Lisbon School of Economics & Management
Universidade de Lisboa

MASTER

DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

MASTER´S FINAL WORK

DISSERTATION

RENEWABLE AMBITIONS, COLONIAL LEGACIES: THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE LITHIUM TRIANGLE UNDER THE CRITICAL THEORY OF COLONIALITY

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SUPERVISION:
THOMAS GERHARD ERICH MUHR

CO-SUPERVISION:
MARTA PEDRO VARANDA

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GLOSSARY

AFA – Advanced Framework Agreement

CBAM – Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

CMP – Colonial Matrix of Power

COP – Conference of the Parties.

CRMs – Critical Raw Materials.

CTC – Critical Theory of Coloniality

EC – European Commission.

EGD – European Green Deal.

EU – European Union.

EU ETS – EU Emissions Trading System.

GATT – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

GHG – Greenhouse Gases.

IEA – International Energy Agency.

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

IRENA – International Renewable Energy Agency

MERCOSUR – Southern Common Market.

REEs – Rare Earth Elements

TIC – Theory of Internal Colonialism

UN – United Nations

UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

US – United States of America

WMO – World Meteorological Organization

WTO – World Trade Organization

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the European Green Deal through the lens of the Critical Theory of Coloniality, unveiling how Europe's green transition reproduces global patterns of extractivism and dependency driven by a neoliberal recoloniality logic. Focusing on the Lithium Triangle, this research seeks to demonstrate that the EGD externalizes ecological degradation and social dispossession to peripheral regions in the name of sustainability. The findings affirm that ecological transitions driven by the Global North will remain structurally unequal unless grounded in epistemic plurality, territorial justice, and a pluriversal reimagining of growth and development.

KEYWORDS: European Green Deal; Coloniality; Lithium Triangle; Green Extractivism; Decolonial Theory; Critical Raw Materials.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Climate change is the defining issue of our time – and we are at a defining moment" (Guterres, 2018). These were the words of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres during his 2018 speech at the UN General Assembly. He also noted that "climate change is moving faster than we are", and his words could not be more accurate. While the growing impacts on communities worldwide have made the need for action more critical than ever, decision makers have apparently failed to respond to ecological issues and seem to not realize, or more likely, choose to deliberately ignore that its market-oriented actions actually contribute to exacerbating the crisis (Howes et al., 2017; Boehmer-Christiansen & Kellow, 2002; Chomsky & Pollin, 2020).

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 2024 ranked as the warmest year on record, with global temperatures averaging approximately 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels (WMO, 2025). This alarming data suggests that the policies and mechanisms implemented to contain global warming in recent decades appear to be insufficient, to say the least. WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo emphasized that "climate history is playing out before our eyes. We have had not just one or two record-breaking years, but a full ten-year series, […] all powered by record-breaking greenhouse gas (GHG) levels due to human activities" (WMO, 2025).

This form of discourse, unfortunately, is not a recent phenomenon. Although the scientific community has been sounding the alarm since the early 1970s – such as through the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, representing the first major international effort where scientists and policymakers came together to formally address the global impacts of human activities on the environment – ecological issues did not start to draw greater political concern until the 1990s, culminating in the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Bodansky, 2001). And it was only in 1997, during the third Conference of the Parties (COP) – the decision-making body for the UNFCCC – that Member States adopted the Kyoto Protocol, representing the "first significant steps forward to collectively address these concerns" (McInerney-Lankford et al., 2011, p.3).

However, as a result of several challenges faced during the implementation process and its inability to define boundaries for developing countries and mandatory

commitments to industrialised ones, the pact was unable to fully address the growing effects of climate change (Falkner, 2016). Years later, under increasing international pressure, global leaders were led to adopt the Paris Agreement in 2015, marking a significant turning point in the fight to mitigate global warming effects, as it "recognised for the first time the key role of aligning financial flows to climate goals" (Kreibiehl et al., 2022, p.1586).

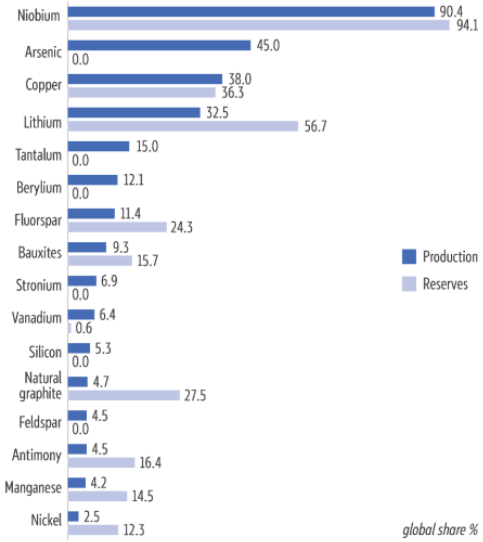
Building on this global evolution concerning international commitments and as a way to maintain itself at the forefront of a *new green era*, the European Union (EU) took an important step in December 2019 by introducing the European Green Deal (EGD). The objective of the EGD is to transform Europe into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, thereby placing the continent as a self-proclaimed leader in green energy solutions. The European Commission's (EC) official communication to the European Parliament, Council, and Committees explains the EGD as "a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of GHG in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use" (European Commission, 2019). According to President von der Leyen, during her speech at the adoption of the EGD, "it is a strategy for growth that gives more back than it takes away" (von der Leyen, 2019).

Nevertheless, transitioning to such a greener economy presents significant challenges, particularly regarding the extraction of Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) including lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements (REEs), as well as other vital resources required for this transformation (IRENA, 2023). This fact creates a disturbing paradox: while promoting sustainability, there has been an ongoing pattern of unsustainable mining practices and ecological destruction in resource-rich regions like the Lithium Triangle in South America.

This dissertation aims to address this issue by exploring how the EGD while framed as a progressive initiative focused on mitigating global warming effects and promoting sustainable development, could be criticized from a decolonial point of view. The main premise is that EU actions could be shaping global dynamics in ways that reinforce historical inequalities, even under the apparent search for equitable ecological solutions – risking becoming a growth strategy that takes away more than it gives back.

This perspective is supported when analysed within the historical context of Latin America. For centuries, European colonial powers extracted Latin America's natural resources and exploited its workforce to fuel their own industrial and economic development, leaving behind a lasting legacy of inequality and "underdevelopment" for local communities (Eslava & Caicedo, 2023; Galeano, 1971; Frank, 1969). According to Frank (1966), "contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries" (Frank, 1966, p. 18). This historical trajectory underscores how colonial hierarchies continue to shape – and be reproduced by – contemporary global economic relations. Echoing this point, Paulo Henrique Martins emphasizes that "capitalism as a program of global modernization depends on the possibility of extending exploitation in former areas of colonization in order to subsidize the increase of wealth and consumption in core countries" (Martins, 2022, p. 257).

Figure 1: Latin America's share in global production and reserves of selected critical raw materials in 2023 (%)



Source: Figure I in *EU–Latin America: Enhancing cooperation on critical raw materials* (p. 3), by M. Jütten, 2024

Based on this principle, and through the lens of the Critical Theory of Coloniality (CTC), the discussion will extend to how the EGD marks another defining context for the region, where patterns of domination are re-examined, given that the large availability of CRMs in Latin America positions the continent as a major supplier for the EGD (see Figure 1). Among all the 34 CRMs listed by the EC – detected according to their economic importance and supply risk assessment – 25 are extracted in Latin America (Jütten, 2024).

1.1. Research Question and Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate possible patterns of coloniality in the relationship between the EGD and neo-extractivist practices in the Lithium Triangle. In other words, it seeks to understand how Europe's increasing demand for CRMs, motivated by its green agenda, could be influencing socio-economic structures and development trajectories in Latin American countries, using the Lithium Triangle as the central case study of analysis. The main argument is that patterns of coloniality, such as the imposition of unfavourable conditions in trade agreements and the uneven exploitation of natural resources, may contribute to the reinforcement of dependency between the EU and Latin America, between *core* and *periphery*.

In order to address this overarching argument, the research question guiding this study is: "*To what extent does the European Green Deal's demand for critical raw materials reinforce dependency through colonial power structures in the Lithium Triangle?*". This question situates the EU's sustainability agenda within a broader historical and geopolitical framework, focusing on the enduring legacy of colonialism in neo-extractivist practices. To answer the proposed question, the dissertation will be guided by three main objectives, which will lead to an analysis on how discourses, policies and trade agreements under the EGD are shaping the relationship between both regions.

The first objective is to set out the recently published Critical Theory of Coloniality and understand the particular optic it offers for deciphering present-day dynamics of *neoliberal recoloniality* and the reproduction of global asymmetries through narratives of development and progress, such as the EGD. It will also serve to situate the CTC within the broader landscape of postcolonial and decolonial theories, highlighting its distinct contributions and points of departure.

The second objective involves the analysis of the internal mechanics of the EGD — including its legislative foundations, market-based instruments, CRMs strategy, and external trade diplomacy — in order to trace how Europe's climate agenda materially extends its socio-environmental footprint beyond its borders and reshapes extractive practices elsewhere. Finally, the third objective is to theoretically apply the CTC's view to the geopolitical landscape and extractive dependencies structured by the EGD's climate and industrial strategies, so as to evaluate, in the Lithium Triangle, whether

Europe's green transition reproduces, reconfigures, or potentially dismantles long-standing patterns of dependency and coloniality.

