Environmental Subjectivity Formation in Ecuador: Challenging Prevailing Notions of a 'Green' Transition

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Abstract: There is broad consensus around the need for an energy transition already underway in many parts of the world. While far from abandoning fossil fuels, the presiding transition put forward by governments as a solution to the climate crisis is unfolding in spatially uneven ways. Contingent upon ever-expanding extractivism, the proposed transition stands to reproduce colonial patterns of inequality and environmental damage in global South countries. The plausibility on material grounds is empirically questionable; what this article is concerned with, however, are the ethical implications of dominant narratives of socioenvironmental transition, especially those that normalise a particular view of society and nature as anthropocentric. Taking the case of young Ecuadorians and their attitudes towards ecological problems, this author examines how their perspectives, in some instances dialogue with, and in other cases diverge from prevailing scenarios through the feminist framework of environmental subjectivity. In doing so, this article contributes to an expanded notion of climate justice by considering peoples' attitudes in sites of high extraction. This paper affirms that young Ecuadorians do not overly focus on emissions, but instead call attention to a variety of socio-environmental issues, mounting a critique of the extractive model of development.

Introduction

Narratives of an energy transition[2] are usually told in a way that is paternalistic, reinforcing the idea that solving environmental problems must be done through modernisation and advances in technology. Absent within such narratives is the idea of environmental justice. Several scholars have asserted the importance of situating ecological problems within the broader context of multiple, mutually exacerbating social and economic crises (Acosta, 2021; Fraser, 2021; Moreano Venegas et al. 2021; Svampa, 2015). Decolonial feminist theory grounded in praxis encourages transcending what is normatively considered 'environmental' by expanding what (and whose opinion) counts, therefore avoiding the restrictive ecologism that is widespread in current debates. This article can be broken down into the following sections: it begins with an introduction, followed by an overview of extractivism and the programmatic and conceptual elements of *buen vivir*; it then defines and justifies the methodology and data collection procedure. Lastly, the empirical findings of the study into the environmental subjectivities of Ecuadorian youth are discussed and contextualised.

Radically different ways of organising social and economic life abound in debates on how to build a non-destructive post-pandemic world. Proposals for better ways of living and alternative measures of well-being are put forward in the global South, such as the Index of Good Living in Ecuador (Burchardt & Ickler, 2021), as well as in the global North. The well-established case for

degrowth, feminist care economics, rationing of energy sources (outside of war-time sanctioning) and not least *buen vivir* (to be discussed below in more detail) are but some extant proposals. Informed by these debates, this article aims to dialogue with youth perspectives, to see if they resonate from a place of high extraction. These proposals are marginal compared with mainstream political visions, whose view of transformation is weak and minimal (Brand and Wissen, 2021), showing no reckoning with the growth paradigm.

Both the 'green' economy and sustainable development are concepts that "entail a series of technological, managerial, and behavioural changes, in particular to build in principles and parameters of sustainability and inclusion into production, consumption and trade while maintaining high rates of economic growth as the key driver of development" (Kothari et al., 2015, 362). Blühdorn and Defloria argue that modes of environmental governance reflect the lifestyle preferences of modern consumer societies, amounting to the promulgation of performing sustainability where environmental governance is relegated to the market (2019). "Moreover, issues are framed only in ways which allow for pragmatic and viable solutions that may be implemented within the realm of the currently possible" (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2019, 26). While there is a vision in the United States and other rich nations of what has been termed a 'Green New Deal', there is little emphasis placed on a similar, rapid decarbonisation project at the global level. The world is profoundly interdependent through climate, material and human labour flows; it is in the context of deep historical and structural inequalities that an internationalist and decolonial lens must be applied if it is indeed an ecologically and socially sound future that we aim to build.

The Ecuadorian Case

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a post-development project was pursued by the Ecuadorian government in the name of *buen vivir* (good living). This process took place among a wider pattern of progressive left governments across Latin America. Among other objectives, these governments aimed to redefine the role of the state in redistributing wealth (Bebbington et al. 2012; Escobar, 2010; Gudynas, 2010; Svampa, 2015). As Davidov observes, "economic growth [was] rhetorically decoupled from neoliberal development and re-linked to public works" (2013, 489). The drafting of a new constitution in 2008 granted rights to nature and declared Ecuador a plurinational state. Among the adoption of other progressive reforms, the new constitution was widely approved by Ecuadorian society, although not always adhered to in practice (Benalcázar and Ullán de la Rosa, 2021). The tensions this period gave rise to and the imaginaries that it occasioned make Ecuador an interesting case for exploring socio-ecological attitudes. The shortcomings and lack of radical social transformation promised by self-titled leftist governments are well documented; less attention has been given to the environmental perspectives and subjectivities this historical context may have generated among the wider population.

