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(Counter-)Imperial Mode of Living and Surviving: contextualizations from South America

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Abstract

The notion of the imperial mode of living (IML) has been widely taken up in both academic, activist and sociopolitical contexts. More recently, scholars have begun to explore the concept not only theoretically, but also empirically, dealing with how the IML works in practice. We see great potential for human geography to ground the IML. To do so, in this article we introduce a set of five geographical cornerstones on the IML, stating that (1) the IML demonstrates that capitalism requires a non-capitalist outside, (2) the IML relies on infrastructural colonialism constituted by global value chains, (3) the IML is tied to current notions of development, (4) the critique of the IML concept challenges the patriarchal order and that (5) the IML conditions a counter-imperial mode of living. Reflecting on soybean cultivation, transhumance and lithium mining in South America, we show that grounding the IML not only requires a critical analysis of the dominant power relations, but also a consideration of opposing tendencies. In this context, we observe that a reproduction of global discourses inherent to the IML often leads to an 'imperial mode of surviving' locally. In contrast, we understand protest movements and conflicts as a 'counter-imperial mode of living'.

Zusammenfassung

Der Begriff der imperialen Lebensweise (IML) ist sowohl in akademischen als auch in aktivistischen und gesellschaftspolitischen Kontexten weit verbreitet. In jüngster Zeit haben Wissenschaftler:innen damit begonnen, das Konzept nicht nur theoretisch, sondern auch empirisch zu erforschen und sich damit zu beschäftigen, wie die IML in der Praxis funktioniert. Wir sehen ein großes Potenzial für die Humangeographie, der theoretisch-konzeptionellen IML empirische Bodenhaftung zu geben. Dazu stellen wir in diesem Artikel eine Reihe von fünf geographischen Eckpunkten zur IML vor, die besagen, dass (1) die IML zeigt, dass der Kapitalismus ein nicht-kapitalistisches Außen benötigt, (2) das IML auf infrastrukturellem Kolonialismus beruht, der durch globale Wertschöpfungsketten konstituiert wird, (3) die IML mit aktuellen Vorstellungen von Entwicklung verknüpft ist, (4) die Kritik am IML-Konzept die patriarchale Ordnung in Frage stellt und dass (5) die IML eine gegenimperiale Lebensweise bedingt. Am Beispiel des Sojaanbaus, der Transhumanz und des Lithiumabbaus in Südamerika zeigen

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wir, dass die Begründung der IML nicht nur eine kritische Analyse der herrschenden Machtverhältnisse, sondern auch die Berücksichtigung gegenläufiger Tendenzen erfordert. In diesem Zusammenhang stellen wir fest, dass eine dem IML inhärente Reproduktion globaler Diskurse häufig zu einer „imperialen Überlebensweise“ vor Ort führt. Demgegenüber verstehen wir Protestbewegungen und Konflikte als eine „gegenimperiale Lebensweise“.

Keywords imperial mode of living, imperial mode of surviving, soybean cultivation, transhumance, lithium mining, South America, Argentina

1. Introduction

Since Ulrich Brand's and Markus Wissen's first publication of *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (2017, in German), the notion of the imperial mode of living (henceforth IML) has sparked a lively debate and has been taken up in both academic, activist and sociopolitical contexts. The IML is a Marxist analysis of our world in crisis. By tracing the political economy of environmental and social change it illustrates the tragedy of modern capitalism: while capitalism's contradictions plunge the world into an ever deeper multiple crisis, there is no organized opposition and no alternative model (see also Malm 2020). Brand and Wissen define the core idea of the concept stating that "everyday life in the capitalist centers is essentially made possible by shaping social relations and society-nature relations elsewhere, i.e. by means of (in principle) unlimited access to labor power, natural resources and sinks (...) on a global scale" (Brand and Wissen 2017: 43, translated by the authors, see also Brand and Wissen in this issue). Since 2017, a number of articles engaging with the IML have been published from various disciplines. More recently, scholars have begun to explore the concept not only theoretically, but also empirically, dealing with how the IML works in practice, and how it was able to spread, gain ground and unleash its impact (Krams and Preiser 2021; Anlauf 2017; Krüger 2020).

First attempts to integrate the IML concept with other approaches show how the IML reproduces and inscribes itself into structures in the Global South (Landherr and Graf 2021) and how it is questioned by social movements (Dorn 2021b). While this bears great potential for human geography, we can, however, still observe a great lack of theoretical reflection and empirical grounding.

