



MODERNITY, COLONIALITY, AND MINING: NEO-EXTRACTIVISM AND THE RESISTANCE OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

MODERNIDADE, COLONIALIDADE E MINERAÇÃO: NEOEXTRATIVISMO E RESISTÊNCIA DOS POVOS E COMUNIDADES TRADICIONAIS

MODERNIDAD, COLONIALIDAD Y MINERÍA: NEOEXTRATIVISMO Y RESISTENCIA DE LOS PUEBLOS Y COMUNIDADES TRADICIONALES

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how the structure of the Colonial/Modern/Capitalist World-System provides the social conditions for the expansion of neo-extractivism into territories previously free from mining, especially those occupied by traditional peoples and communities. Based on the theoretical framework outlined by the Modernity/Coloniality Group, it investigates the historical,

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institutional, and discursive links that legitimize and accelerate the incorporation of new areas into the mining frontier in Minas Gerais, producing violations of human and fundamental rights and exacerbating socio-environmental conflicts. The investigation adopts the methodology of case studies of crimes committed by mining companies in Minas Gerais at the beginning of the 21st century, supported by documentary and critical analysis, and mobilizes decolonial concepts to interpret the continuity of the accumulative logic that privatizes gains and externalizes damages. The results show: (i) the persistence of colonial extraction mechanisms that synchronize the State and business corporations; (ii) the reproduction of practices of territorial expropriation, environmental destruction, and racialization; and (iii) the emergence of traditional communities as the main counter-colonial force capable of articulating legal, political and symbolic resistance. It is concluded that transforming this pattern requires combined epistemic, regulatory and territorial autonomy strengthening measures to enable post-extractive alternatives centered on the defense of life and socio-environmental justice. **Keywords:** Neo-extractivism. Coloniality. Resistance. Traditional Communities.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa como a estrutura do Sistema-Mundo Colonial/Moderno/Capitalista proporciona as condições sociais para a expansão do neoextrativismo sobre territórios previamente livres de mineração, sobretudo aqueles ocupados por povos e comunidades tradicionais. A partir do quadro teórico delineado pelo Grupo Modernidade/Colonialidade, investiga-se os nexos históricos, institucionais e discursivos que legitimam e aceleram a incorporação de novas áreas à fronteira minerária em Minas Gerais, produzindo violações de direitos humanos e fundamentais e agravamento de conflitos socioambientais. A investigação adota a metodologia do estudo de casos dos crimes cometidos pelas mineradoras em Minas Gerais no início do século XXI, apoiado em análise documental e crítica, e mobiliza conceitos decoloniais para interpretar a continuidade da lógica acumulativa que privatiza ganhos e externaliza danos. Os resultados evidenciam: (i) a persistência de mecanismos coloniais de extração que sincronizam Estado e corporações empresariais; (ii) a reprodução de práticas de expropriação territorial, destruição ambiental e racialização; e (iii) a emergência das comunidades tradicionais como principal força contracolonial capaz de articular resistências jurídicas, políticas e simbólicas. Conclui-se que a transformação desse padrão exige medidas conjugadas epistêmicas, regulatórias e de fortalecimento da autonomia territorial para viabilizar alternativas pós-extrativistas centradas na defesa da vida e da justiça socioambiental.

Palavras-chave: Neoextrativismo. Colonialidade. Resistência. Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo la estructura del sistema-mundo colonial/moderno/capitalista proporciona las condiciones sociales para la expansión del neoextractivismo en territorios previamente libres de minería, especialmente aquellos ocupados por pueblos y comunidades tradicionales. Con base en el marco teórico delineado por el Grupo Modernidad/Colonialidad, investiga los vínculos históricos, institucionales y discursivos que legitiman y aceleran la incorporación de nuevas áreas en la frontera minera en Minas Gerais, produciendo violaciones de derechos humanos y fundamentales y exacerbando conflictos socioambientales. La investigación adopta la metodología de estudios de caso de crímenes cometidos por compañías mineras en Minas Gerais a principios del siglo XXI, respaldada por análisis documental y crítico, y moviliza conceptos decoloniales para interpretar la continuidad de la lógica acumulativa que privatiza ganancias y externaliza daños. Los resultados muestran: (i) la persistencia de mecanismos de extracción colonial que sincronizan al Estado y las corporaciones



empresariales; (ii) la reproducción de prácticas de expropiación territorial, destrucción ambiental y racialización; y (iii) el surgimiento de las comunidades tradicionales como la principal fuerza contracolonial capaz de articular la resistencia jurídica, política y simbólica. Se concluye que la transformación de este patrón requiere medidas combinadas de fortalecimiento de la autonomía epistémica, regulatoria y territorial para posibilitar alternativas posextractivas centradas en la defensa de la vida y la justicia socioambiental.

Palabras clave: Neoextractivismo. Colonialidad. Resistencia. Comunidades Tradicionales.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 21st century is marked by the intensification of socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America, resulting, among other factors, from the expansion of the mining frontier driven by coordinated actions between states and mining companies. While states grant environmental licenses for large mining enterprises, companies implement megaprojects in territories previously free from mining, reproducing an economic logic that privatizes gains and socializes environmental and social damages.

These mining-free territories are, in many cases, occupied by traditional peoples and communities, understood as culturally distinct groups that recognize themselves as such, possess their own forms of social organization, and use territories and natural resources for their cultural, social, religious, and economic survival through knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted by tradition.

Currently, there are 28 categories of traditional peoples and communities recognized by the Brazilian state: andiroba harvesters; everlasting flower gatherers; caatinga dwellers; caíçaras; mangaba collectors; vine harvesters; Romani peoples; fundo and fecho de pasto communities; extractivists; coastal and marine extractivists; faxinalense communities; geraizeiros; island dwellers; morroquianos; pantaneiros; artisanal fishers; Pomeranian people; Indigenous peoples; traditional healers; quilombola communities; terreiro peoples and communities/African matrix peoples and communities; Babaçu coconut breakers; herbal healers; Araguaia cattle herders; riverine peoples; vazanteiros; veredeiros; and caboclos (Brazil, 2016).