In many ways, Ecuador is a microcosm for multiple socio-ecological issues facing the region. On a warming planet confronted with profound social inequality, it is necessary to investigate the implications of resource extraction concerning its different dimensions. Social, environmental and indigenous groups aim their criticism at various epochs and development orientations: both neoliberal as well as state-led, what can be termed resource nationalist, and more questionably 'post-neoliberal' (Davidov, 2013; Gudynas, 2010; Riofrancos, 2020; Svampa, 2015). It must be said that the tendency to view various regime types as extractive emerged at a crucial political-historical moment in which a wave of left-wing governments were elected across Latin America.

At the same time, commodity prices were high due to China's demand for raw materials; these favourable macroeconomic conditions, in many instances, led to a deepening of existing patterns of resource use (Arboleda, 2020; Riofrancos, 2017a).

Extractivism

This paper draws upon debates centred on *buen vivir* and extractivism to foreground situated and emic invocations of these concepts as put forward by participants in this study. Local level perceptions are thought to inform environmental subjectivities in that particular histories impact imaginaries around environmental issues. As will be shown, environmental subjectivity among young Ecuadorians is not narrowly focused on emissions. Instead, they identify the presence of various forms of extractivism.

There is a long history of resource extraction in Latin America that is profoundly one of unequal exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods (Acosta, 2013; Falconí Benítez, 2017; Riofrancos, 2020; Vallejo, 2010; Villalba-Eguiluz and Etxano, 2017), ultimately transferring wealth from peripheral regions to capitalist centres. A minimal definition of extractivism can be said to include the extraction of raw materials – usually, for export, and is a mode of accumulation that follows colonial lines (Acosta, 2013; Riofrancos, 2020). For Maldonado-Torres, extractivism is just one of many processes, or "creative adjustments" (2016, 01) concomitant with development and colonialism; it is ongoing and permitted by globalisation to unfold in seemingly new and covert ways. Relatedly, Latin American feminist scholars have expanded conceptions of extractivism beyond combustibles and mining to include monocultural agriculture, tourism and other activities that generate violence and dispossession in what they refer to as a "re-primerisation" of raw materials (Segato, 2016; Svampa, 2015). This intensification is attributed to the past two decades of neoliberal policies in which the processing of primary materials increased compared to other sectors.

In Ecuador, not only oil but open-pit mining was initiated under former President Rafael Correa (2007–2017), enabled by a commodity boom that lasted approximately from 2000 to 2014 amid China's industrialisation (Riofrancos, 2020; van Teijlingen and Fernández-Salvador 2021). Before this period, however, oil had been the primary source of state revenue (Latorre et al. 2015). It was between 1972 – 1982 when the first "oil bonanza" (Latorre et al. 2015, 59) occurred. At the same time, foreign debt accumulated until it could no longer be repaid, amounting to the structural adjustments prescribed by international financial institutions. These adjustments led to trade liberalisation, specialisation ('comparative advantage'), a general move towards privatisation, and away from state-led development (Escobar, 2010; Gudynas, 2010; Latorre et al. 2015; Svampa, 2013). The ensuing years of neoliberal reforms in Ecuador can be characterised as a period of "great social unrest and political volatility, with the presidency changing hands ten times in these 24 years, three times as a consequence of mobilizations led by the indigenous movement" (Latorre et al. 2015, 59). According to Alcarón, Ecuador is a textbook case of a peripheral nation – exemplified by the fact that it exports crude oil and then imports refined oil on the international market (2022).

There has been criticism aimed at the wide use of extractivism as a concept. Wood captures this in essence by saying that extractivism "has often been part of a broader move to collapse capitalism, socialism and, crucially, the Pink Tide variants of developmentalism into a single destructive project, coterminous with 'modernity' itself" (Wood, 2021, para 9); for others, its

broad usage across time and space does not make it bereft of depth, but rather links differing development trajectories with a similar extractive logic. Whether developmental or neoliberal, extractivism remains necessary for assessing interactions between society, the environment, the economy and global trade (Vallejo, 2010). Extractivism is both a phrase and a concept produced outside of academia and has been relevant in assessing the manyfold debates over the intensification of activities related to natural resource use. To give one example in Ecuador, the expansion of mining was justified based on accumulated underdevelopment and the social debt that had amassed over five hundred years (Acosta, 2013; Falconí Benítez, 2017; Restrepo Echavarría and Orosz, 2021).