1.2. Methodological Aspects

To be able to answer the research question and to meet the aforementioned objectives, the dissertation adopts a qualitative approach, employing inductive reasoning to analyse a multiple explanatory case study design. This methodology is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance, which acknowledges that policies, trade agreements, and narratives are not neutral but socially constructed and subject to multiple interpretations by different actors (Bevir & Hall, 2020; Della Porta & Keating, 2008). To conduct the research, the CTC will be used as the theoretical lens for observing if structural dependencies and colonial legacies persists in the relationship between the EU and lithium-rich nations in Latin America. The purpose of this section is to break down why this methodology was selected and to outline how it will be implemented during this dissertation.

First, understanding coloniality in the context of ecological and energy transitions requires an analytical approach that connects historical context with present-day realities. Moreover, as mentioned before, the global shift toward renewable energy is frequently framed as a necessary step toward environmental sustainability. Yet this discourse often disguises the dependencies that underpin development narratives, reinforcing rather than disrupting extractivist logics (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2021; Svampa, 2019). Therefore, the methodological design of this research is shaped by the need to critically examine how these structural dependencies persist within today's society.

Starting from a decolonial perspective, the dissertation prioritizes a critique of the neo-extractivist logic underpinning sustainable development narratives. Given the complexity of this topic – where historical colonial legacies intersect with environmental policies and economic dependencies – a qualitative methodology appears to be an appropriate approach for this research as it "reflects a philosophical commitment to embracing the complexity and diversity of the human experience" (Gautam & Gautam, 2023, p.151). It also aligns with interpretivism, by "valuing unique perspectives and

utilizing methods like narrative analysis and content analysis to delve into the complexities of interpretation" (Gautam & Gautam, 2023, p.150).

By conducting qualitative research, the dissertation will employ a range of methods, including literature review and document analysis, to examine primary and secondary sources. On one hand, primary sources will include official policy documents such as the European Green Deal, the Critical Raw Materials Acts (2023 and 2024), bilateral trade agreements like the politically agreed EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement and the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement (AFA), as well as strategic communications and legislative proposals from the European Commission and EU institutions. On the other hand, secondary sources will situate the dissertation within the broader academic discourse, through a literature review on the Critical Theory of Coloniality, the geopolitics of green transition, the extractive logic of capitalist modernity, and decolonial critiques of sustainability and global trade.

Following the selected structure, the analysis will be conducted inductively, which "involves looking at real cases and drawing general conclusions" (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p.350). Rather than testing a hypothesis derived from existing theories, this approach facilitates the identification of emerging patterns, relationships, and structures within the data (Soiferman, 2010, p.7). In this case, it will be employed to move from analysing the EU's role in neo-extractivist practices in Latin American countries to uncovering broader patterns of power and coloniality.

To narrow the scope of this research within a specific geographic space and to concentrate on a single aspect regarding the EGD, it was crucial to identify and prioritize elements that held relevance to its implementation. In this sense, choosing lithium as a focal point was justified by its evident role in renewable energy technologies, particularly in the production of batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage systems, which are central to the transition towards a low-carbon economy (Dorn & Dietz, 2024, p.44; Heredia et al., 2020). The Lithium Triangle, in turn, emerged as a particularly relevant case, since it holds more than half of the world's known lithium deposits (Janubová, 2023, p.113). This growing demand turned the region into a geopolitical hotspot, where issues of resource governance, foreign investment, and sovereignty walk side by side, making it

a unique context for examining the socio-environmental implications of lithium extraction (Heredia et al., 2020).

The choice of an explanatory case study method will facilitate the dissertations' analysis of the mechanisms reinforcing dependency, given its capacity to better understand how and why certain dynamics persist over time (Yin, 2009). In doing so, it seeks to clarify if the argument that structural dependencies are not merely the product of inertia but are actively sustained through institutional, economic, and political mechanisms (Larraín, 1989), could be verified in this context or not. Additionally, the multiple characters of the Lithium Triangle (Argentina, Bolivia and Chile) also contributed to the choice, as it offers a valuable opportunity to comparatively assess how these distinct realities react to external pressures.

This methodology is theoretically framed by the CTC. In the next chapter, the dissertation will delve into the principles of the theory, tracing its roots from the Frankfurt School to *border thinking* and further explaining its role in understanding the relationship between *neoliberal recoloniality* and the climate crisis.

2. THE CRITICAL THEORY OF COLONIALITY

The EC has repeatedly acknowledged its concern about securing the necessary resources for implementing the EGD. According to its Critical Raw Materials Action Plan, "access to resources is a strategic security question" for Europe's ambition to deliver the Green Deal (European Commission, 2020a). Reflecting this concern, several European leaders have made clear that the agenda's success hinges on reliable access to critical natural resources. This becomes a matter of concern when one looks at the expected global demand over the next few years – as highlighted by Maroš Šefčovič, EC Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, "for e-car batteries and energy storage alone, Europe will for instance need up to 18 times more lithium by 2030 and up to 60 times more by 2050" (European Commission, 2020a).

In light of this worrying demand and given Latin America's large availability of CRMs, when I first confronted this agenda, I reached instinctively for the classic tool-kit of Latin-American Dependency Theory, World-Systems Analysis, and some others Decolonial/Postcolonial theories and concepts that were instrumental in identifying

structural inequalities and geopolitical hierarchies – which proven to be indispensable for understanding how the *core* systematically extracts surplus from its *peripheries*.

In this context, coloniality revealed itself as a persisting structure that goes beyond historical colonialism. While colonialism refers to "a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation […] coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

To better understand how these structural patterns persist, Dependency Theory, for instance, played an important role in the interpretation that "inequality was not just a problem of economic exchange, but also a political and cultural problem" (Martins, 2024, p. 211). This school of thought defends that underdevelopment in peripheral regions was not a stage to be overcome but a structural condition actively produced through their integration into the global capitalist system (Frank, 1966, 1969; Dos Santos, 1970; Amin, 1976; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). As André Magnelli explains, the translation of modernity into the goal of development during the Cold War framed social change as a top-down process defined by the "exemplarity" of developed societies, leading to a global order structured around "First," "Second," and "Third" worlds (Magnelli, 2023, p. 5).

In this context, World-Systems Theory, especially in the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, deepened this view by conceptualizing capitalism as a world system marked by a tripartite division – core, semi-periphery, and periphery – through which labour, resources, and capital were unequally distributed and accumulated (Wallerstein, 1974; 2004). Post-developmentalism was also important to the discussion, particularly through Arturo Escobar's seminal work, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, where he argues that the concept of development has often been employed as a mechanism of control, perpetuating Western dominance under the guise of progress (Escobar, 1995, p. 44). This reinforces the idea that modernization and development are not neutral processes, but discourses of power and domination that delegitimize alternative knowledges and marginalize peripheral societies (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Dossa, 2007; Martins, 2024).

However, as I investigated the EGD in greater depth, these frameworks began to reveal their limitations for analysing the current scenario of green energy transitions. It is undeniable that these traditions remain indispensable, yet, as Martins insists, "these theses have been insufficient to explain the new colonialities recently agencied under the influence of neoliberalism. Recent historical developments confirm that there has been a loss of normative effectiveness of the conceptual arguments available in the social sciences to carry out the critique of colonial modernity" (Martins, 2022, p. 74). In this regard, the author highlights that "coloniality cannot be reduced to a functional effect of the economic expansion of capitalism that empties the political dimension of the debate. Understanding capitalism in its relation to the process of colonization necessarily means accepting that capitalism is a program of planetary colonization with various motivations." (Martins 2022, p. 34).

In this sense, while earlier critical theories exposed the mechanics of structural dependency, they did not fully capture the dimensions of domination, which operates not only through unequal terms of trade but also through the epistemic and discursive mechanisms that structure knowledge production and global governance around cultural, moral, psychological, racial, and patriarchal dimensions (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243; Martins, 2022). Within this structure, dominant forces have the power to determine whose expertise counts, reproducing a discursive practice that "sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority" (Escobar, 1995, p. 41)

Applied to the EGD, the structure is developed to benefit those who can speak, decide and profit from the *green turn*. As Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power shows, the ability of the core to define what counts as *clean*, *sustainable*, or even *development* rests on a historical Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP), in which "one of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism" (Quijano 2000, 533). This concept emphasizes the centrality of race and racial/ethnic classifications in modernity, where hierarchies were guided by racialized divisions that placed Latin America "in a natural position of inferiority" and made race "the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world

population into ranks, places and roles in the new society's structure of power" (Quijano 2000, 535).

Drawing on this concept, CTC deepens the analysis by arguing that any critique of capitalism – in the case of this dissertation in its green and sustainable variants – must understand it as "a generalized mode of cultural production that reflects a symbiosis of selfish interests, technological novelties, racist practices, and the aestheticization of politics" (Martins, 2022, p. 34). This aestheticization serves to obscure the persistence of a dominant logic that classifies, manages, and disciplines life according to colonial hierarchies, which led to the term *colonial capitalism*. As Martins explains, "capitalism is always an anthropological machine that is driven by moral, aesthetic, and racist factors" (Martins, 2022, p. 35). He further argues that "the theoretical critique of capitalism must necessarily be accompanied by the moral and aesthetic critique of coloniality" (Martins, 2022, p. 38).

