


Theoretical perspectives on the socio-environmental conflict over oil exploration

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the socio-environmental conflicts related to oil exploration from various theoretical perspectives. Post-materialism, political ecology, ecological economics, environmental justice, and decolonial theories are examined. Each approach brings a unique insight: post-materialism explains environmental concern in developed societies, while political ecology focuses on the underlying power relations. Ecological economics emphasizes biophysical limits and criticizes unlimited economic growth. Environmental justice highlights inequity in the distribution of environmental risks and benefits. Decolonial theories address how colonial legacies influence the exploitation of resources and the marginalization of communities. The paper illustrates these concepts with case studies from Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and other countries, demonstrating how local communities resist extractive projects that threaten their territories and ways of life. It is concluded that socio-environmental conflicts are complex, rooted in historical dynamics and structural inequalities, requiring a comprehensive approach for their understanding and resolution.

Keywords: Socio-environmental conflicts, Extractivism, Environmental justice, Political ecology, Decoloniality.

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INTRODUCTION

At a global level, the exploitation of natural resources has given rise to a series of socio-environmental conflicts that affect not only the environment, but also the social, cultural and economic structures of the communities that inhabit the areas where these activities are carried out. These conflicts are especially frequent in contexts of hydrocarbon extraction, such as oil exploration and exploitation, which involves the intervention of large multinational corporations and states, confronting local communities, indigenous peoples and environmental movements.

In Latin America, Africa, Asia, and other regions rich in natural resources, oil exploitation has generated growing tension between actors seeking to maximize economic benefits and those fighting for the protection of their territories and livelihoods (Rojas-Bahamón, et. al, 2021). The advance of oil projects in areas such as the Amazon, the Arctic, the Niger Delta or the indigenous territories of North America has led to the mobilization of affected communities, who see their lands, culture and natural environment threatened.

In many cases, these conflicts are not only reduced to a struggle for natural resources, but are intertwined with deep economic, social and political inequalities, exacerbated by historical and contemporary power relations between the actors involved. Local communities, often marginalized, are forced to defend their territory against the advance of extractive projects that promise economic development, but in practice generate negative environmental and social impacts, aggravating conditions of poverty and exclusion.

Oil exploration, in particular, has been a key factor in the increase in these conflicts, due to its global scale and significant impact on ecosystems and local populations. From drilling wells to building infrastructure for transporting oil, each stage of the extractive process involves landscape transformation and exposure to environmental risks such as water and soil pollution, deforestation, and habitat destruction. These impacts not only affect biodiversity, but also disrupt the daily lives of communities that depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.

In the Colombian context, socio-environmental conflicts related to oil exploration have been recurrent in recent decades. A key example is the conflict in Valparaíso, Caquetá, in 2015, where local communities opposed the Emerald Energy project, concerned about the environmental impacts and the lack of adequate consultation on the use of their territory. This case reflects a common pattern in the Amazon region and in other parts of the world, where communities seek to defend their rights in the face of pressure from the state and extractive corporations.

At the international level, cases such as the resistance of indigenous communities in the Yasuni National Park in Ecuador, the struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux in the United States against the Dakota Access pipeline, and the conflict in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, show that conflicts over oil exploration and exploitation are not limited to one region or country. These conflicts have



common characteristics that include the struggle for control of resources, the preservation of territorial rights and the defense of the environment against the threat of extractive projects.

This chapter aims to analyze the main theoretical perspectives that address socio-environmental conflicts related to oil exploration. Approaches such as post-materialism, political ecology, and ecological economics will be examined, which allow us to understand how these conflicts are structured, as well as more recent approaches such as environmental justice, decolonial theories, and Southern ecologies, which broaden the analysis by incorporating considerations of historical inequalities and the struggle for social justice. Through global examples, it will be shown how these theoretical perspectives help to better understand the complexity of socio-environmental conflicts in a context of growing demand for energy resources worldwide.

POST-MATERIALISM

Post-materialism is a theory of cultural change developed by Ronald Inglehart (1991) that argues that as societies advance economically and manage to meet their basic material needs, such as food, shelter, and economic security, people's priorities begin to shift toward post-materialistic values. These values include self-expression, political participation, personal freedom, and, most relevant to socio-environmental conflicts, concern for the environment and quality of life.

