it requires the creation of intercultural relations grounded in hospitality, praxis, and mutual transformation (Esteva, 2022). Read in this way, political ontology does not ask political ecology to abandon distributional analysis, but to recognize that many territorial conflicts are also struggles to defend the conditions under which different worlds can continue to exist. Its contribution is to remind us that the political is not exhausted by institutions, recognition, or compensation, but extends to the ongoing defense and production of plural forms of life.

These debates also require a clearer dialogue with urban political ecology. While political ecology has often focused on agrarian, extractive, and rural territorial conflicts, urban political ecology highlights how metabolism, infrastructure, pollution, water, housing, and energy are politically produced in cities and peri-urban margins. In Latin America, sacrifice zones, industrial corridors, polluted river basins, and peripheral urbanization show that extractivism does not end at the mine, well, or plantation, but extends into urbanized landscapes through unequal infrastructures, toxic exposure, and differentiated access to health and social reproduction.

4. "Yasunization" or struggles against extractivism, ecological debt and pluriversal openings

This section moves from the theoretical contributions discussed above – many of them themselves forged through struggle and situated practice – to an emblematic case that shows how these ideas take shape politically: the history of grassroots resistance to fossil fuel extraction in Ecuador's Yasuní region. It examines how land defenders and environmental activists mobilized the concept of ecological debt to challenge extractivism, defend territories of life, and articulate pluriversal alternatives. The Yasuni proposal was born from the terrible damage done by Texaco-Chevron in the northern area of the Amazon of Ecuador and from the awareness of climate change building since the mid-1980s. The Yasuní case stands out as emblematic of a broader shift in Latin American thought that not only critiques extractivist development models (Acosta, 2013), but also articulates the demand for ecological and climate debt as a form of historical reparation. These claims have become central to a climate justice movement rooted in the Global South (Warlenius, 2017; Pickering & Barry, 2012; Botzen *et al.*, 2008; Adow, 2020). They invert the dominant narrative: instead of seeing the South as indebted, it identifies the Global North – and the populations that sustain what Brand and Wissen (2021) term the "imperial mode of living" – as the true debtors. This reconceptualization of debt has empowered grassroots movements to contest the colonial financial architectures and global division of labor and nature that perpetuate extractivist dependencies. Further to the discussion on the Ecological Debt (in section 2 above), and as Hickel *et al.* (2022) explain, "unequal exchange" – the hidden transfer of wealth via trade imbalances and price differentials – remains a core strategy through which the Global North appropriates labor and resources from the South.

The rallying cry to "leave fossil fuels in the ground" (born in the mid 1990s in Nigeria and Ecuador) has become a cornerstone of climate, environmental, and social justice movements (Bassey, 2016). It responds not only to the immediate harms of fossil fuel pollution and the creeping devastation of climate violence (Nixon, 2011), but also to the racial and colonial ideologies that underpin global extractivism (Bullard, 1990; Andreucci & Zografos, 2022). What may have begun as a relatively narrow demand – stop local pollution, reduce CO₂ emissions, transition to clean energy,

deploy technology – has evolved into a broader indictment of "climate coloniality." As Sultana (2023) notes, this perspective foregrounds how "the legacies of imperial violence insidiously live on, not only in exacerbating environmental degradations, but in increased climate-induced disasters experienced by variously marginalized populations globally."

The concept of climate debt places fossil capitalism in direct tension with technocratic and depoliticized notions of climate justice. Building on a long history of debates around ecological debt (Martínez-Alier, 2002; Paredis *et al.*, 2008; Roberts & Parks, 2009; Simms *et al.*, 1999; Warlenius *et al.*, 2015), Warlenius (2017) traces how the term climate debt emerged as a demand for accountability from countries that have historically contributed disproportionately to global warming. Yet climate debt has been only partially incorporated into international climate negotiations. While the UNFCCC recognizes equity and common but differentiated responsibilities, and subsequent negotiations have institutionalized loss and damage through the Warsaw International Mechanism, in Article 8 of the Paris Agreement, and the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, a stronger reparative meaning of climate debt has remained largely excluded (UNFCCC, 1992; 2015; 2023). This limit was formalized in Decision 1/CP.21, which states that Article 8 "...does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation" (UNFCCC, 2015). As a result, negotiations have tended to reframe the issue around cooperation and facilitation, risk assessment and management, insurance and risk transfer, early warning systems, displacement management, and technical support, rather than around reparations for historical responsibility (UNFCCC, 2018; Calliari *et al.*, 2020; Toussaint, 2024). Instead, they have framed climate change as a technical problem to be solved through innovation, thereby deferring action until cleaner technologies are available.

