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NATURE

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The invention of the Americas in the wake of the European conquests was based upon imaginaries and appropriations of nature (→ America, I/2). 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 representations of nature in the colonial situation that persist until today (→ Foundational Discourses, III/8). The colonizers appropriated mineral resources on a large-scale and later on used part of the conquered territory, its soil, water, and its people to establish plantations for export products such as sugar, cotton, indigo, and later on bananas, coffee, and other products often introduced from other continents (→ Colonial Economies, I/4), which introduced complete environmental changes (→ Columbian Exchange, I/6). Colonialism (→ Colonial Rule, I/5) brought large-scale environmental transformations, making the interaction between humans and nature a central issue in the formation of modern American societies during the 19th and 20th centuries. The present entry addresses the concept of nature that derives from this history, and its impact on power relations, inequalities, and conflicts within and between different parts of the continent, as well as for the Americas in a global context. Rather than analyzing material change of the environment over time, the intersection between knowledge and politics is emphasized, from which new power constellations have emerged in the past five centuries, while also discussing existing and possible alternatives to the modern power regimes as ways to overcome the nature/culture divide.

Etymological considerations and history of the concept within the geopolitics of knowledge

Nature is derived from Latin “natura” which originally denotes “birth.” In regard to its relationship to “birth,” there are certain similarities to native American conceptions such as the Andean notion of “pachamama,” mother Earth, who gives life (Medina 2001). Nevertheless, in occidental thought “nature” has come to mean also “essential, inner qualities.” This is best expressed in the concept of natural laws, which conveys the epistemological separation of nature from society by creating a division between the instinctive and the rational, the innate and the acquired, the natural and the social, e.g. the “civilized man,” according to the Western logic, is the one who has managed to overcome natural laws.

Anthropologists have argued that such a separation of nature from society cannot be conceived of as universal. It is rather a typically Western way of ordering the world, which has been globalized through processes 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) (→ Modernization, I/35). 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 the human body. Like the human body, the space underlies principles of metabolic flows and exchanges. For many indigenous peoples (→ I/11) across the Americas (from the Amazonian Xavantes to the Cree in Canada), humans evolve in the same web of exchanges and rituals as other actors, which can be animal or vegetal species, but also in some cases mountains, rivers, or even spirits and other beings which Europeans and white Americans would in turn categorize as “supernatural” (Descola 2005; Tanner 2007). Many afro-descendant syncretic rituals as they exist in black communities of Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, and other places, also promote a mystic connection to water, fire, air, and earth, which radically differs from the anthropocentric vision underpinning Christianity (Escobar 2008; Santos and Gonçalves 2011). The Americas are home to a multitude of such cosmogonies that do not articulate the universe along the nature/culture division (→ Religious Beliefs, I/40).

For the colonizers, the great divide between nature and culture served also as a backdrop for the explanation of the classification and the development (→ II/6) of human societies. Renaissance thinkers saw the “American savage” as a construct to conceptualize a state of nature. The special attribution of nature to the Americas was not limited to the 17th century. In the late 18th-century French naturalist Comte de Buffon developed a theory of degeneration in the Americas in which New World species were described as smaller and weaker than European ones, because of allegedly unfavorable climate conditions making healthy life impossible. U.S.-American and Latin American intellectuals, among them Thomas Jefferson, criticized these climate-based assumptions and their underlying racism (→ Race, I/39). In the midst of the 19th century, ideas of natural degeneration and inferiority – also inspired by racism and social Darwinism – justified internal colonization of indigenous peoples especially in the U.S. and in Patagonia (→ Conquest and Colonization, I/7). With the rising U.S. imperialism at the end of the 19th century, the U.S. established itself as a “civilizing power” against the “nature-driven” countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. By representing their Southern neighbors as emotional, primitive, wild, effeminate and/or childish, among other traits supposed to recall the innate and the natural, U.S. elites categorized them as incapable of mastering nature, which implicitly or explicitly amounted to a state of racial inferiority (Pike 1992).

