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Exploring the Landscapes of Extraction.

Colonial Continuities, Postcolonial Assemblages of Power, Anticolonial Struggles

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Abstract. The current tumultuous transformations of the world order and disorder, and in particular the **declining hegemony of the U.S.** build the general framework of the analysis pursued in this chapter. At stake is the issue of **decolonization**, which is discussed with reference to the different theoretical approaches that have addressed it in recent years (through such notions as “**neocolonialism**,” “**postcolonialism**,” and “**decoloniality**”). The chapter focuses on the relations between the transformations of the global order, decolonization, and contemporary capitalism. Starting from a discussion of “neo-extractivism” in Latin America, an expanded notion of **extraction** is proposed to grasp crucial aspects of the operations of capital today. Moving across the boundaries between critique of political economy and postcolonial critique, the chapter end with a reflection upon the need to rethink the notion and practice of **internationalism**.

1. Structural crisis, systemic chaos?

Are we at the end of *Pax Americana*, or of U.S. American hegemony within the capitalist world system? While this book focuses on knowledge production and epistemic decolonization, I want to interrogate the present global conjuncture from the angle of the transitions and shifts that are reframing capitalism. I am indeed convinced that such an analysis is urgently needed not only because of the pressure that capitalism puts on knowledge production (e.g. through managerial discourses that pervasively penetrate even the humanities), but also in order to grasp the stakes and pitfalls surrounding contemporary projects and practices of epistemic and political decolonization in many parts of the world, from Latin America to South Africa and East Asia. It is definitely right to stress the ways in which the “international principle of the modern world” shaped the development of humanities bringing about a bifurcation of the world into two kinds

* As I explain throughout the essay the argument I develop here emerges from my collaborative work with Verónica Gago and Brett Neilson. Needless to say, I am the only responsible for the way in which the argument itself is articulated here. But I want to emphasize in a friendly and comradely way my debt to Brett and Verónica.

of humanity, *humanitas* (the subject of theory production) and *anthropos*, the “suppliers of raw data and factual information.”¹ The ensuing articulation between the consecration of the nation-state and the colonial order of the world has taken multiple and shifting forms in modern history, reproducing itself even beyond formal decolonization and invariably revolving around a European, or Western center. What needs to be emphasized is the constitutive relation between the shifting forms of this articulation and capitalism, a mode of production that for the first time in human history takes since its inception the whole world as a crucial scale for its operations.

“The tendency to create the *world market*,” Karl Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, “is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome.”² Like no other “classical economist” of his age Marx was acutely aware of the relevance of these global geographical coordinates for the very definition of the capitalist mode of production.³ While he famously emphasized in his analysis of “so-called primitive accumulation” in *Capital*, volume 1, the implications of colonial conquest for the opening up of the world market⁴, his theoretical reflections on this latter concept laid the ground for following debates on imperialism⁵ and even for the development of “world system theory⁶”. In very general terms, one can say that what is at stake in these political and theoretical elaborations is precisely the relation between the “international” and colonial order of the world and modern capitalism. Giovanni Arrighi’s reflections upon the “territorial logic of historic capitalism” in his *Adam Smith in Beijing*⁷ are probably the most sophisticated attempt to come to terms with the complicated, tense, and nevertheless necessary relations between capitalism and “territorialism” – which means, with the problem of the political articulation and organization of the “world market.” There is no need here to go into the details of Arrighi’s well known theory of hegemonic cycles (each revolving around the central position occupied in the world system by a European, or Western power, from the Republic of Genoa to the Netherlands, from Britain to the U.S.) and hegemonic transitions (starting in the “autumn” of a cycle, marked by processes of financialization). Suffice it to remember that world system scholars like Arrighi and Immanuel Wallerstein were among the first to diagnose the end of U.S. hegemony, challenging the blossoming rhetoric of a “new American century” since the late 1990s.⁸

What appears clear today is that the signs of a crisis of U.S. American hegemony at the world level multiply. However it is very difficult to discern the traces of a linear hegemonic transition and of an incipient reorganization of the world system around a new center. If one takes China, long considered as a candidate to the hegemonic succession by world system scholars, it is quite clear that on the one hand its politics is focused on the consolidation of a regional space of influence, while on the other its “global” projection is epitomized by a project like the “new silk road,” or “belt and road initiative,” which follows a spatial and political rationality quite different from the one of “territorialism.”⁹ More generally, to put it quickly, “multipolar” scenarios are looming up for the next future, among commercial and traditional wars, geopolitical tensions and geoeconomic competition. New combinations of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism emerge in many parts of the world, at once nurtured by and prompting these scenarios. In such a situation, in which the global power of the U.S. continues to decline but no hegemonic transition is in sight, Wallerstein insists that we are facing the end of the modern world system and of historical capitalism (adding, to be sure, that what comes next is going to be possibly worse than capitalism). A “structural crisis” and “systemic chaos” are, according to him, the defining features of the present global conjuncture.¹⁰

While I definitely acknowledge the relevance of crisis and chaos in the present world disorder, it is difficult for me to follow Wallerstein, as well as other thinkers, in his diagnosis regarding the end of capitalism. Since the inception of the debates on “globalization” I have rather been joining a different kind of analysis and conversations, which emphasize the profound transformations of capitalism and the ensuing challenges for any straightforward articulation between capitalism and territorialism. The book by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire* (2000), is particularly important in this respect, although many other names and works could be mentioned here and independently of what one thinks of their point regarding an emerging global sovereignty of capital. Focusing the analysis on the multiplication of borders as a distinctive feature of “actually existing global processes” I have criticized in my work with Brett Neilson mainstream images of globalization and I have also attempted to move beyond such binaries as “smooth” vs. “striated” space, “space of flows” vs. “space of places,” to underscore the key roles played by myriad bordering devices in the *articulation* and *grounding* of global dynamics.¹¹ Such an analysis has provided me with a pronounced sensitivity for the relevance of spatial formations and of their

legal and political governance in the material constitution of capitalist globalization. It has also alerted me regarding the transformations of territory and territoriality in the present as well as the ensuing tensions and disconnections between capitalism and territorialism that make absolutely plausible the reproduction and further entrenchment of capitalism at the global level even without the emergence of a new hegemonic power at the center of the world system.

