

## From Imperialism to Green Imperialism: Tools of World-Systems Analysis in the Face of the Great Ecosocial Crisis

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**H**umanity is at the most challenging crossroads in its history. Anthropogenic productive activity, framed within the capitalist mode of production, has caused most planetary boundaries to be exceeded and others to be strained.<sup>1</sup> This has caused, among other things, temperatures to reach maximums never before experienced by our civilisation, species to become extinct at an unprecedented rate, the loss of soil fertility to become the norm, and the oceans to boil to the point of leaving the poles on the brink of their disappearance while acidifying and suffocating life



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in them. At the same time, civilisation does not lose sight of an increasingly threatening war horizon in which a nuclear outbreak cannot be entirely ruled out. And against this backdrop, a galloping decline of materials and energy sources is unfolding,<sup>2</sup> putting pressure on every vector of the eco-social apparatus to the point of casting a shadow over the future accessibility of our societies' livelihoods and their very survival as we know them.

<sup>1</sup> ↪ Rockström J., J. Gupta, D. Qin, et al. "Safe and just Earth system boundaries." *Nature* 619 (2023), 102—111; Richardson, K., W. Steffen, W. Lucht, J. Bentsen, et al. "Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries." *Science Advances* 9 (37) (2023).

<sup>2</sup> ↪ Michaux, S. P. "The Mining of Minerals and the Limits to Growth: Open File Work Report." Geological Survey of Finland (2021); Michaux, S. P., and S. Vuori. "The Currently Known Global Mineral Reserves Will Not Be Sufficient to Supply Enough Metals to Manufacture the Planned Non-fossil Fuel Industrial Systems." Geological Survey of Finland (2022); A. Turiel. *Petrocalipsis: Crisis energética global y cómo (no) la vamos a solucionar* (Madrid: Alfabeto, 2020).

Amid this panorama of ecological devastation and military escalation, there is a growing impression, both justified and worrying, that mainstream geopolitical analyses are often too lazy to address the role of the planet's biophysical limits in shaping the global hierarchy between states and their regimes of dependency. On the flip side of this impression, but equally justified and worrying, there is also a growing sense that modern environmentalism suffers from excessive naïveté (and often ambiguity) in understanding the global political-economic dynamics that condition eco-social conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of "oversights" has allowed capitalist elites, among many other things, to adopt many expressions of a supposedly environmentalist character to protect and perpetuate their domination. Thus, by means of the "green" label, global capitalism has managed to actualise its planetary and human plunder in a highly efficient manner. Greenwashing camouflages the interests of exploitation and appropriation of life and natural goods on which capitalism itself is based to adapt them to a terminology that paves the way for its expansion. It is the continuation of business as usual by other means: a new mode of accumulation that tunes business to the fashion of the times of ecological emergency. The "creative destruction" of capitalism sees business everywhere, even in disaster.

The dangerousness of this handling of reality, even more so in an era marked by a combination of eco-social crises,

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makes it essential to identify and unmask those central aspects of the green narratives of global capitalism in order to understand its conjuncture and the projections it allows us to glimpse. This paper aims to contribute to studying the relationship between imperialism and political ecology, the characteristics that identify the historical development of ecological imperialism and the eco-social implications of its cosmetic adaptation in a context of growing threat and biophysical concern. In order to do so, it is

essential, first of all, to offer an updated, if succinct, definition of the notion of imperialism. We will use the contributions that have resulted from the extensive debates on the subject within the Marxist tradition as a basis, but which, above all, have subsequently been enriched by world-systems analyses, as well as others from the school of monopoly capital or dependency theory.<sup>4</sup> This framework allows us to understand imperialism as the organisational system of global capitalism and the primary guarantor of the positive accumulation of value in the central countries and regions of the system, conditioning the negative production and circulation of this value in its peripheries. This value is obtained by the elites of the system by means of the relations of domination and dependence that they impose on the regimes of labour and access to materials and energy at the global level.

<sup>3</sup> ↪ A recent example of this ambiguity can be found in the demonstrations that the organisation Extinction Rebellion held, almost simultaneously, in front of the Brazilian and Bolivian embassies in London in 2019 in response to the forest fires of that summer, when these countries were governed by such antagonistic figures as Jair Bolsonaro and Evo Morales respectively. Pablo Solón's intervention in Democracy Now! on the occasion of the coup d'état in Bolivia that same year is another example of this attitude, which in turn was in tune with statements by other figures such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Raúl Zibechi and María Galindo. See "A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales's Resignation", *Democracy Now!*, 13 de noviembre de 2019. Available at [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia\\_evo\\_morales\\_coup\\_debate](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate) (accessed on 8 August 2023); Pedregal A., "Contra la neutralidad y la equidistancia ante el golpe." *Memoria. Revista de crítica militante* 273 (1), 48—54. A detailed critique of these weaknesses within different positions in contemporary political ecology can be found in Ajl M., "Theories of Political Ecology: Monopoly Capital Against People and the Planet." *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 12 (1) (2023), 12—50.

<sup>4</sup> ↪ The historical contributions of Marxism to the debate on imperialism come mainly from figures such as Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Bukharin, which have been enriched by the contributions of world-systems analysis, monopoly capital and dependency theory with the work of authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Arghiri Emmanuel, Samir Amin, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Donald Clelland, Harry Magdoff, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Ruy Mauro Marini, Theotônio dos Santos, Vania Bambirra, Jorge Osorio, Atilio Boron, Torkil Lauesen, Immanuel Ness, John Smith or Andy Higginbottom, among many others.

## Imperialism

Imperialism is not the circumstantial result of a crisis of the capitalist system or a particular conjuncture of war. On the contrary, it is a constituent part of this system, of its historical logic of expansion and its need to sustain itself in the growing quest for profit.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is a consequence of the globalising inertia of capital as a social system. In practice, contemporary imperialism is the system that governs the social order under global capitalism. Like any system, imperialism connects all spheres of social life, which capital subjects to commodification for the capture of value, within the inertia of capital towards constant expansion.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Imperialism is presented as a system based on the capture and transfer of global value, which segregates societies globally for capital accumulation. As such, it is based on the economic domination of some parts of the production and circulation of value by others. This domination, in turn, feeds back militarily, politically and culturally in complex and particular ways. To be sure, the domination of some parts by others implies an integral hierarchisation of the flow of value between countries that do not retain the value they produce and others that capture and appropriate that value.<sup>7</sup> The former constitutes what is known as the system's periphery, while the latter constitutes the imperialist core.<sup>8</sup> Today, other definitions focusing on regional and historical distinctions also refer to these spheres as the global South and the global North, respectively. Thus, we will refer to these poles between dependency and dominance as corresponding to periphery and core or global South and North, following the methodology developed by world-systems analysis. Although the hierarchy established by Imperialism places the countries of the periphery at the bottom of the ladder and those of the core at the top, within both spheres, other hierarchical relations are configured that make the links of domination and dependence established at all levels more complex. Thus, some countries are situated in what is known as the semi-periphery. This is an intermediate sphere in which these countries, on the one hand, are able to appropriate the value of countries situated below them in the imperialist hierarchy but, on the other hand, do not manage to retain all their value production, which, in turn, is also captured in varying proportions by the countries at the core of the system.<sup>9</sup>

In essence, imperialism is based on extracting and appropriating value by capturing labour, material goods and energy as cheaply as possible. Moreover, the logic of the market economy, which requires constant competition for lower costs and higher profits, demands, as a consequence, an endless search for means to externalise these costs.<sup>10</sup> This dynamic leads to the domination of the imperialist cores and the dependence and subjugation of the periphery. And this externalisation of costs falls on the periphery in the form of cheapening local labour, goods and energy for the core's benefit. This hierarchisation requires the active participation of states through legislative, diplomatic and military tools, as

<sup>5</sup> ↪ Amin, S. *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Chase-Dunn, C. *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> ↪ Wallerstein I. *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Chase-Dunn. *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy*.

