The narrative predictability of political ecology: Ethnographic refusals from the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Abstract

Drawing upon critical social theory and fine-grained empirical observations, political ecologists have long argued against hegemonic stories of the environment, development and capitalism. This commitment is held across the wide range of approaches in political ecology. In a world haunted by increasing social inequalities and ecological degradations, there are strong reasons to pursue this critical agenda. In this article however, I coin the concept of "narrative predictability" to offer a critical analysis of a narrative tendency in political ecology towards a plot featuring the State and/or the Corporation as villains, the environment and indigenous peoples as victims, and activists as heroes. My engagement is not a reactionary attack, but rather an application of political ecology's main tool – empirical scrutiny – on itself. Empirically, the article draws upon recent fieldwork among indigenous Shuar people engaged in gold mining in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Theoretically, the article problematizes romanticism and essentialism within resistance studies. A key observation is that there seems to be a neglect of empirical complexity challenging the recurrent plot. What are the implications of avoiding discomforting observations when producing narratives aimed at progressive change? This article argues that political ecology needs to counter its own narrative predictability by strengthening its attentiveness to the heterogeneity and ambiguities of marginalized people in a world of capitalist ruins.

Keywords: political ecology, narrative, mining, resistance, Ecuador, Amazon, indigenous Shuar

Résumé

S'appuyant sur une théorie sociale critique et des observations empiriques précises, les écologistes politiques [political ecologists] s'opposent depuis longtemps aux discours hégémoniques sur l'environnement, le développement et le capitalisme. Cet engagement s'étend à travers un large éventail d'approches en écologie politique. Dans un monde hanté par des inégalités sociales croissantes et des dégradations écologiques, il existe de bonnes raisons de poursuivre ce programme crucial. Dans cet article, j'invente le concept de « prévisibilité narrative » pour proposer une analyse critique d'une tendance narrative de l'écologie politique vers un complot présentant l'État et/ou l'entreprise comme des méchants, l'environnement et les peuples autochtones comme des victimes et des activistes comme des héros. Mon engagement n'est pas une attaque réactionnaire, mais plutôt une application du principal outil de l'écologie politique – l'examen empirique – sur elle-même. Empiriquement, l'article s'appuie sur des travaux de terrain récents auprès du peuple autochtone Shuar engagé dans l'extraction de l'or en Amazonie équatorienne. Théoriquement, l'article problématise le romantisme et l'essentialisme dans les études de résistance. Une observation clé est qu'il semble y avoir une négligence de la complexité empirique qui remet en question l'intrigue récurrente. Quelles sont les implications du fait d'éviter les observations inconfortables lors de la production de récits visant un changement progressif? Cet article soutient que l'écologie politique doit contrer sa propre prévisibilité narrative en renforçant son attention à l'hétérogénéité et aux ambiguïtés des personnes marginalisées dans un monde de ruines capitalistes.

Mots-clés: écologie politique, récit, exploitation minière, résistance, Équateur, Amazonie, Shuar

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Resumen

Basándose en la teoría social crítica y en observaciones empíricas detalladas, los ecologistas políticos han argumentado durante mucho tiempo contra las historias hegemónicas sobre el medio ambiente, el desarrollo y el capitalismo. Este compromiso se mantiene en toda la amplia gama de enfoques de la ecología política. En un mundo atormentado por crecientes desigualdades sociales y degradaciones ecológicas, existen fuertes razones para perseguir esta agenda crítica. Sin embargo, en este artículo acuño el concepto de "previsibilidad narrativa" para ofrecer un análisis crítico de una tendencia narrativa en la ecología política hacia una trama que presenta al Estado y/o a la Corporación como villanos, al medio ambiente y a los pueblos indígenas como víctimas, y a los activistas. como héroes. Mi compromiso no es un ataque reaccionario, sino más bien una aplicación de la principal herramienta de la ecología política –el escrutinio empírico– sobre sí misma. Empíricamente, el artículo se basa en trabajos de campo recientes entre los indígenas Shuar dedicados a la minería de oro en la Amazonía ecuatoriana. Teóricamente, el artículo problematiza el romanticismo y el esencialismo dentro de los estudios de resistencia. Una observación clave es que parece haber un descuido de la complejidad empírica que cuestiona la trama recurrente. ¿Cuáles son las implicaciones de evitar observaciones incómodas al producir narrativas destinadas a un cambio progresivo? Este artículo sostiene que la ecología política necesita contrarrestar su propia previsibilidad narrativa fortaleciendo su atención a la heterogeneidad y ambigüedades de las personas marginadas en un mundo de ruinas capitalistas.

Palabras clave: ecología política, narrativa, minería, resistencia, Ecuador, Amazonía, indígenas Shuar

1. Introduction

On the 22nd of February 2022, a pro-mining march was organized in the city of Zamora, capital of Zamora Chinchipe province, in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon. The march was a response to a government intervention the previous week in an alluvial gold rush in the Yutzupino river, Napo province, about 500 km north of Zamora. The gold rush had attracted numerous miners from across the Amazonian region, including Shuar individuals from Alto Nangaritza (AN)[2], who got their excavators confiscated by the national authorities. The pro-mining march gathered artisanal and small-scale miners from various gold mining districts in Zamora Chinchipe, proclaiming under banners such as "We are all miners" (*Todos somos mineros*) and "We are miners, not criminals" (*Somos mineros, no delincuentes*). The crowd of approximately 600 people received abundant public support from the inhabitants of Zamora whose livelihoods, to a large extent, depend on the informal mining economy. Shuar from AN found themselves side-by-side with *mestizo* miners from Yanzatza, Nambija, Chinapintza and Pangui demanding the release of confiscated excavators and an end to government criminalization of artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM). The march culminated in the central park in front of the Governor's office where protest leaders were invited in for a meeting. The Governor, arguably in an uncomfortable position as the representative authority of an Ecuadorian government pushing for large-scale mining (LSM) expansion while at the same time rhetorically condemning the illegality and hazardous practices of ASGM, could do little but listen, nod in consent, and promise to transmit the demands to the Presidency. In contrast to the central government's mobilization, the Governor could hardly neglect the value and demands of its old ASGM sector. Although the province hosts the recent, controversial construction of the two largest mines in the country – Mirador, a Chinese owned open-pit copper mine[3] and, Fruta del Norte, a Swedish-Canadian owned, subterranean gold mine[4] – its economic and demographic development is much more a result of the booms and busts of

[2] The Shuar is the largest ethnic group in the Ecuadorian Amazon, with approximately 120,000 individuals mostly inhabiting the southernmost provinces of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe. Shuar is one of five Chicham speaking groups (Achuar, Huambisa, Awajun and Shiwiar) historically inhabiting the borderlands between southern Ecuador and Peru. Alto Nangaritza (upper Nangaritza valley) is located east in the Zamora Chinchipe province and is home to ten Shuar centers, including Centro Shuar Shaim, which is the oldest (since 1976), largest (approx. 7,000 hectares) and most populated (approx. 800 individuals). These ten centers are divided organizationally and territorially between two Shuar associations – Tayunts (comprising seven centers) and Mura Nunka (three centers) – both of which are affiliated to FEPNASH-ZCH, the largest out of two Shuar federations in Zamora Chinchipe. FEPNASH-ZCH is affiliated to CONFENIAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) that forms part of CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador).