Buen Vivir

Buen vivir emerged as a post-development and post-capitalist discourse before its inclusion as an objective in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution. Therefore, its conceptual origins need clarification for its programmatic implications to be grasped. Beling et al. identify distinct dimensions of *buen vivir* discourse including an indigenist, socialist, ecological and post-developmental strand, with the latter having gained the most scholarly attention (2021). They reveal through a genealogical reconstruction that while its discursive formation occurred in Latin America, *buen vivir* is constitutive of both "inside-outward" and "outward-inside" flows and exchanges (Beling et al. 2021, 24). Rejecting the charge of ethnocentrism, they highlight the global context in which *buen vivir* discourse is situated and emphasise its shared critique of development – in dialogue with other transformative projects (Beling et al. 2021; Vanhulst and Beling, 2019). In addition to local and regional factors that gave impetus to its rise. The longstanding demands for recognition of indigenous peoples and dissatisfaction with neoliberalism among the wider population are the main contextual factors that shaped its local formation (Vanhulst and Beling, 2019). In this sense, *buen vivir* arose alongside and is linked to concepts such as pluriversality and draws on debates over a post-liberal and decolonial society (Escobar, 2010), coalescent with the 'biocentric turn' and feminist care economics (Gudynas, 2013). Likewise, several feminist movements made contributions to the topic of *buen vivir*, such as dismantling patriarchal relations (Aguinaga et al. 2013). *Buen vivir* draws upon indigenous knowledge and worldviews, and the Spanish term is a translation of *sumak kawsay* in the Ecuadorian Kichwa language (Gudynas, 2013; Vanhulst and Beling, 2019). Central to the notion of *buen vivir* for Andean and indigenous peoples is relationality among all living beings and a collective understanding of well-being. This notion is extended to all spheres of life: the dichotomised notion of production and reproductive work understood in Western societies is instead approached in a life-affirming way, respecting ecological limits; it is critical of modernity and capitalism and is a fundamentally different way to view the world, one that moves towards a cosmocentrism and away from anthropocentrism (Alcoreza, 2013).

The programmatic inclusion of *buen vivir* commenced when social movements took the chance to advance alternatives to decades of neoliberalism, as well as a long history of developmentalism, through the process of a constituent assembly approved by referendum (Becker, 2011; Latorre et al. 2015; Svampa, 2015). The 2008 constitution incorporated demands made by the assembly, including "recognition of rights of Nature, the re-conceptualizing of development as *sumak kawsay* (collective well-being), declaration of the plurinational and intercultural nature of the Ecuadorian state" (Latorre et al. 2015, 59). Although *buen vivir* was explicitly defined within the new constitution as a development objective, the government's interpretation of *buen vivir* differed from the vision held by social movements in important ways; for this reason, much academic

and public discussion has focused on the gap between rhetoric and delivery (Artaraz et al., 2021; Radcliffe, 2012).

Before the 2007–2008 constituent assembly, opposition to extractive projects was frequently tied to indigenous politics. Not only in Ecuador but across the continent movements protest harmful industries, a struggle not discontinuous from Spanish colonial occupation over five hundred years ago (Becker, 2011; Svampa, 2015). Since the 1990s, resistance to neoliberal reforms provoked the social and political strengthening of one of Latin America's most influential indigenous movements – known as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) (Sawyer, 2004; Walsh, 2008). Together with other groups they form what is referred to as the indigenous movements. Becker argues that the mobilisation of indigenous groups disrupted the discourse of politics-as-usual at the national level, and that the CONAIE has been influential in shaping the discourse of civil society (2011). Decolonisation and renegotiation of the state, democracy, and nations – were goals already sought by the indigenous movements before the refounding of the constitution (Herrera, et al. 2020; Walsh, 2008). In referencing these objectives, Walsh states that, "decolonising politics [are] aimed at social, cultural, political, as well as epistemic transformations and the construction of an intercultural and democratic society" (Walsh, 2008, 507). The following is an indication of how such principles were incorporated at the symbolic level into the government's plan for *buen vivir*, "The Andean indigenous peoples have contributed to this debate by applying other epistemologies and cosmovisions. One of their greatest contributions is the notion of *sumak kawsay*, "life to the fullest" (SENPLADES, 2010, 18). As has been alluded to, several key proposals forming part of what was known as the Correa government's citizens' revolution were longstanding struggles first articulated by the indigenous movements (Goeury, 2021; Walsh, 2018).