From this perspective, in developed countries, once economic stability and physical security are guaranteed, individuals and societies become more likely to focus on issues not directly related to survival, such as the protection of ecosystems and environmental well-being. According to Inglehart, this explains the emergence and expansion of environmental movements in industrialized countries, where demands for environmental conservation and the fight against ecological degradation reflect a change in social priorities.

APPLICATION OF POST-MATERIALISM TO SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Post-materialism is useful for understanding socio-environmental conflicts in developed country contexts, where environmental movements and communities opposing the exploitation of natural resources are often driven by concerns for environmental sustainability and quality of life, rather than immediate economic needs. This is evident in several conflicts where resistance to extractive projects is led by citizen movements concerned about long-term environmental impacts, such as air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

However, the theory of post-materialism has limitations when applied to developing countries, where socio-environmental conflicts are more complex and are not based solely on concern for the environment from a quality-of-life perspective. In these contexts, the problems of social justice, inequality and access to natural resources play a much more central role, which calls



into question the applicability of post-materialism as the only explanation for socio-environmental conflicts.

COLOMBIAN CASE: VALPARAÍSO (2015)

The conflict over oil exploration in Valparaíso, Caquetá, in 2015, is a key example of how post-materialism is not enough to explain socio-environmental conflicts in developing countries such as Colombia. In this case, local communities not only resisted the entry of the Emerald Energy company because of environmental concerns, but also because of the direct impact that oil exploitation would have on their ways of life, their access to natural resources and their ability to maintain a sustainable relationship with their environment.

Unlike environmental movements in industrialized countries, which are often based on defending the quality of life and preserving ecosystems for the future benefit of society, communities in Valparaíso were fighting for immediate survival and protection of their territory from the expansion of extractive activities that threatened to deprive them of the resources essential for their livelihoods.

The case of Valparaíso shows that, in Colombia, resistance to oil exploration cannot be understood solely through the lens of post-materialism. Here, socio-environmental conflicts are also deeply linked to issues of social justice, self-determination and the defense of collective rights over the territory. Opposition to oil extraction does not stem solely from a concern for the environment in abstract terms, but responds to a broader struggle for control and defense of territory against corporate and state interests.

OTHER RELEVANT CASES

Post-materialism is a theory better suited to understanding conflicts in developed countries, where concern for the environment has arisen in parallel with economic well-being. A clear example is the resistance of local communities and activists in the Arctic to oil exploitation. In this case, countries such as Norway and the United States have promoted drilling projects in the Arctic, while environmental movements and indigenous communities have expressed concern about long-term environmental damage. Although in this case there is a clear concern for the sustainability of the ecosystem, indigenous communities are also defending their right to preserve their traditional culture and ways of life that depend on the integrity of the Arctic environment.

Similarly, in the conflict over the Dakota Access pipeline in the United States, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe mobilized against the construction of the pipeline, not only because of the potential environmental damage, such as contamination of their water sources, but also because of the violation of their rights to sacred lands. Although this conflict includes elements of post-materialism,



such as concern for the preservation of water and the natural environment, it is also a struggle for indigenous rights and the protection of sovereignty over their territory.

CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS OF POST-MATERIALISM

Post-materialism, while useful in specific contexts, faces criticism when it comes to applying its principles to conflicts in countries in the Global South. In places like Latin America, Africa, and Asia, socio-environmental conflicts cannot be reduced simply to concerns about quality of life or self-expression. In these contexts, issues of poverty, inequality and distributive justice are central drivers of conflict. Communities that are affected by extractive projects, such as oil exploration, are fighting not only for the environment, but also for their survival, their autonomy, and their ability to maintain control over the natural resources that sustain their ways of life.

In addition, the theory of post-materialism has been criticized for not adequately recognizing the power dynamics that underlie socio-environmental conflicts in developing countries. Resistance movements in these contexts are often motivated by the defense of historical and cultural rights, as in the case of indigenous peoples, who see their territories threatened by extractive projects imposed by the state or multinational corporations. These struggles cannot be understood only as a transition from materialist to post-materialist values, but as part of a broader resistance to power structures that perpetuate inequality and social exclusion.

