

# GLOBAL DIALOGUE

14.2

3 issues a year in multiple languages

Talking Sociology  
with Sari Hanafi

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Helle Haglund

South-South  
Cooperation and  
Racialization

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MAGAZINE



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# > Editorial

**A**s we close this issue of *Global Dialogue*, Gaza lies in ruins. We cannot look away. That is why this issue begins and ends with the war in Gaza. In our regular interview, Norwegian sociologists Thora Bjørke Sandberg and Helle Haglund interview former ISA president Sari Hanafi. As a Syrian-Palestinian, Hanafi lived in Palestine during the second intifada, the *al-Aqsa intifada*. He experienced firsthand what it is like to live under what he calls a ‘spacio-cidal’ Israeli project. In this conversation, he presents his reflections on the ongoing war in Gaza, calls for an institutional boycott of Israeli institutions, and discusses some common interpretations of the war that he considers inadequate or wrong.

In this issue, South-South and North-South relations are the focus of two thematic sections. In the first, organized by Carolina Vestena, Eric Cezne, and Marie Stiller, South-South cooperation is interrogated through the dynamics of hierarchization and racialization. They argue that it is crucial to look at broader forms of domination undergirding South-South cooperation in order to analyze global cooperation challenges. The articles in this section seek to do that going beyond the ideas of symmetrical cooperation and mutual help. In particular, they discuss how the real-life experience of South-South cooperation is marked by interpersonal and institutionalized forms of racialization.

The following section explores the synergy possibilities between degrowth in the Global North and post-extractivist alternatives from the Global South. Taken together, the different articles in this section explore issues such as global asymmetries and North-South relations, decolonial global alliances against green growth, the need to contest the framework of ‘just eco-social transitions’ or the different paths to building a grassroots energy transition, and a decolonial climate justice movement that has alternatives to capitalism and the defense of life at its core. This section is inspired by broader dialogues carried out by the Ecosocial Pact of the South and its allies in the Global South and North, as portrayed in the book [The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism: Global Justice and Ecosocial Transitions](#).

The section “Open Movements” presents an overview of the role of protests and social movements in contemporary political processes in four Latin American countries. In Guatemala, Ana Silvia Monzón examines how indigenous and popular protagonism has been a key feature for the election of the current progressive president, the sociologist Bernardo Arévalo. In the Chilean case, Carmen Gemita Oyarzo discusses the expectations of change generated by the constituent process, the reasons for its defeat, and the subsequent reconfiguration of movements. Furthermore, Julián Rebón analyzes the beginnings of the resistance against Milei during his first hundred days in office, while Jesús Gómez-Abarca takes stock of ten years of impunity in Mexico through the case of the 43 students who disappeared in Ayotzinapa.

In the theoretical section, Nadia Bou Ali and Ray Brassier elaborate on the notion of “surplus population” as a characterization of the unemployed masses. This original article is being published here in partnership with the Alameda Institute.

Lastly, in our “Open Section,” Simon Schaupp discusses what labor conflicts can teach us about the relationship between the capitalist labor process and the ecological crisis, while Qatari sociologists Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil present some of the main trends and consequences of digital transformations in the Middle East. The latest article is a call – perhaps more than that, a shout – signed by 158 Palestinian academics and staff of Gaza universities. They call on academics and universities around the world to help them resist Israel’s campaign of ‘scholasticide’ and rebuild their universities. As Sari Hanafi said in the opening interview of this issue, scholars and academic institutions have a social and moral responsibility. I would add that no global dialogue is really possible if we don’t fight against hierarchies and colonial and authoritarian powers. ■

**Breno Bringel**, editor of *Global Dialogue*

> **Global Dialogue can be found in multiple languages at its [website](#).**

> **Submissions should be sent to: [globaldialogue@isa-sociology.org](mailto:globaldialogue@isa-sociology.org).**

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In the section “Talking Sociology”, Norwegian sociologists Thora Bjørke Sandberg and Helle Haglund interview former ISA president Sari Hanafi about **the ongoing war in Gaza**.



The thematic section “**South-South Cooperation and Racialization**” seeks to highlight broader forms of domination undergirding South-South cooperation in order to analyze some of the main global cooperation challenges.



The thematic section “Open Movements” presents an overview of **the role of protests and social movements** in contemporary political processes in four Latin American countries.

Cover picture: Planalto Palace, Brasilia. Credit: Lucas Leffa @lleffa, 2024.



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“Boycott against individuals is often the field of intervention of the culture of cancellation. Institutional boycott, on the other hand, targets the complicity of institutions with active oppressive power”

Sari Hanafi

# > The War in Gaza and the Responsibility of Universities

## An Interview with Sari Hanafi



Sari Hanafi in Palestinian encampments in Oslo University. Credit: personal archive.

**Sari Hanafi** is currently a Professor of Sociology, Director of the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, and Chair of the Islamic Studies program at the American University of Beirut. He is a corresponding fellow of the British Academy and the past President of the International Sociological Association (2018-23). He is the author of numerous articles and books on the sociology of religion, the sociology of (forced) migration applied to Palestinian refugees, and the politics of scientific research. As a Syrian-Palestinian, Hanafi lived in Palestine when the second Intifada, the *al-Aqsa intifada*, occurred. He experienced firsthand what it is like to live under what he calls a spacio-cidal Israeli project. In this conversation, he presents his reflections on the ongoing war in Gaza, calls for an institutional boycott of Israeli institutions, and discusses some common interpretations in vogue today about the war, which he considers insufficient or mistaken. The interview was held in May 2024 by **Thora Bjørke Sandberg** and **Helle Haglund**, members of [Sosiologen.no](http://Sosiologen.no), an editorial project based in Oslo, part of the Norwegian Sociological Association, and supported by OsloMet, the University of Bergen, NTNU, the University of Oslo and the University of Tromsø.

**Thora Bjørke Sandberg (TBS) and Helle Haglund (HH):** Professor Hanafi, what were your immediate thoughts after the October 7 attack? Did it affect how you view(ed) the ongoing war in Gaza?

**Sari Hanafi (SH):** The war started in 1947 and continues into different episodes. I see the Palestinian October 7 attack as part of this protracted process of colonization and of resistance to this colonization. Mainly since 2000, when the Israeli, whether government or public opinion,

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decided not to implement the Oslo peace process, engaging in crushing violently the second Intifada, the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza Ghetto have been so ugly (according to [UN statistics](#), the death toll of Palestinians killed by the Israeli army and the settlers is 21 times higher than that of Israelis, to which should be added land dispossession, expansion and mushrooming of illegal settlement, etc.) that why should we expect Palestinian resistance to be beautiful? Sociologically, this is wishful thinking. Yet, as a sociologist who thinks about his social and moral responsibility, I need to take a position. Some have used the history of Israeli violence in the region to exonerate Hamas.

In contrast, others argue that demanding a moral balance from Palestinians – whose very lives are at stake – is unjust. But perhaps the reluctance among some of us to pass moral judgments on the actions of Hamas is because we don't know how we would act or react if we were living in a concentration camp under the same horrendous conditions. It is ultimately my view that any attack that does not discriminate between civilians and combatants must be condemned. But I certainly do not condemn the right of the colonized to resist the colonizers by violent means.

**TBS & HH: The University of Oslo recently said no to an academic boycott of Israel while at the same time condemning all violations of international law and demanding an immediate ceasefire and a halt to the attacks against civilians in the Gaza Strip and Israel. What are your thoughts on stances like this one?**

**SH:** I would ask scholars and academic institutions to evaluate their social and moral responsibility. I do believe in the moral obligation to carry out an institutional boycott against any institution that has a relationship with colonial or authoritarian powers, *but not at the individual level*. I would call for boycotting not only Israeli institutions but also Syrian universities. The idea of an institutional boycott is often used in liberal democratic countries, yet when it comes to the Israeli case, these countries are reluctant in the name of academic freedom. The European institutions have always been doing this; remember the boycott against the Russian institutions after the invasion of Ukraine and before that, against the apartheid regime in South Africa. I remember a Palestinian colleague from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics who was supposed to participate in an academic workshop in 2008 at the European University Institute in Florence. The invitation was suddenly rescinded two days before the date of the workshop, as Hamas, at that time, won the election, and the workshop was funded by the EU. In my own university, the American University of Beirut (AUB), we cannot invite any external speaker or even registered attendee to a Zoom talk at AUB without vetting using a State Department database. Compliance is necessary to get some funding from

USAID. According to this database, we cannot invite scholars affiliated with an Iranian public university.

Today I think, in line with the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, and the UN quasi-qualification of the War on Gaza as genocidal, that boycotting Israeli institutions is a moral imperative. Already in 2021 and 2022, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, but also the Israeli human rights groups B'Tselem and Yesh Din considered Israel an apartheid state.

I just finished reading the terrific book authored by an Israeli scholar, Maya Wind [Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom](#). This book clearly shows not only the structural racism of the Israeli state as racial inequality is written into the law but also how Israeli universities are entangled with Israeli systems of oppression. Tel Aviv University has many partnerships with the Israeli military: training soldiers, allowing military officers to teach there, providing technology, ethics for extra-judicial killing, etc. Wind gives the example of the “prestigious ‘Erez’ BA program for officers in combat military units. The dual-major degree includes an academic program focused on military ‘areas of interest,’ paired with another program in the humanities, social sciences, business, or engineering. In the Erez program, the military explains, ‘military and academic training are intertwined,’ wherein the cadets are transformed ‘from civilians to elite fighters.’” The other eight Israeli universities do the same (two of them are in the Occupied West Bank), offering expertise, infrastructure, and technologies developed in and through Israeli universities to support Israeli territorial, demographic, and military projects. Israelis in humanities and the social sciences collaborate in colonial archaeology (stealing artifacts from the Palestinian territories), legal studies, Middle East Studies, and training for the Security State.

At the same time, we must recognize that Israeli academia has succeeded in producing some great, courageous scholars who speak truth to power. I am thinking of Lev Grinberg, Oren Yiftachel, and Eva Illouz, among others. Looking at my co-edited book with two Israeli philosophers and friends, Adi Ophir and Michal Givoni, [The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories](#), it is interesting to realize that most of the Israeli contributors now have positions outside Israel. I know that they were harassed to the point of leaving the Israeli academia. The oppression suffered by Hebrew University Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, whose contract was frozen and who was arrested and interrogated by the Israeli police, is just one of many stories heard not only since October 7 but much earlier.

**TBS & HH: This is about a boycott, but what about the other two items included in BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions)?**

**SH:** I am so aback to see that most of the endowments of universities now are part of millionaires' hedge funds. These millionaires are interested in maximizing gains, often looking into lucrative investments in the arms and tobacco industries in the US and in many other countries. What a stark contrast: we teach our students the so-called "liberal arts" while funding this arms/tobacco-military-authoritarian-colonial complex? We should use the same argument for divesting from the Israeli industry, which we know from so many studies to what extent it is complicit with the Israeli settler colonial and apartheid military projects and sanctioning them.

**TBS & HH:** *Some may argue that BDS is a form of antisemitism...*

**SH:** The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a colonial one, even if some would see it as competing nationalisms in the tragic context of post-WWII. Even in this version, one national group dispossesses the other national group. According to international law, the Palestinian territories in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza are occupied land. There is an occupier who has everyday colonial and apartheid practices, and resistance against them. Talking about hate for Jews or antisemitism is, for me, nonsensical. Today, the materiality and the graphic images of the genocide in the making outrage any people who believe in humanity. Antisemitism today, as a subject, shuts down debate and discussion. I never heard about anti-South African or anti-Africana views when people called for academic and economic boycotts of South Africa during the apartheid regime. I am sure most of the European academia boycotts Russian institutions. I never hear people say this is anti-Russian. That being said, antisemitism is vivid in some parts of the world, but conflating it with anti-Zionism or critique of Israeli colonial practices is so misleading.

**TBS & HH:** *Some may also argue that the slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" is antisemitic.*

**SH:** This is definitely a bad interpretation of how most activists use it. In demonstrations in the Euro-American sphere, I have seen many banners and interviews with the demonstrators clearly spelling out that this was a call for a democratic and secular state for all its residents. This means it is no matter what it should be called: Palestine/Israel or any third name. Even Moussa Abu Marzouk, number 3 in the leadership of Hamas, made it clear in a [recent interview](#) that the one-state solution is one man, one vote, no matter what the religion of the person. The choice of this slogan is a reaction to the everyday Israeli settler colonial practices under the politics of "From the River to the Sea." Let's not forget that Netanyahu's own party, Likud, has this slogan on its chart. Worse still, the River is not the Jordan River but the Euphrates.

The Holocaust's memory remains vivid in Europe, and I understand that the October 7 Hamas attack, which does not discriminate between civilians and combatants, has brought back some memories in a sincere manner. But this old generation should also understand why the youth, with their radical slogan, reflect their experience as human beings watching how the Israeli Army is killing and starving women and children, destroying their schools and universities in Gaza – what some scholars call '[scholasticide](#).' However, I should admit that young people often do not watch the same materials: just compare DW News and France 24 to Al Jazeera. This is why we must create a dialogue space inside the campus to expose different groups to different arguments.

**TBS & HH:** *How would you respond if someone said an institutional boycott is the same as canceling others' culture?*

**SH:** Boycott against individuals is often the field of intervention of the culture of cancellation (e.g., disinvitation of a speaker, removing the status of a personality). Institutional boycott, on the other hand, targets the complicity of the institutions with active oppressive power. The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is recognized by the international community as a violation of international law, as was the apartheid regime of South Africa. Institutional boycott should be understood as a last resort peaceful mode of resistance. In this sense, it is not a cancellation of the Israeli culture but undermines the university-military complex. Calling for such a boycott did not prevent me from co-editing a book with two Israeli philosophers. By doing this, I want to invite both Palestinian and Israeli scholars to read each other: no voice should be canceled.

**TBS & HH:** *Is it possible for universities to remain neutral in situations like this?*

**SH:** Silence means complicity. For decades, universities have been a site of protests, open discussion, and disagreement about the politics of hegemonic authorities, as was the case from the Vietnam War to apartheid South Africa. They are a space of free speech that only works when there is vigorous counter-speech. I am, therefore, against any attempt to cancel the culture of others, whether it be related to political, social, or race and gender issues.

**TBS & HH:** *You coined the concept of 'spacio-cide.' What does it mean? And what do you think of the attention and awareness (or lack thereof) regarding the situation in Palestine before the attacks on October 7?*

**SH:** Between 1999 and 2004, I lived in Occupied Palestine at the peak of the [Second Intifada](#). At the time, I

forged this concept of ‘[spacio-cide](#),’ as I was interested in both the question of Palestinian refugees and the political sociology of the conflict. The Israeli settler colonial project has long been “spacio-cidal” (as opposed to genocidal) in that it targets land for the expulsion of Palestinians. By targeting the space upon which the Palestinian people live, this policy forces and makes inevitable the transfer of the Palestinian population.

Spacio-cide is a deliberate ideology with a unified rationale of more land for Jews and less for Palestinians. It’s a dynamic process that interacts with the shifting context, including the actions of the Palestinian resistance. It’s the culmination of different “-cides,” making the Palestinian land unlivable through restrictions on the mobility of the Palestinians, killing Palestinian leaders (politi-cide), stealing groundwater so necessary for Palestinian agriculture and undermining Palestinians’ potential economic viability (econo-cide). By describing and questioning different aspects of the Israeli military-judicial-civil apparatuses, I show that the spacio-cidal project became possible through a regime that deploys three principles: colonization (confiscating more land), separation (between Israeli land and Palestinian land), and the state of exception that mediates between these two seemingly contradictory principles. Now, the Israeli colonial project has moved from being spacio-cidal to genocidal.

**TBS & HH: One last question, looking to the future. What are your thoughts on the future for Palestine/Israel (big question, I know)? Are you positive and hopeful? Do you have a “dream scenario”?**

**SH:** As a sociologist who has seen how bloody the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is, it is very difficult to envisage a right-away one-state solution, yet a two-state solution should be a first step toward establishing *multinational* liberal democracy in the space of Palestine-Israel. This means establishing two chambers: one reflects the “one man, one vote” principle to deal with matters related to all citizens; in the second one, two national groups (Jews, Arabs) debate their everyday issues of autonomy. My Israeli colleague, the sociologist Julie Cooper, developed some interesting thoughts in this direction. Still, this reflects the spirit of the 2007 Haifa Declaration, co-written by Nadim Rouhana, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, and others and signed by many Palestinian scholars and activists. But more urgently, the current Israeli genocide in Gaza must be stopped. We must allow the new generations, our students, around the world to express their outrage at the complicity of mainstream political parties and many university administrations in this war. In the language of Rana Sukarieh, their struggle reflects an anti-colonial Third World internationalist imagination. Hurray for such a mobilization! ■

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# > Hierarchies and Racialisation in South-South Cooperation

by **Carolina Vestena**, University of Kassel, Germany, **Eric Cezne**, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, and **Marie Stiller\***



Delegations held a Plenary Meeting of the Economic Section during the Asian-African Conference in Merdeka Building, Bandung, on April 20, 1955. Credit: Public domain.

**S**outh-South cooperation (SSC) is a key dynamic in the international order. Historical examples include the Bandung Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, and Pan-Africanism, which emerged against the backdrop of decolonisation movements in Africa and Asia during the 1950s and 1960s. More recent examples, particularly in the post-2000 period, can be found in the search for strategic commercial partnerships and political clout by emerging powers such as Brazil, India, China and South Africa – and their respective groupings such as the BRICS – at the height of the commodities boom and amid growing disenchantment with Northern-led globalisation. Although not a new phenomenon, narratives about SSC and potential counter-hegemonic ties [have mushroomed](#) in recent years.