It is precisely this dimension, beyond economics or geopolitics, that previous frameworks could not fully integrate into their concepts. Consequently, it can be said that CTC provides the conceptual bridge missing from earlier frameworks, representing a significant intellectual contribution to contemporary critical thought, as it "works to decolonize the concept of social change and clarifies global change, focusing on analysis of processes of colonialities and decolonialities in contemporary dynamics" (Magnelli, 2023, p. 2).

At its core, CTC can be defined as "a systemic, open, and pluriversal program of reflection aimed at rethinking domination at the borders of colonial capitalism in order to liberate cosmopolitan and anti-colonial feelings, values, and practices (Martins, 2022, p. 256). This definition translates several fundamental characteristics that distinguish CTC from other critical approaches, adopting not only the systemic perspective that recognizes the interconnected nature of economic, political, cultural, and epistemic dimensions of domination, but also characterized by its openness to multiple theoretical traditions and its commitment to dialogue across different epistemic communities. Thus, "CTC aims to critically study and mutually translate this plural emergence of critiques of coloniality and make them converge toward common points" (Magnelli, 2023, p. 7).

From that point of view, this chapter serves as the theoretical foundation for interrogating how the EGD re-articulates long-standing extractivist logics in the Lithium Triangle. By doing so, the dissertation positions the CTC as an analytical lens for understanding the persistence of power asymmetries rooted in historical colonialist relations, now manifesting through *green neoliberal recolonization*. Building on this, the next section will unfold the CTC, tracing its roots from the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental reason to Latin American border thinking epistemologies, thereby laying the conceptual groundwork for the subsequent chapters.

2.1. A Pluriversal Critique: From Frankfurt to Border Thinking

The CTC establishes productive dialogues across critical traditions from both the Global North and South, and in doing so embraces pluriversality. One central metaphor used to characterize the pluriversality of CTC is the *intellectual archipelago*. As Stéphane Dufoix observes, this metaphor suggests "an approach that is quite different from most of the works that have made it their subject. Instead of being 'content' with denouncing Eurocentrism and Western epistemic hegemony […] he suggests thinking about the elective affinities […] between certain Western and non-Western theoretical currents of thought" (Dufoix, 2022, p. 436). By identifying these affinities, CTC creates possibilities for transnational and transcultural alliances in the struggle against various forms of oppression, which could only be achieved by establishing "a fruitful dialogue between the new critiques of the South with the traditions of the Frankfurt School" (Martins, 2022, p. 5), creating possibilities for a truly global critical theory.

Influenced by Marx, Hegel, and Freud, the Frankfurt School's early theorists – such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse – developed a powerful critique integrating philosophy and social science to expose and challenge the forces of domination in modernity. As Max Horkheimer explains in his 1937 essay, *Traditional and Critical Theory*, "unlike modern specialized science, however, the critical theory of society has continued to be a philosophical discipline even when it engages in a critique of the economy" (Horkheimer 1982, p. 247) and is driven "by a concern for reasonable conditions of life" (Horkheimer 1982, p. 199).

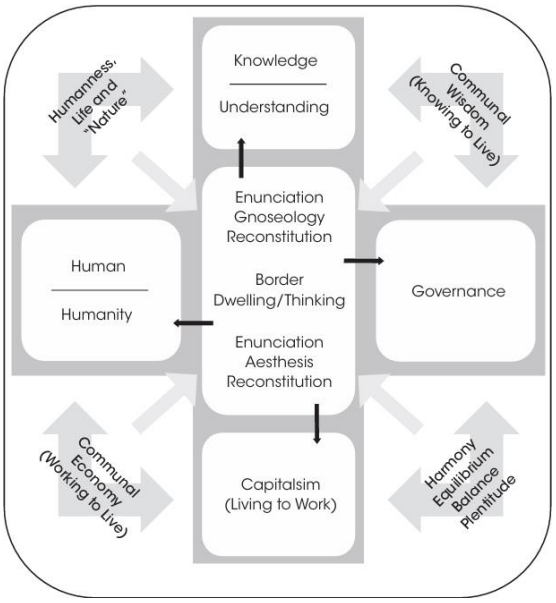
This critique emerged largely as a response to the horrors of fascism in Europe, which revealed the dark potential of modern rationality when divorced from ethical considerations. As Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer further explain, “freed from supervision by one's own class, […] fascism, which by its iron discipline relieves its peoples of the burden of moral feelings, no longer needs to observe any discipline” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 67). However, this critique remains limited by its Eurocentric perspective, which fails to adequately address the colonial dimension of modernity (Magnelli, 2023, p.5). From this perspective, it can be argued that Frankfurt theorists largely focused on the internal contradictions of European modernity without sufficiently examining how these contradictions were related to colonial exploitation and domination outside European borders.

Martins highlights this limitation when he notes that "European critique was perplexed when the model of control and extermination used in the colonial adventure erupted within the empire" (Martins, 2022, p. 258). As Aimé Césaire famously argued in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, what Europeans found intolerable in Nazism was essentially the application to white Europeans of colonial practices that had long been inflicted on non-European peoples (Césaire, 1972, p. 2). To move beyond these limitations of the classical critical theory, Walter Mignolo defends “delinking from the genealogies of the social sciences and the humanities to embrace and dwell in the genealogy of decolonial thought” (Mignolo, 2021, p. 58). Rather than simply rejecting Western knowledge, it enacts what Mignolo calls *epistemic disobedience.* According to the author, “studying the borders doesn’t lead necessarily to border thinking… unless scholars engage in epistemological disciplinary disobedience and bring to the fore the existential experience of dwelling in the border” (Mignolo, 2012, p. XVI).

To better understand the real meaning of border thinking, first it is important to comprehend what means “to delink and engage in communal praxis of decolonial healing through epistemic (of knowledge and ways of knowing) and aesthesic (being, sensing, and believing) reconstitution” (Mignolo, 2021, p. 9). Building on Quijano’s notion of the CMP – which links the control of economy, authority, knowledge, and gender/sexuality as mutually reinforcing domains that sustain the structures of coloniality – Mignolo’s diagram in *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (see Figure 2) helps illustrate that decolonial thinking “requires epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions, and these goals

cannot be achieved within the epistemology and subjectivities of the actors and institutions running the CMP, who operate by means of the double movement of constitution/destitution" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 32). This means that colonial power maintains itself by continuously constituting (founding or instituting) and destituting (dispossessing or dismantling) structures and subjectivities that reinforce its logic.

Figure 2: Border-Thinking Reconstitution: Domains, Enunciation, and Flows Toward Pluriversal Harmony.



Source: Figure I.3 in *The politics of decolonial investigations* (p. 57), by W. D. Mignolo, 2021, Duke University Press

By developing this diagram, the author attempts to "render the triple energy of domination/exploitation/conflict (the spirit of coloniality of power) as the triple movement of constitution/destitution/reconstitution" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 46), operating as a dynamic, ongoing process at the heart of both coloniality and decoloniality. As Mignolo explains, "the task of decoloniality […] is to contribute to the destitution of the totality and the reconstitution of options for being, sensing, thinking, believing, and doing that have been and are being silenced by the epistemic, political, ethical, and economic projects of Western modernity" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 46).

In this regard, the author defends that "reconstitutions do not call out only the contents of each domain but mainly the assumptions on which the contents are grounded – the enunciation" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 67). In other words, decoloniality "must be oriented toward changing the assumptions and presuppositions – not just the contents – that currently validate Western political economy, political theory, and the opinions transmitted by the corporate media to the public at large" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 4). Thus,

border thinking becomes both a critique of and an alternative to the universality claimed by Western modernity.

Moreover, by centring the practices of enunciation – how we know (gnoseology) and how we sense/feel (aesthesis) – the diagram demonstrates the movement from colonial logics toward new communal possibilities. In this way, “the reconstitution of knowing (gnoseology), sensing, and emotioning (aesthesis) by Indigenous people themselves (“cosmic” in Cabnal’s vocabulary) reestablishes the priority of the communal over the glorification of the individual, and the society of individuals separated from the living cosmos (nature)" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 33).

Therefore, it can be concluded that border thinking refers to “the epistemic response of the subaltern to the Eurocentric project of modernity. Instead of rejecting modernity to retreat into a fundamentalist absolutism, border epistemologies subsume/redefine the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity from the cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern, located in the oppressed and exploited side of the colonial difference, towards a decolonial liberation struggle for a world beyond eurocentered modernity” (Grosfoguel, 2008, p. 16). To appreciate the full scope of this approach, it is important to understand that reclaiming modernity in this way inherently challenges the structures that have perpetuated colonial capitalism.

As already discussed in this chapter, colonial capitalism is understood within the CTC as an anthropological, cultural, and economic system that sustains racialized hierarchies through global processes of exploitation and domination. CTC also points out that the persistence of this system is evident since "the postcolonial power system continues to operate, even today, from three perspectives: (a) interpersonal and clientelist negotiations aimed at exchanging favors, (b) alliances of large international corporations with oligarchic elites (political, bureaucratic, military, and economic) to keep state decisions under control, and (c) systematic repression of social movements aimed at valuing participatory democracy and the public good" (Martins, 2022, p. 144).

