

# Climate Debt: A Model for Indigenous Latin American Self-determination?

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The exploitation of the environment has always been closely tied to movement of global capital (Wright and Nyberg 2015:98). The issue of sustainable development has become central to understanding the contemporary global political economy (GPE), however this debate has largely been predicated on the assumptions of neoliberal, colonial-centric constructions of the problem (Okereke 2007:4). This means the solutions proposed have been focussed on a top-down approach to climate policy that protects the hierarchical status quo, which decontextualises the historical processes that have led to climate change (Parks and Roberts 2010:148). Climate debt offers a counter-hegemonic framework that addresses the gross power imbalances that have been cultivated by a global political economic system reliant on the exploitation of Indigenous land and resources (Warlenius 2018:138).

Latin America provides an especially relevant context for the implications of a climate debt scheme given its historically high levels of foreign debt and its significant contributions to the global export of natural resources (Perreault 2018:423) at the cost of the region's biodiversity and Indigenous peoples (Fletcher 2018:409). The first section of my essay will be characterising the disproportionate harm experienced by Indigenous Latinx peoples due to climate change and situating this harm historically to colonialist state-building. I will then go on to explore models for instituting a climate debt scheme as it relates to the theoretical foundations of counter-hegemonic world systems theory. Finally, I will analyse the possible implications of a climate debt scheme for Indigenous Latin Americans.

### The Disproportionate Impact of Climate Change on Indigenous Latinx Peoples

It has been well-established that the effects of more frequent natural disasters, rapid environmental degradation and increasingly unreliable access to natural resources such as water will cause – and indeed, are already causing – significant insecurity to the livelihoods of those living in the majority world (Roberts and Parks 2009:386). The disproportionate impact of climate change on developing countries has occurred because of the 'colonial power matrix[*'s*]' (Quijano 2000:23) decision to create a GPE based off the exploitation of the labour, land, and natural environments of the developing world (Robert and Parks 2009:391). Characterising these impacts as 'disproportionate' is reflective of the unequal exchange of environmental bads experienced by developing countries compared to the benefit they receive from the extractivist practices of natural resources and global food production (Claudio 2007:503). The experience of Indigenous peoples in Latin America clearly reflects this reality. Reyer et al.'s study of the impacts of climate change on Latin America and the Caribbean found that even with a marginal increase in global temperature of 0.5 degrees Indigenous populations will likely see agricultural devastation, the depletion of natural resources integral to Indigenous practices, and the breakdown of traditional knowledge systems due to extreme weather events causing distrust in the credibility of elder knowledge and the risk of community leaders dying from environmental ills (Reyer et al, 2015:1602).

Colonial processes of expansion have fundamentally shaped the development of not only Latin American economies, but indeed the very existence of Latin American nation-states (Muelle 2019:54). Post-colonial theorists emphasise the decentring of the state as the central unit of analysis within the GPE in recognition of the role nation-state narratives have played in upholding the "modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (Grosfoguel 2011:11) at the cost of all other ways of knowing the world. The practice of statecraft is inherently grounded in the

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exploitation of the Indigenous 'other' as the protection of the state subsumes the protection of Indigenous governance structures and political power (Gomez and Sawyer 2012:33). The state becomes naturalised through the legitimising of certain ways of existing in space over others (Soja 1980:209). Feminist theory demonstrates that by treating the state as a neutral object rather than a subjectively constituted, discursive tool the harms state structures produce is obscured (Haraway 1988:599). In the case of Latin America, the responsibility of climate degradation is therefore treated as either a necessary loss in the protection of the reified state or an overreaction to a natural world the state clearly controls.