However, South-South cooperation encompasses more than attempts at enhancing political or economic power, as in the case of the BRICS. More [broadly](#), it can be [associated](#) with the transfer and exchange of resources, expertise, and technology. It includes diverse forms of interpersonal contact mediated through institutional cooperation in the fields of business, education, or labour migration among countries and private actors in what is conventionally referred to as the “Global South”. Terms such as South-South “solidarity”, “friendship”, and “mutual help” are often deployed to characterise and legitimise SSC strategies and practices, which are projected as more horizontal and better suited to Southern countries’ own interests and development contexts.

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Such a positive perspective on South-South cooperation is intended to stress the agency, independence, and resourcefulness of Global South countries. It also undergirds the multifaceted concept of the Global South itself, as [historical analysis](#) of the concept reveals (for example, see Stiller's contribution [in this issue](#)). [Transnational networks](#) of social movements also evoke a positive notion of South-South solidarity when advocating alternative globalisation or novel ways of tackling the climate crisis. Positive images of SSC are invoked from all angles: from “below” as well as from “above”.

But if South-South cooperation – as a political project, a typical practice within the international order, and a conceptual heuristic to highlight the agency of Southern actors – has such an intrinsically positive character, how can we explain the perpetuation of inequalities and hierarchies within such projects of cooperation?

[Critical literature on South-South cooperation](#) has already shown that there is no such thing as neutral cooperation since international exchange and cooperation also reflect (domestic) societal relations of domination. Much of the literature has criticised global hierarchies built on the logic of capitalism. Du Bois, for instance, famously published a series of essays on the international order in the aftermath of the First World War in which he argued that the structuring force of the capitalist economy also manifests itself in the maintenance of racialised hierarchies and the division of labour in countries of both the Global North and South. This interpretation, which seeks to combine capitalist structures and racialised hierarchies, is fundamental to reflections on the complexity of relations of domination in the international order.

However, most South-South cooperation studies still only focus on economic and political hierarchies, leaving out the component of racialisation, i.e. the questions of whether and how such relations are racialised. This could lead to a one-dimensional understanding of global cooperation's challenges and its intrinsic conflicts. Moreover, it would offer no understanding of why such SSC projects strive for discursive legitimisation through the dissemination of narratives of friendship and mutual cooperation from the South.

We argue that it is crucial to look at broader forms of domination undergirding South-South cooperation in order to analyse challenges for global cooperation. We further claim that multidimensional analysis of SSC requires to

study conflicts at different levels, whether within relations between states, international institutions, or actors on the ground. While narratives of friendship and mutual help camouflage the asymmetrical relations of power and hierarchical positions that underpin these efforts of international cooperation, we seek to contribute to [an emerging strand of research on SSC](#) likely to take such complexities on board.

The series of articles that follows shows that behind officially proclaimed ideas of symmetrical cooperation and mutual help, the real-life experience of SSC is marked by interpersonal and institutionalised forms of racialisation, which produce hierarchies and dynamics of differentiation. Racialisation processes also frame the perspectives of the “other” (i.e. the population considered as ethnically different, normally/most often Black citizens) by the very institutions and actors on the international level.

As the literature has primarily stressed economic and political hierarchies, we focus on practices of racialisation, even though we recognise that various dimensions contribute to global hierarchies including class, gender, and citizenship status. Our discussion of South-South cooperation engages with the problematic societal phenomena of racialisation as a heuristic category to reflect on different aspects. Firstly, we consider how racialisation plays out within SSC as one form of hierarchisation and the construction of “cooperators-divided”. We also discuss the role racialisation plays at different levels and in different actor constellations; for example, SSC involving states, international organisations, and transnational movements. Finally, by taking into account spatially situated developments and projects in South-South investment, educational projects, or actors' perceptions of international institutions, the contributions can provide a ground-level perspective on how SSC shapes racialisation locally.

These three dimensions of the debate on racialisation in South-South global cooperation can, on the one hand, offer a more nuanced perspective on the power dynamics within global cooperation, even when it is meant to change power imbalances between the “Global North and South”. On the other hand, this discussion can also be fruitful when it comes to thinking about the structural role of racially-based hierarchies in society and interrelations with other forms of domination, such as gender, class, or ethnic-based hierarchies, and how they have been perpetuated at different levels within the global order. ■

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# > The “Global South” Concept

## and its Unfulfilled Anti-Racist Ideals

by **Marie Stiller\***



Global South and Global North. Credit: Global Majority Wikimedia Technology Priorities.

**I**n his [inaugural address](#) given on April 18, 1955 at the Bandung Conference, the Indonesian President Sukarno linked the “Global South” countries and the question of racism in the following way:

*“We are of many different nations, we are of many different social backgrounds and cultural patterns. [...] Our racial stock is different, and even the colour of our skin is different. But what does that matter? Mankind is united or divided by considerations other than these. Conflict comes not from variety of skins, nor from variety of religion, but from variety of desires. All of us, I am certain, are united by more important things than those which superficially divide us. We are united, for instance, by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of racialism. And we are united by a common determination to preserve and stabilize peace in the world.”*

The Global South was featured here as an anti-colonialist, anti-racist and pro-peace project. This forum, however, shows how South-South cooperation processes have been marked by various kinds of racialization processes. If there is indeed an anti-racist project from the Global South, the promise it offers is still unfulfilled.

### > Racialization and the Global South

Racialization is understood here as a practice by which a group of people is attributed a specific racial meaning

or stereotype. Racialization sustains hierarchical social structures based on the category of “race”. The concept of racialization helps us study practices that result in racial inequality or racism. Moreover, using the term can be a way to avoid the supposedly biological category of “race” for which there is no scientific basis (see the Introduction of this thematic issue).

While the anti-racist ideals have not been realized, the Global South as social imaginary has nonetheless constantly been invoked to create a sense of solidarity among formerly colonized states, institutions and peoples. Governments, in particular, have often used the language of Global South solidarity as a strategic rhetorical device [to legitimize international cooperation](#) or “development initiatives”.

The Global South is not a homogenous entity but a construct that is partly legitimized by a proclaimed anti-racism that remains wanting. The purpose of this short contribution is to problematize the Global South concept along these lines.

### > A trinity of concepts

Generally, the Global South concept is [deeply ambiguous and underconceptualized](#). As social imaginary it may sustain rather than defeat a range of injustices, including racial injustices.

[Schneider](#) (2017) distinguishes three main “Global South” concepts: the geographical Global South, the sub-

altern Global South, and the Global South as a flexible metaphor. The geographical is the most common usage and locates the Global South in those formerly colonized world regions that are conceived of as structurally underdeveloped and poverty-stricken (formerly the “Third World”): Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The geographical concept is dominant in contemporary discourses. It is used by powerful supranational institutions like the United Nations and is based on a nation-state and inter-state perspective.

The second model of the Global South, first suggested by [Alfred López \(2007\)](#), relates to the “subalterns” across the globe: human beings disadvantaged by neoliberal policies who are socially, politically, and intellectually disempowered. They are “global” because they can no longer be confined to a single region. While López dissociates the “Southerner” from a geographic location (the Southerner is everywhere), he ultimately reduces the “South” to “class”.

Lastly, a third reading regards the Global South as a *flexible metaphor* that cannot be reduced to a geographical setting (like Latin America, Africa and Asia) or a socially fixed element (like class). Rather, it is *relational*. This third concept draws a metaphorical border between a supposedly powerful North and a deprived South. To provide an example, it could be related to the border between Northern and Southern Italy, or between the well-off Germans and the disenfranchised German population. It is abstract because it is “flexible”. It can relate to both a geographical and a social distinction, and any kind of inequality.

On closer inspection, all three conceptualizations have their advantages and disadvantages. Also, they relate to a specific historical moment or development. This becomes apparent when we ask: When did the Global South first emerge and when did it replace the concept of the Third World?

Historically, the rise of the term is related to the period of decolonization and the rise of national identities among formerly colonized peoples. The term “Global South” started to become common usage precisely in the 1960s and 1970s after the landmark event of Bandung (1955) and the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 and of The Group of 77 in 1964. It gradually came to replace the terms “West” and “East” as well as that of the “Third World”, which had turned into a pejorative concept. The term “Global South” was associated with a vision of a fairer economic order and the struggle for inter-state and interregional equality. It included the call for new responsibility on the part of the Global North.

### > Heterogeneity, internal divisions, and the dangers of oversimplification

Most scholars agree that the Global South – in its historically oldest and most commonly used reading: the geographical reading – is too unsophisticated a category to describe the “real” world. For instance, there is a massive (and growing) diversity among countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. China, Brazil, and India, along with South Africa (the Southern BRICS) can hardly be clustered with Somalia, one of the poorest countries in the world. Rather China and Brazil have become global stakeholders in [many African regions](#), a development that is conspicuously silenced by the label “South”. Moreover, the geographical reading omits the striking divisions within these Southern nations: the vast gap between rich and poor in these countries. As Vijay Prashad has traced in his [Possible History of the Global South](#) (2012), the South has never been a homogeneous entity but has been divided along ideological trenches (e.g. revolving around neoliberalism).

Yet, most crucially, the geographical reading omits the striking divisions along class, race, gender, and regional lines within these “Southern” countries. López’s concept of the subaltern Global South tries to point to “class” divisions, even acknowledging that poverty is often racialized, and essentially draws on the category of “class”.

So, if until now all available concepts of the Global South have fallen short of accurately describing the real world, what they have downplayed, in particular, are the inequalities revolving around processes of racialization. We lack a concept that moves beyond Black–White binaries and dichotomies centered on Euro-American frames of reference, as this thematic issue demonstrates.

Even if the anti-racist ideals of Sukarno’s South have not been fulfilled, the Global South as imaginary continues to be constantly invoked in a sense of solidarity among formerly colonized people as well as scholars from the North. Many scholars and engaged intellectuals use it in the absence of alternative terms. But it is also often used in pursuit of a fairer and socially more progressive world: to continue to call for an anti-racist, anti-colonial and peace world (Schneider 2017).

Yet, the Global South is not a homogenous entity, but a construct that is partly legitimized via a proclaimed anti-racism it fails to deliver. As such, uncritical use of the concept runs the danger of blinding us to new forms of racialization, racism, and coloniality. ■

\* The author opted to use a pseudonym.

# > The Salience of Race in the Africa–China Encounter

by **Eric Cezne**, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, and **Roos Visser**, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Construction of the ILA Tours highway by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) in Thiès, Senegal. Credit: Yifan Yang.

In 2020, amid the powerful confluence of a global pandemic and worldwide anti-racist protests, [events](#) in the Chinese city of Guangzhou reignited discussions of racism in Africa–China relations. Measures implemented to prevent and contain Covid-19 disproportionately targeted Africans and people of African descent. Many faced eviction, homelessness, and discrimination in public spaces, sparking an outcry among African diasporas and governments.

Africa–China relations have [traditionally](#) been depicted as friendship grounded in South–South solidarity and empathy. The significant growth in these, especially since the early 2000s, has given rise to a plethora of opportunities but also challenges. The surge in travel, migration, and business in both directions has fostered dynamic trade, investment, and cultural exchanges. Yet, increased contact has also led to instances of racial discrimination, suspicion, and segregation, to which the recent incidents in Guangzhou stand as a testament.

Racism and racial prejudice in Africa–China relations are rooted in intricate historical and global dynamics. Importantly, these issues are not limited to Chinese perspectives

and treatment of Africans, as racism manifests in various forms. Racialization – the extension of racial meanings and classifications to social relationships – occurs in both directions, impacting Africans in China and Chinese individuals in Africa alike.

## > Africans in China

Apart from Guangzhou, numerous cases of anti-African (usually anti-Black) sentiment have been documented across China. A notable case is the “[campus-racism](#)” of the 1980s, with African students facing a racially motivated backlash from their Chinese peers. Africans were depicted as “polluting” Chinese society through their relationships with Chinese women, as backward and lazy, and deemed unworthy of China’s aid.

Such racial thinking has persisted over time and has now [found a platform on Chinese social media channels](#) like WeChat and Weibo, where it is not uncommon to encounter racial slurs against Africans. Chinese users frequently construct a derogatory image of Africa and Africans, which is contrasted to China’s recent successes and development. By racializing Africans as lazy, unde-

serving, and sexually aggressive, the Chinese seek to position themselves as hardworking, deserving, and respectful. This depiction reflects [historical constructions](#) of Blackness and racial identities in China, which are often intertwined with notions of cultural and racial superiority, particularly of the dominant Han group over foreigners and other Chinese minorities.

Today, approximately 500,000 African migrants live in China, experiencing varied perceptions of racism in their interactions with the local population. While some feel welcomed and attribute discriminatory behavior to ignorance, others encounter highly prejudiced treatment. Often, racial discrimination in China is viewed as primarily institutional. Unlike the “campus-racism” of the 1980s, clashes often occur between (illegal) African residents and hostile authorities, who are seen to [unfairly apply migration and law enforcement measures against Africans](#). Many have [blamed African governments](#) for failing to address their citizens’ grievances in China, over fears of jeopardizing bilateral economic and political deals. Adding to such frustrations is the relative ease with which Chinese migrants secure visas and permits in Africa, compared to the challenges faced by African nationals in China.

The Chinese government has consistently downplayed racial controversies, dismissing instances of anti-African sentiment as isolated and insisting that racism is a Western problem. However, following the widely publicized events in Guangzhou and the outcry from African diasporas and governments, Chinese authorities have been compelled to cautiously acknowledge the existence of racial prejudices. In particular situations, token measures have been implemented to curb discriminatory practices, such as [improving foreigners’ access to the health app system](#) to facilitate entry into public spaces during Covid-19 restrictions.

However, such measures tend to treat racism and discrimination as incidental and localized issues rather than systemic and pervasive traits. Deep-seated challenges persist as China tightly restricts human rights advocacy and activism, including anti-racist agendas. Despite the government’s strict control over political and media spaces, it has not yet made significant efforts to curb racial discourses and behaviors within (online) Chinese society.

### > Chinese in Africa

When examining the Chinese presence in Africa, racial discrimination and tensions are commonly discussed within the context of labor relations, particularly at Chinese construction projects. Chinese employers, managers, and workers have been [criticized](#) for displaying racist behaviors when referring to the working habits and practices of their African counterparts, who are portrayed as lazy, unreliable,

and untrustworthy. The Chinese have also been [accused of engaging in self-segregation](#): choosing to isolate themselves from Africans in terms of residence, language, and socialization practices due to a dislike of diversity. Notwithstanding, [others have cautioned](#) against generic readings of Chinese racism in Africa. We are reminded that labor inequalities and patterns of self-segregation have long been (and remain) a feature of the Western presence in the continent and that there are successful cases of language acquisition and social integration by the Chinese.

Simultaneously, discernible patterns of hostility and anti-China sentiment emerge among African stakeholders. [One line of thinking](#) suggests that African racializations of the Chinese must be taken into account too, acknowledging African agency. Anti-Chinese attitudes in Africa mostly come from economic groups who are in direct competition with Chinese entrepreneurs and labor, for instance, those who suffer job losses or experience precarious working conditions. Often, negative portrayals of China as the “[yellow peril](#)” engaging in predatory or neo-colonial activities in Africa – common in Western policy and media portrayals – contribute to amplifying these sentiments. This underscores how Africa–China relations are also racialized by external actors, involving an intricate interplay between Whiteness, Blackness, and Chineseness.

African leaders occasionally capitalize on negative sentiments toward the Chinese for political gain, sometimes [resorting to strategies of racial nationalism](#). Criticizing China can serve as a convenient tool for ruling elites to deflect scrutiny and consolidate political power during periods of vulnerability; while opposition groups may utilize anti-China rhetoric to challenge incumbent parties. [A notable example](#) is that of Zambian politician Michael Sata, who campaigned for the presidency in 2011 on an anti-Chinese platform. Upon assuming office, however, he modified his rhetoric and actively pursued economic ties with China.

It is crucial, nonetheless, always to contextualize these dynamics and distinguish local, national, and supranational scales. Across many African states, local populations [generally welcome](#) the Chinese, appreciating China’s investment, trade, and overall development successes. Yet, while Africans value their relationship with China, they are not prepared to do so at any price, [as declared by](#) the deputy Chairperson of the African Union, Kwesi Quartey, in response to the hostilities against Africans in Guangzhou during the pandemic. This highlights the political importance of race-related issues and the necessity for both sides to engage meaningfully with them. Doing so is vital to sustain and strengthen what is often referred to as Sino-African friendship amid evolving – and increasingly challenging – global conjunctures. ■

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# > Pioneering South-South Cooperation of Angola and Cuba (1975-1991)

by **Christine Hatzky**, Leibniz University Hannover, Germany



*The Angolan commander and Cuban major general of the Eastern Front, Dangereaux Kimenga and Carlos Fernández Gondín, in 1975. Credit: Alfonso Naranjo Rosabal / Wikimedia Commons.*

**W**hat are the special features of South-South cooperation? In certain cases, first and foremost it involves cooperation between the governments, institutions, armed forces, and populations of two formerly colonized countries. I will illustrate this using the example of Angola and Cuba, and outline the peculiarities and historical context from which this cooperation emerged. The project took place in the era of decolonization, against the backdrop of the division of the world between capitalist and socialist systems. The era was also characterized by the still persisting hope that strong cohesion between formerly colonized countries would be able to overcome capitalism and imperialism, forging their own path of development beyond those two systems.

