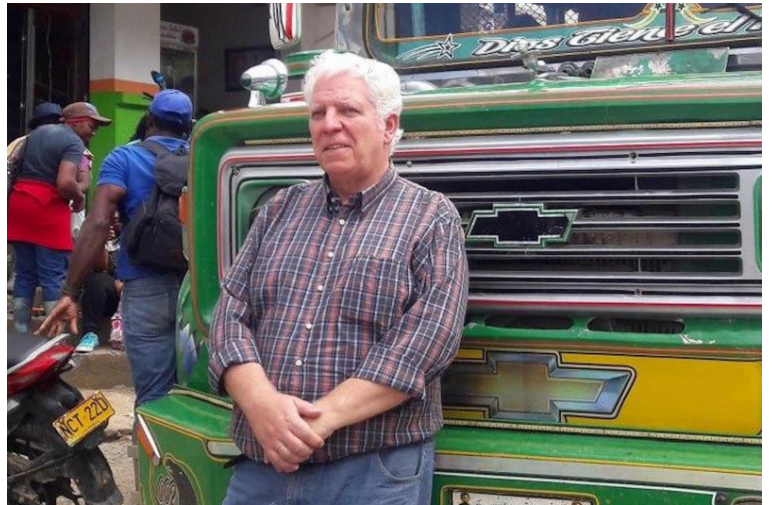


"Necropolitics is about letting people die in order to keep a predatory economy alive"

David Roca Basadre

At 63, Eduardo Gudynas (Montevideo, Uruguay, 1960) is the youngest person on the list of 75 key development thinkers of the last 150 years, compiled by geographer David Simon of the University of London. There are only eight Iberian Americans on the list. As a researcher at the Latin American Centre for Social Ecology (CLAES), a discipline in which he holds a master's degree, he has been following the issues of development, the environment and social movements in Latin America for more than three decades, and has written several books on these topics.



Eduardo Gudynas.

Image provided by the interviewee

His most recent publications include an assessment of human and natural rights violations in Bolivia's extractivism and an analysis of the impacts of the war in Ukraine on Iberian America's political ecology. He also collaborates with South American citizens' organisations and university institutions.

Despite focusing his studies on his native continent, Gudynas was the first Iberian American to receive the Arne Naess Chair in Environment and Global Justice at the University of Oslo (Norway); he is also a Research Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Munich (Germany) and has recently joined the Club of Rome's Commission for the Transformation of the Global Economy.

Here we talk to him about socio-environmental conflicts, the rights of nature, and politics.



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True Democracy and Capitalism

Let us talk about socio-environmental conflicts. How do they occur?

They are disputes with social components where ecological or territorial demands are very relevant. They include, for example, protests by local communities against mining or oil projects. Citizen reactions that incorporate environmental and territorial issues have a long history.

I am reminded, for example, of the first mass indigenous march in Bolivia that had territory and dignity as its slogan, and that took place in 1990. The social, environmental and territorial ingredients were present in that mobilisation. However, these components were already present in historical accounts of conflicts against mining at the beginning of the 20th century.

What differentiates the concept of territory for indigenous peoples from how it is understood by traditional common sense? How is this expressed in practice?

Territory is a social construction. It is defined by the experiences, histories or religiosities, for example, of peasant communities or indigenous peoples. What we find listening to, accompanying or participating in some conflicts is the defence of a geographical space considered one's own. This condition is called territory. Therefore, space or geography are not synonymous with territory; in the same region, there can be multiple, even overlapping, territories.

Are all socio-environmental conflicts similar?

The important thing about accompanying and listening to local communities is that it becomes evident that there are many types of conflicts. Among the most visible are those that are a reaction to threats to health, environmental integrity or the usurpation of territories considered to be their own. This is where the common protests against mining and oil companies are rooted.

But there are also conflicts where what is in dispute is compensation in money or infrastructure works, such as a local health post or a school building. There is no fixed opposition to the arrival of, say, a mining company, but the fight is about getting part of the economic benefit.

At the same time, some conflicts work in the opposite direction. These mobilisations call for the arrival of such projects, arguing that they will bring investment and employment. This leads to very complicated situations where there are disputes between different groups in a community, with some in favour and others against such ventures.

What is the relationship, in general, between socio-environmental conflicts and national political action?

