

“Don’t Look Up”: Political Ecology and the Denials of Environmental Governance

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Political ecology, the encounter between the tradition of Latin American critical thought and the vast experiences and strategies of grassroots communities and Indigenous peoples in the face of plunder and despoliation, questions the established order and the institutions of this order. The study of power relations, crossing the socio-environmental field, has emerged in Latin America as a central interdisciplinary field for thinking about society/environment relations. Latin American critical thinking, which had as a reference a productivist vision of development and modernity, has opened up to the vast plurality of popular movements in search of autonomy and enhancement of rights, and to the unique and constitutive relationship that communities have with their local natures and territories. It implies a critical look at the rationality of state forms and their forms of internal colonialism; primitive accumulation; forms of subordination of the working class around the mining, extraction, and plantation economy; and at the appropriation of agrobiodiversity and ancestral knowledge by the “knowledge society.” How do contestations between knowledge systems and ways of being in the world come together with questions of environmental justice and injustice, class, race, and social costs to future generations when industrial production, infrastructure, and consumption destroy the very basis of urban and rural livelihoods: water, forests, and biodiversity? How does political ecology integrate the challenges posed by the new rivalry in the global economy?

A lineage of critical thinkers has forged political ecology in Latin America, from Mariátegui’s (1971) Latin American Marxism, intended to root socialism in the traditions of Indigenous peoples, including restoration of their community life and productive organization, to the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970) and the eco-pedagogy of Leonardo Boff (1997) (Leff 2015, 46). Eduardo Galeano (1971) recounted in *The Open Veins of Latin America* the history of exploitative colonialism. He brought to light the production of poverty generated through exploitation of the earth’s wealth, “with feverish extraction of gold and silver over centuries, so rapacious that it had seemingly exhausted the hitherto abundant supply of metals in the crust of Latin American territories” (Bryant 2015, 45), while oppressing and displacing traditionally resident populations. This exploitative form of capitalism has a recent and fiercely contested reinstatement in the technologically advanced mineral and oil extraction enterprises in the region (Alimonda 2015). The extractive economies are buttressed by a multitude of international and bilateral trade and investment treaties. If they don’t want to end up in front of dispute-settlement bodies that are beyond national jurisdiction, progressive governments are obliged to tone down environmental measures that would have restrained international mining operations. Likewise, poverty that was produced in the old agricultural latifundia (large agricultural estates)—for example, rubber in Brazil, sugarcane in Cuba, bananas in Ecuador and Colombia—reappears today with land grabbing as well as with new transgenic crops, biofuels, and other so-called ecological forms of capitalism (Bryant 2015).

The recurring focus in political ecology is on unequal power relations—between rich and poor, North and South, men and women—and owes much to dependency literature (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Robbins 2012) challenging mainstream thinking about environmental crises as a product of a Third World population “bomb” or the “tragedy of the commons” (e.g., Ehrlich 1968; Hardin 1968). Latin American political ecology has nurtured the continent’s turn to the political left experienced during the 2000s, motivating a series of internal debates and rearrangements, which arise from a problematic relationship with “progressive” governments and their economic policies. Whether in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, or Brazil, political ecologists were supporting left-wing movements, and now confront the revival of extractivism implemented by governments, some of which were initially elected for their critical view of this development model (see the preceding *LASA Forum* 52, no. 4). The return of extractive or neo-extractive economies, radical opposition to some Latin American governments, and increasing criminalization of activists challenges political ecology. It is not easy to assess the effects of this divorce between an intellectual movement that saw the environmental question as key to a renewal of politics in the region (Foyer and Dumoulin 2013), and governments that quickly relegated these allies, useful for the initial conquest of power, to the rank of an embarrassment, accused of making the bed of the enemy by pointing out the environmental contradictions of “progressivism.”

This issue of the *LASA Forum* brings together perspectives from the recent political ecology of and strategic developments in five Latin American countries: Brazil, Nicaragua, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. The focus is on the mechanisms of governance in the face of increasing internal contestation and ambivalent global connections that continue to extract while calling for compliance with international environmental and climate conventions. It highlights the irrationalities of current economic policies justifying business as usual through denial, lies, and the legalization of illegal practices. Current “bipolar transitions” (Bonelli,

Weinberg, and Ampuero, this issue) continue the mania of capitalist extraction and confront climate change with more production, more cars, more energy consumption, and more economic growth, meanwhile destroying the environment, depleting precious water resources, and closing the horizon for future life on Earth.

Susanna Hecht’s article discusses the current accelerated deforestation of Amazonia, which has become a net emitter of CO₂ due to tremendous forest fires, menacing the climate and in particular the rainfall in the entire Southern Cone and presaging a Southern Cone dust bowl in the decades to come. “Amazonia is not just a key element in the global carbon system but also functions as a kind of land-to-atmosphere water pump, the source of South America’s atmospheric rivers.” Hecht shows how the destruction of this ecosystem can perversely become a source of revenue as Amazonia is held hostage in climate negotiations waiting to be “ransomed” by climate funding for reducing deforestation. The reaction of the Bolsonaro government was to stage a “let’s pretend moment” at the climate conference in Glasgow in 2021 promising to abolish illegal logging. As his government reclassifies protected areas, illegal logging becomes legal and achieves “a tremendous, planetarily horrible paradox: the decline of illegality even as deforestation soars.”