Traditional peoples and communities maintain a social way of life whose symbolic and material reproduction presupposes the collective occupation of a territory and the preservation of nature, understood not as a repository of resources to be exploited for economic purposes, but as a vital space that enables life with dignity and well-being and, therefore, must be preserved.

There is, thus, a symbiotic relationship between territory, nature, and traditional peoples and communities, whose vital logic—interwoven with the knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted through tradition—stands in opposition to the neo-extractivist logic of mining megaprojects that are expanding throughout Latin America.

The implementation of large-scale mining projects in the territories of traditional peoples and communities generates socio-environmental conflicts due to the contradiction between the life-oriented logic embedded in the knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted through tradition, and the neo-extractivist logic of modern mining, which is oriented toward wealth accumulation and guides the actions of both the state and mining companies.

These socio-environmental conflicts have intensified in Minas Gerais due to successive crimes committed by mining companies at the beginning of the 21st century, exposing the destructive logic of neo-extractivism. Not even the control of mass media and corporate advertising by mining companies has been able to prevent the emergence of a widespread sense of outrage and rejection of this mining model among the broader population, far beyond traditional peoples and communities.

Minas Gerais has been the site of the two largest socio-environmental disasters in Brazilian history: (1) the collapse of the Fundão tailings dam in the city of Mariana in 2015⁴, and (2) the collapse of the Córrego do Feijão tailings dam in the city of Brumadinho in 2019⁵.

These socio-environmental disasters killed hundreds of people, destroyed the environmental conditions that sustain and enable life in the Doce River and Paraopeba River basins, and made the symbolic and material reproduction of traditional peoples and communities living in these watersheds unviable, especially peasants, Indigenous peoples, and quilombola communities. Mariana and

⁴ The collapse of the Fundão tailings dam, owned by the mining company Samarco, on November 5, 2015, released 45 million cubic meters of toxic sludge into the Gualaxo do Norte River, flowing through the Carmo River and the Doce River until reaching the coast of Espírito Santo. The Doce River basin was completely devastated, with the total destruction of its fauna and flora. The coastal ecosystem of Espírito Santo, extending to southern Bahia, was also contaminated by this socio-environmental disaster, resulting in the destruction of wildlife, vegetation, and the livelihoods of thousands of workers. Nineteen people were killed. Numerous socio-environmental damages have already been identified, including: the isolation of inhabited areas; the displacement of communities due to the destruction of homes and urban infrastructure; habitat fragmentation; the destruction of permanent preservation areas and native vegetation; the death of domestic, wild, and farm animals; restrictions on fishing; the decimation of wild aquatic fauna during closed fishing seasons; difficulties in electricity generation by affected power plants; changes in water quality and quantity; and a widespread sense of danger and abandonment among the population at various levels, among others.

⁵ The collapse of the Córrego do Feijão tailings dam, owned by the mining company Vale S/A, on January 25, 2019, released 12 million cubic meters of toxic sludge into the Paraopeba River. This socio-environmental disaster caused the deaths of 272 people and destroyed the fauna and flora of the Paraopeba River basin, directly impacting nearly 160,000 people living along its banks, including the Pataxó Indigenous community. Numerous socio-environmental damages have already been identified, including: changes in water quality due to the presence of heavy metals; the disruption of family farming; the destruction of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage; impacts on the physical and mental health conditions of the population; the impossibility of fishing; reduced water availability for human consumption and animal watering; mass mortality of aquatic biota; the destruction of large areas of riparian vegetation; and impacts on the mortality of terrestrial biota, among others.

Brumadinho are only the sites of the two largest socio-environmental crimes perpetrated by mining companies in Minas Gerais, whose population continues to face numerous other crimes and human rights violations in territories exploited by mining activities, such as those occurring in Itabirito⁶, Itatiaiuçu⁷, Barão de Cocais⁸, Conceição do Mato Dentro⁹, among others.

Despite the growing resistance of social movements and traditional peoples and communities to mining neo-extractivism, the mining frontier continues to expand in Latin America, especially in Brazil, with the installation of large-scale mining projects in territories previously free from mining.

This article aims to reflect on the structural elements of Political Economy in the Latin American context that favor the expansion of neo-extractivism into territories that were previously free from mining, particularly those occupied by traditional peoples and communities, as well as the exponential growth of socio-environmental conflicts and the violation of the human and fundamental rights of populations living in territories newly assimilated into the neo-extractivist logic.

The research is conducted from the perspective of a social actor involved in the struggle of quilombola communities against the implementation of large-scale mining projects in their traditional territories. The desire to understand the socioeconomic conditions that favor the expansion of neo-extractivism in Latin America, and more specifically in Brazil—with all the corruption, violence, and human rights violations associated with it—arose from direct experience with the violation of the human rights of quilombola leaders, who are routinely threatened with death, assaulted, and subjected to various forms of symbolic violence perpetrated by supporters of mining companies, with the complicity of the Brazilian state, for defending their traditional territories. Examples include the violence committed against quilombola leaders from Queimadas and Girau/Malhada Preta by mining companies interested in establishing mining projects in the municipalities of Serro and Araçuaí, in the state of Minas Gerais, with the complicity of the Brazilian state.

⁶ The collapse of the Herculano Mineração tailings dam, which occurred on September 10, 2014, in the city of Itabirito, killed three people and contaminated the tributaries of the Itabirito River, as well as the Silva and Eixo streams, whose waters flow into the Rio das Velhas.

⁷ On February 8, 2019, the mining company ArcelorMittal evacuated approximately 200 people from their homes in the Pinheiros community, in the municipality of Itatiaiuçu, due to the risk of the Serra Azul Mine tailings dam collapsing.