Many conflicts have intimate associations with the problems, and especially the miseries, of conventional politics. A good number of them erupt as a consequence of decisions, actions or inactions in public policies taken by states, such as concessions granted to mining or oil companies. In other cases, there is an absent state complicit in

What happens in many countries is that the capital city grants concessions in areas that the technicians seem to think are empty

failing to control and monitor the effects of intensive agriculture. Many of these disputes are associated with corruption and increasing levels of violence, with politics playing a multifaceted role in these ills. Extreme cases can

be found in the murder of human rights or environmental defenders in different countries, with the most serious situations in Brazil and Colombia, for example.

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What exactly is happening?

What happens in many countries is that the capital city grants mining or oil concessions or permits for agricultural expansion in areas that the technicians seem to think are empty, that do not belong to anyone, or that, although they know they are occupied, they do not consider relevant to local groups. Thus, an indigenous community's territory suddenly falls within an oil polygon, and before long, soldiers, workers and technicians arrive to invade their land. This inevitably leads to conflict.

How do we recognise the colonial heritage in these situations?

The colonial heritage is present in many ways. Conventional politics has a clear colonial heritage, especially its repeated Iberian American bias towards caudillismo. But at the same time, economic conditions are also immersed in a subordination that is very much colonial. This is very evident in extractivism, as it involves massive extractions of natural resources that are exported to global markets, repeating a centuries-old international insertion based on raw materials. It currently explains a good part of the most acute environmental conflicts on the continent, which are associated with the appropriation of natural resources for export. It is as if the colonial linkage were still in place but dressed in other clothes, and instead of being directed by kings and viceroys, it is now decided on the stock exchanges.

And what is the relationship between globalisation and socio-environmental conflicts?

Globalisation determines a relationship in which the Iberian American region plays a subordinate role. The prices of natural goods are determined in the financial centres, as is the case with the price of minerals in London or agrifoods in Chicago. If the value of copper or soya rises, then all countries start looking for copper or planting soya. Global conditions are so powerful that they determine national development strategies.

And what is the level or intensity of these natural resource export flows?

The volume of natural resource extraction is brutal. I think that the level of this depredation of nature is going unnoticed. In the 1960s, over 200 million tonnes of natural resources were exported, such as minerals, hydrocarbons, agricultural products, forestry, etc. In the mid-2010s, exports were in the order of 700 million tonnes. In other words, it has more than tripled, which means that every corner of the continent faces problems with these extractivisms.

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The pace, intensity and volume of appropriation of nature is dizzying. It is not surprising, therefore, that conflicts and resistance to this advance are multiplying. In this way, the global conditions that determine trade and prices influence these outbursts.

And how can we identify/recognise the pressure of these foreign interests in the development of socio-environmental conflicts?

In some sectors, foreign interests are decisive, for example, from the performance of large mining corporations or from the investment funds of global capitalism that invest their money in all kinds of projects in our continent.

But it must be clear that the situation has changed a lot. In the 1960s, the main export destinations for Iberian American raw materials were the United States, Canada and Western European countries. In recent years, the

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China absorbs more than three times the resources exported to the European Union

destination has been mainly China and other Asian nations. Moreover, these flows to North America have been drastically reduced, with China absorbing more than three times the resources exported to the European Union. In many cases, the pressure on our territories and resources is increasingly dependent on the decisions of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing.

What role do national economic actors play there?

What the Iberian American experience shows, and what is becoming quite evident in the continent, but less so in other regions, is that the ownership of natural resources or of the companies that extract and commercialise them does not condition or ensure that mandates of social and ecological justice will be fulfilled.

In addition to foreign interests, domestic actors operate in the same way. We have the cases of well-known mining companies with national capital, Bolivian mining cooperatives that even present themselves as revolutionary, and tens of thousands of farmers thrown into intensive agriculture based on agrochemicals. All of them are behind many socio-environmental conflicts. And we cannot disguise the case of state-owned oil companies, which also have social and environmental impacts of all kinds.

Can we relate recent social conflicts and popular mobilisation in Chile, Colombia, Peru and other Iberian American countries to socio-environmental conflicts?

These disputes have some aspects in common but are very different from each other. Each case shows that the national situations are different, and although there are recurring factors, there are also particularities specific to each country.

In the case of Chile, there was a generalised citizen outburst, which multiplied in several cities, expressing weariness with politics and the institutional regime in that country.

On the other hand, Ecuador had uprisings led by indigenous organisations, fuelled by mobilisations from rural communities and support from some popular urban sectors. Demands against mining, for example, were present, but this issue did not lead to these mobilisations.

Were socio-environmental conflicts not perceived?