The case of Cuba and Angola is a case of cooperation between two left-wing projects: the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the Cuban government. The former had not yet determined its final direction, the latter was committed to socialism, but was attempting to overcome the political constraints of a Soviet system. Based on the principles of internationalist solidarity, the cooperation between the two countries aimed at establishing an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist transat-

lantic alliance that opposed US hegemony. Because Angola was (and still is) also rich in raw materials (oil, ores, diamonds), such a cooperation offered Cuba the prospect of more economic (and thus more political) independence from the Soviet Union as well as the opportunity to circumvent the economic blockade imposed by the US government in 1960.

Although it was a cooperation between equals, it was not entirely free of hierarchies and each side always pursued its own political and economic interests. Of course, these hierarchies also included racist assumptions on both sides, but these were not addressed – at least not in the official discourse. There was no room for racism in the discourse of internationalist solidarity within the historical context of decolonization. The existing hierarchies and racializations were rather concealed by a rhetoric of anti-colonialist and anti-racist solidarity, with the aim of strengthening cohesion between liberation movements and independent governments in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

## > Civil cooperation alongside military support

At the end of the war against Portuguese colonialism in 1975 and in the subsequent post-colonial war against

the rivals of the MPLA – the FNLA and Unita – and the South African apartheid regime allied with them, around 400,000 Cuban soldiers fought alongside the MPLA forces until 1991. Civil cooperation developed from this military cooperation, as it became clear that an independent Angola needed much more than just military support: reconstruction aid in all political, social, and economic areas. Therefore, the President of independent Angola, Agostinho Neto, asked the Cuban government for additional civil support, particularly in the areas of education, health, and infrastructure. The Cuban government agreed and made its knowhow available via experts and skilled workers at all levels, and up until 1991 around 50,000 Cuban civilians were working in Angola. These included advisors in ministries, doctors, nurses, engineers, and teachers, who supported the development of the basic structures in all these areas, regardless of the raging internal war.

The support was initially intended as help for self-help, but due to the shortage of qualified Angolans, Cubans had to step up in many areas. The program was tailored to the specific Angolan needs and this was negotiated and coordinated by binational Angolan–Cuban teams. Detailed contracts defined the conditions of the civil cooperation, including payment for the service. The Angolan government paid the Cuban government directly for the work and together they provided accommodation, transportation, and food as well as a modest allowance for the cooperators. Ultimately, the cooperation ended with the New York Accords in 1988 between South Africa, Cuba, and Angola, which sealed the withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops and civilians from Angola and established Namibia's independence in 1990, another milestone in the collapse of the apartheid regime.

Altogether, it was the largest and most comprehensive episode of South–South cooperation between two formerly colonized countries in history. The question of racial hierarchies in this cooperation is complex and depends on whether it is raised from an Angolan or a Cuban perspective. Self-perceptions and mutual perceptions in the everyday life of the cooperation that I explore in my publication, on the basis of interviews with Cubans and Angolans involved, provide insight into aspects of existing and perceived hierarchies.

### > Countries linked through colonialism and slavery

The historical context is key to understanding the background and motivation for this cooperation. The two countries had been linked by Spanish and Portuguese colonialism since the sixteenth century through the transatlantic slave trade. This had resulted in around one million Africans being deported to Cuba's sugar plantations up until

the end of the nineteenth century. Many of these people of African descent participated in Cuba's struggle for independence against the Spanish empire (1868-1898). Cuban head of state Fidel Castro referred to this in 1975 when justifying military cooperation with the MPLA. He saw Cubans as historically indebted and bound to support their African brothers in their struggle for independence against the Portuguese (1960-1975), defining Cuba as a "Latin American-African" nation.

The cultural and linguistic compatibility resulting from the shared experience of Iberian colonialism at least facilitated the cooperation. The common ground was more important at that moment than the perception of racial hierarchies between Angolans and Cubans. A hierarchy certainly existed due to the chronological advantage of the Cuban people in overcoming colonial and post-colonial forms of domination, accelerated by the revolution of 1959, whose internationalism was linked to a decolonial, egalitarian political, economic, and cultural avant-garde project.

### > Global decolonization and the emergence of the Tricont

The revolution with which Cuba liberated itself from the imperial grip of the US (which had replaced Spanish colonialism as the hegemonic power in the Americas in 1898) took place in the era of global decolonization. In 1955, more than 29 sovereign states and 30 liberation movements met in Bandung (Indonesia) to discuss the end of colonialism. There the term "Third World" (later called "Tricont") symbolized a "third way" of development in contrast to the "First" capitalist and imperialist world and the "Second" socialist world – with the exception of China.

With the end of colonialism in Africa in the late 1950s, the Cuban revolutionaries established relations with anti-colonial movements and governments there. At the culmination of the Cold War in 1961 – when the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war – the Non-Aligned Movement was founded in Belgrade, with Cuba as the only Latin American state to participate. In 1966, the "Tricontinental Conference" took place in Havana, attended by 82 anti-colonial movements and governments from Asia, Africa and Latin America, with the aim of preparing the anti-colonial world revolution under Cuban leadership in the spirit of "internationalist solidarity". At the beginning of the 1970s, Cuba was the first country from the "Third World" to be accepted into the socialist economic community of the CMEA in order to ensure the island's economic and political survival. This economic support from the Eastern Bloc states and the Soviet Union made it possible to establish extensive South–South cooperations with Angola and many other Tricont countries. ■

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# > Can Racial Hierarchies in UN Peacekeeping be Dismantled?

by **Sarah von Billerbeck**, University of Reading, UK, and **Kseniya Oksamytna**, City, University of London, UK



Credit: Sarah von Billerbeck.

One of the most important instantiations of international cooperation in the contemporary global system is the United Nations. Bringing together nearly all the states around the world, it involves multiple vectors of cooperation: North–North, North–South, and South–South. Indeed, the UN’s very existence is premised on the assumption that institutionalized fora where states can engage in structured cooperation as equals will help to avoid conflict, promote human rights, and ensure justice. Yet equality between states within the UN has long been questioned and recent research has shown that not only does the structure of the UN institutionalize inequality among states through differential access to decision-making processes (especially between the Global North and the Global South, for example, in the UN Security Council), but that the structures are frequently racial in origin and thus the hierarchies within them are also racialized. As described in the introduction to this thematic issue, we conceive of race as a social con-

struction that involves the othering and ranking of groups based on characteristics that are perceived as immutable, which in turn results in unequal access to social, political, and material resources.

Despite the recognition of racial inequalities among UN member states, scholars have until recently failed to examine how such hierarchies come to exist, are replicated, and become entrenched *within* the UN – that is, within the workforce of the organization itself. In [our recent article](#) entitled “Race and International Organizations”, we examine UN peacekeeping and, drawing on [Ray’s \(2019\) theory of racialized organizations](#), find evidence of four mechanisms through which racial hierarchies are perpetuated within the UN.

## > Differential agency, racialized distribution, credentialing, and racial decoupling

First, we observe the diminished or enhanced agency of personnel from different racial groups. Because all new UN peace operations in the last 20 years have occurred in non-white-majority countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, this is particularly apparent in the distinction between international and national staff. The latter often work in support roles, as drivers or translators for example, or are asked to provide local and cultural knowledge. These roles are valued less than more “substantive” work, and national staff are thus concentrated in race-typed jobs with lower status within the organization. This is exacerbated by the significant [pay differential](#) between national and international staff. The agency of racialized groups in peacekeeping is also diminished through the tokenistic placement of non-white personnel in senior posts.

Second, we find evidence of the racialized distribution of organizational resources. One of the key resources for peacekeepers is physical security, which can be hoarded by white personnel. Among civilian peacekeepers, national staff [face high risks](#), which they are less able to mitigate than international staff: for example, they are not usually evacuated during crises. Similarly, troops from non-white-majority countries are exposed to greater risk than those from white-majority countries. For example, in MINUSMA in Mali, European troops with better equipment and technology took on reconnaissance and intelligence roles, leaving the much more dangerous task of patrolling to African troops.

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Third, we find evidence that whiteness acts as a credential. Some tasks and skills are viewed as more prestigious in peacekeeping, such as military planning or providing thematic knowledge about human rights or security sector reform. White international staff are often assumed to be able to perform such roles, while non-white national staff are associated with local or cultural knowledge, which is considered less “sophisticated”. On the military side, the association between whiteness and professionalism is even stronger, resulting in a [division of labor](#) by which white troops from Europe or North America are appointed to planning and strategy roles, while [patrolling and operations](#) go to non-white troops from Asia and especially Africa.

Finally, we find evidence of decoupling along racial lines, where white troops insist on special treatment that circumvents organizational rules. For example, troops from white-majority countries have demanded special transportation arrangements, larger rations, and negotiated bilateral medical and evacuation agreements. While such arrangements are not technically against UN policy, they reinforce the perception that standard UN procedures are good enough for some – for troops from non-white-majority countries – but not for others. Indeed, contributing troops and police to peacekeeping operations can offer [benefits](#) to countries, ranging from [reimbursements](#) to [coup-proofing](#). However, this often means that these countries – [more than 90 percent](#) of which are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – have less capacity to negotiate favorable conditions for their personnel than Global North countries.

These racial hierarchies are a product of the unequal distribution of power and wealth between UN member states, specific organizational procedures and path dependencies, and the individual biases of UN personnel. But is it possible to dismantle them?

### > **The UN’s efforts to promote equality among its officials**

The UN has adopted some measures to address racial inequality and prejudices within its workforce. In 2020, following the Black Lives Matter protests, Secretary-General António Guterres launched a series of initiatives, such as the Task Force on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dig-

nity for All in the UN Secretariat. A [survey of staff perceptions](#) that same year revealed that a third of UN Secretariat employees believed the organization’s hiring practices were discriminatory on the basis of race, nationality, or ethnicity. A similar percentage reported having experienced discrimination, with those identifying as Black or African particularly affected.

In 2022, the UN appointed a Chief of Diversity and Engagement and established the post of Special Adviser on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for All in the United Nations. The Secretariat also requested funds to establish the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, but this was [not approved](#) by the UN’s Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

The UN has also increased the pay of some categories of national staff. For example, in the Central African Republic, the annual salary of national staff in the highest-ranking Professional category is \$84,735, which is comparable to mid-ranking international staff (P-3), who are paid \$77,884. It does not, however, include the various allowances that international staff receive. The lowest-paid national staff in the General Service category, to which the vast majority of national staff belong, receive only \$7,690 per year.

In addition, a cross-departmental Anti-Racism Action Group was created in the departments managing peacekeeping and special political missions. Ironically, the UN advertised an [unpaid internship at its Geneva headquarters](#) to support the work of this group; unpaid internships are only accessible to individuals with independent means, usually from white-majority countries, which perpetuates precisely the inequalities that the group purports to address.

Finally, the UN launched an [internal communication platform](#) to reiterate anti-racism messages, yet this may remain purely a [self-legitimation device](#), especially if it is limited to one-way, top-down communication. Other measures, such as training on unconscious biases or a review of past claims of discrimination, are unlikely to lead to change in the short term. In the light of all this, whether the Secretariat’s plans for addressing racism will be effective in the absence of structural change remains to be seen. ■

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# > Degrowth, Global Asymmetries and Ecosocial Justice

by **Miriam Lang**, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador



Protests against the World Bank Spring Meeting, Washington D.C., April 2024. Credit: Miriam Lang.

**D**egrowth mainly presents itself as a perspective from and for countries of the geopolitical North, especially Europe and North America. Regarding the relations with the global South, many degrowth proponents clarify that a degrowth agenda is no universal recipe for transformation, rejecting the very idea of one universal transformational path valid for all world regions. Rather, they state that degrowth in northern high-income countries is necessary to “increase the ecological space” or “[liberate conceptual space](#)” for countries or economies situated on the peripheries of the capitalist world system, to allow them “[to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life](#)”. A complementary argument goes that the poorer countries of the global South need to grow in order to satisfy people’s basic needs. It evolves around specific mainstream understandings of poverty, needs and well-being, associated with material abundance versus scarcity which seem questionable in the light of recent debates in the global South.

This article attempts to sketch out some strengths and weaknesses of degrowth considering the task to bring about a globally just, ecosocial transformation, and explores possibilities of cross-fertilization with some global debates in this context. The text is organized around two main arguments: First, I will summarize existing dialogues, resonances and (non-) engagements between degrowth – as a movement and as a research agenda – and the global South. And second, I will highlight the limitations of the claim that degrowth in the North will “open space for the South”, pointing out where some debates could be beneficial to degrowth and vice-versa and establishing the need for decolonial North-South alliances against (green) growth.

## > Synergies between degrowth and alternative paradigms from the South

As degrowth proponents have pointed out, the [concept of degrowth might not be very mobilizing in the global South](#),

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where the paradigm of ‘underdevelopment’ still has strong effects on people’s subjectivities. But there is also no need for degrowth to become a guiding concept for transformation in the South. Latin American authors, such as [Arturo Escobar](#), [Eduardo Gudynas](#), [Alberto Acosta](#) and others, have evidenced certain convergences and synergies between degrowth and postextractivism, post-development, and indigenous worldviews like *sumak kawsay* that should be further explored in the perspective of necessary North-South alliances.

Both *sumak kawsay* and degrowth reject the modern idea of illimited progress and expansion and focus on qualitative rather than quantitative factors regarding what is considered a good life. Both also reject the notion of illimited needs fueled by modern capitalism and advocate for limits: Degrowth sees “[limits not as something externally imposed upon us, but as a conscious choice of self-limitation](#)”, in a collective, deliberative exercise of radical democracy; *sumak kawsay* is dysfunctional to capitalist accumulation as it seeks to re-balance emerging inequalities and considers them a threat to community life. It also fosters collaboration and reciprocity instead of competitiveness. Both embrace the idea that autonomy, collective self-government or freedom imply giving oneself rules of conduct and therefore limits, instead of following arbitrarily or externally imposed ones.

However, while the rich conceptual dialogue between degrowth and alternative visions from Latin America must be acknowledged, from a perspective of global dialogues it is problematic that degrowth proponents formulate their policy proposals mainly just ‘from and for the global North’, without analytically engaging with the deep entanglements and interdependencies in our modern-colonial globalized world.

### > Degrowth in the North is not enough

As was initially mentioned, a recurrent thesis in degrowth literature is that degrowth in high-income countries of the global North will ‘liberate conceptual space’ or ‘ecological space’ for the global South. Some authors, such as [Jason Hickel](#), even claim that degrowth is a decolonial strategy. I strongly agree with Jason Hickel that southern countries should be free to organize their resources and labor around meeting self-defined needs rather than around servicing northern growth. Albeit this only will occur if the structures, institutions and rules of the globalized capitalist world system are transformed and actual room for maneuver is created for the countries of the South. And this requires both regional and global alliances.

Again, let’s look back on the recent Latin American experience. Even when a series of – more or less – left-oriented governments (2000-2015) claimed to leave neoliberalism behind and to overcome extractivism, configuring an exceptional geopolitical constellation in the region, the

respective countries could not achieve a self-determined, endogenous process of sustainable regional integration. Rather, they competed against each other in the export of raw materials, servicing the growth of China and other big economies. It would be shortsighted to exempt the Latin American governments from all liabilities in this context and to ignore intra-regional power imbalances.

But they were also trapped in a tight web of global trade and intellectual property rules, finance and debt dynamics, country risk rankings, dispute settlements etc. that significantly narrowed their possibilities. A web of rules that, from the perspective of global justice, operates in an asymmetric way. Once again [unequal exchange and power imbalances in the global political economy](#) operate when the prices that Latin American countries get for exporting primary goods are significantly lower than what they pay for the processed goods they import. Today, imperial appropriation not only includes cheap unprocessed raw materials, but also cheap labor and processed goods from certain regions of the South that became the world’s factories in the 80s: global commodity chains, where northern firms deploy monopoly power to depress southern suppliers’ prices, while setting final prices as high as possible, still allow the [global North to appropriate this industrial labor for cheap](#).

Consequently, it is a necessary, but no sufficient condition to reduce the material and energy throughput in the global North for the South to thrive. Actual ‘spacemaking’ for endogenous and sovereign reforms in the South will not happen through a simple reduction in the demand of raw materials if the asymmetric global economic structures remain untouched. That might even lead to a catastrophic recession in some southern countries, which is what degrowthers vow to avoid.

### > The need for decolonial global alliances against green growth

Instead of opening pathways for sustainable and globally just ecosocial transitions, the hegemonic answers to climate change centered on green growth are leading to a considerable intensification of extractivist pressure on regions of the global South. Their priorities are to ensure a) a sufficient supply of ‘strategic minerals’ for a new industrial revolution toward renewables; b) ‘energy security’ and c) good decarbonization records for the global North.

Instead of a real energy *transition*, this rather translates into an overall [energy expansion](#) – a new driver for economic growth. The geopolitics of the Ukraine war have exacerbated this expansion further, including fossil fuels. Research from Latin America and Africa shows how this tech-based and corporate-led process to advance green growth translates into manifold new environmental injustices and forms of [green colonialism](#).

