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Dialogue

ALBERTO ACOSTA, ULRICH BRAND, CAMILA MORENO, ANNA PREISER
The Imperial Mode of Living: (Re)conceptualising Unequal
North-South Relations

The *imperial mode of living* is a concept developed in the Global North by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen to make sense of the conflictual reproduction of a resource-intensive mode of production and consumption. Central to this are its externalising mechanisms, which are deeply rooted in social structures and everyday actions. The imperial mode of living is also increasingly expanding in countries of the Global South, which at the same time serve as sites of exploitation and bearers of costs of this resource-intensive mode of living. To discuss and reflect on the contribution of the concept of the *imperial mode of living* for understanding realities, (political) dynamics and protests in Latin America, the editors of this special issue have invited to an online discussion in mid-July 2021. The participants were Alberto Acosta – economist and former minister of Mining and Energy in Ecuador; Ulrich Brand – Professor for International Politics and co-author of the book *The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (2017); and Camila Moreno – Brazilian sociologist and post-doctoral researcher at the Humboldt University of Berlin – all part of the permanent Group “Alternatives to Development”, coordinated by the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation Quito Office.

In the open discussion, participants addressed a number of issues related to the concept of the *imperial mode of living*: its global hegemonisation, both in the global North and South, which has dehumanising as well as humanising and democratising effects; the shortcomings and contribu-

tions of development debates, dependency theory and the concept of coloniality; the impact of new communication technologies on imaginaries, mental infrastructures and on aspirations to participate in the imperial mode of living. Furthermore, the dynamics surrounding the corona crisis as well as the much-discussed mobility transition were examined and how they contribute to exacerbating inequalities and dependencies. Finally, the participants emphasised the heuristic value of the concept of the *imperial mode of living* in dealing with current dynamics, contradictions and as well as forms of resistance – also beyond the academic context.

The following interview on these issues is based on a two-hour discussion facilitated, translated, edited and restructured by Anna Preiser.

1. Through the lenses of the imperial mode of living

Anna Preiser: In what way does the concept of the *imperial mode of living* help us to understand and interpret unequal North-South relations?

Alberto Acosta: The central argument of the imperial mode of living is that there are forms and norms of production and consumption that are present in what we could call the “global North” and which have been generalised throughout the world. They are the logical result of the evolution of the capitalist system and can only be maintained on the basis of a certain civilisation: the civilisation of capital. This civilisation reproduces itself by suffocating the life of human beings and of nature. The capitalist system itself, as Karl Marx said, digs its own grave, because it is unrepeatable on a global scale, and the same applies to the imperial mode of living.

The pressure the capitalist system creates is reflected in resource extractivism, in greater exploitation of labour, in a greater amount of waste. This is perverse. There are millions of people who aspire to the imperial mode of living in terms of consumption, above all, and they will never achieve it. The pressure to tap new resources has never been as great as it is today. They even publicly talk of projects to extract minerals from space. This mode of living is like a dragon that swallows everything, large parts of the earth and even what lies outside. What does this imperial mode of living – that has so much appeal – hide when we consume and buy objects of daily use?

We are in one way or another hiding realities, or rather, those realities are hidden from us. Labour slavery, for example, is hidden, when people, also in the South, consume textiles that come, for instance, from Asian countries. If we begin to discover the behind-the-scenes of the imperial mode of living we discover not only the destruction of human life, but the destruction of nature. And that is a fundamental issue. The concept helps us to understand, to denounce and to draw conclusions in very concrete terms.

The interesting thing about the concept *imperial mode of living* is that it allows us to understand this reality and system which affects life itself both in the Global North and the Global South. The global dimension of everyday life has acquired hegemonic character – as Uli and Markus¹ rightly say, not only in the North, but also in the Global South. It is part of what Arturo Escobar calls “imperial globality”². The *imperial mode of living* can be used critically from the North and from the South to read the reality of the world, but it can also be used to question the essence of modernity, the essence of progress, the essence of development, and to search for and build alternatives from other perspectives – however, not to propose alternative models as global recipes.

Another aspect that seems important to me in relation to the global penetration of the imperial mode of living is the process of control, rationalisation, and commodification of nature across the planet. The process of dehumanisation of humanity has been very visible during the pandemic. As Enrique Leff and other Latin American thinkers have described, this process is closely intertwined with the dominance of Western thought, which has created a separation of humans from non-humans and the living from the non-living.³ The imperial system is based on the exploitation of humans, as well as on the exploitation of nature.

Ulrich Brand: Of course, we all think from a perspective seeing societal contradictions. If you, Alberto, talk about dehumanisation: yes, it is so objectively. But despite that fact, the imperial mode of living also humanises – it subjectivises and creates hegemony. It is highly contradictory. One of the phrases in the book that is quoted the most is, “the imperial mode of living is ‘a victim of its own appeal’”⁴. If you create hegemony, it creates subjectivity, it creates a more or less good or attractive life and, as Alberto says, it is an aspiration for those who do not live the imperial mode of living.