Needless to say, such a scenario would imply a radical rupture with a centuries-old history, characterized not merely by the presence of a hegemonic power but – there is a need to repeat it – more precisely by a *European, or Western hegemony*. This is a point that challenges anybody engaged in projects and practices of decolonization. Is it possible to imagine a capitalist world system without a European or Western center? *Only in the West*, to quote from Max Weber,¹² could modern capitalism emerge and deploy its tendency to become universal and rule the world. Sure, Weber's theory of capitalism could and should be critically discussed at length, both regarding the conceptual link he establishes between modern capitalism and "free" wage labor, following Marx in this respect,¹³ and regarding his underestimation of the constitutive role played by the Americas for the emergence of the capitalist world system.¹⁴ But the connection between capitalism, modernity, and Europe (or "the West") is undeniable and is reflected in the Eurocentric nature of the modern world system. Anti-colonial and anti-racist writers have obviously often emphasized that connection. "European civilization," writes for instance Cedric Robinson in his rightly celebrated *Black Marxism*, "is not the product of capitalism. On the contrary, the character of capitalism can only be understood in the social and historical context of its appearance."¹⁵ The question is whether this historical fact implies the impossibility to think of a capitalism delinked from Eurocentrism or whether it is possible and necessary to imagine the reproduction and mutation of capitalism beyond Eurocentrism (or at least beyond a world system centered upon Europe or the West).

This is a more general problem, which regards the project of decolonization as such. Scholars working with a broad notion of "coloniality" strictly associated with Eurocentrism are quick to identify the politics of Putin in Russia or the emergence of the "BRICS" as well as Iran and China as "the most imminent forces of dewesternization" and therefore, at least potentially, of decolonization.¹⁶ Reading such statements one is reminded, among other comparable instances

in the history of anti-colonial movements, of W.E.B. Du Bois' blindness in front of the violence and ferocity of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s simply because it was a non-white and non-Western imperialism. His infamous endorsement of the Japanese occupation of China and his denial of the massacres following the taking of Nanjing in 1937 remain a dark spot in the life and work of this extraordinary scholar and activist.¹⁷ And it should alert us regarding the necessity to develop an understanding of the project of decolonization predicated upon a set of material criteria that go beyond the simple belonging of a certain country to a region outside of the West. As far as I am concerned I join a line of reflection and political practice that, to quote for instance from feminist postcolonial thinker Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, Introduction), emphasizes the nexus between "decolonization, anti-capitalist critique, and solidarity."¹⁸

An analysis of contemporary capitalism is therefore particularly important in order to test and rethink the project of decolonization. In what follows I try to flesh out the "rationality," or "logic" that characterizes current operations of capital in strategically important "sectors" (say, finance, logistics, biomedicine). This "rationality" eschews containment and articulation by the nation state and has thus "global" characteristics, although the grounding and articulation of this global rationality in heterogeneous spaces and territories deserve a careful investigation. I am convinced that there is much to be learned regarding the contours of that rationality from an analysis of current developments of *extractive* activities, which means of activities that played a pivotal role in the establishment of the capitalist world system in the 16th century and more generally in the history of modern colonialism and imperialism. And there are several good reasons to start with Latin America.

2. Neo-extractivism in Latin America

Over the last decades we have been witnessing a dramatic intensification of extractive activities in many parts of the world.¹⁹ Surrounded by ancient mythological resonances, colonial ghosts, and the epic of the miner as an iconic figure for the labor movement in many parts of the world, mining continues to be a crucial capitalist endeavor in our present. Precious metals or stones, copper or tungsten are part and parcel of the core business of mining, which has nonetheless expanded to include new substances as for instance the "grey gold" lithium that powers

rechargeable batteries or rare earth minerals essential to today's miniaturized electronics. The new "ethereal" frontiers of digitalization, data storage, and processing are indeed intertwined with an unprecedented intensification of extractive dynamics and related processes of dispossession.²⁰ On the other hand, a new extractive technique like fracking presents a cutting-edge of extraction, allowing it to continue beyond the point at which the gases it seeks to remove from the earth have been otherwise depleted.²¹ The image of an expansive frontier of extraction is particularly effective to grasp these developments, which include the widening of oil drilling and resource extraction in the Oceans onto the Arctic region and the extractive turn in agriculture, so apparent for instance in the extensive cultivation of oil palm or soy and so clearly connected with processes of dispossession and "land grabbing." In the case of soy, in particular, companies such as Monsanto are frantically working to enable the cultivation of ever more marginal areas of the Latin American pampas as well as elsewhere in the world.²²

The expansion of the extractive frontier complicates earlier geographies of extraction, superimposing new hierarchies and dependencies on older ones, both between and within countries and regions.²³ But there is also a need to add that the intensification of extractive activities has been met by a multiplication of struggles and resistances across the world – from Northern Greece to West Africa, from India to Indonesia just to conjure up a couple of relevant instances. An important chapter in the history of social struggles of the last decades has been written along the extractive frontier, intertwining environmental questions with the battle for the commons as well as building impressive trans-local and trans-national coalitions. Indigenous communities have often been at the forefront of these struggles, for instance in the 2016 protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation or in the resistance against the building of a road through Bolivia's Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory (known as TIPNIS). My investigation of extraction is predicated upon this rich archive of struggles, which have radically tested the issue of property and the very meaning of "development" raising important question regarding colonial continuities in the present.

