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Gender, nature and capitalist transformations in the southern coast of Ecuador

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Capitalisms, Toxicity and Gender

A theoretical perspective on monoculturalization and the making of rural worlds

Seeking to understand how rural people experience capitalist expansion and how the impacts of monoculturalization are gendered, in this chapter I provide an overview of the distinct conceptual threads that helped me analyze the diverse realities of those living in southern Ecuador's plantation zones. In order to identify the constraints and possibilities that the expansion of capitalist relations produced in these places, I start with two classic considerations of power under capitalism, the first associated with the work of Karl Marx and the second with the writings of Michel Foucault. Due to my interest in the lives of rural women and their particular experience of toxicity, socioeconomic and gender inequalities, I bring both streams of thought into dialogue with the work of feminist scholars who focus on agency and the transformative potential of people's everyday interactions. From a feminist perspective, the diverse responses of women to social environmental changes and their contributions to the reproduction of life in difficult social and economic circumstances are crucial for comprehending how power is both reproduced and contested from the margins of large-scale capitalist developments.

This perspective entails greater attention to the interrelations between rural women, the environment in which their lives take place and its influence over their everyday living strategies. The omnipresence of toxicity and its impact on both human and nonhuman worlds thus informs my understanding of the effects of capitalist expansions in rural worlds and the wide range of responses that emerge in their wake. In general, drawing from scholars working in different fields, in this chapter I attempt to weave a conceptual framework for analyzing the apparent contradictions between rural people's search for opportunities to improve their lives on the one hand and the ongoing destruction of their socionatural worlds by capitalist intensifications on the other. In this sense, Tsing's concept of polyphonic assemblages (2015) is especially useful for its insistence on a power-centered reading of capitalism that leaves space for the existence of multiplicity. These thoughts are further amplified by drawing on Gago's (2014, 2017) exploration of the popular pragmatics and informal networks at the heart of Latin American economies. Inspired by their work, this chapter provides a broad overview of the theories that have been central to the study of capitalism and how they may be expanded and improved through the incorporation of new actors, both human and nonhuman, into the discussion.

The origins of a long-standing debate

The transformation of rural landscapes and livelihoods by capitalism has long been a subject of discussion for social scientists, philosophers and historians. Within these fields, early debates were strongly influenced by the classic works of the German philosopher Karl Marx. Important insights were drawn from his theory of 'primitive accumulation' that traced the origins of capital to the enclosures used by feudal landlords to separate rural people from their lands in sixteenth century England. For Marx, "the expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from

the soil is the basis of the whole process" (Marx 1867 [1887]: 876). Such ideas inspired Kautsky's (1899 [1988]) famous definition of the agrarian question as "whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones" (cited in Akram-Lohdi and Kay 2010: 179). Building on these contributions, important debates concerning the role of rural peasant economies in the development of capitalism emerged along two main lines of thought. On the one hand, followers of Lenin's (1899 [1964]) elaborations on Marx believed that the destruction of peasant subsistence-based livelihoods was necessary for the full development of capitalism and the subsequent emergence of a more just and equal society. Within this view rural people would be displaced by rising levels of industrialization, urbanization and greater market expansion into rural areas. In contrast, followers of Chayanov's (1927 [1991]) work upheld their belief in the viability and strength of peasant societies and their capacity to maintain and defend certain aspects of their way of life under capitalism. They argued that peasant societies were inherently opposed to capitalism and were likely to refuse market and state control over their lives in favor of non-market subsistence-based forms of organization. Such discussions provided the foundations for critical peasant studies and the analysis of the particularities of peasant economies, their diverse responses to the growing influence of capitalism in rural worlds and their increasingly ambiguous relation to the market and the state (see Akram-Lohdi and Kay 2010a).

Publications as Alain De Janvry's *The agrarian question and reformism in Latin America* (1981) further contributed to the field of peasant studies through their development of a theory of 'articulation'. Unlike his predecessors, De Janvry argued that the peasant non-commodity economy was inextricably linked to the wider political economy through unequal relations that enabled the ongoing extraction of surplus value from rural areas. Thus, the urban economy was able to benefit from cheap food and cheap energy supplied by rural areas as well as cheap (migrant) labor that provided capitalist entrepreneurs with a renewable mass of exploitable workers for their industries. In this dual economic theory, peasant communities were seen as being functional to the capitalist system (what De Janvry refers to as 'functional dualism') through their articulation with the urban economy. Drawing attention to the micropolitical level of the family, in his work *Maidens Meal and Money* (1981), Claude Meillassoux studied the functionality of women's unpaid labor for the capitalist system. He argued that capitalist expansions into rural worlds would not pursue the eradication of what he called 'the domestic community' at the heart of peasant economies. Instead, according to Meillassoux, pre-capitalist forms of organization such as the domestic community would continue to thrive through their articulation with the wider economy. He went on to argue that pre-capitalist forms would survive because of the benefits they generated for the capitalist system by assuming the costs of the reproduction of the labor force. Both De Janvry and Meillassoux's models of articulation provided a crucial counterpoint to general theories that attempted to explain whether non-capitalist relations would persist or disappear in the face of ongoing capitalist expansions. However, despite their important contributions, theories of articulation were criticized on account of their lack of representation of subaltern voices, in particular women's voices, and their essentialist dualism and functionalism that failed to account for the persistence of diversity and heterogeneity in rural worlds (see Mackintosh 1977, Katz 1983, Assies 1987, 1997, 1999).