To further contextualize IML, we use Ludwik Fleck's epistemology of thinking (e.g. 1981, 2011). Fleck (1981), arguing from a praxis standpoint, introduces the concept of thought styles as forms of thinking that

are (re-)shaped by a group of people, the thought collective. Influenced by their socio-cultural surroundings, thought styles are fluid and constantly subject to change. Nevertheless, Fleck postulates that every "intracollegial passage of ideas" (Fleck 1981: 140) is characterized by a particular dependency on the esoteric circle (i.e. the elites of the thought collective) that fosters thought style path dependency and tenancy of systems of opinion. Applying this train of thought to our empirical cases, we consider IML as dominant, hegemonic thought styles that have emerged in the Global North and have predominantly materialized in the Global South. Reflecting a strong, coloniality-influenced Eurocentric perspective, the Global North acts as a contextual thought style anchor that has significant effects on the creation of realities in the Global South.

Still very vague and abstract, we raise the question of the empirical usability of the popular concept. To do so, we take Brand and Wissen's IML as a basis to introduce a set of five geographical cornerstones on the IML, stating that (1) the IML demonstrates that capitalism requires a non-capitalist outside, (2) the IML relies on infrastructural colonialism constituted by global value chains, (3) the IML is tied to current notions of development, (4) the critique of the IML concept challenges the patriarchal order and that (5) the IML conditions a counter-imperial mode of living (CIML). With our combined background and views from the Global South and Global North as well as arguing from our research experiences in South America, we consider those five cornerstones central for further in-depth analyses in situ.

Hence, to reflect on this set of rather theoretical theses, we trace the imperial mode of living in Latin America. We use three case studies as examples to make a first step towards the exploration of the potential of the IML for human geography. In so doing, we highlight different theses in each case. In the context of soybean cultivation in the Argentine Chaco region, we observe a reproduction of the IML and of

hegemonic global discourses. We further argue that the partially precarious labor and dependency relations result in a thought style expansion that we call 'imperial mode of surviving' (IMS), where the negative effects of the IML are materialized and felt by actors in the Global South, while they still remain within the positive thinking of the hegemonic thought style of the IML.

The case study of transhumance in the south of Mendoza is an example for a traditional counter imperial mode of living (CIML) that still persists today and offers an alternative proposal of 'good living'. Finally, the different ways in which local indigenous communities deal with lithium mining in the Argentine Puna show both a form of IML and IMS.

The three presented case studies build on our own field research experiences and shall give an overview and examples on directions for further in-depth analyses of IML beyond this paper. The authors involved have been dealing intensively with the respective topics for many years, i.e. with transhumance since 2004, soybean cultivation since 2009 and lithium mining since 2013. The methodological spectrum includes long ethnographic field research with observations and interviews with different actors, but also continuous document, press and website analyses. In the following we will introduce the geographical theses on the concept of the imperial mode of living. Then, in chapter 3, we attempt a 'grounding' of the IML. The chapter is divided into the three case studies, with each case study addressing and reflecting on different theses. At last, we bring the three case studies together in our concluding remarks and provide an outlook for future (geographical) empirical engagement with the imperial mode of living.

2. (Geographical) cornerstones on the imperial mode of living

Starting from the initial observation that the production and consumption patterns of the Global North require disproportionate access to resources, labor, and biological sinks of the rest of the world, Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2017) introduce the concept of the imperial mode of living (IML). They show that the IML allows people to travel, communicate, eat and dress in a certain way. These everyday actions and routines are normalized and are mostly performed unconsciously. We call this the materialization of the

hegemonic thought style for the IML. While this aspect offers great potential for further in-depth analyses, we consider this aspect as central for the following arguments in terms of contextual embedding. Although there are great differences (especially depending on income), most people in Western Europe live at the expense of nature and the workforce of other regions in Europe and the Global South (ibid: 43).

While this is primarily a crisis description and a practical empirical observation, the imperial mode of living also serves as a theoretical concept that highlights the systemic exploitation of raw materials, ecological and social resources of the Global South. On the one hand, their concept of critical social theory shows the proximity of global capitalism and imperialism. On the other hand, the IML extends the critique of the capitalist mode of production through a critique of consumption norms and lifestyles (*Brand and Wissen 2017*). Although largely influenced by political science and political economy, we see that the implications of IML also hold numerous potentials for human geography.

To do so, we identify a set of five geographical theses on the imperial mode of living, which we then contextualize and exemplify by using three empirical case studies.