As Fressoz (2024) notes, dominant climate governance often reframes the climate as a problem of technical management and optimal allocation. Yet the issue is not that optimization or efficiency are inherently problematic. Rather, they become politically limiting when treated as neutral substitutes for questions of justice, historical responsibility, and reparation. In this sense, the central concern is that climate change is reduced to a matter of managing carbon more efficiently, while the unequal appropriation of atmospheric space and the obligations of historically high-emitting countries are displaced or depoliticized. While the concept of fossil capitalism helps identify the historically specific articulation between fossil energy and capital accumulation, this should not imply that real socialism-communism was ecologically innocent. Soviet, Chinese or actually-existing socialist-industrialization also depended on large-scale fossil fuel use and generated severe socio-environmental damage, even if it was organized through state planning rather than private accumulation (Wallerstein, 2004). For this reason, climate debt is better understood in terms of cumulative emissions, unequal occupation of atmospheric space, and the historical responsibility of industrialized states, rather than the political system alone (Hickel, 2020).

The struggle to protect the Yasuní National Park in Ecuador is not an isolated event but a landmark in a long genealogy of grassroots mobilizations challenging the extractive logic of fossil capitalism. These include transnational networks such as Oilwatch, environmental justice organizations such as *Acción Ecológica*, Indigenous territorial struggles led by Waorani and Kichwa peoples in Ecuador, and allied campaigns such as Yasunidos, as well as earlier anti-extractive struggles in places like the Niger Delta linked to Environmental Rights Action and the Ogoni movement (Warlenius, 2017; EJOLT, 2013; Acosta & Viale, 2024). These movements, rooted in the ontological defense of territory, biodiversity, and life, also articulate a powerful critique of the historical injustices embedded in the global climate regime (Warlenius, 2017). They call for the recognition of the ecological debt owed by the Global North to the South – a demand that emerged through transnational alliances forged from shared experience of dispossession and violence (Taiwo, 2022). Beginning in the mid-1990s, coalitions like Oilwatch emerged to resist fossil fuel extraction

by connecting local grievances with the global imperative of climate justice. Founded in 1996 in Lago Agrio and Quito by activists from Nigeria (notably Environmental Rights Action), Ecuador (including Acción Ecológica), and other countries, Oilwatch coined the slogans "leave oil in the soil" and "leave coal in the hole" as guiding principles of a new climate politics from below (Oilwatch, 2023). These campaigns – combining street protests, international advocacy, and legal actions – responded to both the ecological destruction of territories (water pollution, gas burning) and the violence suffered by communities resisting extraction, such as the Ogoni in the Niger Delta, where state and corporate repression claimed many lives, including that of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995.

Within this context, Acción Ecológica in Ecuador (with its experience of Texaco-Chevron's pollution) played a central role in advancing an understanding of ecological debt – not just as an accounting of environmental harm, but as a political and moral claim tied to colonial extraction. As Lang, Acosta, and Martínez (2023) argue, ecological debt names the structural injustice in the division of labor, resources, and responsibilities in the global economy. It inverts the dominant narrative of indebtedness that casts the Global South as debtor, and instead demands reparations for centuries of dispossession and environmental degradation. The Yasuní-ITT Initiative (2007–2013), promoted by civil society and temporarily adopted by Rafael Correa's government with Alberto Acosta as Minister of Energy and Mines, was a direct outgrowth of these struggles. It proposed to keep over 800 million barrels of crude oil underground in the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini fields within the Yasuní National Park – one of the most biodiverse places on Earth and home to Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. This quantity of oil is approximately equivalent to one week of oil extraction around the world (about 100 million barrels per day). In exchange, Ecuador requested US\$3.6 billion from the international community, representing half the expected revenue from oil extraction, thereby linking the protection of biodiversity and Indigenous survival to climate mitigation (EJOLT, 2013). This proposal – an embodiment of the principle of ecological debt – was a watershed moment for grassroots climate action, garnering global attention and sparking debates on the feasibility and ethics of non-extractive development models.