In Latin America, early scholarly discussions continued to confront *campesinistas* who followed Chayanov in their defense of the vitality and adaptability of peasant societies and

descampesinistas who followed Lenin in his insistence on the inevitable decline and disappearance of peasant cultures (see Brass 2004 and Kay 2005 for these discussions). Such binary views eventually gave way to more nuanced debates. In Ecuador the study of ongoing historical processes (Barsky 1988, Chiriboga 1988, Korovkin 1992), the changing role of the state and international markets (Velasco 1972, Cueva 1977, Larrea et al. 1987, Acosta 2001), the importance of race and ethnicity (Sánchez Parga 1986, Valarezo 1993, Guerrero 1997, Baud 2007) and indigenous-peasant movements and organizations (Guerrero 1997, Korovkin 1997, Pallares 2002) came to qualify broad theories and teleological descriptions of capitalist expansion. Despite the existence of a diversity of views, much work came to be dominated by the influential theories of Raúl Prebisch and the CEPAL (1988) which focused on the characterization of Latin America's primary export economies, the role of extractive industries and so called 'enclaves' (Cardoso and Faletto 1969, Kay 1989). These theories established a broad consensus regarding the dependency of Latin American economies on the extraction and exportation of raw materials and their unequal participation in global markets. However, they lacked a general perspective on the actual social and environmental impacts of dependency and its distinct manifestations in diverse rural territories. By focusing on the macro-political, dependency theories also failed to account for the wide-range of responses deployed by rural residents as large-scale export-oriented industries encroached on their lives and territories.

The work of James Scott (1976, 1985, 1990) concerning the moral economy of peasant societies and his later theorization of 'everyday forms of resistance' and 'hidden transcripts' addressed these issues, becoming an important reference across the field of rural studies. Although Scott's work has since been targeted for its excessive romanticization of resistance (Ortner 1995) and his tendency to 'see resistance everywhere' (Fletcher 2010), it continues to inspire researchers interested in understanding the heterogeneous logics of rural societies. Central to Scott's argument is the need to challenge universal categories and the assumption that they can be applied across different contexts and cultures. He notes that, "for the victims as well as the beneficiaries of the large abstractions we choose to call capitalism, imperialism or the green revolution, the experience itself arrives in quite personal, concrete, localized, mediated form" (Scott, 1985: 348, also: 1990). Thus, following Scott, the particular ways that rural people experience and transform external interventions into their lives are crucial for understanding changes in the broader political economy. Through an analysis of people's everyday interactions, we may better understand the influence of their diverse responses and strategies on the transformation of wider structures of domination that seek to govern their lives.

The tensions between forms of domination and resistance from below remain at the center of important discussions concerning rural people's experience in the context of ongoing capitalist expansion. These tensions persist in the work of scholars who have more recently been inspired by the theories of Marx and Foucault in their attempt to understand the latest neoliberal phase of capitalist expansion either as a new mode of accumulation or a new mode of government. These two streams of thought have been questioned by feminist scholars who maintain that broad theories and abstractions should be abandoned in favor of a situated analysis of people's everyday interactions and their relation to the emergence of diverse economies. The final sections are dedicated to their work which has inspired my own study and analysis of rural capitalisms in the southern coast of Ecuador.

Neoliberalism as a mode of accumulation

Neo-Marxist intellectuals understand present day rural transformations as the outcome of a new neoliberal phase of capital accumulation characterized by ongoing processes of dispossession and the reorganization of production on a world scale (Wallerstein 1979, Hardt and Negri 2000, Harvey 2003, Arrighi 2009, Moore 2015b). Under neoliberalism, they argue, capitalist processes and relations of class oppression have become increasingly blurred. With their emphasis on individual choice, economic growth and profit maximization, neoliberal theories have managed to conceal the underlying class project of accumulation that is still under way. In the words of David Harvey (2003: 119), “it has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally”. Using a ‘benevolent mask’, he argues, neoliberal ideologies, projects and policies continue to support and enable the processes of accumulation that Marx had attributed to the origins of capital and treated as ‘primitive’ in his work. According to Harvey these processes are ongoing and continue to rely on new forms of privatization, commodification, financialization and state management to expand and bring new areas under capitalist domination. His use of the concept ‘accumulation by dispossession’ to emphasize the persistence and intensification of capitalist forms has been widely adopted and remains influential among present-day scholars. Evidence of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ can be found in the rise of increasingly aggressive enclosures and ‘grabs’, new forms of exclusion, expulsion and violence, alarming rates of environmental degradation, toxicity and contamination and the intensification of socio-environmental conflicts throughout the world. As several studies demonstrate, these processes disproportionately affect rural people living in resource-rich regions, especially rural women and those belonging to afro-descendent and indigenous groups. The harm inflicted upon these people and the places where they live is directly related to the accumulation and concentration of extreme wealth often in the hands of privileged groups located far from the sites where capitalist extraction is taking place (Borras et al. 2012, Edelman et al. 2013, Hall et al. 2015, Sassen 2015).

