Introduction
Environmental Violence in Mexico

A Conceptual Introduction

by
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In December 2010 Mexico hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Cancún, Quintana Roo. The conference intentionally crossed World Forest Day, celebrated on December 5, and this gave Felipe Calderón, then president of Mexico and current chairman of the World Resource Institute's Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, an opportunity to urge the nations of the world to save the world's forests. In his speech on that day (Calderón-Hinojosa, 2010) he urged peasants to abandon their traditional agriculture in favor of environmental-services payments, arguing that a year's harvest would not be nearly as productive of income as the US$30–100 per hectare per year they would derive from being compensated for not planting.

This speech permuted the realities of self-sufficiency by mistaking its use value for the exchange value of crops and harvests. In an attempt to manufacture consensus, it offered a remarkably narrow view of the economic mechanisms, logic, and functioning of small-scale production systems. It is true that peasants depending on rain-fed plots may not be able to produce more than a single ton of corn a year. However, Mesoamerican agroecosystems also yield hundreds of kilograms of other edible cultivars such as beans, chiles, tomatoes, and squash (Aguilar, Illsley, and Marielle, 2007) and increase biodiversity without interrupting the natural processes of vegetation renewal (Alcorn, Altieri, and Hecht, 1990; Berkes, Colding, and Folke, 2000; Ramakrishnan, 1992; Turner, 1991). In addition, the presence of traditional agroecosystems attracts animal species that are part of peasants' diets (Navarro-Martínez, Schmook, and Martínez-Castillo, 2000) and preserves wild germoplasm from which fruits, firewood, construction materials, handicraft materials, tools, and dyes are obtained (Aguilar, Illsley, and Marielle, 2007; Alcorn and Toledo, 1998). Abandoning agriculture as a result of the negotiation of neoliberal landscapes (see Carte et al., 2010) has deleterious effects on peasants' diets and livelihoods, as well as on local agrobiodiversity and traditional ecological knowledge

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(Ibarra et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is likely to require peasants to become part of the workforce as unskilled and highly vulnerable laborers (see Anderson and Anderson, 2011). Would it, then, be appropriate for peasants to accept Calderón's proposal and abandon their plots in exchange for the payments that he mentions?[1]

Twenty-two years ago, Daniel Faber (1992) compiled a volume on the ecological crisis of Latin America. Three themes that run throughout the volume are the core of socio-environmental conflicts from the eco-socialist perspective: (1) the ways in which people are made available to capital, (2) the serious threat that capital incursions pose to the production and reproduction of the cultural norms and values that secure the reproduction of livelihoods and communities, and (3) the rise of social movements as a consequence of the direct threat that the intrusion of neoliberalism—the ideology that makes capitalism the organizing principle of everything using debt as a moral standard (Graeber, 2011)—poses to livelihoods and cultures. From Calderón's speech it seems that nothing has changed in these 22 years. Neoliberalism continues to act against the reproduction of cultural values and practices by imposing development plans—now, green development—on rural areas (Doane, 2012; Walker et al., 2007), dismantling local social fabrics by destabilizing local moral economies (Aquino-Moreschi, 2009; Castellanos, 2010) and causing deleterious environmental and social consequences (Lazos and Paré, 2000; Narchi, 2013).

There are many valuable critiques showing that it is wrong to represent neoliberalism as a monolithic political project without considering different scales (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Larner, 2003). Despite the numerous asymmetries and ambiguities seen at the local level, however, the case studies contained in this issue suggest that neoliberal policies and plans have deliberately made it more difficult for groups to obtain the resources they need to sustain their livelihoods. When focusing on the erosion of these livelihoods, the variations seen at the local level are nearly insignificant. Vilas (2004) presents a similar argument for regional and global variations.

The core operational framework for this issue is the concept of environmental violence, which occurs when historically structured asymmetrical power relations are reproduced or maintained by individual capitals and politically powerful groups, normally aided by the state's economic, strategic, and constabulary capacities. These power relations enable the state to plan, develop, and implement a specific construct of nature with the goal of accelerating the rate of accumulation either by direct infrastructural development or by commodifying natural resources previously unavailable to the cycles of capitalism. These power asymmetries have profound deleterious social and environmental consequences that directly and indirectly constrain human action both locally and globally.

