3. Colonialism and environmental violence

Introduction

Even when humans started causing the extinction of animal species 50,000 years ago (Harari, 2011), the global mass degradation and destruction of nature for the benefit of some human groups and at the cost of others only began with the colonisation of the Americas. European colonisers arrived in the 'New Continent' at the dawn of the fifteenth century. They plundered the natural riches of the invaded territories, exploited the original inhabitants as a labour force, and altered Indigenous cosmovisions. Beyond these 'material' consequences, colonisation left long-lasting legacies that keep producing environmental violence. Through the consolidation of modernity, capitalism, and a highly unequal world-system, colonialism set the bases for a global system of inequality and environmental violence that lives on today. Since the colonisation of the Americas, nature became a resource to exploit rather than a home to protect, living beings were instrumentally categorised in a hierarchy of value, and colonised territories became dependent on and prone to predation by colonising powers. Colonialism and environmental violence are inextricably intertwined.

Colonialism and environmental violence

Colonialism is the direct physical occupation of a territory originally inhabited by other human groups (Goyes, 2023b; Mahoney, 2012). It is intrinsically violent as it, through force, subdues human communities and defaces their social systems to impose new ways of living and being that are beneficial to the invaders. Colonialism's primary goal is to plunder natural riches (Goyes, 2023a) – a goal partly achieved by using nature as a weapon (Abad Castelos, 2023). The effects of colonial invasions extend beyond what happens during physical occupation; colonial invasions, through the establishment of systems of social control that perpetuate dependency, set the bases for further plundering (Furtado, 1956; Quijano, 1971). Colonialism is thus motivated by a thirst for environmental resources, executed through environmental violence, and results in further environmental destruction. It is not possible to study colonialism without attending to environmental violence and not possible to understand environmental destruction without understanding the dynamics of colonialism.

European colonisers and American original inhabitants met at the dawn of the fifteenth century in the first major colonial encounter. While civilisations had clashed before, the conquest of the 'New World' rippled like never before in the history of humanity. The European takeover of the Americas (or *Abda Yala*, as some of the native inhabitants call the territory) had material and symbolic effects of such magnitude that they set the bases for a system that has sustained large-scale and systematic environmental violence and destruction worldwide up to today.

The Spaniards arrived in the Americas in 1492. They were immediately attracted by the shiny jewellery worn by the locals and their 'enormous treasures of gold ornaments' (Koning, 1993: 25). Upon seeing gold, a 'lust for gold, lust for silver' possessed the invaders (Galeano, 1997: 1). They used the army, Catholic missions, and administrative authorities to take over lands, dominate the original inhabitants of the continent, and plunder the natural riches (Goyes et al., 2021b). Compelled by the desire to extract steadily more minerals and natural riches, the colonisers penetrated Abda Yala to its deepest regions, leaving behind a trail of destruction and dispossession (Robertson, 2005).

The colonisers developed and perfected their technologies of subjugation during the conquest of the Americas – but soon thereafter they transferred their methods to other regions of the world. In 1497, Vasco da Gama built a market in Goa (on the west coast of India) and used it as the base camp to invade Asia, the world's largest continent. From Goa, the Portuguese expanded, razing religious and cultural sites, and achieving the colonisation of the Persian Gulf (Zaffaroni, 2022). Then, aroused by their lust for spices and a geopolitical interest to accumulate more wealth, they launched a larger campaign to seize further portions of the continent (LePoer, 1987). Colonialism in Asia was less absolute than in the Americas because Europeans did not gain control over the entire continent and their institutions 'had to coexist (then and now)

with existing local instituted knowledge, local languages, belief systems and forms of life' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 125). But the colonised locations were exploited intensively.

In Africa, a full-fledged colonial campaign started only in the mid-seventeenth century, almost two centuries after operations in the Americas and Asia. But when the colonisation of Africa started, it was more pronounced than anywhere in the world (Arowolo, 2022). The Dutch initiated the colonisation of Cape Town in 1652 (Zaffaroni, 2022) and soon after they were joined by other European nations. The popularity of colonial campaigns among Europeans led to the 'Scramble for Africa', in which European powers arbitrarily divided the continent. The colonial invasion 'clearly defined and shaped the role of Africa in global economic relations and world politics till today' (Arowolo, 2022: 1).

The first major colonial encounter started in the Americas and was later replicated in Africa and Asia, becoming a global colonial campaign that would shape the social and natural worlds until today. The first major colonial encounter brought about three direct, immediately visible consequences and three indirect, subtle, long-term transformations – all of which had consequences for nature.

