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Infrastructure and Latin American Environmental Geographies: An Introduction to our Special Issue

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LATIN AMERICA'S CONTESTED ENVIRONMENTAL geographies remain globally significant, in particular for the negotiation and analysis of predatory extractive frontiers and for fertile decolonising agendas that include claims for territory, plurality, and ontological multiplicity. Yet contemporary commitments to new infrastructure connect and complicate both extractive and decolonising agendas, with implications for Latin American environmental geographies and their analysis. Plans for new infrastructure include new highways, waterways, railways, ports, dams, and power stations, including in the Amazon basin (Bebbington et al., 2020). These plans support the region's extractive imperative (Arsel et al., 2016) but also extend a wider turn to infrastructure-led development (Dodson 2017; Alami et al., 2021) and, somewhat surprisingly, are entangled with global agendas for sustainable development (Hope 2022, *this issue*).

In this special issue, we bring together fertile geographical debates on infrastructure with debates on Latin American environmental geographies. Specifically, researchers

are examining how new energy, transport, and water infrastructures (including incomplete projects) co-constitute environmental geographies and trajectories. In so doing, the papers pay close attention to several interrelated dynamics. First, juxtaposing the renewed emphasis on infrastructural development with previous waves of similar investments, they interrogate the function contemporary infrastructural projects serve for nation-states and policy makers. Second, the papers tease out societal responses to infrastructural projects at and around the sites where they are implemented, paying particular attention to dynamics of conflict (with outside actors as well as within communities), co-operation (with projects and/or implementors), and co-optation (of stakeholders as well as infrastructural projects). Finally, they theorise the environmental geographies of Latin America by tracing the local, national, regional, and global spaces (re)created and connected by infrastructural developments.

In this introductory paper, we set out the rationale for the special issue, its collective

contributions, and our core arguments—that although infrastructure can be important for inclusion, citizenship, and participatory development (Bayer, *this issue*; Bauman & Zimmerer, *this issue*), much new hard infrastructure is proving top-down and hard to negotiate. It is tied to wider economic and political agendas and constitutes yet another environmental injustice for many communities. These papers show the importance of who drives decision-making about infrastructure and what this might mean for more emancipatory environmental geographies (Werner & Pimentel de Oliveira, *this issue*; Guarnos-Meza & Torres Wong, *this issue*; Post, *this issue*). We further argue that hard, built infrastructure is not simply a connecting device. It constitutes a new object and political agent in particular environmental geographies—one that has consequences for how environments are experienced and known (Hope, *this issue*). This is crucial for assessing what ambitious plans for new infrastructure mean for the regions' environmental geographies and for wider trajectories of sustainability.

This introduction is structured as follows: first, we summarise key debates on infrastructure and how they extend contemporary work on environmental geographies. Second, we argue for the continuing importance of Latin American environmental geographies, focusing on demands to settle Indigenous land claims, recognise plural natures, and implement non-extractive and non-growth-focused trajectories of development as well as on the ways such demands have been appropriated by an extractive imperative (Arsel et al., 2016) and commodities consensus (Svampa, 2015). Third, we

introduce the papers in this issue and how they individually extend current work on infrastructure and environmental geography, focusing on overlaps, continuities, power, choice, and reassembly. Finally, we set out our conclusions.

URNS TO INFRASTRUCTURE

In urban geography, infrastructure has become a central lens for understanding how state-society relations and infrastructures are being analysed as co-constitutive of social worlds (Graham & Marvin, 2002). Going beyond treatments of hard infrastructure (electricity, roads) as purely physical objects, urban geographers have drawn from anthropology (see Larkin, 2013) to argue that physical infrastructure is implicated in the making of social worlds. This includes research on the ways that infrastructures co-constitute citizenship (Lemanski, 2020), act as a political intermediary (Amin, 2014), and determine rights to the city, amongst other dynamics. However, despite many hard infrastructures reaching into rural and conservation areas (such as roads or energy infrastructure), there is less attention to how infrastructures co-constitute socio-environmental worlds. Emerging work in geography and political ecology is arguing for an expanded conceptualisation of infrastructural violence to include violence against the non-human (Enns & Sneyd, 2020), for attention to be better attuned to how infrastructure changes non-human relations and mobilities (Barua, 2021), and for explaining how negotiations of nature discipline human/non-human relations within state-sanctioned

citizenship regimes (Hope, 2022c). Related to this, there is also work that uncovers how new infrastructure projects impact deforestation and biodiversity loss (Bebbington et al., 2018a; Gallice et al., 2019; Vilela et al., 2020) and that critically analyses moves to see and use nature as infrastructure (Hetherington, 2018; Nelson & Bigger, 2022). In this special issue, we extend this work with papers that examine how new infrastructures impact Latin American environmental geographies. In this introduction, we ask what attention to infrastructure enables us to see and ask as environmental geographers.