Camila Moreno: I want to stress the contradictory aspect of a certain democratisation of the material participation of people through the imperial mode of living, referring to the possibility of air travel. Air travel has changed the lives of very poor people in Brazil. Domestic workers, concierges, caretakers of buildings in Rio de Janeiro, who have family in the northeast of the country, which is about three days by bus, are now able to take vacations and visit their relatives. Because of these contradictions, the flight ticket is much cheaper than taking the bus, and much faster. And it allows Brazilians to know different realities of Brazil. So, I believe we have to be very careful when we fall into moralising discussions about how taking a plane contributes to climate change.

I think it is very important to frame the productivity of the concept of the *imperial mode of living*. To polemicise a little, I wonder, with all the complexity that is interwoven, if it is helpful to insist that it is a ‘hard’ concept, a very plastic and descriptive image for collective reflection, very well drawn with all the details in chapter 3 of the book⁵ – even to shield it from criticisms that can be seen – I am thinking here of the question of whether it can be applied from the Global North to the South. The concept nurtures not only highly intellectual debates, but it is also highly political and anchored in the concreteness of experiences, resistances and contradictions. That’s why I believe it is better to think of it as something open. Since the formalisation of the idea and the circulation of the book, our reality has become more complex. For example, when I make some comments on the situation in Brazil and the question of whether the concept can be useful to understand the protests of the current crises in Latin America, I say yes, as an interrogation, and let us think further.

Alberto Acosta: I agree, the *imperial mode of living* is not an immovable or unquestionable concept. It is not a straitjacket concept. It is a concept that opens another door for us to see realities. But it must always and at all times be understood within the logic of capital accumulation.

Ulrich Brand: The concept evolves with the aim of understanding above all the realities in the Global North. However, Latin America and the dominant economic model of resource extractivism are also very present in the book. Another important aspect is our approach to theories.

I agree, we don't want to build a coherent concept, even if it might appear that way in the third chapter. It is a heuristic concept of approaching the world. That is why it is so fundamental to discuss it and to create new ideas. It is not a theoretical concept in a narrow sense, and even less a coherent theory. But there is connectivity with other theories, with other concepts. Working or developing theories means reflecting the realities of concrete historical and current experiences and understanding what is happening, and not doing something formal, abstract, academic.

2. Contextualising Dependency Thought

Anna Preiser: Which theoretical traditions does the concept of the *imperial way of life* draw upon? How did dependency theory play a role in the conceptualisation?

Ulrich Brand: We refer to critical Marxist theories, Gramscian theory, practice theories in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, feminist theories, and, considering subjectivity, we refer to Michel Foucault and others. We also refer to Alf Hornborg's⁶ concept of the Unequal Ecological Exchange and to the work of Social Ecology, and the studies of the last 30 years around social metabolism⁷, which demonstrate the enormous abuse of resources.

In the Global North we can also learn from the theorisation of the realities of the Global South. Therefore, we further refer to dependency theory. Classical dependency theory informs us about the role of international capital and the role of technologies. Dependency theory⁸ further had the argument that consumption in the Global South is mostly luxury consumption of the upper classes. We could reformulate dependency theory with the *imperial mode of living* by showing that consumption is, in certain aspects, also a consumption of the middle classes and to some extent even that of the broad masses. It is also necessary to shed light on everyday life itself. Dependency is not only dependence on capital, transnational investments, technologies, and landowners. It also has something to do with everyday life, with desires, with subjectivity. I believe that, in this sense, we can also deepen a dialogue between different realities. What role do subjectivity, desires and aspirations play in critical theories, in the theories of dependency in Latin America?

Something that we do not make explicit in the book and which requires more work: with the perspective of dependency theory and its concept of structural heterogeneity⁹, we could think about the role of industrialisation and social-ecological industrial policies. Or we could look at questions like: what can we learn from variegated societies and the fact that pre-capitalist modes of production are much more present in Latin America or in the Global South than here in Europe? What are different forms of structural violence and of open violence?

Camila Moreno: I want to problematise the Latin American development debate in the historical era in which it was formulated and the role of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL/ECLAC)¹⁰. The tradition at this time, and above all the political utility and instrumentalisation of the discussion on dependency, was to feed processes, attitudes and measures of the national states, in a world still divided between the capitalist world and the Soviet bloc. This discussion was influenced by debates on imperialism, militarisation, and debt. At that time, we had not yet experienced neoliberalism and the whole process of constituting the subject of neoliberal reason – the consumer citizen. Now, it is normal to see citizens, above all, as global consumers who exercise power and who choose goods, and who might seek ecological and social certification. This was not part of the mainstream of the theories of dependency. The role of subjectivity and of everyday life has not been debated much, but it has been discussed already here; for example, Fernand Braudel¹¹, whose thought influenced the world system theory, has written his work on the structures of everyday life. Here, considering routines and daily life was a way of approaching the consolidation of capitalism and how to shape a much larger system.