Seen together, these mechanisms can be read as the anatomy of what Pablo González Casanova captures with his notion of *internal colonialism*. In his words, “internal colonialism is a structure of social relations of domination and exploitation between culturally heterogeneous, distinct groups” (González Casanova, 2018, p. 40). In this way,

the Theory of Internal Colonialism (TIC) becomes central to the development of the CTC, once it helps unveil the ongoing reproduction of colonial dynamics within nation-states themselves even after formal independence.

Another important idea brought within TIC was that "the colonial structure and internal colonialism differ from the class structure because they are not merely a relation of domination and exploitation of workers by the owners of the means of production and their collaborators; rather, they constitute a relation of domination and exploitation of one population […] by another population" (González Casanova, 2018, p. 39). The author underlines that, once formal foreign rule ends, what emerges is – in Casanova's own formulation – "the domination and exploitation of natives by natives" (González Casanova, 2018, p. 109). This concept is widely used in CTC, as it "facilitates an understanding of the historical dynamics between colonial powers and the complexity of interethnic, national, and class conflicts, updating the understanding of the impacts of colonial capitalism on nation-states" (Martins, 2022, p. 81). With this analysis, "González Casanova seeks to show that colonial-type processes of control, domination and exploitation unfold not only internationally but also inside nations themselves" (Gonnet, 2022, p. 78).

Adding a later refinement, the author observes that "internal colonialism was transformed during the 1990s into a more inclusive category: *global colonialism* (González Casanova, 2018, p. 40). Advancing this idea, Casanova argues that "just as the problems of imperialism and globalisation cannot be understood without examining the links between metropolitan and peripheral bourgeoisies, the problems of internal colonialism cannot be understood without seeing its concrete relations with the bourgeoisie, imperialism and transnational or global capitalism" (González Casanova, 2018, p. 473). In light of this, Martins highlights that nowadays "the power system is nourished both by the values and practices of the white colonizing elites and by the consumer practices and utilitarian values of the Western bourgeois classes" (Martins, 2022, p. 145).

By bridging these concepts, CTC and TIC together deepen the critique of contemporary *neoliberal recoloniality*, allowing a comprehensive understanding of power relations, resistance strategies, and possibilities for epistemological renewal and

practical emancipation/reconstitution. The incorporation of both recoloniality and TIC into CTC represents a genuine innovation in postcolonial analysis. Particularly, when highlighting the "recoloniality of power and knowledge directed by neoliberalism", CTC draws attention to the ways in which neoliberalism updates colonial hierarchies rather than transcending them (Martins, 2022, p. 39).

2.2. Neoliberal Recoloniality and Global Warming

The CTC, as discussed above, identifies some limitations in earlier critical theories, most notably their Eurocentric scope and their failure to engage with new colonialities (Martins, 2022, pp. 169-172, 257). More precisely, Martins highlights their insufficiency in addressing the neoliberal phase of capitalism as a process of *recoloniality* – which constitutes the reconfiguration of colonial patterns of domination under new conditions, merging economic logic with cultural and racialized forms of control. As Martins (2022) notes, "this broader understanding is necessary to make the general critique of neoliberalism as a pattern of global power […] that seeks to manipulate national societies to impose a new global model of wealth expropriation closely associated with cultural, individualistic, and utilitarian consumption" (p. 257). In this sense, it aims to "reformat mentalities to expand the logic of unsustainable consumption" (Martins, 2022, p. 109).

The effects of this recolonial shift are particularly visible in the intensified exploitation of natural resources and the ecological destruction witnessed in the Global South. As the CTC points out, "the current crisis reveals [...] the reorganization of colonial capitalism based on the new strategies of the richest countries", which reactivates "the neoextractivist logic of production and export of mineral and agricultural raw materials in a large part of the former areas of colonization, reinforcing the old colonial division between the center and the periphery" (Martins, 2022, p. 266).

This dynamic has resulted in "a strong process of deindustrialization and impoverishment", exacerbating the conditions of dependency and recolonization through environmental degradation (Martins, 2022, p. 266). CTC expands this idea while explaining that these ecological impacts are not incidental but intrinsic to the recolonial logic of neoliberalism, which seeks to maximize profit at the expense of both planetary sustainability and social justice, leading to "intense disputes between the richest countries

over the political and economic control of the areas considered suitable for the implementation of economic extractive models, which contributes to the degradation of human conditions in former colonization regions" (Martins, 2022, p. 266).

These disputes reinforce the colonial dimensions of extractivist practices, which becomes even more evident in its geographical organization, where extraction typically occurs in territories inhabited by Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities. These *sacrifice zones* bear the environmental and social costs of extraction while the benefits flow elsewhere. Neoliberal recoloniality amplifies this dimension, given the "coercion to growth, on the one hand, and the coercion to acceleration, on the other" (Martins, 2022, p. 111), which contributes to the exhaustion of natural resources and environmental degradation in peripheral regions (Rice, 2007). Hence, the relentless pursuit of economic growth, promoted by neoliberal recoloniality, without considering planetary limits has driven the world towards the current climate crisis.

As Martins and other decolonial thinkers have argued, the climate crisis cannot be separated from the colonial history that has shaped our global economic and political systems. The same logic that justified the exploitation of colonized peoples and territories now justifies the exploitation of critical natural resources for ecological and energy transitions. In this sense, CTC views neoliberal recoloniality as a "program of permanent cultural destruction with unpredictable social and environmental consequences, which has acquired great intensity in recent years with the amplification of the dangerous effects of the climate and social crisis" (Martins, 2022, p. 111), now operating through *green coloniality*.

This means that the climate crisis is intrinsically linked to social and political issues, being a symptom of a system that perpetuates the exploitation of people and the planet, by promoting a model of development based on unlimited economic growth, resource extraction, and fossil fuel consumption. Therefore, the connection between neoliberal recoloniality and global warming become increasingly clear when examined within CTC, which exposes the colonial dimensions of the crisis. In this case, the historical emissions that have driven climate change becomes central to the analysis, as it has been disproportionately produced by industrialized nations of the Global North, while the

impacts are felt most severely in the Global South, particularly in communities that have contributed least to the problem (Tausch & Althouse, 2024; Hyldmo et al., 2024).

This uneven distribution of climate responsibilities and impacts reflects what Martins identifies as the *double face of modernity* – the way in which the prosperity and comfort of core countries depend on the exploitation and degradation of peripheral regions. Historically, from 1850-1969 (territorial) and 1970-2015 (consumption-based), the Global North was responsible for 68 % of cumulative emissions, while the Global South accounted for 32 % (Hickel, 2020, p. 401), representing a clear demonstration that the Global North has borne roughly 70 % of historical CO_2 emissions despite comprising far less than half of the world's population.

Bringing it all together, CTC helps in the understanding of how responses to climate change can either challenge or reinforce colonial power relations. However, it is important to recognize that mainstream climate solutions often reproduce colonial patterns by marginalizing the perspectives and practices of those most affected by the crisis. In this context, green transition initiatives, such as the EGD, although presented as solutions to the climate crisis, can, from the perspective of neoliberal recoloniality, perpetuate and even deepen existing inequalities. Without careful consideration, these green transitions – although necessary – risk becoming instruments of recoloniality, unless they are accompanied by a profound revision of the power dynamics and accumulation logics that sustain them.

3. COLONIALITY IN THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5ºC Above Pre-industrial Levels*, the need for urgent climate action has never been clearer. The IPCC emphasizes that every additional half-degree of warming matters, especially since warming of 1.5°C or higher increases the risk associated with long-lasting or irreversible changes (IPCC, 2018). In line with this emergency, the EU has consistently positioned itself at the forefront of climate negotiations since the climate crisis first emerged as a global issue. Reflecting its long-term commitment to climate action, in 2018 the EC published a strategic vision entitled

A Clean Planet for All, which aimed at guiding the EU towards climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2018a).

This document laid the foundation for the EGD, which was officially presented by the EC President Ursula von der Leyen in 2019. "This is Europe's ‘man on the moon' moment", von der Leyen remarked during its launch, underscoring the unprecedented ambition and scale of the initiative, as well as its potential to fundamentally reshape Europe's economy and society for a *sustainable* future (von der Leyen, 2019). However, the path to climate neutrality requires more than ambitious targets, it demands access to CRMs, which are essential for renewable energy technologies, electric vehicles, and energy storage systems (Blengini et al., 2020) – materials like lithium, cobalt, and REEs are vital for producing the batteries and solar panels that will drive the green transition. But this growing dependency creates new challenges, as many of these resources are concentrated in few countries, often outside European borders, leading to potential geopolitical and socio-environmental vulnerabilities.

Notwithstanding the EGD is framed as a progressive and necessary response to the current crisis, it is essential to critically examine how it may reproduce – or even intensify – historical patterns of colonial extraction and unequal development. From a decolonial perspective, the EGD is not merely a technical roadmap toward decarbonization, but also a political project rooted in normative assumptions about what constitutes growth, development, and environmental initiatives. These assumptions, once translated into international agreements, supply chain strategies, and trade diplomacy, can reinforce structural dependencies that reproduce colonial hierarchies.

Next, a detailed exploration of the EGD will be provided, examining its foundational elements and the policies that drive it forward. Special attention will be paid to how the EU’s climate strategy intertwines with its efforts to secure CRMs in an increasingly competitive global environment. This will be essential for analysing the reproduction of extractive and asymmetrical relations within the Global South. By understanding the developments of the EGD and the EU’s evolving CRM strategy, it becomes easier to better appreciate the nature of Europe’s climate diplomacy, as well as how green transitions may risk reinforcing colonial hierarchies under a new ecological guise –

thereby reproducing historical patterns of dependency under the narrative of *green growth*.

