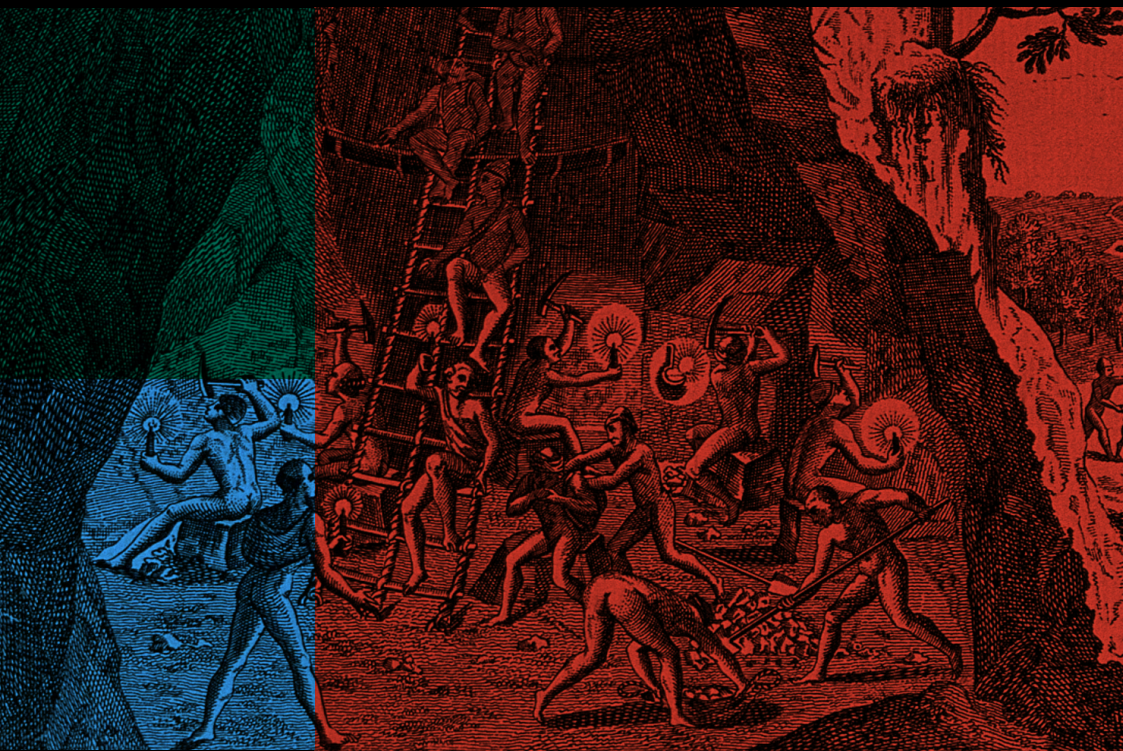


# Crisis, extractivism and debt

Structural reasons for migration

María José Gordillo Kempff, Mariano Féliz and Darío Farcy





“Crisis, extractivism and debt. Structural reasons for migration.”

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Image: David Gaberle

# Introduction

Ever since the occupation and colonisation of America, Europe has been a target location for the migration of millions of Latin Americans. Overall, the movement of people from Latin America to the “old” continent has resulted from the pressure of global capitalism on the living conditions of Abya Yala.

The key to understanding the nature of the life and work of the migrants in Europe is to analyse the dependency links that have consolidated through decades of plundering of common property, financial speculation and indebtedness in their territories of origin. Understanding the forced nature of these migrations does not only allow us to analyse the reasoning behind these long, hurried, uncertain and hopeful journeys. It also gives us the tools to understand the forms of work and lifestyles in these newfound homes and the

relationships that persist with the families and homes in their country of origin. It also allows us to critically connect life conditions, understanding structural limits and the possibilities that make a dignified life for the majority possible.

This study aims to be helpful in that way. It reflects on historical and contemporary events from the reality of these immigrants and the nature and contradictions of the migration cycle that connects Latin America and Europe by relying on critical analysis, with information portraying how the recent migratory process is woven with the unequal ties of both territories. From the point of view of an immigrant, we aim to improve the lives of the migrants and their families, as well as build a different connection between the origin and destiny, our stories and our projects.

# The historical relevance of dependency

Capitalism was born out of mud and blood. By the conquest and colonisation of America (known as Abya Yala by the Indigenous People, among other names<sup>1</sup>), the territory currently known as Europe was able to accumulate capital, obtaining material and human resources. From the late 18th century, this accumulation was primarily concentrated in a handful of core European countries: England, France and Germany. The peripheries surrounding them to the south (e.g., Spain, Portugal) and the east (e.g., Greece, Hungary, Poland) of the epicentre of European industrialisation had unequal and mixed development without achieving the same levels of material wealth.

In America, millions of people from the local communities were forced to work to the looting of natural resources of the “new” continent, while millions more were killed or relocated. From the inception of the Industrial Revolution, the looting multiplied the extraction of food and supplies to produce commodities in European factories. This process was expanded and replicated alongside the newly colonised territories in Africa and Asia, including the forced migration of millions of people for slave labour, death by illnesses and the persecution and extermination of many others in regions

that had to be occupied by their new “owners”.

This continued, despite the fact that the Peoples of Latin America advanced quickly in their processes of independence from the beginning of the 19th century. These political projects were not able to disrupt the historical dependency relations. Through popular struggle, the countries of the region became politically independent. Still, they needed to overcome their place in the world as suppliers of food and raw materials to meet the demands of European powers.

This limitation partly resulted from the emergence of the new imperialist power in the region (United States, U.S.), which would become the dominant power at the end of the Second World War. The expansion of the U.S. relied on the massive exploitation of slave labour, its violent expansion over the territory of Mexico and the communal lands of indigenous peoples, and the multiplication of interventionism in the countries and regions that

## dependency

“...understood as a relation of subordination between formally independent nations, in the framework of which the relations of production of the subordinate nations are modified or re-created to ensure the expanded reproduction of dependency. Thus, the outcome of dependency cannot be anything other than more dependency, and its liquidation necessarily implies eliminating the relations of production it involves (Marini, 2022: 117).