Yes, of course, they are present. Reactions continue to multiply in defence of territories and demand to ensure the quality of life and the conservation of nature everywhere. The number of conflicts continues to increase, and in several cases, they manage to stop some very harmful projects, and this, in turn, becomes an example for another community in another region or country, which also decides to mobilise.

Is it how states deal with these conflicts that you refer to when speaking of necropolitics?

This acceptance explains why repulsive characters like Bolsonaro could win a government. It is the same thing happening now in Peru, where a succession of deaths and repression sustains a presidency and a congress

In my view, we are entering a time of necropolitics. I borrow this term from the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe to support a reflection that makes it evident that death is being accepted. It is tolerated that people die or languish in an eternal condition of the living dead in poverty and exclusion, it is tolerated that criminal



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gangs and hired killers are tolerated, and it is tolerated that forests are cut down, and water is polluted. This acceptance explains why repulsive characters like Jair Bolsonaro could win a government. It is the same thing happening now in Peru, where a succession of deaths and repression sustains a presidency and a congress. This letting die was consolidated during the prolonged pandemic crisis. Necropolitics is letting die to keep alive a predatory type of economy.

The conflicts that erupt in resistance to extractivism are one of the fronts of opposition to this indifference to death, and at the same time, they are the ones that feed the flames of alternatives turned towards life.

In a more political sense, how are we to pose local, regional and ultimately global alternatives to the threats to nature?

Incredible innovations have emerged, especially from South America. Recognizing the rights of nature is a substantial advance, especially under the formulation achieved in Ecuador. This framework makes it possible to take the traditions of indigenous peoples, as well as the critical positions of Western knowledge, and articulate them to recognize non-humans with their values.

The same happened with the Buen Vivir platform in its original meaning since it is a critical construction in the face of conventional development but which launches alternatives that are both post-capitalist and post-socialist at the same time. These and other positions achieved extraordinary vigour and were even formalized in the Ecuadorian constitution. This demand is compelling in Iberian America.

How did this translate into public policy?

Many of these ideas were used to propose new public policies. When it was understood that Nature's rights meant that new oil exploitation in the Amazon could not be approved given its impacts on biodiversity, soils and water, this immediately generated challenges for public policy. The immediate question is how to design a post-oil transition away from hydrocarbons.

It is from these concerns that the so-called post-extractivist transitions were designed. They could be described as

If local communities were informed and consulted, then most of the current extractivist projects would not be approved

action plans, with measures ranging from new regulations to changes in taxation, that would be applied if we were in charge of a government that proposes to move towards Buen Vivir. The South American experience, with all its achievements but also

its defeats, allows for the construction of real government and action plans, very sophisticated on several fronts.

What is the balance? What is the horizon of these alternatives?

The current pace and intensity of natural resource appropriation can only be sustained with increasing levels of violence and under conditions of poverty. If there were adequate social and environmental assessments if local communities were informed and consulted, then most of the current extractivist projects would not be approved.

But local conflicts are multiplying, and in the meantime, the majorities, who are in the cities, seem to have naturalised the destruction of nature, the marginalisation of indigenous peoples and the marginalisation of peasants. What I mean is that there are many reactions and protests, but they are still insufficient because

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For certain sensibilities and positions, it is understood that there are also subjects in life that are not human

governments and politics persist in the same strategies, and they do so because they have important bases of citizen support.

In this context, what do we understand by the rights of Nature?

Human beings are assumed as subjects and, as such, are recognised as having rights. This is the determining condition for the rights of people in their contemporary uses.

For certain sensibilities and positions, it is understood that there are also subjects in life that are not human. Once this condition is understood, rights must automatically be recognised.

This was discussed in the constituent process in Ecuador, which ended with the recognition of the rights of Nature. The new Constitution recognises them in this way and places as a subject the collectives where life is based, such as a species. This is also important because it serves as a reminder that the rights of Nature are not the same as the so-called rights of animals, nor do they impose an untouched environment where nothing can be cultivated or extracted. These rights allow Nature to be exploited as long as its survival is ensured.

Parallel to Nature's rights are the rights of humans, including those that involve ensuring environmental health and quality.

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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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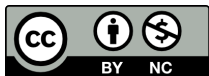


❖ **Eduardo Gudynas** is one of the leading figures in environmentalist thought in Iberian America. He is a researcher at the Latin American Centre for Social Ecology (CLAES) and the author of many books on environment and development; his texts on extractivism and the rights of nature have been widely published.

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