Epistemological questions about “nature” and arguments for its domination and protection

From the 16th century on, counting, mapping, classifying, and representing have been basic operations in the creation of power-knowledge complexes about the (human and non-human) other. This has included in particular the production of knowledge about nature in the colonized areas and subordinated people and their surroundings all over the Americas into Western knowledge systems.

In doing so, Western-European epistemologies (knowledge systems) have been globalized, claiming to represent universal truth, while other knowledge systems have been

minimized and delegitimized. A basic operation emerged in Western thought to separate human societies from the rest of the cosmos and gather in the concept of “Nature” everything that distinguished itself from allegedly “human” properties. This was a key element to legitimize the claim of (Western) men to dominate and exploit nature for one’s own benefit.

In the early 1970s, the Deep Ecology movement emerged as an approach and new mode of activism that conceptualized nature differently and was influenced by the Hippie movement (→ Social Movements, I/41). Deep Ecology assumes that the “natural world” should be conserved for its inherent values, and not primarily in order to guarantee human development. Adhering to the *Gaia* hypothesis that the Earth was a naturally self-regulating organism, which should be protected from excessive human intervention, Deep Ecology was accused of actually contributing to the nature/culture separation. This is somewhat unfair, as Deep Ecology considers humans as an integrative part of *Gaia*, but still it is true that the movement related in many aspects to essentialist thinking. Moreover, criticisms to Deep Ecology have often served to dismiss the environmental movement as a whole, misinterpreting the latter as a project that is aimed at making nature sacred and impermeable to exchanges with humans. Yet, although the green movements have used the concept of nature to mobilize emotions in favor of environmental protection, what they actually did (consciously or unconsciously) was to promote a massive arrival of non-human actors into the (until then exclusively human) political and social spaces. This step, authors like Latour (2004) argue, took a decisive turn in making the concept of nature obsolete.

Social constructivists have pushed this tendency even further, arguing that “nature” does not exist apart from human perceptions and beliefs about it. According to this point of view, all concepts to describe nature and its qualities, such as wilderness, biodiversity, or habitat, are human inventions that carry cultural, political, and other meanings. Yet, this constructivist perspective from the social sciences caused a lot of contradiction among biologists, geographers, and environmental organizations. The latter accused constructivists of ignoring the scientific findings about the material causes and effects of “natural” disasters (→ II/33), biodiversity crisis and climate change (→ II/30), and thus, of indirectly contributing to legitimize the human colonization of the Earth: this “dangerous flirt with relativism” could end up being “as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chainsaws” (Crist and Hargrove 2004, xvi).

Yet, the concept of nature has not only been questioned from a constructivist standpoint, but also from a materialist one. Drawing on Karl Marx’s work, Neil Smith argues that all nature is or has been transformed by capitalist forces (→ Capitalism, II/2), which now operate on a world scale (Smith 2008). Smith analyzes how capitalism and class power serve to make, unmake, and remake the natural and built 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 perceived as nature results from transformation induced by humans and capital.

Marxist ecology points to the fact that the labor process itself mediates and regulates the metabolic relation between humans and nature. Human production is based on the appropriation of nature (Foster 2015). 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 (Evanoff 2005; Forsyth 2001). Drawing on science and technology studies, critical realism investigates the role of knowledge, which claims to have

scientific solutions for pressing environmental problems and locates these within historical, political, and social relations. Even if it completely misreads the driving forces of environmental change, Western knowledge is often privileged at the expense of local understandings of nature. Realist political ecology does not just seek to illustrate how knowledge about environmental issues and boundaries between nature and society are constructed. It also reconstructs proposals for environmental policy that are both biophysically accurate and socially more just, without claiming to convey the only true story (Forsyth 2001).