⁸ On February 8, 2019, residents of the districts of Socorro, Tabuleiro, Piteiras, and Vila do Gongo, as well as several neighborhoods in the historic center of the city of Barão de Cocais, were evacuated from their homes in the middle of the night due to the activation of the warning siren for the potential collapse of the Sul Superior dam at the Gongo Soco Mine, operated by Vale. People were terrified, believing that the dam—which stores 4.8 million cubic meters of toxic sludge—was about to collapse.

⁹ The Minas-Rio Project, operated by the mining company Anglo American Minério de Ferro Brasil S/A, runs a tailings dam with a capacity of 25 million cubic meters of iron ore waste, placing several rural communities in the municipality of Conceição do Mato Dentro at risk, especially the communities of Água Quente, São José do Jassém, Passa Sete, Turco, Cabeceira do Turco, Sapó, Gondó, and Beco. In addition to the risk of being killed in the event of a dam collapse, residents of these localities live with water shortages, excessive dust, ground vibrations, foul odors, and the degradation of watercourses.

In other words, the experience of working as a lawyer and advisor to the Federation of Quilombola Communities of the State of Minas Gerais – N’Golo¹⁰, in defending the rights of Quilombola communities violated by mining companies, gave rise to the desire to understand the structural elements of Political Economy that foster ethnocide, ecocide, and the violation of the human rights of subalternized classes and ethnic groups on the periphery of the capitalist world.

Understanding the structural elements of Neo-extractivist Political Economy makes it possible to guide political struggle toward transforming the conditions that favor the expansion of the mining frontier into territories previously free from mining, resulting in the destruction of nature and the displacement of traditional peoples and communities from their ancestral lands.

The analysis of the structural elements of the Colonial/Modern/Capitalist/Eurocentric World-System is based on concepts developed by the Modernity/Coloniality Group, understood as a scientific research program composed of Latin American intellectuals such as Edgardo Lander, Arturo Escobar, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Fernando Coronil, Ramón Grosfoguel, among others, as well as the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, with the aim of understanding the structural elements of modern society, especially the colonial structures that, although originating during the period of European colonial domination in the Americas, continue to operate beyond the end of formal colonialism.

The main concepts developed by the Modernity/Coloniality Group and used in this article are those of the World-System, the Capitalist World-Economy, and Modernity/Coloniality. These concepts are employed to understand the role of mining in the formation of modern/colonial society in Latin America, as well as the continuity of coloniality beyond the end of colonialism up to the present day, with the peripheral insertion of Latin American countries into the Capitalist World-System as suppliers of primary goods, both agricultural and mineral.

The analysis of the specific role of mining in peripheral Latin American societies within the Capitalist World-System was conducted with support from the works of Horacio Machado Aráoz, Maristella Svampa, Alberto Acosta, and Pablo Solón, particularly regarding the current context of neo-extractivism that permeates hegemonic economic policy in Latin American countries.

¹⁰ The Federation of Quilombola Communities of the State of Minas Gerais – N’Golo is a civil association established in 2005 and composed of quilombola communities in Minas Gerais, with the purpose of promoting political mobilization and the legal defense of the human and fundamental rights of these communities. There are 1,043 quilombola communities identified by N’Golo in Minas Gerais, which suffer from the systematic violation of their human and fundamental rights due to the action or omission of the state and the dominant classes that control state institutions. Socio-environmental conflicts with mining companies—seeking to implement large-scale mining projects in quilombola territories—constitute one of the main causes of violations of the human and fundamental rights of these communities.

1 MINING AND PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL: THE DAWN OF THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF FORMATION OF COLONIAL/MODERN, CAPITALIST, PATRIARCHAL, AND EUROCENTRIC SOCIETY

Colonial/modern, capitalist, patriarchal, and Eurocentric society is the result of a long historical process that began in 1492 and continues to the present day, through the progressive subordination of peoples and nature to the social logic of the relentless and insatiable accumulation of capital (Dussel, 1993).

Modernity begins with the invasion and colonization of the Americas by European nation-states in 1492, but it is consolidated with the emergence and development of a World-System that establishes a global pattern of power to control labor, nature, gender/sexual relations, authority, and intersubjectivity.

This Modern World-System creates and maintains the social, political, and economic conditions necessary for the expansion of economic activities oriented toward maximizing profit in the market. The logic of unlimited capital accumulation is the driving force behind the subordination of peoples, civilizations, and territories to the basic institutions of the Modern World-System, which has progressively incorporated different societies into the capitalist logic since the late 15th century.

The Modern World-System is composed of two fundamental social institutions: the Capitalist World-Economy and Modern Nation-States, both originating at the dawn of modernity and developing, from the 15th century to the present, under the logic of unlimited capital accumulation. The major social, political, and economic transformations observable in the various civilizations incorporated into this system throughout its expansion are guided by a single logic: to promote the unlimited accumulation of capital.

The Capitalist World-Economy is based on the division of social labor for the production of commodities essential to capital accumulation, enabled by the individual, racial, sexist, and class-based expropriation of wealth produced by human labor. This occurs through long-distance commodity chains, which have become increasingly complex and integrated over time, connecting interdependent circuits of production and distribution, always with the aim of promoting capital accumulation.

Within the international division of social labor, the Capitalist World-Economy divides the world into peripheral, semi-peripheral, and core regions, establishing a flow of wealth that moves from the periphery to the core through unequal exchanges among regions integrated into the Modern World-System.

In other words, the Capitalist World-Economy organizes extensive commodity chains of production, circulation, distribution, and consumption that grow increasingly complex and integrated.

These chains generate a flow of wealth from peripheral and semi-peripheral zones—producers of low value-added goods and consumers of high value-added goods—to core zones, which produce high value-added goods and consume low value-added goods. As a result, wealth is concentrated in core regions, while poverty is concentrated in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions of the capitalist world-economy.