This introduction is divided into three sections. The first section explains the multicultural arrays, twentieth-century structural transformations, and twenty-first-century economic decisions that have made Mexico a particularly appealing collection of case studies for articulating a definition of environmental violence. The second section introduces the case studies contained in this issue, presented in order of increasing intensity of environmental violence. The third

section offers conclusions on the importance of the concept of environmental violence for environmental and development studies.

VIOLENCE: A BRIEF DEFINITION

There is no generally accepted definition of "violence," at least from an anthropological standpoint, where the term is remarkably undertheorized (Moore, 1994). Most scholars would probably agree, however, that violence is an intentional, socially visible, interpersonal, direct, physical, and brutal action deemed legitimate by the perpetrator in order to control social or material resources (see Riches, 1986; Schmidt and Schröder, 2001). In socio-environmental studies dealing with resource scarcity, violence is commonly equated with conflict (e.g., Homer-Dixon, 1994; Horowitz, 2009), making it even more difficult to understand one or the other because the overlapping of concepts blurs the distinctions between the concept (violence) and the action (a violent act).

With his definition of "structural violence," Johan Galtung (1969) broadened the concept, considering violence anything constraining human action not only directly by live actors but also structurally. His definition is apt with regard to environmental degradation, given that environmental conflicts are shaped not only by the struggle for scarce natural resources but by the deeper historical and social regimes (Peluso and Watts, 2001) produced by the impersonal violence embedded in colonialism, genderism, and racism.[2] Similarly, Rachel Carson (2002 [1962]) argued that, given the lengthy environmental cycles of our planet, most of the consequences of any environmental or development policies applied now will not be visible for a number of years and will be magnified by ecological interactions.

Rob Nixon (2011) has blended Galtung's and Carson's notions in a single term, "slow violence," that refers to environmental degradation occurring so gradually that it is not seen as violence at all. The repercussions of slow violence are dispersed across space and time under a differential distribution of risk (see Beck, 1992), following a pattern that makes the poor and marginalized the first to suffer its effects. My proposal of "environmental violence" differs from Nixon's by taking into account that stakeholders, by the active use of power differentials, recurrently perform violent acts in order to maintain an established socioeconomic order and a deleterious attitude toward nature. Therefore, this kind of violence occurs on multiple convoluted time scales in which structural, gradual, and immediate acts of violence intersect to perpetuate a hegemonic socioeconomic order.

ENVIRONMENTAL VIOLENCE

The idea that accumulation enslaves nature by transforming all living things and natural cycles into property is not new. It pervaded political and economic imaginaries long before the rise of Marxist theory (Blake, 2012; Friesen, 1965; Marx, 1964: 37). In political economy, the long-standing debate over the negative reciprocity between environment and capitalism has been revitalized by

postulates such as O'Connor's (1986) second contradiction of capitalism, which links the ongoing ecological crisis to the ways in which capitalism degrades its own conditions of production. Other attempts to link capitalism and environmental deterioration polarize the discussion to the point that the crisis is considered not limited to the economic system but a nearly insurmountable crisis of civilization (Bartra, 2013; Boada and Toledo, 2003; Toledo, 1992b)—a collapse made up of ecological, energetic, financial, migratory, and war-prone crises that synergistically erode the capitalist model beyond resilience.

Whatever their size or number, the broader strategy of neoliberal capitalism is to use these crises to generate new scenarios that will foster its expansion into unconquered economic spheres, much of it in the form of so-called green economies[3] (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Moreno, 2013). Green economies reshape and can severely distort public policy, particularly with regard to environmental conservation. This is more a matter of public relations than one of effective decision making. In the end, conservation strategies are inherently political (Adams and Hutton, 2007).