In Latin America, critical geographers are working on ambitious plans for new infrastructure. The expanding soybean complex, for example, is being studied for how it reterritorialises huge tracts of land (for example, in Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil) and reworks state/society relations in the process (Correia, 2019; Giraudo & Gruel, 2022; Oliveira, 2016). The transport infrastructure being built to extract and export natural resources from the Amazon has been found to cause deforestation and threaten rural (including Indigenous) ways of living off and managing land (Bebbington et al., 2018b). This work reveals how global capital and dominant logics of nature-as-resource currently operate. Yet in the grey literatures of global development, infrastructure is explained less critically, often pitched as a way to link states to society, connect remote communities, facilitate the soft infrastructure of social development (for example education and healthcare), and ensure that 'no-one is left behind' (UN, 2015). As introduced by Hope (*this issue*), the global turn to infrastructure-led devel-

opment is one way that global development is being conceived of and implemented. New infrastructure is being pitched as crucial to achieve the global sustainable development agenda (Agenda 2030) and related Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), including large scale road infrastructure through forested areas. In this special issue, these contradictory perspectives on infrastructure provide one of our starting points, and the papers critically analyse what new infrastructure actually means for local development and environments.

RADICAL ENVIRONMENTAL GEOGRAPHIES

As plans for new infrastructure develop, Latin America continues to inspire with social movements and Indigenous and state-level agendas that continue to push against an extractive economy, commodities consensus (Svampa, 2015), and neoliberal and authoritarian politics (for example, with the recent re-election of Lula in Brazil). The region's political economy remains dominated by resource extraction, including gas and oil (Perreault, 2018), lithium (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022), and large-scale agri-business (Correia, 2019; Giraudo & Grugel, 2022; Oliveira, 2016). Latin American and Anglo-European geographers have done much to evidence how the radical, post-neoliberal promises of the early 2000s were appropriated by extractive interests and an extractive imperative, where extraction needs to continue and expand regardless of prevailing circumstances and where the state is playing a leading role and capturing a large share

of the ensuing revenues (Arsel et al., 2016). Nonetheless, scholars and activists remain attentive to the social movements, Indigenous political organisations, Indigenous territorial campaigns, and political leaders that encounter, confront, and disrupt these frontiers, partly for how they navigate extractive logics of development and Nature (as one example, see Riofrancos, 2020).

Contemporary geographical debates are increasingly concerned with the region's decolonising agendas. Though multiple and beyond succinct summary (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), they include demands for territorial political autonomy, Indigenous sovereignty, and a revised state as well as calls to acknowledge (and take seriously) different knowledges and conceptualizations of the world, including of the non-human world. Since 2000, some of these agendas have been implemented in state legislation, such as the 2008 and 2009 Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, respectively. Both Constitutions integrated Indigenous concepts into national development plans and law, and they promised enhanced Indigenous territorial rights. The implementation of these, however, has been much contested by activists and scholars, as post-neoliberalism in practice proved neither anti-capitalist nor anti-extractive (Grugle & Riggiozzi, 2012; Bebbington & Bury, 2013; Andreucci & Radhiber, 2017; Arboleda, 2020; Wilson, 2021). Nonetheless, decolonising agendas remain at the forefront of radical activism and scholarship, including within environmental geography.

In part, Latin American decolonising campaigns demand that we (in this case, geographers from the Global North) recog-