Nation-states are institutions that monopolize the use of violence and public authority to make decisions that are collectively binding on all individuals, classes, and groups within their territories. They function as mechanisms for creating the conditions necessary for capital accumulation, such as: protecting the conditions for the production and appropriation of surplus value; guaranteeing property rights; safeguarding the economic gains of dominant segments of the bourgeoisie to the detriment of other capitalists and subordinated classes and ethnic groups; and controlling, repressing, or assimilating anti-systemic movements and classes that challenge the colonial/modern, capitalist, patriarchal, and Eurocentric social order.

The global pattern of power established with the emergence of the Modern World-System—and reproduced by the basic social institutions of colonial/modern, capitalist, and patriarchal society in regions incorporated into the logic of capital accumulation—is grounded in three pillars: the racial classification of the population, the conception of nature as an inexhaustible source of inputs for economic production, and the organization of commodity chains in which the periphery (Latin America) supplies inputs to the semi-periphery and the core of the Capitalist World-Economy.

The racial classification of the population, through the construction of superior (European) and inferior (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race) races, enabled the formation of a discourse—still widely used today, whether subtly and indirectly (by theorists of political and economic liberalism) or overtly and violently (with the rise of far-right movements in various countries of the Modern World-System)—to legitimize the hierarchical positioning of racialized subjects within the power structure of colonial/modern, capitalist, patriarchal, and Eurocentric society.

In this context, “the conquered and dominated peoples were placed in a naturalized situation of inferiority, and consequently so were their phenotypic traits, as well as their intellectual and cultural achievements” (Quijano, 2005, p. 118).

Socially constructed as inferior, these racialized groups (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race populations) are excluded and marginalized from spaces of political power and are therefore denied the right to participate in decision-making processes that produce collectively binding norms—such as laws, administrative acts, and judicial decisions—despite being obliged to obey them.

The forms of control and exploitation of labor are also grounded in the racial classification of the population and in the coexistence of different labor relations, such as slavery, servitude, petty commodity production, reciprocity, and wage labor. In other words, the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production—based on wage labor—has never led to the disappearance of other forms of labor control and exploitation. On the contrary, wage labor has always coexisted with other forms, with different labor relations being distributed among workers depending fundamentally on their racial classification.

People categorized as belonging to races socially constructed as inferior (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race populations) are those expected to be sacrificed in the name of progress and economic growth, and are subjected to precarious labor relations with very low remuneration—or even no remuneration at all.

On the other hand, the modern mindset reduces nature to a set of inexhaustible resources that can be extracted and used for capital accumulation, both in the phase of primitive accumulation prior to the industrial stage of the capitalist mode of production and in the phase of capitalist accumulation following industrialization.

Nature is thus seen as a collection of elements, some of which possess economic value and can be extracted for the production of wealth, without any concern for the destruction of the environmental conditions that sustain and enable life in all its forms. Nature is denied any inherent dignity and reduced to mere objecthood, whose sole importance lies in serving human interests, desires, and needs.

Eduardo Gudynas (2019, p. 31) explains the colonial/modern mentality regarding nature as follows:

In Latin America, since the times of Spanish and Portuguese colonization, development has been based on the exploitation of natural resources. A utilitarian perspective has prevailed, consistently seeking to maximize the extraction and use of these resources. Under these conditions, the dominant position did not include an ethical component with regard to Nature; there was no “environmental ethics.” In general, the environment was conceived merely as a basket full of resources available for human use. In the 19th century, some minority positions emerged, in certain cases with conservationist characteristics—although oriented toward avoiding the “waste” of natural resources and therefore still framed within utilitarianism—and, in other cases, based on aesthetic concerns, such as the protection of particularly beautiful landscapes.

Throughout the 20th century, the utilitarian mode became increasingly intensified. Its clearest expressions can be seen in the export of raw materials, which is very evident in the cycles of expansion and economic crisis in various countries. Examples include the booms in the extraction and export of minerals, Amazonian rubber, guano and nitrate from the Pacific coast, as well as the cycles of coffee, cocoa, and bananas. At the beginning of the 21st century, distinct components of this type of development persist, such as the export of iron ore and soybeans. Although this generates enormous pressure on the environment, warnings and alternatives are dismissed as obstacles to economic growth.

Rivers, forests, plants, animals, minerals, and other natural goods are stripped of any dignity and, therefore, can be freely used by the modern subject for capital accumulation. The balance of ecosystems and the intrinsic value of their elements are disregarded: nature is seen as having no dignity, no rights, and thus can be reduced to a mere object to satisfy the voracity of modern desires and interests.

Colonial/modern, capitalist, and Eurocentric society is grounded in the most brutal forms of violence, exploitation, and oppression of those races socially constructed as inferior, of women, and of nature—all reduced to mere objects serving the satisfaction of the modern subject's desires and the accumulation of capital.

The philosophical discourse of modernity has served as a false justification for the barbarity, violence, exploitation, and oppression unleashed by the process of colonial domination by European nation-states over other civilizations and peoples, and by the domination of capitalist enterprises over labor and nature for the production of surplus value through the long commodity chains that constitute the capitalist world-economy.

If the origin of modern philosophy is grounded in the metaphysics of the “ego cogito” (res cogitans)—that is, the modern individual who, in a solipsistic manner, reflects upon their own subjectivity and acquires knowledge through the examination of each idea within the chain of reasoning, independently of all materiality (res extensa)—then the spiritual quality of the “ego cogito” comes to be recognized in the white European man (not in women, nor in Indigenous, African, or Asian peoples). For this reason, he is granted the authority to define what is good, just, beautiful, and true through reason, independently of any material or objective criteria.

The “ego cogito” thus quickly transforms into the “ego conquiro,” through the imposition—by means of violence, if necessary, and through the most atrocious instruments of subjugation of other peoples and of nature—of the standards of the good, the just, the beautiful, and the true as defined by those who arbitrarily attribute to themselves the status of res cogitans.