Alberto Acosta: Camila is absolutely right. When dependency theories were developed a couple of decades ago, another narrative and logic was dominating the scenario. This narrative focused on achieving ‘development’ and ‘progress’. That great crusade began on January 20, 1949 with the speech by US President Harry Truman¹². But it is also necessary to note that there are diverse readings of the *dependentistas*. Ruy Mauro Marini¹³ spoke of imperialist and sub-imperialist structures. Andre Gunder Frank¹⁴ spoke of the development of underdevelopment – which I like very much

because it opens doors for us. But there are also dependency-based readings that identify a condition of multiple subordination, which includes not only economic, mercantile, financial, political and, of course, military dimensions, but also academic, cultural, educational aspects and, above all, patterns of consumption. So, there were *dependentistas* who were concerned not only about production and the structural heterogeneity of the productive apparatus, but also about the patterns of consumption.

However, the *dependentistas* did not address issues that are now fundamental and urgent – the destruction of nature, for example. Remember how the report of the Club of Rome was received in the early 1970s. From Latin America, there was a sort of counter-report from the Fundación Bariloche Argentina¹⁵, stating that the findings of the Club of Rome were not accurate and that they wanted to impose a sort of domination pattern on us so that we could not develop. Basically, dependency theories never questioned the idea of progress and development. They were framed within the anthropocentric paradigm and searched for options to obtain this progress and development. Another issue barely any *dependentista* discussed was the reality of the indigenous world, incorporating readings from the perspective of coloniality. Aníbal Quijano¹⁶ made an important contribution. But it was not a fundamental issue; it was another normative. Nevertheless, dependency theories still have a lot to contribute, and the *imperial mode of living* is very strongly related to some elements of dependency theories.

3. Coloniality and the *imperial mode of living*

Anna Preiser: How do you see the relationship between current decolonial debates /movements and reflections on the *imperial mode of living*? What kind of overlaps do you find in these approaches?

Alberto Acosta: I think it is fundamental to recover the strength of the reading of coloniality – the coloniality of power¹⁷, the coloniality of being¹⁸, the coloniality of knowledge¹⁹ – and to put it in discussion with the imperial mode of living. Our region and countries are deeply influenced by different dimensions of coloniality. And what interests me is that coloniality is so deeply rooted in the elites, but not only within the elites.

Let us not forget, the elites in the Global South, who in practice are the Global North, influence the rest of the population. And to put it in very simple terms, there are billions of people who will certainly not be able to access the imperial mode of living, but they have the chip of the imperial mode of living, consumption, and production in their heads. Many migratory processes can also be explained by this chip. Often, the logic of how companies are organised is explained by this chip, as they are aiming at being part of global value chains.

We have incredible expressions of coloniality that can be crude and even ridiculous. The recent statement of the Argentine president Alberto Fernandez – “The Mexicans came from the Indians, the Brazilians came from the jungle, but we Argentines came from boats, and they were boats that came from Europe”²⁰ – synthesises the dominant vision of the elites, and it does not matter if the elites are progressive, or left or right wing. The Argentine president does not accept the indigenous origins of Argentina. The indigenous world does not appear in discussions of modernity. The indigenous world is emerging from the shadows of modernity²¹, from what modernity wanted to hide. It is a fundamental concern to recover the reading and critique of modernity in order to discuss the issue of the imperial mode of living. This could be one of the most important contributions.

Camila Moreno: The book *Coloniality of Knowledge*, published by CLACSO in 2000, is very fundamental for the debate.²² It includes articles by Quijano and the debate proposed by Edgardo Lander on the coloniality of social sciences and of knowledge. Their contributions offer a critical perspective on the constitution of Western science and hegemonic science. This science will now influence both the whole new post-pandemic world, as well as the whole process of ecological modernisation of capitalism, an emerging green capitalism. This techno-political project is anchored in a science-based approach, in an idea of an objective, universal, quantifiable rationality.

I also want to mention Alfredo Bosi, a thinker from Brazil who recently passed away. He wrote the book *Brasil and the Dialectics of Colonization*²³, in which he reinforced the richness of the idea of coloniality. We talk about the colonial as a substantive. But the difference is that coloniality – as Héctor Alimonda²⁴ always said – is an adverb, it is a way of being. And, as a way of being, it is reinstalled every time.

Ulrich Brand: In our book, we also refer to Anibal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power²⁵ to understand how not only the international, but also the internal division of labour within societies, is articulated with racism in order to reproduce itself. In the fourth and fifth chapters of the book²⁶, we try to revise history from a global history perspective and to understand modernities and coloniality with Walter Mignolo and others, and the interwoven modalities of those perspectives. And, as Alberto says, this needs to go deeper. We, Markus and I, cannot do it. We can listen to you and think together. One aspect that I would also be interested in for future work is the concept of coloniality of work that Georg Jochum²⁷ proposed, and to link it with the heuristics of the *imperial mode of living*.