(1) The IML approach is based on the assumption that "capitalism requires a less developed or non-capitalist geographical and 'social outside': from there it obtains raw materials and intermediate products, from there it appropriates both paid labor and unpaid care services, and it shifts social and ecological burdens to this outside" (see *Brand and Wissen* in this issue: 76; see also *Luxemburg 2013; Dietz and Engels 2014*). That capitalist outside stabilizes the system by perpetuating primitive accumulation at the periphery (*Hartsock 2006; Casalini 2017*; for a gender-blind contextualization see *Harvey 2019*).

(2) The systemic exploitation of ecological and social resources constitutes a certain form of infrastructural colonialism and both relies on, and is (re-)constituted and materialized by global value chains/global production networks (*Dorn 2021b; Dorn and Huber 2020*; see also *Dunlap 2020*).

(3) The development ideal has always been tied to progress in terms of a Eurocentric notion of knowledge and technology, which are argued to be the rea-

sons for the superiority of the North (Esteva 2019). Replacing prior forms of military imperialism, the doctrine of development subjugated every sphere of life to an economic logic of yield and profit maximization. Critical Latin American scholars argue that the idea of development serves to legitimize the destruction of traditional cultural forms and of nature, and to justify forms of dependency (Gudynas 2012; Svampa 2016). Since the current understanding of development legitimizes environmental exploitation, for the Latin American context the IML constitutes a critical examination of the concept of development.

(4) A society that exploits nature also exploits people. We can see this aspect both in contemporary North-South relations and by means of a gender and feminist perspective (Herrero et al. 2019; Sempértegui 2021; see Thomas 2022 for an in-depth analysis from an activist, intersectional environmentalist perspective). While there is still much room for concretization, the IML as a concept sets a base line to challenge the patriarchal order by shedding light on the power asymmetries manifested in nature-society entanglements.

(5) In the past decade, we have observed a strong increase in social-ecological conflicts and social movements in Latin America. These protests are both against large-scale development projects (see for example the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice) as well as against social inequalities (see for example the 8M marches). We argue that these conflicts and movements question the IML. Considering recent geographical discussions on territory (Dorn and Hafner under review), we can identify the IML as the unfolding of *territory*, understood as a top-down process. At the same time, this implies a bottom-up countermovement, which we recognize in the context of the *territorio* understanding. Thus, the IML also conditions a counter-imperial mode of living (CIML), also fueled by (progressive and/or left) governments' discrepancies between discursive resistance against the negative implications of IML and their action-oriented pragmatism that reinforces the power asymmetries and mechanics of IML (Hafner et al. 2016: 27).

Keeping in mind this set of geographical theses on the IML, we further argue that the IML can be seen in two different ways: thought style and discourse based (CONTEXT), as well as through the materialization and (re-)actions (EFFECT) based on thought styles. Both forms are intertwined but their positionings differ greatly. From an analytical standpoint, we have

to make clear whether actors buy into the hegemony of the IML, act and react according to the hegemonic narrative(s) and ideals that are desirable, or not.

3. Grounding the imperial mode of living: empirical examples from South America

Having shown five theses of IML, in this section, we want to fill the theoretical considerations with empirical life, showing an overview over three different case studies of soy production, transhumance and lithium mining. Since the three cases are located in Argentina, we consider the actions of the Global North as necessary context to understand the impacts of and reactions to IML in our focus region of South America. Great resemblance to the Argentine cases can be found in other countries and regions as well, e.g. for soy production in Brazil (Hafner and Coy 2016; Coy et al. 2017), transhumance in the rural Andes (Sietz and Feola 2016), or mining in Chile (Molina Camacho 2016) and Ecuador (van Teijlingen and Hogenboom 2016).

3.1. Soy production in northwest Argentina

Argentina is the third-largest soy producer worldwide. Particularly since the phase of technological innovation (non-tillage farming and genetically modified crops) of the 1990s, production size has drastically increased (Hafner 2018: 95-96). While the traditional core regions of crop production are located in the Argentine Pampa region, the recent two decades have shown a massive soy frontier expansion towards the northwest of Argentina. This is a prime example for IML cornerstones: (1) the capitalist soy industry needs further expansion to the previously non-capitalist geographical and social 'outside' to (2) exploit their resources in order to maintain levels of economic growth of the globalized production networks, (3) fully functioning in Eurocentric development ideals and fostering infrastructural colonialism. Here, the Argentine Chaco region represents one of the world's most dynamic frontiers of deforestation (Hansen et al. 2013). Low land prices and 'availability of land' make the region highly attractive for capitalist investment, as seen in the example of the Knight Frank international farmland index 2011 (Knight Frank 2011: 37). In this sense, the Argentine Chaco region offers every attractive feature of a non-capitalist 'outside' ready to be entered in the world market for original accu-

mulation. To put it differently, under a corporate food regime, in a stage characterized by the transnationalization and globalization of agriculture, Argentina has functioned as a production platform in the global soybean chain, aimed at satisfying the supply strategies of large corporations.

