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Understanding Amazonia: From Interdisciplinary to Transdisciplinary Challenge

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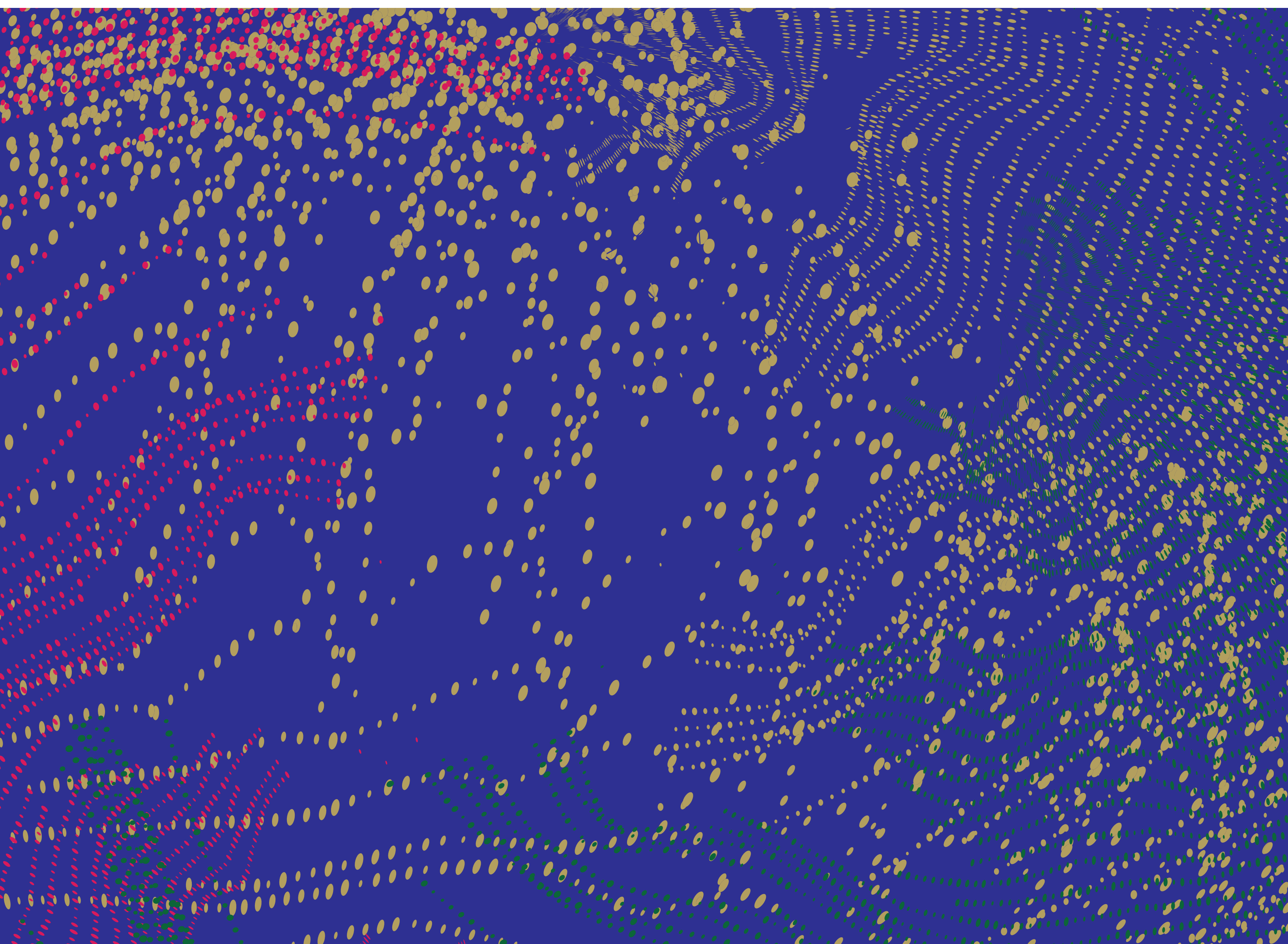

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Understanding Amazonia: From Interdisciplinary to Transdisciplinary Challenge

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Thinking about the intersection of environmental studies and the Amazon region has occupied my career since 2001 when the National University of Colombia–Amazonia inaugurated a master's program in Amazonian studies.[1] The relationship between environmental humanities and Amazonian studies is extraordinarily complex, and to make sense of it here I have chosen three interrelated themes or subjects on which to focus: territory, political ecology, and the imaginary. In the context of globalization, Amazonia is experiencing important new processes of territorialization and reconstruction and, as such, has been converted into the paradox of a *global* region. Complexity of Amazonia as a megaregion includes disputed frontiers and borders, ethnocentric and civilizing expansions, intersecting trajectories of empires, states, and commodities, and other activities that transgress political borders. The creation of this global Amazonia is closely related to the contemporary environmentalization of Amazonia, and this calls for viewing the region from the perspective of political ecology, which requires contextualizing imaginaries of the Amazon region in historical perspective, including its contemporary ecological imaginary.

[1] Since 2014 the university also offers a doctorate in Amazonian studies.
I would like to acknowledge university colleagues from whom I have benefited: Juan A. Echeverri, Carlos Zárate, Santiago Duque, Gabriel Colorado, and Germán Ochoa. Thanks are also due to colleagues from sister universities in Brazil: Rosa Acevedo, Luis Aragón, Edna Castro, Héctor Alimonda, Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves, and Roberto Guimarães; to colleagues from FLASCO Ecuador, especially Nicolás Cuvi; and others from Iquitos and Lima, especially Luisa Elvira Belaúnde; Carlos Rodríguez from the Dutch NGO Tropembos; and, lastly, the Amazon Georeferenced Socio-Environmental Information Network (RAISG). Alberto Vargas of the University of Wisconsin–Madison has hosted me three times between 2010 and 2020, and I have received support from the Tinker Foundation and the Fulbright Commission. Thanks as well to Mathieu Denis from the International Science Council, who encouraged me to write this essay for the World Humanities Report.