[3] See (accessed 21.02.2024): ECUACORRIENTE S.A. (ecsa.com.ec)

[4] See (accessed 21.02.2024): Home | Lundin Gold Inc

its ASGM sector and the successive expansion of livestock production across a century of settler colonialism.

In this article, I will explain the causes and dynamics behind the proliferation of ASGM in southern Ecuador in order to interrogate the narrative hegemony of mining resistance in Latin American political ecology and beyond. Empirically, I rely on several rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in mining communities in southern Ecuador since 2015, particularly recent fieldwork in and around Centro Shuar Shaim located in AN on the border with Peru (2021-2022). In late 2017, the local Shuar association named Tayunts opened for alluvial gold mining, which has resulted in approximately 600 hectares of "washed lands" in and along the riverbeds on certain locations (Villa *et al*., 2022). My ethnography captures the rationales and implications of this recent gold rush, its regional background and ramifications as well as its connection to the history of colonization.

Drawing on this empirical material, I coin the term "narrative predictability" to question dominant framings and counter-narrative production within political ecology (PE) and environmental justice (EJ) studies. As a critique of critique, this intervention is inspired by Sherry Ortner's (1995) ethnographic critique of resistance studies and ironically perhaps by Paul Robbins' suggestion that PE is "a trickster science" (2015). The intention is not to side with capitalist forces, nor to debunk important contributions from PE and EJ.[5] Rather, the aim is to provide empirical nuance to the storytelling about extractivism in the Amazon and explore the implications of highlighting empirical complexity and discomforting observations; that is, observations that do not fit the recurrent narrative plot of Corporations/State as villains, indigenous people/the environment as victims and activists (in some kind of alliance with the victims) as heroes.

Focusing on the recent change of Shuar mining opposition to mining engagement, I rely on an observation from historical research with Shuar interlocutors, where a recurrent pattern of Shuar response is a principle saying: "to prevail one must make use of the means of the opponent" (Juncosa Blasco, 2020, p. 25, my translation). Whereas "prevailing" can be associated with both threats to Shuar language/ontology/epistemology and customs/practices/territory, the argument here relates mostly to economic survival while at the same time refusing the idea of a coherent and static past.[6] Responding to my questions about transformations, Ringo, one of my Shuar interlocutors from Shaim said: "currently, almost everything is about making money, but it can't change 100%, we are still Shuar."[7] Yet, Shuar (like PE), is not a materiality itself, but a set of embodied practices that are reproduced and adjusted in contact with other humans and non-humans on both discursive/semiotic and material levels (Kohn, 2013, p. 99). Like the rivers in AN, Shuar reinvent themselves in unpredictable ways within the dialectics of continuity and change. If I had carried out fieldwork ten years ago in this context it would likely have featured mining resistance, not Shuar mining.

At this stage in my argument political ecologists may object: what about power; what about the "powers of exclusion" (Hall *et al*., 2011)? And yes, this is a legitimate objection; power dynamics within the dialectics of structure and agency is pivotal to understand change. These questions are addressed by most political ecologists, including variants in science and technology studies (STS) and actor-network-theory (ANT) that apply concepts such as "becoming", "emergence", "unfoldment" or "enactments" (Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2015: De la Cadena, 2015; Latour, 2007; Law, 2004).

[5] PE and EJ are both diverse fields of knowledge and practice that are not necessarily aligned with each other, nor with decolonial perspectives. For a critical perspective on EJ see: Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2018. For a political ecology reading of EJ see: Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020.

[6] Two good starting points on Aents Chicham history are: Renard-Casevitz *et al*., 1988 and Taylor & Descola, 1981. For a recent PhD thesis on Shuar history see Vacas-Oleas (2022).

[7] All personal names besides public figures are pseudonyms. Due to space limitations, I avoid rephrasing Spanish originals. All translations are mine.