Neo-Marxist theories constitute important contributions for rethinking how power is deployed under neoliberalism and the constraints it imposes on resistance ‘from below’. However, they also present clear limitations. Neo-Marxist frames have been challenged on account of their reliance on a teleological historical narrative revolving around the *long durée* history of capital accumulation and peasant-worker struggles. Such interpretations tend to essentialize individuals and often ignore the agency and perspective of those who do not easily fit within either/or pre-established categories. Feminist scholars have also problematized these theories for their scarce attention to the contributions of women’s unpaid work and its importance for processes of capital accumulation. By creating a false division between the spheres of production and reproduction, they argue, both Marxist and Neo-Marxist scholars have failed to address the role of household labor for the creation of value under capitalism (Dalla Costa and James 1972, Mies 1982, Benería 2005, Razavi 2009, Federici 2012). This omission overlooks the ways in which capitalist forms of value have consistently been created from the appropriation of nature (raw materials) and women’s non-commoditized contributions to the reproduction of life (Moore 2015b).

In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Silvia Federici addresses these omissions by presenting a history of capitalism that begins with the sexual division of labor and the appropriation of women’s unpaid work. From a feminist perspective, Federici argues that the exploitation of women has

played a key role in the process of capital accumulation due to the fact that women are “producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity: labor-power” (2004: 2). Her argument uses elements of articulation theory. However, her focus remains on the forms of violence that were necessary to subjugate women, destroy their power and appropriate their labor. In fifteenth-century Europe, she argues, women were stripped of their rights and freedoms by state-led campaigns that legitimized the use of violence against women who transgressed new societal norms that had been established to stimulate capitalist expansion. These women were accused of witchhood and burned at the stake after a series of tortures were used to obtain their false confessions. For Federici, public displays of violence were used to terrify women into accepting “a new patriarchal order where women’s bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources” at the service of capital accumulation (Federici 2004: 170). Women were thereby forced into their new role as “servants of the male work force”: they were denied wages for their work and burdened with the obligation of raising children, maintaining a household, and caring for their husbands, the elderly and the sick. In this way began what Mies (1980, 1982) calls the “housewifization of women” and their reduction to a second-class status by means of their dependence upon male wages. In their work, both Federici and Mies argue that the forms of violence and torture that were exercised on women’s bodies were exported to the colonies where non-Europeans were stripped from their power and their lands and forced into indentured labor to accelerate the expansion of capitalist patriarchy on a global scale. On the basis of these histories, these authors conclude that capitalism is a system that is necessarily committed to racism and sexism and is therefore incapable of ever promoting equality and justice.

On a somewhat related note, Latin American feminists draw a direct link between capitalist relations, the expansion of the extractive frontier and the intensification of patriarchal structures in rural territories. Authors such as Segato (2016), Cabnal (2010) and Paredes (2010) maintain that in order to secure their power over resource rich territories and the populations that live there, state officials and capitalist entrepreneurs make use of pre-existing gender hierarchies to reinforce systems of male privilege, a process referred to as *la repatriarcalización de los territorios*. Capitalist relations thus intensify patriarchal practices and reinforce what Segato (2016: 16) calls *el mandato de masculinidad* whereby men are invested with power so long as they prove their capacity to expropriate value and exert domination over a territory. In her analysis of gender-based violence in Ciudad Juárez (2013), she shows how in the context of the savage forms of capitalism imposed upon this city, women’s bodies are perceived as territories to be conquered by men in their quest to achieve certification and acceptance. This was in turn connected to the concatenation of different forms of violence exerted against women and the wave of feminicides that had overcome the city since 1993. A similar pattern has been observed in rural territories where several authors and collectives observe a correlation between rising levels of gendered based violence and the spread of different forms of extractivism. In rural territories, they argue, the intensification of patriarchal structures is reflected in women’s diminishing access to land and water resources (Deere 2017), harsher working conditions, and rising levels of gender based violence, sexual harassment and abuse (Cabnal 2010, Paredes 2010, Segato 2014, Aliaga Monrroy 2019). At the same time, it has also resulted in women’s greater participation in resistance movements against extractive industries in their territories and the growing presence of women in the frontlines of anti-capitalist protests throughout Latin America.

As shown above, the work of feminist thinkers remains a crucial counterpoint to Marxist theories and a powerful contribution for understanding the inextricable connections between capitalism and patriarchy on a world scale. In particular, it shows that these systems rely on the perpetuation of gender, class and ethnic inequalities to accumulate power and profit. However, at times, their work seems to leave little space for difference and ambiguity which can lead to the reduction of women's diverse experiences to a single narrative of exploitation. While crucial for understanding the structural conditions that impinge on women's lives, such analyses are not always capable of capturing the contradictions that are inherent to capitalism and cannot explain unexpected events and outcomes. As a result, they may erase important differences in women's lives and ignore the choices they consciously make in order to survive and perhaps defend a certain degree of autonomy in the context of ongoing capitalist expansion. To draw attention to the importance of diverse subjectivities and how they are affected by but also exert pressure on dominant structures, I turn to the work of Foucauldian scholars and their different interpretations of present-day neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism as a mode of government

Foucauldian inspired analyses of capitalist transformations are concerned with growing inequalities, structural violence and power under neo-liberalism. Yet they differ significantly from the propositions of Neo-Marxist scholars. Taking distance from the latter's definition of neoliberalism as an ideological class project, Foucauldian post-structuralists view neoliberalism as a more general strategy to modify human behaviors in order to achieve the inclusion of diverse territories and populations within a broader project of governmentality (Boelens 2008, Foucault 2008, Fletcher 2010, Li 2011). From this viewpoint, neoliberalism is perceived as an 'art of government' that is centered on creating the appropriate social, political and economic conditions for markets to operate freely and efficiently (Fletcher 2010). To arrive at this end, they maintain, neoliberalism does not act directly to suppress or exclude non-market or alternative social structures and forms of organization. Instead, neoliberal discourses and policies act on the incentive structures that influence people's decision-making and motivates their actions. In Foucault's (2008) words, neoliberalism is about the 'conduct of conducts', or the regulation of people's behaviors to produce 'governable' subjects.