Immediate consequences of colonisation

The first direct consequence of the colonial encounter in the Americas was genocide. The colonisers reduced the Indigenous population, 'who totalled no less than 70 million when the foreign conquerors appeared on the horizon' to 3.5 million 'half a century later' (Galeano, 1997: 38). The diseases brought by the Europeans contributed to the killings (Koch et al., 2019), and the exploitation of Indigenous people as a labour force was a major driver of deaths (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The Indigenous peoples who survived were cornered and their lands were taken and despoiled (Goyes, 2023a; Goyes & South, 2021).

Second, the colonisers transformed the natural landscape, opening 'new whole regions for immigrant settlement and exploitation' (Goyes 2023c: 92), extracted minerals and plants, and replaced fauna and flora with their own by imposing 'crops and livestock pre-adapted to American environments' (Goyes 2023c: 92). Crosby (2004) coined this phenomenon as 'ecological imperialism'. The Americas, and later other continents in the global South, became adjacent gardens reshaped to fill the desires of the colonisers.

Third, together with the genocide of many Indigenous peoples, the colonisers erased from the world millennia-old environmental ontologies or ways of relating with nature (Goyes, 2023c). The environmental ontologies wiped out were comprised of universes of symbols and stories that put humans in a close spiritual relationship with nature, inspiring protective behaviours (Goyes et al., 2021a).

Genocide of the protectors of nature, superimposition of crops and livestock on native ecosystems, and the erasure of Indigenous environmental ontologies entailed large-scale social and ecological destruction. Yet, it is the long-term transformations brought about by colonisation that have produced the most environmental violence.

Long-term consequences of colonisation

Further impacts of colonisation only became perceivable two centuries after the invasion of the Americas. These impacts are simultaneously embodied in corporeal elements and every aspect of global social life; yet hidden to the uninformed naked eye. Modernity (including racialisation), capitalism, and an unequal world-system are not only the subtle consequences of colonisation; they are those with the deepest consequences for society and nature.

Modernity and racialisation

The colonisers, seeking to plunder the riches of the Americas and exploit the Indigenous peoples and African slaves as a labour force, classified humans from superior to inferior – a strategy that enabled colonisers to 'legitimately' abuse non-Europeans (Quijano, 2000, 2007). The hierarchy that the colonisers created encompassed biological features and cognitive capacities and placed West European anatomies and ways of learning on top. The hierarchy had a strong racialising component: 'if modernity is a set of fictional narratives that justified and legitimized the actions of those who told the story and built institutions that made the story credible, then *race* is one of its conceptual fictions, effec-

tive fictions nonetheless' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 182).

The practice of organising humans in a hierarchy had three underpinning messages: (1) that the world, natural and human, can be categorised from most valuable to least; (2) that the human and natural worlds – a dichotomy created by the colonisers – can be not only categorised but also instrumentally organised to maximise the fruits of its exploitation, leading to human progress and development; and, (3) that Western Europeans, and their superior cognitive capacities, can lead humanity to progress. These messages spread through the world, via globalised colonialism, and have shaped international relations since the first major colonial encounter until today, in what we call 'modernity'.

Modernity views progress as a unitary path that leads to human fulfilment (Vattimo, 1990, 1998) and is characterised by the pursuit, more than the achievement, of rationalisation, precision and efficiency, as well as by its thirst for (universal) improvement following an instrumental logic (Bauman, 2000). Modernity, Bauman (p. 18) wrote,

> prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many 'problems' to be solved, as 'nature' to be 'controlled', 'mastered', and 'improved' or 'remade' as a legitimate target for 'social engineering' and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force (the gardening posture divides vegetation into 'cultured plants' to be taken care of, and weeds to be exterminated).

The instrumental modern logic, developed alongside colonisation, sees ecosystems and most living beings (including a big portion of humanity) as resources useful in the progress and fulfilment of 'humanity' (Goyes, 2019; Goyes & Sollund, 2018). Seeing nature, including humans, as instruments for a bigger goal is a core cultural pillar of the current mass destruction of the planet (Brisman & South, 2014).

Capitalism

Decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano (1992) traces the definitive establishment of capitalism as the default production mode back to the colonisation of the Americas. As Mignolo (2011: 21) explains, 'both [colonialism and capitalism] are constitutive of what is generally understood by Western civilisation'. The colonisation of the Americas created 'vast opportunities for land appropriation/expropriation', which enabled the expansion of production. It also created a 'new pattern of management of labour' that, exploiting the colonial classification of humans, allowed it to manipulate the production systems minimising costs and increasing profit. Finally, colonialism began to establish 'a truly planetary commerce—unknown until then' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 183), where commodity trade was expanded. In sum, colonisation made possible a mode of production 'centred and managed according to the interests of the holder of capital' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 183). The possibilities that colonisation opened led to current capitalism, a system characterised by the constant expansion of production in order to increase profit, the manipulation of production systems to create surplus profits, and the unlimited expansion of capital (Stretesky et al., 2014).