<sup>7</sup> ↪ Emmanuel, A. *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Amin, S. *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> ↪ Wallerstein. *Historical Capitalism*; Clelland, D. "Imperialism and Global Value Transfers." In *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, eds. I. Ness and Z. Cope (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1028—1040.

<sup>9</sup> ↪ Clelland, D. "Surplus Drain and Dark Value in the Modern World-System." In *Routledge International Handbook of World-Systems Analysis*, eds. S. J. Babones and C. Chase-Dunn (New York: Routledge, 2012); Osorio, J. *Sistema mundial: Intercambio desigual y renta de la tierra* (Ciudad de México: UAM/Itaca, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> ↪ Clelland, D. "Unpaid Labor as Dark Value in Global Commodity Chains." In *Gendered Commodity Chains: Seeing Women's Work and Households in Global Production*, eds. Dunaway W., and Wallerstein I. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). We approach the question of the externalisation of costs in connection with the capitalist logic of accumulation and its constant search for higher profits that develops mechanisms of value transfer (or 'surplus flight') rather than from other theoretical explorations linked to the capitalist commodification of nature and its disregard for different types of valuation of nature beyond exchange value. Such visions, which sharply question how nature is valued and the limitations of dominant conceptual approaches to the subject, are highly relevant but beyond the scope of this article.

well as other supranational instruments of domination (including economic, military and financial organisations, alliances and treaties, as well as educational and cultural promotion), which escape any formal or real democratic control.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, one can speak of certain states as imperialist, mainly those at the core of global capitalism, and, consequently, of others that are not, whatever one may speculate about their potential historical development. Furthermore, the ambiguous character of the semi-periphery in this respect raises the problem of the relations of domination and dependence between the two poles, as it sometimes supports the value capture of the countries at the core, while at other times it can represent a challenge to the stability of the global hierarchical order.<sup>12</sup>

The drain of imperialist value flowing from the periphery to the core has gone through different stages throughout its history, which are mainly distinguished as colonial, neo-colonial and neoliberal. These phases offer elements of both rupture and continuity with pre-capitalist forms of domination, and their establishment would have served the gradual institutional transformation of capitalism. Each of these stages coincides, to a greater or lesser extent, with periods marked by the hegemony of a particular power: the colonial period was facilitated by Dutch hegemony and followed by British hegemony, which expanded the capitalist system to practically the entire planet, while the most recent period - coinciding first with the neo-colonial and then the neoliberal stage - has been governed by US hegemony.<sup>13</sup>

During the first expansion of capitalism beyond Europe, imperialism adopted and grew on the basis of colonialism. Through colonialism, territories outside the capitalist world system - which responded to the logic of other world systems - were incorporated through military force and coercion, institutional and extra-institutional, over the colonies.<sup>14</sup> As the aim was to favour the expropriation and exploitation of labour, land and goods in the peripheries by any means, one of the most bloody methods used was slavery, which involved a whole mechanics of extreme violence, from the kidnapping of entire populations to their transoceanic transfer and forced subjection to productive activity. Although neither exclusive nor invented by capitalism as a form of exploitation, capital used slavery on a large scale and would perfect its operation to satisfy its expansive accumulation needs. In those early stages of capitalist imperialism, the extraction and transfer of value relied on whatever coercive means were required, including those of a non-capitalist character. And so it was put into practice in the cotton plantations, the collection of guano and saltpetre or the devalued social reproduction of domestic service.<sup>15</sup>

Later, other instruments of economic domination were incorporated thanks to the different episodes of decolonisation in the peripheries, first in Latin America and then in Africa and large parts of Asia. Imperialism moved on to the phase of

<sup>11</sup> ↪ Robinson, W. I. *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and State in a Transnational World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Osorio, J. *Sistema mundial*: 9—35.

<sup>12</sup> ↪ Clelland. "Surplus Drain and Dark Value in the Modern World-System." Although there are different views on the position of those states that are situated in the core, semi-periphery and periphery of the system, we could think of the Triad (United States, Europe and Japan, including, of course, Britain within Europe.) or the G7 (to which Australia and Israel could be added) as the main core of the central countries, the BRICS (together with other regional powers such as Indonesia, Singapore, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Mexico, among others) as the semi-peripheral ones, and the rest of the global South as the peripheral ones. These positions are variable, and within them, there are no less important imbalances since, for example, Germany or France do not play the same role within the European Union as countries such as Bulgaria or Greece, whose weight in global capitalism, on their own, would surely fall into one of the other categories.

<sup>13</sup> ↪ Wallerstein, I. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); Chase-Dunn, C., and B. Lerro, *Social Change: Globalization from the Stone Age to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> ↪ Rodney, W. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972); Davis, M. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London, Verso, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> ↪ Beckert, S. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014); Clark, B., and J. B. Foster. "Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50 (3-4), 311—334; Reséndez, A. *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2016).

*In the field of labour, as part of the world trading system, the trend towards an international division of production and global labour arbitrage led to the normalisation of the super-exploitation of labour power in the periphery - as a type of exploitation of such a degree that it forces the worker's income below the value of his labour-power, denying him the conditions necessary for the reproduction of his life.*

neo-colonialism, in which the formal independence of the peripheries would see its real independence hampered.<sup>16</sup> The mechanisms of domination included, among others, debt and monetary and financial subjugation, the incorporation of the peripheries into transnational trade "cooperation" projects - through their local bourgeois elites and for the benefit of the imperialist cores - and, directly or indirectly, the latent threat of military intervention, usually led or sponsored

by those countries that had previously exercised colonial power over these newly independent countries. In the field of labour, as part of the world trading system, the trend towards an international division of production and global labour arbitrage led to the normalisation of the super-exploitation of labour power in the periphery - as a type of exploitation of such a degree that it forces the worker's income below the value of his labour-power, denying him the conditions necessary for the reproduction of his life.<sup>17</sup> This led to chronic precariousness, dragging masses into the informal labour market (what some authors have called "semi-proletariat") and accentuating the inequality between the populations of peripheral and central countries.<sup>18</sup>

The stagnation of capitalist growth in the imperialist cores, caused by the declining trend of the rate of profit, led to the

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neoliberal counterrevolution, which would exercise with an iron fist new policies aimed at extracting value produced by the peripheries. The financialisation of the economy - its distinction from the real (or productive) economy - and its tertiarisation in the core was

accompanied by an upsurge of military repression in the dependent periphery (Indonesia, Chile, Argentina and Brazil, for example). At the same time, supranational institutions, whose actions exceeded the margins of any sovereign control (such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank), extended the domination of the central markets' over production in the periphery, determining the productive activity of local economies or designing economic plans and free trade treaties in favour of the imperialist cores.<sup>19</sup>

At each stage of imperialism's development, some modes of domination (slavery, debt, financialisation and others) were

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not replaced by others, but each was incorporated and integrated into new forms of domination. Older modes of domination remained latent or were activated according to their relevance to new models of domination, depending on the temporal or regional

conjuncture. One of the areas where this constancy of different forms of domination is best expressed today is in value

<sup>16</sup> ↪ Nkrumah, K. *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Panaf, 1971); Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Galeano, E. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> ↪ Marini, R. M. *The Dialectics of Dependency* (New York: Monthly Review Press: 2022), 130—136; Osorio, J. *Teoría marxista de la dependencia* (Ciudad de México: UAM/Itaca, 2016), 321—335. It should be stressed that Marini did not situate super-exploitation as part of a neo-colonial stage within a systematic periodisation of capitalism. However, his contribution, which originally pointed only to the specificities of Latin America at the time, provided a framework that related to other views on the question of imperialism, including current ones, such as those of Andy Higginbottom and John Smith.