While Brosius and Hitchner (2010) have described the aforementioned process with regard to the planning and implementation of conservation areas, the contributions to this issue demonstrate that it is also seen in urban and periurban environments in which people who derive a sense of well-being and identity from the appropriation, use, and exploitation of natural resources in culturally specific ways (Cocks, 2006) are dispossessed of these benefits by unilateral decisions to modify landscapes and organisms in order to foster capitalist ventures. Just as the colonial powers managed to recreate the fauna and flora of the new world in the image of Europe (Crosby, 2004; Ezcurra, 2003), the logic behind a contemporary global economy is that of homogenizing diversity—both cultural and biological—by destroying it (Carrillo-Trueba, 1991). One obvious case is that of staple foods. Humans know and have used over 50,000 edible plants, but rice, maize, and wheat, favored by an industrialized and monopolized agricultural enterprise (see Leff, 2013), provide nearly 60 percent of the world's food energy intake (Loftas and Ross, 1995).

The designation of areas as suitable for exploitation has to be understood in terms of the power of representation.[4] The areas and practices that will be preserved are designated in relationship to others seen as deficient and incomplete in a discourse that underscores the biophysical and cultural features that are most relevant in describing a given environment. The politics of representation may be illustrated by the contractual relationship between private corporations and environmental organizations. For example, Telcel, the largest Mexican mobile phone service provider, owned by Carlos Slim, has supported with considerable funding the World Wildlife Fund's conservation efforts in Mexico for more than a decade. Among the goals of their alliance is a priority on preserving the Sea of Cortés, home to some 6,000–12,000 animal species and the habitat of charismatic species such as the grey whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*), the totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*), and the endangered vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*). Meanwhile, Frisco, a Mexico-based mining company also owned by Carlos Slim, is determined to establish a mining project in the town of Tetela de Ocampo, a town located in the Sierra Norte of the state of Puebla. The area is home to at least 40

endemic species, 11 of which have special-protection status under Mexican law (Llaven-Anzures, 2013). What is the moral role of Carlos Slim in this ambiguous situation? Why would a man use one of his companies to save 6,000 species while using another to threaten 40 species that can only exist in the very spot that his company wants to exploit?

A simple answer is that Tetela has become a sacrifice zone to support the lifestyles of modern industrial cities. While this may be true, Adriana Vlachou (1997) has provided a more elaborate answer—that the only goal of individual capital is to lower the cost of production by any means necessary. In other words, in virtue of the way in which the logics of capitalism are structured, individual capitals will exploit the easily accessible high-quality products and preserve those that are less accessible until technology and/or changes in accessibility have reduced the costs of production. Ultimately, each and every location on the planet may become a sacrifice zone to support lifestyles while ensuring lower costs of production. The politics of representation is an important first step toward exercising environmental violence.

Currently, the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, along with state policies aimed at the deregulation of trade and the active pursuit of foreign investment and a larger gross domestic product, have provided capitalism with a complex and powerful machinery capable of expanding markets into every corner of the world. The survival of this globalized machinery depends on the existence of surplus labor, the assumption of an infinite number of consumers, and an endless supply of raw materials.[5] Regardless of their political leanings, governments across Latin America provide this supply of raw materials by appropriating and destroying natural resources. In the meantime, emerging economies acquire transformed goods and technologies from developed countries, most of which derive from the very raw materials sold them by the emerging economies, thus continuing to expand the existing asymmetries between the global North and the global South (Svampa, 2012). Power relations play a strong role in the way human beings relate not just to each other but to their environments (Leff, 2003). It is because of the asymmetrical exercise of power that governments and individual capitals can discursively and actively dispossess landscapes, territories, and peoples of their biocultural history, thus suppressing the differences that emerge from biocultural diversity.

Environmental violence occurs when development plans threaten the livelihoods of people and their possibilities of cultural reproduction by appropriating, transforming, and destroying natural resources and the environments in which these are embedded. Environmental violence may be triggered by (1) ignorance, lack of awareness of the social, environmental, and biocultural processes in place in an area to be developed; (2) epistemological blindness, conceiving development projects to fit a single paradigm, whether cultural, economic, scientific, or technological, that developers and planners deem superior to other paradigms; and (3) negligence, disregarding the fact that the coevolution (*sensu* Gual and Norgaard, 2008) of cultures and environments has produced alternative successful forms of development and imposing projects for fostering economic accumulation despite the proven risk of eroding biocultural practices to the point of threatening livelihoods and environments.

