

## Destruction and the Complex Politics of Urgency: Responding to Contemporary Resource Extraction in the Shadow of COVID

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### Abstract

This paper reflects on what constitutes an adequate response to the pressures to accelerate extractive forms of development in a context in which elites and other sectors of society accept destruction and the erosion of civil liberties as a necessary, sometimes desirable, part of development. It seeks to inquire: is it enough to wait for behavioural and policy change to emerge from new narratives promoted by documents such as *Laudato Si'* or the campaigning of movements? What is an adequate theological, philanthropic, and intellectual response to the processes of rapid destruction that are justified, sometimes with popular support, as necessary forms of development? Ultimately, these are questions about solidarity and ecology. The paper approaches these questions through discussions in the Natural Resources and Climate Change (NRCC) programme at the Ford Foundation of which the author is part of. It explores how inequalities in access to and the control of natural resources constitute an injustice that also exacerbates greenhouse gas emissions in times of the COVID pandemic.

### Keywords

Natural resources;  
governance; climate;  
inequality; development  
policies, COVID  
pandemic

### 1. Introduction

Natural resource extraction always threatens destruction.<sup>1</sup> This destruction may be material: of landscapes, of mountain tops, of water courses. It may be social: of livelihoods, of territorial self-governance, of behavioural norms, of civil and human rights. And it may be ontological: of spirits, of sacred forms, of worlds otherwise. While the fear of destruction elicits protest and resistance, expectations of development made possible by this destruction also elicit mobilizations in favour of resource extraction: for the employment generated, for the tax and royalty streams catalysed, for the infrastructure built (Bebbington et al. 2008). While all development involves destruction, resource extraction is especially challenging because it makes so palpably clear the willingness of society to destroy life, nature, peoples, and worlds in the pursuit of “development” and the “modern.”

The proclivity to destroy life and worlds in order to extract resources has only intensified over the last two years, and efforts to reactivate economies after the first two years of COVID will be used as veils and vehicles to justify the further acceleration of extractive development. Indigenous, Black, Traditional,

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1. An early version of this paper was prepared for a keynote talk at the *Women, Solidarity, and Ecology* conference organised by the Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford, 2–4 June 2021. Versions of part of the paper were also presented at Utrecht University and the University of Delaware. I am very grateful to Séverine Deneulin for her careful reading of the paper and to my colleagues in the Natural Resources and Climate Change and Civic Engagement and Government international programs, on whose committed work and thinking a lot of this argument rests. I am grateful to Helena Hofbauer, Iva Dobichina, Kevin Currey, Martín Abregu, Otto Saki, and Justin Sylvester for encouragement, comments, and information and especially for work coordinated by Helena which informs the argument substantially. The text is also informed by conversations with colleagues and students at Clark University and, as always, the generous insights and ideas of Denise Humphreys Bebbington. The opinions here are written in my personal capacity and not as an employee or affiliate of the Ford Foundation or any other institution.

and Local Communities report increasing pressure on their territories, while remotely sensed data on new frontiers of deforestation reveal the same (FPP 2021). Meanwhile, the carbon released in these processes—by deforestation, by mining, by extraction of hydrocarbons for later burning—accelerates the destruction of present and future worlds and lives through drought, heat, sea-level rise, and an increased unpredictability of high magnitude weather events. And yet, COP26 commitments notwithstanding, these processes are endorsed by national governments and economic elites. Examples of such endorsements since the start of COVID are legion and include: the Omnibus bill in Indonesia (Beech and Suhartono 2020); the multiple policy reforms and indifferences to indigenous life in Brazil (Ferrante and Fearnside 2021; Villén-Pérez et al. 2021); policies in Honduras that, to paraphrase Miriam Miranda, the leader of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), “seek to empty our territories in order to hand them over to transnational capital and its projects of death” (Trucchi 2018; see also Bebbington, Fash, and Rogan 2019); and the continued determination of some United States senators to defend coal mining and hydrocarbon extraction in their states and to resist policies that would reduce emissions and mitigate climate change.

In this paper I want to reflect on what constitutes an adequate response to these pressures to accelerate extractive forms of development in a context in which elites and other sectors of society accept destruction and the erosion of civil liberties as a necessary, sometimes desirable, part of development. Such circumstances give rise to many difficult questions: is it enough to wait for behavioural and policy change to emerge from new narratives promoted by documents such as *Laudato Si'* or the campaigning of movements? What is an adequate theological, philanthropic, and intellectual response to the processes of rapid destruction that are justified, sometimes with popular support, as necessary forms of development? Ultimately, these are questions about solidarity and ecology.