1 See glossary.

the U.S. bourgeoisie considered part of its “backyard” (Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc.).

Until the middle of the 20th century, we witnessed the advance of popular struggles for social change and the political independence of the territories, as we observed the consolidation of imperialism as a superior form of capitalism<sup>2</sup>. The development of large corporations concentrated in core countries boosted the export of capital (in its mercantile, financial and productive forms). At the same time, as Rosa Luxemburg analysed, this allowed for the displacement of internal contradictions in the centres through the conquest and capitalist appropriation of vast territories in the global peripheries<sup>3</sup>. Imperialism thus became the strategy of capital in the economic powers of the core to guarantee control over dependent territories, no longer favouring overt forms of political intervention (although still using direct intervention when “their” interests required it). In this context, some territories in the peripheries managed to advance in processes of partial industrialisation. Still, for the most part, they needed to overcome their dependence on valorisation and growth led by capital in the core countries.

The capitalist crisis that began in the late 1960s, with its epicentre in the 1970s,

opened the most recent stage of global capital restructuring: neoliberalism. This crisis came about in response to the growth of social resistance to the contradictions of post-war capitalism<sup>4</sup> and its impact on the conditions of capital valorisation (i.e., the falling rate of profit)<sup>5</sup>. The cycle of struggles that included the movement for civil rights for people of African descent and LGBTQ+ rights (with the Stonewall revolt of 1969) in the United States, the workers’ struggles in conjunction with the student movement in Italy and the rest of Europe<sup>6</sup>, the demands for improved social benefits and the popular resistance to the Vietnam War, among others, challenged the “consensus” reached at the beginning of the post-war period<sup>7</sup>.

In Latin America, this cycle included the Cuban revolution in 1959, and multiplied in processes such as the popular uprising of the Cordobazo against the dictatorship in Argentina (1969) or the electoral triumph of the Unidad Popular in Chile (1970). The crisis was expressed in multidimensional social conflict, but also in stagnating labour productivity, rising inflation, economic slowdown and the fiscal crisis of the state that led to a sustained fall in the rate of profit from the mid-1960s and more clearly from the

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2 Lenin V.L (2008).

3 Luxemburg R. (2021).

4 De Angelis, M (2000).

5 Cleaver, H (2020).

6 Particularly relevant for the collapse of the hegemony of the agreements reached in the welfare state era were the uprisings of the French May and the students in West Germany in 1968, and the hot autumn in Italy in 1969-1970.

7 “[This crisis] is a response to the cycle of struggles that, starting with the anticolonial movement and continuing through the Black Power, Blue Collar and Feminist Movements of the ’60s and ’70s, challenged the international and sexual division of labour, causing not only a historic profit crisis but a true social and cultural revolution” (Federici, S., 2012).

1970s onwards<sup>8</sup>.

Faced with the advance of social struggles, the dominant sectors responded with multiple repressive responses of high intensity, such as the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico (1968), the military coup in Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1973 and Argentina in 1976. The Brazilian dictatorship (which lasted more than 20 years) became the political turning point, and the coup in Chile (which also lasted almost two decades) marked the economic turn in Latin American capitalism. Chile was the first country to openly apply the neoliberal economic strategy, with the active participation of the academic circle of the University of Chicago (known as the “Chicago Boys”, followers of the monetarist economist Milton Friedman). In combination, Brazil and Chile became laboratories of change driven by the neoliberal programme that would be consolidated after the electoral triumph of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Reagan in the United States in 1979 and 1981, respectively.

We cannot ignore the direct link between the military dictatorships in Latin America (sponsored, supported and financed by the United States) and the cycle of atrocious indebtedness that made dollars from oil capital profitable after the so-called “oil crisis” of 1973. The rise in oil prices meant, first, a flow of resources from the working classes to concentrated oil capital. Secondly, this extraordinary flow of resources was valorised through their circulation via the big American banks, which lent them almost unrestrictedly to states in the world’s periph-

eries.

These resources made it possible to sustain dictatorial governments in most Latin American countries for decades. Between 1975 and 1980, the total external debt of Latin American countries rose from 67 billion dollars to more than 208 billion<sup>9</sup> and reached a peak of 50% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1987, on average for the region; by 2020 it had risen to 78% of regional GDP. In the 1980s, despite some attempts at coordinated renegotiation, the magnitude of the debt overhang led to the “debt crisis” that accentuated the region’s economic, social and political crisis.

With a combination of political violence (state and para-state), military dictatorships, wars and military interventions,

### **structural adjustment programmes**

In the 1980s, “structural adjustment programmes” set out the conditions for reforms that countries had to carry out in return for funding from international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These programmes included privatisation of public enterprises, land and common goods, reduction of state spending and cuts in the fiscal deficit, trade liberalisation and deregulation of the economy, including labour flexibilisation and privatisation of the social security system. The proposed reforms had enormous social and economic costs, and were the same for all countries, regardless of their specific conditions. See IMF Factsheets (2023).

8 Nadal A. (2016).

9 Ocampo J.A and others (2014).



and over-indebtedness, in the 1970s and 1980s the dependent territories entered an era of **structural adjustment programmes** driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These programmes were based on defining workers' and popular historical conquests as excessive and unsustainable, and sought to force cuts in public spending (especially in universal social welfare programmes such as education and health), the privatisation of state enterprises, the deregulation of labour relations and the general commodification of the economy. At the same time, with the new neo-liberal engineering, which was consolidated with the fall of the Soviet Union and the imposition of liberal capitalism as a world system, the over-indebted countries were encouraged by international organisations and institutions (World Trade Organisation / WTO, IMF, World Bank / WB, etc.) to sign free trade and foreign investment protection treaties as a way of promoting capital inflows. By way of example, in 1985, Bolivia initiated the so-called "New Economic Policy", which involved a drastic cutback in public spending that led to the dismissal of more than 160,000 miners, factory workers and public employees in the five years 1985-1990<sup>10</sup>; this represented around 4% of the country's working-age population<sup>11</sup>. In Argentina, on the other

hand, neoliberal policies progressed in a conflictive manner during the 1980s, and it was not until 1989/1990 that the generalised process of selling off public companies, privatising the pension system and opening up the economy began<sup>12</sup>; the unemployment rate exceeded 20% of the economically active population in the mid-1990s, and the incidence of income poverty reached 37.2% in 1998<sup>13</sup>. These processes caused waves of internal migration and sustained increases in the precariousness of employment and life, with differential impacts on racialised and indigenous populations.