Environmental violence exists at various different geographic scales, from the planetary (e.g., climate change) to the infinitesimally local (e.g., the extinction of a tropical bug from which the key to curing breast cancer might have been derived [see Schultes, 1986; 1988]). Environmental violence has no degrees; every act is simply violent. There is, however, a progression in intensity that ranges from the structural violence resulting from poorly planned development to the overt and direct violence against those who oppose development programs. Structural and direct violence are not mutually exclusive, and in most cases unconscious violence can quickly become deliberate aggression.

Regardless of the severity of the predicted outcomes, the real contradiction of capitalism lies in the fact that the cycles and requirements of capitalist economies are incompatible with natural cycles and human needs (Bartra, 2008; Lebowitz, 1992). However, in searching for feasible alternatives, we as a species have to recognize that the social and environmental limits to economic growth are not working exclusively against capitalism but against all economic systems that disregard natural cycles and elementary human needs (Toledo, 1992a). In the zeitgeist of neoliberal capitalism, the social and environmental limits to capitalism are particularly obvious because of the sophistication of most technologies, particularly those pertaining to extractive enterprises, and the declining presence of a receding state, whose only duties are, apparently, to give fast approval to neoliberal reforms and provide large direct and indirect subsidies to large-scale multinational enterprises (Anderson and Anderson, 2011).

WHY MEXICO?

The current state of environmental affairs worldwide is worrisome. Similar experiments in water privatization, open-pit mining, poaching of protected and endangered species, and hydroelectric mega-projects, often associated with the shrinking of common and communal property, can be seen in the vast majority of developing countries. We have chosen to focus on Mexico because it constitutes an emblematic case for studying environmental violence.

In the past 20 years, Mexico has completely abandoned the socialist policies that were adopted as official governmental policies after the 1910 revolution.[6] It has restructured its economy to fit a global policy of open markets. This restructuring was a top-down process in which virtually no feedback or contestation from the general public was allowed (Cuijpers and Fernández, 1995). At its core, the restructuring of the economy aimed at a complete transformation of the state-society relationship (Grispun and Kreklewich, 1995). The state would no longer isolate and protect the national economy against international markets. On the contrary, national economies would openly participate in a global market and would benefit from a market in which imports, free of any taxation, could be price-competitive and even more affordable than national products. The restructuring involved austerity measures, privatization, reduction of public-sector spending, and liberalization of trade and investment. The new economic growth would result in export-oriented private investment with enough comparative advantages to compete successfully on the international

market (Cuijpers and Fernández, 1995). No social sector was excluded; peasants owning small farms, for example, would carry on and compete with immense agri-business without any form of subsidy[7] except for technological packages that raised their production costs even further. Therefore, agrarian law was restructured so that communal land could be parceled and sold, giving peasants an easy way out but also allowing agri-business to reconcentrate those little parcels into large agro-industrial plots.

As happened with other Latin American countries, after more than a decade of implementing neoliberal policies the Mexican economy experienced severe economic, social, and political crises (Goodale and Postero, 2013). After these crises, various Latin American countries decided to abandon the neoliberal agenda, returning to a nationalist and protectionist model in which the state acted as the axis of development, regulation, and social protection[8] (Bernal-Meza, 2013). Mexico, where the state decided not only to retain but to strengthen the process of subsumption under global neoliberal economic policy (Czarnecki and Sáenz, 2014), was an exception. In the weakened economy of the globalized neoliberal system, Mexico kept playing the role of periphery (*sensu* Wallerstein, 1974). Geopolitically, it could only become the source of unlimited raw materials in the forms of food, water, energy, minerals, landscapes, and timber, many of which are found in the territories of indigenous ethnic groups (López-Barcenas, 2011). The lack of adaptiveness of neoliberal policies to local social and biocultural practices has fostered the rise of social movements in resistance to neoliberal policies. The discursive formula of these movements adheres to national citizenship despite subscribing to specific collective identities. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, claimed by the intellectual Carlos Fuentes to be the first postcommunist rebellion in Latin America (Gardels, 1994), is one of the most significant and emblematic examples (Stahler-Sholk, 2007).

