

Explorations | Exploraciones

Green colonialism in Latin America? Towards a new research agenda for the global energy transition

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Abstract

Drawing on various empirical examples (e.g. lithium, green hydrogen, REDD+), several studies point out that the global energy transition continues to be based on the geographic externalization of labour, natural resources, and sinks. The energy transition thus increases the pressure on natural resources in Latin America and reproduces the continent's position as the world's raw material supplier. This is increasingly referred to as 'green colonialism' by (scholar) activists. Moving past a merely provocative catchphrase, in this paper, I discuss the analytical implications and value of the term green colonialism for normative political-ecological research. In so doing, it becomes evident that the coloniality of the energy transition has to be understood as a political-epistemological project. This is of particular relevance for Latin America. Embedded in the hegemonic Euro-North American-centered modernity, the energy transition advances techno-optimist solutions and reproduces patterns of thought, knowledge and action. However, it soon becomes evident that the geographies of decarbonization are significantly more complex and shaped by multiple actors, policies, and strategies. Therefore, further research is needed on the geopolitics and geopolitical economy of the energy transition, going beyond the North-South dichotomy. *Keywords:* green colonialism, energy transition, green extractivism, Latin America.

Resumen: ¿Colonialismo verde en Latinoamérica? Hacia una nueva agenda de investigación para la transición energética mundial

A partir de diversos ejemplos empíricos (litio, hidrógeno verde, REDD+), varios estudios señalan que la transición energética global sigue basándose en la externalización geográfica de mano de obra, recursos naturales y sumideros. La transición energética aumenta así la presión sobre los recursos naturales en Latinoamérica y reproduce la posición del continente como proveedor mundial de materias primas. Los activistas (académicos) se refieren cada vez más a este fenómeno como "colonialismo verde". Más allá de un eslogan meramente provocador, en este artículo discuto las implicaciones analíticas y el valor del término colonialismo verde para la investigación político-ecológica normativa. Al hacerlo, se hace evidente que la colonialidad de la transición energética debe entenderse como un proyecto político-epistemológico. Esto es de particular relevancia para Latinoamérica. Inserta en la mo-

derinidad hegemónica euro-norteamericana, la transición energética avanza soluciones tecno-optimistas y reproduce patrones de pensamiento, conocimiento y acción. Sin embargo, pronto se hace evidente que las geografías de la descarbonización son significativamente más complejas y están conformadas por múltiples actores, políticas y estrategias. Por lo tanto, es necesario seguir investigando sobre la geopolítica y la economía geopolítica de la transición energética, más allá de la dicotomía norte-sur. *Palabras clave:* colonialismo verde, transición energética, extractivismo verde, Latinoamérica.

Introduction

Today, discussions about a climate-neutral society are more relevant than ever. With climate change no longer being an abstract dystopia looming on the horizon in the distant future, and with the current energy crisis resulting from the geopolitical situation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, efforts for alternatives to the fossil economy gain further relevance. In this context, in Western industrialized countries, the American Green New Deal and the European Green Deal attempt to overcome the ecological crisis and achieve the transition to a climate-neutral society. The decarbonization goals focus on an expansion of renewable energies, investments in hydrogen, and the promotion of electromobility. These programs are ecological modernization packages that are elements of a green economy. Based on the decoupling thesis, the latter aims to reconcile ecology and economy without lowering the current level of material prosperity. At its core, it is all about green growth, with the central narrative being that technological innovations are a prerequisite for decoupling economic growth from energy and resource consumption (Dorn et al., 2022).

Approaches to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions are hence mostly technological in nature. However, increasing investment in technological solutions such as electromobility is also accompanied by a growing demand for certain strategic raw materials, resulting in a new 'green' resource frontier in many places, including Latin America. Particularly in the case of lithium mining in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile, several studies have recently analyzed and documented the associated pressures on land, ecosystems, livelihood, and lifestyles (Dorn & Gundermann, 2022; Forget & Bos, 2022). On the one hand, embedding commodities in a discourse of climate policy imperative raises questions for resource governance. On the other hand, the bulk of raw materials for the corporate energy transition agenda are concentrated in countries of the Global South (Church & Crawford, 2020). This threatens to reproduce and exacerbate already existing North-South relations and social-environmental inequalities.