Viewed from within, the Argentine Chaco has a 30% rural population, the majority residing in a dispersed manner. This population is made up of ranchers (campesinos also called criollos) and indigenous communities. The region currently has the highest proportion of indigenous population in the country, with more than thirteen ethnic groups and eight languages. Additionally, these populations stand out for their high rates of poverty. Thus, it comes without saying that the inclusion of this periphery into global value chains has had drastic effects on both indigenous and peasant groups that rely on common pool resources and subsistence farming, which resonates in IML cornerstone (4), where the exploitation of nature is inherently linked to the exploitation of people. Originally, they have used a multiplicity of goods and services that the forest provides for free that allow them to satisfy a wide range of needs (food, fuel, medicine, etc.) in addition to nurturing its cultural and symbolic system. Therefore, the forest is essential for these populations (Krapovickas 2016).

Since the mid-1990s, it is estimated that more than two million hectares of forest have been lost in the extreme northwest of the Argentine Chaco alone (Gasparri 2010). Deforestation due to the expansion of soy production implies ecocide for the Wichí of the Chaco (the largest indigenous community). It means nothing less than the end of the world they know (Palmer 2005: 4): "To destroy the forest is to sever the relationship that the Wichí maintain with the land. It leaves them isolated in a monotonous and unrecognizable landscape where their own toponyms no longer make sense, as the bulldozers eliminate the sites they refer to. Not to mention that, from then on, the Wichí are excluded from those places. Without the natural resources (...) their ancestral autonomy is undermined from the roots. To survive, they have no choice but to give up their work and the resources they still have, thus becoming unwitting accomplices in their own ethnocide" (Palmer 2005: 4).

In the case of the Chaco, in effect, we find displacement of the peasant and indigenous populations towards lands of low productivity and little value for live-

stock and agricultural production (Grau et al. 2005), or we find that the populations migrate towards the outskirts of the towns in the region, employing themselves as temporary labor in specific clearing and cleaning tasks (Krapovickas 2016). Despite the fact that reactions and open conflicts would be expected given the magnitude of the territorial transformations and their social and environmental effects, the soybean expansion process has found little rejection in the Creole populations and among the local residents in the small cities of the region. We find, on the contrary, a reproduction of the dominant discourses related to development and progress both in actors linked directly or indirectly to the soybean activity (advisors and agricultural technicians, employees of agricultural companies, machinery, seed companies or others of the like) and in actors unrelated (teachers, medical professionals and those employed in service areas, for example); with the one clear exception of indigenous communities.

In this way, and thus tied to current notions of development, the hegemonial discourse of soybeans as generator of progress is uncritically reproduced, as an engine of development and as a possibility of economic growth for the impoverished peoples of the Chaco. Having a discourse focus for the case of soy production, the main narrative, perpetuated by the Argentine national government and soy agribusiness representatives alike, states that "soy production creates jobs', 'soy production reduces poverty' and 'soy production strengthens wealth and development'" (Hafner 2018: 226; c.f. Gras and Hernández 2013: 18). Hence, soy production is considered as a vehicle for 'good living'. This discursively fertile ground legitimizes actions driven by profit maximization. The definition of good living, however, highly depends on the parameters applied and does not necessarily correlate to the concept of *buen vivir*.

From the perspective of local communities surrounded by large soy monocultures, two thought style possibilities arise: first, follow the thought style of the IML and buy into the pyramid-scheme argumentation of good living through the effects of monoculture soy production and a possible redistribution of funds through export taxes (retenciones). This form of good living clearly represents the IML hegemony particularly in rural areas with high levels of poverty. (Forced) resettlement of so-called *puesteros* from rural areas to towns and villages, dealing with health-related issues (fumigations) in towns surrounded by