nise ontological plurality and take 'other' knowledges seriously (Blaser, 2009; see also Sousa Santos, 2018). Debates on the pluriverse foreground a multiplicity of worlds and knowledges, advocating for territorial, cultural, and political autonomy (Escobar, 2018) and a "world where many worlds fit" (Zapatista thinking quoted in Escobar, 2018, p. xvi; Kothari et al., 2014). A pluriverse enacts multiple ontologies or worlds, which "bring themselves into being and sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere, and mingle with each other" under asymmetrical circumstances (Blaser, 2018, p. 32). Related to this, Latin American Indigenous territories (both rural and urban) are experiencing a resurgence of academic interest, partly as sites generative of decolonising political projects that claim political autonomy from postcolonial states and that can include alternative ways of knowing the non-human (see Halvorsen, 2019). This includes attention to their combined importance in 'repoliticising nature' for the Anthropocene by responding to the 'ruinations' of colonialism and extractive capitalism (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2018). It also includes attention to the ways territorial and place-based knowledges and politics develop within an extractive economy, including, for example, how plurality, difference, and autonomy exist in territories that have double-category status as Indigenous territories and state-managed protected areas (see Hope, 2021, for analysis of TIPNIS, Bolivia). Territory is a vital component of decolonising agendas and debates as well as being crucial to the significance of Latin American environmental geographies. Long-running strug-

gles for territory challenge and rework state power (Aguilar, 2014; see Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020), fight for collectively managed and protected land, constitute campaigns for environmental justice (see Mena et al., 2020; Hope, 2022b, and enact place-based political projects and knowledges (see de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). Within these inter-related debates, a common theme is that territories engender particular and specific politics, knowledges, and socio-natures. This has significant political implications because, for example, supporting alternative ways of knowing and valuing nature(s) not only challenges the hegemony of colonial logics but also strengthens local and Indigenous claims to land (Tuck & Yang, 2012; de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018).

Latin American environmental geographies thus remain crucial to wider concerns for how people live with and create their environments, organise and mobilise in defense of these natures, and negotiate wider political and economic forces in doing so. Yet hard infrastructure projects are so often being promoted as basic, invisible infrastructure that enables society and its development without due attention to how they rework crucial environmental geographies. In examining how they change environmental geographies, we ask how contemporary environmental issues are novel in scope, nature, and significance.

INTRODUCING THE PAPERS

Deborah Werner and Fábio Lucas Pimentel de Oliveira historicise the role of infrastructure in Brazil's socio-economic development,

tracing it from its national developmentalist past to its more recent manifestation under neoliberalisation. Infrastructural development is not simply shaped by neoliberal ideology but deeply implicated in its consolidation. Emerging under the hegemony of global finance, infrastructure in particular and spatial production processes in general have served to deepen the financialisation of the Brazilian economy and enabled the neoliberal state, responding more to the dictates of national and global fractions of capital than to the needs of the Brazilian society—in order to prop up the illusion of a stable market. This was possible to a large extent by the depoliticization of infrastructure, which the authors challenge in their conclusion. They call for the repoliticization of infrastructure within the context of development and put forward the notion of 'emancipatory infrastructure' to transcend the failings of neoliberalism. Emancipatory infrastructural development would not only help achieve economic redistribution and advance political rights of (especially marginalised) Brazilians, but it can also help to sustain Brazil's social, cultural, and environmental diversity.

Erik Post focuses on the rising wave of investment in renewable energy in Latin America, demonstrating that projects for renewable energy and associated mining infrastructures operate through coloniality and infrastructural violence. The renewables turn, despite its putative green credentials, replicates and re-entrenches past patterns of extraction and violence because it too requires ever growing quantities of resources and inputs. Post argues that the resource demands of renewables further expand and

deepen extractive frontiers into the territories of marginalised and racialised subjects. The juxtaposition of the demands of climate change adaptation through renewable energy with the needs of local community makes it possible to trivialise and override the latter. The small hydropower projects Post studies in his paper are not only ecologically unsustainable but also not materially beneficial to the communities whose territories they violently transform. In resisting them, the Indigenous communities of the Sierra Norte de Puebla name these projects *Proyectos de Muerta* to underscore the violence and colonial power differences inherent in them. Challenging the state and its bureaucratic machinations, such as the environmental impact assessments, which seek to legitimise the plunder of nature, they put forward *Proyectos de Vida* that foreground Indigenous resurgence, territorial integrity, and food and energy autonomy.