Persuasion through reason disappears from the philosophical discourse of modernity, which—grounded in the premise of the superiority of European culture over all other civilizations—justifies violence against all peoples and civilizations that resist modern rationality. The philosophical discourse of modernity can be understood as follows:

[...] the most direct way of grounding the praxis of transoceanic colonial domination—coloniality that is simultaneous with the very origin of Modernity and, therefore, a novelty in world history—is to argue that the dominant culture provides the benefits of civilization to more backward cultures (“stupidity,” which in Latin Ginés calls turditatem and Kant calls

unmündigkeit). This argument, which forms the basis of all modern philosophy (from the 16th to the 21st century), was first used with great skill and resonance by Ginés de Sepúlveda (d. 1573), a student of the Renaissance philosopher P. Pomponazzi (1462–1524), during the Valladolid debate of 1550—organized by Charles V (1500–1558) in the manner of Islamic caliphs to “ease his conscience.” It was an “Atlantic” dispute (no longer “Mediterranean” between Christians and “Saracens”), in which the aim was to understand the ontological status of the “Indians,” some “barbarians” different from those of Greece, China, or the Muslim world, whom Montaigne (1967:208), with deep critical insight, defined as cannibals (or Caribs), that is, those whom “we may call barbarians in relation to our own standards of reason.” Ginés (1967:85) writes: **“It will always be just and in accordance with natural law that such people [barbarians] submit to the rule of more cultured and humane princes and nations, so that, through their virtues and the prudence of their laws, barbarism may be overcome and life may become more humane and suited to the cultivation of virtue”**.

This is a reinterpretation of Aristotle, the slaveholding Greek philosopher of the eastern Mediterranean, now situated within the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, that is, with global significance: “And if they refuse such rule, it may be imposed upon them by arms, and such war will be just according to natural law [...]. In short: it is just, appropriate, and in accordance with natural law that honest, intelligent, virtuous, and humane men should dominate all those who lack these qualities” (Sepúlveda, 1967:87).

This tautological argument—because it assumes the superiority of one’s own culture simply by virtue of being one’s own—would prevail throughout modernity. It declares the content of other cultures to be non-human, just as Aristotle, in *Politics*, claimed that Asians and Europeans were barbarians, since “human” were only “those who lived in [Hellenic] cities.” [...] Once the justice of European expansion is established as a civilizing mission, liberating others from the barbarism in which they were submerged, everything else (military conquest, the plundering of gold and silver, the recognition of Indigenous peoples as “human” only insofar as they convert to modern culture, a political organization in which power resides in colonial institutions, the dogmatic imposition of a foreign religion, etc.) becomes justified. (Dussel, 2008, p. 163–165, emphasis and translation ours).

With the expansion of the Colonial/Modern World-System, ancient civilizations were destroyed. Non-European peoples were enslaved and decimated. The wealth of colonized territories was plundered and transferred to European metropolises. Racialized non-European subjects (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race populations) were mobilized to have their lives consumed by labor aimed at capital accumulation. Nature was reduced to a source of resources to be extracted for the accumulation of wealth in European centers. Subsequently, money was transformed into capital and, through capital, surplus value was produced, generating even more capital.

Understanding the process of capital formation and accumulation—which appears as a vicious cycle in which money is transformed into capital, capital into surplus value, surplus value back into money, and so on—requires the presupposition of a primitive accumulation of capital, an accumulation “prior to capitalist accumulation; an accumulation that is not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point” (Marx, 2017, p. 785).

Primitive accumulation of capital is the result of several historical processes, among which the colonization and plundering of the Americas by European nation-states and the emergence of the Capitalist World-Economy stand out. One can therefore argue that there is an “original sin”¹¹ in the formation of colonial/modern capitalist society, consisting of colonial violence in the subjugation of non-European peoples, the imposition of unpaid labor on races socially constructed as inferior, and the looting of wealth (including mineral resources) from non-European territories.

The initial phase of the Capitalist World-Economy constituted the Americas as a colonial space to be exploited and plundered by European colonizers, through the intensive use of enslaved Indigenous and African labor (races socially constructed as inferior and therefore subjected to forced and unpaid labor). The Myth of El Dorado—based on the belief in a city filled with gold that could be mined, plundered, and appropriated by European colonizers—served as a major driving force behind the colonization of the Americas.

The Colonial/Modern World-System, sustained by the rise of European nation-states and the Capitalist World-Economy, is structured to enable the maximum expansion and accumulation of capital, even when this leads to the most brutal forms of control over human life and bodies, the denial of basic freedoms and ethnic identities and cultural traditions incompatible with capital expansion, the destruction of environmental conditions necessary for life on the planet, and the exclusion and marginalization of the majority of the world’s population from access to essential goods and opportunities required for a dignified life according to each group’s conception of a good life.

Walter Mignolo (2011, p. 3) argues that “there is no modernity without coloniality.” Modern society is grounded in the subalternization of races socially constructed as inferior (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race populations) for the exploitation of their labor, as well as in the domination of nature for the extraction of natural resources necessary for capital accumulation. People and nature—whose lives and existence are situated in the peripheral zones of the Capitalist World-Economy—are reduced to mere objects in the service of capital reproduction.

¹¹ Marx explains the “original sin” of primitive accumulation of capital as follows: “This primitive accumulation plays in political economy approximately the same role as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thus sin fell upon the human race. Its origin is explained to us by an anecdote of the past. In a very remote time, there were, on the one hand, a diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal elite, and, on the other, a bunch of lazy rascals who squandered everything they had and more. Indeed, the legend of theological original sin tells us how man was condemned to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow; but the story of economic original sin reveals to us how there can be people who have no need of this. Be that as it may. It came to pass that the former accumulated wealth, and the latter ended up with nothing to sell except themselves, and the wealth of the few, which continues to grow, even though they have long ceased to work. [...] **In actual history, as is well known, conquest, subjugation, murder for the purpose of robbery—in short, violence—play the principal role. In political economy, however, which is so gentle, the idyll has always prevailed. Right and ‘labor’ have, from time immemorial, been the only means of enrichment—except, of course, for ‘this year.’ In reality, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic.**” (Marx, 2017, p. 785–786, emphasis added).

