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The "Green" Transition, (Sustainable) Development and Ireland: Political Ecology of a Semi-Periphery

Abstract: Although nominally an attempt to address socio-ecological crises and inequalities, the so-called "green" transition is today reproducing many of the injustices of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology. Oftentimes, this leads to conflicts on the frontlines of the injustices caused by the transition. However, such conflicts are intricately tied into global structural injustices that have led to the overdevelopment of some places at the expense of the development and socio-ecological wellbeing of others. In this paper, I explore how Eurocentric "development" has permeated Northern environmentalism and mainstream approaches to the "green transition". However, movements for environmental justice in such conflicts need not always unsettle the dominant ideologies of the system they oppose or seek solutions which dismantle systems of socio ecological injustice globally. Therefore, in this paper I also attempt to think through how Ireland's socio-ecological relations are situated within a global capitalist and neo-colonial system of dependency and exploitation, and how various anti-capitalist and anti-colonial critiques of development can form a useful political ecology lens for my research.

Keywords: "Green" transition, sustainable development; political ecology environmentalism; socio-ecological conflicts; Ireland.

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Introduction

The so-called "green" transition is underway today, in Ireland, Europe and worldwide. The term "green transition" essentially refers to the phase out of fossil fuels and their replacement with "clean" or renewable energy alternatives in response to climate change, as well as measures to tackle biodiversity loss and other ecological issues. Targets for emissions reductions have been set at various levels: the UN's Paris Agreement, the European Green Deal (EGD) and Irish law commit respectively to a 43%, a 55% and a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (*Paris Agreement*, 2015; *Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021*, 2021; European Commission, no date). Although we can be sceptical about how realistic it is for the measures being taken to meet these targets, or about whether those leading the transition are driven by benevolent motives, the transition is definitely having real, material impacts on the ground in specific places. As has been pointed out by many scholars and activists, the transition, in most cases, is (re)producing capitalist and (neo-) colonial relationships (Ajl, 2021; Sultana, 2022; Vela Almeida *et al.*, 2023; Bresnihan and Brodie, 2024).

Much work in political ecology, especially from anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and feminist scholars, has sought to unsettle dominant ideas of environmentalism as expressed or pursued by movements, governments, and international organisations, predominantly in the Global North. It is well accepted within critical political ecology that concepts such as "sustainable development" or "climate action" are not necessarily benevolent, instead often reproducing old forms of violence and oppression, as well as innovating new ones. This leads to a plethora of terms to describe the capitalist/colonial/patriarchal organisation of nature-society relationships, often in the name of the "environment", such as green capitalism (Tienhaara, 2014; Goldstein, 2018), green colonialism (Hamouchene and Sandwell, 2023; Lang, Manahan and Bringel, 2024) or climate coloniality (Sultana, 2022), (green) extractivism (Acosta, 2013; Bruna, 2022), the Capitalocene

(Moore, 2016a), Plantationocene (Davis *et al.*, 2019; Haraway and Tsing, 2019; Ferdinand, 2022) and others.

In this paper, I attempt to outline and build connections between various approaches within and beyond political ecology, in order to develop a framework for approaching my PhD research. My research focusses on contestations of the "green" transition in various socio-ecological conflicts in rural Ireland, and what these can tell us about contesting dominant paradigms of green capitalism and neo-colonialism. In my approach, I intend to transcend methodological nationalism - as well as a narrow focus on local contexts - by understanding place-based socio-ecological conflicts within the context of imperialism and the global history of accumulation, and the global interdependencies and structural injustices that this creates (Ajl, 2023b).

To do this, it is important to understand Ireland's place within the global capitalist and imperialist systems that shape the development of socio-ecological relations in specific places, and how movements interact within this context. To do this, I draw on world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2004) and world-ecology (Moore, 2011), and work that positions Ireland as a semi-peripheral space within this system, especially with regard to its ecological regime (O'Hearn, 2001; Deckard, 2016; Bresnihan and Brodie, 2024). This is important because neither the "green" transition as it manifests in Ireland nor any specific contestation of it can be fully understood without contextualising it within "Ireland's status within a fluid network of capitalist states" (Beatty and McCabe, 2024). Ajl (2021) and others have shown how Northern "progressive" Green New Deal plans have tended towards a methodological nationalism that obscures globally unjust flows of value and distributions of labour, and this is something which I wish to avoid.

Key to this paper will be an engagement with the question of (sustainable) development – i.e. what do the various imaginaries embodied in contestations over the "green" transition have to say about what alternatives should look like? Eurocentric notions of linear development – long critiqued by Marxist, feminist and post-development scholars (Rodney, 1972; Mies, 1993; Escobar,

2012; Moyo, Jha and Yeros, 2013) - became a "powerful mechanism for the cultural, social, and economic production of the Third World" (Escobar, 2015, p. 454) and increasingly came to mean expanded economic production (Schmelzer, 2024). Such logics pervade the "green" transition and environmental policies pursued by governments and environmental organisations in the Global North today (Vela Almeida *et al.*, 2023).

