



Ensayo

The Impact of Environmental Colonialism on Latin American Territorial Conflicts: A Perspective From Environmental Humanities and Decolonial Theory

El Impacto del Colonialismo Ambiental en los Conflictos Territoriales Latinoamericanos: Una Perspectiva desde las Humanidades Ambientales y la Teoría Decolonial

Pierangelly Del Rio Martínez ^{1*} 

¹Investigadora, Tallinn University. Narva mantee 25, 10120. Tallinn, Estonia.

*Corresponding author: pierange@tlu.ee

Recibido: 04-10-2025. Aceptado: 13-02-2026. Publicado: 11-03-2026.

Abstract

This essay analyzes, from an environmental humanities and decolonial approach, the origins and long-lasting legacy of colonization in the deadly conflicts that are unfolding in present-day Latin America. It argues that the most significant export of Western European colonizers was their profound alteration of ontological perspectives through the introduction of notions of superiority and inferiority, which, to this day, marginalize racialized peoples and view nature as a commodity. In the first section, the essay focuses on the concept of environmental colonialism and its evolution throughout key historical periods—from the Conquest to the expansion of neoliberal extractivism in the 20th century. The second section discusses key ideas from scholars, such as Aníbal Quijano and Val Plumwood, who have linked the exploitation of marginalized humans and nature to Eurocentric and anthropocentric ideologies at the core of hegemonic systems of power. Lastly, the essay briefly examines indigenous movements actively challenging environmental colonialism by offering alternative perspectives on humanity and its entanglement with nature, with the goal of ensuring a more dignified and ecologically balanced existence.

Keywords: Environmental colonialism, buen vivir, coloniality of power, environmental humanities, decolonial theory, extractivism.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza, desde un enfoque de las humanidades ambientales y de la teoría decolonial, los orígenes y el legado perdurable de la colonización en los conflictos mortales que se están desarrollando en la América Latina actual. Sostiene que la exportación más significativa de los colonizadores de Europa occidental fue su profunda alteración de las perspectivas ontológicas mediante la introducción de nociones de superioridad e inferioridad que, hasta el día de hoy, marginan a los pueblos racializados y ven la naturaleza como una mercancía. En la primera sección, el ensayo se centra en el concepto de colonialismo ambiental y su evolución a lo largo de períodos históricos clave—desde la Conquista hasta la expansión del extractivismo neoliberal en el siglo XX. La segunda sección aborda ideas clave de académicos como Aníbal Quijano y Val Plumwood, quienes han vinculado la explotación de los seres humanos marginados y la naturaleza con ideologías eurocéntricas y antropocén-



tricas en el núcleo de los sistemas de poder hegemónicos. Por último, el ensayo analiza brevemente los movimientos indígenas que desafían activamente el colonialismo ambiental al ofrecer perspectivas alternativas sobre la humanidad y su entrelazamiento con la naturaleza con el objetivo de asegurar una existencia más digna y ecológicamente equilibrada.

Palabras clave: Colonialismo ambiental, buen vivir, colonialidad del poder, humanidades ambientales, teoría decolonial, extractivismo.

Introduction

The history of Latin America (**LATAM**) is intrinsically linked to the logic of extractivism, where its vast resources have been continuously exploited from the colonial era to the present. This exploitation, driven by global capital and in the name of economic growth, has imposed a devastating environmental and social cost, transforming territories into mere sacrifice zones. This dynamic has catalyzed the destruction of vital ecosystems and unleashed a wave of socio-environmental conflicts.

Over the last five centuries, LATAM has witnessed environmental degradation and the systematic destruction of ecosystems, farmland, water sources, and other sacrifice zones, which have been repurposed to promote the exploitation of capital in the name of economic growth and development. Extraction projects related to mining, oil, water, wind, and energy have provoked disputes centered on the pollution and degradation of vital natural resources that sustain Indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant communities. They have also caused conflicts centered on land ownership, human rights, forced displacement and relocation, and deadly violence (Zárate *et al.*, 2020, p. 161).

These violent frictions are unfolding in a crucial context where LATAM is engaged in a profound review of its

colonial legacy. This reflection not only permeates visible social spheres such as the public sector, tourism, or the arts, but also fuels an active decolonial academic dialogue.