In recent years, the associated new environmental conflicts have already received considerable attention in (Latin American) political ecology. Most recently, several authors even highlighted the coloniality of a technocratic corporate energy transition (Bertinat & Argento, 2022; Svampa, 2022) and the nexus between climate discourses and colonial structures. Specifically, the term green or climate colonialism came up throughout recently published ac-

tivist and science-activist-oriented journals and conference presentations. Closely linked to the concept of green extractivism, this provocative term seeks to illustrate that the energy transition is still based on the commodification of nature, the externalization of environmental costs and risks, and certain patterns of thought and action. In this exploratory paper, I will discuss the analytical value of the term green colonialism, its relevance for Latin America, its limitations and its implications for a new research agenda on the energy transition in more detail.

Resources for the energy transition

It is important to note that a ‘green’ energy system is fundamentally different from a fossil-fuel-based energy system. In the very first sentence of its recent *Special Report on The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions*, the International Energy Agency (2022, p. 5) acknowledges that the construction of photovoltaic plants, wind farms and electric vehicles “generally requires more minerals than their fossil fuel-based counterparts”. This means that the growing demand for renewable energy also implies an increasing demand for certain raw materials. In this context, particularly cobalt, lithium and rare earth receive considerable attention from the media and science. While base metals such as nickel and copper are not exclusively needed for green energy technologies, they also play a fundamental role in green technologies. Although technological innovation and the development of substitutes cause continuous changes regarding resource demand, the International Energy Agency (2022) expects a significant increase in these resources in the context of a transition to a renewable energy system. In this context, Church and Crawford (2020) show that numerous strategic raw materials can be found primarily in countries of the Global South. On the one hand, this leads to a new geopolitical conjuncture. On the other hand, it poses new challenges for debates on environmental justice as the relevant raw materials come particularly from countries that have historically contributed little to climate change. Next to lithium, the increasing demand for copper, bauxite, graphite, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, selenium, silver, tellurium, tin and zinc, make the issue an urgent matter for Latin America.

Green extractivism in Latin America

Extractivism is both an economic activity and, for Latin America, a historically present development model (Alimonda, 2011). In general terms, extractivism refers to the appropriation of natural resources to export them. Gudynas (2015) refines this definition by referring to the high intensity of resource extraction, the high concentration of value chains, the exportation in unprocessed form or with minimal processing, the accompanying environmental degradation, and the deterioration of working conditions. The Latin American debate in the past

decade has revolved primarily around neo-extractivism, whereby a series of progressive governments that emerged in the 2000s used resource extraction to fund social redistribution programs. As a result, extractivism gained legitimacy as a development model, while at the same time social-ecological conflicts deepened in many places (Acosta, 2012; Burchardt & Dietz, 2014; Svampa & Viale, 2014; Gudynas, 2015; Arsel et al., 2016).

Following on from the developments outlined above, the energy transition currently advanced in the Global North and worldwide is directly related to the increasing demand for certain strategic raw materials. This results in specific socio-territorial constellations in areas of resource extraction such as Argentina, Bolivia or Chile (Puente & Argento, 2015; Dorn & Gundermann, 2022; Lorca et al., 2022). However, the particular dynamics of commodity extraction always arise in interplay with national and regional ‘development and modernization’ policies. With regard to global decarbonization goals, Latin American policymakers increasingly deploy green arguments to legitimize extractive activities. Using the example of lithium mining, studies show how mining is no longer presented as being compatible with climate change, but is framed as necessary to address it (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2021; Dorn et al., 2022). For example, throughout different spatial scales, the ‘resource of the future’ lithium is discursively linked to new technologies, renewable energies, battery production, internet access for indigenous communities, or the everyday use of the smartphone.

We can observe a similar trend regarding the production of green hydrogen. In the context of Europe’s current energy policy challenges, green hydrogen is experiencing a boom and is promoted by numerous Latin American countries, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico. Arguments of climate change, renewable energy production and avant-gardism obscure the fact that green hydrogen is primarily targeted at the export market. The storage of wind and solar energy is a prerequisite for the production of green hydrogen. Studies point out that wind energy requires significantly more land than e.g. coal energy, making the energy transition not only more raw material, but also more land-intensive. The same applies to the production of green hydrogen, whereby the construction of large-scale infrastructures for the production of wind and solar energy in many places leads to conflicts over access to and use of land and ecosystems (Dunlap & Arce, 2021; Kalt & Tunn, 2022).

