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The Social Production of Nature between Coloniality and Capitalism (Introduction)

Abstract

Written from an environmental history background and a political ecology perspective with an emphasis on developments in Latin America, this introduction to the *fiar* issue *Negotiating Nature: Imaginaries, Interventions and Resistance* provides a conceptual reflection upon the problematic interrelations between coloniality, capitalism, and nature. First, the concept of Nature itself is questioned in regard to its colonial implications. Second, the material exchange and biotic flows towards and within the Americas are explored. Third, the social production of nature in the Americas is addressed. And fourth, the entanglements between colonial and capitalist nature(s) are discussed. Conflictive negotiations of nature and resistance are the topic of the fifth part. This introduction ends with the plea for a decolonization of nature that implies the need to re-conceptualize the relations between human society and its non-human environment.

Keywords: Nature, coloniality, capitalism, environmental history, Columbian Exchange, political ecology, extractivism, knowledge production, epistemology

The invention of the Americas in the wake of the European conquests was based upon imaginaries of nature. The idealization of the potential of soil and subsoil, the idea of frontier and physical proximity with the “wild”, the perception of great distances and vast geographic spaces constituted social imaginaries of nature in the colonial situation. The “Columbian Exchange” also brought large-scale environmental transformations, making the interaction between humans and nature a central issue in the formation of modern American societies (Crosby 1995). This thematic issue of *fiar* seeks to discuss the meaning of Nature to American societies as well as concrete environmental change from an interdisciplinary perspective which brings humanities, social sciences, and to a certain extent also natural sciences, into a dialogue. How is Nature politically negotiated and socially produced? Who are the actors within this negotiation? What strategies do they use to control, determine, exploit, and relate to a changing nature? Exemplary contributions from different locations in the Americas, such as Brazil, the Andes, Central America, the Caribbean, and Canada explore the aforementioned questions and offer approaches to analyze and to rethink the ways nature is dealt with through imaginaries, political and economic interventions, and diverse forms of resistance.

Since its foundations environmental history has basically been concerned with the three Cs – colonialism, capitalism, and conservation – and their impacts on the social production of environment. Recently, this triad has been criticized as it fails to address other issues of environmental importance and because of its moral and political impetus (Carey 2009). In addition, the tendency of some scholars to narrate society-nature relations in Latin America as a story of decay and fall from paradise due to colonialism and capitalism has been criticized by recent studies in the field of environmental history.

Warren Dean’s history of the Brazilian Atlantic forest (1995), Funez-Monzonte’s history of the destruction of the rainforest in Cuba to plant sugar cane (2008) or Bernard Nietschmann’s history of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (1973) all underline the destructive forces of colonialism. But they argue that most deforestation and appropriation of indigenous lands was a product of a capitalist mode of production that started to bring massive transformation in the late 19th or 20th centuries. Some of these works have been criticized for their underlying “declensionist narrative”, portraying a situation in which humans only destroy nature, extract resources and degrade lands (Carey 2009). What is needed is a more complex understanding of human-nature interactions, taking into account the *creation* of nature(s). Instead of reproducing the “pristine myth” – especially influential as a founding myth of the US – and a victimization of local population, researchers should (and have actually started to) ask which social groups transformed landscapes in which way and why as well as who was affected by this. Furthermore, one should pay attention to the other factors affecting human-nature interactions.

There are still a lot of open questions necessary to address the ways in which the triangle of colonialism, capitalism and conservation is shaping and producing nature(s) in the Americas. One key element is to not reduce coloniality to a structural layer of *longue durée* that does not change over time. The Latin American approaches of coloniality (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 1991)

have been important to highlight the extent to which the trauma of colonialism still shapes contemporary American societies. Nevertheless, it is quite problematic to reproduce a simple structuralist argument of the repetition of the same. Instead, it seems more appropriate to understand coloniality in terms of fluid grounds, which are not fixed but permanently renewed and challenged by shifting thoughts, administrative practices, and decolonial struggles. To grasp the struggles in, around, and against coloniality it is important to identify conjunctures of colonization and of decolonization, as well as events that interrupt the routines of colonial governance (Kaltmeier 2016).

Since colonial times, the interaction between humans and nature in the Americas has generated social controversies which still underpin major political discussions: what part of nature can be destroyed, what kind of nature has to be preserved, tamed or maintained “wild”; intensively exploited or sustainably managed? Discursive strands that sometimes date back to the so-called “discoveries” of the double continent should be discussed in connection with more recent nature-related concepts such as conservation, neo-extractivism, biodiversity, or sustainable development. In this introduction we do not want to limit ourselves to the presentation of the essays assembled in this issue, but aim to provide a conceptual reflection upon the problematic interrelations between coloniality, capitalism, and nature. First, we question the concept of nature itself, especially in regard to its colonial implications. Second, our text explores the material exchange and biotic flows towards and within the Americas. Third, it addresses the social production of nature in the Americas; and fourth, the entanglements between colonial and capitalist nature(s). Conflictive negotiations of nature and resistance are the topic of the fifth part of this introduction. Our reflection ends with a plea for a decolonization of nature, which implies the need to re-conceptualize the relations between society and the environment.