3.1. Unfolding the European Green Deal

The EGD is one of the most ambitious initiatives ever undertaken by the EU, marking a critical moment in the bloc's environmental, economic, and social policies. As the EC makes clear, "to deliver the European Green Deal, there is a need to rethink policies for clean energy supply across the economy", influencing how goods are produced and consumed, reshaping large-scale infrastructure and transport, and revamping fiscal instruments as well as social protection schemes (European Commission, 2019). Since it spans so many sectors, its design was strategically conceived as a comprehensive roadmap that goes beyond mere climate policy – it aims to fundamentally reshape the EU's growth strategy and position the continent as a global leader in this *new green era*.

To ensure its execution, on 4th March 2020, the EC proposed the European Climate Law as a way to guarantee that "EU Institutions and the Member States are collectively bound to take the necessary measures at EU and national level to meet the target" (European Commission, 2020b). Moreover, the pact promotes immediate action, as "the law also sets the intermediate target of reducing net GHG emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels" (European Commission, n.d.-b). Following this, in April 2021, the European Parliament and its Member States reached a political agreement on the European Climate Law – formally adopted on 30th June 2021.

A few weeks after the pledge of making Europe the first climate-neutral continent officially became a binding commitment, the EC set out the *Fit for 55 Package*, which comprises a series of legislative proposals "to revise and update existing EU law to make sure the EU policies are in line with EU climate goals" (European Union, 2022). Among its most significant proposals I would like to highlight two elements in particular, which are (a) the revision of the *EU Emissions Trading System* (EU ETS) – "one of the world's largest carbon markets and the EU's key tool for reducing GHG emissions" (European Union, 2022); and (b) the introduction of a *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism* (CBAM), an instrument "to ensure that the emissions reduction efforts of the EU are not offset by increasing emissions outside its borders through the relocation of production to

non-EU countries or through increased imports of carbon-intensive products" (Direction Générale du Trésor, 2025).

It is important to emphasize that the "EU ETS has been in operation since 2005 and was the first international emissions trading scheme […], the largest one until the Chinese ETS became operational in mid-2021" (Galdi & Ferrari, 2022, p. 61). Essentially the operation is quite simple, each year, businesses within the system must purchase allowances based on their GHG emissions. On top of that, a cap is set annually on the total number of allowances available, and it is progressively reduced over time, pressing companies to keep lowering their emissions. However, sectors at risk of carbon leakage, where production may shift to regions with less stringent climate policies, receive free allowances to maintain their competitiveness (European Union, 2022).

Yet the practical consequences of those free allowances reach well beyond Europe's borders and shape who wins or loses in global markets, reinforcing colonial hierarchies: as the risk of relocation is compensated up-front, many European companies turned the ETS into a revenue stream. This can be exemplified by the contradictory fact that "energy-intensive industries in Europe have made up to 50 billion euros in windfall profits between 2008 and 2019" (Ruggiero, 2021, p. 11) from the EU ETS, being "over-subsidised for their pollution" under the argument that "they are deemed to be at risk of carbon leakage" (Carbon Market Watch, 2016). The net effect is an uneven competitive landscape in which third-country producers must meet the same product prices without any comparable subsidy.

Over time, the EGD introduced several new dimensions that have broadened and deepened the EU's approach to climate action, which naturally extended its environmental efforts beyond the previously established policies. With the EU ETS reform, more ambitious emission reduction targets have been set, and control has become stricter, with the extension of the ETS to new sectors and through a more accelerated reduction of allowances available on the market (European Union, 2022). Nevertheless, instead of dismantling subsidy-driven privilege, the EGD leaves this architecture virtually untouched, given that "free allowances continue to represent more than 40% of the total number of available allowances" (LIFE ETX, 2024, p. 27) while, for the heaviest polluters "over 95% of their actual emissions will be covered with free allocation" a share that will

only begin to decline in 2026 and will not be fully phased out until 2034 (LIFE ETX, 2024, note 13 & p. 30). Furthermore, the 2023 revision of the ETS Directive introduced a new emissions trading system focusing specifically on fuel suppliers, the ETS2 (European Commission, 2024d), which is already "raising concerns among stakeholders" due to its "strong social implications" (Hernández, 2025, p. 2).

The revised EU ETS pretends to contribute to a gradual phasing out of free allowances for certain sectors while preventing carbon leakage, a challenge that has become more demanding as the EU tightens its climate regulations. This concern led to the introduction of the CBAM, which "is the EU's tool to put a fair price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon intensive goods that are entering the EU, and to encourage cleaner industrial production in non-EU countries." (European Commission, 2024e). By applying a carbon price on imports of high-emission goods, the EU argues that its intent is to level the playing field between domestic producers subject to stringent emissions regulations and foreign competitors from regions with less ambitious climate policies (Perdana and Vielle, 2022). However, the CBAM does little to resolve the structural privilege that the revised ETS already confers on European industry.

In this sense, the success of the CBAM and the revised EU ETS will depend in large part on how the EU responds to internal and external pressures – especially legal, diplomatic, and economic objections from major trading partners (Hufbauer et al., 2022, pp. 1-3, 9-11), making climate diplomacy an essential facet of the EGD's broader implementation strategy. These tensions have been increasingly visible within the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Council for Trade in Goods, as evidenced by a growing volume of coordinated critiques expressed during its formal sessions.

At the heart of these objections is the widespread concern that the CBAM may not be consistent with multilateral trade rules. The Russian Federation, for instance, labelled it a "land-mark tool to fight imports" and argued that it violates key WTO provisions including Articles I, II, III and XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1994 (WTO, 2024a, p. 11). Many of the critiques remarked that these unilateral actions produce unjustifiable trade barriers, and among them the discrimination between domestic and international producers has acquired special relevance (WTO, 2024a, pp. 11-17; WTO, 2024b, pp. 45-50; WTO, 2024c, pp. 47-52).

Accordingly, multiple Member States focused their critiques on the climate justice dimension of CBAM, denouncing the mechanism for ignoring Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) – which states that "developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command" (United Nations, 1992, Principle 7). As such, Brazil exposed that the current policy framework "shifts the costs faced by developed nations in meeting their Nationally Determined Contributions onto developing countries", and argued that "this mechanism fails to reflect the reality of […] climate contributions" (WTO, 2024c, p. 47).

In line with this critique, the delegate of Paraguay also concluded that "the European Union's intention has nothing to do with the environmental goal it claims to pursue, but rather aims at protectionism at the expense of the development of third countries" (WTO, 2024a, p. 12). Given this scenario, several members demanded greater transparency and recognition of third-country efforts, urging for acceptance of non-EU verifiers, and arguing that carbon prices paid in third countries and equivalent mitigation actions should be accounted for in the EU's methodology (WTO, 2024a, pp. 11-17; WTO, 2024b, pp. 45-50; WTO, 2024c, pp. 47-52).

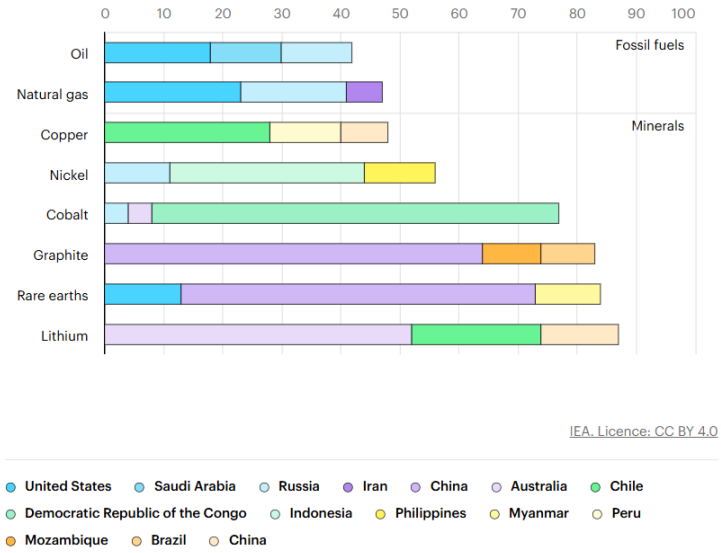
The EU has attempted to address some of these concerns by emphasizing that CBAM remains in a transitional phase until the end of 2025 and that further technical workshops and public consultations are planned (WTO, 2024b, p. 50). Nevertheless, this phased approach has done little to dispel what Paraguay termed the "dual-natured" character of CBAM – that is, its simultaneous environmental and trade-policy objectives without adequate support for developing countries (WTO, 2024b, p. 46). This critique reinforces CTCs idea of the double face of modernity, which presents itself as a universal project of progress and rationality while simultaneously entrenching global hierarchies of power and knowledge, building development at the expenses of peripheral regions.

From this point of view, CBAM exemplifies how regulatory tools grounded in environmental discourse can serve to reinforce Eurocentric governance over global trade flows, while disregarding the structural inequalities that shape emissions profiles and economic capacities in the Global South. By setting the EU's carbon standards as a global

benchmark – without fully addressing historical responsibility, differentiated capabilities, or mechanisms of redistribution – CBAM perpetuates a logic of conditional integration into the world market under terms defined by the Global North. In this way, the mechanism can be seen not merely as a climate action instrument, but as a recolonial device that reconfigures access to European markets through ecological conditionalities, thereby reaffirming the asymmetrical geopolitical architecture that CTC seeks to unmask.

