



Perspective

For more pluralistic critiques of colonialism: A response to Dunlap

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ABSTRACT

In accordance with critical reflective thinking on colonialisation, we respond to Dunlap's critical remarks on our article by deconstructing some of the themes presented in the debate on internal colonialism in the context of large-scale wind energy developments in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico. We return to a historical conceptualisation of internal colonialism as it pertains to a continuation of colonial-like dynamics – oppression, repression, violation and exploitation of vulnerable people – *within* a country, which is important for our discussion on energy justice, particularly cognitive justice, as the colonial-like dynamics of economic transactions between economically motivated indigenous people and private investors with the support of elite actors – which we term transactional colonialism – have repercussions for vulnerable people and indigenous livelihoods. We hope that our perspective will contribute to the global discussion of the socio-ecological impacts of large-scale wind energy developments and green transitions more generally.

'Entre los individuos, como entre las Naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz' [*'Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace'*]. **Benito Juárez (a Oaxacan politician of Zapotec origins who served as the president of Mexico for five terms: 1858–1872)**

1. Introduction

In this perspective, we respond to Alexander Dunlap's commentary, entitled More Wind Energy Colonialism(s) in Oaxaca? Reasonable Findings, Unacceptable Development [1], which critiques our article on the colonial dynamics of economic transactions in wind energy investments in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico (termed 'the Isthmus' hereafter), published in the journal *Energy Research and Social Science (ERSS)* [2]. Our article, based on longitudinal research that integrates diverse primary and secondary sources, presents the following arguments: 1) wind power investments affect indigenous people's socio-cognitive identities; 2) socio-cognitive realities are overlooked when planning low-carbon energy systems; 3) cognitive justice – the right of different ways of life to coexist – is threatened; and 4) transactional colonialism – a continuity of interlinked injustices based on economic transactions – materialises. Dunlap's main critiques relate to the way in which we develop and use the concept of transactional colonialism; the

categorisation of actors used in our article; and our lack of criticism towards wind energy technologies and Goal 7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ('Energy for All'). In addition, Dunlap's critique suggests that we misuse the term colonialism, and that our research is somehow complicit in capitalist development.

While this final claim is slightly bewildering, we express our sincere gratitude for Dunlap's detailed and engaging perspective and its role in fostering further necessary debate on internal colonialism in energy and social science research, particularly in the context of the Isthmus. Dunlap is one of the key researchers in this area, having made several important contributions [3–6] to our understanding of the socio-ecological impacts, among other themes, of wind energy investment in the Isthmus, and we respect Dunlap's right to a different perspective to that presented in our work.

Herein, we respond to Dunlap's major critiques of our article: the lack of engagement with Dunlap's own research, particularly regarding infrastructural colonisation [7,8]; the alleged misuse of the term colonialism; and that our research is somehow complicit in unfettered capitalist development. We first present the background to our research and then engage with Dunlap's interpretations and viewpoints in relation to our article. In presenting our arguments, we hope to foster further academic debate that can enhance our understanding of the specific context of the Isthmus, ultimately leading to the development of

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stronger theory on colonialism(s). We hope that our perspective will contribute to the wider discussion on the socio-ecological implications of large-scale wind energy developments and so-called green transitions worldwide, in search of respect for the rights of others on the pathway to sustainability and peace.

2. Background to our research

The Isthmus has been shaped by social and economic conflicts. The local communities – comprising mainly indigenous peoples – have a rich history of fighting against inter- and intra-national invaders; abuses of their human rights, such as the right to self-determination; and disputes over land tenure, displacement, and land grabbing. At the same time, they have experienced notable democratic achievements – such as the unprecedented election of a socialist party to govern the local municipality [9,10] – and they pride themselves for their tradition of mobilisation and resistance. Meanwhile, Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for human rights activists and journalists, who face attacks, denunciations, defamation and killings at the hands of organised crime [11,12]. Furthermore, human rights defenders (both indigenous persons and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)) may be attacked (such as by defamation) in public consultations by representatives of governments and private investors [13].