Amazonia as Territory and Frontier

The Invention of Amazonia

The largest river in the world has many names of native origin, such as Pará (a Tupí name) or Imani (a Witoto name). The name "Amazonas" is attributed to Gaspar de Carvajal, who chronicled Francisco de Orellana's 1538 voyage on behalf of the Spanish crown.[2] Brazil, in contrast to Peru and Colombia, does not even call the entire Amazon River by the name "Amazonas." Rather, Brazilians use "Amazonas" to refer to the river that begins in Manaus—at the intersection known as the *encuentro de dos aguas* (meeting of two waters) where the Solimões and the Negro Rivers meet—and that continues to the estuary where it meets the Atlantic Ocean, near Belem do Pará. Many who write about Amazonia do not distinguish between the river, the Amazon, and the region, Amazonia,[3] and most who refer to Amazonia are, in all likelihood, referring to a region associated with the basin of the Amazon River.[4]

However, complete agreement on the area Amazonia covers can be hard to achieve. The lack of precision stems from the many possible ways to describe the river and its surroundings. The Amazon is both a river and a watershed; it is also the largest contiguous tropical rainforest in the world; and it is a political region that eight nation-states claim to include or possess. Amazonia can be divided into at least four large subregions: (1) the Amazonian plains, the majority of which are located on the territory of Brazil, though not exclusively; (2) the Andean-Amazonian subregion, divided among Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia; (3) the Orinoco-Amazonian subregion, in Venezuela and Colombia; and (4) the Guianese-Caribbean part, or the Guianas.[5] The Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), an intergovernmental organization located

[2] Gaspar de Carvajal and Medina José Toribio, *Descubrimiento del río de las Amazonas según la relación hasta ahora inédita de Fr. Gaspar de Carvajal con otros documentos referentes á Francisco de Orellana y sus compañeros; publicados á expensas del Excmo. Sr. Duque De T'Serclaes De Tilly* [The discovery of the Amazon River, according to the hitherto unpublished relationship of Br. Gaspar de Carvajal with other documents referring to Francisco de Orellana and his companions; published at the expense of His Excellency the Duke of T'Serclaes De Tilly] (Sevilla: Impr. de E. Rasco, 1894).

[3] For example, John Hemming, *Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Wade Davis, *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[4] Ana Pizarro, *Amazonía: El río tiene voces: Imaginario y modernización*. [Amazon: The river has voices: Imagination and modernization] (Santiago, Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2009).

[5] Susanna B. Hecht, *The Scramble for the Amazon and the Lost Paradise of Euclides Da Cunha* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 99–100.

in Brasilia and jointly run by eight nation-states, uses the term "Panamazonia" to refer to the region.[6] All of this complexity is key to our comprehension of Amazonia.

Whereas the name "Amazonas" dates back almost five centuries, the denomination of Amazonia as a region is more recent.[7] As late as the 1950s, the region still had multiple names, all originating from the colonial period. In Brazil, it was called Pará and Maranhão; in Colombia, Caguanía and the territory of Caquetá; in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador it was called Oriente. "Amazonia" was probably first used in Brazil in association with development projects of the military regime that governed in the 1960s. That regime later invented the doctrine of "legal Amazonia" to specify the territorial scope of the developmental projects that the government would finance. In Colombia, the first use of the term "Amazonia" was in the late 1950s, when the Reserva Forestal de la Amazonia (Amazonia Forest Reserve) was established. In this case, "Amazonia" was associated with the rhetorical and institutional bases of conservation.

The relatively recent shift from Amazon as river to Amazonia as region is the result of both top-down and bottom-up appropriations of the idea of "Amazonia" and involves three different ways of seeing the region: as a part of national territories, as a supranational territory, and as a global space of great ecological importance. From the top down, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization considers Amazonia the institutional expression of its eight member states. In the case of the Initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA), Amazonia is placed within a South America–wide development framework. From the bottom up, the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum (FOSPA) is the most important gathering of social movements and grassroots organizations in the region.[8] Independent of nation-states, FOSPA enables organizational collaboration between Indigenous, campesino, and public organizations in Amazonia. The Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin (COICA) is another important group that attempts to coalesce indigenous interests of the Amazon basin.[9] The Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) is a church-based organization that works with and in support of grassroots social movements. FOSPA, COICA, and REPAM

[6] In Spanish and Portuguese, the acronym is OTCA. The eight nations are Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela.

[7] Germán Palacio, "Amazonian Frontiers: Borderlines, Internal Frontiers, and Political Ecology of Amazonia," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, published online February 22, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.1079.

[8] See https://www.forosocialpanamazonico.com/.

[9] See https://coicamazonia.org/.

support a variety of efforts seeking to have effects beyond the interests of specific nation-states with Amazon territories. The Center of Amazonia Think Tank (Centro de Pensamiento Amazonias, CEPAM), which I direct, is a research-based effort to build the region in a multiscale fashion that involves the local, subnational, supranational, and global.[10]

Unsurprisingly, these contemporary appropriations of Amazonia are strongly contested. From above, powerful interests attempt to functionally articulate social actors to establish developmental and/or conservation projects, and although the territorial nation-state both propels and mediates these projects, its capacities in Amazonia are limited. From below, social actors position themselves not only to offer resistance but also to invent "re-existences"[11] that will distribute more justly the benefits of these projects amid the competing forces of development, conservation, and the territorial control of nation-states.

Globalization of Amazonia

This broad shift in understanding Amazonia as a region or megaregion is related to the contemporary ecological vision of the region that stems from environmental concerns that gained prominence in the 1980s and which were codified in the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit Declaration on Environment and Development. In this vision, Amazonia, due to the idea that its preservation or conservation is important for the entire planet, is a territory that should belong not just to the nation-states that share the basin, but to humanity as a whole. It is part of the "common heritage of humanity," a legal construct of international law used most often by the conservation movement to establish a locality as belonging to all humanity and its resources available for everyone's use and benefit, including future generations, rather than belonging to one or several states.