soy monocultures, show the discrepancy between the hegemonic discourse of soy production for a good (or better life) and the actual living conditions of local communities. Debunking the economic promises of soy production such as job creation (approximately three skilled workers/10,000ha of soy fields are needed) and poverty reduction (even though the provincial indicators in NW-Argentina have improved, the sub-provincial disparities have increased, social housing is still in high demand, self-subsistence farming is reduced, *Krapovickas et al. 2016*), through empirical research, we see that on-site prospects of good living are often not fulfilled. We call this perpetuation of the IML's thought style the 'imperial mode of surviving' (IMS) to consider the lack of empowerment and alternatives of local communities. While the definition of good living depends on power relations, and translates into the thought style of the IML and the IMS, we identify the counter-imperial mode of living (CIML) as a second thought style. This second thought style, embedded in IML cornerstone (5) related to social-ecological conflicts, often emerges in spaces of resistance. We understand that these processes – similar to those that *Räthzel* defined as rebellious self-mission – operate in the Argentine Chaco, that is, the way in which the actors constitute themselves as “agents in certain conditions despite being at their mercy” (*Räthzel 1991: 25*). At the same time, they operate processes of capturing imaginaries: the silence and the absence of organized resistance show a deep resignation and conformity with the destiny that has fallen to them: “You cannot fight against agribusiness. It would be like fighting capitalism” (interview, 14 May 2014). It's a thing too big to face up and deal with. This passive attitude is deeply rooted and is part of a history of dispossession that long predates soybean agribusiness.

Particularly in South America, we can observe this questioning and re-appropriation in the debates about '*buen vivir*' that have been growing for the last decade (*Acosta 2014; Gudynas and Acosta 2011*). In the same period, in addition to dealing with social-ecological conflicts scholars started to theoretically engage with degrowth, transitions and transformations, and empirically analyze local alternatives and exit-strategies.

3.2. Transhumance: indigenous resistance from the periphery of the periphery

Transhumance is a traditional way of pastoralism with seasonal migration, practiced on all continents of the world. The activity is very specific to mountain regions, as it allows to take advantage of the high-altitude pastures, not accessible in winter, while enabling the recovery of the fields in the lowlands. In Western Argentina, this practice was introduced in the early 20th century with the arrival of the European sheep and goats, in the context of the nation-state consolidation process (*Álvarez 1928*). Beforehand it was necessary to expel the original population, which represented an “obstacle to progress” (*Brand and Wissen 2017: 84*), and thus to the expansion of the imperial mode of living. In concordance with colonial practices, the lands gained from the indigenous people were handed over to high-ranking military officers, creating the *estancias*, which are still in existence today (*Maza 1991: 161*). The occupation of the space was gradually consolidated until the middle of the 20th century, in order to facilitate the exploitation of the region's mineral resources. First, coal and uranium deposits and later oil have been the driving forces for the development of infrastructure (railways and roads) in Malargüe.

The so-called *puesteros*, the real transhumant shepherds, are usually settlers who occupied the marginal or non-owned lands, under the condolence of the *estancieros* (*Bocco 1985*). This kind of livestock management is very simple and rudimentary, without any kind of mechanization of agro-industrial production methods, as is the case in the central regions of Argentina. It should be clarified that in Argentina, the peasantry has never been an important social category for the productive system, and has always remained marginal (*Bendini et al. 2005*). The *puesteros* can be *criollos* or *indigenas* and are generally facing a precarious land tenure situation. The lack of land titles puts the *puesteros* in a weak position compared to other economic activities, such as mining, oil extraction or tourism. This results in displacements, a decrease of pasture productivity and high legal insecurity. Migratory routes are encountering more and more impediments, making the practice of transhumance more difficult and reducing the economic benefits. Even though the region was populated by indigenous people, centuries of European colonization, discrimination and dispossession made the basis of indigenous identities disappear in Malargüe. By the end of the 20th century, in the

entire region almost no one recognised themselves as Mapuche. It was only after Argentina ratified the ILO convention 169 (ILO 1989) that revitalisation movements began to strengthen Mapuche identity again.

The Lof Malal Pincheira was the first Mapuche community in Malargüe (actually in the entire province of Mendoza) registered at the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs in 2009 (*Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina* 2012). This community is composed by seven families, in close vicinity to the city of Malargüe. The formal recognition as an indigenous community gives them the right to communal ownership of the land they traditionally live on. This represents a significant positive change for the involved families, providing stability and security for the future, and strengthening the community's territorial integrity. From 2009 onwards, the community Malal Pincheira was able to improve its overall situation, consolidating its own way of life, auto defined in a so called 'Plan de vida' (life plan; c.f. *Tornello* 2009), presented by the community when making the application for recognition. This plan is based on the main pillars of the Mapuche culture and the way of life of the *puesteros*. It states:

- Harmony with nature: "Nature gives us everything we have. We think that everything we have is sacred" (interview with the Werken¹ of the community Malal Pincheira). All activities are designed in such a way that they do not negatively affect nature. Livestock management, agriculture and rituals follow the natural cycle.
- Community resource management: the two most critical resources, water and land, are managed as a common, taking decisions together and seeking the greatest benefit for the whole community. The summer pastures are used in groups, and the march to these sites is carried out jointly, in order to help each other and reduce the required labor.
- Dialogue and cooperation in an equal partnership with society: the community is regularly present in public activities in the city of Malargüe. For example, they bring their disputes with the oil companies to the central square, seeking public support. At the same time, the community presents its products, such as organic meat, at fairs and stands.