I approach these questions not just because they are intellectually important, but because they run through discussions in the Natural Resources and Climate Change (NRCC) programme at the Ford Foundation of which I am a part. One of the Foundation's five international programmes, the NRCC focuses on the ways in which inequalities in access to and the control of natural resources constitute an injustice that also exacerbates greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>2</sup> The programme prioritises efforts to reduce inequalities in rights over natural resources, in the rights and power of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional, and Local Communities to determine patterns of resource development on their own lands, and in the rights and power to capture and control the financial resources that flow from resource development. The bulk of our work is done in forests and forest margins and in areas where mineral and hydrocarbon resources are present: in some instances, these geographies overlap (as in the case, for instance, of mineral deposits in forest regions). As the annual reports by Global Witness on the killings of environmental defenders show (and this is just one of many indicators), addressing these inequalities is an uphill battle that has been hugely complicated by COVID (Global Witness 2021; 2020). In some senses, COVID has accelerated the production and experience of inequalities, making a set of structural problems seem even more urgent. And of course, although these are urgent issues, there is a risk that focusing on the urgent may lead us to take our eyes off the structural.

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2. For more information, see: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/natural-resources-and-climate-change/strategy/> and <https://www.fordfoundation.org/media/5481/fordfoundation-nrcc-july2020.pdf>.

Given this context, I approach my theme beginning with a comment on issues being confronted by grantees and partners of the NRCC programme at Ford in the light of COVID.<sup>3</sup> I discuss these challenges in the light of connections between COVID, the shrinkage and destruction of civic space, and the implications that these tendencies hold for efforts to foster natural resource justice and confront the destructive faces of extractive development. I then ask what is at stake for resource justice in the aftermath of COVID, with a reflection on the risks deriving from economic reactivation policies and from the energy transition. Finally, I reflect on implications for thinking about destruction as part of life and how this may affect our reading of *Laudato Si'*. The paper is grounded in four conversations: one with the institutional moment in our programme at Ford, another with a largely Latin American literature on ontological politics and decolonialism, a third with feminist political ecology writing on the role, and persecution, of environmental defenders, and a fourth with *Laudato Si'* itself.<sup>4</sup> While I do not presume expertise in these conversations, I do think that they help us think about this moment, at the same time as this moment points to limits in those conversations.

## 2. COVID and the Growing Challenge of Civil Society Monitoring of Resource Extraction

As the pandemic began to take hold during the second quarter of 2020, the Ford Foundation in general, and the NRCC programme in particular, began to hear from partners about the impacts that COVID was having on them and their work. Some of the most heart-wrenching accounts were of activists and leaders who had died, often because of public health failures. This impact was particularly grave among indigenous communities in the Amazonian region. The Panamazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM 2020) calculated that by the end of October 2020 some 73,000 indigenous people across the Pan-Amazonian region had contracted COVID, and that 2,134 had died. Those who died included: Robinson López of Colombia, Coordinator for Climate Change and Biodiversity for the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA); Aritana Yawalapiti, a leader from Alto Xingu, Brazil, who the *New York Times* called “a living bulwark against the destruction of Indigenous culture in Brazil” who “worked to defend his peoples’ land in the Amazon against prospectors, loggers and ranchers” (Astor 2020); and Santiago Manuin, longtime leader of the Consejo Aguaruna Huambisa in Peru who played an important role in stopping the 2009 Bagua conflict between indigenous people and the government from getting wholly out of hand (Taj 2020; Bebbington 2009).

Peru was hit particularly hard by COVID. These deaths pointed to the utter failure of the Peruvian health care system during the pandemic and the acutely unequal access to health care and oxygen for rural, especially indigenous communities. This failure gave the lie to any argument that Peru’s mining and hydrocarbon-led resource boom had built strong institutions or had fostered social inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Peru’s health system proved itself to be weak and exclusionary even after 20 years of mining-led growth.

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3. Many of these are also concerns of our sibling programs at Ford, perhaps especially the Civic Engagement and Government programme.

4. For examples of some of these conversations, see the work of Mario Blaser (2010), Marisol de la Cadena (2015), Arturo Escobar (2018), Katy Jenkins (2015), Dianne Rocheleau (2008), Diana Ojeda (2012) among many others.

5. For further discussion on the relationships between resource extraction and institutional quality in Peru, see Bebbington et al. (2018a) and Dargent et al. (2017).

While such deaths were *individual tragedies*, their implications for natural resource governance were also adverse. Rule changes in how natural resources should be governed are won, and then defended, in large part by individuals, leaders and negotiators who have the innate and acquired skills to create spaces for change. Losing these people means losing these capacities (Bebbington et al. 2018b).