[10] See https://www.pensamientoamazonias.com.

[11] Recently, some analysts of social change have developed concepts, such as "resiliency" and "re-existence," that may help us think beyond familiar notions of resistance, reform, and revolution. Re-existence does not need revolution but is rather associated with changes that are already taking place in everyday life and in social and political experiences. Re-existence goes further than resistance because it implies new creations that come from the social struggle and convey social inventions. The first is a reaction; the second is a creation. See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). The re-existence concept originated with Adolfo Albán Achinte, "¿Interculturalidad sin decolonialidad? Colonialidades circu-lantes y prácticas de re-existencia" [Interculturality without decoloniality? Circular colonialities and re-existence practices], in *Diversidad, interculturalidad y construcción de ciudad* [Diversity, interculturality and city construction], ed. Wilmer Villa and Arturo Grueso (Bogotá: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional / Alcaldía Mayor, 2008), 85–86.

The 1990s witnessed the spread of many expressions of planetary interconnectedness, articulated by some as "global change" and by others as "globalization." Globalization gained currency as a concept at the historical conjuncture when the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union and other regimes of "really existing socialism" collapsed, and a market logic became globally dominant. Neoliberal policies eroded nation-states, as did innovations in technology, manufacturing, and finance, which had collapsed spatial and temporal relationships. Whereas "globalization" is a term more typically used in the social sciences, economics, and the humanities, "global change" is more typical of the natural sciences, earth science, and the environmental sciences. The terms "globalization" and "global change" reflect two sides of a coin: on one side, a globalization process that began with the birth of capitalism at the end of the fifteenth century, and, on the other side, the Columbian Exchange that began with encounter between Europeans and the New World and ended up connecting the entire world.[12] Humanity has since pushed planet Earth to its limits, which resulted in climate change, the mass extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, extreme weather, and other pressures that exceed the limits of ecosystem resilience.[13]

Amazonia has become a broad concept for a multinational region that is completely incorporated into the global discourse surrounding environmental and ecological issues. Few regions or places in the world are as "environmentalized."

The globalization of Amazonia in fact owes as much to environmental "global change" as it does to socioeconomic "globalization." Amazonia has become a

[12] See Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), and two books by Alfred Crosby: *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

[13] Karen L. O'Brien and Robin M. Leichenko, "Double Exposure: Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change within the Context of Economic Globalization," *Global Environmental Change* 10, no. 3 (2000): 221–32; Germán Palacio, Alberto Vargas, and Elizabeth Hennessy, "Antropoceno o Capitaloceno en fricción: Des-encuentros entre Geociencias e Historia" [Anthropocene in friction: Dis-encounters between geology and history], in *Ecología política latinoamericana: Pensamiento crítico, diferencia latinoamericana y rearticulación epistémica* [Latin American political ecology: Critical thought, Latin American difference and epistemic rearticulation], ed. Héctor Alimonda, Catalina Toro Pérez, and Facundo Martín (Buenos Aires: Ciccus, 2019), 2:265–88.

broad concept for a multinational region that is completely incorporated into the global discourse surrounding environmental and ecological issues. Few regions or places in the world are as "environmentalized" as Amazonia. As such, Amazonia is no longer simply a resource frontier but also a global environmental object. Amazonia is now not only strongly linked with the rest of the world, but it is also seen in a new light. This might be thought of as a shift from globalization *in* Amazonia to the globalization *of* Amazonia.[14]

The Territorialization of Amazonia: Limits, Borderlands, and Internal Frontiers

At the same time that Amazonia became a globalized region, it remained an immense territory over which various nation-states claim sovereignty. As neither a nation-state nor a political entity, with borders difficult (or even impossible) to establish, Amazonia is a contested territory crosscut by many political borders as well as uneven processes of material appropriation.

Three meanings of frontier developed in the humanities and social sciences can help us think about the contemporary territorialization of Amazonia. First, frontiers are associated with dualistic metaphors such as civilization versus barbarism.[15] Because Amazonia's tropical biome still dominates the region from an ecological point of view, it continues to carry with it the imaginary of being a frontier for civilization.[16] Like Antarctica or the bottom of the ocean, Amazonia is often considered among the final frontiers for human, state, and capital enterprises. Due to this circumstance, this first meaning of "frontier" functions as the ideological support for many economic development projects.

Second, frontiers are understood as political limits (or borderlines).[17] Brazil's border was inherited from the Portuguese crown, but its precise lines were blurry. The more precise process of border demarcation, in relation to other South American nation-states in formation, began in the mid-nineteenth century and culminated in the 1930s and 1940s. The need to make more precise boundary delimitations revolved around the extraction of *quina*, or Peruvian

[14] See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).

[15] See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Pizarro, *Amazonía*; and Germán Palacio, *Territorios improbables: Historias y ambientes* [Improbable territories: Histories and environments] (Bogotá: Magisterio, 2018).

[16] Paul Little, *Amazonia: Territorial Struggles on Perennial Frontiers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[17] See Hecht, *Scramble for the Amazon*; Pilar García Jordán and Núria Sala i Vila, *La nacionalización de la Amazonía* [The nationalization of the Amazon] (Barcelona: Ediciones Universitat, 1998).

bark (also known as *cinchona*), in Andean-Amazonian countries and around the tapping of rubber, or *seringa*, in all the countries of the Amazonian Basin. Thus, in describing the development of Amazonia, the history of resource extraction should take precedence over chauvinist and nationalist narratives.[18]

Third and finally, frontiers are understood as borderlands: that is, social, political, and transnational experiences that exist across specific borderlines.[19] Borders are enforced through police and military powers, often, as mentioned above, to maintain that metaphoric line between the civilized and the savage. But borderlands, in the meaning I am drawing out here, also happen through the territorial expansion of nation-states and armed internal conflict as well as through economic activity, often illicit, such as the cultivation of coca crops or the theft of timber or poaching of animal and plant species. Such activities of territorial appropriation have come at the expense of Indigenous claims on ancestral territories,[20] but national borders are recent, and native peoples have survived. They know these territories, they cross their borders, they have achieved recognition, and they continue to assert influence over this region.