1. Nature, a Problematic and or Even a Colonial Term?

The accumulation of knowledge was an integral part of the projects of European expansion since the 16th century. Counting, mapping, classifying, and representing “the other” were – and still are – basic operations in the creation of power-knowledge complexes about the other and its space (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Kaltmeier 2012). This includes the production of knowledge about nature in the colonized areas in particular. In this regard, foreign artefacts were integrated and classified in Western knowledge systems. In doing so, the local, Western European epistemologies have been globalized and represented as universal truth, while other knowledge systems have been minimized and delegitimized. A basic operation emerged in Western thought to separate nature from society. The concept of natural laws, for instance, expresses the idea of the epistemological separation of nature from society. A similar logic takes place in Cartesian philosophy through the separation of the mind from the body (Haila 2000).

Nevertheless, anthropologists – such as Philippe Descola – have argued that such a separation of nature from society cannot be conceived of as universal (Descola 2005). It is rather a particular Western operation, which is globalized by acts of epistemological violence. The concept ‘nature’ is linked with the Western vision of modernity that arguably exists to draw an artificial separation between what is human and what is not (Latour 1992). This conceptualization is put into question by a whole array of anthropological and ethno-historical research in the Americas. In the Andean world Joseph Bastien (1985) has highlighted that the local environment is often conceptualized in terms of human body. Like the human body the space underlies principles of metabolic flows and exchanges.

But if, as anthropologists have known since at least the 1990s, the separation between nature and culture is a Western invention that many so-called “primitive” people do not recognize, why is it that first Nations / indigenous groups in America so often resort to the concept of Nature? The key to answering this question lies in the fact that many indigenous societies are not isolated from modern capitalism, but have to deal with Western conceptions of nature that circulate through representations provided by the mass media, governmental agencies and NGOs. The contributions of Heeren and Cremers/Rasch to this *fiar* issue address this context, respectively through the examples of bioprospecting regulation in Ecuador, and nature as a field of force in the Western highlands of Guatemala. They show how the concept of nature has become a tool for indigenous groups to claim their rights and resist against an uncontrolled and full incorporation of their land and communities into the logic of capitalism. This way, native people might enter a logic of self-government, fostered by international organizations like the World Bank, which Astrid Ulloa (2005) termed as “ecological native” – the quasi-ontological articulation of nature and indigeneity in new forms of eco-governmentality.

All contributions of the present issue also show that nature is never a vague, de-territorialized, but always a locally rooted concept. For local communities, nature stands for the conceptual continuity of their concrete attachment to a given territory, a land, a specifically located ecosystem. Against this background, several questions arise: is nature not just a translation, which Native communities use in order to make their territorial and social claims understandable to the Western, capitalist world? Is the concept of nature not just a prism through which Westerners can start to see the biotic networks that link indigenous people to their territory and to the non-human life inhabiting it? In that case, what does the *Consejo del Pueblo Maya* tell us when they proclaim “cuidar nuestro ambiente es nuestro deber” (Cremers/Rasch)? They have appropriated Western concepts invented to separate the non-human from the human, such as “environment”, “biodiversity”, “nature”, which historically are absent from most indigenous societies in the Americas, and make little sense in the cosmogonies, which structure (or used to structure) their perception of the world. In that perspective, it is interesting to see how so many Native groups throughout the Americas have (successfully) attempted, since the 1970s, to reframe themselves as brothers of nature, guardians of biodiversity or friends of the environment. Does this narrative correspond to what first Nations and indigenous groups actually think of themselves, or rather to

the image they need to give to the rest of the world in order to lend legitimacy to different kinds of claims? And why do self-proclaimed “modern” societies pay attention when Amerindians mobilize for the protection of animal and plant species, forest ecologies, rivers, but much less when their message is “only” based on questions of land redistribution, territorial recognition, or labor conditions? We cannot answer these questions in general terms, because each constellation has its particularities. But surely in regard to the use of nature indigenous peoples are located in a colonial power field between epistemological colonization, strategic use of Western concepts, and persistence of local knowledges and epistemologies.