Raw materials extraction has indeed been the hallmark of modern colonialism since its inception. In his analysis of the "so-called primitive accumulation," mentioned above, Marx emphasizes "the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population" of America

after the discovery of gold and silver.²⁴ In a recent book, *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe allows us expanding the notion of extraction with respect to colonial history inviting us to consider even the Atlantic slave trade as an extractive endeavor. Underscoring the key role played by Atlantic slavery and the related plantation system in the Caribbean and the Americas for the emergence of modern capitalism, he focuses on the mutations of the figure of the “Black Man,” one “fated to become an essential mechanism in a process of accumulation that spanned the globe.” In order to be turned into a commodity (*man-merchandise*) and to spur the valorization of capital (*man-of-money*), the “Black Man” had to be first of all constructed as a mineral raw material (*man-of-metal*) to facilitate its extraction and removal from the African soil.²⁵ Mbembe’s analysis is original and sophisticated. But there is a need to stress that the use of the language of extraction to describe the destructive impact and lasting influence of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa is widespread in anti-colonial and pan-Africanist writings. One can find it for instance in the important book by Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), where “the extraction of slave labor from all areas (of Africa) to all destinations over the many centuries that the slave trade exist” is linked to the predominance of “purely extractive” economic activities attached to foreign trade to genealogically explain the persistent underdevelopment of the continent.²⁶ And indeed the continuity of extractive activities as privileged form of integration of formerly colonized countries and regions into the capitalist world market has been often critically emphasized after World War 2 in the debates surrounding underdevelopment, dependency, and uneven exchange.

Within this history the position of Latin America is of course prominent, considering the constitutive role it played in the emergence of the modern capitalist world system. Such mines as the ones around the city of Potosí, in present-day Bolivia, where thousands of indigenous people worked and toiled under the system of forced labor known as the *mita* since the discovery of silver in 1545 are just a particularly impressive and well researched instance of an economy of extraction and plunder, exploitation and dispossession that embraced the whole region. What marks the specificity of Potosí is precisely the arrangement of the *mita*, a system of forced labor and seasonal migration that reworked an Inca form of mandatory public service to target and exploit entire indigenous communities. Not only the maintenance and reproduction of the individual laborer were indeed relegated to his community of origin but, as historian Enrique

Tándeter writes, “even the reconstitution of immediate labor power was covered insufficiently by the existing wages.”²⁷

Far from being an “anomaly” or an “abuse,” the *mita* provided the basis for the colonial system in the Andes since the late 16th century and has left deep traces in the organization of labor in mines and more generally in the economic and social structure in a country like Bolivia. In a posthumous work, *Lo Nacional Popular en Bolivia* (“The National-Popular in Bolivia,” 1986), sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado set out to investigate the “strata” that shape the mottling of a society such as the Bolivian, where “free” wage labor was never hegemonic. In his analysis, the relation to the depths of extraction works as a metaphorical basin for Bolivia’s and even more generally for Latin America’s political constitution. Magical and devilish, the shadow of Potosí enshrouds the specific form of legal and territorial formations prevailing in Bolivia (epitomized by the enclave), the assemblages of postcolonial state and citizenship, as well as the articulation of heterogeneous forms of labor relations and exploitation, giving rise to a peculiar mix of formal and real subsumption of labor under capital. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) reminds us, the image of the motley (*abigarrado*) that Zavaleta Mercado forges for thinking about the coexistence of diverse societal organizing principles and temporalities, which are incapable of being made coherent in the modern state synthesis, originates from the imagination awakened in his mind by the technical description of the mine’s veins.²⁸

Such an analysis, as Verónica Gago emphasizes, provides us with an effective viewpoint to critically analyze the legacy of colonial plunder and extraction in Latin America.²⁹ It points to the fact that extractivism is always something more than a mere economic mechanism. It rather has constitutive political and societal dimensions related to the establishment and government of capitalist relations in constant mutation. In this sense, the continuity of extractivism in Latin America definitely includes the continuity of plunder and dispossession as well as of the subordinated integration of the region within the world market through raw materials export. But it also has wider implications, which include the *rentier* character of the creole elites and the ensuing colonial character that is transferred onto the new republican states since the early 19th century. In his 1971 book, *The Open Veins of Latin America*, Eduardo Galeano summed up this predicament proposing a striking image of draining and using a medical allegory.³⁰ It is

important to note that Galeano's book was in many ways connected with the development in the previous two decades of dependency theory, which nurtured several attempts to break with an economic model predicated on raw materials export and to prompt a process of industrialization through "developmental" state policies. Although according to Raúl Prebisch, the founder of dependency theory, there was no contradiction between the "industrialization of Latin America" and "the efficient development of primary production," since the export of primary products (both agricultural and extractive) would "allow for the importation of the considerable quantity of capital goods needed,"³¹ the governments that actually adopted developmentalist politics in the region (e.g. the government of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, the one of Arturo Frondizi in Argentina, or the ones of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement in the wake of the 1952 revolution in Bolivia) were indeed limited but real attempts to open up new economic, social, and political avenues beyond extractivism. In the 1960s and 1970s, amid the tumultuous blossoming of revolutionary movements across the region, it was the establishment of new, often genocidal military dictatorships in several Latin American countries that abruptly put an end to these attempts. These dictatorships laid the ground for a new combination of financialization and extraction, foreshadowing the "Washington consensus" and the neoliberal hegemony in the 1990s (see Gago 2017, 1-28).³²