On top of that, "the transition to the net-zero age, enabled by low-carbon technologies, is particularly materials-intensive. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), achieving global net-zero emissions by 2050 would drive a remarkable surge in demand for critical materials" (Zilli et al., 2022, p. 15). For this reason, it can be said that the extractivist dimensions of the EGD also play a paramount role in its implementation, especially in relation to the global competition for CRMs essential for green technologies, such as lithium, cobalt, and REEs. The EC projects "substantial increases in CRMs to achieve the EU's 2050 climate neutrality goal, envisioning up to 60 times more lithium and 15 times more cobalt compared with current levels. For REEs, essential in permanent magnets, a 10-fold increase in demand is forecast by 2050" (Zilli et al., 2022, p. 15), which foreshadows an unprecedented surge of extractive pressure on the so-called Lithium Triangle (Argentina, Bolivia and Chile), the cobalt belt of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and emerging rare-earth hubs in Myanmar and Greenland (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of top producing countries in extraction of selected minerals and fossil fuels, 2019



Source: IEA (2021), Licence: CC BY 4.0

While the EGD marks a turning point in the EU's climate governance, its framing as a "new growth strategy" signals continuity with a neoliberalist logic rooted in modern/colonial epistemologies. The narrative of green modernization, heavily reliant on technological innovation and competitiveness, reinforces the idea that environmental salvation can emerge without disrupting the fundamental structures of global capitalism. The promise of *green growth*, as promoted by the EGD, remains grounded in extractivist imperatives that demand an unprecedented access to energy, land, and materials.

As the EGD unfolds, it becomes clear that achieving the ambitious goals set for climate neutrality by 2050 requires not only policy reform and technological innovation but also securing the resources for this transformation. "OECD forecasts that global materials demand will more than double from 79 billion tonnes today to 167 billion tonnes in 2060. Global competition for resources will become fierce in the coming decade. Dependence of critical raw materials may soon replace today's dependence on oil" (Blengini et al., 2020, p. 1). The increasing concern has sparked a global race, as countries seek to position themselves at the forefront of the green economy and secure access to essential materials in a world where resources are limited but the demand for growth seems unlimited.

In this context, the role of CRMs becomes central not only to the material basis of green technologies, but also to the reproduction of global coloniality under an ecological guise. The next section will analyse how the CRM agenda is embedded within the EGD and how it shapes Europe's external environmental policy – with consequences that echo and adapt historical forms of extractive domination under the language of sustainability.

3.2. The Increasing Role of Critical Raw Materials

To properly understand the European strategy for securing access to CRMs, it is important to begin by clarifying how the EU identifies them. For that, it is worth noting that since the introduction of the first CRM list in 2011, which detected 14 CRMs, the EU has used an approach grounded in both economic importance and supply risk assessment (European Commission, 2017). Evidence of this can be found thanks to what has been stipulated in the European Commission's Communication on Raw Materials (2011), indicating that the list must be updated at least every three years to reflect changes

in global supply and demand, technological advances and the evolution of economic interests – which has been done ever since. In other words, "the publication of the CRM list aims at setting priorities in policy making focusing efforts where the major risks are foreseen, as well as raising awareness on the importance of raw materials" (Mancini et al., 2016, p. 728).

In terms of methodology, in July 2017 the EC introduced a revised approach for establishing the EU's list of CRMs. Similar to previous assessments the selection process is underpinned by two central criteria: economic importance and supply risk, but this time it introduces a series of methodological refinements for calculating both metrics (European Commission, 2017). These metrics are designed to quantify how crucial a raw material is to the European economy and the vulnerability of the supply chains that provide these materials. The combination of these factors results in a *criticality score*, which determines whether a material should be included on the CRM list or not (European Commission, 2017). In the same year, a third list of 27 CRMs was published, following the new methodology and highlighting the growing dependency of EU markets on non-EU suppliers.

As a consequence of the EGD announcement and the introduction of a new industrial strategy, in September 2020 the EC presented an *Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials* and an upgraded list of 30 CRMs – to reflect the changed economic importance and supply demands driven by its new ecological ambitions (Girtan et al., 2021). Moreover, "the COVID-19 epidemic has fuelled a rethinking of supply chain organization, particularly in terms of material sourcing" (Giese, 2022, p. 3), the Action Plan outlined measures to lessen Europe's reliance on non-European countries by diversifying its supply from both primary and secondary sources (European Commission, 2020a).

The 2020 updated list included 30 CRMs, with lithium – vital for the transition to e-mobility – being added for the first time, pointing out the growing centrality of green solutions into the EU's objectives (European Commission, 2020c). In September 2020, the EC also released a foresight report that looks ahead at the material demands of emerging technologies like clean energy, electric vehicles, and digital technologies. Drawing from the EU's 2050 climate-neutrality goals and other projections, the report estimates the resources needed for these industries and provides insights into potential

supply chain risks and bottlenecks through 2030 and 2050 (European Commission, 2024c).

Built upon a second foresight study, the most recent update in 2023 brought the fifth list to a total of 34 CRMs, matching the evolving geopolitical and economic priorities of the EU. This expansion is not only a reflection of Europe's awareness of global resource competition but also a strategic move to safeguard its long-term industrial and technological ambitions. In this context, "with the global shift towards renewable energy and the digitalisation of our economies and societies, demand for some of these CRMs is forecasted to rapidly increase in the coming decades. Global demand for the lithium used to manufacture batteries for mobility and energy storage is expected to increase by up to 89-fold by 2050" (European Commission, 2023b). Following these trends, the fifth CRM list, like its predecessors, serves as a tool to guide European policy in this increasingly competitive scenario, aiming to ensure the security of supply for materials deemed essential to Europe's green and digital transitions.

Besides contributing to the development of the fifth list, the *Study on the Critical Raw Materials for the EU 2023* also set the basis for the establishment of the Critical Raw Material Act. Recognizing that Europe is highly vulnerable to supply disruptions and that without joint and timely action its climate and digital objectives are at risk. The act emphasizes the increased importance of strengthening the different stages of the value chain, diversify the EU's imports of CRMs, improve capacity to monitor and mitigate current and future risks of disruptions to the supply chain, and improving their circularity and sustainability (European Commission, 2024c).

As a way to make sure that these efforts are achievable, it also promotes that "the list of critical raw materials should include all strategic raw materials as well as any other raw materials of high importance for the overall Union economy and for which there is a high risk of supply disruption likely to distort competition and fragment the internal market" (European Union, 2024b). This way, the EC published a list of strategic materials, identifying those that are not only critical but also vital for the resilience of key European industries, including defence, aerospace, and renewable energy.

In this case, among all the 34 CRMs published by the EC, and even among the specific CRMs identified as essential to the EGD, "lithium-ion is currently the main chemistry of

choice for electro-mobility and will dominate the market in the coming years" (European Commission, 2018b). Lithium-ion batteries, due to their outstanding energy and power density, long life cycle, and lightweight properties, have become the preferred energy storage solution for EVs and stationary storage for renewable energies (SCRREEN2, 2023). According to the 2023 *Critical Minerals Market Review* from IEA, the EV fleets are expanding rapidly, and the lithium-ion batteries growing demand made the lithium market and production levels to increase, "following a doubling of demand in 2021 compared with 2017, lithium consumption witnessed an additional 30% growth in 2022. Production levels are also increasing at a significant pace, with an annual growth rate ranging between 25% and 35%" (IEA, 2023, p. 52).

Therefore, the Lithium Triangle is of paramount strategic importance on the global stage due to its concentration of more than half of the world's lithium reserves. However, the intensification of lithium extraction to meet European and global demand can perpetuate the economic dependency of these countries on commodity exports, without significant development of local value chains or equitable distribution of profits. The pressure for ever-increasing volumes of lithium can lead to the relaxation of environmental and social regulations, resulting in negative impacts on ecosystems and local communities, such as water scarcity, contamination, and the loss of ancestral lands.

Next, the dissertation will cover the intricate relationship between the EGD, the growing demand for lithium, and its impacts on the Lithium Triangle, from the CTC's perspective.

4. GREEN COLONIALITY IN THE LITHIUM TRIANGLE

As already discussed during this dissertation, the EGD's promise of climate neutrality depends on "massive amounts of raw materials" that are extracted mainly in the Global South, and the resulting social-ecological harms are "borne by the most materially and politically marginalised people of the world" (Hyldmo et al., 2024, p. 3). Even so, when analysing EU policy papers and official discourses, the evident impacts on third countries are "effectively silenced", allowing Brussels to brand the deal as a global *just transition* (Hyldmo et al., 2024, p. 7). Its rhetoric of an economic growth that is decoupled from resource use does not seem to represent reality, since the material basis of Europe's green

transformation remains fundamentally dependent on expanding rather than reducing extractive practices (Parrique et al., 2019).