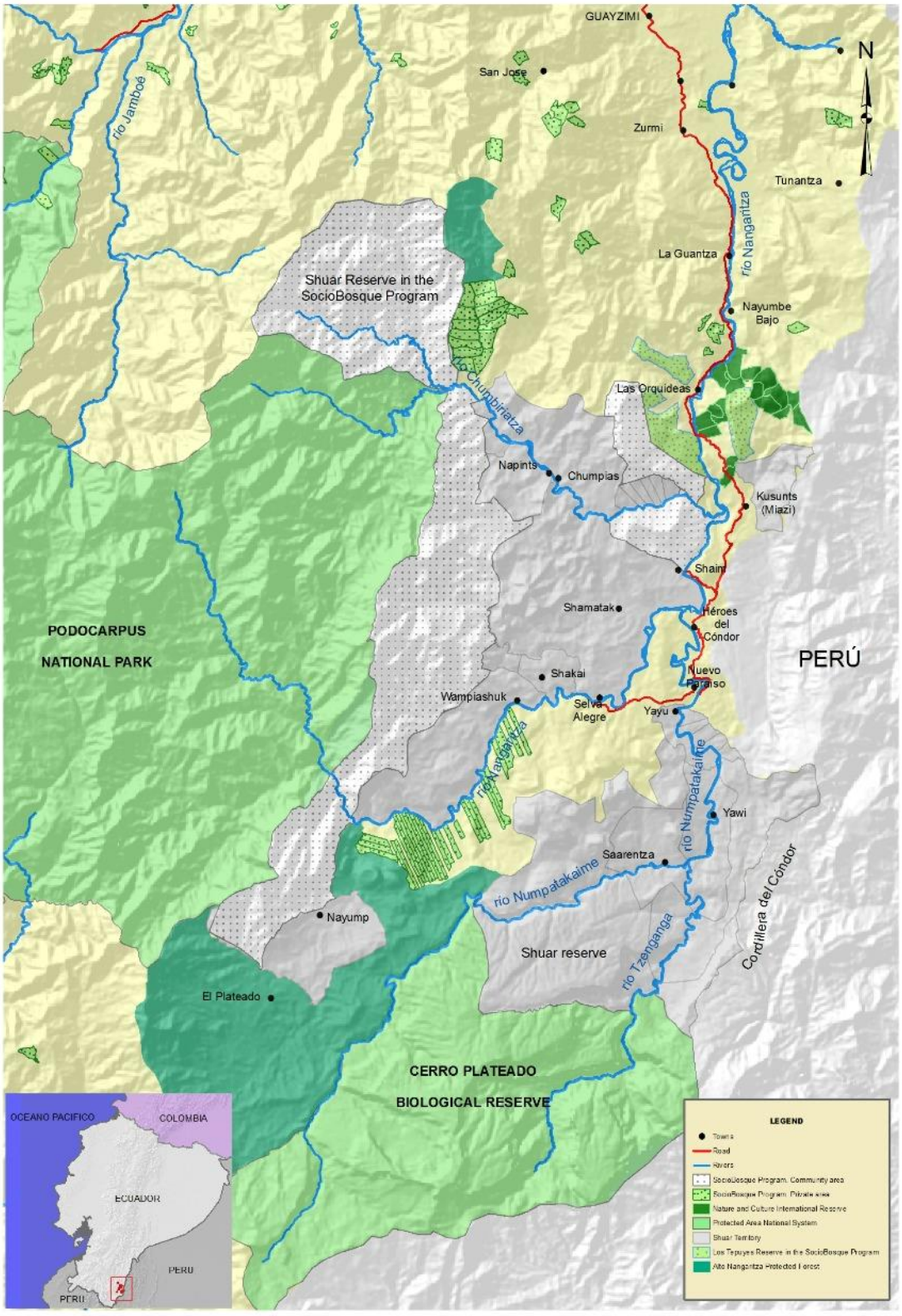

Figure 1: Land tenure complexity of Alto Nangaritza. Light green areas are national conservation parks. Grey areas are Shuar territories. Grey dotted areas are Shuar conservation areas. Yellow areas are private lands. Rivers are blue and settlements are marked with names. Source: Elaborated by Nature and Culture International.

Thus, the argument in this article can be recast to address PE's divergent positions within the philosophy of science, or perhaps more precisely the internal tensions between Marxist materialism (critical realism) and STS/ANT, as partially covered in the recent contributions by Knudsen (2023) and Forsyth (2023) in this journal.[8] Beyond the methodological and epistemological discrepancies of political economy and political ontology (De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2010), such a discussion would also have to grapple with attempts to decolonize positions and academic writing by drawing on postcolonial approaches and arguing for the analytical validity of indigenous concepts (Guzman-Gallegos, 2023). Although related, the argument about narrative predictability in this article differs by pointing to the analytical dangers of committing to a normative position at the expense of empirical complexity within a political economy framework.[9] By following Ortner (1995; see also Abu-Lughod, 1990), the argument is that an overemphasis on power relations risks imposing a biased analysis that collides with an ethnographic comprehension of Shuar communities in this given context. In other words, the moral imperative of political-economic dominated PE, and even more clearly EJ, produces a narrative predictability where the outcomes are largely immune to empirical surprises and discomforting observation. This "confirmation bias" (Robbins 2011, p. 55) push the researcher to look for empirical ingredients to "fill in" her conclusions and not the other, inductive, way around. This is methodologically problematic and, accordingly, the main rationale for this article.

The article is structured as follows. First, I situate some of the conventional narratives of PE along with their problematic sides. Second, I present empirical material on the intricacies of the Shuar turn to mining. Lastly, I discuss the implications of my findings and conclude.

2. The narrative plot of political ecology

If we stick to an inclusive definition of political ecology as "a community of practice" (Helmcke 2022: p. 266) critically engaged with the interface of nature/environment and human/society, its prevailing modus operandi has been the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives and the construction of empirically sensitive, counter-narratives. Given the expansion of PE over the last decades, this community – once populated by a handful of geographers and anthropologists analyzing the impacts of colonialism and capitalism in rural contexts – has evolved into "a metropolis of practice" where cohesion and fragmentation is at best productive and certainly flourishing. Or at worst, creating fenced-in, onto-epistemic neighborhoods where scholars develop exclusionary languages.[10] One could note similar entropic developments in disciplines such as anthropology and geography, but still make the point that discrepancies and contestations are necessary to arrive at new positions and do good research.

Accordingly, my argument in the following is not a questioning of PE's relevancy but rather an internal methodological issue regarding counter-narrative production. As such I contend with Robbins' insistence that PE should be a "trickster science" (2015; see also Desvalées *et al* 2022: p. 311), but besides generating troubles for hegemonic narratives, it can also interrogate PE itself. In other words, "the will to improve" (Li 2007a) is not only a minefield to development agencies adhering to a managerial, hegemonic narrative, but also to internal hegemonies within PE itself. In much the same way as the concepts of growth, scarcity and the tragedy of the commons apply to hegemonic narratives, political ecologists rely on what we may call highly influential, or micro-hegemonic concepts, such as capital, primitive accumulation/accumulation by dispossession, enclosure and access from Marxist traditions, and "governmentality" as formulated by Foucault.[11] These concepts from critical social theory are likewise instantiating moments for counter-narratives shaped by a plot of villains, victims and heroes and a chronological structure of beginning, middle and end (Agder *et al.* 2001: p. 685). Again, the merits of counter-narratives produced by critical scholars are many and important, but they are nevertheless stories

[8] For a relatively early attempt to bridge this tension see Castree (2002). For a more recent one see Sullivan (2017).

[9] Elsewhere (Vangsnes, 2024), I expand this argument to include a subaltern perspective echoing Dipesh Chakrabarty's conclusion that the role of European philosophy (Enlightenment and Marxism – universals, secularism, class/capital) in the formation of political modernity in Bengali India is both "indispensable and inadequate" (2008: p. 6) to capture its local reality and meaning.

[10] For a similar point see Walker (2006: p. 391). For a recent, comprehensive overview of epistemic communities within PE and a related discussion see Desvalées *et al.* (2022).

[11] These concepts are foundational to political ecology. Influential examples are Peet & Watts (2004); Li (2014, 2007a); Benjaminsen & Lund (2001); Ribot & Peluso (2003); Fairhead & Leach (1996) and Ferguson (1994).

that lean on narratology and rhetorical techniques, as Agder *et al*. rightly point out with regards to PE's confrontation with hegemonic narratives on desertification, deforestation, biodiversity and climate change (ibid.). In short, counter-narratives as much as apolitical, populist narratives, need an efficient storyline to work beyond the corridors of PE itself (Walker 2006; Forsyth 2008). The trickster question then, is, what are the (risks of) analytical tradeoffs in this endeavor?

In the opening vignette of the Introduction, I recounted how my Shuar interlocutors united to protest against what they conceived as State criminalization of ASGM. A conventional narrative plot could make reference to state marginalization, or capitalist alienation/fetishism among protesters who are forced into the destructive practices of mining.[12] From a more clearly defined environmentalist vantage point, these miners are villains, antagonists, or at best unwilling accomplices. In fact, on this occasion, a week after the army intervened in the Yutzupino gold rush, the State became a hero acting against illegal mining, even though the intervention was pushed forward by significant public pressure from activists.[13] In both versions however, the environment (i.e. rivers and adjacent forests) is the main victim. The narrative position of the local, indigenous communities living along the rivers, however, is unclear since they were complicit in the gold rush by charging miners for access to the gold fields. Contrastingly, from the miners' vantage point, they themselves are the main victims, having had their excavators confiscated and their prospect of economic livelihoods severely compromised, which in many cases translates into displacements.