Camila Moreno: We should not fall into the normal trap of attempting to attract more people and gain space using this concept to read reality. In the last years, also in Latin America, the concept of coloniality and the decolonial reasoning have been critiqued for the rampant use of the concept, especially in the post-modern reading, also in a book by Enrique de la Garza Toledo, a Mexican sociologist, who recently passed away, published by CLACSO this year²⁸. The concept of coloniality was expanding to the extent that anything becomes colonial or decolonial, eventually not meaning anything anymore. It is like listening to the World Bank criticising capitalism. If even the most important actors moving the system use the word without any censorship, the word capitalism loses its meaning. It seems that Political Ecology also has already become, to use Tomas Kuhn, a broadly accepted paradigm, and normal science.²⁹ It is very rare that debates, for example, on the planetary boundaries, on the biophysical limits, on the Anthropocene³⁰ and climate change are not incorporated. But, at the same time, things move dialectically. I believe that we are challenged to reinvent, perhaps to recover the language, and to create new languages to give us a grammar, to deal with capitalism as it is today. We should not fall into the easy trap of coziness by having concepts where we position ourselves. We have to advance, dialogue with the frontier and bring the logic of thinking the frontier, the frontiers of capital, of merchandise, of accumulation, of financialisation, as something very urgent in our debates. And Latin America is the great frontier of Europe; it is and remains the great frontier of land and of natural resources.

Alberto Acosta: Something that Camila said, which is important: we must be very careful with the use, abuse and misuse of some terms. However, it does not mean that the reading of coloniality has lost meaning. On the contrary, it is necessary to recover its reading.

There are other risks. Not only the global establishment, but also the United Nations agencies usurp the concepts. The logic of the green economy has incorporated Buen Vivir, as we say in Ecuador, or Vivir Bien, as they say in Bolivia, emptying it of content. The concepts are vampirised, as Maristella Svampa would say, and these concepts are used to say other things than what they really represent.

Let's start using proper terms. Is it climate change that we are experiencing or climate collapse? There have always been climate changes in the geological history of the Earth, times of warming, times of cooling. Now we are in a climate collapse. Another concept to be criticised: the Anthropocene, because not all humans are equally responsible for the climatic collapse. I prefer the term Capitalocene³¹. The *imperial mode of living* helps us to approach many things, especially in terms, for example, of post-extractivism. We already discussed this with Ulrich in a book we wrote on post-extractivism and degrowth³², which in a way anticipated some of the still pending debates

Camila Moreno: In my opinion, contributions directly from Latin America, and not from the universities of the United States, have much more density historically. To begin with Mariategui, who wrote *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928).³³ These are essays, and not a pretension to make a systematisation of thought with concepts in an acceptable academic format. It is something much more Latin American in the sense that it gathers impressions, dialogues with a sensibility, a literary sensibility, and that at the same time interpellates very profound issues. Other people who seem important to me, outside the more structural academic logic, is José Arico, who wrote *Marx and Latin America*, where he shows that Marx himself can be imperial when he fails to recognise and think with his feet firmly planted in our reality.

I would also like to recall that this year marks the 20th anniversary of the CLACSO Working Group on Political Ecology, which is where many colleagues met, such as my dear professor, Héctor Alimonda, now

deceased, but also Aníbal Quijano, Germán Palacios, Arturo Escobar. Twenty years ago, there was a great dialogue between this working group and the Modernity/Coloniality group. There was a very fertile pollination, where matrixes of thought and reflection emerging in this unstructured way, have managed to reach many important spaces. I place myself in this tradition of carrying on this way of doing. It is a way of thinking, a way of being in dialogue with reality.

4. Development debates and the appropriation of critical knowledge

Anna Preiser: How does the *imperial mode of living* contribute to updating development theories?

Alberto Acosta: Hopefully, the *imperial mode of living* does not serve to update any development theory, but to overcome development and all its theories. To me, development is like a phantom, not only in abstract terms – but it is a destructive phantom. It has done enough damage in the world, especially in the global South, which is mistakenly called the Third World. And I believe that the great task is to bury these ideas of development and open the door to the idea of post-development and other options of how to organise life on the planet in a pluriversal way³⁴. Dependency theory, which for decades has preoccupied Latin American critical thought, allows us to understand the situation of a group of countries that are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. One is doing well because others are doing badly. To refer to what Stefan Lessenich called the ‘externalization society’³⁵: Some countries have peace because others have war. Some countries have hunger because others have abundance. Some countries have managed to expand themselves, we could say, ‘develop’ – I do not want to use the term anymore – while the others always remain as backward countries.

Camila Moreno: For me, it is not so much a phantom. I think that since the introduction of the so-called Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, it is something that is everywhere and has this interface of small icons, the 17 goals, and everything seems so harmonious. But never before has the push to ‘leave no one behind’ been so strong and so hegemonic! This is like the mantra of the United Nations. But behind *whom*?

All this criticism is more and more hidden under this path that we only have one planet and one big task to accomplish, to solve the issue of global warming, climate change and make this transition – which is decarbonisation. To illustrate: I was just accompanying a parliamentary debate in Brazil. And the mantra is the socio-ecological transformation – they even use these words. But in the grain, the programme follows the agenda of modernisation and green capitalism. It makes it a very complex task to have a debate in this framework that captures our leftist proposals, our language, concepts and vocabularies of struggle, of construction of alternatives.

Ulrich Brand: I think that your positions concerning ‘development’ do not diverge so much. Camila refers more to the productive and dynamic aspects of the current discourse but sees it also as very problematic. Yes, we have to question modernity, progress and development, but we also have to see how these concepts, these practices, are modernised in the environmental climate crisis itself as green capitalism, green economy, ecological social transformation. We reflect this in chapter 7³⁶.