From Political Economy to Political Ecology

In response to the characteristics of Amazonia today, I advocate in this section for a shift in analytical focus from political economy to political ecology as a way to reorient our analysis of capitalism away from economics and toward ecology.[21] This argument grows from an ongoing conceptual paradigm shift across disci-

[18] Daniel M. Larrea-Alcázar, et al., "Economic Drivers in the Amazon from the 19th Century to the 1970s," in *Scientific Panel for the Amazon: The Amazon We Want*, chap. 11, https://www.theamazonwewant.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Chapter-11-in-Brief_updated-7-Feb-2022.pdf.

[19] Carlos G. Zárate Botía, *Silvícolas, siringueros y agentes estatales: El surgimiento de una sociedad transfronteriza en la Amazonía de Brasil, Perú y Colombia 1880–1932* [Foresters, rubber tappers and state agents: The emergence of a transboundary society in the Amazon of Brazil, Peru and Colombia 1880–1932] (Leticia: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Amazonia, 2008).

[20] Palacio, *Territorios improbables*; John Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* (London: Pan Books, 2004); Roberto Pineda Camacho, *Holocausto en el Amazonas: Una historia social de la Casa Arana* [Holocaust in the Amazon: A social history of the Casa Arana] (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 2000); and Roger Casement, *The Black Diaries of the Putumayo* (London: Anaconda, 1997). The novelist Mario Vargas Llosa recreated the history of enslavement and massacre of Amazon Indigenous people as a novel: *The Dream of the Celt* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). See also, the great 1924 novel by José Eustasio Rivera, *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*, trans. John Charles Chasteen [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018]).

[21] Here I am indebted to Jason Moore' book *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

plines. At the end of the twentieth century, environmental issues were conceived in terms of the relationship between society *and* nature. Today, however, it is clear that we need to reconceive environmental problems as problems of society *in* nature. A conception of nature that separates nature from humans, or that sees society and nature existing in diametric opposition, is increasingly seen as outdated, and new concepts such as "socio-biodiversity," "the web of life,"[22] and others have arisen that are not based upon the ontological differentiation of society and nature. Given such a shift in our understanding, discussions that before seemed to be essentially about political economy are now more fruitfully addressed through the lens of political ecology. In this light, we can postulate that capitalism is not only an economic world system but also an *ecological* world system. If the forces of labor exist within the realm of "nature," then exploitation of human work is exploitation of nature and consequently should be the domain of the humanities and social sciences as well as the "natural" sciences.

Discussions that before seemed to be essentially about political economy are now more fruitfully addressed through the lens of political ecology. In this light, we can postulate that capitalism is not only an economic world system but also an ecological world system.

Because Amazonia has been so thoroughly environmentalized, research about it provides fertile ground for considering this transition from political economy to political ecology. I will consider this paradigm shift through three interrelated ecopolitical areas: (1) disputes over the appropriation of Amazonian resources; (2) the developmental project and *extractivismo*; and (3) the project of conservation.

Amazonian Resources

The expansion of nations, states, and markets over Amazonia involves the appropriation and extraction of Amazonian resources that can be synthesized into three categories: subsoil, soil, and canopy (*subsuelo*, *suelo*, and *vuelo*).[23] Each

[22] Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

[23] Germán Palacio, "Subsuelo, suelo y vuelo: Los previsibles desafíos para le región amazónica colombiana en el nuevo gobierno de Juan Manuel Santos" [Soil, subsoil and canopy: The foreseeable challenges for the Colombian Amazon region in the new government of Juan Manuel Santos], in *La naturaleza colonizada: Ecologia política y minería en América Latina* [Nature colonized: Political ecology and mining in Latin America], ed. Héctor Alimonda and Arturo Escobar (Buenos Aires: CLACSO: Ediciones CICCUS, 2011), 93–112.

gives rise to distinct disputes in Amazonia.[24] These three aspects and the interplay among them comprise conflicts over socio-biodiversity. "Subsoil" encompasses the extraction of mineral, water, and hydrocarbon resources, which has expanded intensively in Amazonia in recent decades and in which governments and powerful capitalist actors have a stake. "Soil" refers to those struggles directly related to land use and territory, including an important part of the Amazonian territory that is cloistered and appropriated through Indigenous reservations and through national parks or other projects related to conservation. Lastly, "canopy' involves all that rises above the soil and into the air, such as the forest and its associated fauna, but also invisible things like air, carbon, methane, and the atmosphere in general.

Environmental problems have made the distinction between "soil" and "canopy" much more evident. So, for example, if it is possible to distinguish the soil from the forest, it is possible to think that the owner of the soil can be different than the owner of the forest. Consequently, one faces a new legal distinction and abstraction between the soil and the canopy, which is important to identify amid the environmental conflict that surrounds Amazonia. In these "environmentalized" times, and with new ecosystemic categories and knowledge, resources and ownership are being reinvented. The forest is no longer conceived simply as timber but as biodiversity, and in discussions around climate change, the forest is understood in terms of its capacity to sequester carbon. Several projects related to what is known as Reducing Emission for Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDDs) suggest a new type of market specific to climate change. The forest is no longer what it used to be because it is gradually becoming subsumed into concerns about climate change.