Many anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, feminist and other critiques of the "green" transition and hegemonic approaches to ecology share (either explicitly or implicitly) a critique of Eurocentric developmentalism. There is a reasonable consensus that the linear notions of development imposed on the Global South and peripheries through global processes of capitalism and imperialism have been damaging. However, a tension arises between different visions of alternatives: i.e. "whether emancipation lies in a distinct form of economic development or in alternatives to paradigms of development that are rooted in relations of coloniality" (Riofrancos, 2017, p. 278). For example, while Escobar (2015) considers the inclusion of the Indigenous/Latin American concept of *buen vivir/sumak kawsay/suma qamaña* within the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions – when those states, he argues, are continuing extractivism - as form of appropriation, Ajl (2023b) argues that such approaches dismiss the role of monopoly capital and imperialism in frustrating such state socialist construction, ignoring many alternative development projects that have been part of the history of socialist construction. In other words, is Eurocentric developmentalism reproduced within state projects of ecosocialist transition, or are large, antisystemic movements and state projects needed in order to achieve environmental justice in specific local contexts?

In what follows, I trace connections between Eurocentric environmentalism and development, and how these have become embodied within Northern "green transition" approaches. I then outline some approaches for understanding socio-ecological injustices within the capitalist world-ecology, and how they can be applied to Ireland's semi-peripheral context. Lastly, I explore the

tensions between different imaginaries of alternative transitions and (post)development models, and contemplate how such tensions can be reconciled.

Environmentalism, development and the "green" transition

The term "environmentalism", although often associated with a specific set of aesthetics within Northern media and political discourse, can refer to a variety of social movements, socio ecological philosophies, or specific policies and forms of governance. Much work in political ecology, especially from anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and feminist scholars, has sought to unsettle dominant ideas of environmentalism as expressed or pursued by movements, governments, and international organisations, predominantly in the Global North. The critique I outline here is against what Carrara and Chakraborty (2024) refer to as "hegemonic mainstream environmentalism (HME)". I will use this term to refer broadly to the set of movements, philosophies and governance practices that embody a Eurocentric approach to ecology and are commonly understood as synonymous with "environmentalism" in the Global North. In this section, I outline how HME movements and thought have internalised and reproduced Eurocentric and colonial notions of ("sustainable") development, that have since come to permeate the "green" transition.

The environmental movement is often commonly understood as emerging in the 60s and 70s in the Global North off the back of quite radical protests by a public becoming more aware of the health and ecological impacts of industrial capitalism (Sills, 1975; Slocombe, 1984; Hajer, 1990; Lifset, 2014), subsequently leading to the institutionalisation of environmental concern and governance (Rootes, 2003). However, this story about HME needs to be contextualised within a much longer history of ecological thought and action. Although concern about an explicitly imagined "environment" emerged in the Northern environmental movements of the late twentieth century, this was not the first

time that people developed – either implicitly or explicitly - specific socio-ecological imaginaries. The construction of an "environment" as separate from humanity or culture has a much longer ontological root in Global North societies. The Cartesian separation of the world into "closed totalities of Society and Nature" was crucial to the early development of capitalism and colonial conquest, resulting, for example, in the monoculture landscapes of the plantation and the expelling of certain humans from "Humanity" (Moore, 2017, p. 606). Furthermore, many anti-colonial thinkers and movements thought explicitly about the socio ecological relations of colonialism and how they could construct alternatives (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023).

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to briefly outline here how the Eurocentric paradigm of *development* became influential within HME. This paradigm embodies an evolutionary and linear understanding of history, which explains spatial differences between places as temporal differences along a linear line of "development" towards European and North American standards of living (Massey, 2005). This has been a "powerful mechanism for the cultural, social, and economic production of the Third World" (Escobar, 2015, p. 454), while discounting the continued role of colonial and imperialist structural injustices in maintaining differences in prosperity and living standards between places. Famously, Walter Rodney outlined how Europe underdeveloped Africa, arguing that Africa's underdevelopment was tied to Europe's development (Rodney, 1972). A developmentalist approach has been promoted for former colonies and the Global South by international organisations such as the UN; advocating for states to push industrialisation-led growth, the underside of which, however, is a continued relationship of dependency of the periphery on the core (Féliz, 2024). As such Eurocentric notions of development in the twentieth century became increasingly economised and progress increasingly came to mean expanded production, the paradigm of economic growth became an important component of development (Schmelzer, 2024). Growthism – the idea that wellbeing comes from the endless increase of economic production – was

influential in Fordist economic regimes in the North but has also been influential within other schools of economic thought, such as neoliberalism. It was the key ideology in most actually existing socialist state projects of the twentieth century (Schmelzer, 2024) and has remained stubbornly unbudging within large swathes of the Northern left and trade union movement (Barca, 2019).

Although Global North environmental movements may have in their early days expressed various critiques of Northern, capitalist development, HME has largely ended up reproducing Eurocentric ideologies through its embrace of eco-modernist and one-worldist visions. One clear example is the framework of "sustainable" development. Following the emergence of "environmentalism" throughout the Global North, a liberal consensus emerged in international politics around "sustainable development", especially after the Earth Summit in Rio, which sidelined many alternative voices and perspectives (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023). Sustainable development displaced environmentalism's earlier critiques of development within HME (Kaul *et al.*, 2022). According to Stiernström (2023, p. 662), it is "a political concept ascribed to activities (political programmes, investments, etc.) that seemingly pursue a 'state of sustainability'" while containing "normative, contentious or contradictory understandings of what sustainability and development entail". There is a trajectory from the concept of sustainable development to the notion of "green economy" and eventually the "green transition" that we know today (Vela Almeida *et al.*, 2023). "Sustainable" development embodies a reframing of the earlier Eurocentric idea of development, for example through the uncritical pursuit of growth within the SDGs (Kaul *et al.*, 2022). The contestation over what is "sustainable" or considered necessary for human progress contained within the logic of sustainable development is exemplified, for example, in how mining – an extractive activity – can be justified by its contribution to "sustainable development" (Stiernström, 2023).