Furthermore, Dorn et al. (2022) use examples of soybean cultivation in Argentina to show how agriculture production is discursively linked to climate issues and renewable energy production. In the case of soybean cultivation, a discourse of ecological modernization additionally aims at increasing productivity. Thus, the processing of agricultural products into agrofuels, and eco-efficient technological innovations such as precision agriculture, digital agriculture, and climate-smart agriculture, are expected not only to contribute to climate protection, but also to overcome the sector’s accumulation crisis. These are examples for extractivist activities that are discursively legitimized for the

purpose of the energy transition, and are being discussed under the term ‘green extractivism’ (Riofrancos, 2019; Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020; Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2021; Bruna, 2022; Dorn et al., 2022). Moving past classical development paradigms of progress and prosperity, arguments of climate change and sustainability add a layer of legitimacy to extractivism beyond neo-extractivism and arguments of social redistribution. In other words, those who oppose mega-development projects today are not ‘only’ opposing social plans, but also climate protection. This discursive reframing politically adapts a development model to current debates and aims to impede a certain resistance.

From imperial mode of living to green colonialism?

The energy transition is essentially based on an expansion of extractivist activities.¹ Moreover, several studies already indicate that the energy transition has neither changed conditions of extraction nor the situation for the local population. In Latin America, this results in a further consolidation and deepening of social-ecological inequalities. In this region, conflicts related to commodity extraction already increased between 2000 and 2012 due to rising global demand and high commodity prices. It is not unusual for individual projects to be associated with allegations of forced displacement, murder, and sexual violence (see for example Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022, see also EJAtlas), so that the violent suppression of (often indigenous) protest actions against mining activities is linked to colonial patterns.

The current increase in environmental conflicts in the exploitation of strategic raw materials illustrates that the premise of externalization continues as a crucial part of the current energy transition. One could now link this to the concept of the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2017). Brand and Wissen define the core idea of the concept stating that “everyday life in the capitalist centres is essentially made possible by shaping social relations and nature-society relations elsewhere, i.e. by means of (in principle) unlimited access to labour power, natural resources and sinks (...)” (2017, p. 43, translated by the authors). It could be concluded that the energy transition continues to be based on the imperial mode of living.

But what relevance does the term colonialism have here? After the end of the colonial world order and efforts of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, neo-colonialism appeared as a new relationship between states and companies from countries of the Global North and countries of the Global South. In Latin America, beginning in the 1960s, issues of underdevelopment were discussed under the umbrella of dependency theory (Furtado, 1964; Gunder Frank, 1965; Galeano, 2015[1971]), criticizing the asymmetrical relations between a powerful ‘centre’ (industrialized countries) and a weak ‘periphery’ (developing countries) that were already established in the colonial era. They emphasize that ‘underdevelopment’ is not merely a phase preceding ‘development’, but rather its product, and to a large extent the result of colonialism and

imperialism. Building on this body of literature, work on maldevelopment has shown how the idea of development ultimately leads to (very few) internationalized winners and (many) local losers (Tortosa, 2011; Svampa & Viale, 2014). Tortosa (2011) thus concludes that *Mal Vivir* (in contrast to the idea of *Buen Vivir*) emerges as a direct consequence of the current structures of the world system.

In these debates, the concept of neocolonialism is omnipresent. The central element of neocolonialism is the economic and political control of a state from the outside, despite formal sovereignty. In addition to the historical colonial powers, multinational corporations are now also considered dominant actors. Key instruments of neocolonialism include global debt and financial dependence on financial transfers from the Global North, monopolistic trade structures, foreign control of exchange rate policies, ownership of multinational corporations, and imbalances in key institutions of global economic governance (especially the IMF, World Bank, WHO) (Ziai, 2020). However, the traditional North-South dichotomy no longer seems pertinent. In particular, in the energy and agricultural sectors, there are many elements of neocolonialism in Chinese investment policies in African and Latin American countries. Under these circumstances, foreign investment would not close the gap between rich and poor states, but rather widen it. The central assertions of neocolonialism are reflected in the theories of unequal exchange and ecologically unequal exchange (see Hornborg & Martínez-Alier, 2016).