This extractive dependency is reinforced through institutional mechanisms such as the still-pending EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, which formalizes a structurally asymmetrical trade relationship that positions MERCOSUR as a provider of raw materials, while preserving the EU's technological and industrial dominance. Under CTC, it is clear that "the intended EU–Mercosur treaty is an extension of former colonial policies" where "processed, technology-based goods from the EU including cars, car parts and chemicals" are exchanged for unprocessed minerals and "primary commodities such as soy, bioethanol and beef" (Bieler, 2023). Even though, "the EU promotes these FTAs and related instruments as win–win partnerships", critical assessments reveal that "the way strategic partnerships and projects are foreseen bears the risk of exacerbating human rights and Indigenous rights violations, increasing environmental risks, undermining development in third countries, and circumventing democratic participation" (Müller et al., 2024, pp. 6, 16).

As an example of this asymmetry, the *Annex to the Trade and Sustainable Development Chapter* of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement envisions value chains with "many complementarities regarding the inputs, expertise and technologies required to develop solutions in areas such as sustainable mobility", with MERCOSUR providing the "natural resources" and the EU offering "technological development" and "state-of-the-art" industrial capacity (EU–MERCOSUR, 2024, pp. 9-10). These value chains are structured around sectors such as "responsible mining", "lithium-ion batteries" and "electric automobile industrial production" (EU–MERCOSUR, 2024, p. 10), aiming to support the EU's energy transition. While presented as mutually beneficial, this approach "reinforces this neo-colonial relationship" concentrating "high-value industrial products" in the EU and relegating MERCOSUR to the extraction of "agricultural and mineral resources" (Svampa & Changoe, 2024, p. 16).

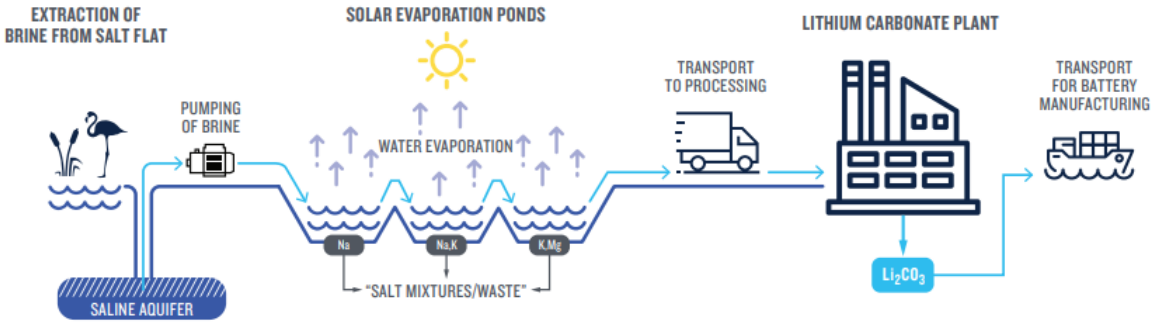
Another important agreement to advance Lithium extraction in the region is the EU-Chile AFA. While the AFA promotes cooperation on climate and sustainability, several of its provisions constrain Chile's regulatory sovereignty over its own natural resources. In doing so, it effectively limits the country's ability to shape industrial policy in

alignment with national/regional development goals, for example, Chile will not be able to maintain a dual pricing mechanism that offers lower prices to local producers, nor will it be able to impose export restrictions (Fern, 2023, p. 10). These policy tools – vital for stimulating domestic and regional industrialization – are effectively dismantled under the guise of market liberalization, reinforcing a pattern of extractivist dependency rather than enabling structural transformation.

This extractivist push has severe implications for both ecological integrity and social justice in the Lithium Triangle, contributing to the idea that "certain landscapes, bodies and whole populations in the Global South are rendered disposable" in service of Europe's green transition, illustrating how "geographies destined for accumulation prey on other geographies, destined to be plundered" (Lang et al., 2024, p. 5). This imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021) reinforces the CMP that continues to shape environmental governance and development trajectories in the region.

Under these circumstances, the intense demand for lithium is generating socio-environmental damages in the Global South, as "the competition for water in lithium mining areas is so high that it could threaten the livelihoods of nearby communities, including indigenous communities who are already marginalized" (Grossman et al., 2023, p. 10). These impacts are particularly severe in arid regions such as the Puna de Atacama, where lithium is extracted through water-intensive evaporation methods (see Figure 4). This process contributes not only to water depletion but also to the drying of lagoons and degradation of fragile ecosystems, which are essential for sustaining biodiversity and Indigenous livelihoods (Liu & Agusdinata, 2020, p. 9; Blair et al., 2022, p. 13).

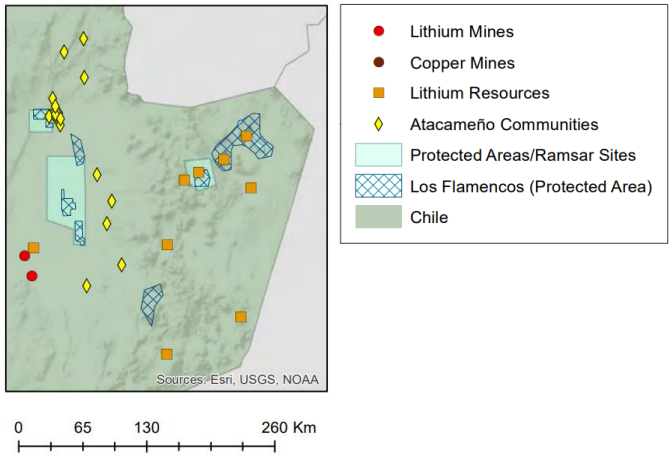
Figure 4: ***The Evaporation Pond Method of Obtaining Lithium from Brine***
(The most common way lithium is sourced in the Puna de Atacama)



Source: Figure 2 in *Exhausted: How We Can Stop Lithium Mining from Depleting Water Resources, Draining Wetlands, and Harming Communities in South America* (p. 10), Adapted by authors from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2018.05.223

Therefore, The Lithium Triangle stands as a mirror to the contradictions of the EGD, as it risks transforming peripheral territories into "green sacrifice zones," wherein "the logic of sacrificing a certain space or ecology" manifests to supply the Global North's low-carbon transitions (Zografos & Robbins, 2020, p. 544). This framing exposes how the European project of decarbonization, while rhetorically committed to sustainability, keeps disregarding the ecological costs of its actions. This becomes clear in the Lithium Triangle case, since numerous salt flats hold national protected status, and yet many of these ecologically significant areas are adjacent to lithium mining operations (See Figure 5), "contributing to conditions of ecological exhaustion for these high-altitude environments" (Blair et al., 2022, pp. 16-19).

Figure 5: ***Mining Activities overlap with salt flats, protected wetlands, and communities***



Source: [Adapted] Map 6 in *Exhausted: How We Can Stop Lithium Mining from Depleting Water Resources, Draining Wetlands, and Harming Communities in South America* (p. 21), By Brenda J. Rojas

The continuation and expansion of lithium extraction, especially in light of untapped reserves located near or within Indigenous territories, threatens the water security and cultural sovereignty of affected communities, who have historically been marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes – in violation of ILO Convention 169 and other instruments of international law (ILO, 1989; UNDESA, 2009). This exclusion can be exemplified by the negotiations of the EU-MERCOSUR trade agreement, as it demonstrates a profound disregard for Indigenous rights and participatory justice, revealing yet another layer of coloniality in its formation.

"Despite the historical colonial, social, economic and racial discrimination of Indigenous peoples […] and the increased pressure the EU-Mercosur trade deal could put on Indigenous communities, their voices have been excluded from the negotiations and

creation of the deal" (Svampa & Changoe, 2024, p. 13). This deliberate exclusion underscores a structural erasure, wherein no consultations with local or Indigenous communities were conducted. Most alarmingly, when mentioned, the core protective principle enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – "the right to free, prior and informed consent" – was weakened and reduced to "prior and informed consent" thus stripping it of its empowering dimension of autonomy and free will (Svampa & Changoe, 2024, p. 13).

This semantic weakening reflects not only a legal downgrade but also a political choice that perpetuates extractive logics and Indigenous dispossession under the guise of international cooperation. Thus, what is labelled as a just transition conceals an enduring structure of extractivist coloniality, where green aspirations in the core are subsidized by dispossession and degradation in the periphery. It also demonstrates how the TIC can be applied to this situation, once Indigenous territories are treated as green sacrifice zones for national and international gain, while Indigenous ontologies and territorialities are overwritten by technocratic and extractivist paradigms that claim neutrality and progress.

The intensification of mining in ecologically and politically vulnerable regions like the Lithium Triangle (Jerez et al., 2021; Vera et al., 2023) directly contradicts any meaningful notion of decoupling resource use or achieving climate justice. In this context, the EGD's narrative of a *just and universal green future* becomes untenable – not because justice is conceptually incompatible with ecological transition, but because the structural inequalities embedded in current global supply chains, trade regimes, and epistemological hierarchies render such a *just and universal* transition impossible under the present model (Svampa, 2021, pp. 4-6; Riofrancos, 2022).

Highlighting this contradiction, the CTC unveils how these inequalities are not incidental but rooted in a CMP that continues to organize global relations through epistemic and aesthesic domination. Under this framework, the EGD does not merely fail to address historical injustices – it actively reproduces them by constituting Eurocentric values of progress and sustainability, while destituting the pluriversal knowledges and territorial rights of Indigenous and marginalized communities.

