

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF
TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS
IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

RESEARCH IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

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RESEARCH IN POLITICAL ECONOMY VOLUME 33

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Cooney and William Sacher Freslon

This Volume 33 of *Research in Political Economy* is a collection of chapters addressing environmental impacts of transnational corporations, focusing on the global South under neoliberal globalization. We have been fortunate in obtaining a range of interesting papers from several continents, addressing a number of important themes related to the environment in a global economy increasingly dominated by TNCs. Many of the social and environmental issues addressed illustrate the negative impacts on the environment, ecosystems and ways of living for many people across the globe and this is reflected in the struggle between corporate interests versus social movements and human rights.

We received several proposals addressing transnational extractive activity, especially mining and oil corporations, primarily in Latin America, Australia, and Africa. These are presented in the first part of the volume, entitled “Part I Extractive Industries, Social Conflicts and Dispossession in the Global South”. A series of other pieces are gathered under a second part, called “Environmental Conflicts and Transnational Value Chains in the Global South”. They address other dimensions of the impact of transnational capital on the environment, and indigenous or traditional populations, for instance the role of the colonial and often racist structures of national and multilateral institutions, projects of “development”, the global food chain, and the impact on family food production. In the agricultural sector, the main concerns are related to transgenic organisms and control over seeds, not to mention the continually worsening problem of agrotoxics that dominate our food chain given the rapacious nature of the transnational agroindustry in the current epoch.

There is also the role played by international institutions. This issue is covered in various pieces of Part I and Part II of the volume. Besides the problematic role played by the International Monetary Fund throughout the globe for many decades there is now the increasing problem of the role played by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has transformed the global landscape.

The combination of the rules and potential sanctions by the WTO has worked hand in hand with the ever greater hegemony of TNCs and thus, for instance, severely limiting national sovereignty and any attempts at industrial policies pursued by countries in the periphery. All of these changes have been supported by the Washington Consensus and neoliberal policies, dominating the globe for close to forty years, even in many Latin American countries where a series of nationalist, popular or even socialist political programs were implemented over the past ten to fifteen years. As the book is organized in two parts, we present the summaries of the varied contributions in two separate sections.

PART I EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES, SOCIAL CONFLICT AND DISPOSSESSION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The first chapter examines the current tendencies associated with transnational mining in the context of neoliberal globalization dominated by TNCs, and examines the usefulness of the category accumulation by dispossession by Harvey. It also presents arguments for considering the present phase of transnational mining as one of mega-mining, if not giga-mining. In addition, this paper examines the conflicts addressing the social and environmental impacts, which have resulted from these recent tendencies.

The chapter begins with an examination of Marx's analyses of original accumulation, followed by an analysis of Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession. For the latter, Harvey built upon Marx's concept, and also discussions and advances by Luxemburg and Arendt, recognizing the role of the State and the use of violence in the modern day and the parallels in carrying out expropriation of populations that occupy the territory where transnational companies seek access to water or land, be it for the soil or subsoil, or the drive to convert peasants into wage laborers. The paper assesses to what extent the mega-mining is an example of accumulation by dispossession. It links this analysis to an examination of the social and environmental impacts as a result of the expansion of transnational mining, mainly in Latin America, though also considered in terms of global expansion, especially during the last super-cycle of commodities/minerals. In this discussion the mobilization by peasants and indigenous groups around these issues has led to significant resistance movements. Moreover, in response to resistance, Latin America and elsewhere have witnessed the increased use of State repression, corporate management of social resistance, and in particular, the criminalization of resistance movements.

An important aspect of the analysis is also the level of scale which has become necessary for mega-mining. This is particularly important when considering the declines in the quality of mineral deposits and the associated increase in waste and thus the negative consequences in terms of the environment. This impacts the communities in the nearby vicinities and comes to jeopardize cultural livelihoods, access to clean water, and uncontaminated soil, not to mention a range of other cultural issues. Thus, the use of repression and criminalization of the resistance movements seeking to thwart the expropriation of people from their regions is key for understanding the present reality and strengthening the

claim that Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession is clearly relevant for understanding struggles and conflicts in the present day.

The paper also examines the issue of reprimarization, which in recent decades, has been a development trajectory, increasingly dominant in places such as Argentina and Brazil where industrialization had achieved some degree of success. The tendency of reprimarization goes hand in hand with the analysis relating to expropriation, be it for mines or hydroelectric dams, increasingly necessary for mining operations, being rather electricity-intensive. Moreover, there is the concern that the reprimarization tendency, which also includes the expansion of transgenic soy, livestock and other extractive activities, has particularly detrimental effects for the environment.