Within any society, the implementation of neoliberalism requires "permanent vigilance, activity and intervention" on behalf of a variety of state and non-state actors, working with relative autonomy to defend market interests (Gordon 1991, Foucault 2008). Through the implicit steering of people's beliefs, desires and aspirations, the 'free' market model is extended beyond the economic realm to all areas of life (Inda 2005, Foucault 2008, Fletcher 2010). Following this line of thought, critical scholars have dedicated important studies to the analysis of the discursive and material mechanisms deployed during processes of neoliberalization. A central question within their work concerns the production of "governable" subjectivities and counter conducts and how they enable or constrain capital and state interventions in people's lives (Agrawal 2005, Boelens 2008, Fletcher 2010, Li 2011). Drawing on Butler's (1999) philosophy of performative subjectivity, their work emphasizes that people are not only subjugated by power but also formed and shaped by its different manifestations. Within this view, "a power exerted on a subject [...] is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject" which posits both subjection *and* agency as central elements in forging power's dual attraction (Butler 1997: 11). From this perspective, subjects are

constantly influenced by different discourses and may simultaneously conform to and deviate from established social norms through their actions and desires.

Using a poststructuralist Foucauldian framework, different scholars emphasize the contingent and discursive nature of *all* subjectivities, their constitution through relations of power, the importance of studying the systems of power/knowledge in which they emerge and the rationalities that operate through them (Agrawal 2005, Li 2007). In doing so, poststructuralist theories disrupt the binaries implicit in Marxist inspired thought drawing attention to the subjection of both 'oppressed' and 'oppressors' under neoliberalism and the multiple selves and identities that develop as a result of neoliberal expansion. Such views provide a more nuanced explanation for the emergence and ongoing expansion of capitalist relations by focusing on power's 'productive' capacity and its ability to create neoliberal subjectivities by way of their inclusion within broader projects of socio-political transformation.

At the same time, they too present important limitations. Foucauldian theories have been challenged for their excessive focus on an all-encompassing idea of power and their tendency to explain how power is deployed while refusing to identify its source. Such views undermine the importance of local social relations and the situated forms of agency through which modes of domination are mediated, exercised and transformed. As a result, the historical trajectories and micro-political struggles of diverse social actors tend to be overlooked in favor of overly structural generalizations of complex social realities. In so doing, they fail to provide a theory of empowerment for those subjugated within unequal power relations and tend to deemphasize people's capacity to resist regulatory and disciplinary technologies.

Feminist scholars have further drawn attention to the omission of the experience of women in Foucault's work. As Federici (2004: ii) notes:

Foucault's analysis of the power techniques and disciplines to which the body has been subjected has ignored the process of reproduction, has collapsed female and male histories into an undifferentiated whole, and has been so disinterested in the 'disciplining' of women that it never mentions one of the most monstrous attacks on the body perpetrated in the modern era: the witch-hunt.

In her view, the witch-hunt clearly demonstrates "the repressive character of the power unleashed against women and the implausibility of the complicity and role-reversal that Foucault imagines to exist between victims and prosecutors in his description of the dynamics of micro powers" (ibid: 16). From a feminist perspective, women's bodies have historically been the main target and the privileged sites for the deployment of power techniques and power relations. As Deveaux (1994) observes, since the early 1970s, feminist studies have contributed to the construction of a discourse on power and the body rooted in the policing of women's reproductive functions, the effects of rape and gender-based violence against women and the imposition of implausible beauty standards upon women as a condition for social acceptability. Important feminist analyses trace these forms of violence against women and their intensification through different forms of biopower to the rise of capitalism and its concern with the accumulation and reproduction of labor-power. Thus, feminist analyses emphasize how many of the institutions of modern life perceive women and men differently and create gendered experiences for both, an important observation that remains absent in Foucault's work. As Bartky (1988: 63-64) rightly

asks: “Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?”

Instead of examining how power relations become engrained in modern institutions, feminist scholars have worked to unveil how power is experienced and contested by gendered, classed and racialized bodies in their everyday relations. Thus, they maintain that to understand how power works and the responses it elicits, we must explore how different people experience freedom and the restrictions imposed upon that freedom. Rather than treating those who do not resist as victims of false consciousness, many feminist scholars are dedicated to finding explanations that highlight the relevance of people’s everyday actions for change. Thus, for example, bell hooks (1984) writes about the importance of considering the possibilities for political transformation borne out of our daily life experiences. Her work provides a theory for a “politics of location” as a means to counter the effects of domination and highlights the dual nature of marginality, both as a “site of domination” and a “space of resistance”. In this sense, feminist writings draw attention to the importance of placing the subject’s interpretation and mediation of her experiences at the center of scientific inquiries on power and resistance. In other words, they attempt to produce an explanation of change as the result of a field of relationships between free subjects that are capable of action and transformation despite the influence of dominant powers in their lives.