The sustainability of the foreign debt<sup>14</sup> will become the new articulating axis of the reproduction of capital in the peripheries<sup>15</sup>. This process strengthened and accelerated the massive migrations from the countryside to the cities in the

### accumulation by dispossession

"A general re-evaluation of the persistent and persistent role of the predatory practices of "primitive" or "original" accumulation throughout the historical geography of capitalism is, therefore, more than justified, ... Since it seems inappropriate to refer to a current process as "primitive" or "original", the following terms will be replaced by the concept of "accumulation through dispossession". ... Accumulation through dispossession can occur in a variety of ways and there is much contingent and fortuitous in its modus operandi. Even so, it is omnipresent at all historical stages and becomes more acute in crises of over-accumulation and expansion of production, when there seems to be no other possible way out except devaluation." Harvey D. (2003).

10 Vacaflores, V. (2003).

11 According to World Bank data, Bolivia had a total population of 6.7 million in 1990. 55.6% were between 15 and 64 years of age.

12 Féliz M. (2013).

13 Féliz M. (2005).

14 See glossary.

15 Féliz M. (2023).

peripheral territories and multiplied the population movement towards the core countries. Over-indebtedness and sustainability policies<sup>16</sup> were (and are) part of a new turn towards a new primitive accumulation of capital<sup>17</sup>, which geographer David Harvey termed “**accumulation by dispossession**”. In this way, dependent territories were forced to provide essential means for the technological and social transformation led by the micro-computing and energy revolution<sup>18</sup>. In addition to traditional exports of food commodities (e.g., soya, palm oil, cereals, meat) and inputs (e.g., liquefied gas), they supply strategic minerals for the development of a new generation of microchips, batteries and critical materials in the green capitalist transition (such as lithium, rare earths), which are extracted mainly from the new frontiers of capital on dependent territories.



Image: Aizar Raldes/AFP

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16 Félix M. (2023).

17 See glossary.

18 Félix M. & Elisa Melón D. (2022).

# Debt and the crisis of the reproduction of life

Over-indebtedness of the state in the international market has become the cornerstone of the transformations that have taken place in recent decades in most dependent territories. This means that states and governing political forces are promoting actions to ensure that, as the IMF proposes, debt is sustainable; that is, it can be permanently refinanced without ever disappearing<sup>19</sup>. The aim is not for countries to get out of debt but for them to remain at the mercy of their creditors in the framework of the debt system. Countries must comply with the requirements of international creditors, and in particular, the Fund, to guarantee continuous access to the refinancing of their financial claims (roll-over). The cases of loans to Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina in recent years demonstrate that despite coups d'état, popular mobilisations, violent repression or transgression of the IMF's statutes, this vulnerability induced in peripheral countries by the policies proposed by the Fund governs the structure and dynamics of the debt system<sup>20</sup>.

Especially in recent decades, several actors have emerged in the financial sys-

## debt system

“The debt system is an integral part of the world capitalist system. But it is not just an opposition between the North and the South of the planet. In every country, local capitalist classes were interested in imposing the debt system. Transposition is therefore within the system, between the ruling classes and the people” Toussaint, E. (2018). “Debt is not only an economic instrument, it is also a political weapon. The main tool of globalisation, it has disorientated the economy and enabled exports and extractivism. It is a major instrument to privatise the economy, to put an end to socialism and to create mass impoverishment. Debt has been used internationally because it is so effective in exploiting individuals. It demobilises and does not generate general resistance, precisely because it hides exploitation and isolates people. A worker engaged in the wage struggle will perceive the unjust exploitation he or she suffers and feel part of the collective. A private debtor will appear to have taken advantage of the money for his or her own benefit”. Federici S. and Toussaint E. (2017).

tem that attempt to gain extraordinary profits by taking advantage of the fragility of countries with payment difficulties. In the wake of the internationalisation of capital, companies use international courts and the courts of the nations of the global core to obtain rulings in their favour. The spearhead of this structure are investment funds<sup>21</sup> - vulture funds

19 IMF (2013).

20 Gambina J. C. & González H. T. (Eds.) (2023).

21 The most important cases on a global scale are Blackrock, Elliot Management and Soros Fund Management, among others.

or holdouts - which acquire public debt securities of countries with financial difficulties on the secondary market at very low prices. Their objective is not to renegotiate the terms of payment but to take the indebted country to court to obtain the full amount owed. There are multiple cases of investment funds that have carried out this type of litigation and lawsuits against states in the global South, confiscating and appropriating public assets to pressure these states to give in to their demands<sup>22</sup>.

Once again, Argentina serves as a paradigmatic case. After years of a lawsuit in the New York courts, in 2016, the government of businessman Mauricio Macri agreed to an extraordinary payment of 9.3 billion US dollars to the speculative funds in litigation with the country<sup>23</sup>. This costly operation reopened the country's international indebtedness for a few years, deepening the problem of debt overhang<sup>24</sup>. The debt crisis is barely masked by the expansion of exports of primary products and the persistent flow of speculative capital. Still, it is always on the verge of exploding: a fall in export prices, a drought, a halt to capital inflows, or a rise in global interest rates, among other (recurrent) imponderables, can always lead the region's economies to collapse.

Debt sustainability has a hidden condition, which even the international lending agencies reluctantly recognise: it must be economically and politically fea-

sible. The economic conditions of sustainability refer to the need for indebted countries to take actions that guarantee the profitability of concentrated transnational capital. The political conditions require that these policies (not only economic) be accepted and sustained without the political system collapsing in the face of social and popular resistance.