In the second chapter, "Mining Giants, Indigenous peoples and Art: Challenging settler colonialism in northern Australia through story painting" Seán Kerins and Kirrily Jordan make a presentation of the problems associated with mining TNCs in Australia and their negative social and environmental impacts on the homelands of aboriginal people. The chapter offers a serious analysis of the violation of indigenous rights of the aboriginals of Australia as a result of mining projects. The TNCs often pay lip service to the concerns of indigenous populations and yet employ manipulation and misrepresentation in order to achieve higher profits and often use political savvy and corruption against the interests of the local populations. The authors provide detailed historical elements which help them to analyze the resistance to the invasion and dispossession in these regions and conclude that "the settler colonial logic of eliminating native societies to gain unrestricted access to their territory is not a phenomenon confined to the distant past". There are a range of problems faced by these populations, as a result of the negative impacts upon their livelihood, culture, sacred lands, and their environment, including clean and pollution-free water and soil. They have pursued a range of legal means and the authors demonstrate the extent to which politicians and lawmakers have abused these population's rights through legal manipulation and also illegal actions.

The specific case of the Gulf of Carpentaria region in Australia's Northern Territory is examined, where "settler colonial logic of elimination" continues through the implementation of mining projects. These projects extract capital for transnational corporations while contaminating Indigenous land, undermining their livelihoods, and overriding Indigenous law and custom. The authors are interested in a range of ethnic groups (Garawa, GudANJI, Marra, and Yanyuwa peoples) who are using creative ways to resist transnational capital, exhibiting "story paintings" to show how their people experience the destructive impacts of mining. The chapter shows several examples of painting in the traditional sense, as well as body art that these aboriginal communities use to confront or present the devastation and violation of their rights that has taken place over many decades.

The authors recognize that identifying the full impact of this creative activism is a major task they were not able to realize. They conclude however, that people's body of work have "the potential to challenge colonial institutions from below, inspiring growing networks of resistance and a collective meaning-

making through storytelling that is led by Indigenous peoples on behalf of the living world". As the authors argue, this constitutes another clear example of the relevance of the concept of accumulation by dispossession as elaborated upon by Harvey, given the expropriation and violence incurred by these populations' lands and territories. It is hoped that the presentation of different art forms will help to convince other Australians primarily to reflect on other values of communities that are also a part of Australia and to take their view into account politically.

The third chapter is a contribution by Patrick Bond titled "Ecological Economic Narratives for Resisting Extractive Industries in Africa". Bond has been carrying out extensive research for both South Africa and for the region as a whole for many years, combining an analysis of political economy with that of environmental and ecological analysis necessary for understanding the ever more complex reality across the globe. In this chapter, he uses the concept of "natural capital", to address the loss of wealth by African countries, due to extractive industries. This concept comes from ecological economics and is a controversial one even within heterodox economics. It nevertheless allows Bond to reach insightful conclusions on the destruction of the environment in Africa.

Bond considers the World Bank's partial environmental accounting and presents the extent to which Africa's natural capital has been depleted without the expected returns, and shows how Adjusted Net Savings (ANS), a mainstream category, experienced a significant decline in recent decades. He cites the World Bank's report on "[...]the Changing Wealth of Nations 2018" which concludes that "Africa loses more than US\$100 billion annually from minerals, oil and gas extraction, according to (quite conservatively framed) environmentally sensitive adjustments of wealth". In spite of the neoliberal orientation of the World Bank, this narrative actually draws attention to the problem of extractive industries in Africa, even according to the mainstream. Bond goes on to examine the problems for Africa as a result of fossil fuel and mineral extraction and how this connects up to both problems in the present and in the near future with respect to climate change. He presents an interesting discussion about how Africa is portrayed as both "victim and fossil-extraction villain" in the context of specific threats associated with climate change and pending catastrophe.

Bond points to the growing popular opposition on the African continent, given the range of socioeconomic, political, and ecological problems. The context is one of increasing resistance at the grassroots level and confronting the narrative of so-called "ecological modernization" strategies, as advocated by technocrats and international agencies. He presents recent evidence of increasing resistance to a number of the most negative social and environmental impacts resulting from the domination of extractive activities in a number of African countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Concomitant with the increased resistance has been the increase in repression to attempt to squash or eliminate the resistance movements. However, Bond argues that "between the grassroots and technocratic standpoints, a layer of nongovernmental organizations do not yet appear capable of grappling with anti-extractivist politics with either sufficient intellectual tools or political courage". According to him, they instead

“revert to easier terrains within ecological modernization: revenue transparency, project damage mitigation, Free Prior and Informed Consent (community consultation and permission) and other assimilationist reforms”.