At the epistemological core of the EGD lies a techno-scientific and market-based rationality that defines climate solutions in terms of innovation, market mechanisms, and

large-scale industrial transformation. Lithium, within this framework, is not just a metal – it becomes a precondition for *progress* and *green growth*. The framing of lithium as critical or strategic turns its extraction a necessity, displacing any ethical, spiritual, or territorial considerations that might contest this logic. In this sense, it can be argued that "the energy transition thus increases the pressure on natural resources in Latin America and reproduces the continent's position as the world's raw material supplier" (Dorne, 2022, p. 137). Reinforcing a historical colonial legacy of exploitation in the name of European development. Within this frame, the Lithium Triangle is imagined not as a territory with its own complex socioecological life-worlds, but as "an area of impoverished emptiness, in need of being rendered productive through extraction" (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022, p. 12).

However, for Indigenous communities such as the Lickanantay (Atacameños), Kolla, Aymara, and Quechua, the salares (salt flats) of the Andes are "an indigenous ancestral territory" and sites of spiritual and ecological connection, not merely reservoirs of raw materials (Jerez et al., 2021, p. 2). In this case, the epistemic silencing of ancestral "Andean practices, traditional water knowledge, and hydro-cosmologies about Mother Earth" (Jerez et al., 2021, p. 3) is central to "the coloniality of nature that sees the salt flat only as a mining commodity" (Jerez et al., 2021, p. 9). This epistemic imposition reproduces colonial hierarchies of power and knowledge, where Europe does not consult or co-produce its ecological strategies with the South – it prescribes, exports, and governs them.

Yet this epistemic imposition does not unfold uniformly across the region, as it is filtered and reshaped by the political, legal, and institutional contexts of the countries involved. In the Lithium Triangle, this dynamic becomes particularly evident with the distinct governance strategies of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile – each one of them responding differently to external pressures and internal demands (Johnson et al., 2024). As a result, the environmental impacts, the degree of Indigenous participation, and the forms of resistance vary significantly from one context to another.

In Chile, mining operations are most predominantly "in the Salar de Atacama and has its origins in 1962 when this mineral was discovered in the salt flat" (Jerez et al., 2021, p. 5). The expansion of lithium extraction in the country was shaped not only by

geography but by legal legacies from the Pinochet dictatorship, which institutionalized a neoliberal model that continues to structure resource governance prioritizing market efficiency and private property over environmental and social protections (Barandiarán, 2018). As an example, Babidge (2015) argues that "the Codigo de Agua 1981 (Water Code) is a key aspect of this model, establishing mechanisms that deregulated use and extraction and privatising water wherever it is found. Under the code, water is 'freely bought, sold, mortgaged and transferred' (Bauer, 1997, p. 641)" (p. 8). Consequently, "mining companies promptly acquired water rights for potential future projects in northern Chile, in some cases registering water being used by indigenous groups" (Budds, 2013, p. 313).

This framework enabled transnational corporations to operate with minimal state oversight and secured long-term concessions over both minerals and water resources, particularly in Indigenous territories (Bastida et al., 2005; Budds, 2013), which is sustained by "the close relationship between companies and state elites in Chile" (Soto & Newell, 2022, p. 12). In this sense, Chilean society has become a clear example of the TIC in practice, as "the expulsion of peasant and indigenous populations by ruling classes and the state was key to the commodification and privatization of land and the exploitation of the subaltern class in favour of elites" (Soto & Newell, 2022, p. 6).

Following a similar logic, under the Milei administration, Argentina has adopted a radically deregulatory model. "The presidential decree repealed the Land Law (26.737) […] which contained restrictions aimed at preventing land grabbing by foreign investment projects" (FIDH, 2024, p. 8), which is particularly worrying considering that "Argentina's lithium sector is wide open to private investment" and, in contrast to its neighbours, "it is the only one of the three countries without a lithium-specific regulatory framework" (Dorn & Dietz, 2024, p. 50). These measures are worsening a scenario that was already unfavourable, considering that "in May 2022, there were more than 40 lithium brine projects in Argentina, spread across the Puna provinces of Jujuy, Catamarca and Salta" (FIDH, 2024, p. 13), a region with high rates of Indigenous populations.

Given this worrying scenario, Indigenous and rural communities have mobilized "in defence of their rights to land and water" and against extractive incursions in ancestral

territories (FIDH, 2024, p. 30) – being later “repressed and criminalised for their participation in the demonstrations” (FIDH, 2024, p. 13). In this context, the TIC and CTC reveal how the systematic repression of social movements and the state's complicity with transnational capital perpetuates colonial hierarchies, where Indigenous territories are not recognized as political spaces of life and knowledge but as mere commodities in the global green transition.

In contrast to Chile's privatized model and Argentina’s aggressive deregulation, Bolivia has pursued a notably different path, much motivated by “the belief that their South American economy has suffered due to predatory foreign companies exporting raw materials without contributing to innovation or human capital investment” (Chaudary, 2025, p. 6). However, despite being home to the largest salar in the world, Bolivia has so far struggled to convert this advantage into meaningful productive capacity since “the brine contains a lot of magnesium salts, which, together with the long rainy season and flooding of salt lakes, makes lithium mining difficult” (Janubová, 202, p. 118), thereby increasing production costs and making it increasingly harder to compete.

In light of these challenges, there has been a significant shift toward welcoming foreign investment and global partnerships, recognizing the necessity of external capital and technological expertise to overcome production inefficiencies and economic stagnation. This shift, although pragmatic, echoes a return to patterns of dependency and raises concerns of perpetuating historical inequalities and ecological pressures on vulnerable local communities, thus reintroducing dynamics of neo-extractivism that its state-led policies initially sought to overcome (Al Bouchi & Caraway, 2024; Carpanese et al., 2024).

Despite their differences, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia all reflect how the green growth reinforces extractivist dependencies shaped by internal colonialism. Whether through privatization, deregulation, or conditional partnerships, each case aligns local resources with external demands, often at the expense of Indigenous rights and ecological integrity. These dynamics underscore the imperative to destitute the colonial logic of global climate governance and reconstitute them around principles of justice, enabling an ecological transition rooted in equity and epistemic diversity.

5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed at investigating how the EGD, although framed as a strategy to mitigate climate change and promote sustainability, actually reproduces colonial patterns of extraction and dependency in the Lithium Triangle. By applying the Critical Theory of Coloniality as a conceptual and analytical tool, the study concludes that beyond the rhetoric of a just green transition, the EGD reinforces historical colonial hierarchies – not only because it demands huge volumes of CRMs, such as lithium, but also because of the epistemic and geopolitical frameworks that define the terms of sustainability and development itself.

The analysis reveals that the EU's ambition to become climate-neutral by 2050 depends heavily on resources located outside its borders, especially in Latin America. While such policies claim to decouple economic growth from resource use, they remain rooted in an extractivist logic based on modern/colonial rationalities. In this sense, trade agreements such as the almost concluded EU-Mercosur Agreement and the EU-Chile AFA effectively institutionalize asymmetrical relationships, since it places Latin American countries to the role of raw material suppliers, while limiting their policy space for sovereign development.

Although this dissertation has focused on the EGD, it is important to recognize that the EU is not the only actor shaping extractive dynamics in the Lithium Triangle. Other global powers – including China, the US, and Russia – are similarly intensifying their position to guarantee access to Latin America's lithium reserves. Given this competitive scenario, the region has become a geopolitical hotspot, where different actors replicate forms of environmental and economic recolonization. This global and rising demand for lithium risks transforming these territories into green sacrifice zones – spaces where ecological destruction and social dispossession are justified under the rhetoric of energy transition and climate action.

For Indigenous communities, the stakes are especially high. These communities face not only the material threats of resource depletion, water scarcity, and territorial displacement, but also the epistemic violence of being excluded from the narratives and decisions that shape their futures. It is not enough to invoke the principle of free, prior, and informed consent if such consent is reduced to a procedural formality or

instrumentalized to legitimize predetermined outcomes. A truly decolonial approach must go further – not only respecting Indigenous autonomy but also learning from Indigenous ontologies and practices of living in harmony with nature. These interactions could offer crucial alternatives to the extractivist logic of modernity and present powerful insights for building alternative solutions.

Under the CTC point of view, if global ecological transition efforts continue to prioritize growth, competitiveness, and technological substitution without fundamentally questioning the logic of unlimited accumulation, they will merely reproduce the same conditions that produced the crisis to begin with. The problem is not only how we extract but why we extract, for whom, and to what end. As the CTC suggests, the climate crisis is not simply a technical or economic challenge, but a deeply political and civilizational issue that demands a radical shift of attitude in how we see ourselves in relation to nature and the natural resources of our planet. Instead of treating them as limitless commodities for exploitation, we must recognize them as shared, finite elements of a living system on which all life depends.

In this context, what is urgently needed is a collective deceleration, a fundamental rethinking of our societal priorities that moves away from extractivism and the obsession with endless growth. In this sense, alternative paradigms such as degrowth and Buen Vivir could offer meaningful opportunities, by learning from alternative ways of living that value reciprocity, care, and harmony with nature. Without shifting our dominant paradigms, no technological solution or policy package will be enough to truly address the climate crisis. To successively go beyond the narrative, we must abandon the idea that we can green capitalism without dismantling its colonial foundations. Only by shifting away from an extractivist and anthropocentric paradigm – and embracing plural ways of knowing and being – can we begin to build futures that are not only environmentally sustainable, but also socially and epistemically just.

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