By way of conclusion, post-materialism is a useful perspective to analyze socio-environmental conflicts in contexts where societies have reached a level of economic well-being that allows the emergence of values focused on self-expression and environmental protection. However, its applicability in developing countries is limited, as it fails to capture the social, political and economic complexities that drive conflict in these contexts. In places like Colombia, Ecuador, and Nigeria, socio-environmental conflicts are deeply rooted in the struggle for social justice, land rights, and the defense of natural resources against state and corporate pressures. Therefore, it is necessary to complement post-materialism with approaches that address the structural inequalities and power dynamics that underlie these conflicts.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Political ecology is a theoretical approach that examines the relationships between power, natural resources, and social injustice. It emerged as a critical response to the lack of focus on power relations in traditional ecology and environmental economics, addressing how the unequal distribution of resources and environmental impacts are often a consequence of unequal political and economic relations. Political ecology focuses on ecological-distributive inequalities, analyzing who



are the beneficiaries of resource exploitation and who bear the costs of environmental degradation (Robbins, 2012).

One of the main contributions of political ecology is the concept of ecological-distributive conflicts, developed by authors such as Joan Martínez-Alier. These conflicts arise when local communities, often the poorest and most vulnerable, resist the exploitation of their territories because the ecological and social costs fall on them, while the economic benefits end up in the hands of external actors, such as multinational corporations or governments (Martínez-Alier, 2002).

PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY

1. Unequal distribution of environmental impacts: Analyzes how the costs of environmental degradation fall disproportionately on the poorest and most vulnerable communities.
2. Power relations: Explores how environmental conflicts are the result of unequal power relations between local actors, corporations, and governments.
3. Resistance and mobilization: Underscores the importance of social movements and the resistance of local communities in the struggle for environmental justice and the redistribution of resources.

APPLICATION OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY TO SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Political ecology is particularly useful for analyzing conflicts that arise in contexts of natural resource extraction, such as mining, deforestation, and oil exploitation. These conflicts are not only about environmental destruction, but also about the struggle for social justice, control of resources, and equitable access to the benefits derived from their exploitation. Local communities often resist extractive projects not only because they negatively affect their environment, but because these projects also violate their territorial and cultural rights (Robbins, 2012).

COLOMBIAN CASE: CONFLICT OVER THE EL QUIMBO HYDROELECTRIC DAM

In Colombia, the conflict over the El Quimbo hydroelectric dam in the department of Huila is an example of how political ecology can help understand the dynamics of power and resistance in environmental conflicts. The construction of the dam, promoted by the Italian multinational Enel-Endesa and backed by the Colombian government, has had serious impacts on the environment and local communities. The project flooded large areas of agricultural land, displacing peasants and fishermen, who depended on these territories for their subsistence (Torres, 2018).

From the perspective of political ecology, this conflict is not only about the loss of agricultural land, but also about a struggle for control of territory. The affected communities have resisted the project, claiming their right to decide on the use of their lands and denouncing the lack of



prior consultation and the imposition of an extractive development model that does not benefit local populations. In this sense, the case of El Quimbo reflects an ecological-distributive conflict, in which the environmental and social costs are assumed by rural communities, while the benefits of the hydroelectric plant go to the multinational company and the Colombian government (Torres, 2018).

BOLIVIAN CASE: THE CONFLICT OVER LITHIUM MINING

Another emblematic case is the conflict over lithium mining in Bolivia, specifically in the Salar de Uyuni, which is home to one of the largest lithium reserves in the world. (Jorratt, 2022). The extraction of lithium, a key mineral for the production of electric car batteries, has generated tensions between local communities, the Bolivian government and multinational companies interested in exploiting this resource.

From the perspective of political ecology, this conflict can be understood as a dispute over the control of natural resources in a context of global energy transition. While governments and corporations see lithium as an opportunity for economic development and the transition to clean energy, local communities fear the environmental and social impacts of mining, including water pollution and degradation of the salar's ecosystem. This conflict highlights how promises of development and progress often hide ecological-distributive inequalities, where environmental costs fall on indigenous and rural communities, while economic benefits are captured by external actors.