The wave of struggles and real insurrectional movements that swept the region around the beginning of the new century opened up a completely new political horizon, within which new "progressive" governments emerged in a number of Latin American countries. "Post-neoliberalism" became the political catchword of the day, while lively debates surrounded the "return of the state" and the ascent of a specific form of left populism.³³ A certain kind of "resource nationalism," echoing dependency theory, was definitely widespread in struggles and political rhetoric of the Latin American left in the early 2000s. Claiming national control of resource extraction, however, rapidly led "progressive" governments to intensify extractive activities in unprecedented ways, both fostering mega-mining projects and prompting extensive cultivations like the one of soy. In a global conjuncture characterized in the first decade of the century by a commodity boom, with historically high prices for oil, minerals, and other primary commodities, a certain part of the extraordinary rent from natural resources was used and directed to finance social policies and to fight poverty. But the intensification of extractive

activities also led to a multiplication of territorial conflicts and eventually to radical clashes with the indigenous movements that, in particular in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, had played crucial roles in opening up the spaces for the formation of “progressive” governments. Those clashes found an iconic expression in the opposition between “development” and *buen vivir* (“good living”) and they concurrently nurtured the emergence of the paradigm of “neo-extractivism” as one of the most widespread critical lenses with which to view wider transformations of capitalism even under the “progressive” governments in Latin America.³⁴

Speaking of *neo-extractivism* implies of course an awareness of the long colonial and postcolonial history of Latin America’s insertion within the capitalist world system through violent forms of raw material extraction and related processes of dispossession. At the same time it signals a shift toward Asia (and particularly toward China) as the main market for Latin American commodities, while it also refers to the “developmental” component of extractivism in the case of “progressive” governments – which means to the nexus between extraction (the “reprimarization” of economy) and social policies I just mentioned. Prompted by scholars like Arturo Escobar, Maristella Svampa, Eduardo Gudynas, Edgardo Lander, and Alberto Acosta,³⁵ the Latin American discussion of “neo-extractivism” remains an important source for any critical discussion of extraction today. Connected with important social struggles across the region, where it is worth repeating that indigenous people are often at the forefront, and taking into consideration mineral extraction as well as the new extractive frontiers of extensive agriculture and agribusiness, that discussion raises crucial questions regarding the reproduction and postcolonial mutations of colonial logics and matrices of power, the relation between humans and the earth, self-government, and the issue of property. Moreover, the discussion of “neo-extractivism” sheds light on the limits that are placed upon the action of states, even under “progressive” governments, by their enmeshment within extractive operations of capital and the resulting dependence on the volatile and deeply financialized dynamics of the world market. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the narrow focus on literal extractive activities is a serious limit of these debates and this critical literature.³⁶ There is a need to carefully investigate the ways in which the intensification of extraction is connected – in and beyond Latin America – with other operations of contemporary capital and with wider transformations of exploitation that are often obscured by the widespread use in theories of “neo-extractivism” of David Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession.”³⁷

3. Extraction, writ large

A criticism of the narrow focus of “neo-extractivism” on literal extractive activities does not necessarily require moving away from the semantic field of extraction. I am convinced that the opposite is the case and that there is rather a need to *expand* the concept of extraction in order to get a privileged viewpoint on the workings of contemporary capitalism well beyond the worlds of mining, oil drilling, and agribusiness. Working with Verónica Gago to intervene in Latin American debates we have critically interrogated the implications of the definition of “neo-extractivism” in terms of a transition from the “Washington consensus” of the 1990s to a new “commodity consensus”.³⁸ Our impression is that such an analysis paradoxically (and unintentionally) confirms the rhetoric of “progressive” governments and their claim to have inaugurated an age of “post-neoliberalism,” which relegates to the past neoliberalism and, even more importantly, the rule of finance. Both the analysis of the reproduction and mutations of neoliberalism and the investigation of ongoing processes of financialization are therefore particularly relevant for us.³⁹ While we underscore the crucial importance of processes of financial manipulation of commodities to point to the structural interlocking between financialization and literal extraction, we also look at the concrete ways in which the social policies funded with the extractive rent work. And we shed light on the fact that the social policies of “progressive governments” have prompted a financialization of “popular economies” in the huge Latin American metropolitan peripheries through an unprecedented expansion of consumer credit due to the acknowledgment of state subsidies as collaterals.⁴⁰ At the other end of literal extraction we thus find a process of financialization of the economies of the poor that also works through an extractive logic, targeting, in a way *from outside*, wide and heterogeneous networks of social cooperation. And it is important to add that the defeat of “progressive” governments in such important countries as Argentina and Brazil does not seem to have changed much in this pattern of financialization of social policies that address poverty.

Even beyond Latin America I am convinced that an expanded concept of extraction can shed light on important aspects of contemporary capitalism. I was stressing above that digitalization, data storage, and data processing are predicated upon a further expansion of the literal extractive

frontier. What must be added now is that the capitalist valorization of the emerging digital worlds basically depends on increasingly sophisticated techniques of *data mining*. I will come back to this point later in this section. For now I just want to stress the symptomatic relevance of such phrasing (whose meaning is far from being merely metaphorical) to define practices and techniques of data analysis and manipulation that are radically reshaping security, media, and marketing as well as a huge variety of economic sectors, ranging from finance to “biocapital.” In a recent book I wrote with Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, we use an expanded notion of extraction to grasp the operative logic of capital in some of these domains of economic activity, focusing in particular on logistics and finance.⁴¹ In doing that we enter dialogues with other thinkers who emphasize the extractive dimension of contemporary capitalism, like for instance Saskia Sassen and Michael Hardt and Toni Negri.⁴²