Yet the failure of wealthy countries to meet their financial commitments revealed the limits of climate justice under neoliberalism. Keeping the ITT oil reserves underground for a sum that was roughly half of the expected public revenue from extraction was unsuccessful – only a small fraction of that amount was ultimately committed, and by the time the initiative was cancelled in 2013 only about US\$13 million had actually been deposited in the fund (UNDP, 2013; Laastad, 2024). Yet the failure of wealthy countries to support the Yasuní-ITT initiative was not merely a contingent political failure; it reflected a longer pattern in climate governance. Since at least the late 1970s and early 1990s, dominant actors in the Global North have worked to frame climate change less as a question of historical responsibility, reparations, and structural transformation than as one of adaptation, technological adjustment, and managerial response (Fressoz, 2024). As Fressoz (2024: 197) notes, adaptation aligned closely with the ascendant neoliberal imaginary, displacing prevention because the latter evoked planning, centralization, and direct intervention in the economy. This orientation became particularly explicit during the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993), when the United States rejected giving financial compensation to affected parties or binding emissions-reduction targets, narrowing negotiations instead to technology transfer and technical assistance compatible with continued economic growth (Fressoz, 2024: 202–203). By "playing the technology card," powerful states helped institutionalize a climate politics centered on decarbonization without redistribution, thereby legitimizing a proliferation of false solutions – from offsets and negative-emissions technologies to large-scale renewable expansion, efficiency discourse, and nuclear revival – that promise climate action while leaving intact the extractive, growth-oriented, and colonial relations that produced the crisis in the first place (IEN, 2022; Tornel & Montaña, 2023).

By "false solutions," we do not mean that all low-carbon technologies or efficiency measures are inherently undesirable. Rather, the term refers to measures presented as substitutes for leaving fossil fuels underground and reducing emissions at source, while preserving the social relations, infrastructures, and valuation regimes that drive extraction and unequal ecological exchange. In this sense, carbon offsetting, net-zero schemes based on land enclosure and tree planting, biodiversity credits, circular-economy narratives, and large-scale carbon removal function as techno-managerial fixes that promise decarbonization without confronting the growth imperative and the colonial logics of capitalist modernity. As recent critical work suggests, these projects often rely on scientific framings that abstract climate change into a problem of greenhouse-gas molecules to be priced and managed, severed from the racial, colonial, and extractive histories that produced them, and on pseudo-scientific devices that claim equivalence, circularity, or compensation where none actually exists (Spash, 2021; Saraçoğlu, n.d.). What makes them "false," then, is not that every technological intervention fails in every instance, but that under green capitalism they are mobilized to reconcile continued growth, competitiveness, and capital accumulation with the appearance of climate action, while reproducing sacrifice zones, unequal ecological exchange, and new extractive frontiers rather than transforming the underlying political-economic model (McCarthy, 2015; Dunlap & Marin, 2022; IPCC, 2018).

Across Latin America, these false solutions increasingly take concrete infrastructural forms. Export-oriented green hydrogen, for instance, can reproduce enclave logics through intensive demands for land, water, electricity, and renewable infrastructure, extending rather than overcoming extractive and sacrifice-zone dynamics (Cabaña Alvear & Aedo, 2021; Flores Fernández, 2026). Similar tensions surround utility-scale solar and wind, large hydropower, transition-mineral extraction, carbon markets, "climate-smart" mining and "circular economy" schemes, where green vocabularies may leave extractive and colonial territorial relations largely intact (Bringel & Svampa, 2023; Tornel & Montaña, 2023). Geoengineering provides an especially stark example, as illustrated by the unauthorized Make Sunsets solar-geoengineering experiments in Mexico and the resulting concerns over governance and consent (Carabajal *et al.*, 2025). Even fossil extraction is being introduced as environmentally friendly: in 2026 the Mexican government (Presidencia de la República, 2025, 2026) reopened unconventional gas extraction or "fracking" through the language of "sustainable" methods, while the "circular-economy hub" announced for the state of Hidalgo similarly illustrates how new industrial infrastructures are increasingly framed through green developmental vocabularies without necessarily reducing material throughput or extractive dependence (*cf* Plataforma Latinoamericana y del Caribe por la Justicia Climática, n.d.).