Through a process of delegitimisation Indigenous peoples' ways of constituting space has been relegated to an essentialised mythology that belongs to the past, rather than a body of living knowledges that must hold weight in contemporary policy creation (Fabricant 2013:160). The role of Indigenous Latinx populations in their colonial history has been dynamic, active and heterogenous. It has involved Indigenous peoples being 'pulled into exploitative relations with capitalism engaging it, resisting it, and posing alternatives to it' (Postero 2018:50). This diversity of experience has been swept up into neoliberal multicultural narratives that have enabled Indigenous peoples to self-determine based off their 'own vision of development' (Postero 2018:50). However, these visions have consistently been constrained by the colonial project of 'global capital and the sovereign nation-state' (Postero 2019:50). Indigenous peoples attempt to construct a relationship to the world situated within Indigenous knowledges of land and place has been opposed by national and international governance institutions. These institutions are perhaps more interested in continuing their policies of extractivism in the name of development and the service of monied corporate interests (Andreucci 2017:171).

## Applying Counter-Hegemonic Theory to the Global Climate Crisis

Unlike many other conceptual climate frameworks, which were first developed by academics and then applied to local communities, climate debt had a 'bottom-up development among Southern and Northern NGOs' (Rice 2009:246). Climate debt first entered the literature in reports produced by Chilean NGO, *Instituto de Ecología Política* in the early 90s (Martinez-Alier 2002:213) and it has continued to be co-opted by NGOs and civil society since (Paredis et al. 2009:4). The premise of climate debt is that developed countries have materially benefitted from their 'resource plundering, environmental[ly] damag[ing practices], and the free occupation of environmental space to deposit wastes, such as greenhouse gases, from the [majority world]' (Acción Ecológica 1999:23), and this debt ought to be renumerated. The key limitation however to climate debt as a policy proposal is the literature is entirely unclear on the mechanism by which it should be calculated and collected. Whilst the principles constituting ecological debt are certainly compelling, the practicalities leave much wanted.

Most calculations are based on the 'unpaid abatement cost[s]' (Paredis et al. 2009:10) that focus on contracting carbon emissions. These calculated repayments to the majority world range anywhere between USD\$15.5bn – US\$4.6 trillion (Paredis et al. 2009:10). These estimates do not take into account a calculation of damages or place a penalty on the damages that could be caused if nothing is done to reduce emissions (Paredis et al. 2009:10). Campaigners have remained resistant to attempts to price the ecological debt owed to the majority world due to a moralistic belief that nature should not be valued according to capitalistic, monetary standards, which is seen as responsible for the crisis in the first place (Martinez-Alier 2002:249).

The second question of how ecological debt could be collected also remains contentious. There are three primary models proposed in the literature to address this question. The first model is that the debt repayments goes towards funding environmental restoration programs and renewable energy projects in the majority world to move their economic development away from a reliance on extractivist practices (Warlenius et al. 2015:26). The second model focuses on climate debt as simply a payment to creditors (the majority world), which should be able to be used however they wish, as per the norms of the global credit system (Warlenius et al. 2015:26). The third, and most popular, model uses climate debt as a mechanism to unconditionally cancel external foreign debt accrued by the majority world, which fuels a cycle of unsustainable debt levels that can only be satisfied by 'undertak[ing] ecologically destructive practices' (Rice 2009:237). In the context of Latin America this third model could be the most preferred implementation option given their 'long history of fiscal deficits and unsustainable debt ratios' (Mandilaras and Bird, 2008:61). Latin America has been victim to some of the worst effects of the IMF's and World Bank's

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neoliberal development policies (Pastor 1989:80), which have reinforced Latin America's dependence on the industrialised core (Wallerstein 2004:24).

The logic of the argument for climate debt is undoubtedly compelling. However, the literature remains lacking in scientific inquiry about the consequences, in real terms, of implementing a climate debt scheme (Warlenius et al. 2015:28). For example, there is extensive research regarding the negative economic effects experienced by Latin American states who have defaulted on their foreign debts (Hébert and Schreger 2017:3119). Whether the consequences to investment and exchange rates would be the same when climate debt is accounted for is a possible direction for future research (Rice 2009:247). In some ways this lack of practical application has limited the ability for climate debt to be adopted in the global environmental policy space (Paredis et al. 2009:13). In other ways this reality has been inconsequential to its power, with civil society more interested in using it as a campaigning tool that holds political weight in its vision rather than its implementation (Simms 2001:4).