Over the last two decades, the Isthmus – due to its topographical location – has been identified as one of the world's best sites for harvesting wind energy, leading to a rapid proliferation of wind farms. Hailed as a technological solution to climate change and sustainable development, the Isthmus' thousands of wind turbines have negatively affected the lives of the local indigenous communities. As well as giving up their lands to wind energy developers, the customs and behaviours of the local communities have been affected, as they have become detached from their traditional economic and cultural lives. These communities have been confronted by repression, oppression and displacement from their land because powerful private and public organisations – investing billions into renewable energy [14–17] – have ignored their human rights [18].

For successive Mexican governments, the Isthmus has been viewed as a prime site for economic and energy development, while public policies supporting the SDGs [19], particularly SDG 7 ('Energy for All') [20], have also been implemented. However, large structural vulnerabilities such as corruption and social unrest have not been adequately addressed. In addition, since 2018, with the incoming president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, public policies have shifted back towards oil and gas development and away from renewable energy investments. This has further fuelled the manifold conflicts over wind energy developments in the Isthmus [10].

Renewable energy conflicts have implications and repercussions worldwide. Given the renewed urgency to transition towards more sustainable forms of energy generation, the conflicts between developers and affected communities, not to mention the ecological dimensions, will only increase in the coming decades. The Isthmus can therefore be seen as a paradigmatic example of these conflicts [2].

2.1. Personal perspective

In Dunlap's critique, he mentioned the 'family connections' of the first author, Jacobo Ramirez, to the Isthmus. Without overemphasising this aspect, we feel it is necessary to briefly describe this connection, because it speaks to the motivation of our research. Ramirez's father is of Zapotec origins, and his upbringing was strongly influenced by his father's perseverance in upholding Zapotec traditions, customs and rituals. Meanwhile, Ramirez's mother came from the community of Santo Domingo Zanatepec, about 80 km from Juchitán, Oaxaca, yet didn't speak the indigenous *Zapoteco* language, which in effect 'ostracised' her from Zapotec society. While Ramirez's father's side of the family all reached university education, his mother 'only' finished elementary

education (6 years). Oppression, repression, violation and subjugation of people within the same region, conceptualised as internal colonialism, is more than a theoretical framework to Ramirez; it has been a lived reality since long before he came across this theoretical concept in his research. Zapotecisation [21–23], presented in our study [2] as a spirit of intellectual and material superiority, has been a lived experience for Ramirez, which led to his motivation to research renewable energy investments in the Isthmus and has been a source of learning and theorising. While this research, like much social science research, has been informed by personal experiences and histories, it is nevertheless grounded in academic theory, and our empirical evidence was triangulated with different data sources to minimise bias.

3. On terminology

Over the last two decades, indigenous peoples' struggles in the Isthmus have been the subject of a myriad of articles [3,6,7,24], seminars, conferences, and online discussions [12,13,18], from a wide range of theoretical lenses, including justice (climatic, environmental, and energy), human rights, social movements, colonialism (internal, green, neo, and infrastructural), political geography, and governance¹. The debates juxtapose governmental policies that favour businesses and private investments in renewable energy against indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and land preservation.

As Dunlap correctly says, much of this research presents the same arguments and conclusions with different terminology. We agree with this. However, we posit that, while researchers' findings tend to converge in agreement of the socio-ecological and internal politics of private investment in indigenous peoples' lands, the differences in terminology stem from the diverse spectrum of epistemologies and ontologies through which researchers develop their theoretical understandings. Rather than hindering research, we posit that this multiplicity encourages more diverse actors to engage in research and discussion, which can only further academic debate. Large-scale renewable energy developments are still relatively new to critical academic scrutiny, given that organisations investing in renewable energy often cast a positive public image, as more consumers demand ecologically friendly products and services [25]. Emerging studies appear to address how renewable energy investments can affect vulnerable people [26]. However, more critical discussion is needed on the way large-scale renewable energy investments portray a rhetoric of mitigating climate change [27,28] but, in fact, carry irreparable consequences for people and the environment [3,29,30].

We are grateful that *ERSS* provides a home for these important debates, and hope the journal continues to provide a platform for diverse academic voices so that we can form sound theoretical and ethical understandings of large-scale renewable energy developments.

4. More colonialism(s)?

'More colonialism(s)?', asks Dunlap. Our findings suggest 'yes'. Colonialism is a hotly debated concept in social science research and beyond. Indeed, ending the debate would limit discussion and research in this important area. So, while Dunlap seems to want to restrict the term, we encourage its pluralism and diversity.