It can also be argued that there is no modernity without the predatory mining of territories, peoples, and nature. Modern mining has become an essential economic activity for capital accumulation, whether through the mercantilist metalism of the 15th to 18th centuries, which enabled primitive accumulation, or through the extraction of inputs necessary for industrial production in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, carried out through the destructive exploitation of nature and people in the peripheral countries of the Capitalist World-Economy.

Mining was the principal economic activity at the beginning of the formation of the Colonial/Modern World-System. It can even be argued that colonial/modern society would not exist without the development of mining activities in the Americas. In this sense, Horacio Machado Aráoz (2020, pp. 114–116) explains that:

The roots of the modern world lie there, in the mining geography of Latin America. From our current perspective, modernity has its dawn in the peculiar form of mining that the Spanish first, and later the Portuguese, began to employ from the early years of the 16th century. The historical particularity of mining in this colonial time and space is related to the direct articulation it establishes between economic power and military power. In an amalgam of gold, silver, iron, and lead, this mining metallurgically fuses the two forms of power upon which modern civilization is built.

Modern mining thus emerges as an activity of conquest. From that point on, this vocation expands as a (self-conceived) universal and globalizing force—homogenizing in nature. It also presents itself as a true religion and a single, imperial rationality. Mining and modernity are born from and under the enchantment of gold, this “great discovery” that brought so much misery and so much splendor to the world (Smith, 2017).

[...]

During the years of discovery and conquest, mining was simply an economy of plunder—accumulation in its primitive state. On his first voyage, Columbus saw what he had come to seek. As previously noted, by his second voyage Columbus already came prepared with all the instruments necessary to undertake the founding act of conquest: weapons and chests. He was no longer a merchant, but a warrior (Dussel, 2004).

That initial warrior spirit was still quite unrestrained. The violence required for this enterprise had not yet been properly calibrated, and its excesses began to threaten its own sustainability (a problem that persists to this day). From 1493 through the early decades of the 16th century, the Spanish occupied the Caribbean islands and engaged in a rudimentary extraction of alluvial gold from rivers. With brutal violence, hunts were organized against the Carib, Arawak, and Taíno peoples in order to subject them to labor regimes in gold washing operations. Bare terror was the first technology for the exploitation of labor. The destruction of local economies gave rise, for the first time, to the civilizational emergence of hunger. Extreme working conditions, malnutrition, and the epidemiological impact triggered by the European invasion completed an apocalyptic scenario. This form of mining applied a scorched-earth policy: plunder lasted only as long as Indigenous populations could survive under such horrific conditions.

Mining constitutes one of the most important material foundations at the beginning of the historical process of forming colonial/modern society in the Americas. The social order in Spanish

and Portuguese America was structured with the aim of enabling the extraction of gold, silver, diamonds, and other precious metals for hoarding in European metropolises.

For this reason, from its inception, mining has been an extractive and predatory economic activity, guided by the logic of the super-exploitation of nature and human labor in order to promote the primitive accumulation of capital. This has involved the destruction of environmental conditions that sustain and make life possible, the subjugation of races constructed as inferior (Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race populations) to the most brutal forms of labor, and the dismantling of the economic practices and social orders of colonized civilizations.

At the dawn of the Colonial/Modern World-System, mining was characterized by the destruction of nature and of the environmental conditions that sustain life and well-being for peoples living in peripheral countries, such as peasants, Indigenous peoples, quilombolas, among others.

Mining fostered poverty among the peoples of the Global South, insofar as it stripped them of the means necessary for the symbolic and material reproduction of their ways of life. Wherever a mining enterprise was established, both the land and the peoples inhabiting it gradually perished due to the destruction of the natural and social conditions that sustain life.

It can thus be argued that mining is constitutive of the colonality of the Modern World-System—encompassing the racialization of populations, the super-exploitation of labor, the destruction of nature, the subordination of science to the interests of capital, the state domination of non-European peoples and communities, and the institutionalization of a social order aimed at capital accumulation. Mining activity embodies all the characteristics of this colonality, and overcoming it requires—though not sufficiently on its own—the overcoming of modern mining.

The *raison d'être* of Spanish and Portuguese America was limited to supplying mineral goods to the metropolises of the Capitalist World-Economy. Economic activities were not carried out to meet the vital needs of Latin American populations; rather, they were oriented toward the hoarding of precious metals in European centers and toward integrating commodity chains that enabled primitive capital accumulation. The lives and well-being of peoples in peripheral countries—especially those belonging to races socially constructed as inferior—held no relevance in economic and political decisions related to mining.

The defining elements of modern mining, forged throughout the development of extractive activities within the Colonial/Modern World-System, include: (1) the destruction of nature and of the socio-environmental conditions that sustain life in all its forms; (2) the super-exploitation of human labor through the interconnection of various labor relations aimed at increasing the extraction of surplus value; (3) the suppression of alternative economic practices oriented toward meeting the needs

of local populations rather than the demands of the international market; and (4) the promotion of capital accumulation.

2 MINING AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THE DESTRUCTION OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS OF LIFE IN LATIN AMERICA

The end of colonialism and the political independence of Latin America, which took place at the beginning of the 19th century, did not lead to the overcoming of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being that characterizes the colonial/modern order. Latin American countries maintained colonial relations after independence, based on the racial classification of the population, the exploitation of workers through diverse labor relations integrated into capital accumulation, the production of knowledge to legitimize the status quo, and the appropriation of territories and nature as instruments of accumulation.