However, counter-hegemonic ways of thinking about and shaping socio-ecological relations have always existed alongside HME. The rise of modern "environmental" concern among the Northern,

white middle classes must be situated within the context of similar concerns expressed by oppressed groups who made broader connections between ecological issues and other layers of oppression. For example, the concerns around pesticides raised in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* received much more attention than those of migrant farm workers in California (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023) or the 1974 strike by workers in Martinique against the use of pesticides and for safter working conditions (Ferdinand, 2022). Indeed, many movements throughout the world have mobilised around ecological issues but from radically different worldviews to that of HME. In response to the socio-ecological violence of colonialism, many decolonial movements and thinkers have given explicit thought to the construction of alternative socio-ecological regimes (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023), what Ferdinand (2022) refers to as *decolonial ecology*. Various terms have emerged to describe the myriad of socio-ecological movements that developed in the Global South and among racialised and marginalised peoples in the Global North, but which often differed significantly from HME in character and expression, such as the *environmentalism of the poor* (Guha and Martínez Alier, 1997) or *environmental justice* (see Bullard, 1990). The role of labour struggles in addressing socio-ecological crises and injustices has been highlighted in discussions of *working-class environmentalism* (Barca, 2012; Bell, 2020). Furthermore, anti-capitalist movements are increasingly centring climate and ecological crises in their critiques of capitalism. *Eco-socialist* thinking is increasingly in conversation with *degrowth* (see Hickel, 2022; Saitō, 2024), thus unsettling the Northern, capitalist logics of growth and productivity that had often remained unchallenged within socialist movements and state projects (Barca, 2019; Schmelzer, 2024).

In Ireland specifically, socio-ecological conflicts and various forms of environmentalism have been framed as a contestation between competing visions of development (Tovey, 1993). Whereas "official environmentalism" resembled the HME of Western Europe, "rural populist sentiment" emerged out of dissatisfaction with the state's development model. Many rural, place-based conflicts have involved a resistance to the effects of the state's

FDI-led model of development on the ground (e.g. objection to industrial facilities). This does not mean that such movements always develop explicitly progressive political visions or sophisticated critiques of imperialism and capitalism, but such contestation is nonetheless significant. Contemporary conflicts span a spectrum of interpretations: from sometimes limited and local understandings of energy justice and democracy (for example, around opposition to private wind farms), to anti-mining campaigns that are actively advocating for degrowth and forming alliances with Indigenous anti-mining struggles across the world.

While all these approaches vary in what they emphasise, the point is that HME and one-worldist approaches do not have a monopoly over how we think about restructuring socio-ecological relations in just and sustainable ways, and more liberatory alternatives are available. Therefore, "environmentalism", as it is commonly discussed in the Global North, usually refers to a very specific set of movements and socio-ecological imaginaries. Recognising this is an important first step towards analysing contemporary crises and imagining their resolution.

The socio-ecological imaginaries of HME have permeated dominant state and industrial approaches to ecology worldwide, leading to a focus on solutions such as "authoritarian protectionism through conservation policies and climate adaptation/mitigation projects predicated on visions of "pristine" nature, and ecological stewardship rules which nominate the individual as the critical and thus fail to hold accountable the powerful machinery of the market and state alliance" (Carrara and Chakraborty, 2024, p. 88), and what Kaul et al. (2022, p. 1150) call "one world sustainable development". These dominant ways of making socio-ecological problems visible today prevent us from adequately addressing the crises at hand (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023).

However, various counter-hegemonic forms of socio-ecological movements and thought have been instrumental in critiquing the ways in which HME has become translated into visions of "sustainable" development and "green" transitions in the Global North and international organisations. From the one-worl-

dism of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (Bresnihan and Millner, 2023), to the Necropolitics of COP26 in Glasgow (Sultana, 2022), hegemonic international approaches to the climate and ecological crises have prioritised the class interests of the world's (largely Northern) minority at the expense of the (largely Southern) majority. The COP15 Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 is an infamous example of this. There, the refusal of the US to consider the demands of many Global South countries, as well as Indigenous and climate justice activists, led to the failure of the negotiations. This event stood in stark contrast to a completely different form of "environmentalism" and vision of "development" expressed at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, organised in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2010, where an alternative framework around global justice and decolonial development was created (Dearing, 2023; Dawson, 2024). Though the distinction between Global North and South is still useful, it should not be a simple binary, and Ajl's (2023b) focus on how global processes interlock with local class structures is useful for illuminating possibilities for solidarity and paths forward. This is useful in thinking about Ireland, where a consideration of the comprador class helps us think about Ireland's position within global capitalist and imperial systems (McCabe, 2013, 2022).

In recent years, more and more large-scale climate transition plans have emerged globally. While many of the neo-Keynesian "Green New Deal" (GND) frameworks aim to reduce both emissions and inequality, they often reproduce ecomodernist frameworks and fail to address globally unequal value flows and distributions of labour, usually positioning the Northern (white) working class as the principle agent of change (Ajl, 2021; Heron and Heffron, 2022; Dawson, 2024). Meanwhile, clearly green capitalist appropriations of the GND, such as the European Green Deal (EGD), have been critiqued for their reproduction of neo-colonial relations that serve Northern capitalist interests (Dunlap and Laratte, 2022; Vela Almeida *et al.*, 2023). In this sense, such plans embody a methodological nationalism that has been common in approaches to sustainable

development (Kaul *et al.*, 2022), ignoring the global interdependencies that make a "just transition" in one place possible.

