

# UNMASKING GREEN COLONIALISM BEHIND THE 'DECARBONIZATION CONSENSUS'

BY MARY ANN MANAHAN, BRENO BRINGEL, AND MIRIAM LANG



# UNMASKING GREEN COLONIALISM BEHIND THE 'DECARBONIZATION CONSENSUS'

By Mary Ann Manahan, Breno Bringel, and Miriam Lang<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, green colonialism has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary capitalism, particularly within the context of decarbonization efforts and market-oriented approaches aimed at addressing the ecological and climate crises. During the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference, a plethora of tools, mechanisms, and initiatives were presented as 'solutions' to the escalating climate and ecological crises, backed by both public and predominantly private actors. These include climate-smart agriculture, carbon offsetting, carbon markets, nature-based solutions, and initiatives such as Reducing Emissions from Forest Degradation and Deforestation (REDD+).

However, despite their promotion as 'solutions', various frontline communities, civil society organizations, critical scholars, and scientists have denounced these market-based approaches, arguing that they aggravate the polycrises of our times. Despite the rhetoric of decarbonization to achieve "net zero emissions," these approaches perpetuate the model of unlimited economic growth, exacerbate vulnerabilities and inequalities, and accelerate the destruction of territo-

ries, ecosystems, and life itself. This hegemonic decarbonization further reinforces center-periphery or North-South asymmetries and has given rise to what recent studies term as new forms of carbon colonialism,<sup>ii</sup> energy colonialism,<sup>iii</sup> climate colonialism,<sup>iv</sup> or climate coloniality.<sup>v</sup> These concepts elucidate the continuity and perpetuation of colonial relations through hegemonic climate and energy transition policies. However, it is essential to acknowledge that green colonialism is not solely a contemporary phenomenon; its roots extend deep into history.

## GREEN COLONIALISM AS A HISTORICAL PATTERN OF EXTRACTIVIST CAPITALISM

The term 'green colonialism' has been used primarily in environmental history to capture a historical process. As British historian and environmental activist Richard Grove states, "the kind of homogenizing capital-intensive transformation of people, trade, economy, and environment with which we are familiar today can be traced back at least as far as the beginnings of European colonial expansion, as the agents of new European capital and urban markets sought to extend their

<sup>i</sup> This paper is an adapted version of the authors' introductory chapter, "Lucrative Transitions, Green Colonialism and Pathways to Transformative Ecosocial Justice. An Introduction" in the forthcoming book, *Geopolitics of Green Colonialism: Global Justice and Ecosocial Transitions*, published by Pluto Press, March 2004. The paper is the longer version of Section 3 of the Right to Food and Nutrition Watch, "Unmasking Green Colonialism Behind The 'Decarbonization Consensus'".

<sup>ii</sup> Lyons, K., & Westoby, P. (2014). Carbon colonialism and the new land grab: plantation forestry in Uganda and its livelihood impacts. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 36, 13-21.

<sup>iii</sup> Sánchez Contreras, J., & Matarán Ruiz, A. (2023). Colonialismo energético: Territorios de sacrificio para la transición energética corporativa en España, México, Noruega y el Sáhara Occidental. Barcelona: Icaria.

<sup>iv</sup> Bhambra, G., & Newell, P. (2022). More than a metaphor: climate colonialism in perspective. *Global Social Challenges Journal*, 1-9.

<sup>v</sup> Sultana, F. (2022). The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography*, 99, 102638.

areas of operation and sources of raw materials."<sup>vi</sup>

Thus, we see that green colonialism is deeply intertwined with the expansion of colonial power and capitalist interests, rooted in the extractivist logic that has pervaded since the onset of European colonial expansion in 1492. In his brilliant book, Argentinian activist and scholar Horacio Machado Aráoz shows how Potosí in Bolivia marked the starting point of a new geological and civilizational era in which modern-colonial mining triggered the capitalocene. This pattern has changed over the centuries. Although the extractivist logic and colonial violence against bodies, territories, and ecosystems have persisted, it has become more complex with the emergence of new material conditions and mechanisms of justification.

With the expansion of colonialism, a new geopolitical and environmental imaginary was formed about Nature and the non-Western "other" to justify land grabbing and the subjugation of entire populations. Paradoxically, the ecological destruction caused by colonialism allowed, from the mid-17th century onwards, the emergence of a concern for environmental conservation. Since then, the colonial powers have made their imperial strategy more complex: they continue to destroy Nature and extract as much wealth as they can, while

constructing conservationist policies and discourses. These dual strategies have alienated and displaced Indigenous Peoples from their territories and resources.