UNITED STATES CASE: THE CONFLICT OVER THE KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE

The conflict over the Keystone XL pipeline in the United States is another prominent example of how political ecology can help analyze conflicts over the exploitation of natural resources. The pipeline project, which would have transported oil from the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, to refineries in Texas, generated strong opposition from indigenous communities, environmental activists, and farmers, who denounced the risks of aquifer contamination and the acceleration of climate change (Klein, 2014).

From a political ecology perspective, this conflict is not only a struggle for environmental protection, but also a resistance against corporate power and ecological injustice. Indigenous communities, in particular, highlighted that the pipeline ran through sacred lands and violated their land rights. The Keystone XL conflict is a clear example of how power relations between corporations, the state, and local communities are central to understanding socio-environmental conflicts. In addition, it illustrates how social movements, through mobilization and resistance, play a key role in the defense of environmental and territorial rights (Klein, 2014).



CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Despite its important contributions, political ecology has been criticized for focusing excessively on power relations and the distributive aspects of environmental conflicts, sometimes overlooking other dimensions, such as cultural or symbolic ones, which are also fundamental to understanding these conflicts. In addition, some critics point out that political ecology tends to romanticize local resistance without taking into account the internal divisions and complexities within affected communities.

Another limitation is that, while political ecology provides a critical analysis of power dynamics, it sometimes lacks concrete proposals for resolving conflicts or implementing sustainable solutions in contexts of environmental crisis.

By way of conclusion, political ecology offers a robust framework for analysing socio-environmental conflicts in contexts of natural resource exploitation, by focusing on power relations, ecological inequalities and the resilience of local communities. The cases of El Quimbo in Colombia, lithium mining in Bolivia, and the Keystone XL pipeline in the United States illustrate how ecological-distributive conflicts arise from the imposition of development models that prioritize economic benefits for external actors at the expense of local communities.

Through the analysis of these cases, political ecology highlights the importance of social mobilization and resistance in the struggle for environmental justice, underlining that environmental conflicts are not only about environmental conservation, but also about the redistribution of power and resources.

ECOLOGICAL ECONOMY

Ecological economics is a theory that challenges the traditional assumptions of classical economics, by questioning the view of natural resources as unlimited and their exploitation as a simple factor of production. This current recognizes the biophysical limits of the planet and advocates an economic approach that respects the carrying capacity of ecosystems, as well as the inclusion of sustainability criteria in economic decisions.

Unlike neoclassical economics, which tends to see economic growth as an end in itself, ecological economics focuses on how economic systems interact with natural systems. One of his central proposals is the need to reassess how value is assigned to natural resources, arguing that the value of ecosystems cannot be reduced solely to their market price. In this context, concepts such as "ecological-distributive conflicts" (Martínez-Alier, 2004) are introduced, which refer to the struggle for the unequal distribution of economic benefits and ecological costs derived from the exploitation of natural resources.



This approach is particularly useful for analyzing socio-environmental conflicts, in which local, often marginalized, communities bear the costs of environmental degradation, while political elites and multinational corporations enjoy the economic benefits. Green economics critiques the way contemporary economic systems externalize environmental impacts and advocates for a development model that takes into account ecological limits and the needs of affected communities.

APPLICATION OF ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS TO SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Ecological economics stresses that conflicts over the exploitation of natural resources cannot be analyzed exclusively from the prism of economic growth. A full assessment of ecosystem services and long-term social impacts should be incorporated. In oil exploitation, the destruction of ecosystems not only implies immediate material costs, such as water pollution or deforestation, but also affects the well-being and survival of local communities that depend on the environment for their subsistence.

From this perspective, socio-environmental conflicts are not simply a matter of economic maximization, but a dispute for distributive justice and ecological sustainability. While corporations and the state seek to extract economic value from natural resources, local communities advocate a sustainability and justice approach, which includes preserving the ecosystems on which they depend.

COLOMBIAN CASE: LA GUAJIRA AND THE CERREJÓN COAL MINE

A prominent case that illustrates the principles of ecological economics in Colombia is the conflict in La Guajira, where the Cerrejón coal mine, one of the largest in the world, is located. Coal mining in this region has caused significant environmental degradation, affecting the rivers, soil, and lands of the Wayuu indigenous communities, who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.