Such transition plans are examples of the ways in which HME and associated ideas of "sustainable" development have become internalised within Northern capitalist environmental governance. They continue to ignore the imperialist structures that allow for unjust distributions of labour and flows of value globally, enabling a resource-intensive energy transition in the North at the cost of more extraction in the South and peripheries. Meanwhile, on an ideological level, the transition maintains Eurocentric notions of what development should look like. These are essentially unchanged under the paradigm of sustainable development: Northern capitalist societies are to simply be made "green". Furthermore, it is still seen as possible for the whole world to reach these standards too, despite the fact that those structures and processes that make the transition possible in the North simultaneously make it impossible in the South.

"Sustainable" development remains largely unchallenged both within explicitly green capitalist approaches and the seemingly more progressive or social democratic GND plans, and even within certain left-wing and eco-socialist transition paradigms. Adequately addressing the socio ecological crises, therefore, involves not just addressing capitalism or reducing inequality, but also dismantling unjust socio-ecological relations on a global scale and unsettling the ideas that have been central to capitalist and colonial development.

Political ecology of a semi-periphery

We live in a highly unequal and unjust world when it comes to the distribution of wealth, resources, environmental burdens, labour and flows of value. Here, I explore how this has been theorised through world-systems theory and world-ecology, what Ireland's position is within the world system, as well as what certain frameworks for understanding the socio-ecological injustices of this system tell us about how to rupture from it and create alternati-

ves. I then contemplate how best to approach questions of socio-ecological justice in a European semi-periphery such as Ireland.

Countering the Eurocentric notion that poorer states can catch up with richer ones through economic innovation and growth, World Systems Theory (WST) emerged as an attempt to account for the structural underdevelopment of the periphery to the benefit of the core, and the unequal divisions of labour and flows of value that this entails (Wallerstein, 2004). When world-systems theorists talk of core and peripheral states, they are really talking about the relationship between production processes. They are not, then, talking about stages along a linear trajectory of development. There is a constant flow of surplus value from producers of peripheral products to producers of core-like products, and thus from peripheral to core states (Wallerstein, 2004). This is essentially a relational and spatial understanding, one that does not flatten spatial differences between places into temporal differences of stages of development (Massey, 2005). WST helps us to understand how the integration of various regions of the world into the core-periphery division of labour created and perpetuated poverty, rather than alleviating it (Sullivan and Hickel, 2023).

World-ecology has its roots in WST, but with a more explicit ecological focus, and an understanding of capitalism itself as a socio-ecological regime, rather than something that acts upon nature (Moore, 2011). Jason Moore contextualises ecological crises within the long history of imperial and capitalist development, demonstrating how capitalism and ecology developed through each other, and how capitalism acts through socio-ecological relations (Moore, 2016a). In this understanding, the anti-ecological character of capitalism did not emerge with the burning of fossil fuels for industrial production in England in the 18th century, but rather with the plantations of early colonial conquest in the 15th century, and the new ways in which this system started to organise both human and non-human nature (Patel and Moore, 2017; see also Ferdinand, 2022). Understanding contemporary ecological conflicts in Ireland, therefore, means understanding how its socio-ecological relations were shaped by British colonial conquest

and its consequent incorporation into global capitalism, as well as its place within capitalist and imperialist structures today (Deckard, 2016; Ruuskanen, 2018; Bresnihan and Brodie, 2024).

WST and world-ecology approaches have been used to examine Ireland's ecological regime, situating Ireland as a semi-periphery within the global capitalist system. Although by many mainstream measures one of the wealthiest countries in the world, its heavy reliance on foreign investment and its unique mix of core and peripheral economic activities (O'Hearn, 2016), as well as its role as a "transistor zone" for the transmission of value between the core and periphery and for new modes of financialisaton and speculative entrepreneurship (Deckard, 2016), tell a different story. Although this neoliberal development model has improved living standards by some indicators in recent decades and there are class interests that benefit enormously from it, the idea of Ireland's miracle transition from being an impoverished, colonised nation to a wealthy core state is, in many ways, merely the illusion of deceptive economic statistics (e.g. GDP). For example, Ireland's labour income share of the total wealth generated in the country is the lowest in Europe by a significant margin (International Labour Organisation, 2024). Ireland is also predicted to have the lowest public investment as a percentage of GDP in the EU in 2025 (European Commission, 2024).

For the purposes of this paper, "ecology" is not only about trees, rivers, climate and wildlife, but also the legacy of the Celtic Tiger, the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC), and Ireland's role as a tax haven: Ireland's "neoliberal ecological regime" (Deckard, 2016). Bresnihan and Brodie (2024) describe how the state's pursuit of foreign direct investment (FDI) since the 1950s attracted investment not only through low corporation tax rates, but also through a "postcolonial ecological regime" that devalued and differentially produced landscapes, resources and infrastructures, particularly in rural regions. They place an emphasis on how the state's development model since the 1950s has created the ecological conditions for foreign multinationals in Ireland and trace a continuity of extractive logics across distinct phases of postcolonial development.