Valeria Guarneros-Meza and Marcela Torres Wong argue that energy infrastructures are intimately and necessarily linked to extractive dynamics. Their paper focuses on two different Mexican cases, one in Oaxaca and the other in Sonora, and brings together analytical insights shared by Latin American new municipalism and autonomous social movements, both of which emphasise anti-establishment political responses and local territorial control. By tracing parallels and contrasts between these two cases, they highlight four salient dynamics in relation to resistance against predatory extractivism. They argue that legal pluralism allows the coexistence of state law with customary law (e.g., *usos y costumbres*), creating space

for movements to innovate in terms of their strategies and political responses. Guarneros-Meza and Torres Wong also highlight the significance of past experience of collective mobilisation, demonstrating that contemporary struggles are best read as part of a layered history rather than as a momentary snapshot. Furthermore, they emphasise that local governance and government matter, despite the considerable importance of federal- and state-level power. Finally, the construction of alternative economies is key to emancipatory politics against predatory extractivism. Rather than rejecting extraction *tout court*, they foresee the need for and possibility of transitioning towards an alternative, sustainable approach to resource extraction that can help communities transcend their marginalisation and alleviate socio-environmental conflicts.

Megan D. Baumann and Karl Zimmerer focus on a vastly understudied form of infrastructure, namely, projects that are 'suspended' in various stages of incompleteness. Their empirical findings come from Colombia's Tolima Triangle Irrigation District. Much like proposed and completed infrastructure projects, suspended ones too can unleash a complex set of conflictual relationships between affected communities and the state. These dynamics are shaped by a fundamental unevenness in socio-economic relations, which suspended projects often deepen and exacerbate. More precisely, noting that suspended projects can still be used in a variety of ways, Baumann and Zimmerer show that communities' experiences are marked by unevenness generated by pre-existing socioeconomic and socio-

political barriers as well as spatial dynamics. In other words, the authors show that suspended infrastructures are not neutral, that they exacerbate existing inequalities, and that they unleash conflict and contestation. Within the specific context of their case study, the contestation is not so much against the project or the state itself. Rather, communities make claims on the state for investment and completion of the project, which ultimately amount to the demand that the state is accountable to society.

Melissa Bayer's contribution focuses on self-built neighbourhoods in Antofagasta, Chile. It is concerned with the political materiality of water and water infrastructures, demonstrating their role in how communities come to understand their place in political society. She documents how the concept of legality serves more to exclude and disenfranchise communities who seek to claim their rightful role as citizens. Denied full integration with political society, the residents of these self-built neighbourhoods create self-organised informal connections with the area's water infrastructure. Rather than relishing their role as outsiders, they seek recognition and integration to the neoliberal logic of water governance, and not only because access to water is essential. Being recognised as rightful consumers would not only advance their claims to infrastructural citizenship but also provide a semblance of security against eviction from their properties. In other words, Bayer shows that 'theft' is not an act of protest but rather an outcome of exclusion from legality, which is tantamount to exclusion from citizenship.

Jessica Hope focuses her attention onto

the contradictions and consequences of the new road infrastructure being built across the Amazon basin as part of the global sustainable development agenda. She asks whether the turn to infrastructure-led development necessitates a change in how we approach and research sustainable development—shifting our attention from how it is continually remade by changing discourse (Redclift, 2005) to how it is materially constituted by new hard infrastructure. She extends contemporary treatments of infrastructure with political ecology (foregrounding how natures are made, treated, and managed through culture, history, and politics) and Mario Blaser's 2009 definition of political ontology (focused on the politics of particular ontologies and the conflicts that ensue as different ontologies interact and mingle), developing violence, political agency, and plurality as critical entry points for analysing sustainable development as a material endeavour. Ultimately, she argues that new roads reassemble people, places, natures, animals, and things in ways that rework the knowledges and politics of our environmental futures, with a particular focus on progressive, alternative environmental agendas.

MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

As already introduced, infrastructure is being pitched by mainstream development actors and many states as crucial for reaching marginalised populations and ensuring they can access the basic and social infrastructures needed for development and wellbeing. Some of our papers show that this does matter—for example, Bayer's and Bauman

and Zimmerer's. However, taken together, the rest of the papers show the importance of who drives decision-making about infrastructure, the ways infrastructure projects are top-down and hard to negotiate, and how they are tied to wider economic and political agendas, some of which echo colonial states and colonial violence (Post, *this issue*). There is thus a need for scholars to be more attentive to different forms of infrastructure as well as the extent to which alternatives are being articulated, offered, and negotiated as road building, energy, or irrigation projects are planned. Otherwise, and as many of the papers in this special issues show, new infrastructure is yet another form of environmental injustice.