The Debate over Extractivism

One of the most important intellectual discussions in Latin America in the last decade has to do with what in the 1980s became known as *extractivismo*.[25] Following proponents of dependency theory, such as Stephen Bunker, extractivism has been understood as destruction or removal of natural resources without producing added value (in contrast, say, to agriculture). Further, profits have

[24] Camila Moreno, "Mudanças climáticas e os elementos da colonialidade atual: O mecanismo de red e a catequecese do carbono sobre os povos indigenas amazônicos" [Climate change and the elements of current coloniality: The REDD mechanism and the carbon catechism on Amazonian Indigenous peoples], paper presented at the XXVII Congress of the Latin American Association of Sociology, Buenos Aires, 2009.

[25] Camilo Domínguez and Augusto Gómez, *La economía extractiva en la Amazonia colombiana: 1850–1930* [Extractive economy in the Colombian Amazon: 1850–1930] (Bogotá: COA, 1989).

tended to leave the countries in which extractive activities take place, or, at the very least, they do not stay in the same region.[26] Extractivism resounded in Amazonian scholarship because so much of it focused on the well-known boom-and-bust cycle in the region around quinine and rubber exploitation, which analysts defined as extractive economic activity.[27]

Subsequent Amazonian scholarship, however, has challenged this definition in light of facts that contradict it. The tapping of rubber is, in fact, not "extractive," given that the *seringa* (rubber) trees are "milked" and not felled. (In some cases, rubber trees are felled, but this is not the general practice.) Nevertheless, the practice certainly is extractive in the sense that most of the wealth produced by rubber exploitation has gone to foreign countries or to faraway regions, which fits the extractivist pattern. However, some of the riches generated by rubber extraction did in fact remain in the Amazon region. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand the growth and expansion of some of the most important cities in the region such as Belem do Pará, Santarem, Manaus, or Iquitos. The main problem with rubber extraction has been a general one of the capitalist exploitation of labor and, in the dramatic case of the Putumayo region around the turn of the twentieth century, an enslaved or indebted Indigenous workforce. For these reasons, it is hard to see what exactly "extractivism" adds to our understanding of the political economy or ecology of Amazonia.

The debate surrounding extractivism, however, has broadened recently, spurred by multiple scholars but most importantly by the Uruguayan Eduardo Gudynas.[28] Gudynas incorporates environmental elements into his argumentation and broadens the parameters of extractivism by including large-scale agriculture or cattle farming, neither of which had previously been seen as an extractive activity. Also, nowadays it matters less whether extractivism is conducted by national or international entities, whereas in earlier literature this factor was critical and activities conducted by domestic businesses were not considered as extractivist. This shift, however, generates more confusion than clarity because, in my view, an economic activity should be questioned based not only on whether or not it is extractivist but also on the basis of its socio-ecological relationships. In other words, the focus should be on the exploitation of

[26] Stephen G. Bunker, *Underdeveloping the Amazon: Extraction, Unequal Exchange, and the Failure of the Modern State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[27] Domínguez and Gómez, *La economía extractiva*.

[28] Eduardo Gudynas, "Transitions to Post-extractivism: Directions, Options, Areas of Action," in *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America*, ed. Miriam Lang and Dunia Mokrani (Berlin: Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, 2013), 165–88. See also Domínguez and Gómez, *La economía extractiva*.

human labor (especially if humans are part of nature and not external to nature) and the harm to biodiversity within an expansive logic of profit that sacrifices all ways of life that are deemed unprofitable. The problem is capitalism in its worst expressions and not an ever more precise definition of "extractivism."

Many activities of Indigenous peoples or forest communities are extractive but do not belong under the rubric of extractivism. For instance, the Indigenous *chagra*, a vegetable garden the social purpose of which far transcends that of feeding communities, involves the slash and burn of land, along with rest and rotation, but it should not be denounced as a source of forest fires or deforestation. Indigenous peoples are hunter-gatherers or fishermen, and as such they consume resources without adding value. These activities by some definitions may qualify as extractivism, but they do not incur environmental problems as long as they respect ecosystem cycles of restoration.

Despite its growing popularity with the political left and with some environmentalists, the concept of extractivism does not cease to confuse, and it does little to solve the challenges facing the Amazon region. Clearly, commercial relationships and extractive capitalist activities are expanding, but to denounce them out of hand as extractive would be to deflect attention from the two issues that demand our attention: the exploitation of workforces and the exploitation of ecosystems with the central purpose of accumulation. Rather than concentrating on extractivism, we should view disputes about resources and property in contemporary Amazonia through the lens not of political economy but of political ecology. Along with that, we must also ask to what degree expansionist capitalism undermines or destroys noncommercial relationships and the environment—and how it may even appropriate it anew with the rhetoric of a "green economy." In other words, we must try to understand which political ecology is being built or destroyed in contemporary Amazonia.

Conservation and Pristine Landscapes

As part of their national projects, states establish within their borders armies, markets, communications, political systems, hospitals, schools, and more. In Amazonia in recent decades, nation-states have also participated in global projects within their borders. For the purpose of conserving nature, they have organized new territorial spaces, the most important of which are national parks. They have also developed broader systems of conservation known as protected areas. Such territorial cloisters have proliferated in the Amazonia since the 1990s, and in a relatively short period of time national parks and protected areas began to make up a sizable portion of Amazonia. Such territorial appropriation

through enclosures of nature is now an important element of the spatial reality of Amazonia. National parks and protected areas in Amazonia follow the standard set in the United States, which pioneered this system of conservation to develop and strengthen a sense of national identity. The American idea of the national park is itself associated with certain ideas about landscape, especially that they are pristine and sacred, untouched by humans, and reflecting nature in its primordial state. In effect, national parks in the US communicated the message that if Europe has architectural jewels and majestic cathedrals, America has natural cathedrals.