Latin American Political Ecology calls for the need to understand the epistemological foundations of the colonial regimes and the power-knowledge strategies that dominated peoples and appropriated their territories (→ Land, II/15) (Leff 2015, 35). Watts 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 (2003, 263ff) (→ Environmental Justice, II/8). Martínez-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). To frame demands in conflicts on ecological issues, different and competing meanings are attributed to nature. They span from nature as a commodity to be extracted to nature as territory, through nature as a sacred and cultural tourist destination. Meanings given to nature are hereby expressions of establishing or negotiating power, relating to intrinsic cultural, political, and physical aspects of particular territories. In this context, the importance of state agency (→ Nation State, II/38) has been recently discussed introducing the concept of the “nature state” (Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly and Wakild 2017).

Furthermore, there is an ongoing discussion of how sustainable societies have rooted in the ecological potentialities and cultural identities all over Latin America. “Traditional” or “indigenous” ecological knowledge and cultural imaginaries of sustainability are important points of departure (→ Indigeneity, I/31), where Latin American thinking offers new perspectives (Alimonda 2011; Leff 2015; Machado Aroaz 2014; Palacio 2006; Ulloa 2005). This is probably best expressed in the concept of *Buen Vivir*, (*sumaq kwasay* in Kichwa or *suma qamaña* in Aymara). *Buen Vivir* stems from Andean cosmovisions and conceptualizes the idea of a conviviality between different beings within an eco-system. This includes a debate on the importance of the commons (→ II, 31) as collectively owned and/or used spaces. Recently it was integrated in the constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), with Ecuador being the first country in the world that constitutionally recognizes the rights of nature. From its Andean origins, the concept has been appropriated by other indigenous and ecological movements in the Americas, which have undertaken the task to translate it into their own cultural background.

Another approach to deal with nature and society is the field of environmental history, which especially in Latin America, is basically concerned with the three C’s of colonialism (→ Colonial Rule, I/5), capitalism (→ II/2), and conservation and its impacts on the social production of environment (Carey 2009). This triad has been called into question as it fails to address other issues of environmental importance and because of its moral and political impetus. The tendency of some scholars to narrate the society-nature-relation in Latin America as a story of decay and fall from paradise due to colonialism and capitalism has also been criticized (Miller 2007). Furthermore, more “C’s” have to be added such as catastrophe (→ Disaster, II/33) and climate (→ Climate Change, II/30), while the c of conflict is – especially in Latin America – an important cross-sectional issue.

Continued Columbian exchange, coloniality, and pristine myths

Since the invention of the Americas (→ *America*, I/2), local environments have been created through continuous acts of disruption, implantation, and development of incoming species, which in many occasions contributed to violent changes in the pre-existing ecosystems. The “Columbian exchange” (→ I/6) that started in 1492 brought large-scale environmental transformations, making the interaction between humans and nature a central issue in the formation of modern American societies (Crosby 1972). The proliferation of Eurasian species due to the colonial expansion is a crucial aspect of this process. In historical biology, 1492 is the recognized benchmark for the introduction of neobiota, (invasive) non-native species. But taking into account different conjunctures of coloniality, this “Columbian exchange” cannot be limited to the early colonial times. Therefore it is preferable to speak of “colonial exchange,” meaning colonial not as a historical period but rather the ongoing field of force of coloniality, in the sense of a persisting order of social domination and territorial appropriation which is a legacy of historical colonialism (Quijano 1997) (→ *Postcolonialism*, I/38). Indeed, a renewed conjuncture of introducing new Eurasian species took place in the context of 19th-century settler colonialism in the U.S., where the dispersal vectors of colonization of non-native plant species correlated significantly with the settlement patterns of European settlers (Moseña, Steinlein and Beyschlag 2018) (→ *Migration*, I/15). This includes also the planned acclimatization of non-native species, especially in agricultural, forestry, and fish farming.

The history of rubber in the first half of 20th century, which involved the circulation of seeds and the more or less successful attempts to reproduce tree species between independent nations of South America, and European colonies of 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 superimposed each other. Still, it is remarkable that the transpacific biotic flows have not been as important as the transatlantic ones (→ *Atlantic*, I/3). Most Asian species have been introduced via the Eurasian dispersal vectors and the Atlantic. Other disciplines, such as Cultural Studies have sought inspiration in the “Columbian exchange” thesis. For example, Kunow (2011) analyzed to what extent the flow of germs has shaped the community-formation and governmental, often racialized, techniques in the U.S.-American metropolis.