Hegemonic green growth policies assign four sets of roles to regions from the global South, each of which contains a strong dimension of imperial appropriation: (1) An important reserve of raw materials, assumed available for the major world powers' decarbonization. (2) A potential place where the CO2 emissions that will continue to take place in the North (including China) can be 'neutralized' through carbon offset projects, to reach the goal of 'zero net emissions' – not to be confused with zero real emissions, in Europe, the US or China. (3) A recipient for waste exports from the North, including electronic and toxic waste from renewable technologies and digitalization. And finally, (4) a potential market for the new technologies that the eco-modernized northern economies will produce and sell at high prices.

One of the main contributions of degrowth to debates about global environmental governance and a just ecosocial transition is to openly problematize green growth, which makes degrowth a potential ally for actors from the peripheries. But it only will be such an ally if, at the same time, degrowth scholars and movements actively engage in strategies to dismantle the structural hierarchies of the global political economy.

My argument is *not* that the global South should generically degrow, in the sense of shrinking all activities. It is the global North, considering its historical responsibilities and colonial as well as environmental debt, that must contribute the major part in the absolute reduction of material and energy throughput in the face of ecological breakdown. But de-centering economic growth, and prioritizing life within planetary boundaries instead, can bring about a selective degrowth of harmful productive and reproductive activities, both in the global North and South.

In the global South, this would mean, for example, to reduce extractivism, which has not only impoverished many social groups in the name of growth, but also constitutes a major structural obstacle on the path toward self-determined economic policies. On the other hand, being one of the few voices in the global North that questions the logic of green growth and claims structural changes, degrowth is predestined to be part of both research and political alliances to such ends – but only if it opens up to a real dialogue with movements in the global South that goes beyond conceptual convergences and engages in strategies for a structural change of the existing asymmetric international relations. ■

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# > Feminist Degrowth and Ecosocial Transition

by **Bengi Akbulut**, Concordia University, Canada

**T**his article situates degrowth as a counterhegemonic proposal that unsettles and goes beyond dominant understandings of transition. Emphasising an understanding of degrowth as one of recentring and reorienting the economy (rather than merely a matter of biophysical downscaling), I delineate three axes that are fundamental for this potential: (a) foregrounding a broader conception of what constitutes work; (b) justice, in particular regarding historical and ongoing injustices between the Global North and South; and (c) autonomy and democracy as organising principles of a degrowth economy.

## > Broadening our conception of 'work'

The first axis is a broader conception of what constitutes 'work' beyond commodity-producing wage labour, including the types of work that are fundamental for sustaining (human and non-human) life. Feminist thinkers have long theorised this domain of labour that falls outside of, yet underlies, commodity production, that is, social reproduction. Social reproduction is firstly the work of reproducing and sustaining labourers; but it also spans the production of life-sustaining goods and services and the regeneration of the social and ecological conditions of life and (commodity) production. Social reproduction thus includes not only the forms of labour that directly produce and sustain human capacity to produce, but also [those that maintain, mediate and transform biophysical processes that undergird life](#).

What makes social reproduction particularly distinct is that it is markedly gendered (and racialised), on the one hand, and highly invisibilised and devalued, that is, codified as 'non-work', on the other. This is far from being accidental: commodity production under capitalism not only hides this sphere of work and production, but fundamentally depends on its devaluation: cheap, if not entirely free, production of labourers, their sustenance and the broader ecological-social conditions of production have been instrumental for the [development and reproduction of capitalism](#). [Feminist scholarship](#) has pointed to the global scale of the devalued and invisible value flows, drawing parallels between colonisation, domination of Nature and subjugation of women. Social reproduction is thus global and includes the work of colonies, indigenous peoples and subsistence producers, which reproduce the global labour force and protect/regenerate natural metabolic cycles.

Added to this is the global division of social reproductive labour, where racialised social reproductive labour (e.g. of migrant care workers) serves to cheapen the costs of maintaining and reproducing capital accumulation, especially in countries of the Global North.

Foregrounding a broader conception of work entails, first of all, that this invisibilised sphere of labour and production is recognised, rewarded and supported. Possible actions to this end include implementing a care income, as well as expanding the rights and entitlements of essential workers and public investment into social and ecological reproduction. Such policies would not only provide material support for the workers of social reproduction but could also be instrumental in shifting perceptions of what is recognised and deemed valuable as work.

Yet recognition and validation are not sufficient for such a foregrounding. The mere recognition and validation of social reproduction, without problematising its organisation, risk perpetuating and solidifying its gendered (and racialised) distribution. A smaller social metabolism and downscaling of material and energy use carry with them important questions, such as what kind of activities will rely more on human labour, and whose labour will substitute for the reduction in energy use in, for instance, household production, agriculture or transportation. As [feminist degrowthers](#) have pointed out, given entrenched patterns of gendered division of labour, such structural shifts without ensuring gender justice run the risk of re-feminisation of social reproduction.

Crucially, feminist thinking and politics have not only been instrumental in pushing for recognising and rewarding the work of social reproduction. They have also problematised how this reproductive work is organised, that is, who will perform, how much of it, under which conditions and under whose control, if and how to remunerate it and how to decide on its distribution. In fact, for feminist politics, making social reproduction visible and to reveal it as work is not an end in itself, but rather the means for the struggle to alter its (gendered and racialised) distribution and the conditions under which it is performed. This is a critical insight, as it expands foregrounding a broader conception of work onto questions of how to organise social reproduction. Although there is hardly a blueprint, [feminist scholarship and practice](#) provide tools to tackle this

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## “Commodity production under capitalism not only hides this sphere of work and production, but fundamentally depends on its devaluation”

question, pointing to cooperative and egalitarian forms of provisioning where labour is collective and organised along gender justice.

To recap, degrowth’s foregrounding of a broader conception of work is both a recognition and rewarding of the labour of social reproduction that is fundamental for sustaining (human and non-human) life, and a vision for its collective, egalitarian and democratic organisation. Such foregrounding provides a novel lens for thinking about transition justice, as it imbues not only the notion of transition but also that of justice with the diverse and immense field of labour and production that underpin commodity production and capital accumulation. That is to say, transition justice requires justice for (human and non-human) workers of social reproduction.

### > Degrowth as/through justice

The second fundamental axis is justice. Degrowth is a project of justice in two interrelated ways. Firstly, justice requires setting limits, as the social and ecological costs of growth are always unequally shared within and across societies and geographies. Downscaling of energy and resource use is a project of justice. This is especially pertinent for the Global North–Global South relations, as economic growth in the North has been driving, and continues to drive, grave socio-ecological impacts on the South. It is therefore the [North’s responsibility to degrow, leaving more space for others to live](#).

Secondly, and more importantly, growth is driven and enabled by global injustices. The unequal relationship between the Global North and the South, which is constituted historically and continues to be reproduced, lies at the basis of global capitalism. It positions countries of the North and South differentially, where the former’s prosperity and growth has been fundamentally dependent on the flows of cheap Nature and cheap labour appropriated from the latter. The historical dynamics of global capitalism that made the Global North wealthy have also put countries of the Global South on paths that have locked them into a perpetual growth imperative, for example, through structural dependency on extractivism, debt servicing or structural adjustment.

Repairing historical and ongoing injustices is thus fundamental to degrowth and equips it with a crucial international dimension. While degrowth is predominantly a pro-

posal developed in and for the core industrial countries of the Global North, with its associated policies and actions often envisioned as interventions within these economies, the implications of the ‘responsibility to degrow’ are by no means limited to the geographical boundaries of the Global North. Degrowth as justice is necessarily a project of addressing historical and contemporary impacts of economic growth, on the one hand, and the growth-reproducing structures of the global economic system, on the other.

Such [recasting of the link between degrowth and justice](#) is indeed central in recent degrowth thinking and activism, crystallised especially around the notions of ecological debt, that is, the historical and contemporary appropriation and/or disproportionate use of ecological resources and sinks, and ecologically unequal exchange, that is, unequal flows of embodied Nature through goods traded in international trade. Yet this needs to be complemented with the global perspective on social reproduction, which expands this notion of justice to include unequal flows of life-sustaining labour of humans and Nature between the Global North and the Global South. Seen this way, it is not only the flows of (embodied) Nature, either through direct use and appropriation or unequal exchange in global trade, but more broadly flows of social reproductive labour that sustains and reproduces capitalist growth. Actions towards repairing global injustices should therefore consider a broader notion of ‘social reproductive debt’ that includes the racialised and cheapened social reproductive labour flowing from the Global South to the North, as well as colonial reparations and giving land back to their rightful indigenous custodians.

The concrete actions and interventions that emerge from this understanding of degrowth as/through justice can be broadly categorised under three headings, which are widely congruent with the proposals made in the chapter on debt in the book *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*. The first pertains to repairing historical and contemporary injustices and includes measures such as repayment of ecological and, more broadly, social reproductive debt, climate and colonial reparations, and interventions in the global financial and trade system that reverses/alleviates dynamics of unequal exchange between countries of the Global North and the South. In this sense, degrowth does not only join contemporary movements that call for reparations and indigenous sovereignty like the [Land Back Movement](#), but also those that revive the transformational potential of the [Southern Peoples](#)



[Ecological Debt Creditors Alliance](#) which had reframed the so-called debt crisis of the Third World in terms of the debt owed by the Global North.

The second set of actions/interventions relates to the potentially debilitating impacts that the contraction of production and consumption activities in line with degrowth in industrialised countries would have on the [Global South](#), especially on countries that are structurally dependent on export or foreign investment. As the asymmetric relationship and the unequal flows and nature of labour between the Global North and the South has also historically shaped many economies in the South to be structurally dependent on export sectors, the latter would suffer in the case of a contraction in the North, amounting to a coerced delinking. Although justice-oriented measures mentioned above would provide some relief, direct measures such as transfer of resources for economic restructuring are also called for.

And the third and final set of proposals is about opening and strengthening the space for the Global South to pursue non-growth pathways if it chooses to do so. This implies recognising the validity of the variety of movements, proposals and worldviews beyond growth originating from the Global South (e.g. post-extractivism, Ubuntu, Buen Vivir) on the one hand, and measures to relieve the built-in imperative of growth in the Global South by, for instance, financing cooperative/public systems of provisioning delinked from growth or supporting a shift away from dependency on unequal exchange relations, on the other.

### > Degrowth as autonomy/democracy

The third and final axis is autonomy and democracy. This relates to degrowth's call to exit a social imaginary dominated by the imperative of growth, and to foreground democratic decision-making in shaping economic processes. A counterpart to this call has been degrowth's emphasis on autonomy. Degrowth is inspired heavily by the conceptions of autonomy (and, relatedly, democracy) developed by thinkers such as Ivan Illich, André Gorz and Cornelius Castoriadis. Despite their differences, the common ground shared by these thinkers is an understanding of how the increased scale of economic activity undermines the ability to self-govern, be it through the centralisation and bureaucratisation of economic decision-making or the erosion of the ability to self-define needs with the rise of the market economy. Endless economic growth is not desirable, even if it were biophysically possible, as it displaces the ability to collectively self-govern.

Democratising economic decision-making towards expansion of self-governance, that is, enabling all to participate in the making of decisions that affect their lives, is therefore inherent to degrowth. This is animated, firstly,

in degrowth's insistence on collective and democratic determination of situated needs and limits, that is, which activities to abolish, which ones to limit, and which activities to support and expand in a degrowth future. But it also resonates with degrowth's emphasis on '*different*, not only less', that is, its call for constructing a different kind of economy that serves functions that are different than one that is built on exploitation, accumulation and growth, towards one that centres needs, provisioning, equity and solidarity. Curbing corporate power, establishing democratic oversight over money and finance, participatory public budgeting, democratic governance of productive capacities as well as constructing and strengthening alternative (non-capitalist) forms of production, distribution/exchange and consumption are thus fundamental facets of degrowth.

Democratisation of economic decision-making at various scales through such interventions and practices has the potential to foreground concrete needs, use values and [non-monetary wealth](#) over accumulation, profit maximisation and growth, and prioritise principles such as ensuring sustainable and equitable livelihoods or regeneration, renewal and protection of environmental quality. Opening economic decision-making processes to democratic participation of a wider base of actors would enable the involvement of a broader range of demands and values in informing decisions regarding, for instance, what, how much and for whom to produce under which conditions, how to set prices or wages and where to invest surplus. This would open space to re-think economic imperatives such as growth or efficiency, enable the operationalisation of alternative goals, and would (re)politicise the economy by subjecting economic rationality to societal deliberation and control.

Democracy and autonomy within the economic realm are not only principles worth pursuing in themselves, but they would also function as a force to curb and transform the socially and ecologically destructive dynamics of capitalist growth economies. Degrowth's emphasis on economic democracy and autonomy is particularly critical against the backdrop of mainstream debates on eco-social transition. The proposals within that front mostly centre on a structural reorientation of economic activities, such as shifting away from fossil fuel-based sectors, often coupled with the use of eco-efficient technologies. They reduce the question of transformation to one of getting the investments 'right', that is, away from ecologically destructive activities and correcting the misallocation of productive capacities. Missing from these debates, however, is a vision of how economic processes are to be governed and what kind of economic institutions are needed. This is where degrowth's emphasis on autonomy/democracy becomes crucial, as it equips debates on transition with a problematisation of the processes of economic decision-making, in addition to their outcomes. ■

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# > How to Build a Just and Popular Energy Transition?

by **Tatiana Roa Avendaño**, Vice-Minister of Environmental Planning of the Territory, Colombia, and **Pablo Bertinat**, Taller Ecologista, Argentina

Credit: Angie Vanessita ([angievanessita.wordpress.com](https://angievanessita.wordpress.com)).



**F**rom a socio-environmental justice perspective and within the universe of popular environmentalism, we defend a just and popular energy transition that is based on an anti-capitalist and socio-ecological narrative. However, to achieve this, we must first make a diagnosis of the current situation and establish the path towards a desired future. In this regard, it is important to understand the magnitude of the changes needed to address the problems associated with energy. This implies considering not only greenhouse gas emissions, but also social inequalities and socio-environmental

impacts in the territories, as well as conflicts associated with energy and the concentration of energy power in a few hands and with large corporations.

We understand the energy system as a set of social relationships that bind us as a society and in our society–Nature relationships, which are determined by production relationships. The just and popular energy transition requires decommodifying, democratising, defossilising, deconcentrating, decentralising and depatriarchalising. But what actions and processes are necessary to achieve that?

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### > The path of decommodification and democratisation

The just and popular energy transition is based on the premise that all people have a right to energy, and challenges the idea that energy is a commodity. It is about deprivatising and strengthening the various forms of the public, the participatory and the democratic. One of the slogans is to decommodify, which implies freeing energy from the predominance of the commercialised logic of economic benefit and focusing it instead on the ability to control and reproduce life in all its dimensions, both material and symbolic.

We consider energy as part of the commons, and therefore, as a collective right in congruence with the rights of Nature. It is necessary to build a vision of energy as a right, taking the struggles for the right to water as an example. This right is not only for human beings, but for all living beings. We incorporate Nature and all its species into this definition, because we recognise that there is an interdependence between the full enjoyment of human life and the environment.

Within the framework of the current capitalist system, markets are instruments that serve sectors whose rationale is based on unlimited capital accumulation, beyond the physical limits of life. The concept of decommodification challenges the centrality of capitalist markets to solve certain needs. The recovery of the public is essential to this path. It not only implies a debate about ownership by reclaiming it from private hands, but also about management. In our perspective, recovering the public should not be limited to its association with the state (national). It is a question of strengthening and recreating all forms of the public, in terms of ownership and management, including historical experiences relating to the community, communal, municipal, collaborative and cooperative areas. These are valuable tools that must be strengthened in the face of the supposed superior efficiency that private companies offer in the provision of services.

Decommodifying and socially constructing the right to energy implies, among other tasks, a broad legislative, regulatory and normative reform that repeals privatisation laws and the liberalisation of markets that have placed the private sector at the centre of the energy system. It is also key to advance a de-privatisation process that includes not only energy companies but also other basic services, as well as developing tools that strengthen all forms of the public in terms of ownership and management, with emphasis on different levels and spheres (cooperative, community, state and national). It is necessary to strengthen the required institutional framework to achieve this.

As a first step towards a process of democratisation of the sector, it is necessary to establish information mechanisms that allow the participation of any community to be

involved in decision-making, whether urban or rural. To do so, it is important to review, correct and even, on some occasions, reverse the direct subsidy policies for fossil fuels and various sectors of the fossil-based economy. It is also crucial to recognise and support institutions and actors involved in the generation, distribution, management and consumption of energy outside the capitalist market.

Furthermore, it is important to assume the possibility of deciding on energy at the local level, in its different dimensions (generation, consumption, energy poverty, etc.). Municipal energy agencies and experiences of reclaiming public services are examples that could be strengthened. To make this process more dynamic, it is also necessary to advance methodologically: developing tools and procedures for constructing local, community and municipal energy policies as a form of collective appropriation of these policies.

### > It is not just about decarbonising

Carbon sinks, which are the mechanisms that absorb greenhouse gas emissions, and the finite availability of materials and minerals set a limit on the ability to substitute fossil fuels with renewable sources, within the framework of the current production and consumption matrix. This means that it is essential to reduce the net use of energy as the main goal, although this reduction must be planned and executed while taking into account the need to balance existing inequalities and the needs of different countries and social groups.

It is also important to consider that it is not enough to merely advance in the use of renewable energy sources. Rather, it is necessary to consider the environmental, social and political dimensions of each specific venture to determine its sustainability.