At the beginning of the refounding process, Pachakutik (the political party of the indigenous movements) and Correa's party were aligned in their critique of neoliberalism and influenced by international socio-environmental laws, such as the right to prior and informed consultation (Forero, 2021). These debates within the assembly displayed diverse invocations of what was understood as *buen vivir* in the Ecuadorian context. Escobar notes that once the constitution was ratified, cracks began showing early and were manifested in the national development plan which, aside from acknowledging harmony, traditional knowledge and plurinational identity, clearly prioritised an understanding of individual liberty through references to individuality and "human cultures" (2010, 21). For the indigenous movements, the government over-promised on its denunciation of the old structures of imperialism – emphasising self-determination, but, at the same time dismissing collective agency as a means to realise this (Becker, 2011; Zaffaroni, 2011). According to Herrera, et al. the inherited liberal state model and extractivist economy were ultimately incompatible with the goals of the indigenous movements, despite initial agreement (2020).

Through attempts to cultivate a citizens' revolution, the Correa government put forward a vision of the individual by undermining the historical differences and the plight of indigenous peoples who see these strategies as rooted mainly in liberal and colonial patterns with universalising tendencies; in the words of Becker, "Whereas Correa wanted to usher in a citizens' revolution, indigenous organisations appealed for a constituent revolution that would embrace the country's plurinational nature" (Becker, 2011, 47). Other scholars including Radcliffe questioned if the state was able to adopt "radical alterity" (2012, 246), focusing on the process of incorporating pluri-nationality into the constitution and the wider constraints in forging a post-neoliberal society.

There is no shortage of commentary focusing on the shortcomings of the *buen vivir* project, both on social and environmental grounds. Benalcázar and Ullán de la Rosa suggest the implementation of *buen vivir* in Ecuador was a diluted version of what social movement actors had proposed, amounting to a "state-guided developmentalist plan mostly inspired by classical social-democratic templates rather than by an innovative and alternative paradigm" (2021, 165). Silveira et al. add that the government's reduction of poverty relied on increased extractivism which targeted racialized minorities, whose land was deemed necessary for the 'greater good' amounting to "sacrifice zones" (2017, 69). Similarly, Vanhulst and Beling find the "statist-socialist" (2019, 121) path taken by the Correa administration did not break with liberal conceptions of well-being, nor with capitalism. For Beling et al. this limitation is not surprising, as *buen vivir* is constitutive of spatially and temporally contested debates about development (2021) and was the first attempt at bridging seemingly unbridgeable "modern and non-modern ontologies" (Vanhulst and Beling, 2019, 121).

The global interest in the *buen vivir* process is expressed through the multitude of literature, and while scholars pay attention to the many contradictions (for example, see Goeury, 2021; Lalander and Merimaa, 2018) and assess the divergence in terms of policy outcomes (Benalcázar and Ullán de la Rosa, 2021), the reflections that it may have generated at the societal level are less clear. Not taking for granted the "structural constraints related to unequal power distributions between core and peripheral countries" (Forero, 2021, 228–229), but with close attention to them, this article will assess how Ecuadorian youth view environmental issues. For Escobar (2010), in places where there has been a search for alternative models, such as those countries that experienced a political left turn, re-politicization and continued questioning of the development model within society is likely.

Environmental Subjectivity: A conceptual-theoretical elaboration

Environmental subjectivity is an epistemological-critical perspective that seeks to open non-dominant forms of knowledge as a way of understanding what practices, opinions and responses to socio-environmental change might exist independently of "researcher identified pro-environmental behaviours" (Ford and Norgaard, 2020, 43). Complimentary to decolonial feminist theory, the concept of climate subjectivity was adapted by Ford and Norgaard (2020) to investigate the environmental concerns of two communities: an urban homesteading community and members of the Karuk Tribe in the United States. While both communities felt at risk of the effects of climate change, they did so in very different ways; Ford and Norgaard found that the way people perceive environmental problems is "filtered through cultural systems accessed from lived experience within hierarchical social institutions that sort people by status" (2020, 44). An adapted notion taken from Arun Agrawal, originally climate subjectivity was used to assess the changing attitudes of communities in Kumaon in India, who had set forest fires in the 1920s protesting the British colonial state's conservation efforts (2005); by the 1990s the villagers were protecting the forest. Combining elements of political ecology, feminist geography and theories of commoning, Agrawal (2005) argues that it is an approach that goes well beyond Kumaon in forging an understanding of how individuals see themselves concerning their environment. Agrawal invokes a post-structuralist understanding of subjectivity formation; theoretically informed by Foucault, he examines power and the effects of discourse on people. Ford and Norgaard, on the other hand, caution against the over-privileging of discourse, which has on occasion downplayed material interactions and the

influence of social position (2020). Instead, they posit that intersectionality, paying attention to the material differences between communities and how these overlap with other aspects of identity, is relevant for expanding non-dominant knowledge about the environment.