Despite political independence, Latin American countries have maintained their subordinate insertion within the Capitalist World-Economy. As peripheral countries, their role has been to supply primary goods—agricultural and mineral—as inputs for the industrial processes of core countries, while consuming industrial goods to meet the needs of their populations. Thus, the flow of wealth from peripheral to core countries has continued even after the end of colonialism and political independence.

Modern mining remains one of the main economic activities in Latin American countries, preserving the same colonial characteristics of its historical origins. In other words, modern mining is an activity oriented toward meeting the demands of the international market for mineral inputs required by industrial production in semi-peripheral and core countries, producing the following impacts in peripheral regions: (1) the destruction of nature and of the conditions that sustain and enable life in all its forms; (2) the destruction of the ways and means of life of populations living in mining territories, especially the most vulnerable classes and ethnic groups, such as Indigenous peoples, Quilombolas, peasants, family farmers, and artisanal fishers; and (3) the super-exploitation of human labor.

Social struggles aimed at overcoming the coloniality of modern society in Latin America after the end of colonialism were brutally repressed by Latin American oligarchies, which—aligned with sectors of international capital—came to benefit from the forms of exploitation and oppression characteristic of modern society. Whenever political groups committed, even partially and incompletely, to overcoming coloniality began to take control of the upper levels of the nation-state—

whether through electoral victories or armed uprisings—Latin American oligarchies, with the support of international capital, mobilized the most brutal forms of repression to ensure the continuity of colonial relations beyond the formal end of colonialism¹².

Mining in Latin America follows the same pattern described above, and throughout the 21st century there remains a tendency to preserve the colonial character of mining activities in the region—especially the destruction of environmental conditions that sustain life in all its forms, and the dismantling of the ways and means of life of populations living in mining territories—in order to meet the demand for mineral inputs from core countries of the Capitalist World-Economy.

Attempts to nationalize mineral resources, with the aim of using them for the industrialization of Latin American countries and thereby achieving a less unequal position within the Capitalist World-Economy, have failed. Efforts to protect nature, in order to ensure the environmental conditions necessary for the continuity of life and the well-being of populations living in mining territories, have also failed. Likewise, attempts to safeguard the ways and means of life of Indigenous peoples, Quilombolas, riverine communities, family farmers, peasants, and others inhabiting mining territories have been unsuccessful. The coloniality embedded in mining—present since the beginning of colonization and the formation of the Colonial/Modern World-System—has prevailed.

These failures have not interrupted struggles to overcome the coloniality of modern mining. On the contrary, they have enabled the development of new strategies and forms of resistance, grounded in historical experience and in the creative construction of new ways to confront oppression and exploitation within the Modern/Colonial World-System.

The persistence of colonial logic in mining has produced successive cycles of expansion and contraction of mining activities, depending on fluctuations in demand for mineral inputs in the core countries of the Capitalist World-Economy. In other words, mining activity in Latin America is determined by the needs of industrial production in semi-peripheral and core countries, rather than

¹² Horacio Aráoz (2020, p. 185) explains the role of Latin American oligarchies in the continuity of colonial relations as follows: “Latin American oligarchies were entirely a historical-geopolitical product of these colonial enclave economies: their bases and positions of power, their modes of domination, and their cultural, ideological, and lifestyle patterns are structurally dependent on the reproduction and administration of the same colonial scheme of organization and exploitation of territories (and populations), now ‘national.’ As Roitman (2008, p. 173) points out: ‘The Latin American oligarchy enjoyed abundance and luxury, holding full political and social control that ensured its ownership of natural resources—tin, coffee, sugar, rubber—as a result of its control over the state and the violent practices exercised against dominated and exploited classes. No country was exempt from this reality. Their oligarchies came to be characterized by the export product upon which they depended to maintain their obscene and luxurious plutocratic way of life: sugar oligarchy, banana oligarchy, coffee oligarchy, guano oligarchy, nitrate oligarchy, or cattle oligarchy. The emergence of productive activities linked to the primary export sector was the driving force behind changes in the social structure. Yet stagnation would continue to characterize it, and social exclusion is the logic that explains the social dynamics of the oligarchic regime’.”

by the material needs of populations living in mining territories. Capital accumulation—not the production of goods and services to meet human needs—is the determining factor of mining activity.

During periods of increased demand for mineral inputs in the Capitalist World-Economy, there is a significant expansion of mining enterprises oriented toward the international market. This expansion is supported by increased credit lines for financing private mining operations and by state intervention in establishing legal and regulatory frameworks that provide security for investors—even at the cost of denying fundamental rights to populations living in mining areas. At the same time, a justificatory discourse is intensified, promoting the idea—often uncritically—that mineral extractivism leads to economic development, poverty reduction, integration into consumer society, and improved well-being for the entire population.

Conversely, during periods of declining demand for mineral inputs, there is a sharp contraction of mining activities. In enclave-type colonial economies, where other economic activities depend heavily on mining, this results in an abrupt decline in income levels across the population.

Whether during periods of expansion or contraction, promises of social development and poverty reduction are quickly undermined by the reality of environmental devastation, the destruction of livelihoods, and the loss of subsistence conditions for inhabitants of mining territories—ultimately leading to increased poverty affecting the majority of the population in these regions.

The beginning of the 21st century marks a period of significant expansion of mining activities in Latin America, driven by increased global demand for mineral inputs—especially from China—and by the adoption of an economic policy known as the “Commodity Consensus,” which reoriented Latin American economies toward primary extractive activities with low added value, in order to meet the demands of the Capitalist World-Economy.