4.1. Towards a theory of transactional colonialism

Classic European Colonialism, in line with the traditional conceptualisation, was imposed with violence, repression, and oppression of values, beliefs, behaviours, and structures of organising life. Based on this conceptualisation and Ramirez's personal experience, our paper aimed to present a theoretical framework that enabled us to discuss our

¹ See Martinez [24] for a thorough assessment of this array of studies.

longitudinal research findings in the Isthmus (2013–2021), which focused on the internal struggles, conflicts and micro-level dynamics among Zapotec and other indigenous communities that have shaped the history of the Isthmus.

Our theoretical search took us back to González Casanova's [31] conceptualisation of internal colonialism, which we believe serves as a strong theoretical framework for these dynamics. In addition, we engaged with different Mexican and international scholars [9,32–34], including Dunlap himself [35], who explicitly or implicitly discuss internal colonialism in the Isthmus. Our in-depth analysis is embedded in a critical analysis of historical developments in the Isthmus, analysing ongoing conflicts in relation to land tenure, particularly social land tenure (communal vs. private land). Our analytical reflections on historical internal colonialism in the Isthmus reveal the importance of the cognitive aspect of energy justice. In particular, we note how unequal economic transactions and cognitive injustices – the lack of respect for the right for different understandings and ways of life to coexist [36,37] – impact indigenous people, maintaining old and creating new mechanisms of domination and exploitation [2]. We argue that elite actors' neglect of indigenous peoples' cognitive particularities – such as the historical continuity of resilience and struggle against local and foreign invasions – during planning, decision-making and economic transactions reveals a novel aspect of the cognitive injustices within internal colonialism. This leads us to propose our theoretical framework of 'transactional colonialism' by combining the internal colonialism and energy justice frameworks. Moreover, we argue that the critical role of economic transactions in creating new mechanisms of domination and exploitation of indigenous people [2] makes 'transactional colonialism' fundamentally different from other conceptualisations of colonialism.

Although Dunlap may not use or like our proposed terminology, we present it in the hope that it fosters further, pluralistic debate on this topic. We believe that a better understanding of the historical dynamics indigenous people have confronted – particularly in Mexico, and since long before European colonialism – is necessary to progress further, constructive conversations. Thus, we stand by our decision to frame the concept of colonial-like injustices in economic transactions in terms of 'transactional colonialism'.

4.2. Detachment from Dunlap's theory on infrastructural colonialism and counterinsurgency colonial models

We interpret Dunlap's critique regarding our extension of 'colonialism' as a lack of engagement with his research, particularly with regard to Dunlap and colleagues' multi-faceted perspective of infrastructural colonisation. Dunlap and Correa Arce's counterinsurgency colonial model suggests that money, *sicarios* (hitmen) and NGOs are instrumental in 'engineering "social acceptance"' of wind energy development, thereby establishing infrastructural colonisation in the Isthmus [7]. We acknowledge that this is an important aspect of the continuation of colonisation of indigenous peoples in the Isthmus' neo-liberal 'green growth' model [6]. Ramirez has engaged with such a perspective in previous works [38,39], in accordance with Dunlap's research. Böhm has also referred to Dunlap's work positively, as he tries to understand the multiple dimensions of violence [40]. Indeed, we reference Dunlap's work in our ERSS article. However, Dunlap and Correa Arce's concept of infrastructural colonialism and the counterinsurgency colonial model [7] pertain to the colonial-like dynamics brought about by NGOs. We were motivated to study and discuss internal dynamics among indigenous peoples; therefore, we instead elected to engage with González Casanova's perspective of internal colonialism [41]. This perspective helped us to propose the concept of transactional colonialism.

Researchers are responsible and free to choose their theoretical grounds when addressing energy and social science issues. Given the basis for discussing infrastructural colonialism and the counterinsurgency colonial model [3], we choose to depart from Dunlap and colleagues' theories. Still, our findings, interpretations and personal beliefs

are largely in agreement with Dunlap and colleagues' arguments on 'development money' – land contracts, employment and socio-infrastructure programmes – and 'repressive money' – intimidation, physical attacks and killings [7]. In fact, this is an important part of our conceptualisation of transactional colonialism. Therefore, Dunlap's extension to our thoughts and his reference to other possible research avenues are useful and appreciated.