Along with this production of new American ecosystems, geopolitical imaginations emerged (→ *Geopolitics*, II/34), be it implicitly or explicitly, that made some environments more appreciable to use than others. In colonial imaginaries, the double myth of untouched land to be conquered and the El Dorado to be exploited has been central (Sutter 2000). North America had been famously imagined as an open frontier (→ *Borderlands*, II/26), and a vast, grassy expanse teeming with game, with a low number of nomads who only left sporadic marks on the landscape. South America, too, or at least the Amazon rainforest, was thought of as an almost untouched Eden (→ *Utopias*, III/23). Nevertheless, newer archeological findings have evidenced the existence of sophisticated agrarian systems before the European invasions (Bezerra 2015; Cleary 2001; Miller 2007). Much literature has concentrated on questioning the pristine myth, both in environmental history and in political ecology. Conflictive debates and severe misunderstandings occurred about what it actually means to question the idea of wilderness (Crist and Hargrove 2004; Proctor 1998).

Transnational appropriations of resources

Since the colonial conquests, a central element of the societal relationships with nature in the Americas has been the extraction of mineral resources – especially gold, silver, tin, copper, coal, oil. The history of the entire continent has been shaped by the flows of extractivism (→ II/9). By the end of the 19th century, the asymmetric integration of Latin America into the world economy as a provider of raw materials was based on export enclaves with brutal social and labor conditions. In North America, the implementation of geological drilling in the 1860s enabled the United States to fuel its capitalist system with oil (→ Energy, II/7), on the road toward a strong economic growth. But this happened at the price of creating “sacrifice zones” in the petroleum producing areas, destroying entire landscapes and putting workers’ lives at risk (Colten 2012; Jones 2014).

Several case studies in environmental history underline the destructive forces of capitalism (→ II/2), arguing that most deforestation and appropriation of indigenous lands (→ Land, II/15) was a product of a capitalist mode of production that started to bring massive transformation in the late 19th or 20th century. Although during the phase of import substitution (from the 1930s to the 1970s) other pillars of the economy were developed, at the end of the 20th century the role of the extraction of resources and the export of primary goods took on again an important relevance for societies all over the continent (→ Development, II/6). For example, neoliberal Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990) (→ Neoliberalism, II/16) fostered a selective integration into the world market based on primary products in sectors such as forestry, fishing, and fruits (Claude 1997).

However, this extractivist way of relating to nature is not exclusive to right-wing regimes. Even the left-leaning governments of the 2000s in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela expanded the extraction of resources during an era of favorable prices on the world market and used the commodity boom to finance expansive social policy. This new extractivism was based on the appropriation of nature in which Latin America continued to be dependent on the world market as an exporter of raw materials and little processed goods (Gudynas 2009).

Various protest groups, especially in connection with indigenous and local peasant movements (→ Social Movements, II/41), have mobilized against displacement, and the environmental as well as health consequences of this model (→ Health, I/29). Large-scale mining is often accused by such groups of being a Western way of exploiting the Earth, and that most benefits are transferred to other parts of the world. The intertwinement between extractivist practices and coloniality led Alimonda (2011) to elaborate on the concept of “naturaleza colonizada,” (“colonized nature”) 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 “nature” is not only “colonized” by industrial powers from the Global North, but also through the representations and actions of Latin American elites themselves.