<sup>18</sup> ↪ Smith, J. *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> ↪ Foster, J. B., and McChesney, R. W. *The Endless Crisis: How Monopoly-Finance Capital Produces Stagnation and Upheaval from the USA to China* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012); Robinson. *A Theory of Global Capitalism*; Wood, E. M. *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2003).

chains, where the complexity of the modern system of "semi-slave" labour is combined.<sup>20</sup> Phenomena such as super-exploitation in the textile industry in the global South or the recent revival of certain forms of child labour in the United States are crystal-clear examples of how global capitalism reacts when the growth rate of the core becomes critical. In short, the logic of capital accumulation, the inescapable basis for every transformation it adopts during each stage of its cycle, underlies the need to expand its economic dominance, i.e. what gives concrete form to imperialism. The identification between imperialism and global capitalism is complete.

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## Coercion and Consensus for an Imperial Mode of Living

It is worth stressing that what prevails under capitalism is not territorial rule but economic rule due to the role of value capture at the system's base and its incorporation into the capital cycle. This does not imply, of course, that capitalist imperialism is not interested in or indifferent to territorial rule. The exclusive use of economic measures rarely achieves complete imperialist domination. Imperialist economic rule, in practice, utilises a whole series of combined instruments of subjugation, involving varying degrees of coercion and consensus and encompassing military as well as political and cultural spheres that are coupled with the economic instruments themselves. Thus, mere territorial domination or military aggression is not the result, however demeaning, of a form of capitalist imperialism per se. However, global capitalism has often imposed the incorporation of a country or region into the global mechanics of value extraction by force.<sup>21</sup> There is no shortage of recent examples (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya) where, when the other instruments employed to achieve economic dominance (sanctions, diplomacy, cultural meddling) have failed to produce the desired results, imperialism has resorted to territorial aggression to impose that dominance. But, as we have indicated, unlike other forms of non-capitalist domination, in capitalist imperialism, territorial domination through the use of force is not a precondition for economic domination. On the contrary, the military threat is often presented as an instrument of latent intimidation of force which does not always materialise in warlike aggression. The imperialism of global capital, in short, does make use of military coercion, but this is neither its first nor its only characteristic, even though the constant military threat does become desirable and, in many cases, crucial. To paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz, imperialism is the epitome of making war into diplomacy by other means.<sup>22</sup>

In this respect, the integrity of economic domination, in addition to the threat of military coercion, is also supported by international political-diplomatic relations and the ideological and moral legitimisation provided by cultural hegemony, which allows the status quo and the superiority of the imperialist cores to be sustained in the social imaginary. On an abstract level, if we were to situate the different fields of action of imperialism on an axis that differentiates between degrees of coercion and consensus, we would find the military sphere, both in terms of military intervention and mere threat, at the coercive end; economic

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<sup>20</sup> ↪ Suwandi, I. *Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019); Smith. *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>21</sup> ↪ Wood, E. M. *Empire of Capital*; Boron, A. *Imperio e imperialismo: Una lectura crítica de Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> ↪ Clausewitz, C. von. *On War* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997).

measures, which condition or punish production and trade, for example, perpetuating debt and conditioning sovereignty, would appear at a less extreme level of coercion. Diplomatic politics would be placed on a higher rung closer to the consensus side, as a facilitator of domination within negotiating frameworks, on a higher rung closer to the consensus side. The field of culture would be in the more extreme realm of social consensus due to its role as a legitimising and morale-forming force. The degree of coercive and consensual intensity of each of these areas varies according to the position of each country in the capitalist world system and the correlation of forces that determines its capacity for geopolitical manoeuvre. Imperialism aspires to find a sustained equilibrium within this coercion-consensus axis that allows it to naturalise its dominance in all areas of social life so that the extraction and capture of value are assimilated as common sense.<sup>23</sup>

As an integral system, all these elements combined are necessary for the complete domination of global capitalism, regardless of their degree of conjuncture relevance. They are not compartmentalised spheres, isolated from each other, but often share and combine fields of action, even if this connection is not always obvious and, in many cases, even counter-intuitive. An example could be found in the case of international arbitration tribunals and investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). These involve regulation in which diplomacy participates, while in the financial field, with the strength enjoyed by multinational corporations vis-à-vis states, the degree of coercion increases - regardless of the fact that in a large number of cases, this force can be exercised in collusion with the states themselves.<sup>24</sup> Something similar could be said of the distribution policies of the audiovisual industry, with agreements that are applied in line with the dominance of some countries over others. This shapes the world's conceptions at a global level, strengthening a certain cultural dominance and weakening the potential for sovereignty in a field as decisive as, for example, the social conception of morality.<sup>25</sup>

As we have pointed out, the contemporary case that best represents the complexity of imperialist domination is the United States. Its economic hegemony, consolidated around the dollar - as the currency governing global trade, especially after the Bretton Woods Agreements in 1944, -the financial system and international pressure, thanks to instruments such as debt or sanctions, is sustained and fed by a variety of means.<sup>26</sup> Namely:

- Militarily, through its bases at home (some 740) and, above all, abroad (more than 800 in 80 countries), a budget higher (877 billion dollars in 2022; 39% worldwide) than that combined by both the following ten countries with the next highest military spending (849 billion dollars) and the rest of the 144 countries

<sup>23</sup> ↩ Robinson, W. I. "Beyond the Theory of Imperialism: Global Capitalism and the Transnational State." *Societies Without Borders* 2 (2007), 5—26.

<sup>24</sup> ↩ Hippolyte, A. R. "Third World Perspectives on International Economic Governance: A Theoretical Elucidation of the 'Regime Bias' Model in Investor-State Arbitration and its Negative Impact on the Economies of Third World States." Social Science Research Network (SSRN) (June 10, 2012). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2080958> (accessed 8 de August 2023). On the ecological implications of ISDS, see Pérez-Rocha, M. "Missing from the Climate Talks: Corporate Powers to Sue Governments Over Extractives Policies". Inequality.org, 29 October 2021. Available at <https://inequality.org/research/missing-from-the-climate-talks-corporate-powers-to-sue-governments-over-extractives-policies/> (accessed 17 October 2023).

<sup>25</sup> ↩ Gürcan, E. C., "Monopoly-Capitalist Imperialism and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex." In *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, eds. I. Ness and Z. Cope (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1322—1336; Lee, K. "'The Little State Department': Hollywood and the MPAA's Influence on U.S. Trade Relations." *Northwestern Journal of International Law & Business* 28 (2) (2008), 371—398; Márquez Elenes, L. "Cultural Diversity, Audiovisual Industry, and Trade Treaties: Challenges for Development and Intercultural Dialogue." Paper presented at IAMCR Conference. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/43690884/Cultural\\_diversity\\_audiovisual\\_industry\\_and\\_trade\\_treaties\\_JULY\\_200920200722\\_3861\\_14utuwb](https://www.academia.edu/43690884/Cultural_diversity_audiovisual_industry_and_trade_treaties_JULY_200920200722_3861_14utuwb) (accessed on 9 August 2023); Deloumeaux, L. "Global Flow of Cultural Goods and Services: Still a One-Way Trade." In *ReShaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good* (Paris: UNESCO, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> ↩ Chase-Dunn, and Lerro, *Social Change*; Panitch, L., and S. Gindin. *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2012); Beal, T. "Sanctions as Instruments of Coercion: Characteristics, Limitations, and Consequences." In *Sanctions as War: Anti-Imperialist Perspectives on American Geo-Economic Strategy*, eds. Davis S., I. Ness. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 27—50; Toussaint, É. *The Debt System: A History of Sovereign Debts and their Repudiation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).

counted (514 billion dollars);<sup>27</sup> agreements on defence, research, development, technology exchange and training services, manoeuvres and others.