Among the actions that can be taken to face these challenges, the following stand out:

- agree not to exploit unconventional and conventional hydrocarbons in risk-prone areas, such as offshore zones, or reduce their use within the framework of a plan to abandon fossil fuels in the short term;
- monitor the net decrease in energy use beyond the climate commitments made;
- have specific proposals for different sectors, such as transportation, which in Latin America is the main energy consumer and should be considered as an energy sector in and of itself;
- develop tools that visualise the socio-economic benefits of energy efficiency and establish regulatory changes that go against commercial logic;
- stop adopting renewable energy competitive bidding processes between large commercial/transnational providers as the only option and prioritise instead the decentralised and deconcentrated development of these sources.

### > On the production model and consumption

To move towards a just and popular energy transition, it is necessary to build a production model that is compatible with the sustainability of life and the care of the ecological systems and cycles that make it possible. It is essential, as feminists propose, to *put life at the centre* of this model.

The energy transition that we propose requires recognising the natural and human physical limits, as well as [the immanence and importance of links and relationships as inherent features of the existence of life](#). These conceptions are associated with new ways of organising life in society, new forms of production, reevaluation of the place occupied by productive and reproductive work in societies, and new forms of consumption, associated with a change in the society–Nature metabolism.

Regardless of the initiatives associated with energy efficiency in various sectors, it is necessary to advance in sectoral analyses to question the regional production and transportation matrix and seek sustainable and fair alternatives. Concrete proposals in this area include, for example:

- establish maximum circuits for the circulation of goods and develop short production chains that prioritise local products;

- analyse the areas of material production that need to degrow and determine what to stop producing; analyse how to enhance services over material goods. This must be accompanied by establishing timelines for this degrowth;
- develop new areas of production and less energy-intensive services;
- establish timelines to stop using individual internal combustion vehicles;
- implement a process of modal change in freight transport;
- rethink the role and design of infrastructure, since it is financed with public funds and determines future behaviour and consumption.

Similarly, a process must be undertaken that allows us to advance in the social construction of other forms of satisfying human needs. It is an intense and extensive process, but one that can be streamlined through the use of various tools, for example, strengthening urban networks for sustainable consumption; developing regulations that prohibit planned obsolescence; making mass life cycle analyses of products; prohibiting or restricting advertising on particular branches of products; establishing a rapid program to eliminate energy poverty; associating energy policies with habitat policies; and restricting luxury uses of energy. ■

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# > (Pan-)African Eco-Feminist Movements

by **Zo Randriamaro**, Research and Support Center for Development Alternatives – Indian Ocean, Madagascar



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**T**he African eco-feminist movement is located at the confluence of three distinct movements that are fighting against the same imperialist ideologies and institutions that disrupted and undermined indigenous cultures and institutions: the anti-neoliberal movement, mainly supported by climate justice activists, the anti-imperialist movement brought forward by decolonialists and the anti-patriarchal movement protagonised by feminists. As such, [Afro-eco-feminists](#) are striving to dismantle power structures and hierarchies that oppress and exploit both women and Nature.

## > A Pan-African feminist movement for climate justice

At the community level, there is a growing awareness of the threats to biodiversity and climate resilience result-

ing from large-scale, agro-industrial and extractive projects across the African continent, and their links with corporate and state powers. Eco-feminism is inseparable from the concrete struggles and initiatives at the grassroots to preserve, develop or repair liveable spaces and social bonds through material and cultural processes that allow a society to reproduce itself without destroying other societies or living species.

From this point of view, special attention should be given to climate justice movements which focus on the ecological crisis and its root causes, from a feminist perspective, based on the growing awareness among the affected people that the dominant neoliberal development model is unsustainable. Such eco-feminist movements centre on the climate and ecological crises in Africa, on their links to extractivist development and its gendered

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impacts, and demand ‘that the unjust capitalist system be dismantled in order to take care of the planet and provide redress for historical violations of the rights of peoples and nature’, [as Margaret Mapondera, Trusha Reddy and Samantha Hargreaves suggest](#).

Because of their transnational nature, both the climate justice movement and the decolonisation project for Africa cannot be limited to a piecemeal approach but require a Pan-African course of action. The fragmentation and ideological divisions of the continent have greatly contributed to perpetuate the different forms of colonialism in Africa, which implies that Pan-Africanism is a critical pillar of the decolonisation project embraced by Afro-eco-feminists.

### > African eco-feminisms and decolonisation

[Wangari Maathai affirmed that](#) “colonialism was the beginning of the deterioration of nature due to industrialisation and the extraction of natural resources [...] Logging of forests, plantations of imported trees which destroyed the eco-system, hunting wildlife, and commercial agriculture were colonial activities that destroyed the environment in Africa”. Thus, from the outset, Afro-ecofeminism has been an important pillar of a decolonial feminist approach to promoting systemic change in Africa.

In this regard, Afro-eco-feminists have also been relying on their rich traditional heritage and indigenous culture to challenge patriarchal power and neocolonialism. While some African feminists, such as Fainos Mangena, have argued that the African cultural tradition and communitarian philosophy are not compatible with feminism because they are deeply patriarchal, other eco-feminists, such as Sylvia Tamale and Munamoto Chemhuru, affirm that African traditional philosophies and tools such as Ubuntu can be used to achieve gender justice as well as the other goals of Afro-feminism.

As the Ugandan academic and Human Rights activist [Sylvia Tamale argues](#), “the underlying features of ecofeminism very much resembled those traditionally practised in non-Western Indigenous cultures”. In particular, eco-feminist practices have a lot to draw from “the epistemic relationship between Indigenous people and nature [that] manifests through their spirituality, clan totems, taboos, ancestral myths, rituals, fables, and so forth [...] Notably, the consequences of violating a taboo were not individualized and responsibility to conform was communalist. If you transgressed social taboos, your relatives would also suffer the consequences” (pp.87-89).

A typical illustration of this epistemic relationship is the statement below, expressed by the women who are the guardians of the local sacred sites and bio-cultural heritage (*Mpijoro tany*) of the indigenous group from the Sakatia island in the northwestern part of Madagascar:

*“Our role as ‘Mpijoro tany’ is our duty to our village, which has been founded by our forefather. There is a sacred place called Ankatafabe, and there is another one in Ampijoroa, and also in Ankofiamena. In the past, there was no church but these were the places where we prayed to God, just like we do in a church. These are the places of annual ‘fijoroana’ (ritual prayer ceremony) to pray and to request benedictions [...] Our ancestors strictly observed ‘fadin-tany’ (land taboos), and most people in Sakatia still observe them. If a person breaks a ‘fady’ (taboo), he must kill a zebu in reparation of the wrong he has done.”* (Justine Hamba, ritual prayer leader, 2021).

The other guardian of the sacred sites on Sakatia island explained as follows the rationale behind the traditional rituals and customs, and the vital importance of abiding by them for the common good and ensuring unity, cooperation, love and trust in the community, as well as for establishing respect between the living and the dead:

*“There is a way of preserving ‘kodry’ (fish) for people who eat them. You pick only the quantity you need; any surplus must be distributed to the community; it cannot be thrown away or sold. This is the sense of community and love. Those who pick the food are not necessarily the ones who eat it; it must be shared with the community. It cannot be sold and it cannot be harvested in large quantities; otherwise it will become extinct and by doing so, people do harm to the environment [...] The small animals in the village cannot be killed without any reason, for example the ‘Anjava’ which is a small animal that lives in shady and cool places. The green forest where it hides should not be cut down. If a person kills such animal, then something bad will happen to him/her. The curse will not go away unless he/she takes away the punishment (manala fady) and apologizes to the traditional prayer leaders in the village [...] The person who broke the taboo commits a desecration; these are treasures of this land that our ancestors cherished and these animals should always be respected and remain in the village [...] It is forbidden to destroy forests that provide rain and fresh air we need for living. That’s why Sakatia is a green island, because we don’t cut down forests over the hills, and we also plant trees. And we also protect marine life, including fish, we prevent fishermen from using non-standard nets from getting here. We protect sea turtles, and endemic fish species like ‘Horoko’ and ‘kodry’ [...] We have a dina (traditional social convention with a system of sanctions) in the village: for example, if you swear or use foul language, there is a corresponding penalty in the ‘dina’. You must go to the ritual prayer leaders and ask for apology, otherwise everyone in the village will be under curse.”* (Célestine, ritual prayer leader, 2021)

As evidenced by the above statements, the Malagasy communities in Sakatia are abiding by the same ‘[ethics of nature-relatedness](#)’ as the numerous indigenous groups in sub-Saharan Africa that are also wary of anthropocentric

interventions on Nature which undermine the healthy web of life in ways that threaten the survival of the planet. As Sylvia Tamale has rightly underlined in her book [Decolonization and Afro-Feminism](#), “women in the global South may not have self-identified as ‘ecofeminists’, but they have a long history of ecological consciousness and moral obligation towards future generations”.

### > African eco-feminist alternatives to development

From a decolonial, eco-feminist perspective, many rich alternatives already exist at the micro- and meso-levels. Many of these alternatives were taken from Africa, such as the solidarity economy and collective solutions to labour and resources like seeds and money and must be recognised and built on. As happened in Latin America with other proposals adopting some of the positions and cosmologies of indigenous peoples, including the rights of Nature and the worldview of ‘Buen Vivir’ (a Spanish phrase that refers to a good life based on a social and ecological expanded vision), there is certainly a significant African archive of endogenous ideas, practices and political concepts that lie in tradition, as well as in anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial transformations from which we should draw inspiration and guidance. These include indigenous knowledge systems, communal tenure/indigenous land rights and social labour cooperation.

Chief among these are the critical alternatives based on the African worldview and philosophy known as [Ubuntu](#) in Southern Africa which is largely practised across sub-Saharan Africa and “tries as much as possible to [whittle down traditional patriarchal, dualist and anthropocentric views of existence](#)”. Owing to Ubuntu, Africans have celebrated the values which connect past and present as well as humans and Nature for centuries.

As an African ethical paradigm, Ubuntu is not compatible with capitalist relations, private property and pervasive inequality. Rather, it demands an activism of solidarity and decolonisation in the face of what Vishwas Satgar terms an ‘[imperial ecocide](#)’. Ubuntu’s ecological ethics has generated “the [radical notion of post-extractivism](#), that is, leaving behind for future generations the fossil fuels and minerals that drive destructive capitalist accumulation and its crises, notably climate change”.

From an [African eco-feminist perspective](#):

*“Ubuntu environmental ethics seek to emphasise the need to treat various aspects of nature that have traditionally been considered as morally insignificant – such as non-human animate beings – with care, reverence, kindness and accord them ethical consideration. At the same time, this ecofeminist dimension in ubuntu implies that similar values that emanate from the virtues of ubuntu – such as caring, goodness and reverence –*

*could also be accorded or ascribed to non-animate aspects of nature such as physical nature, plants and water bodies that do not necessarily have sentience.”*

Living alternatives are already proposed by African rural and indigenous women in the defence of their territories, their autonomy, their forms of production, their community relations and their interdependent relationship with Nature without which they would not survive, against the deeply destructive extractivist model. Such living alternatives can be identified in the ways in which they produce, exchange, care for and regenerate our natural resources; nurture our families and communities; cooperate in our communities, etc. As [WoMin](#) puts it, “the majority of women in Africa, who carry the burden of the climate and ecological crisis and who have paradoxically contributed the least to the problem, are practicing and proposing, in their deeply ecofeminist resistance to extractivist patriarchy, a development alternative which all humanity must respect and echo if we and the planet are to survive”.

In concrete terms, just and sustainable alternatives for a different future, which would be built on the philosophy of Ubuntu and centred upon a collective solidarity and sharing between peoples, together with truly sustainable ways of living in harmony with Nature, would include a series of elements proposed by African eco-feminists. First of all, they would enforce food sovereignty, through an agro-ecological low-input model of agriculture. They would guarantee people’s sovereignty over their own path towards well-being, through the concept of consent for women in the Global South, which gives credence and space to lived development alternatives at the local level. At the same time, those alternatives would have to aim at energy sovereignty through sustainable and decentralised collective forms of generation of renewable energy under the control of communities and specifically women, and put an end to the extraction and burning of all fossil fuels. They would still allow small-scale, low-impact forms of extraction, under collective forms of ownership and subject to local and regional priorities. In terms of their governance model, they would have to put forward participatory, inclusive democracy at all levels of decision-making, which recognises women’s central role in society, their different needs and the requirement for full and ongoing consent by affected communities and women in particular.

Those alternatives would also challenge the primacy of private property, respecting and supporting systems in which natural resources are ‘owned’ and managed by collectives and groups, and the active expansion of common properties as a critical part of the fight against privatisation and financialisation. And they would promote and enforce degrowth and a rapid transition to a low consumption lifestyle on the part of the rich and middle classes in the traditional Global North and South. ■

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# > Chronicle of 106 Crucial Days for Democracy in Guatemala

by **Ana Silvia Monzón**, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), Guatemala



“Guatemala deserves a new spring.” Credit: Carlos Choc.

**I**n 2023, Guatemala experienced one of the most complex electoral processes since its return to civilian rule in 1985, after three decades of military rule and an armed conflict that took a heavy toll in terms of lives lost, disappearances and detentions. Twenty-two presidential candidates were nominated, with the conservative National Unity of Hope (UNE) and the progressive Semilla party advancing their candidates to the second round. The success of the Semilla party was surprising, given its recent founding and the fact that it was not among the top positions in the polls. After the first round on 25th June, and with the announcement that the second round would be held on 20th August, a concerted reaction began from right-wing sectors, which respond to the interests of the elites and the most recalcitrant sectors of the national army.

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The strategy adopted to attack Bernardo Arévalo and Karin Herrera, the Semilla party presidential ticket, was a legal scheme, showing how much justice institutions were co-opted. Based on an unsubstantiated complaint, a deficient investigation, and the biased actions of a judge who applied criminal law criteria and not electoral law, the media began to construct a narrative of electoral fraud. There were requests for the suspension of the Semilla party. Despite this brutal attack, Semilla won an uncontested victory in the second round with 58% of the vote: an indicator of the desire for change among citizens, tired of the corruption and co-optation that has violated the rule of law, emptied the national coffers and undermined democracy.

### > Coup attempts in the face of a “new spring”

Citizen enthusiasm was expressed in the streets with a slogan reflecting the possibility of a “new spring”, alluding to the 1944 Revolution, which was a watershed in the country’s political history after almost a century of dictatorships. That democratic spring, moreover, was led by Dr Juan José Arévalo Bermejo, father of the current president and leader of the Semilla party, who, incidentally, is a sociologist. This coincidence was seen by many as a good omen for the urgent transformations needed in a country subjected to institutional decay and repression of dissent, especially over the previous decade.

The Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Justice joined the judicial plot against the Semilla party, increasing the pressure on the Supreme Electoral Tribunal when it declared the official election results that legitimized the winning presidential ticket. As part of the judicial persecution, in September 2023, the Tribunal’s headquarters were raided by the Special Prosecutor’s Office against Impunity, an unprecedented act described as a violation of the popular vote, as the Public Prosecutor’s Office personnel removed – without any clear purpose – several boxes containing the ballots cast by the citizens.

This scenario led to the mobilization of citizens demanding the resignation of the Attorney General and her team for their actions in this and other cases of criminal harassment against those who exercise their right to protest and criticize the government. Exercising these rights has led to approximately one hundred journalists, judges, prosecutors, and activists going into exile to protect their safety. Others, such as lawyer and former anti-corruption prosecutor Virginia Laparra and journalist José Rubén Zamora, have been held in pre-trial detention for more than a year without their cases having been seriously substantiated and they are therefore considered political prisoners.

In addition, on November 16, 2023, the Public Prosecutor’s Office arrested and charged five university students and a young activist in the case known as the “Occupation of the University of San Carlos de Guatemala” (*Toma de*

*la USAC*). The occupation was a protest against the election of the new rector for the period 2022-26, exercising the right to defend the autonomy of the only public state university, usurped by people who did not meet the legal conditions to exercise the university rectorship and who imposed themselves by resorting to illegalities, threats and the use of force in 2022. In this case, the Public Prosecutor’s Office tried to link the current vice-president, Karin Herrera, who, until the beginning of the election campaign, was a professor in the Faculty of Chemistry, with the university usurpers. As can be seen, the “coup pact” has spared no effort to delegitimize and annul Semilla’s electoral victory.

### > Democracy defended by the people

On October 2, 2023, the authorities of Guatemala’s 48 cantons (a system of communal authorities that has its origins in the history of the K’iche’ people of Totonicapán), generally absent from national politics, publicly demanded the resignation of the Attorney General, two investigating prosecutors and the judge who processed the legal actions against the Semilla party and who endorsed the violation of the votes cast by the citizenry.

Faced with a refusal to comply, the authorities of the 48 cantons began a peaceful march that traveled 200 kilometers to the Public Prosecutor’s Office in the capital, calling on social movements and authorities from other towns and cities to join them. The argument was threefold: judicialization backed by the Public Prosecutor was weakening the foundations of democracy by disregarding Electoral Law, which has constitutional rank; the will of the people was being disregarded; and the struggle was about more than just the Semilla party.