I will just give a couple of examples of the way in which an expanded notion of extraction allows shedding light on the operations of capital in logistics and finance. The new mobility paradigm brought about by the so-called “revolution in logistics” that took place in the 1960s, epitomized by the shipping container, has enabled a radical reorganization of global economic spaces, most notably through the global stretching and reshaping of “supply chains”.⁴³ This has led to dramatic transformations with respect to the relation between production and circulation pertaining at the height of industrial capitalism. To put it shortly, nowadays supply chain operations often tend *to exercise command over processes of production* and to extract value from heterogeneous productive environments. Examining the operations of inventory giants such as Walmart and Amazon, anthropologist Anna Tsing shows for instance how they push costs back to producers, who are allowed to use “any methods they want” to keep prices at a minimum. These methods usually involve “eliminating labor and environmental standards.”⁴⁴ Production *must* be performed of course (and this is crucially important); *how* it is performed is however at the end of day indifferent. What is even more crucial for the practices of valorization pursued by companies like Walmart and Amazon is the “logistical” capacity to synchronize diverse modes of production along the supply chain, exploiting in a way from the outside heterogeneous productive processes. That Tsing uses the term “piracy” to describe the relation between supply chain operations and their surrounding economic and social environments shows just how close her analysis is to the semantic field of extraction.⁴⁵

This extractive dimension of logistical operations of capital is confirmed under different circumstances by an analysis of the new frontiers of logistics. Particularly relevant in this regard is so-called platform capitalism, which is predicated upon “remote sensing technologies” and upon the “data mining” techniques that I mentioned earlier. As Trebor Scholz maintains, such platforms as Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, or Seamless (to mention just a couple of well know instances) can be defined as “extractive platforms” insofar as they rely upon a wider environment of social cooperation from which they extract labor and value without establishing formal labor relations with their workers.⁴⁶ This is for us a very important point since it sheds light on a relationship of platforms with “living labor” that is once again radically different from the one that characterizes industrial capital. Nick Srnicek demonstrates in his recent book *Platform Capitalism* the pervasiveness, well beyond any sectorial boundary, of this business model, which is dependent “upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data.” “Just like oil,” he significantly writes, “data are a material to be extracted, refined, and used in a variety of ways”.⁴⁷ It is social interaction and cooperation that creates the huge deposits of data supplying the material that enables the valorization of capital invested in platforms, whose operations appear therefore characterized by an extractive logic increasingly inscribed onto the codes of the infrastructures that govern society.

Let me now come to finance, which is of course crucially important for any analysis of contemporary capitalism and whose role I have underscored with respect to the critical analysis of “neo-extractivism” in Latin America I pursue with Verónica Gago. While there is obviously a need to critically take into account the roles played by sophisticated innovations like derivatives or high frequency trade in the investigation of global financial markets, I am convinced that there is one point in Marx’s analysis of a completely different financial capital (“interest bearing capital,” as he had it) that continues to be challenging and retains its analytical productivity today. In *Capital*, volume 3, Marx stresses the accumulation of “claims or titles” to “future production” as a distinctive feature of the specificity of the financial moment in the series of transformations effected by capital.⁴⁸ There are several comments to be made upon this definition, which significantly invites us to politicize the analysis of financial capital through the reference to *claims* and *titles*. First of all, the emphasis on the link between finance and a wealth

to be produced in future challenges any interpretation of finance as self-referential, of financial capital as merely “fictitious” and opposed to “productive” capital. Secondly, it is important to reflect precisely upon the moment of “claim” associated with the property of financial assets according to Marx. This moment does not merely foreshadow a relation with “future production,” it also anticipates a set of relations with subjects involved in such production in a subordinated position – with subjects whose life is shaped by the compulsion to work. Thirdly, the link between finance and “future production” posits an abstract figure of social cooperation (a social cooperation that has not yet taken place and nevertheless is foreshadowed by finance) as the main source of financial value and characterizes financial operations as extractive precisely because they are not involved in the direct organization of that social cooperation.

This excursus across the fields of logistics and finance should suffice to give an idea of the sense in which I think an expanded notion of extraction allows grasping the contours of the operative logic of contemporary capital in strategic economic domains. What matters more to me is the position of *exteriority* with respect to living labor and social cooperation occupied by capital in such instances. In the next section I will have something more to say regarding this position of exteriority. For now suffice it to say that it points to a striking contrast with the pervasive organization of labor and cooperation by industrial capital at the point of production. And I need to add that extractive operations of capital target *common* resources and powers, be it in the form of mineral deposits, land, or social cooperation. It is against this background that I believe it is necessary to rethink the notion of exploitation as well as its relation with a set of other concepts, including dispossession, expropriation, power, and domination.⁴⁹ I am convinced in particular that social cooperation emerges as one of the main productive forces spurring contemporary processes of capital’s valorization and accumulation. Nonetheless, this social cooperation is far from being smooth and subjectively constituted. It is rather crisscrossed by hierarchies, fault lines, and divisions, which revolve around such criteria as gender and race but also emerge from the multiplication of labor further intensified by the extractive dimensions of contemporary capitalism.⁵⁰

While Brett Neilson and I emphasize the pivotal role of an expanded notion of extraction to understand the working of contemporary capitalism, *we do not reduce the latter to its extractive*

dimensions. We rather forge the concept of operations of capital to stress at the same time the position of command that extractive operations as the ones I singled out with respect to logistics and finance occupy in the composition of what Marx calls *Gesamtkapital*, “total,” or more accurately “aggregate capital,” and the necessary articulation of those operations with other operations of capital, whose logic can be significantly different.⁵¹ And this is the point in which our analysis differs from any attempt to make sense of contemporary capitalism by privileging or unilaterally focusing on developments within a single sector of the economy (be it through the notion of “neo-extractivism” or through the ones of “logistical capitalism” and “financialization”).