The opportunistic framing of the Yasuni ITT proposal as an economic transaction was in opposition to the framing as ontological values. In any case, the withdrawal of support by Correa in 2009 (at the COP in Copenhagen) and definitively in 2013, and the subsequent drilling underscored the fragility of such initiatives when subordinated to the imperatives of state revenue and global markets. As Acosta (2013) later lamented, the Yasuni ITT proposal was "killed by oil greed," not only internationally but also domestically. The Yasuni case should be understood as a partial failure and success. The Supreme Court refused to hold a referendum on Yasuni for many years but it allowed it to go ahead in 2023. The August 2023 popular consultation was a landmark democratic victory: 58.95% of voters supported keeping Block 43 underground, establishing one of the clearest popular mandates against extractivism in contemporary Latin America. On the other hand, implementation has remained incomplete. By August 2024, UN experts were already warning that progress was slow and that new wells were reportedly being drilled, and by March 2026 oil extraction in Block 43 was continuing despite a 2025 Inter-American Court ruling ordering Ecuador to ensure the referendum was effectively implemented. These limits show that grassroots movements are constrained not only

by the refusal of powerful states to assume historical responsibility, but also by domestic petro-state interests, state selectivity in favor of oil revenues, and uneven local dynamics in which compensation, employment, and infrastructure can generate compromise as well as resistance (Laastad, 2024; Dayot, 2023).

A decade-long grassroots mobilization, led by the Yasunidos collective and supported by Indigenous leaders such as Alicia Cahuiya of the Waorani, culminated in the historic victory on August 20, 2023. This unprecedented democratic decision, pushed forward by the Yasunidos movement and long-standing Indigenous resistance from the Waorani and some Kichwa peoples, directly challenged the dominant development paradigm by affirming the rights of nature, the integrity of Indigenous territories, and the global responsibility for climate action (Acosta & Viale, 2024). However, oil extraction (by Chinese firms) continues in the area, and the victory in the referendum will not be implemented after Noboa's electoral victory of 2025 (HRW, 2025).

The proposal to leave oil underground in Yasuní was never only about local conservation – it became a global call for decolonizing and recentering autonomy and self-determination as a form of justice (Temper, 2019; Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Tornel, 2023b). As Nemonte Nenquimo –an Indigenous Waorani leader– stated, the struggle was "...not just for our territory, but for the planet" (Arellano, 2023). The principle of resisting extractivism in one place can open pathways for climate justice globally. This resonates with the climate debt claim that those least responsible for emissions – often Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities – are disproportionately burdened by the impacts and by the false solutions promoted under green capitalism. Climate debt demands not just compensation, but structural change that "decolonizes" the atmosphere and restores the autonomy of frontline communities (Warlenius, 2017; Sultana, 2023). The Yasuní referendum, achieved despite state violence, cooptation, and institutional resistance, reveals how ecological debt is not merely a rhetorical device – it is an actionable framework for refusal and reparation. The referendum shows that ecological debt is a concrete language of refusal and a demand for reparation. At the same time, reparations in any substantive sense have not yet occurred. The international compensation envisioned under the Yasuní-ITT initiative was never delivered at scale, and even more recent court-ordered protective and reparative measures remain only partially implemented (HRW, 2025).

Moreover, this case bridges the concepts of ecological and climate debt. While climate debt focuses on the unequal occupation of the atmospheric commons, ecological debt includes centuries of resource extraction, land grabbing, and cultural dispossession – what one can call "a broader debt to Mother Earth" (Warlenius, 2017). Sultana's (2023) notion of climate coloniality links atmospheric appropriation to land and water grabs, sacrifice zones, carbon offsets, green extractivism, fossil warfare, and the epistemic marginalization of non-Eurocentric climate knowledges. From this perspective, ecological and climate debt are not only questions of compensation, but of dismantling the colonial structures that continue to organize vulnerability, disposability, and false climate solutions. In Yasuní, the oil underground is not simply a carbon reserve, but part of a living territory inhabited and protected by Indigenous nations whose ways of life have been systematically threatened by colonial logic of resource plunder. The Yasunidos campaign, in alliance with Indigenous women like Nenquimo, reclaims this land not as a sacrifice zone but as a territory of life, where pluriversal futures rooted in *sumak kawsay* (living well) can flourish.