In the first sense, debt sustainability aims to ensure that the economy of the indebted country guarantees that a portion of the social wealth created by workers will be used to pay the interest on the debt (while the principal is refinanced). This requires the state to reduce or contain its spending (mainly on social policies, education and health) to guarantee the availability of resources to pay. Si-



Image: EFE

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22 In addition to the case brought by Elliot Management, owned by tycoon Paul Singer, against Argentina, there are hundreds of cases throughout the region. These include the litigation between Colombia and Eco Oro or Crystallex against Venezuela. Ciar Global (2020), LPO (2022), Stop ISDS (2019).

23 El Comercio (2016).

24 Cantamutto F. J. & Féliz M. (2021).

multaneously, however, the state must create the conditions for the economy to generate sufficient international currency inflows (usually dollars) to meet the interest on existing debt. Securing such foreign exchange is crucial since the debt is mostly in foreign currency. In the case of dependent economies, the primary way to obtain the dollars to sustain such sustainability will come from exports of primary commodities. For this reason, foreign debt leads the countries of the world's peripheries to favour economic policies that expand the frontiers of capital, multiplying the plundering of natural wealth for its commodification and export. To return to the case of Argentina, the process of over-indebtedness that began in the late 1970s accelerated in the last decade, bringing the public foreign debt to more than 133 billion dollars in 2022 (equivalent to 28.7% of GDP), including 50 billion with the IMF<sup>25</sup>. Faced with the decision of the majority political forces to validate the legality and legitimacy of the debt, the sustainability of this debt is based on the promotion of hydrocarbon and mineral extractivism. On the one hand, unconventional oil and gas extraction projects have been strengthened in the geological deposits of Vaca Muerta (and more recently in Palermo Aike) in the country's south, with the primary objective of exporting liquefied gas. At the same time, copper and lithium mining projects are advancing (mainly in the north-west of Argentina), among other minerals that are strategic in the electri-

## extractivism

In broad terms, it implies the specific relationship of the human with the non-human, where the latter would form an inferior entity, available to be exploited and used for the accumulation of capital. In concrete terms in Latin America, the concept is linked to natural resource extraction projects, which comprise intensive exploitation without including value addition in the regions where these resources are located. The result is a dispossession and destruction of territories in order to secure raw materials at low prices in the global North, where they will be incorporated into production chains.

fication of capitalism and the transition to green capitalism<sup>26</sup>.

Of course, the pressure to plunder natural wealth and common goods leads the debt sustainability strategy to collide with the other conditions of possibility: political sustainability. In this regard, debt sustainability faces an insurmountable constraint: the collective social need to sustain life. The expanded reproduction of capital posit as an invisible assumption the need to guarantee minimum conditions for the reproduction of human and non-human life. Without the performance of reproductive and care work, the human labour that ensures economic value production cannot occur. Natural conditions cannot be sustained without such social reproduction work, and thus

25 Total public debt (in local and foreign currency) was equivalent to USD 396 billion or 85% of GDP at the end of 2022. Ministry of Economy (2023).

26 Argentina, along with Chile and Bolivia, is a territory with some of the world's most significant deposits of unconventional gas and lithium in salt flats, which makes the country a space of key geopolitical disputes. Fornillo B. (Ed.) (2015).

life is endangered.

In the face of the vital risk to which the plundering of the commons goods and the super-exploitation of labour power lead, the sustainability of debt always faces social resistance and, thus, the danger of its political unsustainability. However, sustained impoverishment and systemic coercion can lead to discipline and resignation rather than open resistance. In this sense, migration, apathy and social violence can be seen as mass options, especially when (due to different circumstances) collective anti-systemic organisation has difficulties developing to channelling general anger.

The will to sustain extractivism to guarantee debt repayment (and vice versa: the choice to repay the debt as an excuse to promote extractivism) leads to structural adjustment and systematic cuts in state policies, especially those aimed at the reproduction of life while strengthening institutional forms that distance the people from strategic decision-making. This process restricts political decision-making for governments and citizens, whose electoral choices are limited to the candidates who can, for better or worse, cope with this burden. In this way, most indebted countries experience a limitation of their democratic process concerning the fulfilment of debt payments. In Argentina, both the opposition and the ruling party argue that not paying the IMF is not an option. President Alberto Fernández (2019–2023) used his first official message after the legisla-

tive elections (2021) to confirm that he would push for an agreement with the IMF as soon as possible<sup>27</sup>. This is part of the engineering of global neoliberalism, i.e., a legal and political infrastructure that guarantees the expansion and accumulation of capital. The privatisation of key enterprises (as in the case of the partial sale of the PEMEX oil company in Mexico), or of the social welfare system through pension funds (in Chile or Brazil), the policies of a Central Bank independent of political power in Peru, or the extreme of dollarisation in Ecuador, are all strategies to consolidate adjustment policies, by depoliticising them. This is expressed in austerity initiatives that cut social spending and public services while increasing the tax burden on the popular sectors (e.g., through consumption taxes) and cutting taxation on the rich and corporations. In addition, they promote rules that make the labour markets more precarious and restrict policies aimed at promoting and sustaining reproductive and care work (including those that serve to protect the environment). Establishing “free trade agreements”<sup>28</sup> is another fundamental part of this neoliberal assemblage that reveals the new dimensions that capital has acquired through the power of private transnational corporations, which exceeds any kind of state regulation or democratic control.

We are facing a scenario of a lack of territorial, political and economic sovereignty, in which an entire continent is imperially subjugated to become a territory of

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27 In a recorded message, the president announced that in December 2021 he would send his plan to Congress to reach an agreement with the IMF. Infobae (2021).