The separation of nature from society is a basic epistemological operation of coloniality. It is a structuring principle of *longue durée* that has shaped nature-society relations in the Americas. Nevertheless, the concrete conceptualizations of nature underlie different conjunctures, and we can identify the simultaneous existence of different, sometimes contradicting, concepts of nature. Heeren and Cremers/ Rasch indicate the multiplicity of meanings of nature, indexed on the cultural and spiritual representations but also, many times predominantly, on the interest of the humans using it. As a result, nature (in modern capitalism in particular) is not a rigid concept but an object of perpetual negotiations. In this *fiar* issue, Sauthier’s contribution about the ‘Brazilianization’ of a European literary work through the prism of the tropical landscapes outlines that even in a nation-building context, local visions of nature vary depending on regional identities. The meaning of nature, in sum, is variable *because* it is always embedded within a specific human context.

Obviously, this does not mean that negotiated Natures are consensual Natures: they are not consensual but the result of power relations. If Natures takes on different meanings for different people, if our way of naming and perceiving non-human beings and things depend on our cultural, social and spiritual background, then nature does not have the same value for everyone. There is a disproportion in the way non-human life is perceived by different human groups. Many times the destruction of non-human life in American contexts has resulted in a violation of the ontologies according to which the life, values and beliefs of Natives are structured. What one group considers game, an export item or an energy resource can be a sacred being, an essential factor of social cohesion or a crucial hilling source for others.

Not only through the point of view of indigenous societies but also within Western epistemologies, nature has come to be understood in diverging ways, especially in regard to postcolonial settings. A case in point is the Pan-American critique of the theory of American degeneracy which was presented in the late 18th century by the French naturalist, George Louis Leclerc, probably better known as Comte de Buffon. He developed a theory of degeneration in the Americas in which, for example, New World species were described as smaller and weaker than European ones, because of allegedly unfavorable climate conditions making healthy life impossible. This degeneration hypothesis extended to the indigenous and even creole population of the Americas. US-American and Latin American intellectuals, amongst them Thomas Jefferson, criticized the climate-based assumptions and its underlying racism, showing that there was no unanimous vision of nature and so-called natural laws within the Western world.

2. About the ‘Columbian Exchange’ and Biotic Flows

A central aspect to unthinking the ontological separation of society/culture and nature is to attribute agency to non-human actors or agents. Plants, animals, hurricanes, or germs are depicted and can be analyzed as central agents of social change and social transformation (Latour 2004). A seminal approach to grasping non-human agency in the Americas is Alfred Crosby’s work on the ‘Columbian Exchange’. In many respects, the ‘Columbian Exchange’ showed the path by depicting American landscapes, animals, plants, forests, etc. as a result of colonial encounters and shocks (Crosby 1972; 2004). This perspective deeply influenced environmentally concerned disciplines, such as environmental sociology or environmental history, and their visions of the Americas.

In many contemporary biological studies on neophytes and neozoons, the notion of ecological imperialism, i.e. how the introduction of new species in the Americas is related to the colonial project, is denied. Due to some biologist, the species themselves are seen as “invaders”, “colonizers” – as, for example, the most common ape in Brazil called ‘sagui’ is more and more classified as an invasive species (Guimarães, 2015). Other researchers conceive the circulation of species between the Americas and Europe without paying due attention to colonial power relations, which comes out to representing the Columbian exchange as a sum of rather smooth and balanced transactions (Ewald 1995). There is a danger in underestimating violent shocks and ignoring the underlying structures of violence and inequality.

Taking into account different conjunctures of coloniality, we also argue that one cannot limit the Columbian exchange to the early colonial times. The idea of a Columbian exchange, related to the historical figure of Christopher Columbus, can therefore be misleading. It highlights the beginning of the exchange - as the Vikings did not leave important biotics in the New World - but it does not sufficiently address the ongoing colonial biotic flows. Therefore we prefer to speak of “colonial exchange”, meaning with colonial not a historical period but the ongoing field of force of coloniality. Indeed, a renewed conjuncture of introduction of new Eurasian species took place in the context of 19th century settler colonialism in the US, where the dispersal vectors of colonization of neophytes correlated significantly with the settlement patterns of European settlers (Mosena 2015). The history of rubber in the first half of 20th century, which involved the circulation of seeds and the reproduction of tree species between independent nations of South America, and the European colonies in Asia and Africa, is also significant in that respect (Dean 1987). It shows that the Columbian exchange continued to exist in a global framework in which (formally) colonial and (supposedly) non-colonial contexts intertwined and superposed each other. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the transpacific biotic flows have not been as important as the transatlantic ones. Most Asian species have been introduced via the Eurasian dispersal vectors and the Atlantic. Crosby’s work has also been influential in biology, where 1492 is a fundamental turning point for the definition of neobiota (Gläve / Mosena 2015). Other disciplines, such as Cultural Studies have sought inspiration in the ‘Columbian Exchange’ thesis. For example Rüdiger Kunow (2011)

analyzed the extent to which the flow of germs shape the community-formation and governmental, often racialized, techniques in the US-American metropolis.