This essay focuses on the evolution of environmental conflicts in Latin America, postulating that environmental colonialism and its logics of exploitation are not mere accidents, but the direct result of a preceding colonization of cognitive perspectives. This ideological imposition reorganized the world order by introducing and naturalizing Eurocentric and anthropocentric notions of superiority and inferiority, which enabled the justification and perpetuation of extraction and dispossession.

This work is structured in three parts. First, it examines the notion of environmental colonialism throughout regional history, spanning from the periods of the Conquest to the introduction of neoliberal extractivism. Then, it draws on the theoretical frameworks of decolonial studies and the environmental humanities (including key authors such as Aníbal Quijano and Val Plumwood), which have dissected the roles of Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism in hegemonic power systems. Finally, the analysis culminates with the study of Indigenous movements, which actively challenge these structures by offering alternative and fundamental perspectives on humanity and our intrinsic relationship with nature.

On Environmental Colonialism and Its Re-shaping of Latin America

Environmental scholars have defined environmental colonialism, also known as green colonialism, as the practice by which dominant nations or entities exploit the so-called natural “resources” and ecological systems of less powerful regions for their own benefit. Hamouchene (2024) proposes the following definition of the term:



...the extension of the colonial relations of plunder and dispossession (as well as the dehumanisation of the other) in the era of the so-called green transition. Green colonialism pushes costs onto peripheral countries and communities and prioritises the energy and environmental needs...of one region of the world over another. (p. 1)

The historical roots of environmental colonialism trace back to the era of European colonization of the Americas, which saw a permanent re-ordering of the region's ecological and social systems. Prior to that, indigenous societies—ranging from hunter-gatherer groups to advanced civilizations such as the Inca, Maya, and Aztec—cultivated a balanced relationship with the natural world, incorporating artificial processes that promoted both productivity and conservation (Gligo, 2001, p. 57).

While these pre-Columbian societies had, inarguably, an impact on their environments, the scale, speed, and sustained nature of European-led changes were unprecedented. Western Europeans brought with them diseases that decimated native populations, livestock that altered landscapes, and technologies that facilitated the subjugation of ecosystems and societies. In this context, nature became a resource to be manipulated and owned, as it underpinned key economic activities of the Spanish crown, such as mining, export-oriented agriculture, and sugar production.

Significantly, the importation of African chattel slaves meant that most agricultural work was performed through coerced labor. “The latifundio system, which relied on large landholdings, led to extensive deforestation, the introduction of foreign plants, and the reshaping of the landscape by European livestock and crops” (Boyer, 2016, pp. 6–7). “This unequal exchange with the imperial powers of Spain and Portugal helped build fortunes in other European countries, including Britain, and provided Europe with a “comparative advantage” over other regions” (Dussel, 1998, p. 5), to

the detriment of indigenous and enslaved peoples and the environment.

The Wars of Independence failed to dismantle colonial structures. Instead, they led to the rise of colonial nation-states ruled by Creole elites, replacing a two-tiered system with a unitary, racialized one of white domination over non-whites (Mignolo, 2007, p. 157; Williamson, 1992, p. 115). While slavery was legally abolished in the Spanish Americas, other forms of coerced labor based on racial categories were established to meet economic demand (Quijano, 2000).

This era of environmental neo-colonialism deepened the subjugation of land and people and coincided with the global shift to carbon-emitting processes by rapidly industrializing nations. Burdened with debt, the new nations opened their economies to global commerce, leading to a “primary commodity exporting” phase that fed the Anthropocene with materials from Latin America (Meade, 2016, p. 225; Boyer, 2016, p. 8). This global metabolic rift created a hierarchical division of nations and an asymmetry of wealth, with the environmental riches of Latin America being appropriated by advanced nations.

In contemporary Latin America, the patterns of environmental colonialism have not only persisted but have also deepened and diversified. The end of the primary commodity export phase, triggered by the Great Depression, ushered in a new era of dependent development in which primary products were exported to finance industrialization. States encouraged environmentally harmful activities, such as opencast mining for new metals, often constructing hydro-electric mega-dams that displaced communities and produced toxic red mud. Military governments justified deforestation, pollution, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples under a discourse of resource nationalism (Boyer, 2016, p. 12-13), as exemplified by the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Mapuches in Argentina known



as the “Conquest of the Desert”.