The article also elaborates in depth upon a range of important issues and considers more critical narratives, which address environmental problems, concerns over increasing repression, growing debt, etc. Bond presents the case of the natural capital of Zambia and its depletion as a result of transnational investments. He then carries out an examination of the problems associated with the economic crises of recent years and the problems of imbalances with respect to trade, investment, or in fact, disinvestment and growing debt.

Lastly, there is an examination considering another concept coming from ecological economics, “unequal ecological exchange,” as used by several authors and the extent to which this fits or not with different narratives regarding Africa’s future development. In summary, it is Bond’s opinion, there is clear evidence that we are witnessing another wave of pillaging and exploitation of the African continent, reminiscent of the colonial expansion at the end of the nineteenth century.

The fourth chapter is titled “Petroleum Accidents in the Global South” written by Franklin Obeng-Odoom, a scholar from Ghana, currently working in Helsinki, Finland. This piece considers the petroleum industry and begins with an inquiry on the determinants of the high number of accidents in the oil industry, first globally and then in the context of Ghana. Obeng-Odoom employs Molotch’s (1970) political economy methodology of “accident research,” and overall argues in the paper that “such ‘accidents’ are, in fact, routine, and part and parcel of the entire value chain of the oil industry. Obeng-Odoom argues that even though the oil sector is characterized by major accidents, “oil-based developmentalist narratives claim that such accidents are merely isolated incidents that can be administratively addressed, redressed behaviorally through education of certain individuals, or corrected through individually targeted post-event legislation.” The author is highly critical of this standpoint and develops an analysis that aims to show to what extent accidents are structural and have to be treated as such in any policy or legislation that want to tackle this problem and its dramatic consequences.

Obeng-Odoom considers especially the situation of the TNC-led oil investments in Ghana which were widely encouraged as a mechanism for development. In the analysis of the role of TNCs, he points to the clear support from military governments, but also from the World Bank, in promoting primary extractivism in this country. He then addresses the environmental costs of the model of accumulation associated with the expansion of the petroleum industry. After providing a critical assessment of the social and environmental problems related to oil, the author proceeds toward considering a range of alternatives to the dominant model.

Considering the problem of accidents in the oil industry, an assessment of the limitations and errors of actual policies is considered, followed by a presentation of policy alternatives to better address this problem. Obeng-Odoom argues that the previous attempts of “improving technology, instituting and enforcing more

environmental regulations, and the pursuit of economic nationalism in the form of withdrawing from globalization” have been ineffective. He claims that in a context of the search for ever better returns and efficient capital accumulation the pursuit of slow growth has more potency to address the enigma of petroleum accidents in the global south. This “slow growth” would be “characterized by breaking the chains of monopoly and oligopoly, putting commonly generated rent to common uses, and freeing labour from regulations that rob it of its produce”. In summary, the paper calls into question the TNC dominated model of developmentalism and what he criticizes as the ideology of growth or accumulation. Obeng-Odoom claims that this model has been supported through modern forms of colonialism and a blind drive toward growth, and has been the main cause of oil accidents with their concomitant environmental disasters.

PART II ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS AND TRANSNATIONAL VALUE CHAINS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In the fifth chapter, Fernanda Claudio and Kristen Lyons, two Australian authors, examine the impacts of initiatives driven by global political and economic agendas and transnational capital interests on local communities in two African countries, which have come as a result of both colonial history and development schemes. The first case presents the role of neoliberal structural adjustment programs in the case of the Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe. The second case is that of the push for industrial plantation forestry in Uganda in the present day. Their analysis employs a methodology derived from a theoretical lens of structural violence from various authors like Galtung, Kleinmen, and others. It draws particular attention to the role of TNCs in driving this structural violence and its effects. They examine the disruptions to social, health and communities’ livelihood, addressing the issue of violence and suffering which these communities have had to endure. The authors argue that these initiatives disrupted local economies and modified environments, therefore causing profound effects on livelihoods. They argue that “these effects were experienced as structural violence, and have produced social suffering through the decades”. Thus they provide strong examples of how neoliberal policies combined with transnational interests showing utter disregard for local and in particular, traditional communities all in the name of progress and modernization, similar to that discussed by Bond in Chapter 3. The authors argue that in spite of their specificities, the two studied cases “are comparable in the domains of environmental impacts, disruptions to societies, coopting of local economies, disordering of systems of meaning and social reproduction, and nefarious effects on well-being”.