This thesis takes such a feminist perspective as its point of departure, arguing that a greater focus on local actors, their stories and lives is crucial for understanding the heterogeneous dynamics of rural capitalisms. I further maintain that if no effort is made to understand the perspectives and agency of diverse people as self-aware social actors who are experiencing and acting to transform their realities, we are likely to be misled in our intellectual work. As Gibson-Graham (1996) observes, in the absence of a multiplicity of voices that have been historically excluded from dominant economic imaginaries or produced as little more than exploited laborers or condemned masses, mainstream theories have only been able to provide a limited range of potential responses to the degrading effects of capitalism. By incorporating diverse voices to the debate, it may be possible to escape the pitfalls of conjuring a hegemonic image of capitalism that only serves to reinforce its power over people’s lives.

Drawing from the above, an expanded concept of agency that considers the influence of overarching structures in people’s everyday lives *and* people’s capacity to influence and change those structures can significantly advance our understanding of present-day capitalisms. Actor-oriented approaches developed in the field of rural studies have long attempted to place knowing active subjects, capable of problematizing situations, processing information and deploying strategies in their everyday dealings with others at the center of scholarly analysis. These ideas are commonly traced to the early work of Norman Long (1989) with rural laborers and small farmers in Peru and Mexico. Long was able to demonstrate that within the limits of existing information, uncertainties and other constraints (physical, normative or political-economic), rural laborers and small farmers were able to find solutions to the problems they confronted. They learned to navigate within shifting fields of power and monitor their actions by observing how others reacted towards their own behaviors. For Long, the fact that social life is neither unitary nor built on a single discourse proved that no matter how restricted their choices, social actors faced some alternative way of formulating their objectives and deploying different modes of action. Further evidence of this was provided by what Long (1989) described as ‘interfaces’, the discrepancies and discontinuities that he perceived as inherent to the encounter between

diverse social actors who held conflicting or divergent interests and values. In a fundamental sense, writes Long (1989: 222), changes “can only result from the interactions, negotiations and social and cognitive struggles that take place” between local and external actors. Actor-oriented approaches that put the actions and perceptions of local knowing subjects at the center of analyses, he argued, could explain how interfaces were mediated in each context and how these encounters shaped and transformed outside interventions and structures from below.

Following Long, giving voice to people’s own knowledge and experience of state and capital interventions does not imply that structural analyses of broader political and economic processes should be abandoned. Instead, a greater effort should be made to connect micro and macro level political economic analyses that may provide greater insights into diverse capitalisms and how they may or may not relate to local forms of agency. In the following section, I further explore how the contributions of actor-oriented approaches and feminist theories can provide important insights to this discussion by drawing attention to the ways that different actors, both human and non-human, influence events and outcomes.

Landscape, environment and toxicity

Drawing on the emphasis of feminist scholars on the ever-changing nature of power and the multiplicity of responses it elicits, within more recent debates, monolithic representations of capitalism as a unified body or system have given way to an understanding of its complex, variegated and transitioning nature. It is now generally agreed that capitalism is a constantly evolving process that is mediated and transformed through its encounters with local cultures, politics and places (Tsing 2005, Heynen et al. 2007, Castree 2010, Peck 2010, Li 2014, Tsing 2015). Authors such as Fletcher (2010) further maintain that capitalism works in synergy with preexisting local institutions which affect how capitalist relations emerge and develop. Within these perspectives, capitalism is revisited as a historically and geographically determined social, cultural and economic system that exists nowhere in a pure state. Instead it is constantly mutating and adapting in order to expand its reach into new territories and domains of life to the point that few places today remain uncontaminated by its diverse manifestations.

Similarly, it is also generally agreed that one of the central problems with the expansion of capitalist relations is the way that they systematically degrade environmental conditions. The appropriation of nature as a resource for the perpetuation of capitalist relations of production and the ongoing forms of destruction that this entails has placed environmental concerns at the center of scholarly debates. Some, like Jason Moore (2015a&b), argue that we are now living in the Capitalocene or ‘The Age of Capital’, a period defined by the consolidation of capitalism as a world-ecology that is threatening the continuity of all life on earth. Extending these ideas, McBrien (2015: 116) introduces the concept of the ‘Necrocene’, which directly alludes to the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples under capitalism. He goes on to write that “extinction lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation” and is therefore antithetical to life. There is no doubt that the changing climate and extreme weather patterns, mass extinctions, deforestation, soil degradation and rising levels of toxification produced by the expansion of capitalist industries has resulted in one of the gravest ecological crises known to human history. This situation is further aggravated by a new era of financial capitalism that enables enterprises to invest in different extractive sectors worldwide and also switch from one investment site to the next virtually free of cost. Within this context, capitalist entrepreneurs do not have to care