Furthermore, transnational corporations, with their access to technology and expertise, operated under lax regulation, leading to significant environmental and human rights issues, as exemplified by Chevron/Texaco’s oil spill disaster in the Ecuadorian Amazon. This was further exacerbated by multilateral financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which imposed conditionalities to pressure governments to privatize public assets and liberalize economies. This period, termed “accumulation by dispossession” by Harvey (2005, p. 66), reaffirmed Latin America’s role as a supplier of primary commodities and cheap labor on the global stage.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the South American developmental landscape underwent a significant transition toward neo-extractivism. Gudynas (2009) characterizes this model as a development strategy—frequently adopted by progressive regimes—that maintains a structural dependence on the massive appropriation of natural resources for export while increasing direct State intervention through the capture of surpluses and the funding of social programs. Complementing this framework, Svampa (2013) introduces the concept of the “Commodities Consensus” to describe a regional shift toward a new economic and ideological order. This order is driven by a shared productivist vision and high global demand, resulting in a predatory form of extractivism that expands into new territories and prioritizes the exploitation of primary goods over traditional industrial or financial diversification.

Ontological Understandings of Environmental Colonialism in Decolonial Theory and Environmental Humanities

From the perspective of the environmental humanities, environmental colonialism and neoliberalism in La-

tin America are more than merely a socio-economic reality: it is a mindset and cultural ideology with roots in the Conquest. Indeed, in addition to bringing diseases, foreign livestock and plant species, and new technologies, the colonisers’ most significant import to the so-called “New World” was an ideological one: the concept of ascribing “value” to everything (Guardiola-Rivera, 2010, p. 54). *Conquistadores* saw the land as property and nature as a source of wealth to be exploited; a mindset that clashed with that of indigenous societies, for whom nature, a source of life, was intrinsically intertwined with spirituality and culture, whereas the concept of land was tied to communal practices.

Discussing the environmental dimension in the development of Latin America, Nicolo Gligo argues that “the colonial period brought two “fundamental fallacies” of the ontological kind: the notion of indigenous inferiority and the perception of the New World’s resources as inexhaustible, which together justified the dismantling of existing indigenous systems of conservation and governance” (Gligo, 2001, p. 65). Indigenous people were thus cast as the savage other, defined as close to nature and in opposition to the civilised Western European.

Quijano and Ennis (2000), whose work has been greatly influential to decolonial studies, argues “that the modern world-system, formed alongside the colonisation of the continent, is grounded in three foundational elements that continue to shape daily life globally: the coloniality of power, capitalism, and Eurocentrism” (p. 545). The coloniality of power, established with the conquest of the Americas, uses the concepts of race and control of labor to legitimize the domination of “superior” colonizers over “inferior” non-European races. Meanwhile, Eurocentrism is a specific Western European perspective on knowledge that was made to appear universal. It is the belief that Western Europeans are the sole producers of modernity and are at the center of the world’s power structure.



Concurrently, capitalism emerged as a global model of labour control, in which race and labour division were deeply intertwined. “Indigenous peoples were largely confined to serfdom, Africans to slavery, while white individuals were entitled to receive wages, produce commodities, and, in some cases, occupy elite positions” (Quijano and Ennis, 2000, p. 536). This world-order structure also reshaped intellectual and cultural perspectives, initiating what Quijano and Ennis (2000) describes as:

a long period of colonisation of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and assigning meaning, material life outcomes, imagination, and the universe of intersubjective relations with the world—in short, culture. (p. 541)

As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) observes, Western Europeans’ “specific image of the world and their sense of totality” fostered a need to devalue, suppress, or erase any alternative worldview that might threaten emerging epistemic totalitarianism (p. 195).