Environmental subjectivity fits within the perspective of environmental justice (EJ)[3] which can be understood in different ways. A common approach within environmental justice literature addresses how ecological harm is disproportionately and differentially experienced; often these studies are based on a group's marginality in terms of geography, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and racialised identity, and tend to concentrate on one particular struggle. The injustices faced by citizens in places of high extraction are multiple. They include but go beyond the most vulnerable in terms of proximity to a particular 'extractive zone'. This author agrees that the impacts of extractivism should begin at sites of destruction, but they should not end there. It is insufficient to assume that ecological-harms can be fully understood in the usual terms; what critical theorist Saskia Sassen calls an 'expulsion' is perhaps better suited to capture the dislocation of multiple facets of life as we know it; after all, it is the new global social majority who face environmental precarity (Orozco and Mason-Deese, 2022). In this sense, the social, environmental and economic concerns of young people as a subset of the population need further examination. This focus therefore begs the question: what do environmental subjectivities reveal about life more generally in places of high extraction? To answer this question, this conversation will be continued beyond those who are directly connected to an environmental movement.

Assessing how the environmental subjectivity framework applies to the case of Ecuadorian youth is a preliminary exercise in gauging whether – methodologically – environmental subjectivities could contribute to explaining a desire for or an inclination towards resisting extractive projects or building alternatives to them. This is not to assume resistance to extractivism leads to socio-environmental transition. Hausknost makes a useful distinction between 'lifeworld' and 'systems' sustainability (2020) in which he argues the former is prominent in environmental governance and perceivable at a cultural level. He separates the two by suggesting that 'lifeworld sustainability' accounts for the immediate and tangible aspects of an environmental threat, which do not require 'systemic sustainability'; that is, an increase in 'lifeworld' sustainability is not indicative of structural change. This author had anticipated that this distinction could be useful; however, as this study deals with the subjectivities of people not directly involved in an environmental movement, this author further found invocations of 'lifeworld' to contain concern over 'systems', and it was the case that there was too much overlap as a means of assessing the limitations of focusing solely on the 'lifeworld' sustainability.

Approaches to what falls under 'gauging attitudes' often look at how collective imaginaries are shaped by existing environmental discourses. One such (discursive) framework shows how perceptions of environmental issues align within predefined categories e.g. ecofascist, ecocritical, ecosocialist (Williams, 2022). As previously argued, a more open framework was needed for assessing attitudes in a context where pre-existing categories often limit or perpetuate the bias of the researcher. Additionally, a 'mid-range' analysis where both the data and literature suggest concepts was established to incorporate both emergent and literature-based concepts and relate them. Principles of grounded theory where categories "emerge from data and are not imposed a priori upon it" (Hood, 2012, 154) were used to process and code the data. The decision to combine elements of grounded theory with environmental subjectivity was done so based on facilitating a feminist and decolonial lens. This approach is suitable as it allowed the voices of participants to be centred in a meaningful way; this outlook has been largely informed by feminist and decolonial theories and epistemologies: (see, for example, Anzaldúa, 1987; Gómez-Barris, 2017; Lugones,

2010; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2020; Smith, 1999; Svampa, 2015).

This article uses data drawn from 25 in-depth qualitative interviews with young Ecuadorians (aged between 18-30) and was supplemented by a quantitative survey detailing age, gender, occupation, ethnic background, and place of birth. Interviews took place online and in Ecuador in November and December of 2021. Of these 25 people, the majority were students. Of those who were not, one worked for a mining company as a truck driver, one as a seasonally employed fruit worker, another as a seasonally employed agricultural worker, one as a primary education teacher, one forestry engineer, and two were environmental engineers at the time of interviews. In terms of ethnicity, the majority identified as *mestizo*, with one participant identifying as Afro-Ecuadorian. Regarding location, the three main biogeographical regions were represented: the Andes Mountains (Sierra), the Amazon Basin (Oriente), and the Pacific Coast (Costa); 13 of the 25 participants lived in urban areas while the rest lived in rural areas. This author aimed to represent a diverse subset of the population using purposeful sampling (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009) which involves the deliberate selection of participants, i.e., non-random selection. From this small subset, I do not wish to make scalable theories, but rather to suggest openings for further inquiry.

Discussion

Environmental subjectivity among young Ecuadorians is not narrowly focused on emissions but is built on direct experience with the environment rather than through scientific information alone. Both familiar tropes as well as noteworthy subjectivities reflecting an examination of Ecuador's development model were found in this study. Noting how privatised solutions to the environmental crisis are entrenched in the logic of capitalist answers, it is interesting that individual-level responses were infrequent, except for some, and these tended to be linked to consumption, e.g. "I am very aware of environmental care, and I avoid using products that damage clothes, I look for materials that do not damage much". This is noteworthy given the open nature of the methodology which did not seek to avoid such responses, and which this author found sometimes inclined informants towards common and predictable answers – at least in the initial stage of interviewing. In this research, this author also paid close attention to what topics were not brought up.