Colonisers also created a system of cultural representations that provided legitimated capitalism. As Mignolo explains, 'capitalism is not merely an economic structure; it involves the subjectivities and belief systems that go with it, without which it couldn't be sustained' (Mignolo, 2011: 21) The conquerors created, among others, international laws that 'legitimized imperial appropriation and expropriation of land' and the 'imperial slave trade and exploitation of labor to produce commodities for the emerging global market' (Mignolo, 2011: 21).

Finally, colonialism not only made capitalism possible; capitalism keeps functioning thanks to colonial practices. The colonial expropriation of lands across the world to increase the wealth and power of a few, which Harvey (2003) denominates as *accumulation by dispossession*, permits capitalism to reach new regions and expand its commodities and wealth.

Capitalism is thus a key driver of environmental destruction. As Stretesky and colleagues (2014) explain, capitalism has two main interactions with nature: extractions, to obtain the materials necessary for production; and additions, to dispose of the waste from production processes and discarded used commodities. Both interactions alter ecosystems and when added contribute to the current environmental crises. Capitalism and colonialism, an inextricable dyad, advance environ-

mental violence through the commodification of lands and ecosystems.

World-system

The plundering of lands and the enslaving of original inhabitants in the Americas, Africa, and parts of Asia gave the colonisers a privileged position in the world. They acquired supreme economic power from the riches they stole across the world. Colonisers gained political power by imposing rules on other cultures. Colonisers endowed themselves as the ultimate knowledge creators and accumulated epistemological power. By dictating how the world should be seen, sensed, and appreciated, they amassed cultural power (Goyes, 2023b). Using the supreme capital gained in these four categories – economic, political, epistemological, and cultural – colonisers kept augmenting their power in a self-reinforcing logic. Colonisers invested the superior power to keep plundering the world in a seemingly never-ending spiral of environmental violence.

Colonisers, to maintain and augment their power, have defined the international legal instruments that regulate human interactions with nature, imposed environmental practices on the colonised, and situated the colonised in a situation of dependency (Goyes, 2023b). As Alberto Acosta (1994; see also Escobar, 1995) explained, funding for development, given by the colonisers to the colonised, usually leads to an 'eternal debt'. Economic help comes with such high interest and political conditions that the colonised will never be able to repay. Instead, the colonisers force the colonised to pay back through raw materials – fuelling the further destruction of nature.

Economic, political, epistemological, and cultural power unequally distributed between colonisers and colonised give shape to the contemporary world-system. Wallerstein (2004) conceptualised this global structure as split into two: 'core' countries that have semi-monopolies over financial and knowledge institutions, media and communication systems, technologies, and weapons of mass destruction (see also Amin, 1997); and 'peripheral' countries that generate raw materials and supply an 'unqualified labour force'. The core–periphery divide is self-reinforcing as the core continuously accumulates more power to exploit the periphery. The core achieves economic growth and heightened living standards at the cost of 'the social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty' (Gutiérrez, 1974: 51; Furtado, 1956; Prebisch, 1963), and one might add environmental violence, in the periphery.

The dependence that a highly unequal world-system creates allows colonisers to benefit from ecologically unequal exchanges. In the global flows of commodities, the market price for the products sold by the colonised is significantly lower than the human and land labour embodied in them. Meanwhile, the price of the processed commodities sold by the colonisers is significantly higher than the labour invested in them (Honborg, 1998). As Dorninger et al. (2021: 3) explains, 'countries rich in economic, technological, or military power are more likely to gain access to resources (materials, energy, land, and labor) that are relevant to achieve economic growth and to build technological infrastructure'. The thirst for development, increased accumulation, and a position of advantage lead colonisers to increasingly plunder more natural resources from the colonised, thereby producing mass environmental destruction.

Terminology

Colonialism, modernity, capitalism, and an unequal world-system are mutually constitutive. The four are based on, and accelerate, the destruction of nature worldwide. Yet, colonialism has different ways of advancing. The following are key concepts to understand the ways of colonialism:

Coloniality

The colonisations of the Americas brought about a set of social representations that sustain modernity, capitalism, and the world-system. Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007) gathers these representations under the term of 'coloniality', or the preference to consider valid only what follows the modern European way of knowledge creation. Coloniality is pervasive of every social and individual space. It directs how people, in colonial and colonised locations, are and behave. It structures social interactions, also with nature. It trickles down 'framing subjectivities, education, ways of eating, health, and destroyed conviviality' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 108); and is 'engraved in global social structures' (Goyes, 2023b: 15).