Zimbabwean scholar Vimbai Kwashirai analyzed green colonialism in Zimbabwe from the late 19th to the late 20th century, showing both the socio-environmental impacts of British colonialism and the different types of conflicts, relationships, and mediations between colonial officials, companies, scientists, and local actors around logging and forest conservation.<sup>vii</sup> As Indian environmental historian Ravi Kumar argues, the tension between conservation advocacy and forest destruction in Africa and Asia is a legacy of British colonialism. In the specific case of South India, Kumar examines how British "green colonialism" first destroyed forests, while blaming the natives for doing so, and then created a policy of controlling forest landscapes, arguing that it was essential to maintain and extend state control over Nature to control the climate and irrigation systems and thus improve the country's welfare.<sup>viii</sup>

Technological control and domination of landscapes have been fundamental to the continued reproduction of green colonialism, as demonstrated by hydraulic engineering projects undertaken during European imperialism.<sup>ix</sup> The construction of canals, widen-

#### VI

Grove, R. (1995). *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism: 1600-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### VII

Kwashirai, V. (2009). *Green Colonialism in Zimbabwe: 1890-1980*. New York: Cambria Press.

#### VIII

Kumar, R. V. M. (2010). Green colonialism and Forest Policies in South India, 1800-1900. *Global Environment*, 3(5), 101-125.

#### IX

Headrick, D. (1981). *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ing works, and dams maintained imperial power even after the formal end of colonialism through the induced need for technology transfer, after having ignored and devalued existing technologies and forms of management in the colonized territories.

It is not simply a matter of establishing a relationship of material dependence. Donald Worster, a US environmental historian, demonstrates how the installation of irrigation projects in India and the establishment of various forms of water control irreversibly altered the Indian people's relationship with water.<sup>x</sup> Communities in different parts of the global South were disempowered and their water systems controlled by colonial capitalism and state authorities. Consequently, anthropocentrism implies not only the modern striving for human control over Nature, but also an attitude of indifference and contempt towards other forms of organization of social reproduction that are valued as inferior.

In essence, green colonialism was historically forged with capitalism and the commodification of Nature, combining material expansion and subjective control, which is expressed in the "coloniality of Nature".<sup>xi</sup> For global hegemonic thinking and dominant elites, this coloniality of Nature presents the global South as a subaltern space that can be ex-

ploited, destroyed, and reconfigured according to the needs of the dominant regimes of accumulation.<sup>xii</sup> This affects the biophysical reality (flora, fauna, human inhabitants, the biodiversity of its ecosystems) and the territorial configuration (the socio-cultural dynamics that articulate these ecosystems and countries), but also peoples' mentalities (coloniality of mind and knowledge).

### GREEN COLONIALISM AND ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM

The conceptual distinction between colonialism and coloniality, as proposed by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, sheds light on the persistence of green colonialism beyond formal colonization. It helps differentiate between specific instances of imperial domination and the enduring colonial matrix of power post-independence.<sup>xiii</sup> Moreover, the framework of coloniality is useful to understand how the imperialism of some countries, such as the United States of America (USA), did not depend on colonies to exercise patterns of power, perpetuating green colonialism through military threats, global market imposition, and other mechanisms of indirect cultural, legal and political domination.

Green colonialism operates within an "imperial reason". Therefore, it is important for contemporary debates to explore the relation-

**x**  
Worster, D. (2008). *Transformations of the Earth*. Montevideo: CLAES.

**xi**  
Coronil, F. (2000). Naturaleza del poscolonialismo: del eurocentrismo al globocentrismo. In E. Lander (Ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

**xii**  
Alimonda, H. (2011). La colonialidad de la Naturaleza: una aproximación a la ecología política latinoamericana. In H. Alimonda (Ed.), *La naturaleza colonizada*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, pp. 21-60.

**xiii**  
Quijano, A. (2000). Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina. In E. Lander (Ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

ship between green colonialism and ecological imperialism more deeply. A growing body of recent literature, mainly Marxist, revisits the debate on ecological imperialism, which has been alive in academic debate since the 1980s, by highlighting the ecological contradictions of capitalism and the metabolic rift.<sup>xiv</sup> Additionally, other scholars delve into how ecological imperialism is ingrained in everyday practices and supported by institutions, often normalized to obscure its imperial nature. This normalization is referred to by Austrian degrowth scholars Ulrich Brand and Marcus Wissen as "the imperial way of life",<sup>xv</sup> echoing political geographer David Slater definition of "imperiality"<sup>xvi</sup> i.e., the perceived right, privilege, and feeling of being imperial or of upholding an imperial way of life in which geopolitical encroachment is legitimized.