- ▶ Politically, through agencies with diplomatic status, foundations and other bodies and institutions that offer higher education and lobbying services. These include, for example, the Organisation of American States (OAS), National Endowment for Democracy (NED), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Fulbright Programmes, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation and the Open Society Foundation.<sup>28</sup>
- ▶ Culturally, through an industry whose dimensions impose formulas and models of cultural production or exhibition and distribution policies, shaping an imposing hegemony in the social imaginary.<sup>29</sup>

The combination of all these spheres, with the different degrees of coercion and consensus involved in each and between them, not without internal contradictions and conflicts, ultimately shapes what has been called "the imperial mode of living".<sup>30</sup> In a world hierarchised around the imperialist cores, everyday practices are traversed by the unequal exchanges of global capitalism in all the spheres mentioned above, marked by class, race and gender inequalities between geographies. This means that degrees of comfort and accessibility to services and goods are, in turn, conditioned by the invisibility (or abstraction) of the different degrees of exploitation of labour, land and energy in different parts of the planet.

This point allows us to interrogate what has been studied as ecological imperialism as a category within the critique of imperialism, which in turn encompasses, within it, green imperialism as a specific stratum.

## Ecological Imperialism

The link between the ecological question and imperialism is determined by the domination imposed by the core, which results in the dependence on the periphery, whose economy is subordinated to the cheap export of goods and the cheapening of labour. If the core is at one pole of extraction, the periphery is at the opposite pole of supply. This favours both the processes of outsourcing that the monopoly core tends to implement globally and the consequent transformation of the periphery into a sink for that same outsourcing. It is in relation to these dynamics that we refer, in short, to ecological imperialism, a phenomenon that has also been studied as unequal ecological exchange following world-systems analysis.

<sup>27</sup> ↪ "World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 24, 2023. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges> (accessed on 9 August 2023).

<sup>28</sup> ↪ Gürçan, E. C., "Monopoly-Capitalist Imperialism and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex."; Romano, S. M., T. Lajtman, and A. García. "¿Por qué y cómo se piensa desde EEUU a América Latina? Función, dinámica e intereses de los think tanks estadounidenses que estudian América Latina." *Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica*. Available at: <https://www.celag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/THINK-TANK-CELAG.pdf> (accessed on 9 August 2023).

<sup>29</sup> ↪ Lee. "The Little State Department'."

<sup>30</sup> ↪ Brand U., and M. Wissen. "The Imperial Mode of Living." In *Routledge Handbook of Ecological Economics*, ed. Spash, C. (London: Routledge, 2017); Brand U., and M. Wissen. *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2021).



Beyond other approaches to ecological imperialism, which reduced it to a biological phenomenon independent of the historical dynamics of capitalist expansion,<sup>31</sup> concern for the link between the economic domination of capitalist imperialism over the plundered and ecologically degraded peripheries appeared early on in different works of radical political ecology. One such precursor approach was that of Stephen G. Bunker, who linked what he called "modes of extraction" to the concept of unequal exchange of natural goods in the capitalist world system.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, Bunker highlighted the importance of local bourgeoisies in fostering social underdevelopment and ecological decline - fields intimately linked in his eco-social critique - within a globalised economy. These dynamics damaged these elites' potential to accumulate wealth, perpetuating their dependence on the system and feeding back into interconnected global and local socio-economic dynamics. Ultimately, Bunker's study proposed a study of unequal ecological exchange within the relations of domination of the capitalist world system. To this end, he attempted to transcend certain positions within Marxism and world-systems analysis regarding their emphasis on labour as the main source of wealth and value production, helping to bring the analysis of unequal ecological exchange into the realm of global political-economic studies.<sup>33</sup> But in addition to the centrality of unequal ecological exchange, other authors, such as Enrique Leff, also argued in those years for the relevance of other aspects of world-systems analysis and dependency theory for a radical and totalising critique of ecological imperialism.<sup>34</sup> It was not for nothing that the ecological economist Joan Martínez Alier, known for his work on the "ecologism of the poor", was already stressing that dependency theory helped "prepare the ground" for ecological critique.<sup>35</sup>

These contributions laid some of the foundations for other authors from different sensibilities to contribute to this field in subsequent years.<sup>36</sup> The ecological dimension served to understand how the configuration of the capitalist world system, marked primarily by international trade, had determined the historical asymmetry between the environmental degradation of the global South and the social development of the global North. This asymmetry, developed through different stages, reflecting the dialectics of colonial domination, national resistance and neoliberal counter-revolution<sup>37</sup> with the North taking advantage of its position of strength to turn the South into both a supply of goods and a dumping ground for waste. The extension of the analysis of unequal exchange to the ecological field has incorporated the role of consumption and externalisation in the environmental burden of the ecological footprint and other global and local eco-social imbalances into the study of trade and labour. This has served to enrich research on the impact of these imbalances between the valorisation of natural goods and manufacturing on all types of ecosystems and societies. The multidimensionality of these issues has led to an equally complex problematisation of the hierarchisation of global capitalism as a system of competition between states and corporations occupying different spaces of domination and

<sup>31</sup> ↪ The most significant example is Alfred Crosby's work, *Ecological Imperialism*, published in 1986, which was the first to devote a complete study to the issue. Crosby focused on the environmental destruction wrought by European colonisation around the world, especially in the Americas, which he understood to have been largely unintentional. The work placed special emphasis on the biological element as the driving force behind this expansion, leaving political and economic issues out of its historical analysis. While providing relevant elements, Crosby's association of imperialism with biology was limited in terms of the study of the ecological burden and mediation imposed by the formation of competition between imperial powers or the economic domination of the core over the periphery within the capitalist order. Crosby, A. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>32</sup> ↪ Bunker, S. G. *Underdeveloping the Amazon: Extraction, Unequal Exchange, and the Failure of the Modern State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Brolin, J. *The Bias of the World: Theories of Unequal Exchange in History* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2006), 303.

<sup>34</sup> ↪ Leff, E. *Ecología y capital: Racionalidad ambiental, democracia participativa y desarrollo sustentable* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1986), 155—173.

<sup>35</sup> ↪ Quoted in Hornborg, A. "Towards an Ecological Theory of Unequal Exchange: Articulating World System Theory and Ecological Economics." *Ecological Economics* 25 (1998), 129.

<sup>36</sup> ↪ See, for example, the work of James O'Connor, Alf Hornborg, John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, Joan Martínez Alier, Hannah Holleman, Jason W. Moore, Jason Hickel y Max Ajl and Mariko L. Frame.

<sup>37</sup> ↪ Mariko L. Frame offers this periodisation in relation to colonialism (from 1492 to the 1960s), economic nationalism in the periphery against ecological imperialism (from the 1940s to the 1970s) and "the counter-revolutionary backlash following the developing world debt crises of the early 1980s". This periodisation is in line with the colonial, neo-colonial and neoliberal stages of imperialism theorised within world-systems analysis. Frame, M. L. "Ecological Imperialism: A World-Systems Approach". *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 81 (3) (2022), 518-525.

*Ecological imperialism thus constitutes the most bloody manifestation of the plundering of some countries by others, transforming the ecosystems on which social life is sustained and deepening the dynamics of global domination and dependence... The continued plunder and degradation of the periphery in favour of the core is an indispensable part of the North's capture of value and economic dominance over the South.*

dependence in the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery. This complexity has been further accentuated in the current neoliberal era, as the increase in environmental depredation led by the core countries has also prompted the semi-periphery to increase environmental exploitation of the periphery. While the former remains subordinate to the core, this has problematised conceptualisations within global relations.<sup>38</sup>

As John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark noted, "transfers of economic values are accompanied in complex ways by real 'material-ecological' flows that transform relations between the city and the countryside, and between the global metropolis and the periphery".<sup>39</sup> Ecological imperialism thus constitutes the most bloody manifestation of the plundering of some countries by others, transforming the ecosystems on which social life is sustained and deepening the dynamics of global domination and dependence. This also conditions large migratory movements and the subjection of the labour force to the flows of transfer and extraction of goods. Exploiting "the ecological vulnerabilities of societies to promote imperialist control" deepens the gap between a cared-for North and a battered South, which becomes a major sink for the former. In this way, ecological imperialism limits the possibilities for sovereign development of the periphery within the frameworks of global capitalism, perpetuating the fracturing of the indigenous social metabolism<sup>40</sup> in its link with nature.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, Donald Clelland pointed out how the externalisation of ecological costs is part of the drain of surplus value that is transferred from the periphery to the core via commodity chains. The more the cost of ecological wear and tear and damage is excluded, the more value capitalists capture in the core. The consequences are mainly borne by the periphery and are reflected in local taxes for sanitation, health risks for the local population and loss of access to those sources that sustain and guarantee their social reproduction.<sup>42</sup>

In an attempt to systematise some of these critiques, Mariko L. Frame has recently characterised ecological imperialism as part and parcel of the necessity of the system of capital accumulation and its relations of production, built on the hierarchy between countries in the international division of labour, which massively affects the eco-social impacts and unequal ecological exchange of the periphery. As such, it is the result of the dialectic between the asymmetrical forces of capital plunder and social resistance within a global trend of "continuous accumulation of capital for the imperialist countries".<sup>43</sup> The externalisation of the ecological burden of global capitalism thus sustains ecological imperialism. The continued plunder and degradation of the periphery in favour of the core is an indispensable part of the North's capture of value and economic dominance over the South.