This is not a new story. PE has a long legacy of describing how local communities become entangled in extractivist practices (Peluso 2018; Watts 2009; Ferguson 1999; Taussig 2010). Neither is it new to critically address limits to PE counter-narratives (e.g. Forsyth 2008; Bernstein & Woodhouse 2001; Vayda & Walters 1999). And yet, as recently pointed out by Dayot, who draws upon empirical observations from the oil fields of Western Ecuadorian Amazonia:

> Indigenous people who do not hold a 'special relationship' with the environment, incommensurable with money, and who welcome oil extraction in their territories, are rarely part of the analysis. They rarely feature in political ecology studies. (Dayot 2023: p. 336)

Zooming in on informal gold mining, it is worth considering that gold prices are peaking (fluctuating around US$80 a gram) and that the global ASGM community comprises around 20 million people.[14] Based on analyses of satellite images, da Silva *et al* (2023, p. 2) estimate a 625% landcover increase of "illegal" gold mining within indigenous territories in the Brazilian Amazon across the last decade. In this scenario, Jonkman & de Theije (2020) stress how ASGM communities in Colombia engage in what they call "insurgent infrastructure" meaning that, in the absence of the State, miners themselves construct local infrastructure that in turn provide them with a social license against state criminalization. Similarly, ASGM miners in Zamora Chinchipe argue for a positive recognition of their efforts since the informal gold economy sustains the regional economy whereas large-scale mining, while providing some local employment, is essentially a story of elite capture and "accumulation by dispossession" (Leifsen, 2017; see also Acosta *et al*., 2020).

The point here is that the grand counter-narrative of political ecology fits neatly with critical analysis of large-scale extractivism (Van Teijlingen, 2016; Kirsch, 2014) and capitalist conservation (Agrawal 2020), but fails to capture the complexities of ASGM expansion. Whereas global ASGM trends indeed follow a pattern of substantial expansion (Verbrugge & Geenen, 2019), the cast is more complex as it can hardly be reduced to the relationship between dominators and subalterns (Rozo, 2022; Tubb, 2020; Penfield, 2019; Lahiri-Dutt, 2018). This lack of *internal* political analyses is precisely what Sherry Ortner identified in influential resistance studies that, she argues, are infused with an "air of romanticism" (1995:

[12] For a similar, analytical discomfort with "hidden motives" of capitalism and domination, see Li (2007a: 9).

[13] See: La minería ilegal está 'matando' a dos ríos de la provincia de Napo - Agencia de Noticias Ecologistas (agenciaecologista.info) (accessed 17.07.2023).

[14] Statistical estimates of this sector are at best indicative due to its dynamics of boom and bust. Most recent and reliable estimates, however, suggest that ASM employs around 45 million individuals around the world (30% women, 70% men) and 16-20 million out of these mining exclusively for gold - Delve | Home (delvedatabase.org) (accessed 10.08.2023). There are strong reasons to view these estimates as conservative since they are from 2017, and considering that the international price of gold has doubled the last decade.

p. 177) that collides with fine-grained ethnographic "refusals", especially internal conflicts, ambivalences, and contradictions:

> Moreover, there is never a single, unitary, subordinate, if only in the simple sense that subaltern groups are internally divided by age, gender, status, and other forms of difference and that occupants of differing subject positions will have different, even opposed, but still legitimate, perspectives on the situation. (Ortner 1995: p. 175)

Referring to James Scott's classic work on "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott & Kerkvilet, 1986), Ortner suggests that although resistance is a useful category, its articulation in transformations and intentionalities retains a great deal of ambiguity and subjective ambivalence. Picking up on Marx's observation that intentionalities evolve with praxis and accordingly that the meaning of acts change, Ortner argues that acts of resistance are embedded in a social complexity where meaning also moves along the lines of pragmatism and compromises. This insight is important for understanding the shift from mining resistance to mining engagement among the Shuar of AN, to which I turn in the following.

3. The Shuar turn to gold mining

Focusing on the relations between missionaries and Shuar, Juncosa Blasco (2020) provides us with numerous Shuar accounts of the colonial impositions in the former's civilizing endeavor. A key insight is that Shuar individuals respond to evangelization and Spanish alphabetization in boarding schools guided by the idea that "to prevail one must use the means of the opponent" (Juncosa Blasco, 2020, p. 25). As a former missionary assistant himself, Juncosa Blasco recounts fellow missionaries' lament of the lack of "Christian" results, saying that "the Shuar have used us for their own purposes" (2020, p. 291). Juncosa Blasco's work does justice to a complex story of colonization (cf. Vacas-Oleas, 2022; Leifsen, 2021) and highlights how the principle of prevailing against opponents stands out in several contexts where Shuar appropriate from spheres of domination and subjugation (see also: Taylor, 2007; Hendricks, 1988). A renowned example is the formation of Shuar organizations before, during and after establishing the first Shuar federation in the 1960s (Ortiz Batallas, 2022, pp. 98-99; Rubenstein, 2001), which significantly strengthened the granting of collective land entitlements in the form of Shuar centers in the southern Amazon.

The principle of 'prevailing' also applies to the encounters with *mestizo* settlers and military institutions leading towards an increased incorporation into the Ecuadorian State and the regional capitalist economy. As Buitron (2020) argues from the Shuar territories of interior Morona Santiago, Shuar claims to autonomy are increasingly premised on the capture of public funds, particularly from local governments (*gobiernos autónomos descentralizados)*, as well as appropriations of state and market logics which not only generate ambivalence, but internal transformations to the categories of "productiveness," "community" and Shuar itself.[15] Hence, in contemporary Shuar territories of Zamora Chinchipe that have seen significant mineral mining expansion, my observations suggest that this principle of prevailing also applies to the becoming of Shuar as ASGM miners. We can treat the principle not as an all-encompassing force of explanation, but rather as a latent strategic rationale for understanding the expansion of the mining frontier as the last set of colonial waves flowing into this context.

[15] Buitron explores this and related dynamics at length in her PhD dissertation (2016; see also Buitron, 2020). Although her observations strongly echo my own data on Shuar political leadership in AN (i.e. capture of public funds and entanglements with local governments), it is important to note that the Shuar context Buitron explores is marked by the influence of evangelist, Protestant missionaries, an absence of mining in combination with strong political (and demographic) Shuar influence on all governmental levels. Shuar territories such as AN in Zamora Chinchipe are contrastingly marked by more recent migratory dynamics, Franciscan Catholic missions, a fragmented Shuar political organization where Shuar are a provincial, demographic minority (reflecting less Shuar political representation in local governments). Lastly, mining is a dominant economic livelihood.