Australian ecocritic Val Plumwood further examines how hegemonic structures impose a master perspective that becomes culturally normalised, thereby naturalising and rendering invisible patterns of oppression. This master perspective operates through anthropocentrism, constructing “nature” as the other in parallel to how women are constructed in relation to men, people of colour to white individuals, and the colonised to the coloniser—as homogeneous, passive, lesser, devoid of agency, indistinguishable, and inessential (Plumwood, 2005, p. 106). Thus, the domination exercised by colonisers extended beyond resource exploitation, establishing a unilateral control over knowledge, worldviews, culture, and the natural world.

It is no surprise then that Latin America—a region whose colonial legacy has resulted in long-lasting and pervasive relationships based on hierarchy and exploitation closely related to capitalist accumulation—is the

deadliest territory on the planet for environmental defenders. In Brazil, the Kayapó people experience escalating violence amid a new influx of mining caused by stripped-back regulations; mining-related violence is taking place in Venezuela to the Uwottüja and Yanomami peoples and in Peru to the Kakataibos and Shipibo-Konibos peoples; in San Lorenzo, Ecuador, the Wimbí community is facing conflicts with the palm grower company Energy & Palma—these are just some examples of the numerous conflicts stemming from modern-day green colonialism.

Notably, these disputes take place in the territory where Black, indigenous, poor campesinos, and other racialised populations in the Latin American *mestizaje* framework are highly likely to fall victims of environmental suffering, forced migration, harassment, and deadly violence at the hands of actors in favour of mining, logging, agriculture, and other extra-activist projects. Such conflicts highlight the disposability of sectors of the population who have been delegated to the societal periphery due to an othering process that has elevated and prioritises those who are at the centre: populations who adhere to the Western European standards of progress and development. Hence, nature—itself an otherised being—is delegated for more “useful” purposes: benefiting the homogenised majority and international interests.

Resistance and Alternative “Cosmovisions” Challenging Environmental Colonialism in the 21st Century

While international discussions on the extractive economies of Latin America and consequential social issues might paint a false impression that local communities are nothing but powerless victims in the face of contemporary globalist, corporate, and state interests, there is active resistance—albeit not all necessarily decolonial in nature¹—and powerful mobilisations de-

¹ See Betancourt *et al.* (2025) and Betancourt and López (2021) for a deeper insight into the different ways in which Indigenous,



manding for social and environmental justice as well as greater political agency.

As Mignolo (2005) highlights in *La idea de América Latina*, social movements are seriously questioning the epistemology of colonial difference that sustains the unequal distribution of power, and calling for a transformation of el saber or ways of knowing, mainly led by indigenous peoples, Afro-Latinos, women of color, and LGBTI+ collectives. These groups, historically displaced and inferiorised, have no access to the state of markets (repudiating them) nor have they interiorised the perspectives foregrounded in Aristotelian, Platonic, or Biblical doctrines; therefore, such communities possess an epistemological power to challenge and affect the host of knowledge in which science, philosophy, political theory, ethics, and modern aesthetics are based and naturalised (p. 122).

The *Sumaq kawsay* or suma qamaña (Living well in English), for example, has emerged as a philosophy as well as a cultural and political proposal for achieving a full and harmonious life, championed by several indigenous communities throughout Latin America and collectives, such as *Movimiento de Mujeres y Diversidades Indígenas por el Buen Vivir*. This paradigm is based on a balanced coexistence between human beings and nature, as well as on community relations, transcending the Western vision of development by proposing a model of life centered on individual, collective, and ecological balance.

Sumaq kawsay departs from anthropocentrism; it challenges the One/Other binary by decentering the human and positioning life itself (and the many forms of life) at the center of planet Earth. Human beings are enmeshed with nature, not separate from it. Unlike the logic of environmental colonialism and the Western understanding of progress, *sumaq kawsay* is not about maximizing individual wealth or material accumulation. Afro-descendant, and campesino communities have developed resistance in the wake of territorial and socio-ecological conflicts.

but about achieving collective well-being in balance with the environment and social relationships.