3. The Social Production of Nature in the Americas

Nature and environments are not only constructed in theories and epistemologies, they are also produced materially, exploited, transformed, and appropriated. In order to use and produce both nature and environment, geopolitical imaginations emerge, be they implicit or explicit, that make some environments more valuable to use than others are. In colonial imaginaries the double myth of untouched land to be conquered and the El Dorado to be exploited have been central topics (Sutter 2000: 63ff). Recently, much literature has concentrated on questioning the pristine myth, both in environmental history (Denevan 1992) and in the emerging field of political ecology (Cronon/ Demos 2003). Several authors argued that it is basically a European and colonial imagination that the tropical rainforest is a non-cultivated landscape or an “empty land”.

North America had been imagined as a vast, grassy expanse teeming with game and a small number of nomads who left few marks on the land. South America, too, or at least the Amazon rain forest, was thought of as almost an untouched Eden. Newer research shows how false this idea is (Mann 2005). Archeological findings have evidenced the existence of sophisticated agrarian systems before the European invasions (Cleary 2001, Miller 2007), and even pre-Columbian ecological crises have likely occurred there as well (Radkau 2000: 43ff). The illusion of emptiness and virginity tells us more about the European, colonial imagination than about the Americas themselves. But this colonial imagination has also been a motor of destruction as it fed dreams of domination and competition of telluric width with “Nature”. The modern history of the Americas abounds with mega-projects aiming to “win” against nature, such as the decision to reverse the flow of the Chicago river in the 1880s, the building of the Panama Canal (Baquero Melo 2015; Sutter 2000), or the giant farms of the Ford, Jari, and VW companies in the Amazon (Grandin 2010; Acker 2014a). All of these examples, which show the aspiration of the West to defeat natural laws, left concrete traces of the environmental effects, which Western, fantasized visions of nature could engender.

Conflictive debates and severe misunderstandings occurred about what it actually means to question the idea of wilderness (Crist/ Hargrove 2004; Proctor 1998). Social constructivists argue that “nature” as such is always a social construction and does not exist apart from people’s perceptions and beliefs about it. They say that the understandings of nature and human relationships with the environment are cultural expressions. Cultural groups transform the natural environment into landscapes that result in ongoing negotiations in a cultural context and create meanings that are by no way inherent to the nature of things (Greider/ Garkovic 1994). All concepts to describe nature and its qualities, such as wilderness, biodiversity or habitat, are human inventions that carry cultural, political and other important meanings. This perspective has caused

a lot of contradiction among biologists, geographers and environmental organizations. They accused constructivists to ignore the scientific documentation about the biodiversity crisis and climate change and to draw attention toward discourses about the environmental predicament, rather than examining that predicament itself. This can indirectly contribute to legitimizing the human colonization of the Earth (Crist /Hargrove 2004). Or in more pronounced words: this “dangerous flirt with relativism” could end up being “as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws” (ibid.).

The concept of nature has been questioned not only from a constructivist standpoint but from a materialist background as well. Drawing on Marx’s work, Neil Smith argues that all nature is or has been transformed by capitalist forces, which now operate on a global scale (Smith 2008, originally 1984). Smith analyses how capitalism and class power serve to make, unmake and remake natural and fabricated environments throughout history. The argument is that even when in former times people struggled for their means of subsistence, they have appropriated, altered and produced their various environments. He therefore argued that nothing is natural about nature, but that everything we perceive as nature has been transformed by humans and capital. In *Reinventing Eden*, Carolyn Merchant elaborated on the biblical origin of this logic, as she interpreted the capitalist obsession to order nature, exploit it and consume its fruits as a perpetual attempt to recreate the lost Paradise on Earth (2003).

There have been attempts to overcome the struggle between purely constructivist and purely materialist points of view. Within literature studies, ecocriticism, for example, is an academic area that tends to blur the boundaries between our mental representations and our concrete experience of materiality. In the present issue, Roland Walter’s article about inter/transbiotic memory traces in inter-American literature shows that American natures are like texts in which we can read the continent’s tumultuous history (Iovino 2006). This history involves not only humans, but also non-humans, and hybrids resulting from the encounter of both.