With the transhumance as a production method, the Mapuche community has managed to remain true to its ancestral philosophy of life, *buen vivir*. Under difficult conditions, and pressures from other activities

such as mining and tourism, transhumance and the *puesteros* resist against the IML as presented in IML cornerstone (5) on social-ecological conflicts and thus presenting a prime example for a CIML. Additionally, it has to be highlighted that the Mapuche's CIML is not solely a reaction to the materialization of IML on the territory they live on, but more so a continuation of traditional forms of living that is diametrically opposed to IML thought styles on 'good living'.

3.3. Lithium mining in the name of green growth

Triggered by the economic interest in lithium for technological innovations, debates over the lithium deposits in Argentina have gained visibility in the past two decades. Within the framework of the Washington Consensus and the legal and institutional reforms of the 1990s, the State's role was drastically restricted through deregulation. While lithium mining in Argentina can still be considered a relatively recent development, the inauguration of Sales de Jujuy's Olaroz project in the Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari in 2014 made the country the second largest lithium carbonate exporter after Chile. Today, there are more than 60 lithium projects in the Argentine Puna in various phases of exploitation, exploration, or feasibility studies, so that all salt flats in the provinces of Jujuy, Salta, and Catamarca are covered by mining licenses (*Dorn and Ruiz Peyré* 2020). In general, lithium mining must thus be considered in the context of a general expansion of the capitalist resource frontier to a non-capitalist 'outside'. In the name of sustainable green technologies, lithium mining constitutes a globalized territoriality of primary valorization and leads to an overlapping of different territorial visions (*Forget and Bos* 2022; *Dorn* 2021b, 2021a; *Lorca et al.* 2022).

The operating firms are mostly joint ventures of large transnational mining companies and companies from the automotive and chemical sector. They come from countries such as USA, Canada, Germany, Japan, Australia or China. In the name of green development in the Global North, extraction takes place locally, but most of the value creation takes place in the Global North. Here we see how the IML is based – also reflecting IML cornerstone (1) – on infrastructural colonization constituted by a global value chain. Even though the State claims to be committed to further industrialization of the raw material in the country, so far, its role is mainly limited to granting concessions.

At the local level, reactions differ between hope for employment and economic growth and resistance: while some indigenous communities have agreed on contracts with the mining companies, others refuse to accept any company on their territory. The communities surrounding the Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari and the Salinas Grandes-Laguna Guayatayoc offer two contrasting examples within the province of Jujuy.

The (active) lithium mining project in the Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari is the result of a long history with mining. Next to traditional economic activities like transhumant grazing, small-scale agriculture and barter trade with donkey caravans, small-scale mining operations have been around since the beginning of the 20th century. The strong increase in borate extraction in the second half of the twentieth century and the massive increase in all extractive activities since the 1990s has intensified the ties between the local pastoral economy and the global capitalist economy (Abeledo 2017; Dorn 2021a). Due to the price decline, the borate mines had to close in the early 2000s. As a result, many local residents, especially men, found work in other parts of the country. By the time the lithium companies contacted the indigenous communities of the area, many local residents had already entered a dependency relationship with the global market and were looking for a salaried job. Local residents often emphasize the need for lithium mining to provide young people with employment prospects in the villages, which follows a classic IML thought style logic that shows great resemblance to the soy industry. There are hopes lithium will deliver on the mining companies' promise to be the future but there is also great uncertainty about the ecological consequences. Besides the general lack of independent hydrogeological studies, there is a pronounced asymmetry of information between the lithium mining companies and the indigenous communities.

This verbal juxtaposition of a possible 'dying out' of the village due to the emigration of young people with possible future environmental damage illustrates a lack of choices and a lack of options for action by the local population (Dorn 2021a). Although these power asymmetries have existed before the arrival of lithium mining, they are now deepened and increasingly undermine social autonomy. Thus, we find that the communities' relationship to lithium mining is very ambivalent. It is characterized by one-sided dependency relationships and a structural lack of alternatives, and presents a prime example for what we call imperial mode of surviving.