about the full depletion and destruction of particular places and populations, as they can easily remove themselves and begin new cycles of dispossession, accumulation and contamination elsewhere. Another important issue concerns the belief in the capacity of technology to save the world from ecological calamities within dominant spheres of power. Whereas Marx in his nineteenth-century analysis of capitalism could still argue that plunder had its ecological limits as depletion would affect the entrepreneurs themselves, it may be said that neoliberalism has changed and, in some ways, temporarily “solved” this problem by developing new supposedly less contaminating but equally dangerous technologies. The idea that “capitalism can be the savior of its own negative ecological contradictions” (Büscher and Fletcher 2015: 2) is further promoted by the discourse of corporate social responsibility, the Green Economy and diverse forms of payment for environmental services promoted by some of the most powerful non-profit corporations worldwide as well as governments and development institutions. Through these mechanisms, entrepreneurs are able to continue their ‘business as usual’ instead of taking responsibility for the negative social and environmental impacts of their extractive practices on both humans and nonhumans (Büscher and Fletcher 2015).

The extent of today’s ecological crisis makes it difficult to open our awareness to the possibilities of other forms of life thriving in toxic and degraded landscapes. As feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015: 22-23) observes, “entranced by the expansion of certain ways of life over others”, scholars have “ignored questions of what else was going on”. From her perspective, part of the problem lies in the human-centric perspective that often guides mainstream social science scholarship. To begin to notice what else is ‘out there’ beyond the destruction wrought by capitalist growth, she proposes a multispecies reading of the world. The concept of ‘assemblage’ borrowed from ecology is her point of departure to begin to notice the open-ended gatherings that form between human and nonhuman life ways across the supply chain. She identifies these assemblages as ‘polyphonic’ noticing that their existence injects multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories into the dominant capitalist form. Tsing develops these arguments in relation to her multispecies ethnography of the matsutake trade which led her to an exploration of the degraded landscapes where the mushroom is foraged by irregular groups on the margins of society. For Tsing, the fact that the matsutake mushroom flourishes in human-disturbed forests symbolizes the promise of resurgence amid toxicity and “guides us to possibilities of coexistence with environmental disturbance” (p. 4).

While her work views the assemblages borne out of the matsutake trade as lessons in collaborative survival, this is somewhat moderated by the precariousness that the mushroom trade also calls forth. On the one hand, the reliance of the matsutake upon complex ecological arrangements makes its availability scarce and uncertain providing limited opportunities for people on the margins of the formal economy. On the other, mushroom picking is generally performed by an extremely flexible workforce that has been pushed to the margins of society and forced to seek refuge in the forests. While many mushroom gatherers associate their work with a particular form of freedom, the precarity it entails is not necessarily desired. Tsing’s ideas may be further challenged when applied to different contexts of capitalist destruction such as large-scale monoculture plantations or sites of oil, gas and mineral extraction. One might ask whether collaborative survival between humans and nonhumans is possible in places affected by extreme levels of toxification where contamination has made contact with nonhuman life a lethal matter. Sadly, this seems to be the case in many contexts as capitalist industries continue to dump toxic waste upon society’s most vulnerable, destroying the places where they live. Such observations

are important, but they should not detract our attention from Tsing's crucial contributions to the debate.

Her ethnography of the matsutake makes a very strong case concerning the importance of learning to notice what other forms of life are proliferating in the context of ongoing capitalist extraction. Central to her argument is the fact that global capitalism, although often producing 'blasted landscapes' is not a unitary and homogenizing system. It is therefore almost always possible to find diversity in the margins and interstices of capitalist developments. Her appeal to begin to notice the forms of life that thrive in degraded landscapes is central to the subject of this dissertation. Tsing's attention to the significance of nonhuman contributions to events and outcomes and her construction of a multispecies historical perspective further provides a necessary correction to human-centered perspectives that continue to ignore the influence of the nonhuman world altogether. In this sense, her work also opens up possibilities to expand the field of agrarian studies in enlightening ways owing to the importance that rural people attribute to the nonhuman world and its influence upon their actions and decisions. Essentially, as O'Brien (2018: 7) notes, Tsing's discussion "provides an important reminder that existence is neither self-contained and bounded but relational and entangled". This coincides with current debates among environmental justice scholars who look for integrating justice for vulnerable human groups and nature, at once (see, for instance, Schlosberg 2013). The importance of these debates is particularly evident in rural areas where natural conditions often shape people's identities, their diverse economies and ways of living.

Elsewhere, Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010a&b) have argued that rural production processes and capitalist forms of accumulation are always embedded within ecological dynamics that influence and shape particular and widely diverse outcomes for rural populations and the places where they live. They note that this may be related to the geophysical features of a particular territory, the materiality of raw materials and differences between specific kinds of natural resources and the kinds of technologies that may or may not be applied within a particular terrain. Other examples of the influence of the nonhuman world upon human events have been pointed out by Striffler in his study of agrarian modernization and peasant struggles in southern Ecuador. According to this author, geography "profoundly shaped the type of political and economic opportunities that have been open to, created by, and closed off from peasants and workers in different times and places" (2002:13). Striffler observed that peasant farmers living in the foothills of the cordillera were able to organize and resist the expansion of monoculture in their territories due to their access to lands and common resources. Their actions eventually inspired plantation workers to organize a general strike and reclaim lands for themselves and their families.