Within the philosophy of social science a broader debate is dedicated to the presumptions and (in-) compatibilities between a constructivist and a materialist understanding of nature (Forsyth 2001; Evanoff 2005). Drawing on science and technology studies (STS), critical realism investigates the role of knowledge which claims to have scientific solutions for pressing environmental problems and locates these within historic political and social relations. Often Western knowledge is privileged against local understandings of nature – even if it completely misreads the driving forces of environmental change (Fairhead/ Leach 1996). Unlike STS, realist political ecology does not just seek to illustrate how knowledge about environmental issues and boundaries between nature and society are constructed. Political ecology also proposes socially fairer ways of dealing with the situation, and attempts to reconstruct a new and more effective science without claiming to convey the only true story (Forsyth 2001).

Within Political Ecology, the approach of the “societal relationships with nature” addresses both the social construction and the material properties of broadly discussed issues such as biodiversity (Görg 2004). The relationship between society and nature is not seen as an external

one, but as simultaneously different and mutually constituted (Brand/ Wissen 2013: 680f.) This conceptualization of 'Nature' does indeed exist as a material-substantial environment, but it is intrinsically shaped by society and is managed and symbolized in spatio-temporally different forms. Furthermore, it is seen as crucial that the configuration of the society-nature relationship is constitutive for social and political domination. Society-nature relationships are concrete material relationships structured by social processes of production and consumption. They develop dynamically and undergo socio-ecological transformation defined by social perceptions and interpretations with a certain hegemonic order, which, in turn, impose certain limits on these constructions (Brand/ Wissen 2013: 681).

Since the colonial conquests, a central element of the societal relationships with nature in Latin America has been the extraction of resources – especially gold, silver, zinc, copper, coal and oil. The history of the entire sub-continent has been shaped by the flows of extractivism (Galeano 1997). By the end of the nineteenth century, the asymmetric integration of Latin America into the world economy as an exporter of primary products was fully articulated as an economy based on export enclaves with brutal social and labor conditions. Although during the phase of import substitution (about 1930/45-1973) other pillars of the economy have been developed, at the end of the 20th century the role of the extraction of resources and the export of primary goods regained an important relevance for societies all over the continent. The progressive governments in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela among others expanded the extraction of resources during an era of favorable price on the world market and used the commodity boom to finance expansive social policy. In this context a discussion about neo-extractivism as a new development strategy and its social and environmental impacts emerged (Lander 2009; Brand/ Dietz 2014). The new extractivism is based on the appropriation of nature in which Latin America continues to be very dependent on the world market as an exporter of no or very few processed goods (Gudynas 2009: 188ff.) The international division of labor placed Latin America in a colonial and imperial manner to exploit its workforce and its nature, transferring wealth to Europe (Lander 2009). The commodification, exploitation and export of nature have even intensified with the new progressive governments in Latin America (Lander 2009:3). Social movements, especially indigenous movements and local peasants have mobilized against displacement, the environmental and health consequences of this model – sometimes accusing large-scale mining of being a western way of exploiting earth, sometimes with the argument that all benefits are transferred to other parts of the world. Progressive governments tend to negate or downplay the negative effects and often accuse the protesters as being against development (Gudynas 2009: 204ff; Bebbington 2009; see also Acosta in this issue). Which kind of knowledge is privileged and whether the extraction of resources reproduce colonial imbalances or can possibly help Latin American countries overcome colonial legacies of dependence and poverty are currently objects of controversy.

4. Entanglements between the Colonial and Capitalist Nature(s)

Throughout the issue, a historical continuity appears between colonialism and modern capitalism that has its origin in the conquest of the Americas. The construction of the Americas had – as Aníbal Quijano argues – material and social impacts. Hand in hand with the economic and political conquest a “coloniality of power” is also established based on identity politics. In the classification of the “racial” Other the European self is constructed, while the construction of the racial inferior Other served the needs of labor exploitation. For Wallerstein and Quijano this lies at the heart of the formation of the modern capitalist world system. Both eras generated schemes of exploitation which maintained indigenous people and Nature in a position of subordination. Colonialism and capitalism shared the same vision of nature as unlimited reserve of resources, implying the exclusion of environmental costs from economic calculation. This is especially the case for the colonized areas where in the long 16th century extractivism was the main economic activity. This economic pattern was completed in the 19th century with the colonization of land in the Cono Sur and in North America. The intertwining between extractivist practices and coloniality led Alimonda (2011) to elaborate the concept of ‘naturaleza colonizada’, as according to him, Latin America tends to be envisaged as a subaltern space that can be “exploited, devastated, reconfigured” according to global economic needs. He also makes an important point when he says that ‘naturaleza’ is not only ‘colonizada’ by industrial powers from the global North, but also through the representations and actions of Latin American elites themselves. The global economic system indeed is one dimension that influences the power balance underlying extraction activities, but not the only one. The creation or reproduction of domination schemes that base on locally rooted practices also play an essential role in degrading ecosystems and engendering conditions of human servitude. Massive deforestation in the Amazon in the last third of the 20th century, for example, was partly fueled by a global demand for commodities but turned out to be possible through the region’s well-established forced labor networks (Acker 2014b).