Take for instance, to make the point more concrete, the recent critical move to place debt at the center of an analysis of the workings of capitalism, instantiated by the works of David Graeber and Maurizio Lazzarato.⁵² This move definitely registers the widening and further entrenchment of the logic of (private as well as public) debt in an age characterized by what Randy Martin effectively called fifteen years ago the “financialization of daily life.”⁵³ Nevertheless this critical move often leads to disentangle debt – and therefore finance – from the dense and heterogeneous fabric of social and economic relations within which they are enmeshed. In particular the emphasis on debt tends to obscure, once again, the persistent relevance and new qualities of exploitation. Once we consider debt as a form of financialization of what I called before the compulsion to work (which should not be surprising considering the manifold relations between debt and bonded labor that have shaped modern history, particularly although not exclusively in colonial settings), things begin to change. Debt (private as well as public) definitely appears as the specific relation of subordination connected to the operations of financial capital. In order to repay it, however, indebted people are compelled to enter multifarious relations with other figures (or “fractions”) of capital – industrial or illegal, commercial or otherwise –, whose modes of operation and exploitation are significantly different from those of finance, something that appears very clear once debt and the operations of finance are considered from “below,” as it is the case in the work on “popular economies” in Latin America I mentioned above. To investigate the articulation of these heterogeneous operations within contemporary “aggregate capital” is a crucial task. Our point is that such articulation today is presided and commanded by what we call extractive operations writ large, although these operations – i want to repeat it one more time – are far from being the only operations performed by capital today. This leads us in particular to

contend that contemporary capitalism moved beyond industrial capitalism notwithstanding an unprecedented booming of industrial activities in many parts of the world.

4. Colonial continuities, anti-colonial ruptures

I was speaking before of the position of exteriority that capital occupies in the operations that Neilson and I attempt to grasp through an expanded notion of extraction. This is an important point in our work, which leads us to join a debate on capital's relations with its multiple "outsides" that has been particularly lively in recent years – involving, for instance, Marxist geographers like David Harvey, postcolonial critics of political economy like Kalyan Sanyal, and feminist thinkers like Nancy Fraser and J.K. Gibson-Graham.⁵⁴ Particularly looking at operations of capital in such realms as finance and logistics, there is however a need to add that capital's position of exteriority with respect to living labor and social cooperation takes on very peculiar characteristics and needs to be further specified. The "outsides" cannot be conceived of in these cases in literal terms (as indicating spaces that are to be found elsewhere with respect to capital's rule), nor they refer to uncontaminated areas of solidarity, communitarian ethos, and resistance. They are rather often constructed as outsides by capital, which disseminates within the fabric of social cooperation specific devices of discipline and control (be it the compulsion to work corresponding to debt in the case of finance, logistical parameters and standards in the case of supply chains, or algorithmic management in the case of a platform like Uber). In Marxian terms, it is possible to make sense of such a situation speaking of a reemergence of defining aspects of "formal subsumption of labor under capital" on the terrain constructed by "real subsumption." The moment of taking over from outside that characterizes formal subsumption is indeed constitutive of a specific set of operations of contemporary capital. These operations are haunted by the ghosts of dispossession and direct violence well beyond literal extractive activities, as it was for instance clear in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007/8.⁵⁵

The moment of takeover, to which specific antagonisms, tensions, and conflicts correspond, is a conceptually colonial moment whose salience and multifarious manifestations characterize contemporary capitalism. Not accidentally, due to its relevance for the understanding of colonialism, the reflection on "formal subsumption" has been particularly intense and original

within non-Western Marxism.⁵⁶ One can find the problematic of formal subsumption also in the work of Rosa Luxemburg, whose *Accumulation of Capital* (1913) was one of the first major Marxist efforts to emphasize the continuity of “so-called primitive accumulation” beyond the moment of transition to capitalism as well as the constitutive role of colonial expansion and imperialism for capital. Luxemburg’s elaborations remain today an important source of inspiration for any attempt to conceptually frame the question of capital’s relation with its outsides. “The existence and development of capitalism,” she famously writes, “requires an environment of non-capitalist forms of production, but not every one of these forms will serve its ends.”⁵⁷ Luxemburg’s critique of the image of capitalism as composed only by capitalists and wage laborers leads her to stress, along with the historical relevance of colonialism and imperialism, what I was just calling a conceptual colonial moment at the very heart of capital. Sure, she had a literally geographical understanding of the “non-capitalist strata and countries” upon which the extended reproduction of capital was predicated in her account.⁵⁸ Such an understanding leads Luxemburg to contend that once all those “strata and country” have been integrated into the accumulation process, capitalism as such would come to its logical end. This is apparently a serious flaw of her theory, but a different reading of the notion of capital’s outsides – a reading that underscores both capital’s ability to construct its own outsides and the need to conceive of them in non literal terms – allows reframing her point in more consistent ways for our present. While Luxemburg’s work is an obvious reference for any analysis of extraction and extractivism, she also invites us to widen the scope of our analysis of labor, going beyond “the various artificial divisions of labor created by capital” and their regimes of visibility, focusing in particular of “non-wage labor relations”⁵⁹ and on the multifarious ways in which popular and subaltern strata are turned into consumers.⁶⁰ As I already demonstrated, finance and indebtedness figure prominently in this respect.

The huge heterogeneity of the composition of living labor, well beyond the boundaries of “free” wage labor was a defining feature of capitalism under colonial conditions. Today, it has become generalized across diverse geographical scales, blurring the boundary between former colonies and former metropolises, between the “global South” and the “global North.” There are of course important differences among different locations and regions, but as I already stated I am convinced that the extractive dimension of contemporary capitalism further incites and

accelerates processes of heterogenization and multiplication of labor that are often connected with movements of migration. The study of these processes, as well as of the fragments of colonial logics and assemblages they reproduce and disseminate across societies, is an important task for any project of decolonization. While the expansion of the literally extractive frontier in many parts of the world immediately conjures up colonial continuities, and in some cases even a return from “coloniality” to what Rita Segato calls “conquestiality,”⁶¹ it is for me crucially important to widen the scope of analysis and to connect literal extractive activities to the expanded notion of extraction that I have been sketching in this essay also to grasp the multifarious spectrum of colonial logics that haunt our present.