Deforestation has also accelerated in Nicaragua under the successive Ortega governments. Since 2007, illegal logging has been systematic on the Atlantic Coast, where most of the primary forest cover has now given way to pastures and recently oil palm plantations. While in the 1980s, half of the country was covered in forests, the agricultural frontier has reached the Atlantic Ocean. The former liberation fighter Daniel Ortega has literally opened the veins of the country offering a concession to a Chinese company to build a canal across the country that would have sacrificed the biggest freshwater lake in Central America. Although the canal project proved unfeasible and seems to have been abandoned, Law 840 has not been abrogated and still surrenders part of the national sovereignty to the Chinese company (Baltodano 2020; Müller 2019). Birgit Schmook, Claudia Radel, and Lindsey

Carte's essay demonstrates how the surge in mining concessions for foreign companies and the accelerated extraction and deforestation impoverishes the population and leads to emigration and a heightened dependency on remittances. The strong, organized opposition in Nicaragua has remained most of the time under the radar of international attention. In 2018, the fire in the last intact biosphere reserve, Indio Maíz, and expropriations in the canal zone sparked protests that converged with several months of protests against social security reform and for political freedom (OACNUDH 2018). More than five hundred protestors were killed, opposition leaders were incarcerated, and Ortega was confirmed in power after he rigged the elections in 2021 (Baltodano 2021). Ortega's promise of catapulting the country into the range of "developed" nations has turned into a nightmare.

Broken promises also motivated the Second March of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia in 2021 against the extractive policies of the successive "Indigenous" and "progressive" governments of Evo Morales Ayma (2006–2019), Jeanine Áñez Chávez (2019–2020), and Luis Arce Catacora (2020–). As Derrick Hindery, José Antonio Martínez Montaña, and Zulma Villegas Gomez show in "¿Qué se pierde cuando se pierde el bosque?," to fulfill the promise of nationalizing natural resources, the Bolivian state bought up the shares of foreign companies in a "hostile takeover" but then proceeded to act itself like a corporation continuing to extract. Direct victims of this policy were the forests that Indigenous peoples depend on for their livelihoods and whose biological diversity is the source of their knowledge and cultural diversity. But the consequences of deforestation are much larger. Similar to Amazonia, deforestation in Bolivia causes climate disruption elsewhere. Cities become hotter and drier, water cycles are disrupted, less carbon is sequestered, and less oxygen is produced. Paralleling climate chaos elsewhere in the tropics, torrential rains and floods cause runoff and erosion. Abnormal periods of intense cold, hail in Andean valleys, and hurricane-force winds are increasingly common. The authors argue that protecting Bolivia's forest should thus be a

concern for all beyond national boundaries. "In an interrelated world marked by climate catastrophe and devastating biodiversity loss, protecting the rights of Bolivia's indigenous peoples and the forests where they live is a vital step in safeguarding the well-being of the planet."

Why is this not happening? What makes corporations or entrepreneurs and governments continue business as usual and ignore the urgency of climate change, toxic pollution and freshwater loss? A hint is provided by the economic rationale of medium-sized Argentinian soy farmers, which Pablo Lapegna and Johana Kunin analyze in "Rethinking Environmental Polarization and Pesticide Use in Argentina." Embedded in rural communities and considered the local elite, these farmers are supported in their belief that there are few alternatives to cultivating soy and using pesticides by the state policies of neoliberal and neo-developmental governments, encouraged by transnational companies and pressured by international financial institutions. The farmers that Lapegna and Kunin study make moral sense of the universe of agrochemical-based agriculture by expressing doubts about the risks of agrochemical exposure using their own bodies as evidence of the nonexistence of danger. They claim that they "cannot produce without pesticides." Agrochemicals are thought of as a "positive and morally charged solution" to world hunger, a means to "feed the world" and meet global population growth, and a way to combat climate change by using herbicides instead of ploughing the soil.

These convictions are systematically reinforced by transnational companies that create chains of financial and personal dependencies that reach from the global to the local level (Skill and Grinberg 2014). Four corporations, ADM (Archer-Daniels-Midland), Bunge, Cargill, and Dreyfus control the global grain market. Abstract and intimidating on the global scale, they rely nevertheless at the local level on relations of proximity, trust, and reciprocity that their employees establish with the producers, including through family links and friendships (Wesz 2016). Chemical corporations such as

Bayer Crop Science and Syngenta, bought by ChemChina, bank on sophisticated promotion strategies which involve the local farmers and offer them complete legitimating discourses for their agricultural practices (Bayer Crop Science 2021; Müller 2021). Farmers, bureaucrats, and corporate actors can thus render invisible the evidence of toxic exposure by refusing to observe and understand the material consequences of the economic and technological system they operate in. Denial dissipates the traces and invisible effects of the catastrophe (Müller and Naepels 2021). It is a powerful weapon that allows normalization of a toxic situation in a seemingly rational way while producing what Donna Haraway, following Hannah Arendt, calls “a deep surrender” to the “evil of thoughtlessness.” It is an inability to “track the lines of living and dying” (Haraway 2016, 36).