The “extractivist mentality” animate even those who, within the capitalist system, advocate for more social justice and control of financial flux. This is because the exploitation of nature constantly appears as the most rapid and efficient solution to produce riches, as is shown in this *fiar* issue by Acosta, who analyzes extractivism as a persisting category of devastation. Acosta, but also Figueira, who contributed to the present issue with a movie and interview on the consequences of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in Jamaica, evidence the tiny link between the idea of nature as *reserve*, and the absence of structural policies to fight against social inequalities in the Americas. The contributions of Walter, Heeren and Cremers/Rasch show in turn how these inequalities are deeply intertwined with phenomena of racial hierarchization. They put in evidence the historical exclusion of indigenous groups and people of African/slave descent from the imaginaries of modernity, which emerged along with the growth of capitalism after the independences. Thus, including nature as a source of life in our vision of politico-economic structures in the Americas helps to understand that racial, social and environmental imbalances do

not only result from the behavior of greedy elites ready to submit all forms of “otherness” to maximize their profit. Instead, these imbalances are at the core of the “mito del progreso” (Acosta), which sees the overexploitation of nature as a solution supposedly conciliating the needs of all social classes.

The texts of this issue point at a certain historical continuity between the mechanisms of domination that characterize colonialism and capitalism. But some contributions (especially Heeren and Cremers/ Rasch) also point at specificities of capitalism, such as the creation of spaces of negotiations in which subaltern populations can earn a place within the economic system. Another subtlety of capitalism is its capacity to make all things marketable, even nature as a concept. Up to today the tourist industry sells an image of tropical landscapes as paradises for tourist consumption (Sheller 2003), while some conservation strategies tend to see local inhabitants as “invaders” and “illegal occupants” of “virgin” nature who destroy biodiversity hotspots (Ojeda 2012: 364). In the past three decades cosmetic firms, global organic food networks, advertising companies, the entertainment industry and ecotourism have built on an exotic vision of the Americas as a “wild” and still largely “pristine” continent.

In this context, approximations between humans and nature have also become a powerful commercial argument. Thus, and paradoxically, the success of this marketability of nature is also a sign that something is changing at the core of capitalist society. In enlarging sectors of urban American populations, there exists a demand for more direct forms of connecting with nature, and even a growing curiosity for indigenous knowledge and cosmogonies as well as an emerging interest for the spiritual value of non-human forms of life. Of course, this post-modern desire of more nature may sometimes take brutal and careless forms (we see it in several examples in the contributions to this *fiar* issue). Still, it is hard to deny that there is an ongoing tendency to interrogate, even unconsciously, the “great divide” between nature and culture theorized by Descola (2005). This is where the notion of the “ecological unconscious”, proposed by Walter in the present issue, might start. This “ecological unconscious” could very likely situate itself precisely within the spaces of negotiation between capitalist economy and indigenous cosmogonies, between the ‘mito del progreso’ and the nostalgia of pristine nature that expresses itself through ecotourism. That same “ecological unconscious” might explain the ecological contradictions throughout the Americas: attachment to wilderness versus rampant agrarian colonization of space, global records of carbon consumptions versus the first and biggest natural parks in the world, expropriation of indigenous peoples and destruction of their environment versus the diffuse presence of indigenous toponyms mapping the American landscapes.

5. Conflicts, Resistance and Contestations

Resistance against the colonial subjection of nature and its inhabitants has been present since the beginning of the conquest of the Americas. Indigenous groups all over the continent tried to escape the brutal relations by rebelling or migrating to more remote areas. In the Americas, a number of territories has either been conquered much later or remained unconquered. Despite epidemics, slavery, massacres and colonial rule people resisted, fled and developed a wide set of strategies to deal with life-endangering threats. The struggles for independence and the ensuing conflicts and civil wars between competing elites in many countries showed that vast territories have been relatively isolated. Often glorified as “nation building processes”, at the end of the 19th century, the repressive state apparatuses broadened their scope – which meant to “integrate” certain territories into the “nation” by violently implementing private property and forcing people to work. The massive dispossession of indigenous lands, the displacement of people by force and many rebellions against both characterized the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the whole 20th century many countries in the Americas experienced processes of internal colonization, and celebrated people who settled on so-called “last frontiers” – within Alaska, the Brazilian Amazon, Northern Guatemala, the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, “Tierra del Fuego” in Southern Chile and Southern Argentina, among many others.