This discussion will begin with a general overview and then elaborate on the differences among participants. By not only focusing on thoughts and opinions but situating them within the particularities of their context, this author hopes to bring about a situated understanding of ecological problems that is attentive to social location. The open-ended nature of the approach prompted participants to invoke socio-environmental topics that persist, although these were not necessarily experienced directly. Some of these include toxic exposure in marginalised communities, (for example, see Hernandez, 2019), subjectivity formation and resistance movements particular to oil and mining respectively, (Davidov, 2013), and environmental migration, (Pribilsky, 2007).

The majority of informants mounted a critique of extractivism that can be broken down into two categories. The first relates to the legacies of dependency and the many limitations it poses to young people in Ecuador in terms of perceived opportunity, access to quality health care, foreign indebtedness and the political economy at large. The second category is more consistent with the aforementioned scholarly debates about the socio-environmental impact of mining projects – many of which are proposed to go ahead in areas of high biodiversity. Participants noted hydro-

carbon exploration, which is by no means complete in Ecuador and remains a pertinent issue that frequently gains international attention. Deforestation due to oil and mineral-mining projects and new frontiers of agriculture and plantations (such as palm oil cultivation and crops for livestock feed) fit the framework for extractive activities according to participants in this study. This assertion is not surprising as Ecuador's rate of deforestation is among the highest in Latin America (Vallejo, 2010). Activities perceived to cause irrevocable harm carried out with little concern for biophysical limits or for long-term social and environmental impacts were frequently cited as extractive.

Reflecting a broader trend among responses, one participant suggested that a paradigm beyond the state and current political trajectory is needed to address the environmental predicament, as corruption, variably defined, was perceived to be one of the biggest impediments to improving social and environmental conditions. The structural features of the economy that restrict post-extractive imaginaries were deemed to be extremely limiting. One participant stated that, "for me, the objectives of development and environmental sustainability are incompatible because in a nutshell there is always an additional purpose involved and I think that is a general problem in our countries in South America. Politics should not always be at the centre, there must be something in between". Resembling this argument, others cited existing municipally-led participatory projects as hopeful alternatives that generated income and promoted a different model to extractivism; however, they were viewed as 'too local' in that they did not necessarily resonate as transferable to urban environments. The range of responses indicates that socio-environmental problems are differentially perceived, experienced, and lived. Here, I will discuss where some divergence occurred between participants' understanding.

Research indicates that a lack of information has long been perceived as a barrier to engagement or apathy towards climate issues (Norgaard, 2012). If we turn to education, few participants alluded to consciousness-raising as necessary and desirable among the wider population. The majority of respondents felt this would be inadequate, as there is already a high degree of cognisance around socio-environmental harms and their drivers, as the results from this study would also suggest. Two participants, however, from more socially privileged backgrounds remarked that education in school was inadequate; they connected this to poor environmental outcomes. This correlation of damage with lack of awareness was supplemented with examples of dumping garbage and pollution. In this sense, the image of individual shortfall was presented above systems which drive destruction. Another respondent, however, oriented their framing toward the need for critical education and stated that, "a fairer society in my country is a bit more complex since there is structural corruption, we have a fairly progressive constitution, but we have laws that are only on paper because not all the actors are fully socialised or fully aware of their rights . . . so we hardly have a just society for these reasons. How to generate this . . . well, it is a topic of education, of reinventing values, defining priorities and harmony with the community, which is quite complex and much deeper than intervening with policies".

Spanning various ideas of opposites, the notion of local/universal was put forward within a systemic critique of the present situation. Here a 'global consciousness' could be detected in responses that voiced concern over what is beyond national borders with remarks such as, "as Ecuadorians, we feel vulnerable worldwide because we are the lungs of the world, we have the largest amount of flora per square metre. While the 'developed' countries, what they do is use nature." Not absent from other responses was the idea that biodiverse regions are responsible for sustaining the well-being of the planet and that the instrumentalization of nature is perpetrated by rich nations. An awareness of bearing the consequences of the unequal exchange of resources

was similarly not limited to a single participant, as another framed it, "those responsible for our problems are the rulers – they control the entire system of a nation for the benefit of themselves, and the bigger powers who also control countries like Latin America – they take all the resources from raw materials, they buy the *cacao* to then make and export chocolate and sell it at the highest prices . . . also gasoline etc." These examples come from participants with differences in education and material circumstances. One participant was an engineer and worked in forestry, the other a seasonal agricultural worker. However, they both offered a politicised framing of resource use and the causes of socio-environmental conflict, indeed both perspectives relate phenomena to the prolonged extractive tendencies of Northern countries. Except for this example, generally, people with higher levels of education were less inclined to make causal links, instead offering technocratic responses. Things like "bad management" and "bad planning" were said to account for the issues that they had witnessed.