In contrast, in the communities of the Salinas Grandes-Laguna Guayatayoc we can observe a consistent anti-lithium rhetoric that perfectly illustrates a counter-imperial mode of living grounded in a conflict situation. This counter-discourse relies on far-reaching economic independence based on pastoralism, small-scale subsistence agriculture, work in tourism, artisanal salt extraction and other occasional paid labor. The anti-lithium rhetoric can be split up into three closely interrelated areas: first, it builds on the fear of negative impacts on the sensitive natural ecosystem they consider themselves part of, being particularly concerned about the scarce local water resources. In this context, one also has to consider the profound relationship with Pachamama. Not only in terms of traditional economic activities, the Salinas Grandes constitutes an important cultural reference. Second, opposition to lithium mining has revived calls for indigenous rights. This claim is based on international and national regulations, including the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 by the International Labor Organization (ILO 1989) and Article 75 paragraph 17 of the Argentine Constitution. Third, while the state defends lithium mining as forward-looking and development-oriented, local residents emphasize their divergent understanding of development, underlining reciprocity with nature and their (ecological) heritage to their children and grandchildren.

The example of lithium mining thus illustrates the reproduction (national, regional, local) of a hegemonic discourse of eco-efficiency and new technologies 'to save the planet'. On the other hand, resistance to lithium mining also gave rise to a counter-discourse based on communal lands, local autonomy, and indigenous rights, making the rise of social-ecological conflict situations evident, as shown in IML cornerstone (5).

4. Consequences of the IML: the attempt of a conclusion

For a reflection of the three case studies, we also need to differentiate between the IML (a) as an object of investigation, i.e. how the characteristics of IML can be found and described with soy production, transhumance and lithium mining, and (b) IML as a science-activist tool to criticize hegemonial discourses, colonial and Eurocentric actions. This definitory distinction is vital to make transparent the users' embedding in particular (critical) thought styles.

(Counter-)Imperial Mode of Living and Surviving: contextualizations from South America

As with problems of the IML frame, it sets five basic cornerstones, but the actual shaping of IML, IMS, CIML are highly context-based, dependent on the actors, time (frames), physical location and scalar focus of the analysis (CONTEXT). *Figure 1* shows a schematic visualization of this contextualization and its implication for the Global South. Its main goal here is to show that the Global North’s hegemonic thought style of IML sets the frame in which the implications and materializations of this thought style become apparent in the Global South. The counter-hegemonic thought style of the Global South is to highlight the aspect that CIML have already existed before the arrival of IML and they therefore – too – offer a contextual nature to the scheme. Having established the contextual baselines, our focus was on the effects of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic thought styles in Argentina. We have presented three rather different case studies in relation to the IML. While this diversity prevents a systematic theoretical comparison, it allows us to explore the various facets of the IML and the great potential of the IML for human geography: Here, we see particular relevance in dealing with the EFFECTS of IML as an object of investigation.

In the case of soybean cultivation in the Argentine Chaco, we find a local reproduction of hegemonic discourses. The local population largely follows the hegemonic thought style, so that the idea of progress and jobs materializes as a continuation of the IML. While some companies profit massively, the environmental risks are distributed among society. We further argue that precarious labor and dependency relations related to the reproduction of the hegemonic thought style result in an imperial mode of surviving (see *Fig. 1*) that is grounded in IML cornerstones (2) infra-structural colonialism, (3) euro-centric development ideals and (4) local negative consequences for nature and people. In contrast, the case of transhumance constitutes a prime example for the continuation of a traditional economic activity and a traditional mode of living. Grounded in a counter-hegemonic thought style we can thus identify a counter-imperial mode of living that has pre-existed before the IML has reached the non-capitalist geographical and social ‘outside’ (cornerstone (1)). By using lithium mining in the Argentine province of Jujuy as a third case study, we find the presence of both thought styles. On the one hand, the indigenous communities surrounding the Salinas