Alongside these individual losses, partners were also reporting a series of *organizational* impacts. These impacts were not brand new, but they did reflect how COVID had intensified challenges that existed prior to the pandemic. Just as some examples:

- Partners told us of problems of financial resilience and instability caused both by an overall reduction in funding and because organizations had to divert budgets from initial intended uses in order to help their staff and constituents cope with COVID.
- Partners also reported severe pressures on staff mental health and welfare. These included work stress and fears about safety, a reminder of the acute stress of many who work in civil society organisations.
- Many organizations were also struggling with connectivity. With restrictions on travel and meetings, virtual communications were key, but this raised real problems for smaller organizations located outside principal cities. The challenge was how to do advocacy, how to coordinate new modes of protest, how to sustain movements, and how to share information when connectivity was constrained.
- Closely linked to the connectivity challenges, concerns for digital security were also accentuated in this period as people worked from less secure environments and conducted much more of their communication online.

There can be little question that this combination of organizational stress and loss of leaders has made it easier for political and economic elites to exert their interests and their visions of society and of environmental governance.

These individual and organizational impacts have been aggravated by the ongoing *reduction of civic space*: that is to say, at the same time as organizations were being weakened, their operating environment was also becoming significantly more constrained. Indeed, this reduction of civic space is itself another global pandemic, whose spread by contagion would seem to have been accelerated by COVID. Just as one measure of this pattern, the civil society organisation CIVICUS reported that in 2020 only 42 countries (making up just 3.4% of the global population) had safeguarded civic space; everywhere else the trend was adverse.<sup>6</sup> CIVICUS's 2021 State of Civil Society Report concluded that 87% of the global population lives with severe restrictions on civic space (CIVICUS 2021a).

This reduction of civic space has played out in diverse ways. First, it has constrained the ability of civil society organisations to carry out advocacy around climate change mitigation and to engage with related

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6. See <https://monitor.civicus.org> where this data is continuously updated and revised.

policy processes. For instance, COVID public health restrictions have been used to prevent or criminalise protests, gatherings, and marches. Some political and economic leaders have said explicitly that they saw such restrictions, coupled with the media's focus on the pandemic, as an opportunity to press forward on regulatory reforms facilitating investment in large-scale infrastructure and extraction: examples include Alberta's Energy Minister (BBC News 2020) and Brazil's then Minister of Environment Ricardo Salles (Marshall and Grillo 2020). Public health restrictions have also been used to limit consultation processes. When the government of Indonesia passed its so-called Omnibus Bill in 2020, a law for promoting job creation that included the weakening of environmental and social safeguards governing natural resource investments, the absence of any serious consultation on the bill was partly justified on the grounds that COVID made this too dangerous (indeed, the bill was passed so quickly that even lawmakers were uncertain as to which version of it they had approved) (Beech and Suhartono 2020).<sup>7</sup> More generally, the inability of civil society to interact in person with government officials and elected representatives has weakened greatly their capacity to exercise persuasion and informal influence on legislative proposals (cf. Hamid and Hermawan 2020).

A more extreme variant of the same phenomenon is the expanding criminalisation of any forms of criticism of government policy (Nicaragua and Belarus would be among the most extreme examples) that has also taken advantage of the COVID moment. Galih Gumelar of the *Jakarta Post*, for instance, reported that Indonesia's national Chief of Police issued orders that criticism of the government's handling of COVID could be charged as a criminal offense to be punished with possible prison terms (Gumelar 2020). Drawing attention to similar restrictions on civic space in the United Kingdom, in July 2021 the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, David Boyd, expressed concern that "three pieces of legislation are shrinking civic space at a time when the global environment crisis demands that people's voices be heard" (Griffin 2021). The three pieces he was referring to were the [policing bill](#), which proposes changes to enforcement and sentencing, the [covert human intelligence sources bill](#), which protects undercover state agents from prosecution for crimes, and [plans to weaken judicial review](#) (the process to challenge ministerial decisions, [including on the environment](#)). The *Guardian* talked of these as "three pieces of legislation that will make human rights violations more likely to occur and less likely to be sanctioned even as averting climate catastrophe depends on these rights" (2021).

A second dimension of the reduction of civil space has been the deliberate effort to limit public debate and information. In the natural resources space, companies have used Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), including against our grantees. SLAPPs deliberately try to divert civil society organisations from their accountability work by forcing them to dedicate time and money to defend staff (Rall and Mnqondo 2021). Over the period 2015–2021, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2021) identified 355 cases brought or initiated by business actors that bear the hallmarks of SLAPPs. Sixty-five percent of these cases were related to mining (108 cases), agriculture and livestock (76 cases), logging and lumber (29 cases), and palm oil (20 cases).