As it was said earlier, one way out of the conceptual confusion and the appropriation of critical knowledge by dominant actors is to permanently reflect on and counter this. For instance, the term ‘social-ecological transformations’ runs more and more the risk of being coopted. It is part of what Antonio Gramsci called a “passive revolution”, i.e. radical changes as an answer to severe crises and changing societal consciousness and demands but under the control of the dominant economic and political powers and the logics, such as growth, that privilege them. But we could qualify it further by calling them critical and emancipatory social-ecological transformations.

5. Greening the economy and energy transition

Anna Preiser: Do international strategies for greening the economy and for renewable energies promote socio-ecological transformation?

Alberto Acosta: No. The so-called ‘greening’ of the economy is not the solution. Electric cars have become a reference all over the world, not only in the North. That is the perversity of this imperial mode of living. Even here in Ecuador, there are people who already aspire to have one. But what does this electric car represent? A greater quantity of minerals of another type: for example, lithium.³⁷ And there is not enough lithium to replace all the batteries for all the cars. What is the destruction caused by lithium and the growing demand for copper? Further, Wolfgang Sachs already in 1984 said that every private car that enters a city restricts the freedom of the rest of the citizens.³⁸ That is key. It is not just about changing energies; it is about changing societies. So, if we make readings from concrete realities, we can understand the perversities of these processes that Camila and Uli are concerned about, which are tied to the green economy. The only thing a green transition does, is, perhaps, lessen environmental problems in some places, improve air quality in some cities, but worsen them in others, returning to the same logic of coloniality. The same happens with wind energy. The growing demand for balsa wood – which is, mixed with latex, used for wind energy rotors – is causing an enormous destruction of the forests. So, these are issues that allow us to understand all the perversities of these green transitions, more and more presented under the term social-ecological transformation.

Camila Moreno: Concerning automobility and electric cars: for more than 10 years, I was very critical about the process of promoting agrofuels and the role of Brazil concerning sugar cane³⁹. But the point is, if you look at the last 10-15 years, we can see a transformation of the global productive system. In the Brazilian context, sugarcane ethanol was produced to reduce the consumption of fossil products. Car models with Flex Engines were Brazilian technology.⁴⁰ This was completely attacked even by me, and denounced in the international context, to the point that it is regarded as something bad. But at the same time, the electric car models of Tesla, of

Mitsubishi, of Toyota, with their lower energy and CO₂ balance appeared. But now, they have no Brazilian technology at all. Everything depends on a transformation of the fleet of cars, and we, now, have a fleet of cars obsolete for the future. So, we see the contradictions, if we think about the theories of dependence and debate the role of technological innovation. Where are the patents and the monopolisation of value? The possibility of Brazil contributing to technical development was eliminated. Now, the same elites, including the left, are delighted with electric cars. But the major contradiction is that Brazil's electric matrix today is sustained to a bigger part from sugarcane biomass than from hydroelectricity. It is like a cycle. We are going to feed the same electric cars with sugar cane, but it will be sublimated, transformed in a way that is now acceptable to the green hegemonic discourse. So I think that all these are contradictions, movements and frictions of history, that call us to think and rethink. What does it mean in practice, to think and work at a time of such rapid transformations that we do not have time to debate and analyse with the depth that is required?

Alberto Acosta: What Camila has just said opens the door to another very concrete issue. In the midst of these complicated processes of transformation, there are groups that in theory should support transformation, but do not in practice. I am referring to what we could call the labour aristocracy⁴¹. Not only in the global North, but also in the global South, there are groups of workers who are linked to those big companies that are part of the global value chains and are no longer in solidarity with the rest of the comrades of the proletariat. It is true what Ulrich and Markus say: there are differences between the levels of exploitation of workers in the North and in the South. It is also true that the way of integrating workers in the global North into the imperial mode of living has always been done in a subaltern way. But these workers in the global South, linked to transnational corporations, have other logics and other solidarities.

In the book, you address the issue of the environmentalism of the working class. It is complex to talk about this with trade unions – in terms of a real ecological energy transition based on rights of nature, for example – what it means to think about the redistribution of labour, to incorporate other criteria. In recent years, after I was invited to a World Leisure

Congress in Brazil, I have been thinking about the need to promote the right to leisure and not the right to work, which is the right to be exploited in the capitalist world. The right to leisure integrates other visions of the world and opens the door to another way of understanding ‘Buen Vivir’, in which leisure and work, as we know them, end up dissolving. Perhaps the concept *imperial mode of living* could open the door to other options to build modes of living based on a harmonious relationship of human beings with themselves and with nature.

6. Corona Capitalism and global inequality

Anna Preiser: To what extent did the Covid19 pandemic and the way it is addressed by governments and transnational corporations affect unequal North-South relations?

Alberto Acosta: The development and distribution of corona virus vaccines reinforce centre-periphery relations. The centres are overcrowded with vaccines. The peripheries have serious problems. All this is going to provoke a boomerang effect. As long as there are no answers to the corona virus in the global South (I think of India), the mutations will multiply, and that will affect those in the North as well. We are going to realise that we are all in the same boat, but some are the ones rowing and others are the ones resting.