This was a qualitative advance in social mobilizations in Guatemala in recent decades. In the country’s most recent significant citizens’ movement, which took place in 2015 against the corruption of high-level government authorities, the mobilizations were restricted to the capital. Now, the lead was coming from indigenous authorities in different territories, with the 48 cantons taking the lead, including the authorities in Sololá, the Ixiles, Kaqchiqueles, Q’eqchi’s, Chortíes, and Xincas, among others, in addition to certain sectors of the capital city.

From the first week of October 2023, thousands of people took to the country’s main roads in support of the indigenous authorities, blocking them at up to 80 different points. The level of organization was impressive. Shifts were adopted to maintain a constant presence outside the Public Prosecutor’s Office, guaranteeing food and the necessary conditions for 300 to 400 people daily. This task was undertaken mainly by women who ran the “solidarity kitchen” for the more than 100 days that the people were in the capital.



The migrant population in the United States made an important contribution, expressing itself through donations and political action every week in front of Guatemalan consulates in several US cities, as also happened in Canada and Europe. The role of social networks was also fundamental.

Blockades multiplied in the city, led by neighborhood groups, religious groups, students, informal hawkers, and regular workers, who organized original actions such as dance and yoga classes in the streets, lottery games, spontaneous concerts, and street talks. In addition to political protests, the aim was to reclaim public spaces in a city suffocated by a lack of transport, services, and public safety.

The street in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office became a democratic space for denunciation, analysis, Mayan ceremonies, religious rituals, games, singing, dancing, and speeches in all the indigenous languages. In this improvised encampment, ideas and proposals boiled over, and women, elders, and young people expressed themselves, following attentively every step taken by what was called the "pact of coup plotters", which included the Attorney General's Office, colluding judges and magistrates, and the president himself along with his cabinet.

The protest was peaceful, despite attempts by infiltrators to provoke a police reaction. In the 106 days of protest, there was only one aggression by armed people on the San Marcos highway in the south of the country, which left one person dead and two injured.

Other essential actors over this period were the Organization of American States (OAS), the US government, and the European Union. All of them followed the electoral process through specific missions, which reported on the transparency of the two ballots and, consequently, on the legitimacy of the two elected candidates. The OAS issued statements expressing its concern over the persecution of

the Semilla party, the countless judicial proceedings – often incomprehensible and out of all proportion – and the violation of voters' rights.

The situation in Guatemala was the subject of several extraordinary meetings and the continuous presence of the OAS Secretary General's Mediation Mission during the long period between the 20th August vote and the inauguration of Bernardo Arévalo on January 15, 2024. One aspect worth highlighting is the establishment, under the auspices of this Mission, of a dialogue table that placed the indigenous authorities and the government of the Republic on an equal footing. Although the dialogue did not produce the expected result for the indigenous peoples, it gave a vital endorsement to their leadership and the citizens' demands.

These 106 crucial days for democracy in Guatemala were lived amidst uncertainty, the desire for change, and the fragility of institutions. The attack by the established powers maintained a climate of anxiety among the citizenry right up to the moment of the inauguration of the new presidential pair. Despite attempts to stop the new spring, we lived...

*One hundred and six days  
to spin memories  
rebuilding tissues  
take the floor  
in all languages  
reaffirming dignity  
reclaiming joy as a right  
citizen awakening  
to transform stealth,  
in an explosion of bodies in the streets  
that dispute the meaning of history  
One hundred and six days  
that have left their mark on the conscience  
that will not back down ■*

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# > Social Movements

## After the Failure of the Constituent Process in Chile

by **Carmen Gemita Oyarzo Vidal**, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Chile



*"The neoliberal model is born and dies in Chile."*  
Credit Moisés Palmero.

**I**n October 2019, Chile experienced the beginning of the largest mobilizations in its contemporary history. There were many assessments by Chilean sociologists of this cycle of protest, but three main theses should be highlighted. The first, quite widespread, suggests that the 2019 uprising marked the peak (and also the closure) of a previous stage of mobilizations calling for the restitution of social and political rights. That cycle was initiated in 2011 with the student movement, whose social demands could not be met without a new democratic order. A second interpretation refers to the [autonomization of protest](#) and describes the distancing of social mobilization from institutional political actors, such as unions and political parties. In the Chilean case, the fracture between institutional politics and social movements had its maximum expression in the Constitutional Convention of 2021. Thirdly, there is the thesis that the process of politicization experienced by Chilean society between 2019 and 2021 was a contradictory and complex phenomenon that arose

out of the paradoxes of everyday experiencing of neoliberalism. Such a situation produces, on the one hand, a strengthened image of individuals and their capacities for action and, on the other hand, a perception of injustice and inequality. The thesis of the [politicization of subjective discomfort](#) would explain Chilean society's difficulty in imagining an alternative collective project to neoliberalism.

### > The constitutional experience of 2021 and defeat in 2022

After the massive protests in Chile at the end of 2019, the majority of the country's political parties agreed to undertake a process of citizen consultation in order thereby to initiate a new constituent process. In October 2020, a referendum was held in which more than 78% of voters approved the beginning of a constituent process, which would be conducted by a "Constitutional Convention", elected in May 2021. It was the first time that representatives of historical-

ly excluded social groups (women, indigenous people, and members of different social movements) found themselves in an institutional space in which they had decision-making capacity and public influence. It was also the first time a Chilean Constitution would be drawn up by a democratically elected constituent process throughout all the steps.

The composition of the elected Constitutional Convention was characterized by the prominence of independent candidacies, which obtained 48 of the 155 seats, and the fragmentation of the progressive forces called to reestablish democratic order. Much expectation was deposited in the constitutional process which, for the left, was seen as the primary political outcome of the 2019 protests and a real opportunity to re-found the country and overthrow the 1980 Constitution, approved during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-89).

The constitutional debate brought tension to bear on political and social matters that had been taken for granted in the previous period, such as the homogeneous character of Chilean society, the unity of the territory, and the concept of nation. It also introduced the notion of social rights based on solidarity.

The work of the Constitutional Convention resulted in the presentation, in July 2022, of a proposal for a new Constitution for Chile, which required ratification by the population two months later. The text recognized and incorporated historically marginalized groups and had an ecological and plurinational outlook. However, on September 4, 2022, in the referendum held to approve or reject the constitution, in which more than 85% of the population participated (it was the electoral process with the highest participation in Chilean history), the proposed text was rejected by 62% of the votes versus just 38% in favor.

### > Emotions and reasons for defeat

The outcome of the elections left activists and social movements perplexed. When they recall the impact of that moment, they explain that the months of work of the Convention were so intense that the members apparently failed to realize in time that the contents of the constitutional proposal simply did not make sense to a broad section of citizens. After the intensity of the constitutional discussions, the nucleus of activists who had devoted themselves to the work of the Convention began to perceive the disaffection of the ordinary people only during the electoral campaign, when it was already too late to alter the process. Most painful was the realization that “the people” were not with them. However, they seemingly refused to accept that reality; they thought they could win because there was so much will for change.

Due to the sacrifice involved in carrying out the process, the activists experienced pain when the result came in.

In my research, I interviewed several activists who described the defeat as involving a process of mourning. The electoral failure of the constituent process marked the death of hope for social change, for which some had been fighting for decades. After the intense mobilizations of 2019, there was tremendous hope to finally have the social and political strength to bring an end to Pinochet’s constitution and the model of social and political injustices it enshrined.

On the other hand, many of the activists engaged in the process felt that they had wasted time and energy. An interesting aspect is a gap between the daily life of the activists most committed to the process and what, in their opinion, was happening “outside the convention”. The balance sheet acquires a sacrificial tone in the narrative of the different activists: the memory of exhausting working hours, the lack of sleep to meet deadlines, and the postponement of family or leisure time, makes them feel that the population in general did not reciprocate all the energy they had put into the process.

The pain of defeat was followed by anger at the ingratitude of the voters who were supposed to be the recipients of the social transformation the new constitution could promote. Assessing voter behavior and why a large majority rejected the proposal generated tensions among activists. Immediately after the results, the most skeptical could not bring themselves to believe the electoral disaster. At the same time, the most disappointed thought that ignorance and the campaign of disinformation led by the right explained the electoral result. Others blamed themselves for not having done enough to convince people. But the result was clear: there was not a single region of Chile where the “yes” to the new constitution won.

Almost two years after the electoral debacle, activists have reflected more deeply on the distance between their demands and the people’s common sense. When they recall the passion and bitterness with which some wrote off the popular vote, they believe that disregarding or ignoring the voters’ reasons does not lead them anywhere. Above all, during the group interviews I conducted, the participants agreed on the impossibility of building political majorities if those who claim to represent popular demands ignore them.

Although activists still express their sadness at the failure of the process, they now recognize the importance of not idealizing the people or trivializing their motives. They also believe connecting with the material concerns of people living in the most challenging conditions is necessary to understand why certain political discourses do not make sense to those people or why they are not interested in advancing this type of social change. It is, therefore, essential to understand why it is so costly to imagine a social order based on solidarity.

When activists discuss other reasons for the defeat, they also recognize their difficulties in negotiating with their ethical and political principles. During the most intense moment of the social mobilization, they came to believe that anything was possible and that they had sufficient strength to displace the traditional political actors. Reinforced by the unexpected electoral triumph of 2021, they thought it was unnecessary to negotiate even with the established parties.

Regarding the radical nature of some of the content of the constitutional proposal and the need to moderate it, the assessment made by the movements is that the constituent process was a historic moment for advancing the transformations that the country needed. It was the time to ask for everything and leave everything sorted and sealed because the parliament could betray them in the future. However, the interviewees recognized that there was also arrogance and intransigence on the part of their organizations, which, driven by their triumph and a desire to make their majority tangible, refused to negotiate or listen to the arguments of others.

Moreover, political support for a new constitution required more than just conceding on specific issues in the text. The deep social and institutional transformations sought by the 2022 constitutional proposal required a prior social and political consensus. That consensus did not exist in Chile, even if the movements had the strength to carry the constituent process forward.

### > Is all lost? Latent tensions and territorial shift

Although groups of activists who participated in the Convention have already formed alternative political parties (as in the case of *Solidaridad para Chile*) everything seems to indicate that the conquest of spaces of representation and the construction of popular bases will be a long and challenging road for social movements. So far, there is no viable way to overcome the political fragmentation that characterized the former Constitutional Convention. The movements' distrust of the governing parties suggests it will be very difficult to build alliances in the future.

The territorial bet seems most robust in the eagerness to preserve the identity of their movement. The multiple meanings of territory help us to identify the priorities of the movements after the defeat and their relations of cooperation and conflict with other actors (including left-wing parties). We can recognize at least three relevant meanings in

the current Chilean movements. First, territory defined as a geographical and socio-ecological space shows a broad environmental awareness that is quite transversal among activists and not only between those who currently act or cooperate with environmental organizations. In addition, it highlights the importance of territorial diversity in Chile. Living in the north, center, or south of the country is different. Smaller communities have less difficulty thinking of themselves as a collective with a single identity than large, spatially and socially segregated cities do.

The territory also emerges as a political space and as a belonging group. Social movements identify their social bases of support and who would be the targets of the "territorial work". As socio-political spaces, territories encompass diverse people and forms of daily coexistence in which organized groups recognize themselves. From this point of view, the territory is a space of meaningful interactions that define activists and allow them to be recognized by others as valid interlocutors.

Finally, the work with representatives of Mapuche communities revealed a third meaning of territory. For the Mapuche communities, the territory is a space where their entire way of life is at stake: material life (access to land and water), political life (a set of rules of coexistence), and spiritual life. The land and the rivers are connected and engage communities with the memory of their ancestors. So, understanding that the Mapuche are their territory, the space of political coexistence is that of the communities. The community is the primary means of organization for families that share a territory. They are small communities in which coexistence is administered by a political authority (*lonko*) and a spiritual authority (*machi*).

These different meanings of territory are vital to understanding the political action of social movements in Chile after the defeat of the constituent process. Political engagement occurs when representatives of movements are recognized, replacing the categories of "grassroots" or "people". However, it is a reduced political space in which subcultural or community ties predominate. Social movements may become testimonials left without the capacity to influence the public agenda. But, in politics, two years is a long time. It is necessary to wait and see how the movements fare in the connections between the different territories and in the generation of new mediations that may echo in the upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections and in the various spaces of representation. ■

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# > The Beginning of the Resistance to Milei's Government

by **Julián Rebón**, University of Buenos Aires and CONICET, Argentina



| Credit: Emergentes, CC BY-NC 4.0.

## > Who is Milei?

Javier Milei is an economist and an outsider to the political system. As a television commentator famous for his disruptive style, he proposed dollarization as a remedy to rising inflation in a country marked by recurrent recessions. A couple of years after entering institutional politics, with no political party of his own to speak of, he defeated the two coalitions that had been alternating in government and had polarized the country: on the left of the political spectrum, *Unión por la Patria-peronismo*, and on the right, *Juntos por el Cambio*.

Despite its scant institutional power – it has only a small minority in parliament and does not govern any provinces – the *Libertad Avanza* (“Freedom Advances”) political coalition boldly proposes a re-foundational agenda of extreme neoliberalism in the economic sphere and authoritarianism on the political scene. With an aggressive style, implemented mainly through social networks and the media, Milei’s political narrative defines the “caste” as his enemies. However, he mainly attacks populism-Peronism, the left, feminism, trade unionism, and social movements. Meanwhile, he incorporates historical politicians from a range of backgrounds into his project and nurtures support among large economic groups.

## > The emergence of anti-Milei protests

The adjustments implemented by Milei quickly met with resistance on the street despite the government’s restrictive and repressive policy on protesting. Shortly after taking office, an anti-protesting protocol was introduced allowing the security forces to limit demonstrations on public roads. The ban on “blocking the streets”, a classic form of protest in the country’s repertoire of civil action, as well as charging the costs of security operations to social organizations and the creation of dedicated channels specifically for anonymously denouncing alleged coercion by groups

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**A**t the end of 2023, Javier Milei assumed the presidency of the Republic of Argentina, presenting himself as the first libertarian president in history. In his inaugural address, he spoke to his assembled supporters, with his back to Congress and the members of parliament in attendance. He promised to put an end to Argentina’s decadence by introducing adjustments to the state and the “caste”: a vague term referring to supposedly privileged political figures ranging from traditional politicians to trade unionists and public employees. Those present responded to him from the square with jubilant chants of “no hay plata” (*there is no money*).

A frenzied readjustment of all things orthodox marked the first 100 days of Milei’s government. However, the adjustment fell on a broad and varied social spectrum rather than on the “caste”. The action of his “chainsaw”, with the aim of creating fiscal surplus, as Milei likes to say, has led to thousands of layoffs, closures of various agencies, paralysis of public works, and the elimination of subsidies. Milei also implemented shock therapy that he has termed the “blender,” with a devaluation of more than 50% of the Argentine currency in one day, leading to inflation more than doubling. This generated a sharp loss of purchasing power for the retired and workers (around 30%), along with wiping out savings in pesos, compounded by negative interest rates, as well as decimating the public budget.

to force people to attend demonstrations, are some of the disciplinary measures that have been established. Within a few days of Milei taking office, the government had signed a Decree of Necessity and Urgency (DNU) to deregulate the economy, eliminating dozens of laws and promoting reforms across a wide range of areas from labor to housing and health insurance. Following the announcement, spontaneous protests and demonstrations in the streets of the country's main cities evidenced the difficulty of enforcing the newly introduced anti-protesting protocol.

Subsequently, the government announced the submission to parliament of a multi-purpose "omnibus" bill containing more than 600 articles on various issues, including extraordinary powers for the president, privatizations, and limitations on the right to protest. As is typical for such neoliberal reforms, there were different lines of resistance arising from the broad social upheaval that it will cause. The trade unions and social movements took the lead in this process, holding a general strike in mid-January that mobilized crowds of demonstrators throughout the country. Different protests of various kinds broke out in public spaces both before and after the general strike. These included sectoral strikes against dismissals and calling for wage increases, street protests by social movements against the limits imposed on social policy, and protests by the cultural and scientific sectors against the threat and implementation of cuts in a range of institutions and organizations, among others. Hundreds of thousands of women marched on 8 March against Milei's economic plan and the dismantling of gender policy.

The resistance on the streets represents a new trend in social opposition to the government, faced with the weakness of political opposition, mainly Peronism, which was defeated in the last election and seen by a significant part of society as responsible for the current crisis. So far, this resistance has not halted the general restructuring, although obstacles to it have been erected in its path. The judiciary partially halted the DNU, especially its labor chapter; first version of the Omnibus Act failed in Congress, mainly due to the president's inability or refusal to negotiate modifications with the pro-dialogue opposition. However, the loss purchasing power continues. The government retains the initiative, and new cuts together with the elimination of acquired rights are announced every week.

The social resistance arose soon after the beginning of Milei's government, with protests occupying public space. In contrast, the government has not mobilized support on the streets since it took office. It is not an extreme right wing that appeals to social movement forms. However, given the historical parameters of protest in Argentina and, above all, the extent of the grievances and the diverse na-

ture of the actors affected, in terms of scale this is not, at least for now, one of the most significant cycles of protests; nor have the various different forms of resistance coalesced into a united front.