28 “These unaccountable bodies, acting overwhelmingly in the interests of capital, are “constitutionalising” neoliberal notions of “free trade” and “intellectual property”, connecting them to the global regime and bypassing democratic labour and environmental legislation in advance. (Fraser 2020: 130).

plunder and sacrifice zones<sup>29</sup>. This situation is deepened by the cyclical crises of capitalism, which, exacerbated by indebtedness and economic dependence, drive companies and states to loot resources and profits. This recurrent expansion of the predatory logic of capital undermines the reproduction of human communities and destroys the ecosystems that enable life on Earth to reproduce. Amplified by the 2008 global financial crisis and the growing internationalisation of capital, economic austerity policies have deepened socio-economic inequalities, particularly impacting the most vulnerable sectors and populations (due to their ethnicity, gender and class) of societies<sup>30</sup>. In this sense, peasant and indigenous communities experience the (para)military, capitalist and patriarchal violence of displacement, dispossession and destruction of their territories of habitat and origin, the expropriation of their means of subsistence and the breakdown of their communities. These communities experience the harshest repercussions of the regime of accumulation by dispossession that takes place through extractivism.

This is why, in Latin America, many environmental activists protecting territories that are being dispossessed are systematically persecuted, criminalised and assassinated. According to the organisation Global Witness, in 2020<sup>31</sup>, 227 environmental activists were murdered in Latin America, while in 2021<sup>32</sup>, 200 were assassinated as well.



Image: Richard Bauer | Diálogo Chino

This violence is one of the faces of the multiple ways capital enters territories, not only stripping people of their livelihoods but also tearing apart the reciprocal relationships of communities and destroying ecosystems. The structural violence caused by the advance of the imperialist regime through accumulation by dispossession also manifests itself in the urban or peripheral territories of the nations of the South. Thus, the critical nodes that clearly illustrate the territorialisation of neoliberalism and the increase of violence in Latin America include the introduction of the “war on drugs” and the establishing of “free trade zones”.

Through the “war on drugs” the United States has managed to increase its direct

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29 See glossary.

30 We use this term because we believe that the vulnerability of these people is not a feature of the essence, but is the result of the social structure that makes them more vulnerable to oppressions and exploitations.

31 Global Witness (2021).

32 Global Witness (2021).

control over some southern nations' legal and security systems to make them work for its interests, the most emblematic cases being Mexico<sup>33</sup> and Colombia<sup>34</sup>. Similarly, the banner of the "war on drugs" is a new way for capital to try to resolve its contradictions by expanding the use of violence in areas with strategic natural resources so that transnational extractivist companies can enter communities under the justification of controlling drug production<sup>35</sup>. Organised crime related to drug trafficking and the violence exercised in the territories – especially against activists who try to organise their communities – is exacerbated, especially in the border areas with the United States, due to increased militarisation and intra-cartel disputes over territorial control<sup>36</sup>.

On the other hand, "free trade zones" have been set up for the benefit and expansion of transnational capital, with the T-MEC (Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the US and Canada, which replaced NAFTA) and CAFTA (Free Trade Agreement between the Dominican Re-

public, Central America and the United States) being paradigmatic examples. Within this regulatory framework, the border areas and a large part of Central America and the Caribbean territories have become strategic territories for expanding transnational companies and the enclave of the maquila industry<sup>37</sup>. The maquila industry is one of the central nodes of neoliberalism in Latin America. It produces low-cost goods for export based on the subordination of an underpaid and largely feminised workforce with insecure subcontracting practices and zero labour rights. In this sense, the current Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations between the EU and Mercosur or the already successful FTAs between the EU and Chile, Colombia and Peru show that these economic policies will be extended and deepened in other regions and countries.

This shows that austerity and the expansion of transnational capital in the region are suffered most harshly by feminised bodies. This is evidenced by the increase in patriarchal violence in the form of phys-

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33 Martin, L. (2015).

34 Plan Colombia: Cashing In on the Drug War Failure (2003).

35 In the book 'Drug War Capitalism', Dawn Paley illustrates the relevance of the US drug war to the process of accumulation by dispossession (Paley, 2014).

36 "Activists in Chihuahua and elsewhere in Mexico find themselves at a crossroads of environmental activism and organized crime in a region where all armed actors (police, army, organized crime groups) operate with near-total impunity. [...] Saúl Reyes Salazar, an activist from the Juarez Valley, estimates that in the state of Chihuahua alone, 40 activists have been killed since December 2006, something he likens to an ideological cleansing in the state. Two of his sisters, his sister-in-law, and two of his brothers were murdered between January 2010 and February 2011. The Reyes Salazar family was known for its environmental activism, having successfully fought a proposed nuclear waste facility in Texas and carried out campaigns against contamination and toxins being illegally disposed of in Juárez. Reyes Salazar links the killings of his siblings to their outspoken conviction that the army was responsible for murdering and disappearing family members (beginning with Josefina Reyes's son)" (Paley 2015: 111).

37 "New economic zones designate an extra-territorial space to lure capital. In these zones, capital operates in extra-territorial global spaces where national governments suspend labor laws and other regulations. Social and political considerations along with profit maximization motivate hiring and locational decisions contributing to economic globalization" (Gottfried 2013: 203).



ical, sexual and psychological violence, which tends to predominate in an intensified form in territories directly affected by mass unemployment, socio-economic insecurity, low social spending and increased inequality<sup>38</sup>. In most cases, this also involves increased state militarisation and the proliferation of criminal groups and cartels, which use physical and patriarchal violence as a strategy of terror and control over communities. One of the cases that could exemplify this situation is the state crime that culminated in the forced disappearance of 43 students from the Rural Normal School of Atyonizapa in 2014 in Mexico.

At the same time, there is an increase in patriarchal violence within the households, mainly because families can no longer be sustained solely by the paid work of a single member - who used to be an adult male-. Faced with the greater integration of women (albeit precariously and insecurely) into the labour force in public life, and the loss of male control over women's bodies and work, many men respond through greater patriarchal violence in order not to "lose power"<sup>39</sup>. Thus, in the face of austerity policies, feminised women and bodies accumulate on their backs the most care, reproductive, or social reproduction work. It is important to emphasise that in addition to care work, social reproduction encompasses activities related to cleaning, health, feeding and educating people, and caring for nature in a broad sense. These



Image: Wikipedia

jobs have been systematically and historically relegated to women and femininities under the patriarchal imposition that they are "naturally" more apt to handle them. This operation makes invisible a division of labour that practically reduces the remuneration of reproductive work to zero despite the physical and emotional burden it requires. This practice of devaluing care work contributes to maintaining production conditions and high profit rates at the lowest possible cost to the owners of capital.