An early example of contestation of this ecological regime was the state's strategy of attracting pharmaceutical industries to rural Ireland in the 70s and 80s, leading to the transplanting of hazardous production from core countries (mainly the US) where environmental awareness and regulation was growing. This led to a series of place-based protests around the local consequences of this development (see Allen, 2004). Today, in order to facilitate the extraction and infrastructures needed for the "twin green and digital transition" (European Commission, 2022), over 25% of land area on the island of Ireland has had prospecting licenses issued to foreign mining companies (Greene, 2022), while in the South, the amount of energy projected to be used by data centres is predicted to be 10 times higher than the European average by 2030 (Ryan-Christensen, 2022). Although these issues are increasingly the concern of movements, there is very little willingness to question the logics of growth and extraction within state climate policy. Instead, resources are prioritised for transnational capital-based development rather than any type of sovereign development aimed towards the provision of social needs. Therefore, thinking spatially about Ireland's position as a semi-periphery within the capitalist and imperial world-ecology is a useful starting point for understanding place-based socio-ecological conflicts in my research. However, it is important to bear in mind how the Irish state participates in globally unjust structures which perpetuate neocolonial patterns of exchange, even in the name of sustainability, for example, through the European Green Deal (Vela Almeida *et al.*, 2023). Next, I explore three concepts used to frame and theorise such spatial and socio-ecological injustices: ecologically uneven exchange, (green) extractivism and (green) sacrifice zones.

Ecologically uneven exchange

Ecologically unequal exchange (EUE) has its roots in world-systems theory's and critical development studies' concept of uneven exchange, which links a country's economic performance not to its internal dynamics, but its position within an unequal

transfer of labour and value from periphery to core (Emmanuel, 1972; Amin, 1976). This has remained an important means of maintaining colonial economic relations in the post-colonial period (Hickel, Sullivan and Zoomkawala, 2021).

Countering the failure to consider the material substance of traded commodities within much development studies, EUE aims to theoretically explain the uneven transfer of natural resource assets and ecologically damaging production and disposal activities between countries or regions (Jorgenson, 2016; Givens, Huang and Jorgenson, 2019; Hornborg, 2023). This theory has highlighted the material dimension of global trade, which orthodox economics – with its conceptual separation of society and nature – usually fails to do (Hornborg, 2023). Recent work has been concerned with how industrial relocation displaces or aggravates pollution, the unequal use of atmospheric space for the absorption of CO_2, inequalities in the mass of material exchanges, and on unequal climate vulnerability (Ajl, 2023b).

(Green) extractivism

The concept of extractivism (*extractivismo*) has roots in the Latin American context, especially in relation to the resistance of Indigenous peoples and peasants against the ecological and social damage caused by the extraction of natural resources. Chagnon et al. (2022, p. 763) define extractivism as "a complex of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, depletion, and non-reciprocity. Extractivism depends on processes of centralization and monopolization, is premised on capital accumulation, and includes diverse sector-specific development and resistance dynamics." Extractivism is a popular lens in political ecology, and increasingly scholars are using it to examine efforts to "green" capitalism and empire. In the era of the "emissions imperative", Bruna (2022) uses the term "green extractivism" to refer to both the resource grabbing and the expropriation of emissions rights

from the rural poor that is associated with many environmental policies. Green extractivism is differentiated from its traditional variety not only in its material nature (e.g. extracting lithium for batteries as opposed to oil for combustion), but also through the discourses and imaginaries created to legitimise it in the name of progress and sustainability (Voskoboynik and Andreucci, 2022).

However, extractivism has not only been used to critique capitalist relations, but also socialist and state-led development projects in which activists criticise the continuation and reproduction of extractive logics, even though the projects themselves may be attempting to rupture with the imperialist and capitalist system that has produced such injustices in the first place. For example, following Latin America's "pink tide", there was a realignment around the discourse of extractivism as the critique once levelled against foreign capital and imperialist power was now levelled by movements against their own states, with whom they had previously been aligned but who they saw as reproducing a development model based on colonial logics of extraction (Riofrancos, 2017).

(Green) sacrifice zones

The concepts of extractivism, EUE, and the capitalist world-ecology all imply a spatial relationship in which healthy socio-ecological relations in one place are *sacrificed* for the benefit of another. Such spaces are often referred to as sacrifice zones – places where "the physical and mental health and the quality of life of human beings are compromised in the name of economic development or progress - but ultimately for the sake of capitalist interests" (De Souza, 2021, p. 220). Infamously, in 1991 a chief economist from the World Bank explicitly called for the relocation of the most polluting industries to the "Least Developed Countries", because, among other reasons, mortality is already high in these places and the demand for a clean environment low.

Like extractivism, the lens of sacrifice zones is increasingly being applied to the green transition. Zografos and Robbins (2020) describe *green sacrifice zones* as ecologies and spaces where

the sacrifice associated with green energy physically manifests itself. They associate this with the coloniality of practices whereby pastoral or Indigenous lands are considered underutilised and in need of "salvation by newness". Stiernström (2023) critiques the justification of mining in rural areas of the Global North in the name of "sustainable development". He defines a sacrifice zone as a "region whose continued existence is dependent on a willingness to sacrifice resources in order to sustain itself" (p. 665). Peripheral countries and regions, as discussed above, are usually dependent in this way. This definition frames the extraction in the sacrifice zone not as an anti ecological choice, but rather as a way of surviving within the broader system. Whether this happens by force or by coercion, we need to understand the ways in which a sacrifice zone in one particular place is connected to global systems of injustice.