### > **Recent protests: characteristics, challenges, and trends**

Despite the intensity of the grievances that are driving the protests, the current political scenario makes it seem unlikely that they will develop. In particular, the reactionary government chooses specific actors as its favorite enemies. It refuses to open up dialogue with these and seeks to weaken their organizational power – by changing the capacity of trade unions to represent themselves, for example – and the forms of struggle they can engage in, limiting those tolerated and permitted by the state and actively promoting repression. At the same time, the government focuses its discursive and communicational apparatus on these groups, seeking to portray them as responsible for the critical situation and social unrest. There is also an evident difficulty in establishing a political reference point for the protests, given the defeat of Peronism, the typical point of reference for most organizers. The failure of the last progressive government and the speed and simultaneity of the reforms have increased skepticism among the aggrieved. Finally, the government is still in the first months of its mandate, so the effects of some of its measures have not yet been fully perceived while it continues to retain the hopes and support of around half of the population. This limits the possibility of the discontent spreading in a cultural climate that is still favorable to several of Milei's government policies.

The dynamic of the protests is uncertain, and the future is full of challenges. On the one hand, the government's fate depends on its ability to stabilize the economic situation by reducing inflation and to build a political and social majority that will allow it to govern and provide it with a more stable legitimacy. However, a mere decrease in inflation – a difficult result in itself – would not automatically validate the social regression and the resulting realignment of forces unfavorable to workers unless the principal actors in the protests are defeated or severely weakened. If that were to happen, we could enter a stage of more discontinuous, compartmentalized, and inorganic conflicts without there being a clear capacity to discuss the directionality of change. On the other hand, there is the capacity of the aggrieved, on the streets and in the institutions, to channel a social force to challenge government action, riding on the social, economic, and political tensions which that action promotes. It cannot be ruled out that, as on other occasions in Argentine history, the protests transform the structure of political opportunities, opening up new scenarios. ■

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# > Ayotzinapa: Ten Years of Impunity

by **Carlos de Jesús Gómez-Abarca**, Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, Mexico



*"Alive you took them! Alive we want them back NOW!" Credit: Jesús Gómez-Abarca, 2014.*

**O**n March 6, 2024, in the heart of Mexico City, [human rights activists and parents of the students from Ayotzinapa who disappeared in 2014](#) violently entered the National Palace.

The striking images of a van knocking down a historic nineteenth-century door circulated worldwide. The protesters advanced to the visitor registration counter, where the military, responsible for security, responded with tear gas. All this happened while President López Obrador held his usual morning conference. A sign placed in the palace window reads: "We just want dialogue". In light of this, we wonder: What has changed ten years after the tragic "night of Iguala"?

## > Facts and investigations

On the night of September 26 and into the early hours of September 27, 2014, an operation targeted a group of students from the Rural Normal School "Isidro Burgos" in Ayotzinapa, in the state of Guerrero. In the incident, six people were killed and a further 43 students kidnapped. Such events are not uncommon in the region, which has a long history of popular struggles and state repression. The aggression against the young students is linked to government policies with negative effects for rural schools, due to their connections with the Federation of Socialist Peas-

ant Students of Mexico (FECSM), as well as to historical echoes of peasant and student uprisings. The events took place in an area where numerous economic and political interests, both legal and illegal, were at stake.

During Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012-18), the investigation into the "disappearance" of the 43 Ayotzinapa students was led by the Attorney General of Mexico (PGR), Jesús Murillo Karam. On November 7, 2014, Murillo announced the "historical truth" about the facts. According to that version of events, a group of detainees confessed to having murdering the students. The students were going to disrupt an event by the wife of the municipal president, and were detained by the police from Iguala, Guerrero, and then taken to the local police station. The "historical truth" thus presented suggested that the students had been incinerated in the Cocula landfill by the criminal group "Guerreros Unidos", in collusion with the local police.

Since 2014, parents, protesters, analysts, and the media have all questioned this version, presenting testimonies and evidence indicating that military leaders had knowledge of and were implicated in the execution of these criminal acts.

Upon assuming the presidency of Mexico in 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) revitalized the investi-

gation by creating the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case (COVAJ). The Commission embarked on a new inquiry to clarify the facts, guaranteeing the right to truth, justice, and non-repetition of these serious crimes. In the [2nd Report of COVAJ](#), the “historical truth” was debunked, new hypotheses of the events were established, and it was recognized that what happened in Ayotzinapa was a “state crime” in which various authorities and elements of the Mexican army and navy were involved.

It is estimated that at least 434 people participated in this tragedy. The remains of three students have been identified and the prosecutor has ordered the arrest of 132 people, but there is no evidence that the missing students are alive. Among those arrested are members of the army, Guerreros Unidos, the police, and former officials of the Attorney General’s Office. In the past year, significant arrests have been made, including those of high-ranking officials such as former Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam, one of the people behind the invention of the “historical truth”.

### > A struggle for justice

In 2014, during the march to commemorate the murder of students on October 2, 1968, in Mexico City, there was little knowledge of the whereabouts of the 43 Ayotzinapa students. However, the commemoration turned into a unanimous cry demanding the return of those who had been “disappeared” alive. The streets of the historic center of Mexico City were blocked as students, civil organizations, and social movements marched from the Plaza de las Tres Culturas to the Zócalo, expressing their distress, sadness, distrust, and indignation at the escalating violence in the country.

In the following months, massive marches and gatherings multiplied in different locations across Mexico and abroad. Parents of the 43 students, activists, social organizations, and citizens joined in a series of mega-marches, demanding justice and denouncing “It was the State!” amid increasing repression and confrontation with the police at

the end of the demonstrations. Official information was scarce, but the population began to form its own conclusions, expressing its outrage through slogans such as “neither 43 nor 68” in rejection of the ongoing repression and the government’s narrative.

Despite decreases in attendance at the marches after December 1, 2014, the parents’ struggle has not waned. They have continued to seek support and to coordinate efforts with students, civil organizations, and other social movements. The recent incursion into the National Palace in March 2024, led by parents of the 43 students, aimed to reopen dialogue with the President and advance the investigation.

This action occurred in a context where the relationship between the parents and the government of AMLO has become tense, and the most significant people driving for clarification during the early years of COVAJ are no longer part of this task. On the one hand, the parents of the 43 students point to a lack of government willingness to clarify the case, denounce protection for the military personnel involved, and demand the release of military espionage documents that could be key to the investigation, but so far have received no response. On the other hand, in the final stretch of AMLO’s term in office, the government continues to discredit the demands of those who question it, labeling them as “conservatives” and offering the parents of the students a meeting without their lawyers present.

For Santiago Aguirre, director of Centro Pro, [this case could have been exemplary of a turnaround in justice delivery in Mexico with this new government. However, it has become one of the biggest disappointments of this administration](#), revealing the new military power and inaction in the face of the deficiencies of the Attorney General’s Office. Meanwhile, justice for the 43 students seems to be a debt that will remain pending and will likely be inherited by the next administration. With only a “half-truth”, the parents of the 43 students continue their tireless efforts to access truth and justice. ■

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# > Surplus and Displacement, Refugees and Migrants

by **Nadia Bou Ali** and **Ray Brassier**, BICAR (Beirut Institute for Critical Analysis and Research) and American University of Beirut, Lebanon



Artwork created by Arbu using IA.

**T**his article seeks to elaborate on the notion of “surplus population” as a characterization of unemployed masses. This includes masses in precarious labor excluded from the formal wage relation and masses of people who, due to capitalist immiseration, are only visible under general categories (refugees, migrants). The general categories of refugees and migrants are abstract descriptive categories which require a concrete analytic account of “surplus populations” within the differential dynamic of global capitalism.

Capitalism is uneven in its original form of constitution; primitive accumulation is originary insofar as it is constantly reproduced with the production of surplus value. That said, the colonial impulse is fundamental to capitalism, which is both a social relation and an ecological one. On the one hand, the “capitalocene” is characterized by the [expendability of human life and of nature](#). On the other, the category of “[demographic dispossession](#)” describes how this unevenness is experienced, in particular and universally, by masses of people whose exclusion from the formal wage relation is fundamental for the generation of surplus value.

## > Surplus population as proletarianization

One major misconception needs to be addressed from the outset. Surplus populations are not by definition displaced: they need not be populations from outside the boundaries of a given country or nation state. They are not simply a consequence of uneven development but rather the *effect that becomes a cause* in the process of capitalist accumulation. Marx has a pointed critique of the crude Malthusian logic that sees overpopulation as a law of nature and thereby justifies the expendability of some populations for the survival of others. Today, we hear outbursts of Malthusianism in the logic of those who seek to immunize national borders against influxes of surplus populations and those who seek to exterminate or transfer expendable populations. Ongoing environmental collapse adds layers of complications to the question of surplus humanity and will be addressed in a later section dealing with capitalist ecologies. In Marx’s analysis, it is not the Malthusian logic of supply and demand that generates surplus populations but the logic of valorization, or of maximizing of surplus value as such:

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*“It is capitalist accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces indeed in direct relation with its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant working population, i.e. a population which is superfluous to capital’s average requirements for its own valorization, and is therefore a surplus population [...] This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every particular historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere.”* (Capital, [782–784](#))

There is a law of population peculiar to capitalism: the development of productive forces necessarily results in relative surplus populations. The “law of supply and demand of labor” regulates the ratio of general wages (of the working class, i.e., labor power) to total social capital: “The higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their own existence” (*ibid.*, 798, emphasis added). Likewise, “machinery produces a surplus working population” (*ibid.*, 531–532). In this context, it is the wage relation itself that results in the immiseration and proletarianization of the working class.

This would entail that relative surplus populations become at once a *cause and effect* of the development of productive forces as a tendency of capitalism through the wage relation. Although capitalism develops the forces of production (mechanization, automation, and so on), this does not entail that it also develops the labor force; rather, the inverse seems to occur: as productive forces develop, the cost of reproducing labor-power drops and wages decrease. What drives the development of productive forces is the compulsion to increase the rate of exploitation (the rate of extraction of surplus value from labor power) and thereby to increase the ratio of surplus to necessary labor, not just within the labor process but across the entire population of wage laborers. As more and more surplus value is extracted from less and less labor, an ever-increasing number of wage laborers become superfluous to the valorization process.

Capital creates unemployment, which is a condition of its real subsumption of the labor process (i.e. of its restructuring to maximize the rate of exploitation). Thus, the unemployed, the excess and surplus, are fundamental to the current system of exploitation. While capital reproduces itself through the exploitation of labor power, and labor power reproduces itself by allowing itself to be exploited by capital, the expansion of value as capital does not entail the expansion of the value of labor power; on the contrary, capital’s expansive self-valorization entails labor’s depreciation, which is to say, an ever-increasing ratio of surplus to necessary labor, of unemployed to employed. This is to say that having first separated labor as such from the means of production, capital then proceeds to separate

an ever-increasing portion of laborers from the production process through which they are compelled to reproduce themselves. This secondary subsidiary separation (of employed from unemployed) follows the initial primary separation (of producers from the means of production). The issue then is how to reconnect surplus to necessary labor, or the unemployed to the employed:

*“[...] the proletariat is defined by its separation from the means of reproduction, and its compulsion to reproduce itself by reproducing capital. The reproduction of the proletariat (the value of its labor-power) is kept in line with the reproduction of capital through the ‘normal’ working of the law of value: if wages rise too high, capital will hire less workers, thus creating a reserve army exerting a downward pressure on wages. The point here is that as long as the employed and unemployed do not combine, wages will always fall back in line with the requirements of capital accumulation.”* ([B.R. Hansen](#))

Thus, surplus populations, as a “reserve army of the unemployed” and unemployable “Lumpenproletariat,” are at once internal to the capitalist core, i.e. internal to those areas of the world that have been fully integrated or subsumed by capital, and peripheral to this core, i.e. existing in those areas which are as yet only partially or formally subsumed by capital (the Third World or Global South). This is to say that the surplus humanity generated in and through the reproduction of capital occupies both core and periphery: it exists at both center and margin.

### > Visible masses and invisible labor

Surplus populations tend to appear in the form of popular masses. From Paris to South America, the Middle East and South Asia, in recent decades we have seen sudden eruptions of mass demonstrations by slum and camp dwellers, and what could perhaps be described as refugee insurrections. These apparently spontaneous mass uprisings are the visible manifestation of a usually invisible structural dynamic. But they render it manifest as subjective manifestations of objective structure: they are subjective moments of the becoming visible of the invisible.

Structural analysis should expose the conditions for this visible, subjective manifestation of invisible, objective structure. The first step in such an analysis is to distinguish between displaced and surplus populations. Although masses of people appear at national borders as refugees and migrants, they are not the only ones that can be defined as surplus populations. The reasons for this common misperception may be ideological: it is undoubtedly easier to address surplus populations from a human rights perspective that seeks to integrate and grant rights of asylum to foreigners and expatriates in developed states. However, I will argue that this perspective fails to address the question satisfactorily, either conceptually or practically.

Surplus populations are not necessarily displaced or migrant populations. As [Aaron Benanav](#) points out, since the 1950s, much of the urban unemployed in low- and middle-income countries (LICs) are in fact urban-born: “As early as the 1950s, the largest part of urban population growth in LICs was already due to people being born in urban areas, rather than migrating to them.” Benanav argues that “despite the slowing rate of urbanization after 1980, the urban labor force continues to expand rapidly across the low-income world.” Urban workers do not simply appear from nowhere or arrive from elsewhere; they emerge as symptoms of the processes of proletarianization that have developed in the wake of the stalled growth of late capitalism. While there is a slowdown in rates of urbanization, there is a demographic growth of the urban poor who have now produced generations of children who, like their parents, carry on in the circuits of informal labor. Proletarianization can be understood simply as the “rise of the share of the population that depends on selling its labor to survive.” This increase of proletarianization is not due to rural populations migrating into urban areas, which is a misconception encouraged by development studies. Rather, LICs exhibit a low demand for labor due to two principal factors: 1) high levels of economic inequalities that lead economies to the production of capital-intensive goods demanded primarily by the elite, rather than labor-intensive goods demanded by the wider population; and 2) technological advances and automation imported from industrialized countries. Thus, economies in LICs are more capital-intensive than labor-intensive.

Little has been done to accommodate labor forces from LICs and other countries, despite claims made over the past decade by economists (particularly US-based ones) about employment growth and the need to accommodate the post-1990s shift to a global labor market. As a leading world power, America could have done much to avert the increased isolationist policies emerging within it as well elsewhere in the world. The Global North’s failure to redistribute the benefits of the world economy was already predicted in NAFTA debates in the 1990s as well as debates about how to deal with illegal immigrants in the early years of this century. Today things are even worse as we witness the detaining of illegal immigrants at borders and in camps, the construction of border walls, and so on.

### > **Migrant labor is trapped in a cycle of unsettlement and exile while facing sociocultural prejudice**

In the MENA region in particular the story is largely determined by the flow of refugees and migrant populations. Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and the consequent European colonization of the region, divided between the British and the French, the emergence of nation-states in the wake of colonization has been largely marked by the territorial division

of the region according to colonial interests. The occupation of historical Palestine in 1948, as a result of the influx of Jewish migrants from Europe, rendered 750,000 Palestinians refugees in the neighboring countries. In Lebanon, between 260,000 and 280,000 [Palestinian refugees](#) are distributed across 12 camps and 42 gatherings. Lebanon’s current population is 6.8 million and there are roughly 250,000 Palestinian refugees, [according to UNRWA](#). They represent roughly 5.6% of the Lebanese workforce, 50% of which is non-Lebanese. Palestinians in Lebanon continue to be excluded from the formal labor market and denied the right to formal wages, property ownership, and other basic civil rights. As with other refugees, Lebanese employment restrictions bar Palestinians from accessing liberal professions such as medicine, engineering, and law, [forcing Palestinians into a precarious informal labor market](#) characterized by short-term, low-paid jobs. About half of employed Palestinians work in construction and commerce or related activities (wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles, repair of household goods, etc.), where there are very high levels of informality, longer than average working hours, and the majority earn less than the Lebanese minimum wage.

In addition to Palestinians, since the 1950s Syrians have constituted a large portion of the migrant labor force in Lebanon. This portion has risen dramatically since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. There are currently 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Together with Palestinians, they constitute roughly one quarter of Lebanon’s entire population. In [The Invisible Cage](#), John Chalcraft shows how forced migration and forced labor are intertwined. They are the result of a labor market dynamic predicated on forced labor and an endless rotation of migrant laborers existing in a constant cycle of prolonged unsettlement and exile.

In 2024, the invisible labor cage has become starkly visible: with the Lebanese financial collapse of 2019 and the increasing scarcity of both resources and labor opportunities, Syrian laborers are increasingly faced with prejudice, xenophobia, and persecutory discrimination. The steep rise in the number of Syrian laborers exacerbates anti-Syrian sentiment, together with the immiseration of the Lebanese working class in the wake of the country’s worsening economic crisis. According to the International Labour Organization, [Lebanon’s labor force participation rate](#) is 43.4%, indicating that less than half of the working-age population is either working for pay or profit, or seeking employment.

Instead of leading to the organization of labor across divisions of nationality and race, proletarianization entails immiseration and precarity, which in turn leads to the fragmentation of the working class. In Lebanon, the working class is composed of Lebanese, Syrian, African, and Asian laborers who carry out most of the reproductive labor in the country, from domestic and care work to other

forms of precarious labor. Some 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are informally employed. Among these, poverty rates have increased by 56% since the onset of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Increasing competition in the informal low-skill labor market is forcing refugees to accept inadequate working conditions characterized by long hours, low wages, and a lack of legal protection, health insurance, or paid sick leave. Female Syrian workers are also forced to endure inadequate transportation, a lack of childcare support, and sociocultural prejudice. Such conditions render refugees more susceptible to arrest, forced repatriation, and deportation.