This implies that these tasks are system-

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38 Silvia Federici, after consulting demographic sources, asserts that in all countries that have undergone structural adjustment, there has been an "increased violence against women at the hands of male relatives, governmental authorities and warring armies" (Federici, 2012: 88).

39 "We have also witnessed an increase in male violence against women, triggered in part by fear of economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience in not being able to fulfil their role as family providers" (Federici 2012: 109).

atically relegated to the private sphere and the family economy in the face of the privatization of spheres of reproductive activities. This situation, coupled with the reduced income of families due to more precarious employment conditions, means that these families cannot provide fair remuneration for those who carry out reproductive work. As a result, the state is relieved of the responsibility of guaranteeing reproduction, and this work falls to women, increasing their workload of unpaid labour.

In times of austerity, cuts in public spending impact both productive sectors (cutting employment benefits and increasing unemployment rates) and reproductive sectors (particularly in health, care, education and housing), leaving them at the mercy of financial speculation and subjected to pressures for privatisation. In this scenario, the household economy is the most vulnerable to indebtedness and bank speculation. By way of example, in 2019, it was calculated that 65% of Chilean households were indebted through consumer credit, mortgages and even commissions charged on salaries in the banking system; this debt is equivalent to 44% of the country's Gross Domestic Product<sup>40</sup>.

The deterioration of living and working conditions, the endangering of the population's health, and the curtailment of state policies that favour the popular sectors are the substratum of growing levels of social resistance. Thus, as the sustainability of the debt consolidates and confirms its economic matrix (renewed plundering of natural wealth and common goods, precariousness of work

and life), it leads to unsustainable living conditions and political instability.

These dimensions of dispossession and structural adjustment are systematic and global, so today, we speak of a crisis of social reproduction on a planetary scale. This crisis leads to the massive, forced migration of people from the South to the global North: to sustain the lives of their families in their countries of origin through remittances and to search for better living conditions abroad, millions of people are forced to move. These are the foundations of the new generations of migrants from the peripheries to the capitalist centres.

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40 Lara Cortés, C. (2023).

# Migration as a key to accumulation

The current systemic crisis of capitalism is occurring globally and at all levels. However, it is in the peripheries of the world where its most brutal and extreme facets are manifested.

The consequences of this form of capital accumulation become visible to the global centre in the form of one of the most acute trends of these times: migration. Despite being as old as humanity itself and having various reasons for it, the current crisis means that more and more people are forced to face the decision to leave their home territories because of the impossibility of achieving a dignified life. Today, millions of people migrate, trying to build a better life for themselves and their families (both for those who arrive in their country of destination and those who remain in their places of origin). In recent decades, there has been an exponential increase in migration from Latin America to the European Union: the number of migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean living in Europe has quadrupled between 1990 and 2020, reaching 5 million people<sup>41</sup>. This is the result of the historical dispossession of the territories of the global South

coupled with the growing economic and social instability caused by the neoliberal and extractivist international policies of the core countries and their allies in the peripheral regions.

For migrants from Latin America, the main destinations are the United States of America (U.S.) and Europe. This is linked not only to the possibility of finding employment that ensures the reproduction of life in the countries of the global South (mainly through remittances<sup>42</sup>) but also relates to cultural and linguistic similarities resulting from the history of colonisation and dependence between these countries and regions. It is no coincidence that the places that concentrate capital accumulation (many, former imperial metropolis) are the ones that attract most migrants. Through this mechanism, the migratory flow occurs in parallel to capital accumulation and wealth flows from the periphery to the centre.

In this sense, the dynamics of migration allow us to see the global division of labour and the roles played in it by the peoples and territories destined to produce raw materials and provide labour power for the development of care work and other low-paying jobs at the capitalist core. In these dynamics of systematic dispossession, we can get a glimpse at the interconnection between the precarious living conditions of the working class of the global south and the demand for cheap labour in the northern countries to maintain their living standards. As German authors Brand and Wissen put it,

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41 McAuliffe, M., & Triandafyllidou, A. (Eds.). (2021).

42 To cite a paradigmatic case in the region, in Mexico the second largest net producer of foreign exchange, just behind the automotive industry, are the remittances sent to the country by the millions of workers who have had to migrate. Vázquez, V. (2021).

for an imperial way of life to exist in the global north, there must be a specific relationship between society and nature on the peripheries that allows for a transfer of resources, work and cheap products that ensure the reproduction of that way of life in the world's centre. This is not only the result of "economic" determinations but also of a cultural hegemony defining right and wrong living standards as a norm in the central economies and as an aspiration in the countries of the periphery<sup>43</sup>.

This structural process marks the current trend but does not imply that the forms of

migration are monolithic or that all migrants are in situations of extreme poverty or illegality. In fact, there are several experiences of migration. On the one hand, some travel with study permits, but in many cases, they must work precariously both inside and outside the academy. On the other hand, some obtain work permits, and are subject to respecting contracts with their employers; they keep their visas to the extent that they remain under the employer's guardianship for which they obtained them. Besides, some get Working Holiday visas, aimed at citizens of middle-income countries. This



Image: Tobias Schwarz | AFP - Getty Images

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43 Brand U. & Wissen M. (2021).

visa does not allow migrants to stay in a job for more than six months, requires a bank deposit as collateral and stipulates that the work stay may not exceed one year. In addition to these “labour” alternatives, there are people who find marriage as a way to avoid immigration policies or hold European passports. In many cases, find it difficult to carry out their trades or professions because their qualifications are not recognised or simply because of the difficulty of expressing themselves in the local language.

