



# ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter  
Vol.10 - Issue 1 [July 2023]

## Introduction to “Critical perspectives on Development, State Formation and Extractivism in the Amazon”

María de Pilar Ramirez Gröbli 

*Center for Global Studies, University of Bern (Switzerland)*

Accepted: 28 July 2023 / Published online: 28 July 2023

---

Alternautas is a peer reviewed academic journal that publishes content related to Latin American Critical Development Thinking.

It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

---

### How to cite:

Ramirez Gröbli, M.P. (2023), Introduction to “Critical perspectives on Development, State Formation and Extractivism in the Amazon”, *Alternautas*, 10(1), 1-4. DOI: 10.31273/an.v10i1.1407

University of Warwick Press  
<http://www.alternautas.net>



ISSN - 2057-4924

María de Pilar Ramirez Gröbli<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction to “Critical perspectives on Development, State Formation and Extractivism in the Amazon”**

Expanding across nine different countries in South America – Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana – the Amazonia is not only the most diverse zone in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is the most diverse ecosystem in the world. The Amazon is estimated to contain 10% of the world's biodiversity, with high levels of endemism, although it occupies less than 1% of the earth's land surface; and it is home to about 500 indigenous groups. Such is the ecological power of the Amazon rainforest that it creates its own climate, shaping the environment of the continent and impacting on the weather patterns around the world. The complex interaction between the multitude of fauna who inhabit the Amazonia and the flora of the rainforest creates carbon sinks, absorbing the increasing amounts of carbon dioxide emitted by twenty-first century colonial capitalism. Likewise, the more than 40,000 plant species play a significant role in regulating the ecosystem, sustaining water, carbon and oxygen cycles that support life in the rainforest and beyond.

The rapid expansion of agricultural activities and extractivism, for export and, to a lesser extent, domestic markets, has dramatically altered the Amazon rainforest since the 1970s, threatening its unique ecosystems and the survival of indigenous communities who live there. Human activity has led to significant environmental degradation without improving the living conditions of the local population. Each of the nine countries in the Amazon region bears responsibility for processes of deforestation, but each country has its own characteristics and differs in terms of size and territory. Fossil fuel extraction, environmental degradation and social exclusion are common problems throughout the Amazon region. According to the World Resources Institute, in 2000 with 58% of the Amazon rainforest area, Brazil accounted for 77% of the loss of primary forest cover in all Amazonian

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Maria del Pilar Ramirez Gröbli is an Associated researcher at the Center for Global Studies, University of Bern in Switzerland. Email: pilar.ramirez2@unibe.ch. ORCID: 0000-0002-0424-8922

countries', follow by Bolivia (7.5%), Peru (3.2%), Colombia (3.1%), and Ecuador (1.9%), Venezuela (14%) Suriname (1.1%), Guyana (0,79% and French Guyana (0,65%). (Amazon Assessment Report 2021: 4; 6; 7).

The main drivers of deforestation in Brazil are cattle ranching and soybean cultivation. Brazil is also home to the largest mining operations in the Amazon region, mainly extracting iron ore. There are currently five different iron ore projects operated by the mining giant VALE SA alone. Mining is a critical cause of multiple environmental degradation in all Amazonian countries. Together with iron ore in Brazil, gold mining—particularly through illegal and unregulated operations—is present throughout the Amazonian territory. Illegal activities linked to the extractive model have also led to violence and exclusion, with serious consequences for local communities. The various manifestations of socio-environmental problems in the Amazon have historical roots in the political and economic systems of previous centuries, when colonial powers appropriated land and resources.

The impacts of the neo-extractive model are linked to land grabbing and forced displacement affecting drastically local indigenous communities and their living conditions. Although some States, particularly Bolivia and Ecuador, have introduced political legal frameworks to promote conservation, there are contradictory decisions and policy strategies. Specially during the twenty-first century the expansion of global commodity exports such as soy, beef, mining activities and extraction from iron ore, oil, gas, gold have accelerated deforestation and degradation. Both local communities and activists have risen their voices to claim against the socio-environmental impacts and environmental injustice that threaten their territories and their lives.