Another example of the influence of the nonhuman world can be deduced from people's responses to different types of extractive industries. As Boelens observes (personal communication), agribusiness extraction seldom leads to open or large forms of resistance. This is due in part to deeply entwined social relations of dependency between local populations and the owners of the means of production who may allow a minimum redistribution of wealth through the promotion of labor opportunities on their plantations or land leases for further agribusiness development. This is different from what may happen in cases of mining extractivism or hydropower where wealth is directly extracted and taken outside the region resulting in less interdependency and fewer labor opportunities for local populations, although there are always groups that benefit from these activities. In the first case, one is more likely to

find the everyday forms of resistance and hidden transcripts described by Scott while in the second, organized resistance may be an important feature in the strategies used from above and from below to regain control over territories and resources (see also Hidalgo-Bastidas and Boelens 2017).

In both cases, rising levels of toxicity and their negative impact on human health and the surrounding environment are making life more difficult for the residents of capitalist production zones and their capacity to reproduce their ways of life. As Haraway (2015: 160) observes, “right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge”. Even in cases where human and nonhuman assemblages may provoke changes to dominant structures, they are often forced to coexist with dangerous levels of environmental contamination and toxicity with important consequences for the future survival of rural people and their ways of life. Within this context, a multi-scale interregional perspective remains crucial for understanding the heterogeneity of capitalist practices and how they are reproduced and contested from below.

Capitalisms, crises and popular voices: a view from Latin America

In Latin America, the resurgence of neoliberal policies, the dismantling of government protections and the proliferation of diverse forms of labor and exchange among impoverished sectors of the population force us to think differently about common notions on power and resistance under neoliberalism. As Gago and Mezzadra (2017: 575) observe, the popular uprisings of the 1990s and early 2000s that contested the legitimacy of neoliberal market policies in the region produced an important shift in social life. The challenges posed by social movements and massive street protests opened the way for the election of “popular” and progressive governments in most countries in the region. In Ecuador, this moment was marked by the election in 2007 of the progressive leader Rafael Correa who went on to proclaim the end of the long neoliberal night that had plunged the country into the shadows. During this period which Correa acclaimed as *la revolución ciudadana*, “the citizens’ revolution”, the government assumed a central role in the organization of social and economic life. The return of the state was announced alongside the promise to reform all areas of government to overturn the rule of capital over people’s lives. This moment was defined by the enactment of hundreds of legislative measures that allowed the state to use and direct part of the rent obtained from natural resource extraction to finance public investments in infrastructure and a series of social redistributive programs for marginalized groups. Such measures improved the lives of the most impoverished sectors of the population and led to a significant reduction of socioeconomic inequalities in the country (Conaghan 2015). Yet they also fostered authoritarian political practices and made the government more dependent on the extraction and exportation of raw materials with often devastating consequences for rural populations and territories (Gudynas 2010, Acosta 2013, Svampa 2015). During this period, the state also reformed the Penal Code introducing a series of measures that were used to silence and criminalize critical views and population groups, in particular, indigenous federations and environmental activists who opposed the expansion of the extractive frontier. Due to the intensification of extractive activities, from large scale mining to agribusiness, oil drilling, commercial forestry, industrial fishing and the exploitation of offshore hydrocarbon reserves, throughout this period, Ecuador remained fixated within its traditional role as provider of cheap labor and raw materials for global markets producing new rounds of dispossession and contamination throughout the country (Latorre et al. 2015).

Other elements help explain the persistence of capitalist relations despite the opposition of vast sectors of the population. For example, in their analysis of capitalist expansions, Baud, Boelens and Damonte (2019) observe that as a result of ongoing adaptations and adjustments to the demands of national governments, the claims of local populations and consumer coalitions, Latin America saw the rise of 'benevolent' manifestations of capitalism, increasingly presented as 'sustainable', 'green', 'pro-poor' and even 'pro-indigenous'. These authors point to the existence of capitalisms – in the plural – that rely on state structures to reconfigure local territories and re-pattern social relations of access, use and control over productive resources. These actions generated benefits for the state which temporarily translated into increased public spending in infrastructure, health and education, producing a shift in the social landscape in Ecuador and most Latin American countries. Gago (2017: 5) describes this shift as the passage “from the misery, scarcity, and unemployment of the early twenty-first century (and the forms of struggle and resistance that emerged then) to certain forms of abundance found in new forms of consumption, work, entrepreneurship, territorial organization and money”. These new expressions, borne out of the precariousness experienced under neoliberalism, gave rise to the diversification of subsistence strategies and the proliferation of informal networks of labor and exchange.

Gago suggests that, as a result of the neoliberalism of the 1990s, in Latin America the majority of the population came to rely on their own economic institutions (of savings, exchange, loans and consumption) to ensure their subsistence and reproduction. Drawing on her extensive research in *La Salada*, one of Latin America's largest informal markets on the outskirts of the city of Buenos Aires, she shows how in response to 'neoliberalism from above' defined as a series of political and economic measures imposed by international institutions and national state mechanisms, people learned to combine diverse knowledges and potentialities to negotiate opportunities for themselves and their communities. Their actions resulted in the emergence of informal economies in the many crevices of capitalist and state structures. She goes on to write that these informal or popular economies are in many ways an offspring of capitalism itself and constitute a form of what Gago calls 'neoliberalism from below'. At the same time, they differ significantly from the dominant form and are in many ways contributing to its transformation through the reclamation of public spaces and the deployment of different rationalities rooted in popular pragmatics that are shaping the emergence of new urban and rural landscapes.