Transnational dynamics of conservation

A wave of concern for the fate of nature having to struggle with the destructive effects of modernity grew strong in the second half of the 19th- as well as the start of the 20th-century Americas. This “early conservationism” resulted from mixed motivations, including the influence of European romanticism, a utilitarian preoccupation for forests, soils, and climate as the material basis of agricultural development, and a patriotic attachment to the wild

as a source of “Americanness.” It was particularly strong in the United States, where the writer Henry David Thoreau advocated the virtues of forest preservation as early as in 1860, while in 1892 the “Sierra Club” was founded as a pioneer organization for the protection of natural resources. Early conservationism helped create the world’s first national park (Yellowstone in 1872) but also the nationwide measures against soil erosion and for reforestation, which accompanied Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s (Henderson and Woolner 2005). In the 8th Pan-American Conference held in Lima in 1938 (→ Pan-Americanism, II/40), the governments of the Americas agreed upon a common Pan-American Convention for protecting native flora, fauna, scenery, and objects of aesthetic, historic, or scientific values. The convention came into force in 1940 and was largely inspired by the U.S.-American conception of different stages of conservation (Scarzanella 2002). Later, other Pan-American agreements on preservation and conservation, like the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles, completed this convention.

For a long time, it was frequently (and wrongly) assumed that the United States was the only reference with regards to the history of conservationist thought in the Americas. However, since the 19th-century intellectuals, scientists, and later also governmental experts of Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico have developed their own understandings and institutionalizations of protected areas (DeVries 2013; Pádua 2002; Wakild 2011, Kaltmeier 2020). In some cases, they took a critical distance to the U.S.-American model (Argentina), including in a revolutionary way, such as in Mexico under the government of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s. Latin American conservation also sought inspiration in other intellectual traditions, such as Prussian forestry, based on the idea of sustainability (Chile).

Around the 1970s, traditional conservationism in many parts of the world gave place to more politicized, world-conscious, and socially critical initiatives converging toward a “new enlightenment” (→ Enlightenment, I/8), which saw the rise of modern environmentalism (Radkau 2011) (→ Social Movements, I/41). Mainstream politics attempted to appropriate this movement, as became visible through the multiplication of environmental agencies and acts all over the Americas and the world, and, at the global scale, with the UN conference on the human environment in Stockholm (1972). Here again, the United States have often been portrayed as the most fertile American country for the emergence of this “global environmental moment” (Eardley-Pryor 2014). Aldo Leopold’s concept of “land ethic” (1949), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* bestseller against the devastating DDT pesticide (1962), massive popular events such as the Earth Day (1970) and early ecological legislation like the *National Environmental Policy Act* (1970) were indeed decisive milestones, through which segments of the U.S. society and politics gave a global impulse to environmentalism. In 1971, the foundation of *Greenpeace* in Vancouver also made Canada the world’s cradle of modern ecological activism. Yet, similarly as for early conservationist thought, Southern contributions should not be underestimated. Brazilian environmentalists, for example, played a crucial role in the defense of biodiversity by turning the Amazon into a global deforestation symbol in the 1970s, after which they successfully lobbied to make Brazil’s 1988 constitution a global pathfinder for environmental law (Acker 2017; Hochstetler and Keck 2007). In 1992, the Rio de Janeiro’s Earth Summit created what can be considered a second “global environmental moment.” Recently, smaller American countries also made their way to the foreground, such as Costa Rica, which has acquired the reputation of a green energy model for the 21st century (Evans 1999) (→ Energy, II/7).

From the 1980s onwards, powerful non-governmental organizations became global advocates for environmental questions (→ Civil Society, II/28). In social sciences, the role of

environmental organizations has recently been a topic of controversial discussions. A few big international NGOs are controlling a rising amount of budgets for environmental conservation and are involved in projects that have displaced communities (→ Biopolitics, I/22). In the last decades, nearly 8.5 million people worldwide have had to leave their homes because the territory they lived in was transformed into national parks (Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2006, 1818). In many cases, NGOs have legitimized the transforming of spectacular landscapes into national parks or high-end touristic attractions, or have admitted that areas were destroyed for large-scale development, infrastructural, and extractivist projects (→ Development, II/6) as long as nature was protected elsewhere (Brockington and Igoe 2007, 5).