From the perspective of ecological economics, this conflict can be understood as a case of ecological-distributive injustice. Wayuu communities bear the ecological costs of mining, including water scarcity, air pollution, and land destruction, while the economic benefits are concentrated in the hands of multinational corporations and the Colombian state. Despite the profits generated by coal mining, the living conditions of local communities have worsened, and fundamental rights, such as access to clean water, have been violated.

The conflict in La Guajira reflects the central critique of ecological economics: the need to incorporate a more equitable valuation of natural resources, which is not based solely on their market value, but considers the well-being of communities and the sustainability of ecosystems.



ARGENTINE CASE: FRACKING IN VACA MUERTA

Another important example is the conflict over the exploitation of gas and oil by fracking in Vaca Muerta, Argentina. This field is one of the main reserves of unconventional hydrocarbons in the world, and has been the subject of heavy investments by both multinational companies and the Argentine government. However, local communities and environmental organizations have denounced the devastating impacts of fracking on water resources, public health, and ecosystems in the region.

From ecological economics, the conflict in Vaca Muerta is a clear case of how economic decisions focused on maximizing resource extraction do not take into account ecological limits and long-term impacts. The intensive use of water in a semi-arid region, together with the contamination of groundwater sources by chemicals used in fracking, has generated a socio-environmental crisis that affects rural communities, which depend on these resources for agriculture and human consumption.

This conflict also shows how the economic benefits of fracking are concentrated on political elites and corporations, while the ecological and health costs fall on local populations. Green economics argues that this development model is unsustainable, as it ignores the biophysical limits of the planet and puts the health and well-being of communities and ecosystems at risk.

CASE OF CANADA: ALBERTA TAR SANDS

In Canada, Alberta's tar sands are another paradigmatic example of the ecological-distributive conflicts posed by ecological economics. Oil sands extraction is one of the most resource-intensive forms in terms of energy, water and pollution. The extraction process has led to massive deforestation and pollution of rivers and lakes in the region, which has had devastating effects on indigenous communities that depend on local ecosystems.

Indigenous communities in the region have fought for years against the expansion of extractive activities, arguing that the destruction of local ecosystems not only threatens their health, but also their culture and livelihoods. From the perspective of ecological economics, this conflict raises a fundamental question: how is oil valued compared to ecosystem services, such as clean water and biodiversity, that are essential to the lives of local communities?

This conflict also underscores one of green economics' main criticisms of current economic systems: the tendency to externalize environmental costs, shifting them to marginalized communities, while economic benefits are concentrated on corporate actors and governments that prioritize economic growth over ecological sustainability.



CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

While ecological economics offers a critical and holistic view of socio-environmental conflicts related to the exploitation of natural resources, it also faces practical challenges. One of the main challenges lies in incorporating the principles of ecological sustainability into current economic systems, which are deeply rooted in logics of growth and capital accumulation. In addition, the implementation of policies based on the principles of ecological economics, such as degrowth or redistribution of resources, often faces strong resistance from dominant political and economic actors.

In addition to the practical challenges, another limitation is that ecological economics, by focusing on biophysical boundaries, can sometimes overlook the cultural and symbolic dimensions of socio-environmental conflicts. While this approach recognizes the importance of ecosystem services to local communities, it does not always delve into the ways in which environmental destruction affects the cultural identities and traditional ways of life of these populations.

In conclusion, ecological economics provides a crucial framework for understanding socio-environmental conflicts related to the exploitation of natural resources, by highlighting the need to respect ecological limits and equitably redistribute the benefits and costs of resource extraction. Cases of resource exploitation in La Guajira, Vaca Muerta and Alberta show how the dynamics of economic growth often ignore these limits, leading to ecological-distributive conflicts in which local communities bear the negative impacts, while the benefits are concentrated in the hands of external actors.

This approach also underscores the need to rethink the value placed on natural resources and ecosystems, and to prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term economic gains. Although the green economy faces significant challenges in its implementation, its emphasis on environmental justice and sustainability offers a critical tool for addressing global conflicts related to the exploitation of natural resources in a world that is increasingly interconnected and vulnerable to environmental shocks.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice is a theoretical approach and social movement that arises in response to inequalities in the distribution of environmental risks and benefits. It criticizes how marginalized communities—especially indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and low-income populations—tend to bear the brunt of pollution, environmental degradation, and ecological risks. At the same time, the economic and political elites are the ones who enjoy the benefits of extractive and industrial activities.