Literature that seeks to understand what fosters environmental awareness makes empirical reference to the global North and frequently suggests that a minimum level of material wealth is a precursor to thinking about the environment. Popularised by political scientist Ronald Inglehart in the 1970s, the idea of 'post-materialism' persists as it is constitutive of sustainable development (the green economy); noting this, Kothari et al. remark that within global governance, a reorientation away from the affluence of the North and a shift to poverty reduction in the South legitimised economic growth as a means to deal with environmental problems, implying "an overall reframing of both the diagnosis and prognosis in relation to the ecological crisis" (2014, 363). Where 'post-material' attitudes are said to exist, however, it seems the opposite is true. A common example, according to Martinez-Alier is the Netherlands (2002), where per capita usage of energy and material is tied to well-being and is only made possible by externalising harm. Despite the inverse link between income and concern for the environment in high-income nations (O'Conner et al. 2002) and thin evidence of the prospect of decoupling of material throughput from economic growth (Hickel and Kallis, 2020), the argument is that when middle-class status is reached that 'post-material' values will follow, although there has been no indication that 'peak stuff' has been reached (Pearce, 2012). While problematic on many fronts, there is no commonly held view of what sufficiency looks like.

The 'post-material' theory does not fit the Ecuadorian context (among other reasons, many livelihoods are directly threatened by extractivism), and was rejected by young Ecuadorians with less social privilege. Conversely, those with more socioeconomic capital tended to agree with the post-material argument. In dealing with this question, several participants commented that from their day-to-day conversations, economic concerns far outweigh environmental concerns. It was said by those with more social capital that those with less did not have much capacity for concern because the 'need to put food on the table' took precedence over strictly 'environmental' problems.

In cases where participants' interests were threatened directly by socio-environmental issues, especially in regions affected by mining and job insecurity (due to droughts and crop failure), it was innate for participants to either actively resist or demonstrate a politicised framing of the dynamics shaping their circumstances. This is another reason why the post-material theory should not be universalised. Post material theory does not take resistance seriously as a precursor to change, instead relying on dominant cultural patterns of consumption. Unlike the suggestion that post-material values inevitably follow material security, the majority of participants said that income level was not an indicator of awareness. One participant noted that, "I believe that the most privileged sectors of the country do not necessarily see a responsibility to the environment

and that the most affected are the *campesinos*[4] and people who live far from the big cities".

Development

There was ambivalence regarding who participants thought would provide solutions to problems. Various governments and their enabling of extractivism were at the forefront of conversations; although, some participants concomitantly invoked politics as the solution to ecological problems. Echoing the opinions of others, one interviewee divulged that in their region, "mining concessions were made without environmental permits, which destroy the rivers that for thousands of years have fed populations". Concerns over the informed consent of extractive projects – of hydrocarbon, legal and illegal mining and agriculture – were framed around corruption, and participants were more inclined to call attention to specific policies that had failed or were lacking as opposed to the absence of a significant alternative.

Both 'progressive' and neoliberal regimes were viewed as enabling environmentally destructive practices – writ large. The view that both regime types are viewed as extractive and harmful is not surprising, given the history of Ecuador. Bebbington et al. note that there is not so much variation in the perception of how environmental consequences of extractive economies play out within neoliberal and post-neoliberal contexts (2012). For Davidov, the subjectivities of those involved directly in conflicts diverge in terms of the resource type and political context, noting the differences between oil exploitation and how it, "has subsequently become metonymic with neoliberal governance and exploitative foreign corporations" (2013, 490). Resistance to mining, on the other hand, expanded in a much more convoluted context of an expressed 'green' and environmentally minded government under which, "Pachamama (nature) itself is given inalienable rights" (Davidov, 2013, 490). This confusing historical conjuncture did not appear to impact participants' views of particular resources and their end-uses, nor influence a justification of their extraction.

Not only governments but also international development policies were viewed with a similar ambivalence; there was no doubt in terms of responsibility for historical wrongdoings, although some were hopeful that there could be more accountability going forward. One participant, an environmental chemist, was dubious of the outcome of the government's 2007 initiative to 'keep oil in the soil', remarking that "I think that *buen vivir* was an excellent idea but it did not have enough support; when the government proposed to sell carbon credits in exchange for not going into the Yasuní, I consider that it was a pantomime at the international level because the necessary agreements were reached to avoid extraction". Another conceded, "If I think that the plan for *buen vivir* has had a positive impact on Ecuadorian society, it would be at the emotional level of people since I believe that it has made people aware of topics such as sustainability, environmentally friendly life and the health of people . . . but it is important to emphasise that it should be advanced much more . . . since it seems that the government has been paralysed with the promotion of these objectives".