From this point of view there is a need to test the conceptual language we use to name colonial continuities. Postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, decoloniality are terms that have nurtured over the last decades alternative approaches and proposals. As far as I am concerned I think that the emergence of postcolonial criticism since the 1980s has made lasting contributions to critical debates, particularly through the emphasis on the many ways in which Empire strikes back, beyond the great divide between the colony and the metropolis.⁶² As Stuart Hall explains, “the subverting of the old colonizing/colonized binary in the new conjuncture” of decolonization – a conjuncture which, “like colonization itself, has marked the colonizing societies as powerfully as it has the colonized (of course, in different ways)” – laid the basis for a productive “postcolonial” rethinking of colonialism and of its continuities in a postcolonial age from the angle of the agency of the colonized.⁶³ Having said this, I have the impression that the critical language of postcolonial critique is in some way exhausted today, probably due to an exclusive focus on cultural dimensions and to a certain reluctance to engage in analyses of structures of power and domination that should at least complement that focus. As far as the notion of “neo-colonialism” is concerned it is well known that it was forged in the wake of independence in Africa to designate a situation in which formal sovereignty of a formerly colonized country is combined with a direction “from outside” of the economic system that ends swallowing up “its political policy.”⁶⁴ “Neo-colonialism” has spurred and continues to spur important struggles, while from an analytical viewpoint it definitely compelling in specific cases. To provide an example from the field of finance and monetary arrangements, just think of the Western and Central African CFA franc, whose value and exchange rate is guaranteed and set by the French treasury. The notion of

“monetary colonialism,” recently proposed by Pedro Biscay, is a quite accurate description of the ensuing neo-colonial relations between African countries and the old colonial master.⁶⁵ More generally, however, the use of the notion of neo-colonialism can end up being generic and ritualistic, obscuring more than illuminating relations of power and domination.

Decolonization, anyway, is apparently far from being over. Such an amazing movement as the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign in South African campuses, which gave rise to other struggles such as the one against the increase in tuition (“Fees Must Fall”), addresses in a powerful way the question of decolonization in the context of a general critique of post-Apartheid South African politics and society. In the U.S. African American scholars and activists increasingly frame their claims and struggles in terms of decolonization, joining Indigenous studies and politics that never stopped raising that question in many parts of the world and supporting Palestinian struggles for freedom under Israeli occupation. In Latin America, struggles surrounding neo-extractivism and more generally territorial conflicts often speak an anti-colonial language, as well as struggles of migration and anti-racist movements in Europe. Decolonial thinkers like Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo have made important contributions to the understanding of these movements, forging concepts like the “coloniality of power” and the “geopolitics of knowledge.”⁶⁶ These theoretical frameworks help us shedding light on the political and epistemic stakes of decolonization, in particular insofar as they invite us to critically focus attention on the ways in which the adoption of the nation-state as structure of governance in the wake of “geopolitical decolonization” laid the basis for the reproduction of colonial logics in the newly independent countries.⁶⁷ However, as I anticipated earlier, the specific critique of Eurocentrism pursued by decolonial theories often leads to reinforce rather than to deconstruct the border circumscribing Europe and the West from “the Rest”⁶⁸ and to disentangle their interest in epistemology from an analysis of the materiality and mutations of capitalism. Moreover, such a critique locates the main line of antagonism at the level of civilizations – “the decolonial,” Mignolo writes, “confronts all of Western civilization, which includes liberal capitalism and Marxism”⁶⁹ – which risks on the one hand reproducing the pitfalls of (European) civilizational thinking and on the other hand nurturing a merely moralizing critique.

I am convinced that all the approaches I have synthetically sketched may contribute to critically shed light on the heterogeneous, and often far from obvious colonial continuities that are connected to the further entrenchment of capitalism and its extractive dimensions. While in many conflicts surrounding the expansion of the literal extractive frontier continuities may appear as clean and straightforward (also due to the involvement of Indigenous people in many parts of the world), there is a need to focus attention also on what Ann Laura Stoler calls “strange continuities,” on a “recursion” that is something fundamentally different from imagining that “social and political processes ever play out in a repetitive and mimetic fashion.”⁷⁰ The expansion of the notion of extraction to investigate the ways in which literal extractive activities articulate with finance in Latin American metropolitan peripheries is an attempt to move precisely in that direction. The conceptually colonial (and extractive) moment that presides over the workings of contemporary capitalism should more generally figure prominently in the agenda of any project of decolonization today. The mutations and further entrenchment of capitalism, possibly beyond any European, or Western hegemony within the world system, provide a crucial angle on the multifarious colonial continuities that are inscribed onto postcolonial assemblages of power and that often take forms quite different from the ones epitomized by the notion of neo-colonialism. In such a predicament reactivating the archives of anti-colonial struggles and thinking becomes a strategic task to rethink and further develop the agenda of decolonization.

5. Internationalism, reloaded

The colonial history of extraction, be it in mines or plantations, is a history of dispossession and violence, forced labor and dread. Take rubber, for instance. The very existence of this “incredible commodity,” which epitomizes through its elasticity the “metaphysical subtleties and theological whimsies” attributed by Marx to the commodity form as such,⁷¹ was predicated upon processes of extraction and plantation economies whose geography stretched across Latin America and Africa, Asia and Australia. Michael Taussig has eloquently traced the “culture of terror” surrounding rubber extraction in the Putumayo territories of the Amazon during the “rubber boom” between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.⁷² Indigenous people were forced to work day and night without any retribution, they were starved to death, flogged, tortured, castrated. Similar conditions prevailed in the rubber plantations in Congo, where the

“rubber boom” provided Joseph Conrad with the background for his *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in Indochina, or in Papua, to mention just a couple of crucial sites in this specific geography of extraction.