The concept of environmental justice is anchored in the struggle for an equitable distribution of environmental risks, inclusive participation in decision-making and the recognition of the environmental rights of vulnerable communities. This approach is applied in socio-environmental conflicts to analyse how ecological costs, such as air pollution, water pollution or soil degradation, fall disproportionately on the poorest sectors, while economic gains are concentrated in the hands of external actors.

PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

1. Equitable sharing of environmental risks and benefits: Ensures that the most vulnerable communities do not disproportionately bear the negative impacts of economic development, such as water pollution and loss of agricultural land.
2. Inclusive participation: Promotes the participation of affected communities in decisions about the use of their territories and resources, reducing the imposition of projects without their consent.
3. Recognition of the rights of vulnerable communities: Seeks to ensure that the human and environmental rights of communities that have historically been excluded are respected and protected.

APPLICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TO SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

The environmental justice approach is essential to understanding conflicts in which vulnerable communities are forced to bear the impacts of pollution or environmental degradation. These cases involve not only ecological damage, but also violations of human and territorial rights, as governments and corporations often exclude these communities from decision-making processes.

COLOMBIAN CASE: COAL MINING IN LA GUAJIRA

In Colombia, the conflict over coal mining in La Guajira has been a symbol of the struggle for environmental justice. The exploitation of coal by the Cerrejón company, one of the largest open-pit mines in the world, has generated a disproportionate impact on the Wayúu indigenous community. The Wayúu have denounced the destruction of their lands, the contamination of water and the diversion of rivers essential for their subsistence, while the economic benefits of mining have been appropriated mainly by the company and the Colombian State.

This conflict reflects a clear case of environmental injustice, where the most vulnerable communities have been marginalized in decision-making, even though they are the most affected by negative environmental impacts. The struggle of the Wayúu has been for the defense of their territory and for the recognition of their rights to live in a healthy environment.



ECUADORIAN CASE: CHEVRON-TEXACO

One of the most emblematic international cases of environmental justice is the litigation against Chevron-Texaco in the Ecuadorian Amazon. For more than 30 years, the oil company was responsible for one of the worst environmental catastrophes in the country's history, dumping millions of gallons of oil and toxic waste into Amazonian rivers and soils. Indigenous communities, such as the Cofan and the Siona, have fought in international courts to hold Chevron-Texaco accountable for the harms caused, including contamination of drinking water, increased disease, and destruction of their livelihoods.

This case is a clear example of how the communities most affected by environmental disasters are often the poorest and least equipped to deal with the consequences. In addition, it highlights the difficulty of achieving environmental justice when multinational companies use their economic and political power to evade responsibility.

UNITED STATES CASE: TOXIC DUMPS

A key case in the history of the environmental justice movement in the United States is the Love Canal conflict. In the 1970s, a working-class community in upstate New York discovered that they were living on top of a toxic industrial waste dump. This led to serious health problems, including cancers, birth defects, and respiratory diseases. The community organized to demand justice and eventually succeeded in getting the government to evacuate the affected families and adopt stricter regulations on hazardous waste management.

The Love Canal case marked a turning point in the fight for environmental justice, demonstrating that marginalized communities are often victims of industrial decisions that prioritize economic profit over people's health and well-being.

CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Although the environmental justice approach has had a significant impact on the visibility of socio-environmental conflicts, it faces several challenges. In many contexts, legal and political systems are insufficient to ensure justice for affected communities, as large corporations have a strong influence over public policy. In addition, lack of access to justice and bureaucracy can make it difficult for communities to achieve adequate reparations.

Another limitation is that environmental justice often faces resistance from actors who argue that environmental protection measures could slow economic growth. This creates a tension between economic development agendas and the protection of environmental rights.

By way of conclusion, environmental justice is central to analysing and addressing socio-environmental conflicts, as it provides an approach based on equity, human rights and inclusive



participation. The cases of La Guajira, Chevron-Texaco and Love Canal are examples of how the most vulnerable communities have been the most affected by environmental degradation, and how they have fought to defend their right to a healthy environment.

This approach remains crucial to ensure that all people, regardless of their economic or social status, have the right to live in a clean and safe environment, and to make visible the struggles of marginalized communities in defending their rights.