Colonization in the various meanings of the term always generated conflicts over who controls the land, how to decide over land use and how to transform nature in specific places. Research on conflicts about nature is a key issue, if not even the defining element, of political ecology. By 2013, two-thirds of all political ecology studies contained as a central element of analysis the term “conflict”, which constituted the second most important conceptual tool after the notion of “power” (Le Brillon 2015: 598). Watts (2000: 263ff), for instance, defines the goal of political ecology as to explain environmental conflict in terms of struggles over knowledge, power and practice as well as over politics, justice and governance. Martinez Alier conceptualizes political ecology as “the study of ecological distribution conflicts” (2002: 71), and Robbins sees the four key questions political ecology is concerned with as 1) degradation and marginalization, 2) environmental conflict, 3) conservation and control and 4) environmental identity and social movements (Robbins 2004: 14f).

Conflict also plays a major role for this *fiar* issue, in which all articles talk about different understandings of what nature is and depict nature as something which social actors transform. As Acosta, Heeren, Figuera and Cremers/ Rasch show, different actors have very different interests about how to transform nature, extract resources and generate profit from this process. Nevertheless, nature can also be a source of emancipation and the protection of nature can be a mobilizing element for collective actors. In some cases it serves as a basis to build new collective, post-colonial identities. In the texts of Heeren and Cremers/ Rasch, indigenous communities use nature as an argument to fight for their rights within the capitalist context. Walter explores the possibility to resist (post-)colonial domination by *reconnecting* with the history of oppressed

minorities and with the alternatives lectures, which the latter offer to perceive the cohesion of the different dimensions of the world (human, animal, mineral, vegetal). Sauthier shows how tropical nature can play the role of an intermediary, through which Brazilians absorb, chew and transform European culture to “Americanize” it. In this context, nature becomes a space of affirmation of identity and differentiation from Europe, which is based on the rejection of colonial influence.

6. Decolonizing Nature?

Humans have subjugated and transformed nature for millennia, but the intensity of their action of resource extraction has accelerated a lot with colonialism and capitalism. Although concerns with the damaging effects of anthropic activities on nature have much older roots, the idea that humanity as a whole can be a danger for the earth's ecological balance has grown especially influential since the 1970s. The “limits of Growth” reports from 1972 was one of the first widely recognized signals that started the discussion about the effects of industrialization (Meadows et al. 1972). The reduction of pollution of the environment in the industrial areas and the declaration of protected areas were the key political strategies that responded to this emerging awareness, but a real reduction of growth was never intended. The discussion about causes and impacts of climate change essentially took form in the 1980s in a continuation of these debates. “Sustainability” started to be a concept that was used for almost everything and made into a modern publicity slogan. Although often imagined under pressure of spectacular scenarios that predicted the earth a catastrophic future if pollution continued to grow, strategies to protect the environment, reduce carbon emissions and stop deforestation had limited effects. Later on, interdisciplinary teams (but mainly with a natural science focus) started to measure the “planetary boundaries” (Rockström 2009). But despite many expert reports (Stern Review 2006; WBGU 2011, etc.), international conferences (Rio 1992, Kyoto 1997, Paris 2015 amongst many other), and an emerging global environmental governance as well as the recent intent to have a social-ecological turn within development policy and proclaim the sustainable development goals (SDGs), the linear development of resource consumption remains far from being checked. Up to today, only severe economic crises have had a significant impact in terms of reducing the ecological footprint (Krausmann et al 2009).

Remarkably, the recent discussion about the Anthropocene seems to indicate an epistemological rupture: even within geology human beings are now seen as a telluric force transforming nature in an irreversible way – a contradictory mixture of gardener and predators (critically Görg 2016). Some works date the beginning of the Anthropocene back to the start of the Neolithic revolution 10,000 years ago, while other situate it during the “Great Acceleration” of the industrial revolution in Western Europe 200 years ago (Krausmann et al 2009). From the perspective of the Columbian Exchange Charles Mann has identified 1492 as most important rupture and coined the concept of the homogenocene to analyze the merging of ecosystems from

Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas that had been separated before since the fragmentation of Pangaea (Mann 2011: 3-50). This brings a completely new timeframe into the discussion about historical conjunctures – but is still an open, controversial discussion. As Görg puts it, the dialectics of the control over nature has entered a new phase, and once again the Anthropocene shows that humans have dominated nature, but are not able to control their relations with it (Görg 2016: 34). What all these debates have in common is that they imagine “humanity” as a collective actor equally causing the problems. The danger of this approach is that it ignores the differences between Global North and Global South, but also between different groups and classes within respective world regions, especially in terms of consumption patterns or even cosmological representations (Bonneuil/ Fresco 2016). Not all societies have a predatory approach to the non-human environment, nor have all humans the same carbon footprint. Promoters of the Anthropocene narrative often ignore asymmetric power relations and tend to frame problems in apocalyptic scenarios, but offer a very technocratic and marked-based approach to handle them, if not even post-political managerial planning (critically: Löwbrand et al 2015).