<sup>38</sup> ↪ Li, M. "China: Imperialism or Semi-periphery?" *Monthly Review* 73 (3) (July-August, 2021). It is important to stress the dialectical nature of the semi-periphery in terms of its systemic and anti-systemic character: although the world system constrains the politics of individual semi-peripheral actors, limiting them to a small number of possible avenues of ascent within the global hierarchy, they ultimately play a role in transforming the system as such. Overestimating the relevance of the semi-periphery within the world system, however, can lead to essentialist positions that abstract the order from imperialism and may even become instrumental to it.

<sup>39</sup> ↪ Foster, J. B., and Clark, B. "Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism." *Socialist Register* 40 (2004), 187.

<sup>40</sup> ↪ Social metabolism refers to the flow of materials and energy that takes place in the mediation between society and nature. The term was of particular importance for the later Marx, as authors such as John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett or Kohei Saito, among others.

<sup>41</sup> ↪ Foster, and Clark. "Ecological Imperialism", 187

<sup>42</sup> ↪ Clelland, D. "The Core of the Apple: Dark Value and Degrees of Monopoly in Global Commodity Chains." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 1 (2015), 82.

<sup>43</sup> ↪ Frame. "Ecological Imperialism," 508-510.

The externalisation of the ecological burden from the core to the periphery, in its link to the global capture of value, takes different forms.<sup>44</sup> One can be seen in the unequal access to wealth through the appropriation of energy sources, the extraction of materials - especially minerals - and the cheapening of labour in the periphery to produce and sustain imperial lifestyles in the core.<sup>45</sup>

The effects of this imperial drain are also evident in the disproportionately unequal energy consumption between a profligate North and a South with billions of people without even minimal energy access for the production and reproduction of social life.<sup>46</sup>

A no less relevant aspect of the externalisation of the ecological burden is the inequality in emissions, which not only translates into the central countries disproportionately exceeding the carbon footprint of the peripheral countries but also into the North, with the need to reduce its emissions or make up its figures, externalising its emissions by transferring its most polluting production to the South.<sup>47</sup>

Equally unequal effects on human health and well-being are also a product of ecological imperialism. The hierarchical flow of material and energy goods and the burden of labour exploitation affect aspects as varied as infant mortality rates, maternal risks, exposure to diseases with unavailable cures, or lack of access to preventive and quality medicine, among others.<sup>48</sup>

The burden of ecological outsourcing is also reflected in unequal deforestation as an integral part of export flows to rich regions, with countries of the South suffering disproportionately, which in turn translates into increased repression in these countries against local defenders resisting global dynamics.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, water tensions between North and South are disproportionately affected by the lack of protection and the dependence that the dominance of the former has on the latter.<sup>50</sup>

These aspects serve to expose the great global paradox between consumption and degradation that occurs as a consequence of unequal ecological exchange, and which reveals the true dimensions of the impact of ecological

<sup>44</sup> ↪ Some of these are outlined in Givens, J. E., X. Huang, and A. K. Jorgenson. "Ecologically Unequal Exchange: A Theory of Global Environmental Injustice." *Sociology Compass* 13 (5) (2019), las cuales han servido parcialmente a esta sección del presente artículo.

<sup>45</sup> ↪ Hickel, J., D. W. O'Neill, A. L. Fanning, and H. Zoomkawala. "National responsibility for ecological breakdown: a fair-shares assessment of resource use, 1970–2017." *The Lancet Planetary Health* 6 (4) (2022); Hickel, J., C. Dorninger, H. Wieland, and I. Suwandi. "Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy: Drain from the Global South through Unequal Exchange, 1990–2015." *Global Environmental Change* 73 (2022)..

<sup>46</sup> ↪ "Global Launch: Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report." *World Health Organization*, June 7, 2021. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-06-2021-global-launch-tracking-sdg7-the-energy-progress-report> (accessed 9 August 2023).

<sup>47</sup> ↪ Foster, J. B., H. Holleman, and B. Clark. "[Imperialism in the Anthropocene](#)." — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, January 2021; Hickel, J. "Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown: An Equality-Based Attribution Approach for Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Excess of the Planetary Boundary." *The Lancet Planetary Health* 4 (9) (2020), 399-404; "Carbon Emissions of Richest 1 Percent more than Double the Emissions of the Poorest Half of Humanity." *Oxfam International*, September 21, 2021. Available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/carbon-emissions-richest-1-percent-more-double-emissions-poorest-half-humanity> (Accessed on 9 August 2023); "Inequality kills: The Unparalleled Action Needed to Combat Unprecedented Inequality in the Wake of COVID-19." *Oxfam International*, January 2022. Available at <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621341/bp-inequality-kills-170122-en.pdf> (Accessed on 9 August 2023); Chancel, L. "Global Carbon Inequality over 1990–2019." *Nature Sustainability* (5) (2022), 931–938.

<sup>48</sup> ↪ Hickel, J. *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: William Heinemann, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> ↪ Shandra, J. M., C. Leckband, B. London. "Ecologically Unequal Exchange and Deforestation: A Cross-National Analysis of Forestry Export Flows." *Organization & Environment* 22 (3) (2009).

<sup>50</sup> ↪ Clark, B., S. B. Longo, R. Clausen, and D. Auerbach. "From Sea Slaves to Slime Lines: Commodification and Unequal Ecological Exchange in Global Marine Fisheries." In *Ecologically Unequal Exchange: Environmental Injustice in Comparative and Historical Perspective*, eds. Frey, R. S., P. K. Gellert, and H. F. Dahms (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Shandra, J. M., E. Shor, and B. London, "World Polity, Unequal Ecological Exchange, and Organic Water Pollution: A Cross-National Analysis of Developing Nations." *Human Ecology Review* 16 (1) (2009); Fitzgerald, J. B., and D. Auerbach, "The Political Economy of the Water Footprint: A Cross-National Analysis of Ecologically Unequal Exchange." *Sustainability* 8 (12) (2016).