In the same years, the rubber industry – along with oil business, another extractive endeavor – was one of the best illustrations of the emergence of what Lenin would famously dub in 1916, in his *Imperialism*, monopoly capitalism. “Rubber firms such as Michelin, Goodyear, Dunlop, and Firestone,” historian John Tully writes, “were among the first of the giant corporations to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century. Given that rubber is crucial for the modern economy, it is little wonder that at certain junctures the industry formed synergic bonds with the state.”⁷³ This was particularly the case with the chemical corporation IG Farben and the German state under National Socialism. The efforts to produce synthetic rubber for Hitler’s war machine ended up in 1941/42 in the construction of the “Buna plant” in Monowitz, close to Auschwitz.⁷⁴ The IG Farben rubber plant in Monowitz quickly became the biggest chemical plant operative in Europe, its operations were predicated upon widespread use and ferocious exploitation of slave labor (prisoners of war, inmates, and civilians in occupied countries), and the plant itself was organically integrated into the system of concentration and extermination camps of Auschwitz. The colonial “culture of terror” had reached into the heart of Europe, one can say joining an anti-colonial interpretation of Nazism that was developed soon after World War 2 by W.E.B. Du Bois (1946, 23) and Aimé Césaire (1950, 14-15).⁷⁵ It was an uncanny inauguration of a “postcolonial” time under the sign of what Césaire called the “boomerang effect” of colonialism, indeed (see Rahola and Mezzadra 2015).⁷⁶

But the history of rubber is not only an history of terror and violence. In South-East Asia, in particular, rubber plantations were part of a wider “plantation society” amply dependent on the indentured labor of “coolies.”⁷⁷ As in the U.S. South before the civil war, rubber plantations were crisscrossed by multiple forms and practices of daily resistance, defiance, and sabotage, as well as by movements of “desertion, sometimes en masse.”⁷⁸ And as in the U.S. South, according to the thesis of W.E.B. Du Bois,⁷⁹ those practices of resistance laid the ground for the “general strike” against the slave system during the war, in many plantation societies powerful waves of strikes dictated the pace of the emergence of the nationalist, labor, and communist movement in the first

half of the twentieth century. While for instance in the late 1920s the strike wave across the plantations of French Southern Indochina marked the beginning of the Communist Indochinese Party's involvement in mass labor struggles, waves of strikes shook rubber plantations in Malaya between 1937 and 1940, posing severe challenges to the British authorities and shattering the myth of the "mild Hindoo" worker⁸⁰.

There is much to learn from histories of labor struggles under such severe conditions as the ones prevailing in colonial rubber plantations, where the ghost of slavery and the direct use of violence from the bosses always haunted even the experience of indentured laborers. But there is also a need to remember that the rubber transformation industry was the scene of intense labor struggles and militancy in many parts of the world. The city of Akron, Ohio, is particularly relevant in this regard. Since the 1890s this city of the U.S. Midwest began to be known as "Rubber's Home Town" and housed the world's greatest concentration of rubber factories. Goodrich and Goodyear, Firestone and General Tire had all their headquarters and run large factories here. The history of labor struggles in Akron reached in a way its peak in the famous, and victorious strike of February-March 1936, which began at the Goodyear factory and then quickly involved the workers in the other rubber factories. What interests me here, however, is a previous strike, the strike of 1913 that was led by the *wobblies*, the industrial Workers of the World (IWW).⁸¹ While this strike was eventually defeated, it provides us with a remarkable instance of internationalist solidarity. "Big Bill" Haywood, the leader of the IWW, in the middle of the "rubber boom" and in front of its implications in the colonial world, was indeed able in one of the speeches he held during the strike to connect the struggle of (largely migrant) industrial workers in Ohio with the plague and pain of indigenous plantation laborers in the Amazon and Africa. Referring explicitly to Putumayo and Congo, he addressed the striking workers with the following words: "the rubber manufacturers do not cut off the hands and feet of your children, but they take the food from their mouths" (quoted in Wolf and Wolf 1936, p. 400).⁸²

The history of rubber instantiates an amazing interlocking of processes, issues, and stakes revolving around the nexus between colonialism and extraction. It conjures up the culture of terror and the histories of bonded labor that surround the plantation system, as well as their displacement onto the very heart of the European space through Nazism during World War 2. But

it is also made up of multifarious struggles that challenged the plantation system and colonial rule in many parts of the world, while the rubber manufacturing industry has been a site of intense labor militancy, organizing, and strike. “Big Bill” Haywood’s speech was just an instance of an attempt to link the pains and movements of such diverse subjects as industrial workers in the U.S. American Midwest, Indigenous people in the Amazon, and indentured laborers in South-East Asia. There is no need to overemphasize the relevance of that particular speech. The point is simply to acknowledge the power of a discourse, internationalism, which independently of its shortcomings and pitfalls was effectively able to articulate the claims and to speak to the condition of a multitude of heterogeneous subjects across the world. While that particular discourse is historically exhausted, there is a need to invent an equivalent language of liberation, keeping in mind both the commonalities that shape our global commitment and the specific forms of oppression and exploitation – as well as the specificity of the vocabularies and claims that crisscross struggles in different parts of the world. This is even more urgent in a situation in which what I have called the conceptually colonial (and extractive) moment at the heart of contemporary capitalism spurs a reshuffling of geographical scales and increasingly inscribes the heterogeneity of conditions and subjects that once was the main question addressed by internationalism within the space of single cities.

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