In Amazonia, however, these protected areas are neither national nor parks. Their purpose is to address contemporary global environmental crises, and they are difficult to reach and have few tourists. Rather than being part of a national project, they are part of what we might call the globalization of conservation.[29] As another form of appropriation of Amazonia, these protected areas dilute the millenary presence of Indigenous communities in Amazonia and their domestication of plants, soils, and landscapes. Following the logic of this new institutional arrangement, Amazonia becomes understood as a pristine place, untouched by the hand of humans, when, in fact, humans have intensively transformed the region for millennia for horticulture, hunting and fishing, and, more recently, for urbanization, cattle farming, and the development of large-scale plantations. In this respect, Amazonia can today be seen as comprising frontier lands and as following a historical process similar to that of "the conquest of the West" in the nineteenth-century US with its national parks and Indian reservations. Meanwhile, other processes of national appropriation have developed in the interstices of the contradictions of nation-states, such as Indigenous territories and Indigenous reserves. The technical distinctions between these and other mechanisms of territorial appropriation are indeed important, but they are not the central concern of this essay. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: the nationalization of Amazonian spaces has been enabled by legal constructs established in the name of Indigenous peoples. In turn, Indigenous communities have grown intrinsically linked to protected areas. Ultimately, Indigenous peoples in general are "environmentalized," and those from Amazonia in particular are often assumed to be park rangers or spontaneous ecologists.

By examining the three spheres—soil, subsoil, and canopy—and their interactions, one sees that Amazonia is not simply one space, among others, over which

[29] Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, "Towards a Global History of National Parks," in *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 1–25.

globalization reigns. Rather, Amazonia is a territory that has been reconstructed by both (socioeconomic) globalization and (environmental) global change, and understanding it requires an analytical transition from the political economy to political ecology. A political ecology framework makes clear that development and conservation projects are two distinct forms of territorial appropriation in Amazonia, with the nation-state playing an intermediary role. Both developmental and conservation projects penetrate and take root in the state as they territorialize Amazonia. And, ultimately, the territorialization of Amazonia expropriates Indigenous populations as it finds new ways of putting Indigenous peoples and their territories to work. As such, these new appropriations undermine the right of Amazonian peoples to enjoy and have authority over their own territories.

The Amazonian Imaginary

My third principal theme is the collective imagination surrounding Amazonia, its roots and ethical implications. Here, I examine Amazonia as a source of both utopic and dystopic imagination, and I assess the recent judicial redefinition of nature as a kind of political ecology of religion.

Ecological Natives

In contemporary eco-political struggles in Amazonia, Indigenous people and their territories are under attack from two directions. From one, their presence is not seen as compatible with development projects, which conceive of nature mainly as a resource to be exploited or, in the discourse of sustainability, *better* exploited. From the other, Indigenous territories are "environmentalized" when, to receive financing from international donors, ministries of the environment and national park authorities turn them into official protected areas. In other words, Indigenous peoples are instrumentalized as being in favor of conservation and against development, but both development and conservation are modern projects that come from the outside and are often imposed on local populations. In the global conservation project, Indigenous peoples are offered a role as protectors of the forest but not as political actors in their own right. Conservation turns them into "ecological natives." In turn, Indigenous people attempt to take advantage of these circumstances if they find that doing so advances their cause. Ultimately, it isn't that Indigenous peoples do not protect nature. They do, but for reasons other than those offered to them by inherently flawed conservation–(sustainable) development paradigms.

The supposed environmentalism inherent to Indigenous peoples belongs to the European Romantic tradition that shaped the encounter between Europe and the Americas. It can be seen in the mythology surrounding Christopher Columbus; in the famous debate between Bartolomé de las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, and Spanish philosopher Juan de Sepúlveda about the subjugation of American Indians in the sixteenth century; in Montaigne's representations of "noble savages"; and in social contract theory, as proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other European thinkers. A popular recent expression of this view is James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar*. In the film, militant extractive-capitalists are in the process of colonizing a habitable moon, which is home to great biodiversity and the Nav'i, who live in harmony with nature. At the center of this confrontation is a dashing American soldier, who, upon falling in love with a beautiful female Nav'i, sheds his greed and his warrior spirit and decides to risk his life for the just cause of the *alienígenas* (alien Indigenous peoples). The bad guys are defeated when the aliens form an unlikely alliance with a group of marginalized idealists from Earth—women, minorities, and a lone representative of the scientific community, a biologist who, facing the film's existential dilemma, takes the moral high ground. Against all odds, biodiversity is preserved, the miserly and greedy humans are expelled from the planet of ecological harmony, and all of us romantics applaud, enchanted by the happy ending to such an awful situation. Within this discursive field, the rights of Indigenous peoples are preserved owing to their inextricable association with ecology, biology, and the struggle to defend forests and fight climate change. It sounds rosy, it sounds beautiful, but it is an ideological construction that owes much to the colonial experience.

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The Rights of Nature and the Political Ecology of Religion and Ethics

The ontological and methodological separation between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the social sciences and humanities, on the other, stems from the conceptual distinction between nature and society. This duality also undergirds modern law. The civil law tradition that informs the Latin American legal

tradition was built upon a dichotomy of legal subjects and legal objects. Legal subjects held rights and could claim their violation, but legal objects could not.[30] Thus, flora and fauna and other elements of nature, including the sea, rivers, and the planet itself, have been without rights—until recently.

In the late twentieth century, questions surrounding the rights of nonhumans emerged along with challenges to the legitimacy of the distinction between human subjects with rights and nonhuman objects without rights. Amazonia plays an important role in this debate due to its over-environmentalization.[31] In the common law tradition such as exists the United States, constitutions or their equivalents last for centuries, modified only by amendments, but this is not the case of Latin American countries, where entire constitutions are rewritten. Constitutional reforms in Brazil (1987) and Colombia (1991), which preceded other landmark shifts, were viewed as producing "ecological" constitutions, but these consitutions remained centered on the protection of humans, as in the case of the right to a healthy environment. These earlier "ecological" constitutions were more clearly anthropocentric and understood ecological rights from the human point of view. Recent constitutional transformations in Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009 have emphasized a more biocentric model. For example, the Ecuadorian new constitution introduced the idea of *derechos de naturaleza* (rights of nature) and Bolivia's introduced *Pachamama* (Quechua for "Mother Earth"). But, as with Brazil and Colombia, in seeking to protect nature they continue to conceive of nature as a resource for human use. The process of understanding and making realistic these transformations cannot be expected to happen in one day or one effort, as they are complex and *longue dureé* processes. I am not arguing that nature has rights against human concerns or interests or hoping to turn this duality upside down; rather, I am saying that in both types of constitutional reforms an ontological split between nature and humans persists and that we should move in the direction of a dialectical overcoming of this opposition.