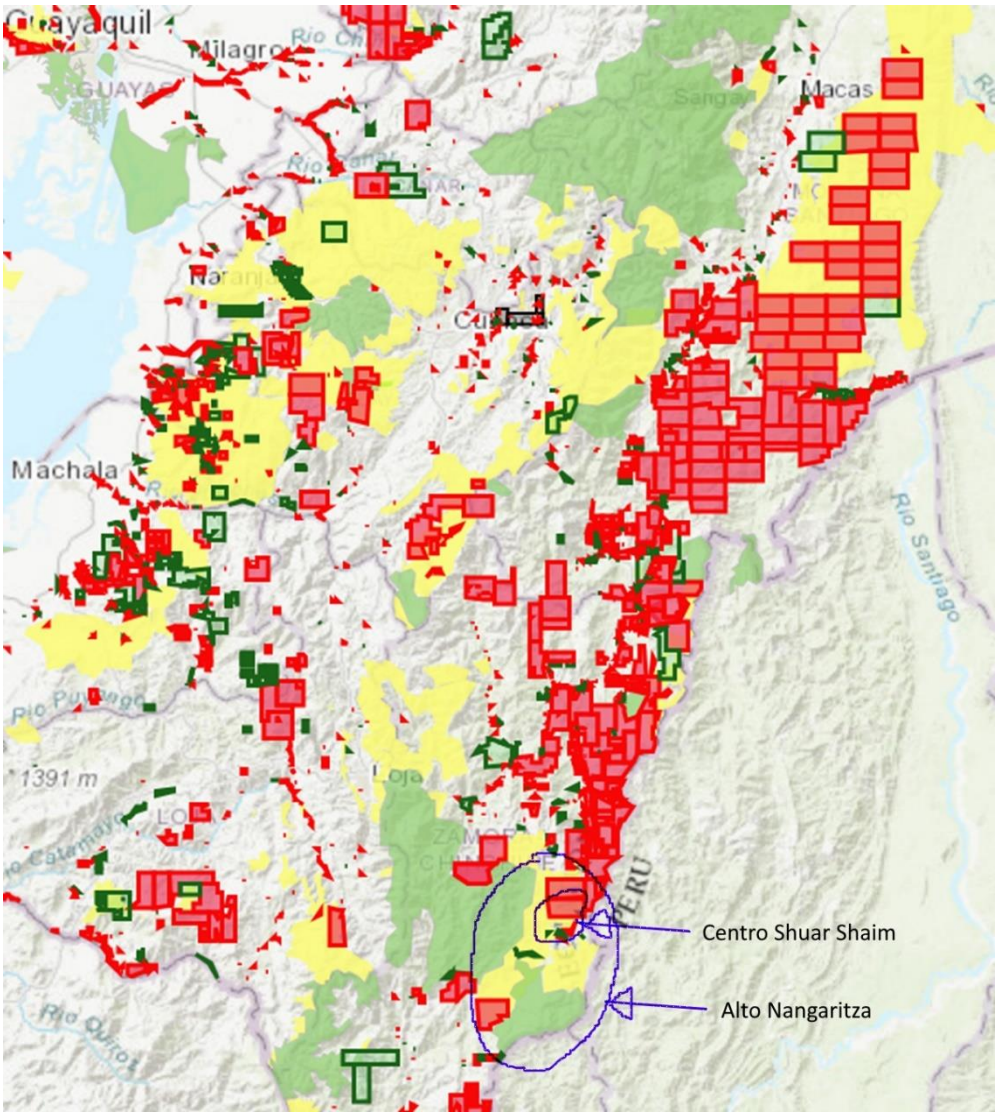

Figure 2: Map of southern Ecuador featuring mining concessions in the Amazon. Granted concessions in red, "applied for" in green. Light green areas are national conservation areas managed by the Ministry of Environment. Yellow areas are lower-status conservation areas managed by other actors (e.g. Shuar communities). Source: Ecuadorian mining Cadaster16 with the author's interventions in blue.

Gold mining has a long history in southern Ecuador, and it is beyond the scope of this article to do justice to that story.[17] In a nutshell, Spanish colonizers established several placer mines in the southern Amazonian region in the 16th century, but due to Shuar uprisings these were left abandoned until the 20th century (Renard-Casevitz *et al*., 1988; Castro Ponze, 2002). Across the last century, gold mining picked up momentum and several ASGM districts were established, most notably Nambija and Chinapintza in the 1980s (Aguirre, 1986). In the 1990s, foreign mining companies made their way to the region and obtained

[16] Available online (accessed 21.02.2024): Geoportal de Catastro MineroLímites territoriales internos, CONALI 2020 (arcgis.com)

[17] See: Mestanza-Ramón *et al*., 2022 and Sacher, 2015. In this article, I limit my focus to the southern Ecuadorian Amazon region thus excluding the history of gold mining in the adjacent Andes, notably its cradle in Zaruma/Portovelo (Marshall *et al.*, 2020; Carrión, 2016).

concessions to engage in deeper mineral prospections. This development eventually resulted in the much-contested, construction of the Mirador open-pit, copper mine, and subsequently, the less-contested, subterranean Fruta del Norte, gold mine (Van Teijlingen *et al*., 2017). From 2016, both these mines produce increasing amounts of minerals that are shipped overseas, to China and Europe respectively, for smelting and refinement.

In the shadows of the Ecuadorian turn to large-scale mining (LSM), ASGM not only persisted but expanded with the increase in gold prices (Sánchez-Vásquez *et al*. 2016). Several new alluvial deposits have been exploited across the years, especially in the Amazon region, by mobile miners equipped with excavators, zig-zag sluices and pumps. While at first targeting old deposits, much of the "widening" of alluvial ASGM takes place within indigenous territories. In the context of Zamora Chinchipe, the pioneering case was the Shuar center of Congüime, located in the lower parts of the Nangaritza River, where the riverbeds of the Chinapintza and Congüime tributaries have been subjected to alluvial operations since the turn of the millennium with consent and participation of the Shuar community (Guzman-Gallegos, 2021; Lalander *et al*., 2021).

Echoing the contestation of LSM projects, the case of Congüime caused both internal and external discord. Shuar centers upriver in AN, marked their disagreement by refusing access to both ASGM miners and LSM concessionaires (Gerique, 2010, p. 45; Gerique *et al*., 2017). They also protested against the Mirador project in national anti-mining campaigns. In relation to LSM, this political-normative position still holds fairly well as it forms part of a "resource sovereignty" (Carver, 2019) argument that manages to merge the claims made by both Shuar and non-Shuar ASGM miners that local resources support local livelihoods, with specifically Shuar claims for territorial sovereignty and political autonomy.