The Yasuní struggle in Ecuador, and particularly the mobilization of the Yasunidos collective, offers a powerful illustration of the concept of *cuero-territorio* – a key framework in Latin American and Indigenous feminist thought that articulates the inseparability of bodies and territories, and the violence inflicted on one as violence upon the other (Cabnal, 2010; Gago, 2019). Emerging from community-based Indigenous feminisms, *cuero-territorio* delinks the body from liberal notions of private property and instead asserts a political, affective, and epistemic continuity between bodily

integrity, land, and collective existence (Francisca, 2024; Glockner *et al.*, 2023). In Yasuní, this framework becomes particularly salient in the voices and leadership of Indigenous women, who emphasized that the defense of the forest is also the defense of life, identity, and spiritual relations. As Nenquimo puts it, "we are not separate from the forest; we are the forest" (Arellano, 2023).

In this sense, the Yasunidos campaign does more than demand a moratorium on drilling; it performs a broader decolonial and feminist praxis of *r-existencia* (Porto-Gonçalves, 2006; Glockner *et al.*, 2023). It reclaimed Yasuní not as a passive space of conservation but as a living body of interconnected beings – human and more-than-human – whose relational integrity is threatened by the logics of extraction. Despite opposition from inside Ecuador (from president Correa himself, and from some segments of the local Kichwa population in the Napo river), the struggle to "leave the oil in the ground" thus becomes a profoundly embodied act: an assertion that the territory and the bodies of its defenders are not expendable commodities, but vital agents of life and resistance (Dayot, 2023). This reading aligns with Latin American feminist geographies that center the experiences of Indigenous women in articulating territorial defense as corporeal defense, where violence against the land is also felt as violence against the body (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021). By foregrounding *cuerpo-territorio*, the Yasuní case unravels colonial separations between nature and culture, public and private, and positions Indigenous cosmologies not at the margins but as central to the articulation of climate justice and pluriversal futures. From the lens of ontological politics, as developed by de la Cadena and Blaser (2018) and de la Cadena and Escobar (2023), the Yasuní struggle can be interpreted as a confrontation between diverging modes of worlding. For Indigenous communities and allied movements, the Yasuní is not merely a forest or a carbon sink, but a living entity, a "territory-being" that exceeds the epistemic frameworks of modern conservation and development.

Framing Yasuní through *cuerpo-territorio* also reveals it as a pluriversal contact zone – what de la Cadena and Escobar (2023) describe as a site where divergent worlds meet without being reducible to one another. The Yasunidos campaign mobilized a broad alliance of environmentalists, Indigenous defenders, and urban youth, who, while differing in their ontological commitments, converged around the demand to keep oil underground (Escobar, 2020). As José Gualinga, a Sarayaku leader, put it in a parallel struggle, "the explosives are attached to the body of the Sarayaku" – a declaration that refuses the separation between people and territory, legality and life (de la Cadena & Escobar, 2023).

In this sense, the Yasuní struggle is a paradigmatic case of what Blaser (2025) calls the conflict between emplacement and displacement. Extractivist infrastructures – pipelines, wells, and roads – operate according to the logics of displacement, uprooting beings from their relational territories in the name of progress, growth, and carbon markets. By contrast, the Indigenous and grassroots resistance in Yasuní reflects grounding infrastructures of emplacement: lifeways that emerge with place, not despite it. Political ontology, as articulated by Blaser, thus provides a lens to understand this conflict not merely as a dispute over land use, but as a clash between worlds – between a dominant one-world ontology that reduces nature to resource, and a pluriverse of ontologies that refuse such reduction.

Ultimately, the Yasuní referendum is (or was) not only a policy decision but an ontological affirmation of alternatives to extractive modernity. It embodies what Escobar (2021) calls "civilizational transitions" – movements toward a world of many worlds, where territorial autonomy, ecological care, and community self-determination are prioritized over GDP, sovereignty over subsoil resources, and market-based climate solutions. In this sense, the call to *yasunizar el mundo* is both political and ontological (Acosta, 2025; Tornel, 2025). It urges us to reframe the climate crisis not merely as a problem of emissions, but as a crisis of civilization rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and the severing of relational life. It demands that we recognize the ecological debt owed to those who

have cared for the planet while bearing the brunt of its destruction – and that we support the emergence of multiple ways of living, knowing, and being in/with the Earth.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Through these conceptual lenses, we highlight how the key contributions discussed in this article – from extractivism, ecological debt, and ecologically unequal exchange to *cuero-territorio*, *comunalidad*, communitarian entanglements, epistemic equity, territories of life, and political ontology – can inform political ecology debates across the Global South. In referring to ideas from Abya Yala, we mean especially those rooted in Indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendant, and communitarian struggles that have articulated relational, territorial, and pluriversal ways of defending life against extractivism and colonial modernity. These contributions are not presented as a single model to be replicated elsewhere, but as a set of concepts, methods, and political orientations that can help analyze extractivism, ecological debt, ontological conflict, territorial defense, and the co-production of knowledge in contexts marked by coloniality and uneven ecological exchange. Our intent is threefold:

- (1) to reflect the richness of Latin American conceptualizations in confronting the deep crisis of capitalist modernity
- (2) to highlight key movements, struggles, authors and texts
- (3) to suggest potential avenues for research through praxis, dialogue, and militancy and activism for scholars of political ecology in the Global South.

The region has generated critical perspectives on extractivism, ecological debt, ecologically unequal exchange, and socio-environmental conflicts, deeply rooted in historical experiences of colonialism, resistance, and grassroots praxis. These contributions challenge dominant development paradigms, critique the epistemological assumptions of mainstream environmental governance, and open avenues for pluriversal approaches to sustainability, autonomy, and justice.

Industrial economies are not circular but entropic: fossil fuels are burned, metals such as copper are only partially recycled, and biomass is continuously transformed, degraded, or displaced through industrial production (Martínez-Alier, 2025). The promise of circularity therefore obscures the constant need for new commodity frontiers, waste sinks, and sacrificial territories. In Latin America, this has made extractivism not only a question of resource extraction or unequal distribution, but a socio-metabolic process that generates irreversible ecological damage, territorial dispossession, and unpaid ecological debts. As Dunlap, Verweijen and Tornel (2024) argue, many conflicts cannot be understood through distributional questions alone, since they involve the destruction of territories, lifeworlds, and ways of knowing. They should therefore be approached not only as ecological distribution conflicts, but also as ecological destruction conflicts (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Blaser, 2013; Dunlap *et al.*, 2024).

This also requires a more nuanced understanding of the role of progressive governments in the region. These governments should not be treated as a homogeneous political formation. As Gaudichaud, Modonesi, and Webber (2022) show, the Latin American progressive cycle included moderate center-left and social-liberal governments, as well as more national-popular and anti-imperialist experiences. In several cases, these administrations introduced redistributive measures, expanded social spending, increased state intervention, and partially reversed neoliberal policies. Yet these gains were often financed through the commodities boom and the intensification of extractive capitalism, leaving largely intact the raw-material export model, dependency, and territorial

dispossession. In this sense, progressive governments often mediated ecologically unequal exchange rather than transcended it: they redistributed part of its surplus while preserving many of the extractivist structures on which that surplus depended (Gaudichaud *et al.*, 2022; Machado & Zibechi, 2017).

The limits of this progressive cycle formed part of a broader political impasse or interregnum, marked by the exhaustion of commodity-led progressivism, political fragmentation, and the growing advantage of increasingly radical and authoritarian right-wing forces (Gaudichaud *et al.*, 2022; Webber, 2025; Bringel *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, extractive frontiers have become increasingly entangled with securitization, militarization, and illicit economies. Across the region, territorial dispossession is mediated not only by states and corporations but also by armed actors and hybrid legal-illegal arrangements, producing overlapping forms of social militarization, criminal extraction, and governance (Barrios Rodríguez, 2023; Terán-Mantovani & Scarpacci, 2024). Mexico under López Obrador offers a recent variation of this contradiction. Despite its anti-neoliberal and pro-people discourse, the Fourth Transformation maintained extractivist and megaproject-led development while marginalizing Indigenous opposition and autonomy, as illustrated by the Proyecto Integral Morelos and other strategic projects (López & Rivas, 2020; Solorio *et al.*, 2021; López-Gómez *et al.*, 2020). These continuities—fossil-fuel expansion, entrenched neoliberal regulatory structures, and an expanding military role—also reveal the broader structural limits of contemporary left-populism (Tornel, 2023c; Webber, 2025).

Ecologically unequal exchange should therefore not be reduced to a simple North–South binary. In Latin America, extractivism is also reproduced through internal colonialism and through "peripheries within the peripheries": mining zones, petrochemical corridors, agro-industrial frontiers, logistics enclaves, and Indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendant, and working-class territories rendered sacrificial for the reproduction of national and global accumulation. Drawing on Brand and Wissen's (2021) notion of the imperial mode of living, this means that the externalization of socioecological costs operates not only between North and South, but also within the South itself, through alliances between transnational capital, domestic elites, and state institutions. Sacrifice zones are therefore not marginal exceptions to development, but central spatial expressions of extractivist political economy and its colonial continuity.