That said, in Amazonian countries with new ecological constitutions, the role of judges has been increasingly important. In Colombia, for example, a growing number of judicial rulings have been issued granting rights to nonhuman entities, including some rivers and regions such as Amazonia. We are far from understanding the specific implications of these rulings, and, although

[30] Palacio, *Territorios improbables*.

[31] Germán Palacio, "An Eco-Political Vision for an Environmental History: Toward a Latin American and North American Research Partnership," *Environmental History* 17, no. 4 (2012): 725–43.

official entities are obliged to offer ways to implement these rulings,[32] they are difficult to enforce due to practical restrains of the legal system. Latin American legal systems often have a stronger symbolic than practical role. Nonetheless, symbolic decisions can pave the way for transformations of the system in the long term.

Other traditions of thought have provided other paths toward overcoming the nature-society dichotomy. Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, "Laudato Sí," asserts that humans and other living beings occupy the same home, Earth. [33] As the Pope, who takes his name from that friend of wild animals, Saint Francis of Assisi, refers to a philosophy of a "whole Earth" system, he brings attention to two specific regions of the world: Amazonia and the Congo. Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa and ethnologist Bruce Albert in their book *The Falling Sky*[34] poetically describe the land as having a heart and being able to breathe. Likewise, Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes that Amerindian thinking conceives of animals as persons and, therefore, as self-aware beings.[35] Although his ideas originated from a scientific discipline, James Lovelock and his Gaia hypothesis led to similar conclusions.[36] Together, these thinkers suggest the rise of a political ecology of religion and, with it, a new ethical common sense that sees humans not as masters of nature but as entities that share the same home, Earth, with nonhuman entities, amid a catastrophic environmental crisis. A wide variety of scholarship has demonstrated that humans have transformed Amazonia for more than 12,000 years to such a degree that all of humanity today benefits from the work and knowledge of its forest communities.[37] As a result, the Amazonia we seek to "defend" must be the Amazonia of *today*, not a Romantic fiction. This new perspective on Amazonia should encourage us to

[32] For example, the April 2018 ruling of the Colombian Supreme Court of Justice (STC 4360-2018) in the case of young people against the president of Colombia and several government agencies, which determined that the Colombian Amazon has legal rights that are entitled to protection.

[33] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, "Laudato Sí: On Care for Our Common Home," May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[34] Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[35] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere: Four Lectures Given in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, February–March 1998*, Masterclass Series 1 (Chicago: Hau Books, 2012), https://haubooks.org/cosmological-perspectivism-in-amazonia/.

[36] James Lovelock, "Gaia: The Living Earth," *Nature*, no. 426 (2003): 769–70.

[37] Charles R. Clement et al., "The Domestication of Amazonia before European Conquest," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 282, no. 1812 (2015).

rethink the relationship between scientific thought and indigenous knowledge, which, as a result of both globalization and global change, has become glocal.

Conclusions

This essay highlighted, first, a shift from the Amazon as a river to Amazonia as a region. The environmental significance of the Amazon as a tropical rainforest has occasioned this change or irruption of meaning on regional, national, and supranational scales. "Amazonia" is used increasingly by academics, international organizations, and social movements to refer to a global megaregion.

While preparing this essay, I conducted a Web search of terms referring to the Amazon.[38] I found that the word "Amazon" is highly associated with the e-tailer by the same name that has become a key sign of the globalization of trade. That a company called Amazon has become a sign of socioeconomic globalization is more than a coincidence. In 1995, Jeff Bezos was astute enough to wield the symbolic power of the Amazon to position his company as a global brand. He named his business after an exotic place and the largest river in the world in the hopes that his store would become the largest of its kind. With Amazon as a global brand and the Amazon as a global environmental symbol, we are left with a curious confluence where globalization *in* the Amazon merges with globalization *of* the Amazon. That "Amazon" is not simply a river but also a giant of e-commerce is perhaps the best expression of the region's globalization.

Another important conclusion of this article is that it is necessary to move away from the idea that nature or the environment is "out there," separated and ontologically different from the human. Will we be able to see humans as part of nature rather than outside of it? What is almost certain is that this duality is weakening and that the sharp categorical divisions between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and social sciences and humanities, on the other, are fading away. Consequently, the presumption that the natural sciences can be practiced as though

[38] With the help of colleagues, I performed a series of internet searches using three key terms—"Amazon," "Amazonas," and "Amazonia"—from within various countries: the United States, Colombia, Brazil, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela. These searches were all conducted on December 13, 2021. In addition to the clear result for "Amazon," a search for "Amazonas" returned top results in the US that mention the Amazon rainforest. The same is true from Venezuela (*bosque húmedo tropical*) and Brazil (*floresta*). From Colombia, Germany, the UK, and France, the first search results for "Amazonas" coincided with Amazonia as a region in South America, but other results were to websites of the political and administrative divisions of countries (e.g., the State of Amazonas in Brazil, the Department of Amazonas in Colombia, and the State of Amazonas in Venezuela). "Amazonia" had the fewest results.

humans did not exist, and the humanities and social sciences, as though nature, biodiversity, and planet Earth did not exist—it is also becoming untenable. Unfortunately, the conceptual transition that is taking place is plagued by doubts and erratic experimentations, both cultural and linguistic. In a 2019 seminar-workshop with Indigenous peoples of Colombia on the reconstruction of truth pertaining to the armed conflict in the Colombian Amazon, Indigenous participants affirmed, emphatically, that they no longer want to talk about the "environment" but about "territory." As anthropologist Juan A. Echeverri has shown, the Indigenous conception of "territory" is continuous with the conception of their bodies, which annihilates the ontological distinction between people and nature.[39]

Emerging research methodologies should include not just interdisciplinary but transdisciplinary approaches . . . [that] involve all actors with an interest in a particular problem and that enrich academic and scientific inquiry.