In more recent debates, also the concept of coloniality has regained momentum. It is broader in scope and examines the power structures resulting from colonialism and their economic and political, but also cultural and psychological effects (Lander, 2005). The notion of coloniality goes beyond economic dependency and global externalization and exploitation structures to highlight the multiple entanglements between a racist, sexist, patriarchal, capitalist, military, Christian-centered, imperial and colonial modernity (Grosfoguel, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The coloniality concept seems particularly relevant to understand the corporate energy transition. The answer to the Anthropocene, it is argued, is the right market-based management strategies to keep emissions below 350 ppm. Erickson (2020) argues that, while avoiding questions of what the path forward actually is, these management strategies are often presented as non-political. This conceals and downplays basic assumptions of decarbonization strategies: Green New Deals continue to be embedded in the current dominant world order, i.e. “contemporary colonial relations of injustice, which remain premised on assumptions of race and social difference” (Zografos, 2022, p. 38). The question, then, is not whether the currently propagated energy transition is colonial, but rather how a decolonial Green New Deal can be designed.

Concluding remarks

In summary, we can identify several colonial elements in today's climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, i.e. the energy transition. Under the umbrella of 'sustainable development' and an urgent need to 'save the planet', we can observe that a) the institutional bias between poor and rich states today also permeates international climate policy; moreover, b) current climate change policies are primarily an 'escape forward' (see Cáceres & Gras, 2020) and thus a conservative accumulation strategy that reproduces and deepens existing power relations; finally, supposedly for the good of 'all humanity', c) climate-related discourses are used to justify socio-ecologically destructive structures of exploitation. So far, climate change seems to be seen primarily as a new business and growth opportunity (see also Vergara-Camus, 2021). New business fields such as carbon offset trading, nuclear energy, green finance, sustainable entrepreneurship, renewable energy, electromobility, carbon capture, and geoengineering underline how capitalism is understood less as a problem than as a solution to climate change. Thus, dominant interest groups promote the idea that all major problems facing humanity can be solved with technological approaches, preferring short-term technical over long-term structural solutions. With the narrow focus on the variable of CO₂-emissions to address the multiple crisis dimensions of the Anthropocene, current policies to combat climate change often rely on a further commodification of climate change commodities. In many Latin American countries, this results in changes in access to land, forests, and water, and the acceptance of environmental degradation and water consumption in the name of climate change mitigation.

It, therefore, seems important to ask whether the decarbonization of our economic model is still based on a colonial present. Do the mentioned experiences of the implications of the energy transition from Latin America indicate that the Western worldview is rather extended, instead of being disrupted? I argue that the current energy transition is rather (neo-)colonial, in the sense that it perpetuates a hegemonic epistemology. The notion of climate or green colonialism bears the potential to disenchant (false) solutions and to push power asymmetries, and existing North-South and dependency relations onto the agenda. The outlined nexus between energy transition and green extractivism illustrates the inequalities, conflicts, violence, and vulnerability associated with partial and false solutions. It draws attention to the urgency of a decolonial turn that aims at different ways of thinking, knowing and acting.

At the same time, merely 'labelling' the energy transition as colonial lacks an important analytical foundation. The shift to renewable energy is far from limited to the countries of the Global North. In 2017, for example, China alone accounted for nearly half of renewable energy investment. In addition to the traditional 'big four' lithium companies (Albemarle, FMC, Tianqui Lithium, SQM), the lithium market today is primarily shaped and dominated by the entry of new Asian players (Bridge & Faigen, 2022). Thus, green colonialism and

the reproduction of North-South relations are only one side of the coin. For Latin America in particular, the role of China is playing an increasingly important role. In parallel, the European Union is pushing for the ‘onshoring’ of critical raw materials, promoting lithium mining in countries such as Portugal and Spain, among others (Dorn, 2021). For greater analytical insights regarding the global energy transition, we thus need future relational research that provides a better understanding of the multitude of actors, policies, and strategies involved. At the same time, exposing epistemologies in dominant approaches to solve climate change raises the question of more far-reaching analytical insights into the functioning of hegemony in the twenty-first century. To address this, I propose linking (Gramscian) political ecology and green extractivism in a future research agenda. This link could be fruitful to gain further insights into current forms of consent and domination, ‘common sense’ in environmental politics, and understanding counter-hegemonic discourses of affected communities to guide alternative and just climate action.

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Notes

- 1 As overall energy levels keep increasing and renewable energy production is added to current fossil fuel based energy production, Hickel (2020) notes that the energy transition is mostly an energy addition.

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