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7. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law reported that between August 14 and November 5, 2020 at least 7,045 people were arrested during protests against the law (<http://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/Indonesia>).

The effect of SLAPPs can be more broadly pernicious. Presumably fearing litigation, some virtual platforms have removed or blocked distribution of “controversial” news. One platform has, for instance, blocked or deleted hundreds of posts from one of our grantees whose reporting focuses on the environmental, climate, and social impacts of resource extraction. In some contexts, of course, the pressure on journalism is much more severe. The National Federation of Journalists in Brazil reported 428 cases of violence (including two murders) against journalists in 2020, the most violent year across a 30-year record. Meanwhile, a report by the Brazilian Association for Investigative Journalism (Abraji) found that Brazilian politicians filed 399 lawsuits to remove content published by media outlets.<sup>8</sup>

Third, organizations have been closed outright or subjected to restrictions in what they are allowed to do. As a particularly extreme example, during August 2021 Nicaragua withdrew permits from 45 NGOs and told six International NGOs that they had to leave the country. This response reflected a steady buildup from earlier government repression of student protests that themselves had some of their roots in protests against government failure to control forest fires and land invasions in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve (Rocha 2019). The Nicaraguan model of civic repression has travelled to other countries. One clear example is El Salvador where the Bukhele government has clamped down dramatically on NGOs. A proposed Foreign Agent’s law there would require all civil society organizations receiving international funding to register as “foreign agents” with the government and would levy a tax of 40% on some resources received by NGOs from outside the country. Organizations not complying could be closed (CIVICUS 2021b). Another example would be India’s decision in late 2021 not to renew Foreign Contributions Regulation Act licenses for a number of civil society organizations operating in the country.

Meanwhile, the killings of environmental defenders continue and have been made easier by the COVID-related absence of government officials or policing from the public space. Frontline Defenders recorded 331 killings of social justice activists in 2020, over 220 of whom were activists on natural resource extraction. The Global Witness figures published in September 2021 show no let-up in the killings of environmental defenders: these reports document an average of around four killings a week for some years now (Global Witness 2021; 2020). At a national level, estimates of killings tend to be higher, with the Colombian NGO Indepaz reporting 681 indigenous rights and land defenders killed between 2016 and 2020 (Indepaz 2020). In July 2020, four members of OFRANEH, together with one other Garifuna person, were taken from their homes and remain missing (Crisanto 2020). This is in a context of ongoing conflicts over land-grabbing and investments in resource extraction on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. And finally, as one more example, in late 2020, local South African activist “Mama Fikile Ntshangase was gunned down in her home in Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal, after raising concerns about a coal mine in the area” (Rall and Mnqondo 2021).

Of course, some of these trends clearly precede COVID, and I do not want to suggest in any way that COVID created them. However, in many cases they appear to have interacted with COVID to further constrain civil society organizations’ ability to monitor and hold accountable natural resources governance and the forces of extractive development that are driving climate change. There is a concern that these destructive forces might continue downstream of COVID and become partly justified in its light.

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8. This material on Brazil derives from presentations by colleagues at Mongabay, an NRCC grantee.

### 3. Resource Extraction Risks Downstream of COVID

#### *a. Reactivation, "Urgency," and the Continuing Threats of Destruction*

There is a sense in which destruction has permeated the modern project. This has taken multiple faces: the destruction of aboriginal societies in the face of white demographic expansion and expanded capital investment; the multiple destructions visited by the Atlantic slave trade; the destruction of land cover and biota due to human land use; the (initially unwitting) destruction of atmospheric flows and equilibria by carbon-based industrial energy, coupled with the much more witting destruction of urban atmospheric qualities in the cities of industry.<sup>9</sup>

There is a close relationship between extractive forms of development and this destruction. While there are different and disputed definitions of extractivism, one of its core features is the human taking of "rents" from the biosphere and geosphere. These are neither "gifts of nature" (because nature does not give them freely), nor an inexhaustible "bounty" of a self-regenerating natural supply.<sup>10</sup> They are "rents"—surpluses that are not produced by human action nor human ingenuity (other than perhaps the sometimes politically astute acts of enclosure that precede acts of taking). Taking hydrocarbons from the underground is to extract such a rent. Using the atmosphere as an unpaid-for sink for the pollutants produced by burning these hydrocarbons is to extract another rent. Using the hydrosphere as an unpaid-for sink for pollutants from mining is another. Logging, mining, the control of land, and the extraction of unpaid-for value from human bodies—all these are rents.