Internal colonialism

Colonialism often creates, coexists with, and is fuelled by hierarchised relations among inhabitants of the colonised regions. Mondaca (2017: 37) defines internal colonialism as a 'structure of social relations of domination and exploitation among heterogeneous cultural groups within a single state'. Internal colonialism is driven, partly, by the offspring of the colonisers who, although born and raised in colonised locations, prolong the exploitation of their countrypeople. But also, members of native communities can be agents of internal colonialism when they are co-opted by their colonisers. Internal colonialism is then the exploitation of the racialised and colonised at the hands of the racialised and colonised – all in the service of the original colonisers.

Neocolonialism

While colonialism is the physically violent occupation of a territory – a phenomenon most associated with previous centuries – the contemporary world most often witnesses neocolonialism, the 'de facto occupation of a country via land grabs after the country has gained independence from its coloniser' (Goyes, 2023b: 10). Through land grabs, neocolonisers impose colonial ways of interacting with nature (Goyes & South, 2016).

Imperialism

Imperialism is the indirect control of nations, not primarily by physical occupation but through economic and political manipulation (Goyes, 2023c). Using their superior economic, political, epistemological, and cultural power, colonisers – new and old – can influence and direct the macro-dynamics of colonised states. The coups supported by the US in the 1960s and 1970s, and the manipulation of elections in the 2010s and 2020s, as well as the imposition of particular international legal frameworks (e.g., free trade agreements), are all acts of imperialism (Goyes, 2017).

Ecological discrimination

Specifically located in the realm of environmental interactions, ecological discrimination is 'the systematic negative differentiation and oppression of some human groups, non-human animals, and ecosystems, based on modern instrumental ideas about how to treat and relate to the natural environment' (Goyes, 2019: 15). Ecological discrimination is the application of coloniality to environmental issues, and the resulting exploitation of a large portion of beings.

Environmental violence and environmental crime

Orthodox criminology understands *crime* as those behaviours that breach the penal law (Johansen, 2021). Yet, almost six decades ago, Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1970) drew attention to the problem of relying only on the penal law to determine what is a crime and what is not (at the time, racism and imperialism were not defined as crimes). Afterwards, Pearce (1976), Davies et al. (1999) and Passas (2005) highlighted that not being punished by the criminal law does not mean that an action or omission is not harmful or undesirable. The law, skewed to protect the interests of the powerful, can symbolically hide and legitimise the acts that harm society and nature the most (Baratta, 2004; Lynch & Michalowski, 2010). Some green criminologists (e.g., Sollund, 2015, 2019), relying on a critical view of the criminal justice system, have called to apply the label of crime to acts that are lawful but cause environmental degradation and victimisation. While orthodox criminology understands environmental crime only as those included in the penal code, critical green criminology understands as crime all acts and omissions that victimise humans, non-humans, and the environment.

The soul of a harm perspective, however, calls not only to expand the array of researched phenomena beyond the purview of the penal code, but also to take distance from the logics of the criminal justice system itself. Even invoking the crime nomenclature can lead to beliefs that the criminal justice system offers *the* solution to deep social problems through the use of its technologies (Canning & Tombs, 2021; Hillyard et al., 2004). But the criminal justice system, beyond its selectivity (Vegh Weis, 2018) and vacuous responses (Mathiesen, 2006) to social issues, has historically been a tool of colonialism. The colonial use of criminal justice systems to plunder natural riches ranges from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ad hoc courts established by the Spaniards to judge Indigenous people for not extracting enough resources from nature, to the current use of the penal law to prosecute 'illegal' exploitation of

resources while allowing the most destructive large-scale exploitation of nature by corporations. There are deep links between 'the exploitation of nature by colonizers, former and current, the creation of social systems [including the criminal justice system] to legitimize such plundering, and the extensive harms inflicted on Indigenous inhabitants, their lands, and their ecosystems' (Goyes, 2023a: 413).

Decolonial thought, which tries to undo the consequences of colonialism (Quijano, 2007) or delink knowledge from 'epistemic assumptions common to all the areas of knowledge established in the Western world' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 106), thinks in terms of *environmental violence* rather than of *environmental crime*. To avoid reproducing colonial categories but still convey the devastating environmental effects of colonialism, decolonial work therefore uses the term *environmental violence*: the systemic harm that stems from most human interactions with nature when they are guided by the modern, capitalist, colonial way of being.

Conclusion

While decolonial theory and praxis demonstrate the links between colonialism, modernity, capitalism, and an unequal world-system with global mass environmental destruction, other theories try to delink colonialism from current environmental destruction and instead blame the colonised countries and peoples (e.g., Auty, 1993). As Mignolo & Walsh (2018: 107) describe, however, 'while for some [the colonisation of the Americas] was a moment of salvation and civilisation, for others it was the beginning of the historical crimes justified by the narratives of modernity – salvation, progress, development'. Decolonial theory and praxis accept the contributions Western civilisation and modernity have made to humanity, but also emphasise and highlight their intrinsic human and environmental violence.

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