New ruralities in toxic circumstances

Central to the functioning of popular economies is the act of weaving together diverse relations and practices that can variously be cooperative, communitarian, conflictual or exploitative, “reconstructing a new political dynamic that overflows and qualifies neoliberalism itself” (Gago 2017: 5). In Gago's view, informal economies are “the origin of reality creation” and “a source of incommensurability” that introduces new ways of measuring value and creates new rules and institutions that operate on the street level (2017: 15). In this manner, those who sustain these informal networks, mainly women, migrant laborers and the unemployed, are generating important changes from below: they conquer spaces, challenge the city and create different ways of living almost in spite of dominant capitalist structures. In this sense, her work can be read alongside Holston (2008) and his use of the idea of *autoconstrução* which he derives from the auto-constructed spaces built from the ground up by rural migrants in the outskirts of major

Brazilian cities. For Holston (2008: 9), auto-constructed spaces function to sustain dominant forms of citizenship but are “also the conditions of its subversion”. In this sense, these spaces become strategic nodes to study the many ways in which capital and state interventions are modified, reinterpreted and refracted from below.

Both authors point to the value of people’s daily practices as they try to improve their lives and construct their own version of a dignified life. Such work shines a different light on the small domestic truths of everyday life and highlights the quotidian ways that people learn to negotiate and transform dominant structures so as to have their interests prevail. As Baud (2018: 15) observes, “the back and forth mutual constitution of quotidian activity and institutional change” explains “the political and social vitality of Latin American society and the ways Latin American populations have confronted the dramatic social, political and economic changes they have experienced”. Both Baud (2018) and Gago (2017) draw attention to the gendered dimensions of these negotiations and the crucial role of women in the maintenance and reproduction of popular economic alternatives and the relations of trust and solidarity that they often rely on. As Baud (2018: 27) argues, “*Confianza* is strongly gendered and often remains a female domain. Many of the strongest networks of *confianza* are clearly dominated by women”. In contrast to common interpretations that view informal networks as forms of exclusion, here they appear as the bedrock of communal relations and alternatives to capitalist degradations. Both Gago and Baud emphasize how subjects who are often categorized as “dispossessed” make use of their creativity to establish their own rules and structures and continue to exert agency in difficult and often repressive contexts. Larissa Lomnitz (1977: 208) makes a similar argument in her study of Mexico City where she observed that the urban poor resorted to relations of kinship, *compadrazgos* and friendships to solve their problems of precariousness and insecurity. Through practices of mutual aid, solidarity and reciprocity across multiple levels of interaction, people are able to somewhat divert the most negative effects of capitalist relations. In their everyday lives, they incorporate a variety of mechanisms that enable their survival and learn to combine and articulate their practices with other knowledges and ways of doing to have their interests prevail. In doing so, ordinary people manage to imprint different spatial and temporal dynamics into the landscape, contributing to the transformation of dominant forms. For Gago (2014:18), understanding popular dynamics as they emerge and adapt to shifting contexts is crucial for expanding our knowledge of how capitalism is translated and transformed both from ‘above’ and from ‘below’.

Although most of the above-mentioned authors draw examples from urban settings, their analyses also apply to rural contexts. In many cases, the kinds of social relations they describe can be traced to the rural origins of the residents of urban barrios and the practices they learned and inherited in the countryside. Historically, rural people have relied on social networks of trust and solidarity to survive in hostile environments, particularly in the wake of ongoing capitalist expansion. It has further been observed that capital and state developments are strongly rooted in rural worlds which are the origin of the cheap food, labor and energy that enable their growth. Thus, to fully understand the emergence of capitalist relations, their effects on people’s lives and the places where they live, we must return to the study of the rural countryside and the strategies deployed by those who remain despite capitalist degradations. In their pursuit of a dignified life, rural people draw on the many resources they have at hand to forge new relations among each other and their surrounding environment. These practices may result in the emergence of Tsing’s

(2015) polyphonic assemblages: the gathering and co-constitution of multiple spatial and temporal realities that are able to coexist and mutually transform each other.

To contribute to a better understanding of these assemblages, their historical roots and their importance for the reproduction of life in rural societies at present, this dissertation attempts to achieve three main objectives. First, it seeks to analyze and compare how capitalist relations emerge and develop in distinct rural contexts and asks whether or not we can speak of diverse capitalisms. It further explores whether such a proposition can enhance our understanding of how capital and state powers intervene and transform rural territories. Second, it draws attention to the intersecting gender, class, and racial/ethnic inequalities that underlie capitalist developments in rural worlds. This links, thirdly, to the differentiated gendered responses of rural peoples to the advancement of capitalist relations and the proliferation of diverse ways of living that are reconfiguring present day rural landscapes.

This research also attempts to address the effects of toxicity understood as a central structuring element of different capitalist manifestations. While many studies have focused on the conquests of indigenous-peasant movements and organizations in rural areas, few have considered the activities of ordinary residents and their daily efforts to produce situations that they recognize as just. I consider my own project of documenting the transformation of rural environments from below as a way of underlining the contributions of rural women and men to processes of social change while seeking to better understand the effects of capitalist degradations in their everyday lives.