DECOLONIAL THEORIES

Decolonial theories emerged as a critical response to the power structures imposed by colonialism, which still persist in the form of neocolonial relations. These theories analyze how colonialism not only implied the exploitation of resources and people, but also a colonization of knowledge, which marginalized and devalued the knowledge and practices of indigenous and non-Western rural populations (Mignolo, 2011).

One of the key contributions of decolonial theories is their critique of traditional models of development. From this perspective, development—based on the exploitation of natural resources and the expansion of capitalism—is seen as an extension of colonial dynamics. Far from bringing prosperity to communities in the Global South, these models perpetuate poverty, exclusion, and dependence on the Global North (Díaz & Forero, 2016). Instead of accepting these models, decolonial theories propose alternatives to development based on respect for traditional practices, self-determination, and recognition of local knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

PRINCIPLES OF DECOLONIAL THEORIES

1. Critique of development: Decolonial theories reject the development models imposed by the Global North, arguing that they perpetuate colonial inequalities (Grosfoguel, 2007).
2. Epistemic justice: They advocate for the recognition and valorization of the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities, who have been historically marginalized (Mignolo, 2011).
3. Self-determination: They emphasize the right of peoples to decide on the use of their territories and resources, as opposed to extractive projects imposed by external actors (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

APPLICATION OF DECOLONIAL THEORIES TO SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

In the context of socio-environmental conflicts, decolonial theories are especially useful for analyzing how indigenous and rural communities resist extractive projects imposed on their territories. These communities fight not only for the environment, but also for the recognition of their



historical and cultural rights. Thus, socio-environmental conflicts are not simply disputes over resources, but also struggles for the decolonization of territory and the defense of alternative ways of life that have been marginalized by hegemonic models of development (Díaz & Forero, 2016).

COLOMBIAN CASE: INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE IN CAUCA

In Colombia, the resistance of the Nasa and Misak indigenous communities in the department of Cauca is an emblematic example of how decolonial theories are applied in socio-environmental conflicts. These communities have actively resisted mining and resource extraction projects, claiming their territorial rights and respect for their ancestral practices (National Center for Historical Memory, 2016)

From a decolonial perspective, these communities are not only fighting to protect their natural environment, but also for cultural autonomy. Through the defense of their territory, the Nasa and Misak have claimed their right to self-determination and have rejected extractive projects imposed by the state and corporations, which seek to exploit the region's resources without their consent (Díaz & Forero, 2016).

MEXICAN CASE: THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT

The Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, is another example of decolonial resistance. Since their uprising in 1994, the Zapatistas have fought for the rights of indigenous peoples and have proposed a model of autonomous governance that rejects the extractivist neoliberal model (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This movement criticizes free trade agreements and development policies that exploit natural resources without taking into account the rights of local communities.

The Zapatistas propose an alternative model of life based on indigenous self-determination and sustainable coexistence with nature, challenging both the Mexican state and international corporations. This case reflects how decolonial theories emphasize the rejection of extractive policies and the creation of more equitable and sustainable development alternatives (Mignolo, 2011).

ECUADORIAN CASE: CONFLICT IN YASUNI NATIONAL PARK

Another prominent example of the application of decolonial theories is the indigenous resistance in Yasuni National Park, Ecuador. The indigenous communities that inhabit this region, such as the Huaorani, have fought against oil exploitation, arguing that these activities not only destroy their natural environment, but also violate their right to self-determination and threaten their cultural identity (San Sebastián & Hurtig, 2004).

From the decolonial perspective, the conflict in Yasuni is a struggle for the decolonization of the territory, where indigenous communities seek to protect their ways of life and traditional



knowledge against the impositions of the State and multinational corporations. This case reflects how indigenous peoples claim their right to decide on the use of their lands and reject extractive development projects that perpetuate colonial inequalities (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS OF DECOLONIAL THEORIES

Despite their important contributions, decolonial theories also face criticism. One of the main limitations is that they can often idealize traditional ways of life without acknowledging the contemporary challenges faced by indigenous and rural communities. In addition, proposals for self-determination and epistemic justice can conflict with global environmental conservation policies, creating tensions between land rights and international efforts to protect biodiversity.