At the same time, Latin American political ecology has shown that affected communities are not only victims of these processes, but also producers of knowledge, diagnosis, and alternatives. Navarro and Barreda's (2022) notion of eco-territorial know-how (*saber-hacer*) names the situated knowledge produced through embodied experience, territorial defense, collective memory, community health work, counter-expertise, and intergenerational learning in places marked by socioenvironmental devastation. These practices can be seen in struggles against sacrifice zones in Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere, where communities build forms of epidemiological counter-knowledge, autonomous organization, and territorial reappropriation (Castán Broto & Sanzana Calvet, 2020; Navarro *et al.*, 2024; Tornel, 2024). For political ecology, this implies a shift from merely analyzing conflict to accompanying practices of re-existence, from critique to co-construction, and from treating knowledge as something produced only in academic spaces to recognizing the territories of life as central sites of conceptual and political production. Notions like Radical Ecological Economics (Barkin *et al.*, 2026), developed through long-term collaboration with Latin American communities place collective governance and socioecological reproduction at the center of constructing alternatives beyond capitalist market organization.

Given this rich epistemological and ontological landscape, we suggest several interlinked directions for future research in political ecology in *Abya Yala*, and from *Abya Yala* to the world.

First, there is a need to deepen empirical studies of ecological distribution conflicts in rural and urban areas through an ontological lens – investigating not only what is being contested materially by deploying diverse valuation languages, but how struggles are animated by distinct cosmovisions and life projects.

Second, political ecologists must further engage with questions of onto-epistemic justice and co-production of knowledge. This means going beyond critiques of maldistribution, misrecognition or participatory exclusion in their formulation of environmental, climate or energy justice that remain wedded to the epistemological framework of modernity (Temper, 2019; Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; De Onis, 2022; Tornel, 2023a). To actively support pluriversal research agendas where diverse knowledge systems – ancestral, feminist, ecological – are taken seriously, political ecologists must do more than acknowledge or "respect" these frameworks. They must help shape research questions, methods, and outcomes in ways that de-center and de-provincialize academic authority and place scholarly work in dialogue with, and accountability to, broader forms of collective action, including grassroots organizing, territorial defense, legal advocacy, pedagogy, and activist research with more militant commitments. Such work must confront the geopolitics of knowledge production – as articulated by Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), Grosfoguel (2016), and Dunlap and Tornel (2025) – and resist the extraction of concepts from the South for Northern academic gain.

Third, future research should continue to interrogate the ecological implications of global economic and metabolic structures, including green transitions and financialization; the Latin American critique needs further emphasis. From this perspective, transitions are not only technological substitutions from fossil to lower-carbon energy systems; they are also political-economic projects that reorganize extraction through new financial and institutional mechanisms. There is (yet) no energy transition, but energy addition (Dunlap, 2021) or as Frescoz (2024: 9) puts it an "entanglement and symbiotic expansion of all energies." As recent work on green extractivism argues, carbon markets, biodiversity offsets, green bonds, ecotourism, and related forms of public de-risking transform forests, minerals, conservation areas, and energy landscapes into assets, often under the legitimating language of sustainability and decarbonization (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015; Andreucci *et al.*, 2017; Sullivan, 2023; Dunlap *et al.*, 2024). In Latin America, this helps explain why so-called "renewable energy" megaprojects, transition-mineral extraction, and conservation schemes frequently reproduce enclosure, dispossession, and sacrifice zones rather than constituting a straightforward ecological alternative.

What this body of work contributes, then, is not a rejection of transition as such, but a critique of the way dominant green transitions remains tethered to financialization, extractivism, and ecologically unequal exchange. The Latin American critique of neoextractivism and green colonialism is especially relevant as renewable energy infrastructure and conservation markets risk reproducing historical patterns of dispossession (Lang *et al.*, 2024). Research must critically trace the supply webs of old and new commodities, labor regimes, and territorial impacts associated with these "green" initiatives, while also engaging with movements advancing alternatives such as Yasunization, communal conservation, and energy autonomy (Walter *et al.*, 2024; Roa Avendaño & Bertinat, 2024; Roa Avendaño & Carrillo, 2024).