4.3. On different lenses of internal colonialism

One of the goals of our research is to obtain a thorough understanding of indigenous peoples' cognitive knowledges through the lens of internal colonialism. From this backdrop, we elected to engage with a perspective based on cognitive knowledge and the work of González Casanova [41], Stavenhagen [42], Castaneira Yee Ben [21], Lucio López [23] and Manzo [32] – the earliest roots of research on internal colonialism in Mexico and in the Isthmus – and develop a perspective through which to analyse the historical struggles of communities of the Isthmus in their fight to defend their territories, culture and human rights, albeit through a different lens of internal colonialism to that suggested by Dunlap and colleagues [7].

Dunlap and colleagues' [7] contend that internal colonisation 'is legalistic and nation state-centric, as it demarcates artificial boundaries in a fluid and increasingly convoluted process of transnational capital accumulation.' Moreover, they state that 'The line between "internal" and "external" actors become[s] redundant, especially – but not only – in the case of regional collaboration that is further blurred by (trans)national investment, influence and regulation.' We appreciate these views for discussing the influence of the recent wave of researchers, activists and human rights defenders in the Isthmus [43–45]. Nevertheless, conceptualising internal colonialism through the lens of a continuation of colonial-like dynamics – the oppression, repression, violation and exploitation of vulnerable people – *within* a country (*intra-nationally*) is important for our discussion on energy justice, particularly cognitive justice. Therefore, we engage with a historical perspective of internal colonialism in our article, such as that presented by González Casanova [41], and the historical colonisation within the Isthmus [22,23,46]:

Internal colonialism, which can be understood as a pattern of oppression, repression and violation within countries in the Global South, is both continuous and distinct from classic European colonialism. It focuses on how colonialist dynamics are replicated within countries in the Global South by subjugating people, lifeworlds and remote territories. The concept depicts the exploitation of vulnerable people's well-being and resources within a country [2].

Of course, as mentioned by Dunlap, internal colonialism is not unique to the Global South. We do not dispute this critique. The intention of the above quote is to define internal colonialism from the perspective of the article in question, which focuses on the situation in Mexico. Were we to rewrite it, we would clarify that internal colonialism is observed in the Global North as well as the Global South. Indeed, the theoretical framework of internal colonialism has been used to discuss struggles within Great Britain [47] and, more recently, to discuss wind energy investments in Saami territories [48], among others.

5. On 'reductive' categorisations

Our critical approach was intended to analyse the internal divisions among and within indigenous communities. We understand that one could interpret our analyses as supportive of private investments, or as naïve towards the role of NGOs in indigenous peoples' wind energy conflicts in the Isthmus. One could even go so far as to argue that we are accusing indigenous people of causing the ongoing unrest in relation to land disputes in wind energy investments. From this, Dunlap derives his claim that we are somehow complicit in capitalist development:

Instead of an anti-colonial narrative, getting to the roots of the colonial model, it reads more like assimilating, already existing, dominate development perspectives into the region, avoiding complexity of why and how people desire socially and ecologically destructive development. The article positions itself to speak truth to power and not people (or researchers), meanwhile demonstrating how ‘critical analysis’ are not so critical in the end, instead working to refine processes of infrastructural colonization and capitalist development [1].

We feel this misses the point of our intention – to document the often-devastating consequences of large-scale wind energy investment on communities such as those in the Isthmus. Certainly, the basic premise of our conceptualisation of transactional colonialism relates to economic tensions, and how money has been a source of division among indigenous peoples in the Isthmus. However, reporting on the colonial-like dynamics of economic transactions does not equate to us being complicit in the unfettered growth of capitalism. In the words of González Casanova, ‘*what we seek is [to provide] a sociological explanation of problems of under-developed societies*’ [41]. We present our findings regarding how economically motivated indigenous people engage in transactions with private investors with the support of elite actors, and how this causes indigenous people to favour the privatisation of what was traditionally communal land [2]. This is not unique to the Isthmus [44,45,49], as similar patterns have been reported among indigenous and non-indigenous people in Brazil [50], Germany, Canada and Spain [15,51,52], among others. Unfortunately, far from improving their lives, these unequal economic transactions fall within the pattern of repression and oppression experienced by those indigenous people. We hope our work helps to raise awareness of this phenomenon, encourages further research on it, and leads to action to alleviate its consequences.