With more than 60 different native ethnic groups and an extremely large rural mestizo population, Mexico is, without any question, a multicultural nation. These groups have been impacted in different ways by the liberalization of the market starting 30 years ago—not only the economic shift but also the effects of an epistemological system embedded in the logics of neoliberalism (Méndez, 2008), whose incompatibility with local ways of understanding and using nature has had tangible environmental and social consequences. On a local scale, these consequences have included unsustainable resource exploitation, disruption of long-held social practices, and indifference toward officially recognized sacred sites. On a global scale, the consequences have been soil degradation and erosion, deforestation, mineral depletion, chemical pollution of air, land, and water, drought, and desertification. Everyone, not only the poor and marginalized, is a victim of environmental violence. Conversely, because of our consumption practices, we are all partners in the generation and administration of violence toward the environment.

In the papers included in this issue, contributors provide various examples of environmental violence in Mexico. For example, Horacio de la Cueva points out that animal species have been faced with extinction because shortsighted development programs and unsustainable commercial practices have reshaped terrestrial and marine environments faster than most species can

adapt to them. Providing three examples occurring in the delicate environments of the arid Mexican Northwest—the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), the masked bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus ridgewayi*), and the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), he invites readers to think of environmental violence as an anthropogenic interruption of natural processes that will eventually have repercussions on human populations at various time scales.

Lucero Rádonic builds on the contemporary Yaqui struggle for water in the face of the construction of the Independencia Aqueduct in Sonora. She argues that environmental conflicts and the violence derived from them are the modern equivalent of the bloody campaigns against indigenous groups in an effort to gain control over their natural resources over a century ago. She shows that although the aqueduct is being constructed on the premise of extending human rights, this approach is meaningless for political and cultural minorities.

Darcy Tetreault elaborates on neo-extractivism by focusing on mining. He documents that since 2000 mining companies have extracted twice as much gold and half as much silver as was extracted in Mexico in the preceding 300 years. The mining boom became possible in Mexico through a two-phase restructuring process that helped strengthen and consolidate mining as a private enterprise by removing restrictions on foreign ownership and royalty payments and introducing a low tax regime and weak and seldom enforced environmental laws. Tetreault asserts that the only real difference between Mexico's deregulation of the mining sector and the actions of other Latin American governments calling themselves progressive is that the progressive governments managed to get a better and more direct deal with external capitals. In any case, it is local communities that are most affected by mining operations.

Food and food generation systems are not exempt from environmental violence, and Yolanda Massieu and Olivia Acuña show how local communities are dispossessed of their surrounding richness by the introduction of corn-based biofuel. They argue that the production of agrofuels for international trade dispossesses people of their resources and territories by eroding the land and displacing forests and jungles. In the long run, agrofuels can severely threaten food sovereignty and food security on the national and international levels.

According to Veronica Ibarra and Circe Badillo, accumulation by dispossession is the cornerstone of the appropriation by individual capitals of common goods. In their article they analyze the power relationships involved in developing Bahía de Banderas, a tourism project in Nayarit. They hold that power differentials in contemporary Mexico emanate from the structural adjustments implemented in the 1990s by the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

The exercise of power and the factual legitimization of dispossession are not the only mechanisms of environmental violence. Beatriz Canabal and I show how ideology is used to control the perceptions, management, and use of an otherwise agriculturally productive and culturally rich region of Mexico City in which violence of representation is the state's prime strategy for imposing a particular view of Lake Xochimilco and how it should be managed.

While ideology plays an important part in establishing the neoliberal path toward kleptocracy, some sectors of society may escape this programmatic ideological propaganda by trying to redefine and resignify local imaginaries of the environment. When this happens, civil society groups will undertake

resistance against development projects that they perceive as menacing their livelihoods. Dawn Paley boldly illustrates how environmental and indigenous-rights social movements are subjugated by the so-called war on drugs sponsored in Mexico since the Calderón administration. Parallel to Plan Colombia, the U.S.-Mexican Plan Mérida draws upon the synergistic interests among mining companies, drug traffickers, and instigators of state-sponsored wars to militarize Mexico in an attempt to control, occupy, and reconfigure territories for extractive industry.