*While the countries of the core, the main consumers of goods, are the least affected by environmental degradation, in the countries of the periphery, which consume fewer resources, environmental deterioration is much greater... it is physically impossible for the countries at the core of global capitalism to continue externalising their ecological burden indefinitely. Once externalisation becomes increasingly unsustainable, the core itself is hit by the contradictions it displaces to the periphery.*

imperialism on the planet and the societies that inhabit it: while the countries of the core, the main consumers of goods, are the least affected by environmental degradation, in the countries of the periphery, which consume fewer resources, environmental deterioration is much greater.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the conversion of peripheral countries not only into suppliers but also into dumping grounds for the North yields chilling figures: it is estimated that more than half of the world's 50 million metric

tons of annual electronic waste ends up in illegal dumps, mainly in Asia and Africa.<sup>52</sup> As Kohei Saito has pointed out, the mistreatment of populations and ecosystems in the South by the North reflects the increasing contradictions of the system, the consequences of which force the periphery "to a double burden": "after suffering the plunder of ecological imperialism, it must bear the unjust imposition of the destructive effects of the transfer".<sup>53</sup> However, it is physically impossible for the countries at the core of global capitalism to continue externalising their ecological burden indefinitely. Once externalisation becomes increasingly unsustainable, the core itself is hit by the contradictions it displaces to the periphery, which "return home" in the form of climate migrants or natural disasters, in turn fuelling eco-fascist policies to varying degrees in the former and undermining the development potential of the latter.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as Saito also underlines, "for the outsourcing society, the lack of the outside is deadly".<sup>55</sup>

In short, the eco-political critique of imperialism opened up by the study of unequal ecological exchange has served to identify in a more complex way how the relationship of systemic inequality between core and periphery favours that

*As a central part of the imperialism of global capital, unequal ecological exchange also relies on all the other forms of coercion and consensus that support the existence of this domination.*

material flows between the two spheres take on unequal characteristics in terms of resource extraction, production, consumption and disposal. As a result of the international trade structure, the wealthiest and most powerful countries have perpetuated their historical dominance in both access to

natural goods and their disposal in poorer and more dependent countries. This power rests on an iron grip on every stage of trade supply chains, which conditions the unequal distribution of benefits and harms both natural and social dimensions. As a central part of the imperialism of global capital, unequal ecological exchange also relies on all the other forms of coercion and consensus that support the existence of this domination. These include the threat of war power from the North, the most diverse forms of financial or diplomatic subjugation, and the cultural hegemony legitimising this power. The effects of their territorial inequality have consequences for the inequality with which the populations of the global South can develop, making the distance between them and those of the global North ever more acute, for the latter sustains their imperial ways of life based on dispossession that is *naturalised* in everyday social life.

<sup>51</sup> ↪ Hickel, J. "Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown"; Lenton, T. M., C. Xu, J. F. Abrams, A. Ghadiali, et al. "Quantifying the human cost of global warming." *Nature Sustainability* (2023).

<sup>52</sup> ↪ Parajuly, K., R. Kuehr, A. K. Awasthi, C. Fitzpatrick, et al. *Future E-Waste Scenarios* (UNU and UNEP-IETC, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> ↪ Saito K. *El capital en la era del Antropoceno* (Barcelona: Sine Qua Non, 2022), 42.

<sup>54</sup> ↪ Ness, I. *Migration as Economic Imperialism: How International Labour Mobility Undermines Economic Development in Poor Countries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023). Pajares, M. *Refugiados climáticos: Un gran reto del siglo XXI* (Barcelona: Rayo Verde, 2020); Walia, H. *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> ↪ Saito K. *El capital en la era del Antropoceno*, 44.

## Green Imperialism

At this point, it is worth delving into the specific characteristics of green imperialism and its link to ecological

*Green imperialism can be understood as a mechanism of imperialism itself to perpetuate the domination of global capitalism... it relies on the adaptation and instrumentalisation of the different dimensions of the ecological and energy transition to the expansive needs of capital, which are associated with the preservation, intensification and growth of imperial domination and the dynamics of dependency it imposes on the subordinate peripheries.*

imperialism. Apart from other different or even methodologically antagonistic approaches,<sup>56</sup> green imperialism can be understood as a mechanism of imperialism itself to perpetuate the domination of global capitalism. This is a new mode of accumulation aimed at favouring the transfer of value from the periphery to the core, as well as the outsourcing, extraction and transformation of the periphery into a waste dump. As such, green imperialism proposes a reformist and counter-insurgent agenda linked to a commodified view

of nature —monetisable and exchangeable as a 'service'— which ties in with some of the original supremacist features of the Western conservation movement and its various expressions around the world since the 19th century.<sup>57</sup> By reducing the environment to exchange value and alienating it from other features of social metabolism (e.g. socio-cultural, biological and ecosystemic), green imperialism aims to preserve the imperial mode of living in the core at the expense of labour, materials and energy in the periphery. To this end, however, green imperialism uses methods of legitimisation based on the justification and promotion of supposedly environmentally beneficial policies.

This conservation logic emerges, for example, in the so-called nature-based solutions (NBS), a term that has been widely used by actors as varied as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the European Commission and the World Bank. The NBS refer to the sustainable use, management and engineering of natural resources and processes for the provision of beneficial services to both societies and the environment, serving the multiple current ecosocial challenges of mitigation and adaptation. However, indigenous critiques focusing on environmental justice have labelled these "false solutions".<sup>58</sup> Important instruments of these NBS are the REDD and REDD+ initiatives, which stand for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries". REDD and REDD+ are voluntary forest management programmes developed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Still, they have been in the service of conservationist

<sup>56</sup> ↩ Some conservative, neoliberal and elite-friendly intellectuals have used the term, sometimes interchangeably with ecological imperialism, to refer to the economic degradation they believe would be caused by constraints imposed in the name of environmental protection. With nuances, this meaning was given by Helge Ole Bergesen in 1988 in response to the Brundtland report. Bergesen, Helge Ole. "Reformism Doomed to Failure? A Critical Look at the Strategy Promoted by the Brundtland Commission." *International Challenges* 8 (2) (1988). Similarly, it appears in Lal, D. "Green Imperialism: A Prescription for Misery and War in the World's Poorest Countries." *Social Affairs Unit* 87 (32) (1999). In a different form, it appears in Grove, R. "Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600-1860." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), which studies the emergence of early environmentalism in relation to colonial expansion.

<sup>57</sup> ↩ See, for example, Anker, P. *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jacoby K. *Crimes against Nature. Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Taylor, D. E. *The Rise of American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Holleman, H. *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of "Green" Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Blanc, G. *The Invention of Green Colonialism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> ↩ McGregor, D., S. Whitaker, and M. Sritharan. "Indigenous environmental justice and sustainability." *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 43(2020),35-40; Pham N., T. Gilbertson, J. Witchger, E. Soto-Dansec, et al. *Nature-Based Solutions*. Indigenous Environmental Network: Climate Justice Program Briefing Series (2022). Available at <https://www.ienearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Nature-Base-Solutions.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2023); *Hoodwinked in the Hothouse: Resist False Solutions to Climate Change*. Climate False Solutions (2021). Available at [https://climatefalsesolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/HOODWINKED\\_ThirdEdition\\_On-Screen\\_version.pdf](https://climatefalsesolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/HOODWINKED_ThirdEdition_On-Screen_version.pdf) (accessed 17 October 2023).

mega-projects promoted by corporations and supranational organisations, which have often displaced entire native populations from their lands and ruined their local economies.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the financialisation of ecological reparations has included instruments ranging from debt-for-nature swaps to the establishment of carbon credits.<sup>60</sup> It has been observed that these tools do not provide sufficient financial resources to the periphery while reinforcing its debt burden. At the same time, they lack support for conservation measures, conditioning the politics of alignment within the world system and strengthening domination-dependency paradigms within it. Carbon offsets have been accused of empirically worsening the problem they are supposed to solve while at the same time tending to favour the global corporate system, co-opt NGOs and perpetuate the colonial-imperial links that mark international relations.<sup>61</sup>

Accusations of green colonialism have also been directed at so-called "green energy", which has been denounced as an instrument of financial subordination.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, it has been pointed out that green energy, far from its self-proclaimed clean and renewable characteristics, is intended to provide energy additions rather than transitions,<sup>63</sup> greening global capitalism for the sake of its expansionary logic. As such, it has become what has been described as "a tool of global counterinsurgency" with which green capitalist techno-fetishism obstructs radical social change.<sup>64</sup> This kind of green growth and eco-modernist tendency has led, for example, to the fanciful discourses of absolute decoupling of emissions and GDP, i.e. the continuation of economic growth. In contrast, emissions and environmental pressures decline in absolute terms.<sup>65</sup> This rhetoric lacks empirical evidence and is most often based on selected results from selected high-income industrialised countries in the global North that can control domestic and import supply chains in world trade.