Against this background, Martinez-Alier (2002) describes three currents of environmentalism: the cult of wilderness, the gospel of eco-efficiency, and the mantra of environmental justice (→ II/8). The cult of wilderness defended the above presented idea of pristine nature, using the idea of the beauty of landscape and nature as basically a habitat for animals, which can be observed by conservationists. It was and still is promoted by the U.S. Sierra Club; the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), International Conservancy, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace among others. A second current of environmentalism, which has a different take on nature, started to develop with a focus on efficiency, less pollution and is connected with the idea that if nature at one place is destroyed, this should be compensated for elsewhere. By backing this principle, environmental agencies throughout the Americas, and international lending organizations such as the World Bank or the Interamerican Development Bank, have enabled a market of environmental destruction to emerge. A third type of environmentalism follows the paradigm of environmental justice that refers to the right to live in a safe environment for all, and to reject the idea that especially the urban poor are forced to be exposed to many health risks due to toxic waste, industry, and traffic (→ Urbanization, I/45). At the same time, the rural poor in the Americas are threatened and displaced by dams, mines, oil, deforestation, and national parks. As they do not express their claims within the official discourse of environmentalism, the rural communities have had difficulties to make their voices heard (Palacio 2006, 150). Environmental justice (→ II/8) was therefore developed as a social movement's perspective on these issues.

The way state (→ Nation State, II/38) and society treat nature has changed over time (Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly and Wakild 2017). In Colombia, for example, a conservationist perception of nature only started to penetrate official language from 1980 onward, carrying with it new juridical and political ways of regulating questions of land and forest protection (Palacio 2006, 150). While in many other American countries a rhetoric of sustainability developed, however what took place in practice was often a neoliberal remodification of nature (→ Neoliberalism, II/16).

The concept of nature has become a tool for several indigenous peoples worldwide to claim their rights and resist against an uncontrolled and full incorporation of their land and communities into the logic of capitalism (→ Indigeneity, I/31). Many native groups have appropriated Western concepts invented to separate the non-human from the human, such as "environment," "biodiversity," and "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 indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have (successfully) attempted since the 1970s to reframe themselves as guardians of the environment. 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 being an "ecological native" – the quasi-ontological articulation of nature and indigeneity in new forms of eco-governmentality.

The 2009 film *Avatar* by James Cameron is a case in point showing how this indigenous defense of livelihoods and nature against commodification and colonization has penetrated even the entertainment industry (→ Media Flows, III/35).

The imagination of nature is highly marketable. The tourist industry sells an image of tropical landscapes within the Caribbean as paradises for tourist consumption (Sheller 2003) (→ Consumerism, I/23). In this logic, local inhabitants tend to be perceived as “invaders” and “illegal occupants” of “virgin” nature who destroy biodiversity hotspots (Ojeda 2012, 364) (→ Biopolitics, I/22). In the past three decades, cosmetic firms, global organic food networks, advertising companies, the entertainment industry (→ Cultural Industries, III/27), and ecotourism have built on an exotic vision of the Americas as a “wild” and still largely “pristine” continent. Therefore, old colonial imaginaries are strengthened once again, and at the same time new forms of commercial appropriations of nature emerge.

The logic of Green Grabbing (Fairhead, Leach and Scoone 2012; Tittor 2016) – to sell nature so as to save it – is becoming increasingly present all over the Americas. Although intended to protect areas deemed pristine, the outcomes of these environmental initiatives are often modest at best. For example, the Yasuní ITT-initiative of Ecuador’s government in 2007 proposed to leave the oil resources in the National park untapped (→ Energy, II/7) in exchange for compensation from the international community. Nevertheless, in 2013 the initiative failed due to the lack of financial support and the extractivist-oriented economic policy of the Ecuadorian government. Additionally, debt-for-nature swaps are another instrument to protect nature and reduce CO₂ emissions that can have unintended consequences. In exchange for debt forgiveness, the debtor-government has to foster conservation or invest in climate-related expenditures. Critics have stated that this instrument leads to a further commodification of nature, and reduces countries of the Global South to a status of nature while production regimes in the Global North remain untouched.