These emerging discussions are welcome, as are those seeking to think of degrowth from an anti-colonial political perspective.<sup>xvii</sup> They are relevant in terms of North-South relations because they point to the accountability of big polluters and recognize ecological debt as a central agenda of contemporary struggles, while claiming the struggle for decolonization in the North. However, we must consider a delicate issue: often, the anti-imperialist discourse continues to be widely mobilized against Nature by sectors who call themselves "progres-

sive". Fossil developmentalism is still very much present among certain Global South factions who claim to defend a just energy transition while in favor of continuing to exploit oil in the name of national interests, based on the argument that, otherwise, a foreign country would do it. Similarly, the idea of the "right to development" continues to resonate strongly among many actors in the Global South who claim to be in favor of a just energy transition.

They are considered anti-imperialists despite the abundant evidence of ecocide, genocide, and epistemic destruction also caused in the name of "development". Saving the climate and decarbonizing the economy have become 'mantras'. The historical tension—or complementarity—between conservation and destruction is still very much present, albeit with increasingly sophisticated digital and territorial control mechanisms. Today's green colonialism, epitomized above all by carbon colonialism amidst the climate crisis, reproduces historical colonial relations and the coloniality of power, all the while seeking renewed social legitimization around the idea of decarbonization and the promotion of "green" solutions.

#### XIV

Foster, J. B., & Clark, B. (2004). Ecological imperialism: the curse of capitalism. *Socialist Register*, 186–201.

#### XV

Brand, U., & Wissen, M. (2021). *Modo de vida imperial. Vida cotidiana y crisis ecológica del capitalismo*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.

#### XVI

Slater, D. (2010). The imperial present and the geopolitics of power. *Geopolitica(s)*, 1(2), 191–205.

#### XVII

Hickel, J. (2021). The anti-colonial politics of degrowth. *Political Geography*, 88, 102404.

## GREEN COLONIALISM IN THE ERA OF DECARBONIZATION CONSENSUS AND PROFITABLE TRANSITIONS

In recent years, a "Decarbonization Consensus" has emerged as a global capitalist agreement that is committed to transitioning from fossil fuels to reduced carbon emissions based on "renewable" energies.<sup>xviii</sup> Its leitmotif is to fight global warming and the climate crisis by promoting an energy transition driven by the electrification of production, consumption, and digitalization. However, instead of protecting the planet, this consensus contributes to its destruction, deepening existing inequalities, exacerbating the exploitation of natural resources, and perpetuating the commodification of Nature.

On the one hand, this consensus suggests that everything can continue as before if we replace fossil fuels with so-called renewable sources of energy. On the other, it maintains the centrality of economic growth, now dressed in a "green" guise, for the organization of our economies and societies. Furthermore, this Decarbonization Consensus limits climate change action to what Brazilian socio-environmentalist Camila Moreno and fellow activists defined as the "carbon metric".<sup>xix</sup> The use of environmental metrics to easily quantify carbon emissions provides an international bargaining chip and creates the illusion that something

is being done about environmental degradation. These metrics reduce the deterioration and increasing collapse of the highly complex web of life on Earth to a single digit that is easily compatible with the capitalist ratio of accounting, i.e., tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. These figures supposedly provide reliable information about the manifold damages caused to our habitat by hegemonic lifestyles. In reality, they obscure the extent of underlying problems while explicitly advocating "green business" and developing inadequate and unsustainable policies.

The protection of our habitat has thus become the object of lucrative ecological transitions and speculative pacts that end up financializing Nature. Transnational oil and gas companies are simultaneously planning to expand their fossil fuel operations while exploring new technologies, for example, hydrogen. The major world powers (the European Union, the USA, and China) concerned about their energy security, are committed to reducing carbon emissions and reorienting their economies towards low-carbon and low-carbon modes of production while at the same time targeting new opportunities for "green" economic growth. Similarly, some countries in the global South are also beginning to announce their "green transition" plans.

### XVIII

Bringel, B., & Svampa, M. (2023). From the Commodities Consensus to the Decarbonization Consensus. *Nueva Sociedad*, (306), 51-70.

### XIX

Moreno, C., Chassé, D. S., & Fuhr, L. (2016). *A métrica do carbono: abstrações globais e epistemicídio ecológico*. Rio de Janeiro: Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

Within the framework of the Decarbonization Consensus, contemporary green colonialism takes the form of green extractivism that devastates habitats and communities. It also promotes neocolonial ecological practices and imaginaries and focuses on research and technological innovation processes that prosper but are deeply inscribed in the paradigms of profitability, infinite progress, and economic growth, rather than sustainability and life reproduction.