After a long, internal process of contestation, including significant internal disagreements among inhabitants from the seven Shuar centers affiliated with the Tayunts association, in late 2017 the decision to open for mining was reached by democratic majority in an assembly. Several factors played into this decision. First, there was a marked drop in the price for naranjilla (Solanum quitoense) – at the time an important cash crop – in combination with a lack of provincial and municipal government support to incentivize agricultural development that suffered from small and manual production and a heavy reliance on middlemen. Second, there was a growing recognition that the relatively small revenues – roughly US$120,000 compensated annually for approximately 20 thousand hectares of conservation forest – generated by a payment-for-ecosystem-services scheme named Socio Bosque, was insufficient to meet the material needs among the constituencies of Tayunts. Third, several large and medium mining concessions overlap with Shuar territories in AN and there was a growing concern that concession holders, backed up by the State apparatus, would intrude and insist on exploiting the minerals. Fourth, the depletion of the gold deposits downriver in Conguime generated interest among local miners in the upper Nangaritza River and its tributaries, causing increased pressure to expand mining.

These factors emerged in a scenario of increased market integration of Shuar communities accelerated by the construction of a much-desired road connecting AN to the rest of the province. As in other remote places with indigenous populations, infrastructural development such as roads, bridges, and electricity are imbued with ambiguity since they facilitate access to public and private services (health, education, markets) but also extractivist logging and mining. In the context of AN, infrastructural development was and is highly desired among the Shuar population, not only due to improved access, but also because travel by boat on the treacherous Nangaritza River is both risky and time-consuming. On one hand, this desire of increased integration into State institutions and capitalism theoretically echoes Foucault's (1991) conceptualization of governmentality, in which subjectivities are transformed and new needs/desires emerge aligned with the desires of the dominators.[18] On the other side, the road facilitating access for machinery also actualized the vernacular, Shuar principle of prevailing by using the means of its opponent: we can learn mining, take control of its articulation in our territories, and use it to our advantage. This echoes Buitron's empirical observations from Morona Santiago on similar dynamics (Buitron & Deshoullière, 2023; see also Deshoullière, 2016) and differs from the Foucauldian perspective because it highlights rather than reduces Shuar agency, including internal contestation. Put differently, Shuar incorporation into state and market logics is less about falling prey to capitalist forces, which would also suggest an acculturation thesis. Rather, as Buitron and Deshoullière (2023) point out, Shuar struggle to

[18] For a critique of the limits of the governmentality concept and concerns with Foucault's methodology see Li (2007b).

domesticate capitalism by avoiding the position of the prey and rather aim to master it through entrepreneurialism, which, in contrast to acculturation, suggests an "inculturation of capitalism."

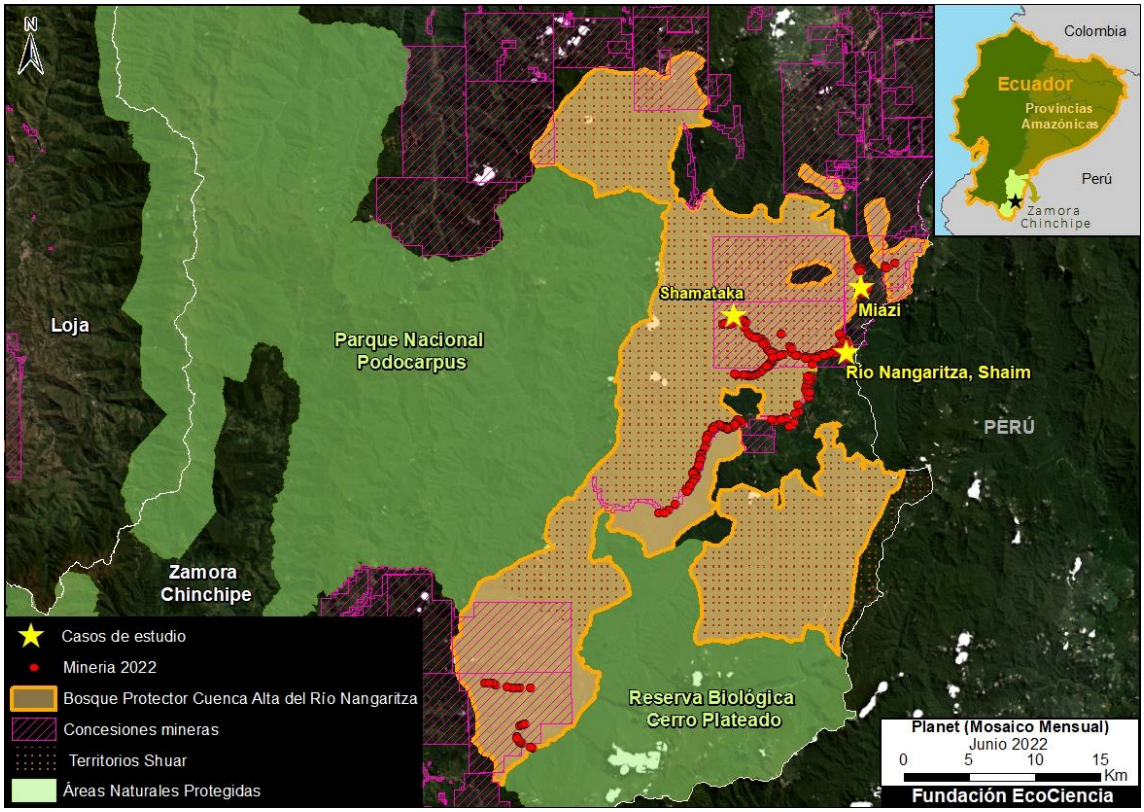

Figure 3: Alto Nangaritza showcasing alluvial ASGM expansion until 2022. Mining interventions marked in red dots, national conservation areas administered by the Ministry of Environment in green, Shuar territories and conservation areas administered by Shuar in yellow, large-scale mining concessions in purple. Source: Villa *et al*., 2022.

4. Contested authorities

According to Ecuadorian mining legislation (Ley de Minería, 2009), most ASGM operations in Ecuador are illegal because they occur without a legal mining title, without fulfilling environmental and safety criteria and without paying tax/royalties. The prospect of alluvial mining in AN was no exception to this. Yet, "illegal" ASGM occurred within and around formal mining concessions, issued to private actors by the Ecuadorian State. Concession holders equipped with a legal right to explore and eventually exploit the mineral resources are also legally responsible for any mining undertaking within their given concessions. Their way out of this responsibility is to denounce illegal mining to national authorities that in turn, must respond accordingly. Although this may seem straightforward, it is complicated by the lack of government capacity and willingness to control and regulate the ASGM sector (Vangsnes, 2018). Moreover, it is complicated due to the overlaps and dynamics between parish-municipal-provincial-central government institutions and Shuar political and territorial organizations.

