The Jus Semper Global Alliance

In Pursuit of the People and Planet Paradigm

Sustainable Human Development

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"Environmental collapses have been accompanied by genocides"

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Josefa Sánchez Contreras is a researcher and socio-environmental activist from the Angpøn (Zoque) community of Chimalapas in Oaxaca, Mexico. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Granada, where she currently lectures in the Faculty of Social Sciences. She has published several works, including *Desojos Racistas, hacia un ecologismo anticolonial* (Anagrama, 2025) and *Colonialismo energético* (Ona, 2024), in which she analyses, among other issues, the relationship between colonialism, structural racism, and the current climate crisis.

The researcher and socio-environmental activist Josefa Sánchez Contreras during an interview in 2024. / SERTV Panama

The Angpøn community to which you belong is situated in a region with a long history of struggle and resistance in defence of its territory. How have your origins influenced your work as a researcher?

Certainly, the historical realities experienced by the Angpøn people, to whom I belong, have shaped my research and academic development at university. These realities are reflected in the threats posed by megaprojects and agrarian conflicts targeting communal lands, and in the Angpøn people's defence of their territory against gold- and copper-mining concessions. They are also reflected in the struggles waged by other neighbouring peoples, such as the Ikoots and Zapotecs—peoples of the Tehuantepec plain and isthmus—who have resisted the proliferation of large-scale wind farms on their lands. All these experiences form my starting point as a researcher. Works such as

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"Racist Dispossession and Energy Colonialism" stem from these specific experiences, from the need to understand how all these processes unfold.

Among the global issues currently in the news are, on the one hand, the climate crisis and, on the other, the rise of racist rhetoric from the far right. In your analysis, you identify a direct link between these two situations.

As the environmental crisis, the climate emergency, and the struggle for energy resources intensify, a range of racist narratives is on the rise in both the United States and Europe, which, in some way, seek to justify genocides and mass exterminations in other parts of the world. This is not the first time this has happened. This is a historical relationship; in other words, environmental collapses have been accompanied by genocides. For example, the massive demographic collapse during the early days of colonisation, with the extermination of 90 per cent of the indigenous population of Iberian America, also had an impact on the planet's climate.

It is no coincidence that Donald Trump is currently stirring up hatred against migrant populations, as his racist rhetoric seeks to dehumanise these people who come from territories which, now more than ever, are being plundered for minerals, oil or gas – resources required by the Global North to continue sustaining its imperial mode of living.

But it is not just Donald Trump; there is also the European Union, which feeds off the resources of its former colonies, and Spain, which, through its immigration laws, exploits the cheap labour supplied mainly by people from Africa. Racist hate speech dehumanises the people who die every day crossing the Mediterranean in an attempt to reach 'Fortress Europe'. We see that this rhetoric is becoming increasingly strident because the environmental crisis demands ever more resources. Nor is it a coincidence that we see so many wars around the world, that the United States has bombed Iran, intervened in Venezuela, is disputing Greenland, that the extermination of the Kurdish people in Syria is intensifying, and that the war in Ukraine is dragging on…

Palestine...

After Palestine, anything is possible; everything falls apart. The televised genocide demonstrates that the major powers are prepared to do anything. Disputes over resources, racism and the colonial process tear apart Palestine. A telling example is the case of Mekorot, Israel's national water company, which, as well as bearing responsibility for the genocide of the Palestinian people, is also involved in stealing water from Mapuche territory. This is a territory where large-scale mineral extraction is planned and which has recently been set alight in a new form of warfare. We are therefore entering an extremely turbulent year, in which we are witnessing a new form of racism that is intensifying and taking shape.

In your work, as you have mentioned, you analyse how racism serves to dehumanise entire populations in order to extract resources from their territories. How far back does this strategy go, and to what extent is it still relevant today?

The starting point lies in the early days of conquest and colonisation in the 15th and 16th centuries. Back then, racism took a different form, one that has evolved throughout history right up to the present day, whilst always maintaining the notion that those bodies we have come to label as 'Indians', 'Blacks' or 'dark-skinned people' are disposable, devoid of humanity, and not entitled to human rights. This explains why there is so much impunity in the murders of human rights defenders who, in many cases, belong to indigenous peoples. These defenders are just

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another statistic in this violence that can be perpetrated in broad daylight because nothing happens; they can be murdered with impunity because, historically, violence against these racialised bodies has become normalised. This is racism. This is not about denouncing social prejudice—about how you are viewed because of the colour of your skin—we are talking about a historical pillar of the system.

In the same vein, you also explain that these areas suffer from environmental racism.