Ulrich Brand: We have already mentioned the role of technology. The Covid vaccine is a technology, which is distributed in a very unequal way. At the beginning of 2021 a form of perverse vaccine nationalism emerged. “Northern countries first!” and – as hidden agenda, of course – profits first. It was not surprising but frustrating, because in the second half of 2020 there were so many political statements that the distribution of the vaccine should occur in a globally more or less solidary manner. Another indicator of systematically failing solidarity mechanisms beyond nice Sunday speeches: the opposition of the EU, the pharmaceutical industry and others to a temporary waiver of patents on vaccines, as requested by the Indian and South African governments, together with many others. There is a kind of emergent Corona Capitalism which needs to be analysed

and politically confronted with solidary alternatives. This also sheds a light on prospective international cooperation to combat the climate crisis – governments and capital will first of all secure their interests. Thus, climate policies are a means of climate change mitigation by geo-engineering and related profit-making rather than a means of really transforming the imperial mode of living towards a solidary mode of living.

Camila Moreno: In the post-covid world, all the glorification of Western science and the messianic claim that the vaccine is going to save us all, is hiding other debates. For example, the GIZ⁴² has announced this big infrastructure programme for the countries of the global South to compete with China and also to offer a billion doses of vaccines, etc. But what are these vaccines? It is, as Uli said, the competition of the most powerful corporations. This market is being built so that you take the vaccine every year. The pandemic is real, but at the same time we see the role of corporations and so-called philanthro-capitalism operating in the World Health Organization and all the so-called facilities. So, under the excuse of Covid, we are already normalising this new multi-stakeholder capitalism, which legitimises the role of corporations, and these non-state actors are legitimising themselves – just to point out that the world is changing very quickly.

7. Facebook, Google, Amazon: Phono-sapiens, merchandise culture and manufacturing of consent

Anna Preiser: What influence do big media-corporations, social networks and the technologisation of everyday life have on processes of imperial subjectivication?

Alberto Acosta: In relation to technology, it is fundamental to discuss the configuration of new scenarios of domination. Think of transnational corporations and big communication companies, such as Facebook, Google, Amazon, that are dominating the scenario, but always in alliance with the big states, or even subordinated to them. The market does not have an invisible hand, the market has visible hands that are usually the big states.

Camila Moreno: A very important agenda of debate, relating to Chomsky, is how consent is manufactured⁴³. How is desire manufactured? Today, we live in an era of Behavioural Economics⁴⁴. We have to understand that there is a science of behaviour, of semiotics, a science to control our desire, and emotions. This phenomenon and its reflections in politics make it very clear how urgent this issue is.

It is fundamental to discuss the fact that today's great mental infrastructure is controlled by Facebook, Google, Instagram, WhatsApp, etcetera. Tools mediate our perception and hegemonise the spaces of political participation, discussion and meeting of sociability in all its forms. In the last years, popular culture in Brazil, as never before, was subjected to a process of imposition of a produced culture, a merchandise culture, produced under the standards, as a mould, of what the idol of adolescents is, which type of book that the middle class should consume. It is produced in an industrial mode, as a modality of franchise, and is not anchored in the local intellectual or organic living processes. Even social movements in this moment of super advanced globalisation are presented as hegemonising the debates. They themselves are a brand. They are increasingly accepted by the imperial logics of how the protest is organised, how demands are nuanced. Netflix has been colonising imaginaries with a series of agendas on how to live, what the values are, how to relate as a couple, how to deal with technology and the contradictions of the world. All this is like a great pedagogical project, a pedagogy of hegemony. It is passively entering into the mentalities at this moment where we are all confined to screens, telephones, computers. The culture that is made through these fabrics is a topic to be exploited in the future. The *imperial mode of living* can help to think about what is happening.

Many new brands are taking the lead in making the transformation, driving women's empowerment initiatives, and acting against racial discrimination. I am thinking about Unilever and Dove, promoting the notion that all bodies are beautiful, self-acceptance, etc. The transformation is approached through consumer lenses and branding. So, what's the appeal? We have a culture industry that has cornered all the spaces. We have the tools to brain wash, to enter into subjectivities, through social networks, applications, and filters. I always use this metaphor: smart-

phones are not a technology – they have become a limb, an organ. We are phono-sapiens. Today we are no longer homo sapiens. Attractiveness is not something external to the imperial mode of living. It has entered into the bloodstream of our daily experience, with an unthinkable capacity of penetration. The power of the digital is to transform us. The first great cycle of discussion of globalisation did not have a hegemonic tool as powerful as it has today.

8. Building bridges

Anna Preiser: How important is it to dialogue with social movements advocating for a socio-ecological transformation regarding the concept of the *imperial mode of living*? What other strategic alliances and bridges need to be created?

Camila Moreno: The concept of the *imperial mode of living* helps to popularise and democratise debates that otherwise would be very limited to more intellectual and academic spaces. You can dialogue with movements or with unions. And, for this very reason, as Alberto also said earlier, the concept should not be taken as a straitjacket but as something that is being transformed and put in dialogue with the contradictions as they arise. There are new dynamics that need connectivity. A valuable contribution of the *imperial mode of living* is that it creates the possibility to dialogue and of building bridges.