Rupturing with the system and planning for the future

These concepts are all useful for developing understandings of how the injustices of the world ecology materialise in and between specific spaces, and what the logics driving this are. It is relatively easy to critique the fact that a certain place is reliant on the extraction of resources, or that there is unequal ecological exchange between core and periphery. However, it is when we try to envisage alternatives that these concepts become trickier. One clear example of this is Riofrancos' (2020) account of contestation around continued extractivism under a left-wing government in Ecuador.

Riofrancos (2020) explores contested "resource radicalisms" in Ecuador: a state-led project of collective ownership of oil and minerals (and the redistribution of revenues for social goals) versus movements that reject extraction altogether. People and movements that were initially opposed to the same logic of extraction by foreign companies at the expense of local communities and national revenue became divided, as the price of redistributing wealth and increasing living standards was continued dependency on the extraction and export of natural resources. For many rural and Indigenous communities at the frontline of the extraction,

this simply represented a substitution of corporate actors with state ones. However, as Riofrancos (2020, p. 4) points out, natural resources in such conflicts are "intensely local" in their social and ecological impacts, while simultaneously being tied up in international supply chains and trading structures. The developmental options of a country like Ecuador are often limited, and such decisions need to be seen in the context of the subjugation of (semi-) peripheral ecologies to global capitalist and imperialist interests.

At the same time, I have earlier referred to how colonial and extractivist logics of development have often been reproduced and sustained within socialist movements and projects (Barca, 2019; Schmelzer, 2024). This is where postdevelopment would argue for an ontological reorientation of what the goals of any transition should be (see Escobar, 2020), away from "paradigms of development that are rooted in relations of coloniality" (Riofrancos, 2017, p. 278). However, cases such as that of Ecuador raise important questions about alternatives. Ajl (2023b) argues that the lens of extractivism does not give adequate attention to planning for the future and that it displaces politics onto the periphery. For him, it usually undertheorises "development", conflating a variety of production processes that embody different class interests. Clearly, although from the perspective of frontline communities, an end to extraction is "vital to the project of decolonising a continent in which the history of resource extraction is intimately tied to that of conquest and subjugation" (Riofrancos, 2020, p. 12), such claims run into difficulty when attempts to enact change come into conflict with global structural injustices that limit a country or region's developmental paths. It is not enough, it seems, to oppose specific place-based extractivist projects without thinking about how to rupture with these systems that they are tied into, and contemplating alternatives.

Ajl (2023b) levels similar critiques towards EUE, for its failure to engage with value flows and the global structure of monopoly capital and imperialism. Instead, he reframes the theory to consider "the unequal use and access to non-human nature through monopoly/imperialist control of world trade relations, as

they interlock with local class structures, which are implicated in national-level primitive accumulation – neocolonialism" (2023b, p. 28). The uneven exchange which causes socio-ecological underdevelopment of and injustices in the peripheries cannot be understood outside of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecological system. However, this position also considers the local dynamics with which these systems interact. The response to extractivism (or the local effects of EUE, or the creation of a sacrifice zone), therefore, are informed by "local rationalities" (Cox and Nilsen, 2014; Biocca, 2023): i.e. how people on the frontlines of these processes relate to the structural injustices imposed on them in a myriad of ways, depending on various local factors.

Political ecology of a semi-periphery: Ireland

The lenses of (green) extractivism and sacrifice zones are becoming increasingly popular to understand contested ecological transitions in Ireland; from mining (Cirefice, Mercier and O'Dochartaigh, 2022; McGovern, 2023) to data centres (Brodie, 2024). Such lenses often help people make sense of experiences at the front lines of extraction, and, to an extent, the spatial injustices this entails. But, as argued throughout, the phenomena of extractivism or sacrifice zones emerge within a broader capitalist and imperialist world-ecological system. Understanding how this can be transcended in any one localised place also requires an engagement with this system and its structures and power dynamics.

I argue that there is a need for a complex understanding of Ireland's position in the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology which can transcend methodological nationalism, but does not fall into the binary trap of seeing Ireland either as a victim or culprit in unequal exchange. This understanding must also transcend a localism which fails to see place-based struggles in the context of the wider political economy (I elaborate on this further later). In reality, these global structural injustices are mediated by both global and national class interests which create unjust socio-ecological relations at different scales and in different spaces. This means that, for example, challenges to the extractivism

of data centres – often expressed by NGOS in terms of moratoriums and legal regulations (e.g. Friends of the Earth Ireland, 2024) - need to reckon with how the intense concentration of data centres in Ireland is related to the country's position within the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology, its current development model, how this form of development impacts on other places, and the factors that would hinder or facilitate alternatives. As Moore (2016b, p. 94) has argued "Shut down a coal plant, and you can slow global warming for a day; shut down the relations that made the coal plant, and you can stop it for good." Similarly, preventing one data centre or one gold mine will not change the underlying socio-ecological relations that have led Ireland to be so dependent on multinational capital.

Alternative visions of transition

The discussion so far has centred around questions of development in socio-ecological transitions. There is, more or less, a consensus within critical political ecology and adjacent fields that the current hegemonic model of (sustainable) development reproduces Eurocentric notions of progress in service of capitalist accumulation. However, as discussed already, antisystemic, state-led projects to take natural resources into national ownership have also sparked conflict due to their continued extraction of those resources, continuing the hardship for those on the frontlines of extractive violence (Escobar, 2015; Riofrancos, 2020). This raises many questions about the material and ecological reality of meeting the developmental needs of the world's population, normative ideas of wellbeing and human progress, and the role of states and national liberation struggles in breaking with the structures that prevent socio-ecological justice and sovereign development.