The very act of extracting these rents destroys both life and inert matter. The act of extracting frequently leads to collateral destruction as well: the destruction of systems of governance, social relationships, landscapes of meaning, and other worlds. Addressing the possible installation of a mine at the mountain Ausangate in Peru, Marisol de la Cadena (2015) discusses how the open pit would have destroyed not just the mountain landscape but also other worlds, the worlds of "earth beings," perceptible to her *Quechua* informants and at the very least imaginable to de la Cadena herself. Mario Blaser (2010), Arturo Escobar (2018), and other anthropologists exploring ontological politics have each developed a similar argument: that modernity in general, and extraction in particular, have been complicit in the destruction of worlds and the crunching of a pluriverse of worlds into a universe of one world.

There is a very real risk that one policy response to the destruction of lives and of value that has been wrought by COVID will be to facilitate and encourage yet further destruction. The politics of urgency—the urgency of restoring growth, the urgent need to rebuild a base for public finance, the urgent need for employment, etc.—might all too easily encourage and provide political cover for making those policy decisions quickly. I have already mentioned the Omnibus Bill in Indonesia, which scaled back environmental and social safeguards on investment (Jong 2020). The law also offers a three-year amnesty to oil palm companies, who have illegally occupied and cleared forest, to allow them time to get the land

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9. These increasingly profound changes to the Earth's "faces," "flows," and social relations were at least partially captured by the series of books: *The Earth as Modified by Human Action* (Marsh 1874), *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Thomas et al. 1956), and *The Earth as Transformed by Human Action* (Turner et al. 1990).

10. Across many societies, perhaps especially Latin America, there is a constant reference to natural resource wealth and its role in contributing to financial wealth for citizens.

redesignated to a non-forest class—in essence, the law has granted impunity to environmental criminals (Jong 2021). In another reactivation initiative, the government is planning a 900,000 hectare rice, cassava, and grains development program in Central Kalimantan province as part of a policy commitment to develop the national “food estate” to guard against the impact of the COVID pandemic on food security. This program will use peatlands (which are critically important stores of carbon) and will be led entirely by large companies.

But perhaps the most dramatic example of this growing pressure on natural resources and community lands continues to be Brazil, where the government of Jair Bolsonaro has encouraged forest clearance and the invasion of indigenous lands, with the result that the area deforested between August 2020 and July 2021 was the highest in a decade, 10.476km<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, violence against communities has increased, with the widely reported killings, burnings, and intimidation by miners of Yanomami and Mundurucu communities in May and June 2021 being a few examples among many. As these processes unfurl, the Brazilian government is currently seeking to remove protections of indigenous lands so that resource extraction can occur. This is being pursued both through the courts and through Congress. A proposed bill will allow mineral exploration on indigenous lands as well as use of their water (presumably to produce energy). Again, this bill would facilitate processes that are already underway: over the last 10 years there has already been a 495% increase in mining in indigenous land (Mapbiomas 2021).

It is also worth noting that some post-Covid reactivation policy actually seeks to deepen hydrocarbon investment. The 2020 Production Gap report (SEI et al. 2020; see also SEI et al. 2021) notes that governments committed more COVID recovery funds to fossil fuels than to clean energy, with \$233 billion for activities supporting fossil fuels (mostly by encouraging consumption) and \$146 billion for renewable energy and low carbon alternatives. The report found that jurisdictions that subsidised fossil fuels before 2020 continue to do so during reactivation. As Michael Northrop, Program Director for Sustainable Development at Rockefeller Brothers Fund, has noted, this reproduces a broader pattern in which private finance and equity continue to flow towards fossil fuels. He notes that the report “Banking on Climate Chaos” (Rainforest Action Network et al. 2021) concluded that the 60 largest commercial banks in the world have financed \$3.8 trillion of fossil fuel development since the 2015 Paris Accords (by the end of 2021 this figure had reached \$4.58 trillion; see, Rainforest Action Network et al. 2022), while a parallel report noted that private equity has financed a further \$1.1 trillion of fossil fuel development since 2010. These patterns raise questions about private and public sector commitments to the decarbonization of energy made at COP26. Regardless of statements by the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, Northrop comments, “it’s striking that unlike any of [the] other sectors implicated in speeding global warming, there is not a single one of the 60 major commercial banks that has staked out a leadership position on decarbonising” (Northrop 2021).