Finally, Toledo, Garrido, and Barrera-Bassols show that the need for livelihoods to be accepted and recognized by others is not exclusive to the Zapatista movement. They highlight an increase in the numbers and intensity of civil resistance movements against the reconfiguration of rural and indigenous territories to serve individual capitals. They also point out that when social movements become larger and more numerous, state-sponsored violence, often in complicity with individual capitals, becomes common, open, direct, and lethal.

CONCLUSION

Clashes between neoliberal top-down policies and local livelihoods account for some 300 environmental conflicts in Mexico. These conflicts attest to the fact that the environment is constructed, represented, claimed, and contested by the numerous different stakeholders colliding in particular situations. However, from the juncture between all the earth and atmospheric sciences and the many case studies offered by the social sciences we know that many of the ways in which capitalist ideology constructs and claims the environment are maladaptive. An Orientalist treatment of nature assaults territories by ignoring or intentionally disregarding (1) the fact that the biophysical processes occurring in these territories act as life-support systems not only for humans but for entire ecosystems and (2) the fact that landscapes have been shaped, perceived, and conceptualized by continuous human occupation. In the words of Lucero Rádonic in this issue, the practices of capitalism are socially and environmentally destructive across an immeasurable range of temporal scales. However, capitalism alone is not to blame. There has been, without any question, an increase in popular-based and civil-resistance environmentalist movements, but the people involved in them will have to face the contradictions arising from their dual role as activists and consumers in order for a truly congruent solution to emerge. The articles that make up this issue will ideally place violence at the center of the discussion of development and conservation in Mexico and throughout the world. They represent an effort to delve deep into the consequences of thinking of nature and culture as irreconcilable, and this effort should prove to be one of the last of its kind as we focus on just, equitable, and nonviolent solutions.[9]

NOTES

1. The average plot size per person in Mexico is 7.5 hectares (Robles, 2008). With Calderón's proposal, the average peasant would ideally earn $8,166 (US$626) a year in environmental-service payments.

2. A remarkable example of structural environmental violence occurs when the environmental impacts of a development project are discussed among the stakeholders in citizen consultation hearings. The Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, the environmental authority in Mexico, allows all kinds of comments and concerns to be put forward by society but considers pertinent only those that deal with the technical details of a project. All of the other aspects, cultural, biocultural, or social, are disregarded (Vera, Lina-Manjarrez, and Conraud, 2009). Mechanisms like this leave out the genuine concerns of the community while also serving as a filter that manipulates the participation of civil society, limiting its power and eroding the community's right to self-determination (Leis, 2001).

3. For the purposes of this introduction, the greening of economies should be understood as the process by which profit is generated from selling products and services claimed to be either environmentally friendly or even a partial solution to environmental degradation. Many of these products and services, such as carbon bonds, were previously unavailable to the accumulation processes of capitalism.

4. The phenomenon is better explained in relation to Armstrong and Tennenhouse's (1989) "violence of representation," simply understood as the suppression of difference.

5. Surplus labor and the creation of an infinite number of potential customers are achieved by enforcing a fixed set of rules that create and control a pecuniary wage system, the redistribution of rent, and the financialization of the economy, while the endless supply of raw materials is ensured by the privatizing of all goods and services, whether natural or manufactured.

6. It is not my claim that the Mexican revolution was socialist. It is in fact quite unclear what its character originally was (see González-Navarro, 1961), as it was a mixture of indigenous communalism, classical liberalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism (Oñate, 2000). Postrevolutionary Mexico was, however, institutionally socialist because of many of the premises underlying the revolution, the most important being the redistribution of land and the formation of ejidos.

7. Yet capitalist economies, particularly the United States, Mexico's greatest trade partner, continue their subsidies to most of their industries and agribusinesses (see Muñoz-Martínez, 2014).

8. The so-called post-neoliberal shift has not gone uncontested or undercriticized (see Arditi, 2008; Yates and Bakker, 2013).

9. I cannot help but paraphrase Nixon (2007) and suggest that these just, equitable, and nonviolent solutions will have to abandon the ethics of debt in favor of an ethic of selflessness.

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