Another side of environmental subjectivity formation I found among young Ecuadorians was connected to their hopes for the future. How these concerns were relayed were often contextualised and linked to education, health, and both the level of public and private indebtedness. A student from Coca (a place of high extraction) described her worries as such, "honestly, I feel very sad with myself in my city, because I realise that there are resources; above all, the government extracts the

vast majority of the oil here and the city does not benefit from it. I'm telling you that we do not even have a public university here yet and young people like me have to emigrate to bigger cities to be able to study". Nearly all had healthcare concerns, as one noted, "regarding health, only in times of the pandemic can you realise how the situation was handled here, there was no oxygen, many people died, they left corpses in the streets. In this new government, gasoline rose excessively due to the debts that the country has with the IMF and when diesel goes up, food and all essentials go up – even medicine". Acutely aware of how the highs and inevitable lows of the boom-and-bust cycle affect not only daily life but imagining a different future, this author has identified how some young Ecuadorians describe aspects of life in a place of high extraction. Overall, the majority of participants were deeply aware of this predicament. Similarly, Alcarón finds that the reliance on raw materials for export is increasingly being questioned within Ecuadorian society, as ecological thinking is commonplace (2022).

Conclusion

Engaging with counter-hegemonic methodologies, this research aimed to centre the voices of young Ecuadorians. They will suffer the consequences of destructive environmental practices, and it is their daily experiences and perspectives, as argued in this article, that are needed to construct alternative visions. While this study did not aim to produce generalisable results, similar processes of extraction are happening beyond the bounds of Ecuador. Not only Ecuador but also Peru has been hailed as a new mining frontier for copper, and the Southern Cone countries for lithium; therefore, one can expect the mining-environment nexus to play out in similar contexts and to be centre stage in national elections (Morse, 2022). Aiming to contribute to theoretical debates on extractivism and *buen vivir*, this author found that not enough attention is paid to how social groups (outside of site-based resistance, indigenous groups, and civil society) might challenge discourses that portray Ecuador as the next mining frontier. A more open and contingent understanding of environmental subjectivity suggests that a greater connection needs to be drawn between what is considered social and environmental and that these questions should be central to research on extractivism. Subjectivities show an attempt to reconcile an understanding of ecology and the economy, taking as an example the environmental origins of COVID-19 and its worsening of pre-existing crises.

One limitation is that environmental subjectivity is an approach that permits weaving and alternating between seemingly distinct topics. In this sense, while there is a temptation to collapse distinctions, the need for dialogic methodologies that can facilitate other ontological perspectives is necessary. This necessity holds especially true as anthropocentric claims of equal responsibility for environmental damage and especially climate change work to conceal how changing environmental conditions affect people in very different ways across the globe, especially in terms of class, race and gender (Ford and Norgaard, 2020; Norgaard, 2012). This research aimed to represent a diverse subset of people aged between 18-35 in Ecuador and deliberately amplify marginalised voices, not to obsessively draw attention to the differences in privileges between the author and participants, but to highlight the importance of social location in understanding one's perception of their environment. Highlighting disadvantages in terms of global position and location more than any other factor, this study illuminated attitudes which could be further investigated to show environmental inequalities that are linked to gender, class, or ethnicity; in this sense, environmental subjectivity is relevant as an anti-positivist framework for addressing a more nuanced understanding of how the political economy of resource extraction affects livelihoods beyond the

obvious harms at sites of extraction.

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Notes

[1]Elizabeth Carrigan is an MA candidate in the Global Studies Programme at Humboldt University Berlin.

[2]In speaking of an energy transition, I refer to proposals articulated around the idea of emissions reduction, such as the Green New Deal, and the transition emerging within the current order of multilateral institutions, that are constitutive of the crisis. An eco-social transition references a variety of contra-systemic approaches, in concert with a holistic approach to socio-environmental breakdown.

[3]Within the EJ literature, debates span philosophy, sociology, and legal studies (increasingly within a 'rights-based' framework), it may also reference a longstanding (now trans-national) social movement.

[4]The Spanish word for peasant which is campesino, according to Lang and Hoetmer (2018) is an identity category that is specific to Latin America, and takes on socio-cultural meaning that often denotes class, ethnicity

and rurality, and was often invoked by participants when describing who they thought were most affected, but also who they felt were inclined to have a better relationship with the environment.

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