According to Maristella Svampa (2019, pp. 36–37):

[...] neo-extractivism expanded in a context of epochal change, marked by the transition from the Washington Consensus—associated with financial valorization and structural adjustment—to the Commodity Consensus, based on the large-scale export of primary goods, economic growth, and the expansion of consumption. In practice, unlike the 1990s, from 2000–2003 onward Latin American economies benefited from high international prices for primary commodities, which were reflected in trade balances and fiscal surpluses. This fact cannot be ignored, especially after the long period of stagnation and economic contraction in previous decades, particularly the openly neoliberal period (the 1990s). In this favorable economic context—at least until 2013—Latin American governments tended to emphasize the comparative advantages of the commodity boom, while denying or downplaying the new socio-environmental inequalities and asymmetries that accompanied the consolidation of a development model based on the large-scale export of raw materials. In this sense, all Latin American governments, regardless of their ideological orientation, enabled the strong return of a productivist vision of development which, together with developmentalist illusions, led to the denial and suppression of deeper debates on the social, environmental, territorial, and

political impacts of neo-extractivism, as well as to the devaluation of mobilizations and emerging socio-environmental projects.

As for its consequences, the Commodity Consensus was characterized by a complex, rapid, and recursive dynamic that must be understood from a broad perspective. From an economic standpoint, it translated into a renewed tendency toward the re-primarization of the economy, evident in the reorientation toward primary extractive activities with low added value. This ‘re-primarization effect’ was intensified by the rise of China, a power that quickly established itself as an unequal partner of Latin America. In 2014, in Mercosur countries, exports of primary goods ranged from 65% in Brazil to 90% in Paraguay (ECLAC, 2015). Due to its more diversified economy, Brazil experienced what the French economist Pierre Salama (2011) described as a phenomenon of “premature deindustrialization”.

Within the paradigm established by the Commodity Consensus—which is nothing more than the continuation of coloniality in the socio-political and economic context of the 21st century—mining is presented as the only viable path for economic development in Latin American countries. This narrative is used to justify the sacrifice of traditional peoples and communities whose ways of life are antagonistic to the logic of mining neo-extractivism.

The tragedy of peripheral Latin American countries is compounded by the near-unanimous acceptance of this so-called model of economic development—which is, in reality, a model of death and destruction of both people and nature—by the major political parties across the region, whether conservative (right-wing) or progressive (left-wing).

Conservative parties support the expansion of mining activities based on the belief that Latin America’s role is to supply primary goods—especially mineral resources—to semi-peripheral and core countries of the Capitalist World-Economy, receiving in return limited benefits from their inclusion in this economic order. These benefits are largely appropriated by national elites, who maintain European-level standards of living while relegating the majority of the population to deep poverty.

Progressive parties, on the other hand, support the expansion of mining activities on the grounds that taxes and royalties collected from mining companies can finance social programs aimed at reducing poverty and expanding public services to meet the material needs of the poorest populations. They also argue that mining can generate employment and increase income, thereby contributing to poverty reduction.

Latin America does not possess any predetermined vocation, much less a servile or subordinate one within the Capitalist World-Economy. Its subordinate position is a historical construction, and overcoming it depends on the collective struggle of Latin American peoples to transcend the Modern World-System.

The financing of social programs and the creation of jobs cannot be achieved through the sacrifice of traditional peoples and communities, who are destroyed through the plundering of their

ancestral territories in the name of capital accumulation. The sacrificial myth that legitimizes the exploitation of races socially constructed as inferior in the name of progress and economic development must be denounced as a violent practice that violates the human and fundamental rights of traditional peoples and communities. No form of economic progress can be justified at the expense of the lives and well-being of those living on the periphery of the capitalist world-economy.

Overcoming the neo-extractivist logic requires a radical transformation of the structural elements of the Capitalist World-Economy. It is necessary to build a new social order based on an economy oriented toward the satisfaction of human needs—rather than capital accumulation—producing only what is democratically determined to be essential for human dignity and well-being, while respecting the ways of life of traditional peoples and communities.

The Modern World-System has already proven to be unsustainable, both from a social and an environmental standpoint. The future depends on humanity's capacity to politically construct a new social order in which both people and nature can continue to exist under conditions of dignity.

At the beginning of the 21st century, traditional peoples and communities emerge as one of the key social forces opposing the continuation of the neo-extractivist logic that underlies the expansion of the mining frontier in Latin America. They demand the preservation of nature and of the socio-environmental conditions that sustain life, well-being, and health for the populations living in territories threatened by mining activities.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reflections developed throughout this article demonstrate that the advance of neo-extractivism in Latin America—and particularly in Brazil—constitutes a contemporary expression of a colonial and capitalist rationality that reproduces itself in new forms. Mining, as a central axis of this political economy, symbolizes the historical continuity of relations of exploitation and subordination that structure the modern/colonial world-system, marked by the denial of rights to peoples and to races socially constructed as inferior, as well as by the destruction of nature.

The theoretical analysis grounded in the concepts of the Modernity/Coloniality Group makes it possible to understand how extractivist logic is intertwined with the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, sustaining a model of development that naturalizes the dispossession of territories, bodies, and cultures. This perspective reveals that mining expansion is not merely the result of isolated economic or political decisions, but rather part of a broader civilizational project

that hierarchizes populations and territories, transforming nature into a commodity and cultural difference into an obstacle to progress.

Socio-environmental conflicts arising from mining—especially when they affect traditional peoples and communities—are thus concrete manifestations of this persistent coloniality. Environmental violence, human rights violations, and processes of deterritorialization are expressions of a single logic of accumulation that, in the name of economic growth, perpetuates ethnocide and ecocide.

However, within this scenario, a counter-colonial force also emerges: the resistance of traditional peoples and communities, who affirm alternative ways of existing, producing, and relating to nature. Their practices and knowledge, rooted in cosmologies that recognize the interdependence between humans and nature, offer not only local alternatives but also foundations for rethinking the very concept of development and socio-environmental justice, pointing toward the overcoming of the coloniality of modern society.

Thus, understanding neo-extractivism as a historical and structural phenomenon is an essential condition for addressing its deep-rooted causes and building paths toward transformation. Political and legal struggles in defense of traditional territories, combined with an epistemic and ethical critique of the prevailing model of exploitation, constitute a crucial step toward a post-extractivist horizon grounded in human dignity, environmental justice, and the recognition of the plurality of ways of life that make up Latin America.

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