This sustained pressure due to extractive interests and COVID-related regulatory reforms on local communities’ lands is, thus, a broad-based phenomenon. It is worth quoting from a review coordinated by the Forest Peoples Programme (2021) that assessed what was happening to social and environmental safeguards under COVID in Brazil, Colombia, DRC, Indonesia, and Peru. The study concludes:



1. **States are prioritising the expansion of the energy sector, infrastructure, mining and logging and the development of industrial agriculture in or near indigenous territories**, while failing to protect the land and self-determination rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to free, prior and informed consent to projects affecting their lands and lives.
2. **States are not enforcing domestic or international law prohibiting land grabbing and are facilitating illegal deforestation, agribusiness expansion and mining in or near indigenous peoples' territories.** Despite an overall economic slowdown, deforestation is surging and is likely to get worse in 2021 as governments continue to promote the expansion of industrial-scale extractive industry activities.
3. **States have developed and are enacting land-use and planning policies and potentially harmful regulations that violate indigenous peoples' rights**, and have unilaterally weakened regulations for prior consultation, compounding the harm caused by existing policies and regulation.
4. **Indigenous peoples who try to assert their rights are facing increased violence, arrests and criminal prosecution** in a climate of inflammatory lies and disinformation (Forest Peoples Programme 2021, 6)

### *b. Climate Urgency and the Extractive Risks of Energy Transition*

There is a second, less intuitive face to this possible deepening of destruction: the acceleration of the energy transition. The challenge generated by climate change is urgent, an energy transition is needed, and investment in the transition is therefore pitched as a way of creating jobs, which of course it is. While all this is reasonable, and there is no choice but for there to be an energy transition, there are significant risks that this transition might destroy as much as it renews. This risk of destruction is manifest at different scales and across diverse geographies. My colleague at Clark University, John Rogan, has begun to document the steady loss of forest cover in Massachusetts due to the installation of solar panels to produce energy for the grid. In Mexico, wind farms have already been installed on community lands, extracting the rent of land and free wind and with the collateral destruction of vistas and prior forms of land governance (Avila 2017; Pasqualetti 2010). At a global scale, colleagues at the University of Queensland estimate that the energy transition will mean that the first half of the twenty-first century will see nine times more copper mine tailings being produced than during the twentieth century (Kemp et al. 2021; see also Sonter et al. 2020; Sovacool et al. 2020). The expanded extraction of lithium in the southern Andes of Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia, required for lithium batteries, will lead to the irreversible destruction of the salt flats in whose brine the lithium resides. Some 70% of global cobalt is currently sourced from the forests of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and its expanded extraction will inevitably lead to forest loss and human degradation (Searcey, Forsythe, and Lipton 2021).

Of course, it might be argued that this destruction will allow for recovery elsewhere, as the scarred landscapes of open cast coal mining in Kalimantan and Sumatra, or the polluted waters surrounding oil wells in the Amazon, are allowed to recuperate. But this argument makes a double assumption. First, it assumes that the human assistance that recuperation needs for processes of landscape and environmental restoration will be forthcoming; and second, it presumes that recuperation is even possible—the

savannisation argument that haunts discussions of Amazonian deforestation suggests that such recovery may not be possible. And of course, the multiple ontologies of other earth beings or indigenous people who had lived in isolation in forests that are cleared are also gone forever, never to recover. Too often, when it's gone, it's gone.

It might also be argued that destruction, like social conflict, is simply the other face of the coinage of development, and that this destruction will, as recovery plans hope, produce jobs and revenues for social investment. There is, though, a caveat here also. This was the argument that was made in Peru to legitimise the extractive boom that has run, with ups and downs, since 1993 to the present. Yet, as we have noted, Peru's public health institutions collapsed under COVID, making starkly apparent the acute racial, ethnic, class, and regional inequalities in access to health care and thus also in the likelihood of dying from COVID. These experiences made clear that there is no obvious route from extraction to social and economic inclusion, and that the nature of Peru's political settlement had made this so. Peru's performance under COVID should be a cautionary note to arguments for a post-COVID recovery grounded in the promotion of natural resource extraction: it did not work in the past, and it likely will not work in the future.

I make these comments not to endorse the arguments of critics like the late Gustavo Esteva for whom "development stinks" (as quoted in Pieterse 2000), nor to reject all forms of extractive industry and landscape modification. Rather, I make them to suggest that the extraction of resources and rents is part of the beating heart of modernity, and destruction is genetically coded into that extraction. Capitalism may have benefited from Schumpeter's creative destruction, but it has also been enormously subsidised by destruction from natural resource extraction, human subjugation, and the associated conversion of the commons into privately appropriated wealth. The risk is that the urgency of the post-COVID moment elicits a deepening of this extraction and thus amplifies these diverse forms of destruction. If destruction has come to be part of our very condition of modern being, what does this do to our spirit?

#### [4. Navigating Destruction, Living with Trade-offs](#)

In many regards, the 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* places communities at the centre of its argument: urban communities suffering poverty, inadequate shelter, and criminality, and rural (indigenous) communities subjected to the sorts of natural resource-based investment that post-COVID reactivation plans will almost certainly promote. As the encyclical states:

145. Many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community. The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal. The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems.