Meanwhile, Syrian refugees who choose to work formally must be registered as migrants under a sponsorship or lease agreement by a Lebanese employer. As with Palestinians, formal employment for Syrians is generally restricted to three sectors: the environment, agriculture, and construction, requiring a residency permit costing \$200 per year. Refugees may seek formal employment in a few other limited sectors but will face numerous financial and bureaucratic hurdles, not least in renewing their residency permits: in 2020, roughly 70% of [registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon](#) (especially those aged 15 or over) were without permits, seriously restricting not just their capacity to earn a living but also their freedom of movement.

### > **The management of surplus populations is integral to the reproduction of capital**

It is important to distinguish economic migrants from the refugee labor force. According to [Elisabeth Longuenesse and Paul Tabar](#), Lebanon's workforce comprises around 15% migrant workers and 35% Syrian workers. We stressed above the need to distinguish surplus populations from displaced or refugee populations. Yet all their plights are intertwined in the political economy of Lebanon, where the Syrian and Palestinian populations comprise both migrants and refugees. These sections are doubly disadvantaged within Lebanon's working population: they constitute a surplus vis-a-vis the labor deemed necessary by capital, while also being displaced vis-a-vis both the formally and informally integrated labor population (made up of Lebanese and other nationalities). Their condition exposes the superposition of necessary and surplus labor on one hand, and of integrated and displaced labor within the population of wage laborers on the other.

Any political analysis that fails to account for this distinction runs a double risk. On the one hand, it leads us to assume that refugees constitute the case of an "incomplete migration," a problem which could be mitigated either by returning home or by accessing the formal status of citizenship. This assumption, in turn, means that solutions tend to be considered at the level of rights and social recognition. The first problem with this approach, evidently, is that it obscures a deeper and widespread effect of capitalist social dynamics – which affects both displaced and non-displaced working-class populations alike – and frames solutions and responses in terms that further distance working-class sectors which, in fact, share common political conditions. On the other hand, when one does not take the distinction between the migrant and the refugee labor force into account, one also runs the additional risk of reducing the political challenges at hand to the mere management of a crisis scenario, as many non-governmental organizations do when they seek to provide aid in response to social and natural tragedies.

What is lost in failing to recognize this distinction is the acknowledgement that the management of surplus populations is not an external activity that is countering the causes of the population's plight: it is in fact *an activity that is integral to the reproduction of capital*. This management not only allows the cost of labor to go down, through the competitive force exerted by the reserve army of labor on the workforce, but it also inserts itself within the broken circuit of social reproduction, allowing for the broader circuit of capitalist reproduction to remain intact. Besides widening the divide between sectors of the international working class, such an approach ultimately treats refugees as a *laboratory of crisis management* that can then be used as the basis for new social technologies to manage the unemployed, the underemployed and the pauperized working class more broadly.

To recognize the particular quality of refugee labor – to treat it as a symptom that reveals the intrinsic connection between *social disintegration* and *economic integration* that, rather than blocking the cycle of social reproduction, in fact *makes it possible* – is to open up space to pose anew the question of what a structural response to a social system that *feeds on catastrophe* would be. ■

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# > Appropriation or Utilization?

## The Ecological Dimension of Labor Conflicts

by **Simon Schaupp**, University of Basel, Switzerland



Credit: Ricardo Gomez Angel, 2017.

**I**n the fall of 2022 several thousand Swiss construction workers went on strike. The sectoral employers' association had demanded an increase in maximum weekly working hours to 58, alluding to a seemingly very peculiar reason: climate change. Currently, adverse weather delays 45 percent of construction projects globally; but climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of weather conditions causing such delays. More importantly, temperatures above 24°C are associated with reduced labor productivity. This makes the construction sector one of the most vulnerable to heat waves. At the

same time, however, construction is a major polluter and producer of greenhouse gases: the production of cement alone produces around 8% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### > The domination of nature as an ingredient in production

In my recent book (published in German), *Metabolic Politics. Labor, Nature and the Future of the Planet*, I examine what this and other labor conflicts can teach us about the relationship between the capitalist labor process

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and the ecological crisis. There is a surprising agreement between mainstream environmental economics and Marxist perspectives that the central cause of environmental destruction is a relation in which nature is “appropriated” without payment, thereby incentivizing its overuse. This is certainly the case, yet an analytical drawback of the concept of appropriation of nature is evident in that it conveys an image of nature as a massive storehouse of raw material whose goods are simply there to be collected, or whose “ecosystem services” flow into production of their own accord. Such an image has little to do with reality. Nature does not exist as a resource: work must be invested in order to “make nature usable”. The concept of appropriation merely describes the activity through which aspects of nature become private property: this in itself does not initiate anything concrete; it is an abstraction. Rather, it is human labor which obliges nature to become part of the production process. For instance, a river is not merely a source of water, energy, and food, but also always exists as a risk: it can flood fields and settlements or block traffic routes. For this reason, the utilization of nature always requires an aspect of control: the river must be channeled, animals must be domesticated, weeds and pests eradicated, and so forth. Utilization therefore essentially means domination over the autonomy of nature.

### > Control over nature is never complete

However, no effort of control can repress this autonomy permanently. Instead, the river will erode the channel over time, animals will fall ill, and weeds will return again and again. The work of control is unceasing. Additionally, utilization must always include an element of rationalization: higher-yielding plant and animal species are bred, fossil fuels are used to accelerate natural metabolisms, organisms are genetically modified to make them economically useful. Yet, in due time, such utilization leads to paradoxical outcomes, because it undermines the very substances whose utility it was meant to increase. This result is then normally met with further efforts to utilize. The case of the Dust Bowl is paradigmatic. At the beginning of the twentieth century, European settlers had ploughed over the prairies of the American Midwest, leading to massive soil erosion and sandstorms. To maintain productivity, agriculture was intensified, with synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanization; but this in turn led to further losses of fertile [land](#).

### > Human labor: one more natural resource

There are obvious similarities between the utilization of nature and the utilization of labor. Like other segments of nature, human beings are not born as workers, but must be continuously fashioned thus. Before people are able to work, they must first be educated for years, that is,

they must be made to adhere to social conventions which constitute the basic conditions for the division of labor. In addition, workers require a certain amount of general education and technical training in order to be employable. When they are exhausted, people need care and affection, and when they fall ill, their labor power must be restored through medical care. In the workplace itself, human bodies are made useful via rationalization and control.

The relationship between the utilization of nature and the utilization of labor is not limited to analogy. Rather, the two are necessarily dependent on each other. Making nature usable enables intensified utilization of human labor, which in turn enables more intensive utilization of nature. Slavery and the plantation economy, for example, were mutually constitutive: the surplus of cotton produced by the combination, together with the intensified utilization of fossil fuels, became the material basis of the factory regime. A concatenation of utilization of other segments of nature followed, to which the new labor potential was applied. Yet the paradoxical destructiveness of utilization always loomed.

### > All labor politics is ultimately environmental politics

The construction industry is a prime example. In 1892 François Hennebique patented reinforced concrete, giving him a virtual monopoly on the construction of concrete buildings throughout Europe for decades. Reinforced concrete allowed construction companies to cut labor costs, because it largely erased the traditional craft occupation of the skilled bricklayer. Walls were now simply cast in molds. Moreover, sand could now be used as the basic material instead of expensive stone – the production of concrete is the main reason why today sand is by far the most widely extracted resource on earth. As only sand from rivers and lakes can be used for construction, its sourcing and manufacture causes massive degradation of ecosystems. Moreover, [construction CO2 emissions](#) are a major contributor to climate change, which in turn undermines the productivity of the industry itself.

If labor, as [Karl Marx](#) argued, always is the transformation of nature, then all politics of production are also environmental politics – or “metabolic politics”. This means that in order to understand the roots and possible ways out of the ecological crisis, we need to place stronger emphasis on issues of work; and more specifically on the question of how to overcome the destructive utilization of both work and nature in the capitalist labor process. In this sense, the widespread suffering that results from the intensification of work has an underexplored ecological dimension, which could be a starting point for transformative metabolic politics. ■

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# > The Middle East's Digital Double Bind

by **Mohamed Zayani**, Georgetown University, Qatar, and **Joe F. Khalil**, Northwestern University, Qatar



Fragment of the book cover of *The Digital Double Bind* published by Oxford University Press.

**T**he Arab Middle East is undergoing a significant digital transformation, opening up new avenues for economic growth, social change, and political empowerment. Whether it is the adoption of e-government, telehealth, or e-courts, the digital metamorphosis has been a disruptive force, altering long-held practices and reinvigorating sectors that have been deemed unfit for change. Successful regional startups such as the ride-hailing app Careem, ambitious high-tech urban development projects such as Neom, and grand initiatives such as the One Million Arab Coders are a testament to the region's efforts to leverage all things digital. More countries in the region are working to adopt the knowledge economy by investing in digital infrastructure (e.g., satellite, fiber optics, next-generation networks) to achieve digital readiness, crafting comprehensive digital plans, and launching various initiatives.

## > Regional disparities and underlying tensions

But the Middle East has yet to experience the digital uniformly. The region exhibits notable disparities, with some countries fully embracing the digital transformation while others lag. Uneven access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy exacerbate existing inequalities, creating multiple digital divides within the region. These considerations remind us that digital transformation is not just about adopting new technologies. It entails navigating the complex interplay between technological innovation and societal change, which defies glib prognostications about the Middle East's transformation.

While digital advancements offer unprecedented opportunities, they also introduce added challenges. Characterizing the Middle East's immersion in the digital is a growing

tension between the impulse for change and resistance to it. This disjuncture ensnares the region in a [double bind](#) in which the adoption of digital technologies both enhances change and maintains the existing stasis. The very same possibilities that digitalization makes a reality are a source of apprehension for many economic players, social actors, and political regimes as they face the digital double bind, compelling them to simultaneously harness technological capabilities while exerting control over the digital sphere.

Grasping these complexities requires us to move the debate away from what people do with technologies and to explore the disjunctures and tensions resulting from state, market, and public digital immersion. Instead of dissecting digitality, we ought to examine sociality.

### > Between modernization and resistance

Historically, the Middle East's relationship with technology has been intertwined with its engagement with modernization (*al-asrana*) and efforts to grapple with modernity (*al-hadatha*). From the colonial era to the present day, the region has both embraced and resisted technological change. Such ambiguity reflects how technological adoption is linked to intricate sociocultural and political dynamics. Consider, for instance, Saudi Arabia. The kingdom's resistance to the introduction of television in the 1960s and its apprehension toward adopting the Internet in the 1990s are matched only by its drive to lead in the ownership of television industries and to promote a robust digital media sector, from transnational satellite channels and thriving gaming studios to global digital investments and homegrown startups.

All along, the adoption of technology has brought challenges. For newly independent states, the advent of discourses on technological dependency was a rallying cry against Western influence and power, which sat side by side with the realization that access to Western technology figured prominently in their modernization efforts and development plans. In the current era of high industrialization, economic pressures, rapid change, and fast urbanization have made the transfer of technology and expertise more pressing for the region.

The appeal of such a development path has endured even as the technology itself has evolved. In recent decades, with the full force of globalization and the advent of digital capitalism, the pursuit of modernization has shifted focus from technology transfer in traditional sectors to digital transformation. In this evolving context, adopting the knowledge economy has become the hallmark of a bid to achieve economic growth and societal change.

### > Shared aspirations and uneven development

In practice, though, these efforts are uneven at best. While some countries (e.g., Yemen, Sudan, Syria) are flagrantly lacking in terms of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and digital readiness, others (e.g., Gulf states) have embraced the digital wholeheartedly, investing in next-generation networks and building smart cities. Where some countries (e.g., UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) figure prominently on the global digital performance and readiness charts and are emerging as digital powerhouses, the region's early adopters of the Internet (e.g., Tunisia) are falling behind in terms of digital transformation. Meanwhile, Middle Eastern countries recognized as being rich in information technology (IT) talent (e.g., Jordan) have not evolved into regional digital/IT hubs.

While poor infrastructure is often associated with low economic indices and/or restrictive political cultures, it is not always the case. Therefore, caution must be exercised against considering a typology of the digital based solely on infrastructural, economic, or political variables. Various factors – including historical, cultural, and societal contexts – significantly shape a country's digital landscape and readiness. Thus, a nuanced understanding is essential for comprehensive analysis and effective policy formulation.

### > The immersive digital turn

Even where the deficiencies are being overcome, the Middle East's immersion in the digital is mired in a tension between a growing impetus for change and resistance to that very change. This is the [digital double bind](#) the region is caught in. While adopting and adapting digital technologies propels the state, market, and public into an immersive digital sphere, such an endeavor paradoxically impedes the region from gaining momentum for substantial change, perpetuating a state of stasis.

Effectively, states embrace the digital while walling off the Internet from their citizens. They seek to develop knowledge economies that thrive on innovation and creativity while refusing to relinquish clientelistic economic systems based on privilege and entitlement. They promote a startup culture while maintaining a hierarchal, risk-averse business culture.

Yet, amidst these complexities, it is essential to recognize that change and stasis are not mutually exclusive. The Middle East's development path is characterized by both continuity and transformation, reflecting the intricate interplay between technological progress and entrenched sociocultural, economic, and political dynamics. ■

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# > Open Letter by Gaza Academics

by academics from Gaza\*



The reinstated Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University on its fourth day, April 21, 2024. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

**W**e have come together as Palestinian academics and staff of Gaza universities to affirm our existence, the existence of our colleagues and our students, and the insistence on our future, in the face of all current attempts to erase us.

The Israeli occupation forces have demolished our buildings, but our universities live on. We reaffirm our collective determination to remain on our land and to resume teaching, study, and research in Gaza, at our own Palestinian universities, at the earliest opportunity.

We call upon our friends and colleagues around the world to resist the ongoing campaign of scholasticide in occupied Palestine, to work alongside us in rebuilding our demolished universities, and to refuse all plans seeking to bypass, erase, or weaken the integrity of our academic institutions. The future of our young people in Gaza depends upon us, and our ability to remain on our land in order to continue to serve the coming generations of our people.

We issue this call from beneath the bombs of the occupation forces across occupied Gaza, in the refugee camps of Rafah, and from the sites of temporary new exile in

Egypt and other host countries. We are disseminating it as the Israeli occupation continues to wage its genocidal campaign against our people daily, in its attempt to eliminate every aspect of our collective and individual life.

Our families, colleagues, and students are being assassinated, while we have once again been rendered homeless, reliving the experiences of our parents and grandparents during the massacres and mass expulsions by Zionist armed forces in 1947 and 1948.

Our civic infrastructure – universities, schools, hospitals, libraries, museums and cultural centres – built by generations of our people, lies in ruins from this deliberate continuous Nakba. The deliberate targeting of our educational infrastructure is a blatant attempt to render Gaza uninhabitable and erode the intellectual and cultural fabric of our society. However, we refuse to allow such acts to extinguish the flame of knowledge and resilience that burns within us.

Allies of the Israeli occupation in the United States and United Kingdom are opening yet another scholasticide front through promoting alleged reconstruction schemes that seek to eliminate the possibility of independent Pales-

tinian educational life in Gaza. We reject all such schemes and urge our colleagues to refuse any complicity in them. We also urge all universities and colleagues worldwide to coordinate any academic aid efforts directly with our universities.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the national and international institutions that have stood in solidarity with us, providing support and assistance during these challenging times. However, we stress the importance of coordinating these efforts to effectively reopen Palestinian universities in Gaza.

We emphasise the urgent need to reoperate Gaza's education institutions, not merely to support current students, but to ensure the long-term resilience and sustainability of our higher education system. Education is not just a means of imparting knowledge; it is a vital pillar of our existence and a beacon of hope for the Palestinian people.

Accordingly, it is essential to formulate a long-term strategy for rehabilitating the infrastructure and rebuilding the entire facilities of the universities. However, such endeavours require considerable time and substantial funding, posing a risk to the ability of academic institutions to sustain operations, potentially leading to the loss of staff, students, and the capacity to reoperate.

Given the current circumstances, it is imperative to swiftly transition to online teaching to mitigate the disruption caused by the destruction of physical infrastructure. This transition necessitates comprehensive support to cover operational costs, including the salaries of academic staff.

Student fees, the main source of income for universities, have collapsed since the start of the genocide. The lack of income has left staff without salaries, pushing many of them to search for external opportunities.

Beyond striking at the livelihoods of university faculty and staff, this financial strain caused by the deliberate campaign of scholasticide poses an existential threat to the future of the universities themselves.

Thus, urgent measures must be taken to address the financial crisis now faced by academic institutions, to ensure their very survival. We call upon all concerned parties to immediately coordinate their efforts in support of this critical objective.

The rebuilding of Gaza's academic institutions is not just a matter of education; it is a testament to our resilience, determination, and unwavering commitment to securing a future for generations to come.

The fate of higher education in Gaza belongs to the universities in Gaza, their faculty, staff, and students and to the Palestinian people as a whole. We appreciate the efforts of peoples and citizens around the world to bring an end to this ongoing genocide.

We call upon our colleagues in the homeland and internationally to support our steadfast attempts to defend and preserve our universities for the sake of the future of our people, and our ability to remain on our Palestinian land in Gaza. We built these universities from tents. And from tents, with the support of our friends, we will rebuild them once again. ■

\* This letter was signed by 185 academics from Gaza. See the full list of signatories here: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/29/open-letter-by-gaza-academics-and-university-administrators-to-the-world>