<sup>59</sup> ↪ Ramutsindela, R. "National Parks and (Neo)Colonialisms." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, eds. Legun K., J. C. Keller, M. Carolan, and M. M. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Blanc. *The Invention of Green Colonialism*; Lee, J. "How the world's favorite conservation model was built on colonial violence." *Grist*, April 13, 2023. Available at <https://grist.org/indigenous/30x30-world-conservation-model-colonialism-indigenous-peop/> (accessed 17 October 2023); Longo, F. "Why 30x30 would be the worst possible outcome of COP15." *African Arguments*, December 8, 2022. Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2022/12/why-30x30-would-be-the-worst-possible-outcome-of-cop15/> (accessed 17 October 2023).

<sup>60</sup> ↪ Greener, L.P. "Debt-for-Nature Swaps in Latin American Countries: The Enforcement Dilemma." *Connecticut Journal of International Law* 7 (1991), 123–180; Cassimon, D., M. Prowse, and D. Essers. "The Pitfalls and Potential of Debt-for-Nature Swaps: A US-Indonesian Case Study." *Global Environmental Change* 21 (2011), 93–112; Bachram, H. "Climate Fraud and Carbon Colonialism: The New trade in Greenhouse Gases." *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 15 (4) (2004), 5–20; Eberle, C., N. Münstermann, and J. Siebeneck. "Carbon Colonialism: A Postcolonial Assessment of Carbon Offsetting." Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337622634\\_Carbon\\_Colonialism\\_A\\_postcolonial\\_assessment\\_of\\_carbon\\_offsetting](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337622634_Carbon_Colonialism_A_postcolonial_assessment_of_carbon_offsetting) (accessed 10 August 2023).

<sup>61</sup> ↪ West, T. A. P., S. Wunder, E. O. Sills, J. Börner, et al. "Action needed to make carbon offsets from forest conservation work for climate change mitigation." *Science* 381 (6660), 873-877; Bachram. "Climate Fraud and Carbon Colonialism."

<sup>62</sup> ↪ Haag, S. "Old Colonial Power in New Green Financing Instruments: Approaching Financial Subordination from the Perspective of Racial Capitalism in Renewable Energy Finance in Senegal." *Geoforum*, 145 (2023).

<sup>63</sup> ↪ York, R., and S. E. Bell. "Energy transitions or additions?: Why a transition from fossil fuels requires more than the growth of renewable energy." *Energy Research & Social Science* 50 (2019), 40-43. This aspect can also be read in relation to the Jevons paradox, which states that increasing efficiency in the use of a resource leads to a decrease in its cost and, consequently, to an increase in resource consumption.

<sup>64</sup> ↪ Dunlap, A. "The green economy as counterinsurgency, or the ontological power affirming permanent ecological catastrophe." *Environmental Science & Policy* 139 (2023), 39-50; Dunlap, A. "Does Renewable Energy Exist? Fossil Fuels + Technology in the Search for Renewable Energy." In *A Critical Approach to the Social Acceptance of Renewable Energy Infrastructures*, eds. Batel S., and D. P. Rudolph (London: Palgrave, 2021), 83– 102; Fitz, D. "What Is Energy Denial?" *Resilience*, September 12, 2019. Available at <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-09-12/what-is-energy-denial/> (accessed 10 August 2023).

<sup>65</sup> ↪ Parrique T., J. Barth, F. Briens, C. Kerschner, et al. "Decoupling Debunked: Evidence and Arguments Against Green Growth as a Sole Strategy for Sustainability." *European Environmental Bureau* (2019); Haberl, H., D. Wiedenhofer, D. Virág, G. Kalt, et al. "A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling of GDP, Resource Use and GHG Emissions, Part II: Synthesizing the Insights." *Environmental Research Letters* 15 (6) (2020). Vogel, J., and J. Hickel. "Is green growth happening? An empirical analysis of achieved versus Paris-compliant CO<sub>2</sub>-GDP decoupling in high-income countries." *The Lancet: Planetary Health* 7 (9) (2023); Hubacek, K., X. Chen, K. Feng, T. Wiedmann, et al. "Evidence of decoupling consumption-based CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from economic growth." *Advances in Applied Energy* 4 (2021); Wiedmann, T., M. Lenzen, L. T. Keyßer, and J. Steinberger. "Scientist warning on affluence." *Nature Communications*, 11 (2020); Vezzoni, R. "Green growth for whom, how and why? The REPowerEU Plan and the inconsistencies of European Union energy policy." *Energy Research & Social Science* 101 (2023).

It is through these mechanisms, among others, that green imperialism seeks to perpetuate the dominance of global capitalism. To this end, it relies on the adaptation and instrumentalisation of the various dimensions of the ecological and energy transition (which global capitalism itself has made inevitable due to the system's inertia towards uncontrolled consumption of goods and services) to the expansive needs of capital. These, in turn, are associated with the preservation, intensification and growth of imperial domination and the dynamics of dependency it imposes on the subordinate peripheries.

In this way, green imperialism translates into a range of positive discursive tools that, through their emphasis on the urgency of 'saving the planet' and passing off the capitalist economy as 'sustainable', whitewash imperialism itself in the eyes of global public opinion. Thus,, green imperialism, often replicating colonial rhetoric, adapts a patronising supremacism to contemporary forms and discursive frameworks. Underlying it is a paternalism that translates into a green rhetoric, which adapts "we're doing it for your sake" expressions to the new times, reflecting different forms of an old colonial vision. The global North once again presents itself as obliged to make amends for a supposed "mismanagement" of nature by the global South due both to ignorance and to the technical or technological deficiency caused by its underdevelopment.<sup>66</sup>

The category of green imperialism allows us to understand that the green and sustainable economy projected in and from the countries of the core implies a global mobilisation of eco-social costs that perpetuate the dispossession of the

*"the structure of ecological imperialism has simply changed its object of desire to rare metals", as "plunder has become the prerequisite for environmental protection" of the cores of global capitalism... green capitalism and its imperial inevitability organises the global economy by antagonising business as usual to ecosystems, communities and, ultimately, life, for the benefit of a privileged minority that is becoming increasingly minoritarian and privileged.*

peripheries, which are reduced to "green sacrifice zones" in order to continue the expropriation that, in the past, was carried out in these same regions for different purposes and justifications.<sup>67</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting that the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimated that, in a "sustainable development scenario" for a rapid global "2040 net zero transition" by 2050, demand for lithium could increase 42-fold, graphite 25-fold, cobalt 21-fold, nickel 19-fold and rare earth minerals 7-fold, as a result of the expected

deployment of renewable energies, which would necessarily increase the ecological burden on the global South.<sup>68</sup> As Saito points out, "the structure of ecological imperialism (...) has simply changed its object of desire to rare metals", as "plunder has become the prerequisite for environmental protection" of the cores of global capitalism.<sup>69</sup> It is in this sense that we must understand how what in recent times has been called environmental Keynesianism, and which has materialised in a whole variety of hegemonic Green New Deal proposals, has appeared to, among other things, give

<sup>66</sup> ↪ Some historical examples of such discourses that somehow emerge as variations of the terra nullius myth (or are expressed in or from the myth of the "land without people") and the eagerness to "make the desert bloom" called for its "improvement", can be found in George, A. "Making the Desert Bloom. A Myth Examined." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8 (2) (1979), 88-100; Davis, D. K. "Desert 'Wastes' of the Maghreb: Desertification Narratives in French Colonial Environmental History of North Africa," *cultural geographies* 11 (4) (2004), 359-387; Sasa, G. "Oppressive Pines: Uprooting Israeli Colonialism and Implanting Palestinian A'wna." *Politics* 43 (2) (2023), 219-235.

<sup>67</sup> ↪ Zografos, C., and P. Robbins. "Green Sacrifice Zones, or Why a Green New Deal Cannot Ignore the Cost Shifts of Just Transitions." *One Earth* 3 (5) (2020), 543—546.