In the process of entering the labour market of destination, migrants often undergo a process of disqualification. This is reflected in the devaluation of educational and vocational qualifications acquired in the country of origin since the jobs at their disposal usually have little technical or academic requirements. The new temporary visas governing the link between Europe and the periphery seek to ensure this subordinate incorporation of migrants into the labour market. Especially the case of the Working Holiday visas, which are aimed at young people from the global south so that, through temporary contracts, they work in precarious jobs in the north. Applicants for this visa must have resources and knowledge (idiomatic, but in many cases also professional) that allow them to secure their lives in the countries of destination. In this way, companies are guaranteed a skilled workforce at minimal costs. In other words, this process is part of the necessary devaluation of variable capital (labour) versus (fixed) capital to consolidate higher rates of accumulation in the hands of the

capitalists.

For their part, people in exile and/or displaced by political violence in Latin American countries remain in a precarious situation for years, suffering state and police violence in the European Union. In many cases, they are eventually deported along with their families, which especially affects people from countries where access to other types of visas is far more difficult (such as Colombia or Venezuela). In turn, the European Union<sup>44</sup> has recently changed its asylum policy, further restricting the right of asylum for persons coming from the list of countries considered safe.

Finally, there is the group of migrants who arrive in the global north without papers and thus suffer illegalisation and criminalisation by receiving States. In this case, they are further exploited by companies that take advantage of this situation to reduce labour costs.

All these experiences and methods are part of a systematic process of State administration of the precariousness of life, especially of migrant life. The flow of migration is regulated but not totally prevented because it responds to the need for capital to take advantage of the conditions of vulnerability to increase its profitability. In practice, the precariousness of migration conditions makes integration in the terms required by public institutions impossible<sup>45</sup>. This situation makes it unfeasible for migrants to obtain the same working conditions that apply to native citizens in a given country and constitutes a segmentation in the labour market in the global North that is

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44 Reform of the EU asylum system. Council of Europe (2023).

45 Hanewinkel, V., & Oltmer, J. (2017).

functional to the needs of the capital<sup>46</sup>. In the case of Germany, 22 per cent<sup>47</sup> of the population are migrants or have a migration background. However, it remains difficult to determine the exact number of migrants living in Germany from Latin America. On the one hand, official statistics do not show specific data on the region<sup>48</sup>. On the other hand, many migrants hold European citizenship, which makes it difficult to identify the number and origin of migrants. Part of the invisibility of these exploitative relationships lies in institutional silence or a statistical vacuum. Not knowing how Latino migration is composed in a country like Germany, the centre of the European economy, hides the reality of the people who clean Germans' houses, take care of their children and work in their restaurants' kitchens. The majority of these invisible people migrate to the North to carry out reproductive and care work, and it is mainly women who lead the flow to the European Union from Latin America<sup>49</sup>, creating a growing flow of labour in the sector<sup>50</sup> in conditions of precariousness and infor-

mality. This migration to the global North for care, cleaning, healing and cooking is exacerbating the care crisis in the South. This migratory movement forces other people to migrate to their places of origin to take care of the people who need them, or that these tasks fall as a double or triple workload on other members of the household, generally women and feminised bodies that bear an increased burden of care in precarious conditions. The aim of these "global care chains" is to fill the gaps in the global North in an institutional system of care and reproduction (such as health or education) that does not meet the needs of the majority. The processes of privatisation, commodification and public disinvestment leave families and individuals at the mercy of the market in the face of care and reproductive needs. In the face of this crisis, families in the core countries are opting for the cheapest options to get around care, through informal contracts (such as the Au Pair programme<sup>51</sup>) and/or sub-contracting by intermediary companies<sup>52</sup>. It should be stressed that this process is not

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46 Leubecher, M. (2019).

47 Hanewinkel, V., & Oltmer, J. (2017).

48 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2022).

49 "In addition to the fact that it is possible to identify a growing feminisation of migration, we can also observe that migration flows are quite concentrated. The cases of Spain, Italy and France stand out as destination countries for people originating from the Andean countries, mainly Ecuador, Colombia and Peru". (IOM 2012: 17).

50 "Although the demand for care workers in private homes is increasing, the German government has turned a blind eye to the topic of migrant care workers. As a result of the mismatch between demand and restrictive policies, a large sector of undeclared care work has come into being [...] we assert that undeclared care migration is an integral part of German welfare state policies, which can be characterised as compliance and complicity" (Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck 2010: 419).

51 A programme in which temporary visas are issued to migrants from peripheral countries to clean houses and care for children in Europe in extremely precarious conditions.

52 "The vast majority of domestic workers are unregistered and work illegally without coverage and accident insurance. This is because around 88% of households do not register their workers. [...] Around 3.3 million German households hire help occasionally or regularly, and of these, around 2.9 million use undeclared work. (Own translation from German) (Enste 2020: 1).



Image: Thomas Peter | Reuters

unique to the countries and economies of the centre, but is a feature of the capitalist system in general. Thus, despite their importance in sustaining life, capital continues to make reproductive work invisible, keeping the migrant population informal and precarious, without labour rights and therefore in conditions of extreme vulnerability.

It is important to clarify that precariousness is a reality that affects migrants in particular, but is also shared by other oppressed sectors of society. Cuts in social policies and privatisations also affect local workers' sectors, who a priori are in a better position to face these problems.

This fosters harmful competition between migrants from different latitudes and local popular sectors.

The case of Germany is paradigmatic on this point. As the strongest economy in the EU and Europe, the most recent data show that the population living in poverty or at risk of poverty<sup>53</sup>, as estimated in the country, is 20.7% and the unemployment rate in some cities is over 10%<sup>54</sup>. The high rate of job insecurity and instability in one of the richest countries on earth is symptomatic of the global crisis. Between 2003 and 2018, the number of people with more than one job increased from 1.4 million to 3.4 million<sup>55</sup>. For their part, mi-

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53 In Germany, those earning less than 60 per cent of the median gross wage (Mediangehalt) are considered poor, and those close to that amount are considered at risk of poverty. By 2023, this amount would be 2200 euros gross income, which would represent a net salary in hand of around 1700 euros. (Statista, 2023)

54 Sell, S. et al (2020).

55 DW (2019).

grants continue to be even more affected by this process, as statistics show that the income of registered migrant workers in Germany is 44% lower than that of those with German citizenship<sup>56</sup>.