In the United States, research has been conducted since the last century on the distribution of pollution across cities. In 1978, a report entitled "TOXIC WASTES AND RACE. In the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites" demonstrated that there was a correlation between the areas receiving the greatest amount of waste and the places where Black and Hispanic populations lived. We can see the same pattern in Iberian America. Who pollutes, and who pays the price for that pollution? Where are the city's rubbish dumps? Who lives in the parts of cities without water, without electricity, without access to services? Why are these always the people categorised as Indigenous, as people of colour, as Black people? Because there is a colonial aspect to it, a racist aspect. Structural racism serves to classify these territories as wastelands, liable to be occupied, dispossessed and used for whatever capital wants and needs. In the same vein, areas inhabited by indigenous communities are vulnerable to abuse, where there is no respect for human rights, no recognition of indigenous rights, nor a person's right to breathe clean air and live in a place free from pollution.

You speak explicitly of colonialism, and whilst some might think this is an anachronistic concept, you point in a different direction.

Indeed, one might think it is anachronistic to speak of colonialism in the 21st century. In countries that underwent processes of independence in the 19th century, people might say: 'No, well, you haven't read your history.' That is not the case. In Mexico, when we speak of colonialism, we are pointing out that, in the formation of the nation-state, unequal dynamics towards indigenous peoples have persisted.

The violation of these peoples' territorial rights points to a colonial relationship – one in which the state claims guardianship over them, and where the concept of the nation is based on whiteness. By 'whiteness' I mean a power relationship which, as the Algerian author Houria Bouteldja explains, relates to a project in which the nation is subordinated to neoliberal and capitalist interests that follow colonial logic. Mining concessions abound in Mexico and will continue to do so because of global demand for minerals, driven by colonial logics that ensure their extraction. This is happening in Mexico, but also in many parts of the world, where these same colonial logics are becoming increasingly acute against this backdrop of environmental crisis and demand for resources.

When we refer to indigenous peoples and those of the Global South, we often view them solely as vulnerable communities, retreating into resistance; yet they also have a proactive side that needs to be highlighted, and which, as you explain, has deep roots.

I am trying to highlight how anti-colonial expressions have been part of these peoples' history since the colonial era. For example, when they opposed the colonial tax-based economy that was completely transforming their territories, introducing new livestock farming, new crops and ways of thinking that demanded land for export. The rejection that peoples such as the Ikoots and Zapotecs felt towards these systems represents forms of territorial

defence that were not termed 'ecological' at the time but that, today in the 21st century, could certainly engage with ecological movements. So, if we look back at history and highlight these processes of resistance, we may find —in the face of the deeply doomsday-like notions we hold today—that similar situations have already occurred in the past and that many peoples have survived, devising strategies and sustaining their crops and their communal and ejido lands. Indigenous peoples have historically witnessed the end of their worlds and rebuilt them time and time again. Perhaps we should learn from them without romanticising them, without portraying ourselves as the 'noble savages', nor claiming that there is an essential relationship between indigenous peoples and the land. This is another form of racism. Rather, we must understand that there is a historical process in which indigenous peoples and many other peoples around the world have fought—and continue to fight—for their decolonisation and emancipation. We must learn from and engage in dialogue with these forms of resistance and renewal, and with their own ways of sustaining life.

Indeed, in your work, you explain that the so-called solutions to the climate crisis, such as the so-called renewable energy transition, are still built upon an environmentalism that remains colonialist.

Green policies acknowledge the climate emergency and the need to commit to clean energy, but they do not abandon fossil fuel use or extractivist practices. The developmentalist model is not called into question by the so-called green transition. So, once again, it is the peoples of the Global South who suffer from colonialist policies that exploit their territories for the extraction of minerals and all manner of resources necessary for industrial societies to continue.

However, the rise of Trump and the violence perpetrated by leaders such as Netanyahu, amongst others, serve to highlight that this new form of fascism is denialist, capable of destroying territories and exterminating populations, and prepared to stop at nothing. So, at this juncture, I believe it is important to focus our criticism there. An anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist critique that puts into proper perspective the significance of the struggles to defend territories being led by peoples in many parts of the world.

You propose an anti-racist alliance that goes straight to the heart of one of the pillars of the system.

Yes, above all as a way of challenging 'the Norths'. My essays engage with environmentalists from the Global North who are seeking to bring about change, but that cannot be achieved simply by phasing out fossil fuels. It is important to point out that environmental crises are inherently racist. There will be no solutions to these problems unless we understand that the climate emergency and the energy crisis have their roots in historical colonialism. Only on that basis can we begin to envisage environmental justice that puts an end to racial inequalities and meets the historical demands of anti-colonial struggles.

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❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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