## The Empowering Potential of Climate Debt

Climate debt models have strong theoretical groundings in counter-hegemonic, world systems theory. Whilst these theories have been challenged for being too deterministic in nature (Ciplet 2017:1055), they offer a lens that highlights the unequal exchange of power between the core and the periphery. This enables a rethinking of the GPE that takes a 'view from below' (Davies and Seuffert 2001:270) that could have 'radical consequences: massive investments in mitigation and massive transfers of resources from North to South' (Warlenius et al. 2015:151).

Notably, the key consensus around climate debt in the literature is that it should be 'recognised' (Paredis et al. 2009:11). This focus on recognition is reflective of a theory of justice that is not solely interested in the distribution of 'goods and benefits' (Rawls 1971:423), but also deeply concerned in the 'recognition of group difference' and 'political participation' (Schlosberg 2004:519). Recognition of the climate debt owed by the minority world to the majority world shifts away from the historic focus on the majority world's indebtedness, and instead offers the people from these nations the discursive power of being creditors in the global financial system.

Di Giminiani (2018) warns of 'The inadequacy of framing indigenous environmental demands in the universalizing language of global environmentalism' (p. 231). In recognition of this, many Latinx Indigenous activists have turned their focus to localised acts of world-making, which centres the reclamation of stolen territory (Di Giminiani 2018:232). The relationship between land and identity for Indigenous Latin Americans is not plagued by the nature/body/mind divide of Western Cartesian thought (Ramón 2011:6). Rather all these concepts are inextricably linked. It is not enough for environmental activists and researchers to use Indigenous peoples for their 'symbolic capital...reflecting little of their daily experiences with the environment,' (Di Giminiani 2018:230) and this is perhaps the biggest gap in the debate around climate debt.

While many authors of climate debt literature promote its efficacy for fulfilling the aims of 'the environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier 2016:10), rarely was I able to find reference to knowledges produced by and for Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the implementation of climate debt, despite its grassroots origins, runs many of the same risks of 'misrecognition' and 'disenfranchisement' (Schlosberg 2004:522) of Indigenous communities as many of the neoliberal solutions proposed to address climate change. When Indigenous movements demand the right to have their traditional knowledges and right to self-determination recognised, the issue is not how the minority world can calculate monetarily what Indigenous peoples are owed; the issue is how the minority world can make way for pluralistic governance structures that promote the adaptive practices of Indigenous peoples as they exist today (Di Giminiani 2018:231).

## Conclusion

Across this essay I have sought to value the 'view from below' (Davies and Seuffert 2001:270). In characterising the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Indigenous Latin Americans I took the long view, interested not only in the tangible outcomes of climate change but also the histories and narratives that enabled the 'colonial power matrix' (Quijano 2000:23) to wreak havoc in the way it did. I then outlined the origins and principles of a climate debt scheme

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within a counter-hegemonic framework and evaluated its possible benefits, implications, and limitations in the context of Latin America. Finally, I highlighted the importance of recognition to theories of environmental justice and questioned the ability for climate debt models to achieve the recognitional justice being demanded by Indigenous peoples.

The devaluing of Indigenous knowledges is born from a Western epistemological tradition that claims universality from 'a view from nowhere' (Haraway 1988:581) which conceals the way knowledge has been produced within community. By using Post-colonial, Feminist epistemology to situate knowledge, we can turn to valuing the view of the marginalised/oppressed. This is not to claim that the view from below is more objective, but rather that when we look to the knowledge produced by the marginalised we are likely to engage 'with a...often more complete understanding of the oppression' being studied (Davies and Seuffert 2001:271). The implications of this epistemological grounding for the present research is that I have been obliged to turn to responses that centre not only Indigenous Latinx peoples in my characterisation of the problem of climate change, but also in the explored solutions.

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