In this context, indigenous environmental defenders like Berta Cáceres, who have been killed by environmental capitalism, have emerged as powerful symbols of alternative forms of resistance. “Berta vive” (Berta lives on) and “Berta no murió, es semilla y se multiplicó!” (Berta did not die; she is a seed and she multiplied) have become slogans chanted during manifestations and commemorations of the advocate’s life. Furthermore, her life, labour with COPINH, and untimely death have been the subjects of several cultural media, including the biography *Who Killed Berta Cáceres: Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender’s Battle for the Planet* by British journalist Nina Lakhani, a song by Jófríður Ákadóttir (JFDR), Sandrayati Fay and Damien Rice in honor of her fiftieth birthday, and documentaries like *Berta Vive* (2016) and *Berta soy yo* (2022). In this way, cultural mediums have not only become a way to commemorate the life and legacy of defenders like Berta Cáceres, but they have also become powerful tools to raise awareness and keep the fight for social and environmental justice alive.

Final Considerations

Latin America is experiencing a time of reckoning, with discussions around the colonial legacy in political, social, and environmental spheres gaining more traction. The arrival of Europeans in the Americas in the sixteenth century introduced environmental colonialism; thereby pushing in a capitalist world order marked by a Eurocentric, anthropocentric worldview that invalidated, suppressed, and exploited racialised human beings and nature. Today, this legacy persists in the disempowerment of non-white communities and in environmental exploitation through transnational extractivist projects, which seek to replicate Western neoliberal economic models and development paradigms, and even nationalist projects that, in their pursuit of de-



velopment and opposition to the great Western superpowers, replicate similar logics of environmental and social exploitation.

These projects have sparked numerous conflicts over territory and human rights, with Indigenous, campesino, and afro-descendant environmental defenders often facing fatal violence from powerful actors or those aligned with them. As previously discussed, the fields of decolonial studies and environmental humanities help us understand that the roots of these present-day issues are deeply entangled with Eurocentric and anthropocentric perspectives, which introduced a classification of both people and the natural world into categories of value to serve capitalist goals.

To counter these perspectives, some (not all) historically marginalized communities are mobilizing for recognition and more political agency, while campaigning for *Sumaq kawsay*; an indigenous philosophy centering on harmony between humans and nature. Furthermore, in the realm of culture, documentaries and literary works honour environmental advocates while also serving as important tools in the ongoing struggle for justice.

Consulted Bibliography

- Boyer, C. R. (2016, April 05). *Latin American Environmental History*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History. <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-295>.
- Dussel, E. (1998). Beyond eurocentrism: The world-system and the limits of modernity. In M. Miyoshi & F. Jameson (Eds.), *The cultures of globalization* (pp. 3–31). Duke University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378426-001>
- Gligo, N. (2001). *La dimensión ambiental en el desa-*

rrollo agrícola de América Latina. Libros de la CEPAL. Naciones Unidas Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL). <https://ideas.repec.org/b/ecr/col015/2262.html>

- Guardiola-Rivera, O. (2010). *What if Latin America ruled the world?: How the south will Take the north into the 22nd century*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hamouchene, H. (2024, February 26). *Green colonialism*. The Decolonial Centre. <https://decolonial-centre.org/2024/02/23/green-colonialism>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *The new imperialism*. OUP Oxford.
- Meade, T. A. (2016). *History of modern Latin America: 1800 to the present*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mignolo, W. (2005). *La idea de América Latina: la herida colonial y la opción decolonial* (S. Jawerbaum & J. Barba, Trans.). Gedisa Editorial. https://monoskop.org/images/8/8f/Mignolo_Walter_La_idea_de_America_Latina_2007.pdf
- Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498>
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). Eurocentrism and coloniality: The question of totality of knowledge. In *On decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis* (pp. 194–210). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11g9616.14>
- Plumwood, V. (2005). Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203996430>
- Quijano, A., & Ennis, M. (2000). Coloniality of Power,



Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3), 533-580. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23906>

Svampa, M. (2013). “«Consenso de los Commodities» y Lenguajes de valoración En América Latina.” *Americanæ (AECID Library)*, no. 244, Apr. 2013, pp. 30–46. <hdl.handle.net/11336/6451>

Williamson, E. (1992). *The penguin history of Latin America*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA17235148>

Zárate, R., Vélez, C., & Caballero, J. (2020). The extractive industry in Latin America, its incidence and the socio-environmental conflicts derived from the mining and hydrocarbon sector. *Revista Espacios*, 41(24). <https://www.revistaespacios.com/a20v41n24/a20v41n24p13.pdf>