<sup>68</sup> ↪ *The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions: World Energy Outlook Special Report* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021). In this regard, the growing importance of minerals destined for the "green transition" in crimes against environmental defenders has been noted. "Standing firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis." Global Witness, 13 September 2023. Available at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/standing-firm/> (accessed 17 October 2023).

<sup>69</sup> ↪ Saito K. *El capital en la era del Antropoceno*, 72—74.

sustenance and continuity to an imperial mode of living that the North makes its own and exclusive.<sup>70</sup> The different manifestations of the unequal exchange between core and periphery - from wealth to modes of material and energy extraction, to the mobilisation of forest, water or atmospheric conservation policies, and others - show how green capitalism and its imperial inevitability organises the global economy by antagonising business as usual to ecosystems, communities and, ultimately, life, for the benefit of a privileged minority that is becoming increasingly minoritarian and privileged. And it is in this catastrophic antagonism to nature and human societies, these same privileged minorities find, once again, a business opportunity in the repair (or its simulation) that they themselves have caused.

## Transcending Green Imperialism: Bridges to Be Built Between Critiques of Unequal Ecological Exchange and Degrowth

The more conventional and dominant green discourses and policies are insufficient in addressing the complexity of these problems of hierarchisation and distribution of ecological and eco-social burdens within global capitalism. The reduction of such rhetoric to climate or sustainability issues neglects the systemic dimensions of the conflicts we face in

*In short, green imperialism is the friendly face of global capitalism's "creative destruction".*

terms of imperialism and political ecology. As a result, they tend to privilege purely technological solutions at the core rather than the complex eco-social dimensions of these

conflicts. In turn, these positions facilitate the accumulation and legitimisation of power of those forms of corporate industrial development, which, in turn, hinders the democratising potential that can be found in alternative forms of management and resolution of these eco-social conflicts. In short, green imperialism is the friendly face of global capitalism's "creative destruction".

For these reasons, green imperialism is incompatible with demands from the global South to reclaim the ecological debt owed by the global North, which is at the heart of the global environmental justice movement. This debt, which has recently been quantified at \$192 trillion in damages,<sup>71</sup> would favour the South's ecological transition, as well as its mitigation and adaptation to the new eco-social reality, and is therefore essential to improve living conditions in these regions and lessen the global inequality on which their dependence is perpetuated. But these demands are only part of the multiple measures needed to stop the core of the global capitalist system from appropriating the labour, goods and

*In the face of ecological imperialism, whether painted green or not, the environmental justice movement promotes the liberation of local assets from domination and dependency, allowing healthy ecosystems to favour local development, poverty eradication and autonomous self-management of their communities. This would allow for a socially just transition to low-energy-intensity production, especially in its use of fossil fuels.*

energy that the periphery needs to restore its social metabolism, and to which, for obvious reasons, green imperialism cannot respond. As Alf Hornborg has pointed out, "the resources imported into the industrial centres are transformed into quantities of products vastly superior to the fraction that is returned to their peripheries".<sup>72</sup> At the same time, what the mercantile logic of capital translates into mere inequality is ideologically passed off as reciprocity. Breaking with

this would mean breaking the domination-dependence binomial that marks social life under imperialism. This would

<sup>70</sup> ↪ Aji, M. *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Dunlap, A., and L. Laratte. "European Green Deal necropolitics: Exploring 'green' energy transition, degrowth & infrastructural colonisation." *Political Geography* 97 (2022); Bordera, J., A. Coronel, and A. Pedregal. "Green New Dilemmas: Inercias autoritarias y límites de la democracia." *Ecología Política* 64 (2022), 12—16; Almeida, D. V.; V Kolinjivadi; T. Ferrando; B. Roy, et al. "The "Greening" of Empire: The European Green Deal as the EU First Agenda." *Political Geography* 105 (2023)

<sup>71</sup> ↪ Fanning, A. L., and J. Hickel. "Compensation for Atmospheric Appropriation." *Nature Sustainability* (2023).

<sup>72</sup> ↪ Hornborg, A. "Towards an Ecological Theory of Unequal Exchange", 134.



allow the global South a rational and planned use of its resources without its subordination, marking the fate of the local economy, its populations and ecosystems, subsumed by the pressure of an export economy of submission, of acceptance of plunder and dispossession. In the face of ecological imperialism, whether painted green or not, the environmental justice movement promotes the liberation of local assets from domination and dependency, allowing healthy ecosystems to favour local development, poverty eradication and autonomous self-management of their communities. This would allow for a socially just transition to low-energy-intensity production, especially in its use of fossil fuels.

A thorough critique of unequal ecological exchange today could benefit from a fruitful dialogue with the radical positions of contemporary degrowth.<sup>73</sup> These positions emphasise the need for a planned and marked degrowth both in the global North and in the productive sectors that are most harmful and irrelevant to sustaining life and ecosystems to favour the global South's growth in those productive and reproductive activities that are essential for social life. Degrowth positions thus seek, on the basis of environmental justice and within the planetary biophysical limits, to facilitate a kind of development of the periphery that allows for the restoration of its social metabolism. However, Max Ajl has acutely pointed out that some degrowth advocates often lack a theorisation of value and a historical understanding of global accumulation. This leads to the possibility that their proposals may overemphasise technical aspects of capitalism, such as growth, rather than examining systemic features related to the relationship between global hierarchies, the international division of labour and international trade. As a result, the politics of degrowth can be blurred by calls for universal social justice, overlooking the importance of concrete actions for sovereignty and emancipation in the Global South.<sup>74</sup>

While other schools of political ecology and environmental justice take up ecological problems as problems of social asymmetries, degrowth has sometimes overlooked that these ecological burden inequalities are entirely linked to inequalities in the distribution of material and energy resources. However, given the common goals of international solidarity and radical social change, it is imperative that fields such as degrowth share constructive spaces with world-systems analysis and other critical currents of unequal exchange that can provide an alternative view on the formation of global capital and its impact, especially on the world's most damaged regions, populations and ecosystems. Both degrowth and unequal ecological exchange must be aware that they cannot achieve their goals in isolation. Only a holistic ecological view of the integration of our economies within global capitalism can provide us with a systemic perspective on the hierarchical and asymmetrical distribution of eco-social burdens across the planet. Only a holistic ecological view of the integration of our economies within global capitalism can provide us with a systemic perspective on the hierarchical and asymmetrical distribution of eco-social burdens across the planet.

*Only a holistic ecological view of the integration of our economies within global capitalism can provide us with a systemic perspective on the hierarchical and asymmetrical distribution of eco-social burdens across the planet.*

Years ago, Hornborg stresses the need to "build bridges between world-system theory and ecological economics",<sup>75</sup> as they must be built between dependency theory and political ecology. In this same spirit, current spheres of critical intervention, such as unequal ecological exchange and degrowth, must be explored to complement each other to

<sup>73</sup> ↪ Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal*; Hickel. *Less is More*; Kallis, G., S. Paulson, G. D'Alisa, and F. Demaria. *The Case for Degrowth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Schmelzer, M., A. Vansintjan, and A. Vetter. *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022); Pedregal, A., and J. Bordera. "[Toward an Ecosocialist Degrowth: From the Materially Inevitable to the Socially Desirable.](#)" — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2022; Foster, J. B. "[Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development.](#)" — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023.

<sup>74</sup> ↪ Ajl. "Theories of Political Ecology." Véase también Frame, M. L. "Integrating Degrowth and World-Systems Theory." *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 21 (2022), 426-448.

<sup>75</sup> ↪ Hornborg, A. "Towards an Ecological Theory of Unequal Exchange", 129.

transcend laziness in ecology and naivety concerning geopolitics and international relations. In a world of lethal asymmetries for life on the planet, the material and discursive traps of green imperialism challenge our capacity for a radical and systemic response that is socially just, internationalist and in solidarity. The complexity of this conflict can only be fully addressed through the combination and richness that these methodologies can offer us. It is only from this systemic problematisation that truly transformative alternatives can emerge for the lives of all, regardless of the randomness of our origin.

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