As noted before there are numerous struggles of local dwellers, indigenous and Afro-American communities and advocate organizations aiming to defend local livelihoods. Especially in conjunctures in which the accumulation of capital through extraction and expropriation is accelerating, there is a growing number of different struggles of resistance. While these sites of struggle may decelerate conjunctures of colonial extraction, we argue that it is also necessary to question the coloniality of nature in its different dimensions. Academic reflections about this task to ‘decolonize nature’ formally emerged in 2003 with an excellent collective work on the history of the British empire (Adams and Mulligan), featuring case studies about settler societies (Australia), Native communities (Australia’s Aborigenes), countries going through decolonization processes (South Africa) or even phenomena of internal colonization within the colonial metropolis (Scotland). The choice to focus on this specific (but huge and extremely diversified) colonial context enabled the authors to give an insight into the multilayered makeup of colonial and post-colonial situations in which discourses about nature are embedded. Yet, the book essentially interrogated how conservation was interwoven with colonial mentalities, and how it served as a tool to perpetuate situations of domination. We believe this is an important aspect. At the same time, one should not lose sight that the most severe effects of coloniality on the life of people and nature are not due to the excesses of conservationist thinking, but rather to logics of limitless and violent exploitation of human and non-human resources. While the topic of conservation appears in various contributions of this *fiar* issue, the present volume inscribes it in a broader reflection aiming to rethink the general nature-culture dialectic, which, beyond conservation, has impacts on most aspects of collective life in the Americas.

First, it seems important to foster new epistemologies beyond the nature-culture divide. In the Americas these new epistemologies can emerge from the dialogue between Western and indigenous knowledge. These diverse forms of knowledge have to be conceptualized as social-cultural patterns to relate to environments. In this sense the colonial notion of comparing

indigeneity to nature has to be rejected. There is no inherent feature that makes indigenous people more “natural” than Western people. Furthermore, it is important that indigenous knowledge is not only subordinated to or integrated in Western knowledge; it is instead an epistemological rupture of revolution (Kuhn 1962). This is a difficult task, since, in our contemporary global knowledge society, there is the permanent danger of expropriating and/or commodifying indigenous knowledge. As the debates on bio-piracy show, while denying the value of indigenous knowledge developed over many generations, Western powers now attempt to colonize life itself (Shiva 1997). The current use of patenting and genetic engineering is understood by Shiva as an attempt from the West to recolonize the Global South.

Second, decolonizing nature should take into account the materiality and internal logics of environment. Material space matters to think about and to interrelate with the environment. And it would be misleading to relate all destructive forms of the use of nature to coloniality and capitalism. As the dynamics of deforestation in Central America show, many forms of agriculture developed in a specific area of a country are not compatible with the conditions with the soils of the rainforest. Or while Andean indigenous-peasant communities have complex reciprocity systems in regard to its highland environments, they fail to relate to tropical environments in the lowlands (Kaltmeier 1999). Nevertheless, it would be very interesting to further research the way in which those supposedly local dynamics are both shaped by internal colonialism, and a homemade ignorance towards natural conditions in a specific place, interwoven with Western ideas of progress and modernity. A decolonial approach towards different understandings of nature has to handle the problem that these are almost always relational and shaped by multiple transnational relations.

Third, this means to undo the existing interrelation between society and the biotic and a-biotic environment based on exploitation, extractivism and misuse. In many indigenous societies, these relations are conceived in terms of reciprocity and substance orientation. This implies systems of care beyond the Western extremes of preservation of pristine wildernesses and profit-maximizing extraction. To unthink and possibly re-conceptualize the category of Nature, we should relate to the different imaginations of and modes of relation with environment. Maybe new radical proposals from a “world-ecology perspective” to overcome the nature-society divide through conceptualizing the “web of life” (Moore 2015) or Bruno Latour’s provocation to speak of “multinaturalism” (Latour 2004) can contribute in the future and start a dialogue on coloniality to find new ways of conceptualizing the field of Nature/ Environment/ Society/ Culture.

Hopefully this issue of *fiar* is able to make a small, but thought-provoking contribution from very different disciplinary, regional and theoretical perspectives to the ongoing and broad debate about the multiple meanings of Nature and their underlying epistemologies in different parts of the world.

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