146. In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural

traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture (Francis 2015, § 145–46).

The idea that when communities “remain on their land, they themselves care for it best” is also a central tenet of the NRCC program and one that has been demonstrated by scientific research (FAO 2021). When communities have rights, forests are more likely to stand. However, it is also the case that communities negotiate the threat of destruction of their lands and ecologies in diverse ways. Sometimes the conflict surrounding extractive industry investments is indeed driven by whole-hearted resistance and a desire to protect territory and ecology (resistance often led by women or in which women play critical roles, as, for instance, in the Standing Rock case). At other times, however, conflict and mobilization are driven by other aspirations. These other motivations can include efforts to capture compensation from extractive industry companies or to arrive at agreements that give communities a greater share in the financial benefits that flow from extraction (e.g. Arellano-Yanguas 2011; O’Faircheallaigh 2015; Amengual 2018). Conflict can also seek a redesign of projects (Franks et al. 2014) so that they are less destructive while still generating benefits for local populations (whether they ultimately generate these benefits is, as just noted, a different question). There are plenty of examples of community-based consultative processes that, however imperfect, suggest that community members have been interested in renegotiating project design and benefit distribution rather than blocking investment wholesale (Humphreys Bebbington 2012; Langton 2013; O’Faircheallaigh 2015; Humphreys Bebbington and Cortez 2021; Schilling Vacaflor 2017).

The implication of these apparently diverse motivations is that communities are sometimes predisposed to negotiate destruction and to trade in care of the land for other forms of benefit. It may be argued that this predisposition is a consequence of their poverty and that under different distributional conditions their motivations might be different. However, these are the distributional structures from which they have to negotiate and from which they will have to negotiate as new waves of extractive investment arrive, driven by post-COVID reactivation policies and the mineral and land-based demands of the energy transition. Governments will similarly be negotiating these forces from positions of fiscal poverty.

So, just as destruction, and an acceptance of destruction, is coded into modernity, an acceptance of extractive destruction seems also to be part of how communities negotiate and live with this modernity. This challenges philanthropy (such as our NRCC programme), and perhaps also theology, to have a view on what destruction is acceptable, under what conditions, where, and when. In the current scenario of climate crisis, there is the particular challenge of having a view on what destruction is acceptable under conditions of urgency. At their core these are appallingly difficult questions because they are, in many instances, questions about protecting some ontologies by being complicit in the destruction of other ontologies. Responding to this dilemma in turn requires the respondent to devise grounds on which to

take a view on such ontological substitutions. We in NRCC need to have a theoretical, ontological, and ethical view on this, even as other parts of our work in solidarity resist destruction and privilege care of life and land. Saying that one will simply support communities in what they decide is no resolution to this dilemma, at least not for philanthropy, because philanthropic organisations always work with some communities and not others. That is to say, philanthropy is already choosing, though possibly on grounds that are not well thought through.

“Care for our common home,” then, also involves destroying some of it. This is not the same as saying that humans have the God-bestowed right to dominate nature in any way they wish, not only because this position has helped drive the current ecological crisis (White 1967; see also Nelson and Sauer 2016), but also because the power to dominate is always unequally distributed. Nonetheless, we need to determine our guard rails for approaching degrees of destruction: we need those guard rails as much as we may need to hear exhortations regarding the imperative of care.

## 5. Concluding Comments

Following a public lecture I gave at the University of Bath in July 2019 on “Resource Extraction, Climate Change and the Right to Live Well: Long and Short Routes to Policy Change,”<sup>11</sup> in which I reflected on the conditions that might need to be in place for extractivism to be regulated in ways that align with climate change and with the right to live well, Séverine Deneulin commented that one “kind of meta-driver, of policy change” might be “the emergence of coherent alternative narratives about ‘development’ through communication in the public sphere, and the building of coalition and mass mobilisation.” She went on to suggest that “*Laudato Si’* and the Synod on the Amazon [might] be the first steps in that direction.”<sup>12</sup>

While Deneulin’s reflection might have been optimistic, the point is an important one. Social movements theory, especially out of Latin America, draws attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between movement and narratives. Movements play an important role in shifting narratives by reframing questions and placing new ideas in the public sphere, often forcefully; at the same time, narratives can help articulate movements by serving as a source of mobilising ideas around which actors coalesce. Meanwhile, theories of institutional change and political settlements also argue that ideas and narratives are central to explaining how institutions change under given relations of power. These theories apportion causal power both to ideas and to the actors who are able to elaborate and project them. Ideas can have the effect of changing social definitions of what and who is legitimate, can help recruit new actors to particular causes (with implications for overall power relationships), and can change notions of what is desirable and possible, itself a source of motivating and mobilizing power. The remarkable Greta Thunberg and the youth climate movements that her individual protests ultimately inspired are embodiments of these very points.