Fourth, the integration of feminist political ecology and *cuero-territorio* perspectives remains essential for understanding how environmental violence operates across scales—from bodies to the biosphere. Further work is needed to connect struggles for bodily autonomy, care, and reproductive justice with socioecological defense, highlighting how extractivism intersects with patriarchal and racialized forms of domination and affects the reproduction of life.

Fifth, more empirical work is needed on ecological distribution conflicts in both rural and urban settings, particularly where distributive struggles overlap with ontological conflicts. This would allow

political ecology to distinguish more carefully between cases centered on compensation, pollution, and livelihood loss and those involving incommensurable world-making practices.

Sixth, research on epistemic equity and the co-production of knowledge remains crucial, but its contribution will depend on moving beyond participatory rhetoric toward methodologies in which communities actively shape research questions, concepts, methods, and outcomes. This requires treating movement-based and territorial knowledge not merely as empirical material, but as constitutive of political-ecological knowledge production itself.

Seventh, research should examine more systematically how decarbonization policies are translated into concrete territorial transformations. Comparative work across renewable energy, transition-mineral extraction, carbon and biodiversity markets, transport infrastructure, and other forms of "green" development can help identify when and how new commodity frontiers reproduce sacrifice zones and ecologically unequal exchange, as well as the conditions under which different trajectories become possible.

These avenues are promising because they can deepen political ecology's analytical reach while also forcing it to confront its methodological limits, especially its continued dependence on academic forms of knowledge production. Although Latin America is not the only region to have generated critical perspectives on socioecological conflict, it is distinctive in the density and articulation with which several strands have converged:

- Critiques of extractivism, ecological debt, and ecologically unequal exchange,
- Decolonial and postdevelopment critiques of development,
- Territorially grounded concepts such as *cuerpo-territorio*, *comunalidad*, and territories of life;
- A particularly strong entanglement between academic production and social movements.

Reviews of Latin American environmentalism and feminist political ecology emphasize precisely these historically rooted links to coloniality, territorial struggle, and collective praxis, while recent work on anti-colonial environmental justice from Abya Yala shows how notions such as *buen vivir*, rights of nature, and communal territorial defense have reshaped what justice itself can mean.

Similar critical contributions clearly exist elsewhere in the Global South – for example, African political ecologies foreground African epistemologies, agency, socioecological debt, and reparation – and there are also important resonances in the Global North, especially in U.S. environmental justice, feminist political ecology, and Indigenous and anti-colonial scholarship. The point, then, is not that Latin America is uniquely critical, but that it has produced a particularly influential regional articulation of political ecology in which extractivism, coloniality, territorial defense, and pluriversal politics have been woven together with particular force. Moreover, political ecology must be open to intersections with related struggles of working-class trade unions trying to fight in "company towns", peasant and landless workers fighting for land and water access and rights, millions of urban dwellers fighting against pollution and evictions, for better housing and transport in growing cities, Indigenous and *quilombolas* struggles. Political ecology must continue to be a praxis-oriented field, engaged with the struggles it studies and accountable to the movements it learns from. The plural contributions of Latin American political ecology demonstrate that other knowledge is not only possible, but already in practice – emerging from the territories of those who defend life in its many forms.

In closing, we have argued that Latin American political ecology contributes to global political ecology not by offering a unified school, a regional canon, or a model to be exported elsewhere, but by showing how concepts are forged through conflict, territorial defense, and the co-production of knowledge. Its central contributions lie in connecting extractivism, ecological debt, ecologically unequal exchange, social metabolism, *cuerpo-territorio*, epistemic equity, *comunalidad*, territories of life, and political ontology into a broader critique of capitalist modernity and its sacrificial geographies. These contributions also show that environmental justice cannot be reduced to the distribution of harms and benefits, nor to compensation after damage has occurred. It must address the historical and ongoing destruction of territories, bodies, knowledges, and worlds, while remaining accountable to the movements that defend and regenerate life. From Yasuní to struggles against mining, monocultures, sacrifice zones, and green extractivism, Latin American political ecology reminds us that alternatives are not only imagined in theory or policy, but practiced in territories through autonomy, care, re-existence, and collective refusal. Its broader contribution, then, is to insist that political ecology must remain at once analytical and militant, empirical and ontological, critical and reparative: a field capable of tracing the material flows of destruction while also learning from the many worlds already struggling to survive beyond them.

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