The ecological rationale of the world economy still set on growth seems to be in the thralls of irrationality and wishful thinking which borders on delusion or mental illness. In “El litio, un (des) estabilizador de transiciones bipolares,” Cristóbal Bonelli, Marina Weinberg, and Pablo Ampuero diagnose a bipolar world disorder, an oscillation between mania in the centers of capitalism and depression in the centers of extraction. Even within the same country, Chile, these manic and depressive moods coexist, steeped in geopolitical dynamics. Mania overestimates the power of the subject and loses touch with reality, whereas depression makes subjects unable to act. The dream of the “Eden of carbon neutrality” in the rich countries is founded on the extraction of lithium in the deserts of Chile, where every ounce of lithium extracted consumes and contaminates phenomenal amounts of fresh water. The global processes of carbon reduction and energy accumulation irrupt thus locally to destroy any perspective for a livable future where there is no water left. With the concept of “bipolar transitions,” building on a mental health terminology, the authors develop a diagnosis *about* capitalism without offering ready-made

solutions that might lead *beyond* capitalism. This is particularly important as the situation in Chile cannot be understood without considering geopolitical dynamics including, for instance, the investment of Chinese capital and labor. The diagnosis then allows envisaging the possibility of an experimental and always open “cure.”

As I write in December 2021, a new government has been elected in Chile on the promise of an economic revival, the beginning of a “process of economic transition towards a new development model that overcomes the excessive focus on GDP growth and prioritizes the well-being of society and the sustainability of life” (Boric 2021a, 58). The incoming president, Gabriel Boric, wants to create a national lithium company that will develop a new national industry for this strategic resource, adding value to production and insuring the participation of the local communities affected by extraction. However, the electoral program also announces that his government will not unilaterally leave *any* trade and investment treaty. His intention is to update the investment chapters of the multiple trade and investment agreements that Chile is part of, pull out from investor-state settlement procedures, and ensure that new foreign investments generate linkages with the local productive fabric (Boric 2021b, 95). It remains to be seen at what cost the new government could succeed in renegotiating investor-state settlement clauses that previous governments have signed, and that are extremely favorable to the corporations of countries wanting to mine Chilean resources. In the race to accelerate extraction before losing power, the outgoing government of Sebastián Piñera opened competitive tenders for the national and international public to “boost” the lithium market through exploration, exploitation, and commercialization of new lithium deposits that would commit the new government.¹ In addition, new constraining environmental measures that would restrict mining and water use are likely

¹ “Se reactiva polémica por licitación del litio: Giorgio Jackson llama al Gobierno a posponer proceso ‘para un debido análisis,’” *El Mostrador*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.elmostrador.cl/mercados/2021/12/31/se-reactiva-polemica-por-licitacion-del-litio-giorgio-jackson-llama-al-gobierno-a-posponer-proceso-para-un-debido-analisis/>.

to bring the country in front of investor-state arbitration committees that may penalize it with billions of dollars.

We are all in this together! Despite the recent recognition of the realities of the Anthropocene, of climate change and countless toxic processes, including the destruction of biodiversity, this reality is still massively and persistently denied by most. What characterizes our time in many ways is this tangle of often contradictory denials. It is only through “looking up,”² in a concerted effort of critical thinking at all scales of governance, from the local to the global and across national boundaries, that we might be able to curb what Judith Butler, following Freud, calls the “death drive” of our civilization (Butler 2020, 160). We need to retool international trade and investment law, render corporate environmental responsibility legally binding, and make ecocide a crime that can be prosecuted in international criminal courts. “The ideal condition would be one in which every member of a community exercises self-restraint, and does so precisely by recognizing that the preservation of life is itself a good to be valued in common” (Butler 2020, 177). This, however, is unlikely to happen smoothly as the human psyche is full of ambivalence. Only one part of our organic nature wills us to overthrow the forces of destruction. A “cultural process” is needed that allows us to develop a revulsion against destruction itself and to understand that the various forms of organic life are “connected through relations of dependency that extend throughout the living world” (Butler 2020, 180). What if environmental movements in Latin America were to join with those fighting for labor rights and dignity in China, for example? The negative power of hatred itself can then become refocused as an aggressive stance against destruction, turning against the world leaders who insist that obedience to the logic of growth, accumulation, and extraction is obligatory.

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² The title of this introduction is taken from *Don’t Look Up!*, a 2021 American science fiction film by Adam McKay that satirizes government and media indifference to the climate crisis.

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