While it is of course a theological statement, *Laudato Si’* is also a sociological document. It lays out a series

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11. The video of the public lecture, given on 25 July 2019, can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/350917127>.

12. Unpublished communication for a seminar on the Amazon Synod, 11 October 2019, Campion Hall. See Deneulin (2021) for a longer statement.

of ideas and claims that might sustain a coherent narrative hinging around the value of all life, including non-human life and the life of future generations. It makes a case for the centrality of care as an ethical response to this value of all life and to the idea of the Earth as an inherited home rather than as an input for capitalist enterprise (Emel, Bridge, and Krueger 2003). At the same time, *Laudato Si'* elides certain difficult questions. It evades any real guidance on trade-offs and the criteria on which these should be made; when it mentions the industries of resource extraction it is generally critical of them without exploring the conditions under which mining, for instance, should still proceed. This is a particular problem when thinking of the clean energy transition which will rely upon the products of metal mining on a large scale. It is also a challenge in resolving the relationships that *Laudato Si'* might accept between destruction, the financing of social policy, and dignified employment. I think that these are real questions to confront, not ones to be written off as being posed by those who “with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment” (Francis 2015, § 217).

*Laudato Si'* also invokes, at least implicitly, the power of reason and persuasion, avoiding discussion of the potency of raw power—this represents something of a rationalist position in the spirit of a Habermasian invocation of undistorted communication. This restricted attention to power is also a limitation when confronting extractive industries where politics can often be characterised by the exercise of such raw power. The way in which raw power truncates any act of reasoning is manifested most blatantly by the killings of environmental defenders and by the use of gender-based violence to intimidate communities in resistance. This power drives the lacklustre attention to, and sometimes systematic infringing of, regulations for environmental protection; this power is manifest in the sustained lobbying by resource extraction interests to weaken environmental and social regulations in the name of removing barriers to investment. Some of what has gone on during COVID makes evident that denunciation on moral grounds has not done much to change such behaviour and exercise of power.

In such contexts, and as the “post”-COVID period places more pressures on the natural resources that serve as the basis for many communities’ territories, livelihoods, lives, and senses of meaning, many practical discussions remain pending. These discussions hinge around questions such as:

- How might community organizations and their allies be able to reduce such violence through strategies of territorial control, community based self-policing of territory, and interconnected networks of protection?
- What sorts of investment need to be made in improved digital access and digital security in order to call out such violence in real time?
- How can litigation be used to defend rights, protect environmental regulations, and sue those who infringe these norms?
- How can constituencies be widened in ways that moderate some of the raw power of extractive industry lobbies that gives them preferential access to decision making?

While it is not the job of *Laudato Si'* to answer such questions, it may be the case—to follow Deneulin’s

suggestion—that the encyclical can contribute to the crafting of a narrative that helps articulate actors into movements and at the same time (partly on the back of the force of such movements) contributes to change in how extractive industries are governed by ideas and how they self-govern. Such changes might create more space for some of these other changes to take root and, I suppose, might be part of a broader form of the “ecological conversion” invoked in *Laudato Si’* (Francis 2015, § 217). Indeed, the encyclical itself says:

Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds. This task “will make such tremendous demands of man that he could never achieve it by individual initiative or even by the united effort of men bred in an individualistic way. The work of dominating the world calls for a union of skills and a unity of achievement that can only grow from quite a different attitude”. The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion (Francis 2015, § 219)

There are, though, several “however’s” here. The first is that this narrative, if it is to be honest, must grapple with destruction as much as it does with care. It would have to accept the legitimacy, perhaps even the moral rightness, of some degree of destruction, as much as it seeks to articulate actors around the idea of care. The second “however” takes us back to questions posed at the outset: is waiting for policy change to emerge from social mobilisation sufficient, especially in conditions of shrinking civic space? Is it enough to wait for behavioural change to emerge from new narratives promoted by documents such as *Laudato Si’* or the campaigning of movements? Here we return to the complex politics of urgency. Short of a society-wide version of Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus, this conjoined ecological and community conversion will take time—and time is what the biosphere does not have. It may literally be that there is no more than a decade left to turn this juggernaut around. A societal ecological conversion will have to be manufactured quickly, in the face of asymmetries of power, rapidly closing civic space, and the gathering forces supporting a further round of post-COVID destruction. An architecture of rapid persuasion has to be built, and it is probably the case that if diverse solidarities go their separate ways this will not happen.

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