Nature strikes back – “natural” disasters and climate change within the Anthropocene

Another narrative that was present in many other perceptions of nature was the idea of nature as a dangerous force that is able to bring catastrophic situations to humans (→ Disaster, II/33). There is a religious narrative that sees natural catastrophes like droughts, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes as events through which God punishes “men,” if humankind in general, or different groups of it, behave in an unholy way (→ Religious Beliefs, I/40). Although within the bible, humans have the right and duty to master non-human life for its own needs, evangelical churches all over the Americas have successfully pushed their interpretations of floods, hurricanes, and Tsunamis as having a biblical meaning.

A different strand of interpretation argues that most natural catastrophes are not natural at all, but that certain models of political dependency and colonial entanglements have made the consequences severe (→ Postcolonialism, I/38). As Davis shows, for example, great famines in the late 19th century the Brazilian Northeast might have been “materially” unleashed by climatic droughts, but they stood in tight relation with the production, exchange structure, and ideologies of global Victorian capitalism (Davis 2002). As a human counterweight to these perceived natural catastrophes, 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 Volkswagen companies in the Amazon (Acker 2017; Grandin 2010) (→ Modernization, I/35). All of these examples,

which show the aspiration of defeating natural laws, left concrete traces of the environmental effects, which Western, fantasized visions of nature could engender.

Humans have subjugated and transformed nature for millennia, but the intensity of resource extraction has accelerated a lot with colonialism (→ Colonial Economies, I/4) and capitalism (→ II/2). 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" report from 1972 was one of the first widely recognized signals that started the discussion about the effects of industrialization (Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens 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 not even intended.

The discussion about causes and impacts of climate change (→ II/30) essentially took form in the 1980s in continuity 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 a catastrophic future for the Earth 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, international conferences (Rio 1992, Kyoto 1997, Paris 2015, Bonn 2017 among many other), and an emerging global environmental governance as well as the recent intent to have a social-ecological turn within development policy (→ Development, II/6) and proclaim the sustainable development goals, the linear development of resource consumption remains far from being stopped. Up to today only severe economic crises (→ II/4) 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 others situate it during the industrial revolution in Western Europe 200 years ago, or even later, with a "great acceleration" that took place in the middle of the 20th century (Krausmann et al. 2009). From the perspective of the Columbian Exchange (→ I/6), Charles Mann has identified 1492 as the 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 since the fragmentation of Pangaea (Mann 2011, 3–50). This brings a completely new time frame into the discussion about historical conjunctures – but is still an open, controversial discussion.

What all these debates have in common is that they imagine "humanity" as a collective actor equally causing the problems. Nevertheless, the danger of this approach is to ignore the differences between the Global North and the Global South, but also between different groups and classes within respective world regions (→ Social Inequality, II/20), especially in terms of consumption patterns (→ Consumerism, I/23) or even cosmological representations (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016). Not all societies have a predatory approach to the non-human environment, neither have all humans the same carbon footprint. This is especially true in the Americas, where the United States and Canada have reached skyrocketing CO₂-emission rates, while in some rural areas of South America and the Caribbean people still have to struggle for basic resources. Promoters of the Anthropocene narrative often ignore

asymmetric power relations and tend to frame problems in apocalyptic scenarios, but they offer a very technocratic and marked-based approach to handle them, if not even post-political managerial planning (critically: Lövbrand 2015).

Anthropocene research mostly builds on chronological milestones that follow the evolution of the European, North American and sometimes Soviet production models, such as the industrial revolution, the rise of the fossil fuel economy and the development of the nuclear sector (→ Energy, II/7). Historians still struggle to find a place for the Southern Hemisphere in this narrative, although recent works have started to discuss Latin America's ambiguous role (both as an extractive periphery and a rising contributor to global pollution) in the making of Anthropocenic change (Acker and Fischer 2018).

Discussion: Decolonizing nature?