In our analysis, we return to the history of ‘elites’ within the indigenous population in the Isthmus in order to explore how the dynamics of transactional colonialism affect vulnerable people. We are concerned not only about oppression by people in power (e.g. in the government or private sector), but also oppression within indigenous populations. We elect not to engage, at this time, with the different vulnerabilities that indigenous and non-indigenous people are facing around the world or with global political agendas on green transition and neo-colonialism in energy transitions, as is explored by Dunlap and colleagues [7]. Nevertheless, this line of research is certainly important, and we will consider it in our future work.

Additionally, we agree that some of our categorisations – for example, anti vs. pro-wind energy, pragmatic negotiators vs. those who feel indifferent to wind energy, and vulnerable people vs. elites – might be seen as reductive and conflicting. Yes, all academic categorisations run the risk of reducing the complexity of reality. We are fully aware of this risk, and hence tried our best to include as much detail as possible in an appendix. At the heart of our empirical analysis, however, confirming past research on the Isthmus, is the insight that large-scale development projects divide communities. The myriad of perspectives cannot be ignored here. Where one researcher might see resistance and opposition, another might see desire (of indigenous people) to be incorporated into such projects [53]. This is not to say that inequality nor internal colonialism do not exist.

6. On cognitive justice

This takes us to Dunlap’s following critique: ‘*cognitive justice was poorly developed and substantiated in the article, which is why it was largely been ignored in this review*’ [1]. Our research on Ikoote, Zapotec and other indigenous and non-indigenous communities provides novel empirical support to discuss cognitive justice in relation to class, caste, ethnicity and gender within the Isthmus – demographics that all affect an individual’s capacity to fully participate in decisions that affect indigenous peoples’ livelihoods. Researchers tend to overlook indigenous peoples’ traditions of trade and negotiation, and the continuity of degrading

indigenous peoples in relation to the environment and their work-life activities.

Our cognitive justice approach gives us the opportunity to discuss Zapotecisation in the region, which seems to be the crux of Dunlap’s critique that ‘*placing greater emphasis on Zapotec imperialism gives the impression that Zapotec imperialism is responsible, more than the Mexican government, wind companies and elites in the region, for wind turbine colonization in the region*’ [1]. We appreciate this observation and interpret it through the consideration that further research needs to be conducted in order to fully understand the internal dynamics of divisions and struggles among indigenous people. Our research [2] is not intended to highlight all the causes of the struggles that exist in the Isthmus. We acknowledge that corruption, narco-terrorism, organised crime, and violence have certainly shaped some regions of Mexico [54], including the Isthmus. However, these lines of research and concerns go beyond the main objectives of our article. We do not have first-hand information of firms using illegitimate or otherwise underhand tactics to pressure indigenous people into signing land contracts or agreeing to wind energy investments, and therefore cannot comment on this issue.

7. Conclusion

One of the main objectives of our article [2] is to provide new insights into the conflicting dynamics of wind energy investments in the Isthmus. We combine the internal colonialism and energy justice frameworks to discuss the micro-historical dynamics in the Isthmus and the oppression, repression and subjugation of indigenous peoples’ rights. Our analysis provides the support to conceptualise transactional colonialism. We are grateful that our article has generated a robust response and that it has fostered further academic discussion in energy and social science research. Dunlap tends to agree with the general rhetoric and message of our article, as, in turn, we largely agree with his *oeuvre*. However, he argues that our work has little analytical value and that it makes use of subterfuge to highlight historical events and political machinations. In this response, we re-emphasise our commitment to our analysis and the analytical categories we develop, particularly transactional colonialism and cognitive justice. While we find some of his claims bewildering, particularly that we are somehow complicit in the capitalist developments we critique, we welcome different interpretations and understandings of our work, as we believe that fostering academic debate will create a more robust theoretical discussion to advance our advocacy of the respect for peoples’ rights on the pathway to sustainability and peace. Dunlap correctly identifies some shortcomings in our paper; however, this does not detract from our contribution. We hope that our article will help to create further pluralistic and critical engagements with the rapidly accelerating ‘green’ energy transitions and their socio-ecological implications around the world.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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