Let us turn to an example that illustrates this. In May 2018, government mining regulators (ARCOM)[19], accompanied by policemen and a few soldiers, drove up the Nangaritza valley to a spot nearby the settler town of Selva Alegre. With reference to legal sanctions of illegal mining, article 57 in the Mining Law (Ley de Minería, 2009), ARCOM staff set fire to an excavator working in this sector. This excavator

[19] ARCOM stands for *Agencia de Regulación y Control de Mineria* (Agency of Mining Control and Regulation) and was, until its reconfiguration into ARCCEMM (Agency of Regulation and Control of Energy and Non-Renewable Resources) in 2020, the national agency of mining control and regulation.

belonged to Tayunts members and the act of destroying it was a major provocation. Miners responded assertively and rumors spread quickly to the Tayunts leadership attending an assembly in Santa Elena (Nankais Association) downstream. The then-president of Tayunts sent his brother up the valley to see what was going on. When he got there the situation was escalating; Shuar set fire to ARCOM's pickup truck and a police car, as revenge. They captured ARCOM staff, policemen and soldiers and transported them to the communal house in Centro Shuar Shaim. The public servants were locked into a room where they had to spend the night. Information about this incident soon reached the provincial capital of Zamora and the following day the Governor arrived accompanied by a military contingent to successfully negotiate the release of the public servants.[20]

Echoing the rhetoric of the ASGM community in the opening story of this article, Tayunts leadership criticized the government on several points. First, the aggressive behavior of national authorities in Shuar territory was unacceptable regardless of any mining legislation. Second, the historical absence of the state in AN fueled an argument saying that infrastructure and productive incentives had been systematically undercut for decades. Third, no outreach or dialogue had been established to regulate and control the emerging mining activity. Instead, mining concessions had been granted to large, foreign companies, without any dialogue with local populations. Hence, local Shuar leaders objected by asking: Why can't we get any concessions? Why can't we receive training and capacity workshops to ensure a safe and controlled exploitation of "our rivers"?

When I returned to do fieldwork in AN in October 2021, most of the Nanagaritza River had been mined upriver from the municipal capital, Guayzimi. In the lower parts, mining was ongoing, and the visual impressions of the enormous craters deeply contrasted with my green and lush memories of the same place three years earlier. Upriver, the area between the small *mestizo* town Heroes del Condor and the main village of Centro Shuar Shaim, was recovering with new vegetation as a result of recurrent floods. I was told however, that this particular area, at its peak in 2020, was mined by 150 excavators working 24/7 and that Heroes del Condor had boomed with activity: bars and restaurants, temporary hotels for miners, sports games with hundreds of dollars at stake, abundant gold commerce, prostitution etc.

After the incident in May 2018, national authorities refrained from any new confrontation with miners in AN. This practice of inaction reflects business as usual as the Ecuadorian State hardly prioritizes confronting miners, apart from occasional interventions. Besides, it is no secret that public servants, ex-military personnel, and politicians have vested interests in the ASGM sector. Accordingly, miners largely ignore mining legislation because compliance is expensive and because the local communities are embedded in the economy they generate, and thus provide miners with a social license to operate.[21]

Compared to non-indigenous ASGM districts, a particularity of the gold rush in AN stems from its encounter with current Shuar land tenure system (see Figures 1 & 3). A Shuar center is a collective land claim that is indivisible and exempt from market logics. In practice, this means that the land cannot be sold to external actors. Internally however, it is divided into parcels with exclusive usufruct rights, that can be sold internally among legal members (*socios juridicos*) of the center. Upon their foundation in the 1970s and 1980s, Shuar populations were small, and land was relatively abundant to the first generations. Over time, the head of the family divided his/her land among his/her offspring for inheritance. What happened in the face of mining was that only the families with land adjacent to the river and the alluvial mining operations, could tax the external miners for the gold retrieved from their land; normally between 15-20% of gold content. These families had no explicit obligations to share collectively with either the center administration or their siblings.

Gold revenues emerged as an unprecedented economic differentiation among people within the collective land claim of the center. To many families it was also the first time they got access to substantial amounts of cash, and some were wiser than others in spending this money. Some families invested in properties outside the Shuar centers, others saved sufficient capital to buy their own excavator, or began renting excavators. These investments along with a steep learning curve in the arts of alluvial gold mining, marked the start of a new chapter where Shuar individuals became gold miners themselves; first exploiting

[20] When this happened, I had conducted participant observation the previous months with ARCOM officers in Zamora and earlier (2015/2016) in Zaruma-Portovelo, El Oro province. The anecdote builds on their accounts and is triangulated with the accounts by people in Shaim in 2021/2022.

[21] See Bugmann *et al*. (2022), for an example of how PE is applied to argue similarly (social license to continue business as usual) with reference to the persistence of mercury among ASGM miners in Burkina Faso.

local deposits and later moving into other parts of the Ecuadorian Amazon such as the above-mentioned Yutzupino gold rush site. Additionally, the practice of manual mining (*janche*) in the mining craters became a widespread source of income, conducted by both men and women, young and old, across AN. Currently, alluvial gold mining reaches widely into Shuar territories in AN, the Yacuambi valley, El Pangui and southern Morona Santiago.

My empirical material exhibits a collection of stories of both relative success and failures when it comes to these adventurous mining endeavors, and likewise in relation to conflicts and cooperations between siblings with or without mineable land. Still, an important observation is that people who sacrificed their most fertile lands by the river to mining, and eventually spent the money, were left without much farmable land for subsistence and were in a tricky position for negotiation with their siblings holding land further up the hills (unless they had shared generously from their mining revenues).

One does not need to venture far in the mining literature (Van Teijlingen *et al*., 2017; Kirsch, 2014; Deneault & Sacher, 2012) to understand that the corporate-state strategy of inaction, that is, to let Tayunts dictate the alluvial gold rush in AN, was the foreign companies' entrance ticket to this area.[22] Yet, the prospect of LSM development as an outcome of current mining explorations within Shuar territories is highly uncertain. Beyond the geological uncertainty about the extent of mineral deposits, a decision to mine on such a scale will be subjected to many rounds of critical deliberations in the Shuar organization that holds both knowledge and experience about similar processes in nearby places. Surely, these deliberations will entail cost-benefit analyses from the local points of view, but also and more deeply perhaps, the cultural question of prevailing as Shuar: in what form, and through what means. A central question remains that of economic survival and many place their bets on ASGM in a post-pandemic situation with significant political turmoil and few economic options. Combined with an unparalleled increase in crime, this has also sparked a new migration wave, including several individuals from Shaim, towards the US in search of work.