Ulrich Brand: Open thinking, which I consider very important, needs contexts. It is not a task that can be accomplished from our desks alone, but it requires these conversations. And the point that Camila always makes and that seems very important: how do we open, not the concept itself, but the discussion to people far beyond our contexts and to overcome this academic and narrow political environment? I think there is a negative criterion to approach other areas. The negative criterion is not to be moralistic. And I think that the success of the book is also that we don't have this moralising tone.

Alberto Acosta: The task is to build bridges, between local and national spaces, between regional integration and global spaces. This is the great challenge we have. I believe that we cannot escape any debate, even with the moralists. We should even look for mechanisms to discuss with people from the business world. We have to open those debates and discussions, aware that it is not about finding moralising answers, but about finding spaces that help us to reflect, to change and to open other scenarios.

Camila Moreno: I also think that it is very fruitful to exploit the heuristics of the *imperial mode of living* by putting it in dialogue with this contextualised living thought of Latin America, to let the wind blow these sails of thought, because we have a lot of wind in Latin America.

9. Alternatives

Anna Preiser: Given the deep social and structural embeddedness of the imperial mode of living: What prospects are opening up for the future? What alternative paths of living are imaginable? And to what extent can we learn from movements and developments in the Global South?

Ulrich Brand: Thinking about alternatives, I ask myself: what kind of critique – including practical critique – of the existing order do we need? Twenty, 30 years ago, it was the protest, and there is still protest, but maybe we have to think what kind of critique we need against this subjectivisation, this strong inscription into everyday life, without falling into the trap of the individualising of responsibility, which is the proposal of liberal environmentalism.

Alberto Acosta: There is an additional issue that worries me, because we do not analyse it deeply. It is necessary to begin to understand that we are living a very complex crisis. It is a multiple crisis, not only a systemic crisis, but a civilisational crisis. The great promise of modernity, progress and development has failed. It is no longer accepted in many parts of the planet. Modern thinking and ‘solutions’ are in crisis.

A great part of the recent mobilisations in Latin America is carried by a youth that does not see the future, or at least not as we imagine it. They are

not organised in political parties. They go out to the ‘front line’ (*primera línea*) in Colombia to reject, and that is part of their life. They have no future in this system. Their life, thought in the conventional traditional patterns, does not make any sense. In that struggle, they are finding other options. I do not believe that these are immediate solutions, nor can these experiences be multiplied or generalised. But these people without a future – without ‘our’ future – are opening the door to other futures.

Camila Moreno: This seems fundamental to me. We should also bring in the perspective of “ni-ni” of these movements, because in Brazil we call ourselves generation “ni-ni”: neither study nor work (ni estudiar, ni trabajar). Not even with a degree would I get a job, because it is a society where formalised work is disappearing. So, it is a form of organisation of society where something new is going to emerge. I agree with Alberto, that it is very dramatic to think that entire generations do not have a sense of life.

Alberto Acosta: We must begin to think outside the promises of prosperity of modernity. And that is one of the great tasks at hand. It is also the purpose of the concept of the *imperial mode of living* to address the issue of extractivism and post-extractivism, the issue of development and post-development. I would even approach the discussion of a post-economy, opening the door to the debate of degrowth within the global North which also has a lot to contribute in the South. And of course, this poses us schemes that have to address a post-anthropocentric civilisation. What is that going to look like? I don’t know in concrete terms, but that’s a big discussion we have on our hands.

In the world today, there are multiple actions, proposals, alternative thoughts and practices. The great challenge is it to recover those plural paths towards the pluriverse – without formalised theories, without recipes and without prefabricated models. We have to build alternatives as we go along. The great challenge is how we discuss with people about concrete issues, because people need effective answers here and now. The solution is not going to emerge from academia or states, it is going to come from below, from the communities. The task, I think, is not only to have these spaces for conversation, which are very rich and instructive. I am charged with doubts, and that for me is profitable. We need to progress. But we

have to build bridges with the sectors that are really building alternatives from below, because there are struggles of resistance and struggles of re-existence that almost always coincide.

Ulrich Brand: Perhaps a window that opens is the re-emergence. It is very important to be able to say 'no!', to resist. But not as voluntarism of the middle class that can afford to do it, but to start with what it means to say no to these manufacturings and which are, as a second step, the social conditions for people to be able to say no to exploitative work, to the use of cell phones, etcetera. Maybe this is a way to think about it. A great thing of '68 was that, as Marcuse said, "die großer Verweigerung"³⁵, the great negation, of people saying, "I don't want to have this life of disciplining, of consumption, of status, of living as people want it," but to have this autonomy, to link the power to say no with the conditions of autonomy. But not autonomy as voluntarism of people who may already have the conditions, but to think the conditions to be able to do it. If we want to build a new left, we cannot follow a strategy of already having the truth.

Alberto Acosta: In practice, the communities that are resisting mega mining are already saying 'no!'. And simultaneously, they are saying 'Yes!' to their ways of life or to other options that they want to develop. It is true that there is a risk that many of these people are thinking of moving in some way closer to the consumption patterns of the imperial mode of living. But even so, when they say 'No!' to the destruction of nature, of their territory, of their community, of their subjectivities, it is already an important action. I believe that this is something that must be recognised.