Examples abound: China's demand for balsa wood for wind turbine construction drives deforestation in the Ecuadorian rainforest. In South Africa, the huge infrastructure of hydrogen plants to export "clean" energy threatens communities that base their livelihoods on small-scale fishing or agriculture. In the Maghreb, shepherds are losing their land and water to the vast solar parks being built to supply "green energy" to Europe. Activist researchers Hamza Hamouchene and Katie Sandwell stress that North Africa and West Asia continue to be key nodes in the scramble for green energy by the world's major economies, perpetuating neocolonial practices and environmental orientalism that disproportionately harm communities.<sup>xx</sup> In South America's lithium triangle, communities are fighting for scarce water sources that are increasingly being grabbed by lithium mining to

equip electric cars. In the rural communities of Indonesia, peasants and Indigenous Peoples are displaced from their territories as the Indonesian state extracts critical raw materials needed for the development of its own industry for electric vehicle batteries.

### CONTEMPORARY GREEN COLONIALISM AND NORTH/SOUTH RELATIONS

Today's green colonialism unfolds in at least four dimensions within the geopolitical dynamics between the 'North' and 'South', reshaped and updated in the context of the Decarbonization Consensus. Firstly, the pursuit of unlimited raw materials in the new global energy security race adds a "green" layer to existing extractivist pressures. In Bringel and Svampa's words,<sup>xxi</sup> the Decarbonization Consensus does not replace the *Commodity* Consensus but overlaps with elements of continuity and rupture. Secondly, as discussed above, green colonialism manifests in the imposition of specific conservation initiatives on the territories of the South within carbon offsetting schemes, enabling major polluters in the North to evade urgent structural changes in their production processes. The third dimension is the use of sites in the Global South as dumping grounds for toxic and electronic waste resulting from renewable energies and digitization. Finally, the fourth

xx

Hamouchene, H., & Sandwell, K. (2023). *Dismantling Green Colonialism. Energy and Climate Justice in the Arab Region*. London: Pluto Press

xxi

Bringel and Svamp. *Supra* note xviii.

dimension involves projecting the South as a new market for the latest climate-proof technologies.

In many discussions in the global North, the geographies targeted for appropriation are often imagined or represented as devoid of people and conflict, as if on another planet. Landscapes, bodies and entire populations of the Global South are treated as disposable. The notion of "empty space", a typically imperial geopolitical rhetoric, is frequently employed by governments and companies. Historically, this concept, complementing the Ratzellian notion of "living space" (*Lebensraum*), led to ecocide and Indigenous ethnocide, later serving to justify policies of "development" and "colonization" of territories. Today, it is invoked to justify territorial expansionism for "green energy" investments, portraying large swathes of land as "productive" and "profitable" through the construction of mega windmills or hydrogen power lands, after being labeled by green energy proponents as sparsely populated or "empty spaces".

The enduring and mutually constitutive elements of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and racism are thus reproduced, with geographies designated for accumulation exploiting geographies designated for plunder.<sup>xxii</sup> Today's green colonialism continues to expropriate materials and reproduce colonial relations

while masquerading as environmentally friendly and essential for securing humanity's future, thereby generating confusion and silencing resistance. In this narrative, racialized populations of the Global South have no say. It is disconcerting to see the extent to which the habit of externalizing the social and environmental costs of an imperial lifestyle has become normalized. In debates about energy transition, efficiency, and security, privilege is just as glaringly evident in Northern societies as it was during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This self-evident privilege stems from growing up in an environment where one's life and rights are worthy of protection while implicitly recognizing that this is not the case for most of the world's population. Thus, the coloniality of being, power, and knowledge permeates different debates in the North.

#### THE INTERPLAY OF CONTEMPORARY GREEN COLONIALISM AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD

On the one hand, contemporary green colonialism represents an iteration or new phase of global environmental practices primarily driven by capital accumulation rather than the preservation of complex ecosystems. On the other, it is colonial in scope; it operates on the assumption that certain regions, bodies and pop-

#### XXII

Machado Araújo, H. (2015). Ecología política de los regímenes extractivistas. De reconfiguraciones imperiales y re-existencias decoloniales en nuestra América. *Bajo el Volcán*, 15(23), 11-51.



ulations must serve others to ensure favorable environmental conditions for a life in dignity. Green colonialism undermines various rights, but in the context of the human right to adequate food and nutrition, it perversely prioritizes the "green" over the food sovereignty, well-being, welfare, and livelihoods of those communities living in areas rich in critical raw materials. Demands to shift from fossil fuels to renewable energies have led to the large-scale cultivation of bioenergy crops such as corn or sugarcane for biofuels, displacing agricultural lands previously dedicated to food production. This shift has contributed to food price volatility and, in some instances, food shortages, directly undermining the population's right to food.