It is in the interests of capitalism in Europe to make the costs of production and social reproduction as low as possible. On the one hand, by creating expulsive living conditions in the migrants' countries of origin. On the other hand, by creating institutional conditions in the receiving countries that keep migrants in precariousness.

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56 Leubecher, M. (2019).





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**DEFENDER LA ALEGRIA**  
★ **BLOQUE LATINO**

Image: Bloque Latinoamericano Berlín

# Of past and present struggles

It is demonstrated that there is a structural and historical link between the place occupied by the countries from which migrants come and the central countries (core) in the global capitalist system. The history of plundering the former colonies is the framework that allows freedom of action to finance capital in search of the highest profit yields. The greater the dependence on the centres of global power, the more states must seek ways to fulfil their obligations, leaving extractivist solutions as the only possible ones. The political will of the governments in office has not proved to be the key factor in understanding the continuity and deepening of these policies. The conclusion is that capitalism, especially in its neoliberal format, pushes dependent countries to continue along the path of extractivism. If the climate crisis has shown anything, it is that green solutions are not feasible under the current system and that drastic action is needed to stop the machinery of global destruction. There are no sustainable solutions within capitalism, as “green” policies in some countries are sustained by the continued destruction of the ecosystems that

sustain life on earth in others. Since three decades ago, capitalism imposed itself as the hegemonic system on a planetary scale, the consequences could not be clearer, as well as the urgency of building alternatives and the need to create popular organisation.

In the face of a capitalist system that operates globally, the alternatives must necessarily be global as well. In recent years, struggles in the global north, mainly those seeking to build a climate justice perspective, have been incorporating a perspective that takes into account the perspectives of peoples in the periphery. However, in the daily struggle it is necessary to incorporate the practices and visions of migrant organisations living in these same central countries. It is proposed that by taking the concrete needs of migrants and their respective political organisation as a starting point, solutions can be found that take into account the global interconnectedness of the processes of accumulation and dispossession. Part of the aim of this reflection and research work is to contribute to this construction.

We believe that the construction of knowledge that seeks to contribute to these new developments has to be linked to historical and current popular struggles. We also argue that if it is to have a profound impact on how this praxis (theory and practice) is constructed, a necessary condition is that the knowledge comes from and is generated within the framework of the concrete practices of political and social organisation. As the social movements in Latin America put it: the head thinks

where the feet tread.

On the basis of this situated theorisation and theorised situationality, the aim is to challenge and influence activists and organisations within the climate justice movement, the organised labour movement and the global south solidarity movement on the need for coordination at first regional and then international level, in order to develop counter-hegemonic<sup>57</sup> thinking and praxis alongside broad sectors of society. The key to breaking the historical tendencies of capitalism is the organisation of the majorities and the construction of popular power, adding Latin American migrants as a fundamental part of the mobilisation in Europe.

Our survival depends on the success of the construction of a new system that can break with dependencies and exploitation.

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57 See glossary.

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# Glossary

## Abya Yala

“Abya Yala, which means Mature Land, Living Land or Flourishing Land, was the term used by the Kuna, the original people inhabiting Colombia and Panama, to designate the territory comprising the American continent” (Carrera Maldonado and Ruiz Romero, 2016: 12). (Carrera Maldonado and Ruiz Romero, 2016: 12). The use of the term Abya-yala stems from an agreement reached at the historic II Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, held in Quito (Ecuador) in 2004.

## Sustainability of the external debt

For the IMF, debt sustainability assumes that achieving a balance of payments position in the economy that at least stabilises the debt is economically and politically feasible, so that the debt can be rolled over with low risk while maintaining reasonable economic growth. However, this assertion implies that financial sustainability of debt may put the sustainability of life at risk and thus call into question social and political stability. Féliz M. (2023).

## Reproductive work

It is called reproductive because within a specific mode of production it is the means by which workers can be fed and cared for, in order to sustain life and thus - in capitalism - labour power. It can also be interpreted in its most literal sense, since it is through human reproduction that more labour power can be incorporated into the market.

## Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

It is an indicator of the size of economies. Technically it measures the value of total income created (value added) by workers in an economy during a year, and is equivalent to all production of end-use goods and services (i.e., consumption, export or investment). It only measures marketised production and part of state production, so it does not record all non-market wealth production (i.g., unpaid reproductive and care work carried out in households and communities, mostly by women). On the other hand, “value added” does not take into account non-monetarised costs, such as, for example, the environmental damage generated by production.



## Original accumulation of capital

Original (or primitive) accumulation of capital is the process through which “... the split between workers and property over the conditions of labour realisation”. (Marx, 2013). These are three central points. *“The first is that the separation of producers and means of production is a common character of both accumulation and primitive accumulation. The second is that this separation is a central category (if not the central category) of Marx’s critique of political economy. The third is that the difference between accumulation and primitive accumulation, not being a substantive one, is a difference in the conditions and forms in which this separation is implemented.”* (De Angelis, 2001: 6).

## Counter-hegemony

The concept of counter-hegemony accounts for the elements for the construction of autonomous political consciousness in the various popular classes and sectors. It raises the scenarios of dispute in the transition from particular interests to general interests, as a key political process towards an alternative social bloc.

## Imperialism

According to Vladimir Lenin, imperialism *“is the monopoly stage of capitalism. Such a definition would include what is most important, for, on the one hand, finance capital is the bank capital of a few very big monopolist banks, merged with the capital of the monopolist associations of industrialists; and, on the other hand, the division of the world is the transition from a colonial policy which has extended without hindrance to territories not seized by any capitalist power, to a colonial policy of monopolist possession of the territory of the world, which has been completely divided up”* (Lenin, 2008).

## Sacrifice areas

*“...for the sake of capital, companies and governments project an efficiency-based vision of territories that considers them to be “socially disposable”, insofar as they contain goods valued by capital. At the extreme, they are considered territories or sacrifice areas. In the name of the ideology of progress, the communities settled there are made invisible, regional economies are devalued or their crises are exacerbated, in order to facilitate the entry of other development projects that end up becoming agents of territorial occupation”.* (Svampa and Viale, 2014: 31).

# About the authors



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