If, as some natural scientists have postulated, we are living amid the Anthropocene, an era in which humanity has become a geological force,[40] then *Homo sapiens* constitute a planetary subsystem along with the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and all other geological subsystems. In this context what is the meaning of the human? Is it a homogenous, unitary, universal entity or a social one, rich with differentiations? This dilemma compels us to ask how we should understand the "anthropo-" of the Anthropocene.[41] Natural scientists, stymied by their own inherited categories, answer this question by asserting that the human is one among many biological species. However, according to the social sciences and the humanities, human beings cannot be analyzed solely from a biological perspective. That is why some critics have proposed "Capitalocene" as an alternative to "Anthropocene."[42] For example, as a matter of environmental justice, Indigenous people living in Amazonia should not be included in the same category as contemporary European, American, or Chinese people; rather, they

[39] Juan A. Echeverri, "Territory as Body and Territory as Nature: Intercultural Dialogue?," in *The Land Within: Indigenous Territory and the Perception of Environment*, ed. Alexandre Surrallés and Pedro García Hierro (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 2005).

[40] Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41 (May 2000): 17–18.

[41] Palacio et al., "Antropoceno o Capitaloceno en fricción."

[42] Germán Palacio, Alberto Vargas, Elizabeth Hennessy, "Anthropocene in Friction: Disencounters between Geology and History," in *Fronteiras: Journal of Social, Technological and Environmental Science* 8, no. 1 (2019): 151–68.

belong in a different category, that of "low-carbon people." Of course, centuries of separating and specializing knowledge—with its attendant (mis)understandings—cannot be undone in a matter of decades, but we must establish a better relationship between the "globalization" of the humanities and social sciences and the "global change" of the natural sciences. There is a long road ahead, and it is not a clear highway but a dense jungle of paths that branch and intertwine.

The third conclusion derives from the previous point: if "Capitalocene" is a concept that can be contrasted with "Anthropocene," capitalism can no longer be analyzed solely in terms of political economy, and we must assess it in terms of political ecology.[43] Following this line of reasoning, I discussed how controversies have brought about legal redefinitions of Amazonian "nature" and the granting of rights to the nonhuman. I also discussed the ethical implications of this shift, which demand that we consider, more profoundly, the political ecology of religion.

The three themes I have considered in this short essay obviously do not represent the entirety of environmental humanities as they relate to Amazonia, nor does my brief discussion of these themes exhaust them. I have merely attempted to draw out what I believe to be among the most pressing and salient issues. I wish that I could have included two interrelated insights, which, for lack of space, I can discuss only briefly, leaving them for future reflections. The first is the insight that the polyphony of knowledge creation should include not just scientists but also local experts and other stakeholders of research projects who are part of the complexity of Amazonia. The second is that emerging research methodologies should include not just interdisciplinary but *trans*disciplinary approaches.[44] While the interdisciplinary approach remains within the confines of academia, a transdisciplinary approach involves all actors with an interest in a particular problem, enriching academic and scientific inquiry by making space within it for the knowledge and perspective of stakeholders. In the context of Amazonia, this would include, but not be limited to, Indigenous peoples, campesinos, fishermen, merchants, businesspeople, and townspeople.

I have acquired these insights over the course of my career. My own disciplinary training took place in the socio-legal sciences and humanities, but I learned that to understand environmental problems I had to pay close attention to the work of those with training in the natural sciences. While on the Faculty of Law of the National University of Colombia, I participated in the Institute

[43] Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

[44] Heidi Hackman and Asunción Lera St. Clair, "Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change," *Mundo Amazonico*, no. 4 (2013): 117–52.

of Environmental Studies (IDEA) where I learned a great deal from engineers, biologists, chemists, agrologists, economists, and philosophers. Later, when I joined an NGO called Ecofondo as Director of Networking and Communications, I promoted environmental causes and evaluated specific projects as they related to environmental issues, some of which involved campesinos and Indigenous peoples. As such, this essay reflects my own process of "un-disciplining," that is, escaping the constraints of my own training to learn from others with backgrounds distinct from my own. Furthermore, what I propose in this essay does not belong only to me but to the many colleagues and students from whom I have benefitted. Much the same, this work belongs to social groups, state functionaries, and NGOs, just as it belongs to Indigenous peoples, campesinos, and urban social movements from different places within Amazonia.

One way to advance this transdisciplinary methodological vision would be through greater attention to Amazonian studies as a field. There are numerous programs and centers focused on Latin America but few that center on Amazonia. At the same time, we must also work to undo the categorical separation between environmental "science" and environmental "studies." The contemporary study of Amazonia should involve not only natural scientists and engineers but also health professionals, social scientists, and humanists. For the multidisciplinary range to be as broad as possible, there must also be spaces of interdisciplinary research and reflection, in which participative and transdisciplinary methodologies are employed. The cliffs and precipices that separate the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities must be overcome.

Finally, I want to end with a paradox that I have identified when thinking about the contemporary Amazon. Because the Amazonian megaregion has been so thoroughly environmentalized as part of the global environmental change, many see development as a push to populate the region and thus believe that the international community should resist the region's development to ensure its conservation. At the same time, because democracy is a system based on the rule of the majority, decisions about the region belong to the majorities within its nations. The result is that Amazonia's low-density populations are not in a position to decide their own fate. I consider this an eco-political paradox.

Translated from the Spanish by Jeremy Kundtz

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