The sixth chapter of this volume is a study which evaluates the principal forms of socioenvironmental damage suffered by local traditional populations and indigenous communities in the context of the installation of a major Industrial and Shipping Complex in Pecém, Ceará, in the Northeast of Brazil.

Meireles, Melo, and Azevedo Said employ a theoretical framework based on the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism to analyze such impacts. They describe the transition for these communities as part of a process of “deterritorialization” which has resulted in extensive impacts on the natural environment, as well as on the way of life and productive practices of these communities.

The traditional and indigenous communities of the area had a socioeconomic formation, characterized by non-capitalist exploitation of “natural resources”, such as artisanal fisheries, subsistence farming, and in general the use of the commons. A major problem the authors analyze is that of pollution in a number of local municipalities in Ceará and the destruction of the natural setting which provided a basis for their livelihoods.

They present a strong argument that this process is constitutive of environmental injustice and environmental racism. As several other papers in this volume, they show how these traditional communities resist and struggle against another case of expropriation and violation of basic human rights linked to TNC investments and associated activities. Once again local communities are seen as “the other” all in the interest of the expansion of capitalist accumulation by transnational interests. Of note, the main transnational actor in this case is the mining giant Vale do Rio Doce, formerly a public enterprise which was privatized at even lower than bargain basement prices. Since then, Vale has shown much more conviction in obtaining high levels of profits by operating in China and elsewhere as opposed to any accommodation to its country of origin, or to the Brazilian population that was ripped off as a result of its privatization.

In the last chapter, title “Transnational Corporations, Family Farming and the Environment, Pedro examines a range of topics related to the global food chain and the implications for family farming, which still constitutes over 70% of the world’s food production. The author engages with a number of discussions in the legal realm, examining a number of relevant issues from international law, in the areas of Human Rights, including environmental laws and treaties but especially the current neoliberal international trade and investment legal framework (arguably transnational law). For him, this framework “constitutes a legal niche” and accommodates the accumulation and expansion of transnational agribusiness, much more than any family farms or food consumers globally. He also presents the action research methodology and the experience of mobilizing participation in the Civil Society Network for Food and Nutrition Security in the context of the Community of Countries of the Portuguese Language (CCPL).

Pedro provides a history of the agricultural industry from the twentieth and into the twenty-first century and in this, he presents the evolution of the global food chain. He presents substantial information regarding family farming historically, first overall and then followed by an emphasis on the CCPL and in particular, a number of important issues for several African countries and Brazil. The third section of this chapter offers an evaluation of the influence of neoliberalism and the growing domination of TNCs, with emphasis on the global farming model. As mentioned above, there is an emphasis on legal issues or

developments, related to international law and food certification systems, not to mention, the case of the Monsanto Tribunal. The author concludes with a presentation of the environmental impacts of agribusiness today, ranging from discussions of the carbon footprint, biodiversity, agrotoxics, and public health.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The variety of contributions of the present volume spans a broad range of issues linked to transnational capital interests and their impacts on the environment. They show how environmental impacts are invariably intertwined with many other dimensions. This includes global capital dynamics; colonial heritages, culture and structures; the ever larger scale of industrial and extractive processes; plundering and unequal ecological exchanges; public health, as well as the use of physical and symbolic violence; the role of national states and the power of multilateral institutions in promoting TNCs investments; the destruction of pre-capitalist or small-scale systems of production; and of course the intensity of social conflicts, the original political subjectivity and ways to struggle associated with these conflicts as well as state and corporate strategies to repress them. These dimensions linked to environmental impacts are captured by various theoretical frameworks, for example, Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, ecological economics' "natural capital", environmental justice and environmental racism, or sociology of the arts.

It shows, in our opinion, how environmental destruction, and its ever-increasing intensity and extensiveness linked to TNCs capital accumulation, cannot be thought of in an isolated manner or through a framework that is "purely" ecological. The complexity of the interrelation between environmental and social dimensions of TNCs interests and activities evidenced here show the dialectical character of social and ecological problems and invites us to continue analyzing the destruction of the environment from both a radical and multidisciplinary approach.