Transitioning away from the current capitalist and imperialist system and towards more just alternatives will necessarily be messy. One broad school of thought that is trying to grapple with the messiness of this transition, and around which many of the tensions I am describing become clear, is degrowth. Degrowth

refers to the overall reduction of material economic throughput globally, in order to reduce ecological impacts and redistribute resources towards human needs and development. Although there is some legitimate scepticism of degrowth positions that actually perpetuate colonial injustices (e.g. Kothari, 2024), degrowth scholarship is increasingly anti colonial and ecosocialist in nature, dealing explicitly with the question of development: i.e. how can we bring the world towards socio-ecological convergence, where genuine developmental needs can be met in the South without the plunder that feed the excesses of Northern consumption? (see Hickel, 2021).

Although the term degrowth itself largely originated within Northern academia, many critiques of growth that have influenced it come from the South (Hickel, 2021), as well as European socialist and world-systems thinkers (Heron and Eastwood, 2024). However, the term's Northern roots have led to scepticism by some Global South scholars. On the one hand there is a fear that degrowth may not be appropriate for the South, where people are still deprived of basic needs (Kothari, 2024), while some degrowth positions fail to differentiate between the developmental aims of different kinds of economic activity (Ajl, 2023b). On the other hand, there is a fear that even radical degrowth, with its focus on leaving space for Southern, decolonial development, implies a continuation of the "catching-up" logic of Eurocentric developmentalism (Escobar, 2015). Both Kothari (2024) and Escobar (2015) point to worldviews and practices of well-being that are Indigenous to or rooted in Southern societies, such as *swaraj*, *ubuntu* and *buen vivir,* as more appropriate than Northern-imposed "transition discourses" (Escobar, 2015) that potentially reproduce Eurocentric developmentalism. Both point to the potential and need for advocates of degrowth and of these worldviews to work on commonalities while respecting diversity, existing together in a pluriversal perspective. Such *postdevelopment* scholarship perspectives remain largely sceptical of state power and large-scale developmentalist projects: i.e. of the control, domination and the denial of the 'village world' by the 'state world' (Escobar, 2020, p. 18).

Meanwhile, to many others, "development" has a very different meaning, focussed instead on rupturing with the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology and *developing* towards genuine human needs and self-determined goals. Ajl (2023) argues that Escobar's pluriversal approach emphasises a vague "modernity" instead of neocolonialism and imperialism, and ignores alternative, socialist developmental projects. Development, therefore, is not understood as synonymous with Eurocentric *developmentalism*, but instead as inclusive of "counterforces" to imperialism, such as Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nepal, and their respective questions of national liberation (Moyo, Jha and Yeros, 2013, p. 113). While acknowledging that Eurocentric developmentalism has been a weapon of imperial domination, the work of scholars such as Walter Rodney (1972) has shown the existence of *Third World* or *anticolonial developmentalism* (Temin, 2023). Though not necessarily degrowthers, such scholars have much more in common with radical degrowth positions (a consideration of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology and its underdevelopment of the peripheries, and an understanding of *development* beyond *Eurocentric developmentalism*) (see Hickel, 2021; Hickel, Sullivan and Zoomkawala, 2021; Hickel *et al.*, 2022). Féliz (2024) argues that an increased convergence between degrowth and Marxist dependency theory in the peripheries, involving a focus on delinking and an elaboration of new goals and policies, has the potential to strengthen the degrowth position.

It is important to highlight that the tension I am outlining here is not a complete disagreement or contradiction. Such scholarship is in general thinking about how to counter the socio-ecological violence and injustices of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology. Of course, any attempt to do this will require both an unsettling of hegemonic ideas and goals, as well as an engagement with the material realities and constraints of imperialist global structures. And while it is fair to say that some socialist projects and movements have reproduced Eurocentric goals of developmentalism and growth, it is important not to conflate distinct models of development and to recognise the many

peripheral, Indigenous and subaltern projects and movements towards an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and ecological form of development (Ajl, 2023a). Furthermore, engaging with large-scale transitions thinking, and the role of states and national liberation struggles, does not preclude the existence of multiple worldviews, and bottom-up democracy and sovereignty within this.

While Escobar (2015) does acknowledge the possibility for Northern "transition discourses" to exist alongside a plurality of other worldviews, and degrowth literature is increasingly less Eurocentric, I argue that there is useful work within and adjacent to political ecology that integrates these different perspectives much more holistically. Ferdinand's (2022) *Decolonial Ecology* does this quite well: through the poetic metaphor of the slave ship, he shows the contestation between and erasure of epistemologies and relationships with the non-human world, while also positioning the Caribbean's colonial plantation economy within the relations of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology (though without using that language). Such work approaches the socio-ecological crisis through different language and epistemologies than (mainly) Northern Marxist WST and world-ecology scholars, but their work is highly compatible and complementary.

Ferdinand defines decolonial ecology as follows: "Beyond the anticolonial reappropriation of collective responsibility for resources, it is concerned with overthrowing the economic ideology that turns humans and non-human living environments into resources serving an unequal capitalist enrichment" (p. 177). He points to numerous concrete struggles encompassed by decolonial ecology, which are needed to bridge the gap between social and environmental movements. Thus, it is about overthrowing the capitalist and colonial world-ecological system, unsettling its dominant ideologies, and allowing the centring of others. Perhaps this can be achieved by what Bresnihan and Millner (2023, p. 130) refer to as *resonance*: building connections between "diverse forms of struggle and inquiry, rather than the building of momentum around a single way of framing and solving a problem".