Much of this injustice can be traced back to the workings of contemporary neoliberalism (Arsel et al., 2021). This concerns the antagonism between the will of the state—to dominate, to transform, to develop and, ultimately, to facilitate accumulation—and the capability of local communities to articulate livelihood strategies that are meaningfully and distinctly their own. This antagonism can often manifest itself in overt conflict, as shown in the contributions of Post and Baumann and Zimmerer. In other contexts, to the extent that there exists a conflict, this is more covert, taking the shape of insurgent strategies of local communities, as is the case with the interlocutors of Bayer's in Antofagasta. It also concerns the huge power of global capital—the new ways that it is landing in nation-states (for example, as Hope identifies in global sustainable development agendas) and the extent to which it can be negotiated or held accountable.

It is worth noting, however, that conflict concerning infrastructures is not necessarily and always synonymous with conflict *against* infrastructure. The struggles of local communities to make meaning of their local realities under the shadow of state power can sometimes result in their militating in favour of infrastructural development and associated dynamics of extractivism. Baumann and Zimmerer, for instance, show how marginalised communities affected by the suspended Tolima Irrigation Project are demanding the completion of the project. It is just as important to note, however, that this is not necessarily a demonstration of unalloyed support for the state or its large-scale infrastructural projects. Rather, as Werner and de Oliveira as well as Guarneros-Meza and Torres Wong argue in different ways, support for infrastructural and extractivist development can be inspired by a search for emancipatory political strategies, ones that promise meaningful material development and genuine democratic control over resources and the state. In the absence of such strategies, local communities who (are forced to) acquiesce to the dictates of the neoliberal order, such as the residents of self-built neighborhoods in Antofagasta studied by Bayer, do so with the hope of gaining a stronger foothold for themselves and their communities. In other words, conflict against as well as accommodation of state power is always a transitory outcome. Both strategies are deployed as part of a broader search for territorial autonomy and struggles for alternative subjectivities and livelihoods.

The papers also demonstrate that the antagonism between local communities

and the state unsurprisingly predates the onset of neoliberal developmentalism but is being reworked by infrastructure projects. This is not to suggest that these struggles are repeating past patterns (Arsel 2022). Rather, the special issue demonstrates the layered nature of the contemporary politics of infrastructural development. As the papers of Post, Guarneros-Meza and Torres Wong, and Bayer and Zimmerer show clearly, understanding these layers is key to making sense of the communities' political subjectivities today, though this in no way suggests that previous layers of struggles determine contemporary outcomes. Just as the communities themselves change in myriad ways, the context in which they enact their politics—the character of the relationship between the state and capital—is continuously transformed as well. Going beyond the remaking state-society relations, these papers foreground how environmental geographies are remade within these processes despite nature so often being rendered a “static backdrop” for infrastructure projects (Enns & Sneyd, 2020, p. 484).

In instances where infrastructure is being challenged and environmental consequences are being emphasised, these papers reveal that hard, built infrastructure is not simply a connecting device. Rather, it constitutes a new structure and object in particular environmental geographies—one that has consequences for how environments are experienced and known. In this special issue, the papers outline the relevance of hard infrastructure to Indigenous communities that experience it as a death of their own ways of living (Post, *this issue*), to spreading and

enabling global and state-led political ideologies (Werner & de Oliveira, *this issue*), and for their materiality, which reassembles existing relationships between human and non-human (Hope, *this issue*). This has particular relevance for a region looked to for its radical frontiers and glimpses of possibility, as this infrastructure is being built into the very communities, territories, and regions from which radical alternatives emerge. In short, new hard infrastructure constitutes a new non-human and political actor in Latin American environmental geographies and we need to know more about the work that it does.

In asking what attention to infrastructure enables us to see and ask as environmental geographers, we find that environmental geographies are implicated in the co-constitution of state-society relations and citizenship by infrastructure; that infrastructure is one way that environmental geographies and environmental projects are connected to wider political processes and histories, such as the coloniality of renewable landscapes (Post, *this issue*); and that attention to environmental geographies reveals how infrastructure influences the politics that govern and negotiate land as well as changes the material constitution of environmental geographies in ways fundamental to the making of environmental knowledges and politics. Finally, infrastructure helps us to identify contemporary environmental issues. Whilst important work has outlined how environmental crisis is rooted in long, violent, colonial histories (Sultana, 2022; Liboiron, 2011 and amounts to a slow violence (Nixon, 2011), the current turn to infrastructure demonstrates that envi-

ronments are also being remade quickly and significantly, under the guise of straightforward, common-sense basics that all humans need to develop. However, as well as constituting new problems for already threatened places, this also offers us a way to think about how other kinds of infrastructures would underpin better ways of living.

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