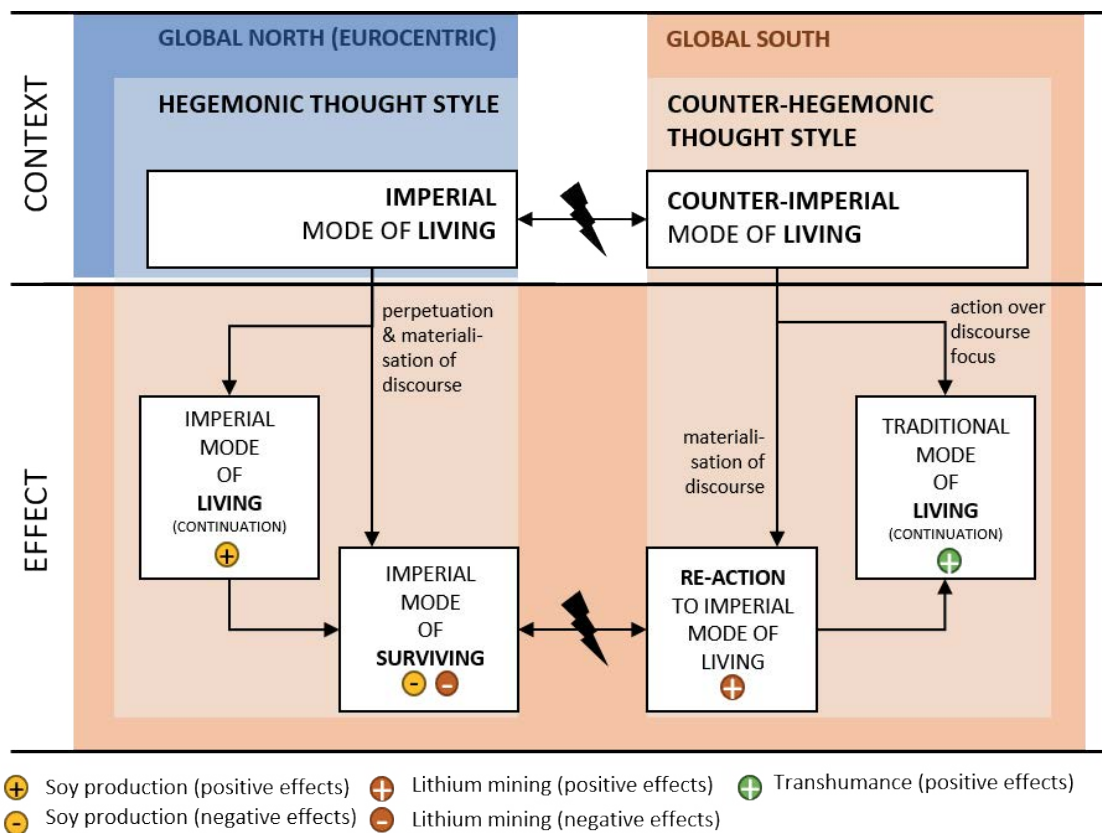


Fig. 1 Context and effects of modes of living on people and the environment in the Global South. Source: own elaboration

Grandes-Laguna Guayatayoc resist the imperial mode of living by protesting and road blocks. Dominant actors are clearly grounded in the counter-hegemonic thought style and overlapping territorial logics unleashed an open conflict here in recent years (cornerstone (5)). On the other hand, in the communities surrounding the Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari we can identify a strong reproduction of hegemonic discourses. Similar to the case of soy, particularly place-based local actors find themselves in a pronounced dependency relationship with dominant actors of the lithium value chain, therefore illustrating a second example for an imperial mode of surviving.

As different as these case studies may be, at the core of all three is the question of 'good living'. However, different thought styles, and especially the reproduction of these thought styles, result in different local approaches to this very question. One central distinction has to be made between IML interpretations of good living (deriving from a Global North-Eurocentric perspective focused on growth and capitalist expansion) and traditional/indigenous forms of good living, exemplified in the holistic, mother-nature-centered concept of *buen vivir*.

We have shown that grounding the IML not only requires a critical analysis and reflection of the dominant power relations, but also a consideration of opposing tendencies, i.e. Latin American counter-hegemonic thought styles. If and how these friction spaces can give an answer to the open question of possible exit-strategies requires further empirical research of lived alternatives. In this sense, for further research, it is of great importance to strengthen eco-, postfeminist and postcolonial perspectives to fully address the implications of the materialization of IML thought styles in situ.

Finally, a critical reader may ask why we actually need IML as a research-activist concept at all, since the case studies can be (and have been) worked on before the introduction of the concept, as also our own research has shown. As a reply, we consider IML as a successful umbrella term with a common semantic frame to bundle research on the effects of hegemonic discourses and actions, power asymmetries and critiques on capitalism. This, however, does not necessarily mean that approaches, methods and results have to be radically new or innovative. The visibility of research in the wake of IML's virality has the potential to become more 'searchable', more visible. We consider this a

great contribution to the academic debate, particularly in human geography, and beyond.

Note

¹Werken = speaker or messenger

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