However, although the tension I have described is not irreconcilable, I argue it is important to take a stance on some of the issues it raises. I remain wary of approaches that romanticise peripheralised places and ways of life, or which approach the local dynamics of a conflict as separate from the material conditions and relations of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology. Furthermore, I do not follow approaches which outright reject movement engagement with state power, in the same way that we must avoid state-centric approaches. Instead, I aim to "steer a strategic course between anti-statism on the one hand and state-centrism on the other hand", acknowledging how "movements from below develop historically in relation to the hegemonic projects of social movements from above" (Nilsen, 2010, p. 200).

Ireland is an interesting case study due to its semi-peripherality: there is a need to address the immense wealth being created here, and both the domestic and foreign underdevelopment which facilitates that. Challenging Ireland's development model will require an unsettling of our conceptions of wellbeing and progress. The FDI-led model is commonly understood as having brought increases in living standards in recent years. Therefore, such a challenge means rethinking what prosperity looks like and where it comes from. This will also require a deep engagement with the reality of actually existing global capitalist and imperialist relations, Ireland's place within them, and what projects for sovereign and ecological development may look like in that context. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary and essential: decentring the epistemologies that led to led to Eurocentric developmentalism and growthism is essential so as not to let them become reproduced within any proposed alternatives.

In Ireland, some movements involved in place-based socio--ecological conflicts are doing the work of building *resonance* with Indigenous and other Global South communities facing similar threats (e.g. see Cirefice and Sullivan, 2023; Derry Now, 2024). I argue that while such practices are essential for movement building and for building an understanding among communities and activists of the historical and spatial processes of the world-eco-

logy that are leading to such injustices, it is also important to avoid any romanticisation or essentialisation of an intrinsic pre-colonial and ecological way of life in Ireland (e.g. see a discussion of paganism in Irish environmentalism Lane, 2023). To argue for the preservation of a plurality of "Indigenous" and local worldviews and ways of life (Escobar, 2015), in a place like Ireland, is tricky, due to the *mestizaje* (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021) of Irish society and the increasing use of such concepts of purity by the far right. Rolston and McVeigh (2021) argue for an embrace of *mestizaje*: the messiness and openness of Irish society and identity, rather than romantic or purist notions. This is essentially a call for a politics not built on identity, but rather choice, thus opening up the possibility of making imaginative decisions about liberatory and just futures. Dealing with the actually-existing realities of the interdependencies and relations of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology will require imagination and innovation. Decolonising our ideas of the wellbeing and progress, then, comes from this, rather than notions of returning to romanticised local worldviews or pre-colonial socio-ecological relations. This does not at all mean that the transition must be top-down and dismissive of local variations in worldviews and practices, but rather it is a call for a more participatory democratic transition (see the following dicsussion of the Cuban agroecological transition: Ratchford, 2021), which allows for differentiation between people and places, and is also cognoscente of interconnections and relations within the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will recap the main arguments of this paper and briefly outline how the political ecology approach I have outlined is relevant to my research project. First, I have shown how colonial and capitalist notions of development permeate today's "green" transition, perpetuating older structures and processes of injustice. Second, I have positioned Ireland within the semi-periphery of the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology, and argu-

ed that understandings of place based socio-ecological conflicts must take account of this. Third, I have argued that we need to bridge the tensions between ideological and materialist critiques of development in the "green" transition. This will require a deep engagement with questions of what kind of progress and development movements want, and how different levels of power (e.g. the state) can be leveraged effectively. Although these approaches are not necessarily antagonistic - a just transition will look different in different places, and will necessarily incorporate many worldviews and ways of life - building resonance and solidarity between movements and peoples will require engagement with the state and global scales, as well as with large-scale transition projects. The structural injustices of the world-system cannot be avoided, and the space for such a politics is opening up more and more. For example, the ongoing colonial genocide in Palestine is increasingly being framed as an ecological issue in its own right, with commonalities between the systems that drive colonialism and the climate crisis being highlighted (Hughes, Velednitsky and Green, 2023; Abu Zuluf, Bresnihan and Rowan, 2024). Meanwhile, some climate justice movements (originating from very different positions) are increasingly seeing the decolonisation of Palestine as part of their own struggle (e.g. Thunberg and Fridays for Future Sweden, 2023). Equally, the absence of such an analysis, given the capitalist and imperialist structures and relations underpinning colonial and socio-ecological violence, should be indicative of a type of politics that does not offer the type of analysis needed to address the crises at hand.

A key question then, is how thinking through all of this is useful for researching socio-ecological conflicts in rural Ireland? In my research, I will be analysing where movements and campaigns position themselves on the issue of development in the "green transition" and how they position their struggles in relation to the capitalist and imperialist world-ecology. I am interested in observing this in how they articulate their politics and through their actions. Research on socio-ecological conflicts in Ireland up until now has tended to focus on the place-based conflicts

themselves, their grievances and dynamics (e.g. Cirefice, Mercier and O'Dochartaigh, 2022; Gorman, 2022). Instead, incorporating a global perspective, my research should broaden this by looking at what elements of the political ecology approach I have described above are articulated by or influential to movements in place-based struggles, or whether their praxis actually raises other dimensions not explored here or in the literature. I am, therefore, not just interested in how a Just Transition looks in the specific sites of my research, but also how these sites fit into a globally just transition.

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