I agree with what Camila said earlier, that it is time to recover not only ideas and proposals, but practices, values, experiences and visions of Latin America – because they are not only ideas within the formal, but within what we could call the indigenous worlds, the Afro worlds. There, we have many things to recover. Why don't we begin to recover José Carlos Mariátegui to understand what is happening, particularly in Peru, and in other parts of our America? Also, the dependentistas themselves have much to say. And above all, indigenous peoples; because, from these alternative visions on the margins, hidden in the imperial mode of living, hidden in modernity, we can begin to work on other options and

other ways of understanding the world to the extent that it is possible to confront the uniformity and imposition implied by the imperial mode of living. The great task is how to promote processes that encourage diversity and self-organisation, commonality and interdependence. The *imperial mode of living* also opens the door to discuss those other options, issues, visions, practices and readings that allow us to better understand certain realities while, at the same time, recovering and building alternatives that allow us to move towards the pluriverse.

- 1 See Brand/Wissen 2017
- 2 With the term “imperial globality” Escobar (2004) refers to an untenable “economic-military-ideological order” and neoliberal capitalist projects based on the world-wide subordination of “regions, peoples and economies” through “asymmetrical and spatialised violence, territorial control”, and racial and ethnic hierarchies defending white privilege. Escobar 2004: 207ff.
- 3 See Leff 2008: 197
- 4 Brand/Wissen 2017: 15
- 5 See Brand/Wissen 2017: 43-68
- 6 See Hornborg 1998
- 7 See for instance Fischer-Kowalski/Haberl 2015: 100–138
- 8 See for instance Pimmer/Schmidt 2015
- 9 The concept of structural heterogeneity describes the uneven international dissemination of technological progress as one of the core causes of uneven development in the centre and periphery and the associated income disparities.
- 10 Raúl Prebisch, Argentinian economist and second Secretary General of CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) problematised Latin America’s dependency on economic dynamics of important trading partners. With his study *The economic development of Latin America and its principal problems* (1950), he shaped Latin American structuralism and influenced the emergence of dependency theory and the criticism of the dominant paradigm of modernisation and the illusion of linear development. See Beigel 2015: 14f.
- 11 See Braudel 1980
- 12 See Inaugural Address of Harry S. Truman (1949). For a detailed reflection on the impact of “development” and critique of it, see Escobar 2012.
- 13 See Marini 1972
- 14 See Frank 1991
- 15 See Herrera et al. 1977
- 16 Anibal Quijano was both an exponent of the dependency theory, contributing to discussions on marginality, and an important intellectual of decolonial thought, coining the concept “coloniality of power”, with racial hierarchisation being an inherent part of it.

- 17 See Quijano 2016
- 18 See Maldonado-Torres 2007
- 19 See Lander 2000
- 20 See Misculin 2021
- 21 See also Dussel 2012
- 22 Lander 2000
- 23 In *Brazil and the dialectic of colonization* (2015), Alfredo Bosi, a renowned Brazilian intellectual, explores how colonialism, its tensions, imported values and interests, have been influencing Brazilian culture until today.
- 24 Hector Alimonda was an important representative of Latin American political ecology. He linked thoughts on environment, history and geography to debates of the modernity/coloniality project.
- 25 Quijano 2016
- 26 Brand/Wissen 2017: 69-124
- 27 “Coloniality of work” refers to the phenomenon that coloniality also reproduces itself through the division of global labour and workforce, and which continues to be based on racial differentiation. See also Maranón Pimentel 2017
- 28 See de la Garza Todo 2021
- 29 See Kuhn 1962
- 30 In 2002, Paul Crutzen, Nobel prize winner for chemistry, denominated the current geological epoch as the Anthropocene to account for the growing influence of humans on environmental change.
- 31 See Moore 2016
- 32 See Acosta/Brand 2018
- 33 José Carlos Mariátegui was a Peruvian essayist, politician and Marxist, anti-imperialist thinker. He was known for his *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928) in which he introduces, amongst others, “the problem of the Indian” as being rooted “in the land tenure system” of Peru’s economy, stating that administrative, legal, educational or infrastructural measures do not suffice to solve it. Mariátegui 1971
- 34 The concept of the pluriverse can be defined as “a world where many worlds fit”, can co-exist and synergise, without being exposed to oppression, overcoming different axes of discrimination as well as the universalisation of one dominant concept, such as that which “development” has become. See for example Kothari et al. 2019
- 35 Lessenich 2016
- 36 See Brand/Wissen 2017: 147-164
- 37 See Dorn 2021
- 38 See Sachs 1984
- 39 Also see Backhouse/Lorenzen 2022 in this special edition
- 40 Flex engines can be fuelled by a mix of gasoline and ethanol.
- 41 For discussion on labour aristocracy see Rinke 1997
- 42 GIZ stands for „Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit” (German Agency for International Cooperation).

- 43 See Herman/Chomsky 1994
- 44 In contrast to the assumption and conception of a rationally behaving homo economicus guiding economic models, Behavioural Economics combines insights of psychology about human behaviour and decision-making which might differ from economic rationality. See Beck 2014
- 45 See Marcuse 1969

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