Furthermore, the construction of renewable energy infrastructure such as wind farms or solar installations necessitates huge tracts of land, resulting in the displacement of local communities, ecological disruption, and threats to biodiversity. This process, known as green grabbing, involves amassing lands under the pretext of environmental goals,<sup>xxiii</sup> sacrificing local farming and Indigenous communities' well-being and social fabric, depriving them of their ability to cultivate and harvest food. Consequently, communities lose control over their food production and consumption patterns, further

compromising the right to food.

The extraction of critical raw materials such as lithium for batteries and rare earth metals for solar panels also carries significant environmental consequences. Mining activities lead to soil degradation, water pollution, and habitat destruction, adversely affecting ecosystems and the communities reliant on them for sustenance.

Therefore, the intricate link between green colonialism and the right to food poses substantial challenges to socio-environmental justice and genuine ecosocial transformation.

### BEYOND GREEN COLONIALISM...

Recognizing green colonialism and its current manifestation as green extractivism as an adversary, it becomes imperative to understand its dynamics and strategize how to self-organize against it. Our collaboratively published book, *Beyond Green Colonialism: Global Justice and the Geopolitics of Ecosocial Transitions*, brings together activists and intellectuals from all continents to examine the different characteristics and implications of contemporary green colonialism and to propose viable alternatives.<sup>xxiv</sup> This collective effort offers a diagnosis of corporate transitions, analyzes global interdependencies and interlinkages, and presents different paths towards alter-

#### xxiii

Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I. (2012). Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature? *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(2), 237–261.

#### xxiv

A first Spanish version of the book was published by CLACSO in October 2023. In early 2024, an English edition will be published by Pluto Press and a Portuguese version by Editora Elefante.

Please see *The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism*. Available at: <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745349343/the-geopolitics-of-green-colonialism/>

native models of development and socio-ecological transformation rooted in global justice.

One of the book's premises is that genuine ecosocial transformation necessitates global justice. Our planet is a highly complex ecosystem where human beings are just one component. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated the consequences of prioritizing national or corporate interests over systemic solutions that cater to all. At the same time, we must transcend individualistic and hyper-localist approaches to embrace justice in all its dimensions: social, racial, gender, ecological, interethnic, and interspecies. This entails exploring a spectrum of alternative approaches, ranging from ecofeminism to ecological economics, and from ecosocialism to understandings of the pluriverse.

A second premise is that ecosocial transformation demands an urgent reduction in human consumption of energy and matter in absolute terms, which implies planned and profound changes in our modes of production and appropriation. Planned degrowth, especially in the Global North, coupled with structural reforms towards equitable distribution of essential resources for life reproduction, both within and between countries or regions, is integral to this transformation. True global justice can only be achieved through collaborative efforts

where critical voices from the North and the Global South navigate a shared path, despite their differences. The range of possibilities for convergence encompasses spaces for articulation around environmental and climate justice, exchange and learning from grassroots ecological experiences, degrowth, dialogues with Indigenous and ancestral knowledge, and a plethora of localized and popular initiatives towards ecosocial transition.

Moreover, just as we cannot overcome green colonialism without amplifying the voices of the Global South, neither can we homogenize the Global North. Our analyses must embrace complexity. Green colonialism is not solely imposed from above or from the North on the South. It also often involves "internal green colonialism", whereby alliances and complicity between national elites in the South and global elites create the conditions to facilitate the advance of green extractivism. It is essential to build further bridges between the struggles of the North and the South under the umbrella of alternatives to development, systemic alternatives, and radical and post-extractivist transitions. If the idea of transition, including just transition, has been co-opted by capitalism and various institutional actors who use it in a limited and problematic way as a synonym for a market-oriented energy transition, it has become paramount to reclaim its true

meanings and horizons. Ecosocial transitions represent the first steps in a broader transformation process of culture, economy, politics, and society and its relationship to Nature, and should not be reduced to a promise of the future, as in the case of most he-

gemonic proposals. Experiences of transitions are already unfolding among many communities and territories, in rural and urban areas, as well as in territorial resistances around the world against green capitalism/colonialism and its false solutions.

PUBLISHED BY



**FIAN**  
INTERNATIONAL

**Brot**  
für die Welt

Willy-Brandt-Platz 5,  
69115 Heidelberg, Germany

 [www.fian.org](http://www.fian.org)

 @FIANista

 @fianinternational

 FIAN International