Many of the examples mentioned above show how modern rationality should be subject to political and epistemological discussion. Indeed, it constructed an unsustainable world, whose ecological destruction is due to the exploitative appropriation of nature during the colonial regime (→ Colonial Rule, I/5), as well as prolonged and amplified through the present world economic order (Leff 2015) (→ Capitalism, II/2). This went hand in hand with the exclusion and oblivion of traditional practices, while Western knowledge attempted to extend its domination over the Americas. Yet, there are numerous struggles of urban and rural dwellers, indigenous and Afro-American communities, and advocate organizations aiming to defend local livelihoods against capitalist appropriation (→ Social Movements, I/41; Alter-Globalization, I/21). For example, conflicts against large-scale mining projects have become frequent in all parts of the continent. In their cultural dimension, these conflicts over territories and landscapes also represent antagonist representations of the world. They can be best understood as multidimensional conflicts over territories, ways of living, access to water and land, and the question of environmental governance.

In spite of the ethno- and anthropocentric origins of the concept, the category of nature in the Americas may not need to be abandoned altogether. Nature as a distinct category is deeply rooted in our contemporary models of imagining the world: as said before, even indigenous groups have embraced “nature” as an issue to fight for. Strategically, to revoke the concept of nature might not be the most rapid and efficient way toward stopping environmental degradation and social exploitation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to underline the colonial dimension which characterizes the history of the idea of nature (→ Postcolonialism, I/38), and to learn from intents to de-colonize it. Three dimensions appear crucial on this path: First, it seems important to foster new epistemologies beyond the nature-culture divide. In the Americas these new epistemologies can surge from a 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, it would be wise to stop amalgamating indigeneity (→ I/31) and nature. There is no inherent feature that makes indigenous people more “natural” than Western people. Instead, different knowledge systems and epistemologies need to be considered. Beyond the question of inter-cultural translation and dialogue, there is also the problem of cultural appropriation, especially in regard to indigenous environmental 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) (→ Biopolitics, I/22). The current use of patenting and genetic engineering is understood by Shiva as an attempt from the West to re-colonize the Global South.

Second, decolonizing nature should take into account the internal logics of environmental change as well as its materiality, and not only its representations. It would be misleading to relate all forms of a destructive use of nature to coloniality and capitalism. For example, while Andean indigenous-peasant communities have complex, sustainable reciprocity systems with their highland environments, they fail to relate to tropical environments in the lowlands. Also, archeologists suspect the collapse of anciently prospering civilizations of North and Central America, such as the Chaco Anasazi and the Maya, to be the result of an unsustainable way of extracting natural resources. Trying to take advantage of White colonization (→ Whiteness, 1/46), Amerindians hunters of Canada and Quebec also actively participated in the animal massacres that made the transatlantic fur trade expand from the 17th to the 19th centuries (Ray 1998). It would be interesting to further research how certain dynamics of environmental exploitation have been shaped both by internal colonial logics, and by a homemade ignorance toward natural conditions in a specific place, interwoven with, but not necessarily deriving from Western ideas of progress and modernity (→ Modernization, 1/35). A decolonial approach toward different understandings of nature has to handle the problem that these are almost always relational and shaped by multiple transnational relations and Inter-American entanglements.

Third, decolonizing the idea of nature means to undo the existing interrelation between society and a biotic environment based on exploitation, extractivism (→ II/9), and misuse. In many (not all) indigenous societies, these relations are thought in terms of reciprocity and substance orientation. This implies systems of care beyond the Western extremes of preservation of pristine wilderness and profit-maximizing extraction. To rethink and possibly reconceptualize the category of Nature, the different imaginations of and modes of relation with the environment need to be considered. Proposals from Latin America (Leff 2015; Machado Aroz 2014; Palacio 2006) or from a “world-ecology perspective” may contribute to overcoming the nature-society divide through conceptualizing the “web of life” (Moore 2015) and thus deepen the dialogue with (post-)colonial approaches to open new ways of conceiving the field of Nature/Environment/Society/Culture.

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