The articles in this issue provide a variety of perspectives on recent transformations in the Amazon. The first set of articles focus on the relationship between capital, the state and indigenous communities and movements. They explore the different political mechanisms, conflicts and quandries that emerge from extractivism in the Amazon. In the first article, Pedro Silva explores the impact of investor dispute settlement (IDS) mechanisms introduced into multilateral trade treaties from the 1990s onwards. Silva explores the tensions that emerge from the state-centric framework of the IDS and how the assumption of a unified state with a single set of interests unravels in the face of the diverse set of interests across the political terrain of South American countries.

In the second article this issue, Julie Dayot explores the changing relationship between social movements and the Ecuadorian state in disputes over oil extraction in the Amazon. By tracing oil production in Ecuador from the 1970s until today. She argues that despite powerful actors such as large oil companies and States meeting the demands of marginal populations for necessary basic services and other socio-

economic benefits, acceptance (by the local people) does not mean the situation is acceptable. Instead, local acceptance may hide cases of environmental injustice, pointing to the need to search for post-extractive futures in the Amazonia.

In the third article, Benjamin Kantner and Hugo Lopes Tavares distinguish between the *poder* (force) of capital and the state when implementing extractive projects and the *potencia* (creative potential) of indigeneous communities resisting these projects to explore the territorialising effects of extractivism in the Amazonia. Through interviews and counter-mapping with the São Francisco community, the authors demonstrate how the place-based lifeways (“*modo da vida*”) of the community also sustain prefigurative potential for a territory that exceeds the logics of the state and capital.

The second set of articles analyse and document the socio-environmental impacts faced by indigenous communities in the Amazon region. They illustrate different forms of resistance and community resilience mechanisms, as well as indigenous artistic activism in the Amazon. The fourth article by Rickard Lalander, Magnus Lembke and Juliana Porsani present a very interesting analysis of alternative livelihood models in mining and tourism implemented by indigenous Kichwa communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In response to the socio-environmental impacts caused by global capitalism in the mining and tourism sectors in their regions, the Kichwa and Suhar communities have developed mechanisms to modify these capitalist models and introduce innovative systems that include multiple forms of resistance and adaptation. On the one hand, by strengthening their ethno-cultural identity and the visibility of the role of women, and on the other, by managing the resources linked to tourism and mining in their region, the communities protect the ecosystems and reformulate patterns of sustainability that correspond to their living environment and their indigenous cultural identity.

In the fifth article, Lisa Grund’s “When everything was forest”, provides us with reflections on the changes and narratives from the perspective of local communities about the changes and deforestation processes in the Amazon region. Through both the historical approach and the discursive analysis, Grund presents a broader understanding of the meanings and experiences that deforestation has changed in the lives of communities over several generations.

In the sixth article, Bartira Fortes, Juliana Porsani and Rickard Lalander focus on indigenous activism and resistance in the Amazon. Through the artistic expression of four diverse and prominent indigenous artists, they illustrate critical questions about the ontological dualism of man-nature. The artistic work draws

attention to contemporary indigenous voices and self-determination resisting extractivism.

This issue concludes with an interview for the Dialogues section and two book reviews. Pilar Ramírez Gröbli dialogues with Hernando Chindoy Chindoy, leader of the Inga community of Putumayo in the Colombian Amazon about the new university project in the Colombian rainforest, which aims to strengthen the indigenous identity of the Inga community.

The interview is followed by a review of the book *A New Indigenous University in the Colombian Rainforest*. The review describes how the collaboration between the Inga communities and the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich has been an exciting experience for both parties. On the one hand, the students and professors had the opportunity to learn about the conceptual and ancestral heritage of the Inga communities and how the university project should reflect their culture. On the other hand, the Inga community was able to access the latest scientific knowledge and technologies that could contribute to the design of the university in their territories. The result was an encounter that went beyond design and construction and raised awareness of how to contribute in different ways as *guardians of the earth*.

Finally, the issue ends up with a book review of Daniel Lyons recent book “Like a River”. Lyons’ book wants to give the reader another perception of individuals living “at the margins. The photographer approaches the young, the queer, and the trans living close to the city of Manaus, Brazil, who pose against the natural landscape. Taken shortly after Covid-19, Lyons’ photography draws on relationships he created with Casa do Rio, an institution providing assistance and shelter to youth facing difficulties in life.