Another criticism is that decolonial theories, while powerful in their critique of colonialism, sometimes lack a clear framework for the implementation of their proposals in the current global context, where economies and political systems are deeply interconnected with extractivist capitalism (Mignolo, 2011).

By way of conclusion, decolonial theories offer a critical vision that is essential for understanding socio-environmental conflicts in contexts where indigenous peoples and rural communities fight for their territorial and cultural rights. These approaches make visible the connections between the legacies of colonialism and the current struggles for self-determination, environmental justice, and the recognition of local knowledge.

Cases of resistance in Cauca, Chiapas, and Yasuni show how decolonial theories provide a key framework for analyzing power dynamics around extractive projects and the struggle for more just and sustainable alternatives. As communities continue to resist the logics of extractivism, decolonial theories will continue to be a crucial tool for challenging dominant development models and proposing alternatives based on equity and sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of socio-environmental conflicts through various theoretical perspectives reveals the complexity and multiple dimensions involved in these processes. Each of the theories discussed—post-materialism, political ecology, ecological economics, environmental justice, decolonial theories, and Southern ecologies—offers valuable tools for understanding the underlying factors in conflicts related to oil exploration and other extractive projects.

Post-materialism explains how, in developed countries, concern for quality of life and the environment arises when basic material needs are met. However, in developing country contexts, this perspective is limited. Conflicts are not only focused on quality of life, but also on the struggle for survival and control of the resources necessary for subsistence. This theory is useful in societies



where environmental movements are driven by post-materialist values, but it does not capture the full complexity of conflicts in regions where resource exploitation directly affects the life and identity of communities.

Political ecology offers a deeper approach by focusing on the power relations and structural inequalities that underlie environmental conflicts. It highlights that these conflicts arise not only from damage to the environment, but also from the unfair distribution of the costs and benefits of the exploitation of natural resources. Power dynamics between local communities, governments, and corporations are central to explaining socio-environmental conflicts. This approach is particularly useful for analysing how communities resist the impositions of extractive projects that affect both their livelihoods and their territorial and political rights.

Ecological economics complements political ecology by highlighting the biophysical limits of the planet and questioning the logic of unlimited economic growth. This perspective is crucial to understanding how the exploitation of natural resources, such as oil, often ignores the long-term consequences for ecosystems and communities. Ecological economics defends the need to value ecosystem services and seek development models that respect ecological limits, ensuring a fair distribution of costs and benefits.

The environmental justice approach places an emphasis on equity and participation of marginalized communities, who are often the most affected by environmental risks and ecological damages. This theory highlights that indigenous, rural, and low-income communities bear the costs of environmental degradation, while the benefits are concentrated in the economic and political elites. Environmental justice underscores the importance of these communities being included in decision-making and receiving fair compensation for the negative impacts of extractive projects.

Decolonial theories broaden the understanding of socio-environmental conflicts by focusing on how colonial legacies and neocolonial dynamics continue to influence the exploitation of resources and the marginalization of indigenous and rural communities. These theories criticize hegemonic development models and advocate the recognition of ancestral knowledge and the self-determination of peoples. From this perspective, conflicts are not only about resources, but also about the defense of cultural identity, territorial rights, and sovereignty.

For their part, the ecologies of the South provide an approach based on the resistance and struggle of communities in the Global South in the face of extractivism. This approach highlights how marginalized communities have developed more sustainable ways of life, based on solidarity and respect for the environment, as opposed to the extractivist models promoted by the Global North. The ecologies of the South not only criticize the current development model, but also propose fairer and more sustainable alternatives, based on respect for local knowledge and community management of resources.



Through the analysis of these theoretical approaches, it is evident that socio-environmental conflicts related to oil exploration and other extractive projects are not merely disputes over land use or resources. These conflicts are deeply rooted in historical dynamics, unequal power relations and competing visions of development. The exploitation of natural resources not only has devastating ecological impacts, but also exacerbates existing social, political and economic inequalities.

Each of the theories discussed provides valuable tools for understanding different aspects of these conflicts. The main challenge is to integrate these approaches in the search for solutions that respect human rights, promote environmental justice and ensure ecological sustainability. Only through a comprehensive approach, which combines the critique of extractivism with the defense of the rights of communities and the recognition of ecological limits, will it be possible to move towards a more equitable and sustainable future for all.



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