Lastly, the question of political authority in Alto Nangaritza would require a lengthy discussion both in relation to Shuar organization itself but also in its entanglements with local and national governments.[23] Important to note however, is that the division of Shuar organization into center-association-federation levels does not imply a hierarchy of authority. Individual Shuar centers are led by locally-elected leaders (*sindicos*) and although they are affiliated with an association and a federation, the leaders of the latter cannot impose decisions on individual centers, but merely perform an advisory role. Moreover, the formation of one large Shuar-Achuar federation (FISCH) in the 1960s fragmented into several federations from the 1980s. FEPNASH-ZCH, founded in 2007, is the largest out of two Shuar federations in Zamora Chinchipe and the organizational link to indigenous confederations on regional, Amazonian level (CONFENIAE) and national level (CONAIE). The other provincial Shuar federation, FESCH (Federacion Shuar de Zamora Chinchipe) founded in 1988, emerged from a rupture with FICSH (Federacion Interprovincial Shuar) with headquarters in Sucúa, Morona Santiago. Although FESCH is older than FEPNASH-ZCH, its territorial coverage is significantly smaller compared with the latter. FESCH's political line has accommodated negotiations and alliances with foreign mining companies in a modernist, development paradigm that has offered crucial symbolic-cultural leverage to these companies in exchange for infrastructural investments. In contrast, FEPNASH-ZCH works closely with CONFENIAE/CONAIE on the wide concern for territorial sovereignty and political autonomy from an anti-LSM position, cooperating with environmental NGOs and state institutions.

In the national party politics, Pachakutik has been the main party to represent indigenous people in Ecuador with close affiliations to CONAIE. Yet, in the last few years, internal disputes have generated a partial rupture between Pachakutik and CONAIE, let alone a significant internal fragmentation of the former. Hence, Shuar individuals aren't necessarily aligned with Pachakutik any longer. Although the anti-LSM position is largely maintained by CONAIE/Pachakutik, the Shuar turn to ASGM is a local decision at center-association level, a decision that can hardly be reversed by federation, confederation or Patchakutik leaders. Similarly, environmental NGOs such as Nature and Culture International,[24] working with Shuar communities in AN for many years, have increasingly been cut out of cooperations since the Shuar turn to

[22] The junior mining company Projectmin, a subsidiary of Luminex Resources corporation holding two major mining concessions to the subsoil in AN, signed a letter of agreement with Centro Shuar Shaim in 2019 and have engaged in mineral explorations ever since.

[23] I flesh this out at length elsewhere (Vangsnes, 2024, pp. 267-336).

[24] See webpage (accessed 19.02.2024): Nature and Culture International

mining. In sum, there is notable complexity to the dynamics of conflicts and alliances regarding political authority in AN, and yet, the prevailing pattern on Shuar decision-making is a continuous struggle to maximize local authority and autonomy vis-à-vis external actors. Despite the contested nature of the gold rush, including the economic differentiation it has generated, Tayunts has been successful in taking a lead role in its articulation.

5. Between ideological and empirical commitments

How does PE or EJ tackle a case like this? Political ecology offers solid evidence of extractive exploitation in a neoliberal world. Without undermining the importance of showcasing environmental and social injustices (Temper *et al*., 2014), my concern is about a propensity within PE to go along with a "confirmation bias", where weak empirical research risks being tolerated as long as the (normative) findings fit to the plot. The problem arises when sweeping categorizations meet empirical observations. For instance, Leff (2015) provides us with a comprehensive genealogy of Latin American PE, yet still invokes phrasings such as:

> In the view of indigenous peoples, biodiversity represents their patrimony of natural and cultural resources, with which they have co-evolved throughout history, the habitat where their cultural practices are forged and embedded. Their ecological potentials and cultural meanings are *incommensurable* with economic values. (2015, p. 38, my emphasis)

This "boxing" of indigenous peoples as uniform and homogenous leaves my Shuar interlocutors engaged in alluvial mining in their own territory somehow out of touch with themselves. This kind of reductionism is recurrent in PE and EJ, as much as its essentialist renderings of Eurocentrism (Quijano 2000). Indeed, the case for ontological alterity among indigenous groups exceeding the hegemony of "the modern constitution" is strong (Latour, 1993; De la Cadena, 2015, pp. 92-93; see also Viveiros de Castro, 2015; Descola, 2013). One could make similar arguments for the case of Shuar of AN and substantiate it with regional ethnography (Mader, 1999; Rubenstein, 2012).

Still, as Tym (2023, pp. 723-725) convincingly argues from the context of the Mirador project in Zamora Chinchipe, it does not follow that all indigenous groups are socialist environmentalists fighting extractivism at all costs. In the Ecuadorian Amazon, some groups such as the Tagaeris and the Taromenanis continue to live, as jaguars, in voluntary isolation (Rival, 2015, pp. 294-308), and many groups, including Shuar communities, continue to oppose extractivism.[25] Indeed, across recent decades, responses to both oil and mineral extraction have featured indigenous resistance (Espinosa, 2021; Vela-Almeida *et al*., 2020; García-Torres *et al*., 2020; Sánchez-Vázquez *et al*., 2017; Sawyer, 2004). At the same time, groups such as the Cofán in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon, have adapted strategies of survival that increasingly accept oil drilling in their territories despite the disruption and havoc it generates (Cepek, 2019; see also Dayot, 2023). Accordingly, the question of resistance and response is fundamentally an empirical question where positions can change abruptly due to both internal and external factors, regardless of ontological alterity. Besides, as the empirics presented above indicate; indigenous groups like other groups, are pragmatic, analytic, and strategic in their decision-makings.

A key point is that the intrusion of LSM in indigenous territories implies a very different game compared to the alluvial ASGM where Shuar can benefit economically directly in the phase of extraction (Lalander *et al*. 2021). Again, empirical contexts offer different accounts but evidence of indigenous co-optation to the contentious expansion of ASGM (Rozo, 2022; Angosto-Ferrández, 2020; Penfield, 2019) sits uncomfortably with critical PE and EJ foregrounding indigenous resistance.[26] Furthermore, it is highly

[25] Pueblo Shuar Arutam, comprising a large Shuar territory (numerous Shuar centers) in Morona Santiago, stands out due to their persistent anti-mining campaigns. See (accessed 10.11.2023): Alert: Pueblo Shuar Arutam face mining and infrastructure projects that threaten their territory of life - Alert - ICCA Consortium. Yet, as Tym (2023) points out, although the elected leadership of Pueblo Shuar Arutam maintain strong resistance to foreign LSM endeavors, there are at least two Shuar centers *within* this Shuar territory, that dissent from this position. Moreover, alluvial ASGM with Shuar consent is expanding also here, including the participation by some of my Shuar interlocutors from AN.

[26] This is not to say that mining does not create resistance, it surely does. The point here is rather that initiatives such as the Environmental Justice Atlas – EJ Atlas – while highly informative, also hide empirical cases that do not align with the dynamics of extractivism-resistance, let alone the internal complexity of the given cases.

problematic to take an environmentalist stance to criticize Tayunts for spearheading the alluvial mining operations in AN since Tayunts' decision was the result of local deliberations that in the end favored mining in their own territory. If people have the right to say No, they also have the right to say Yes. To oppose this decision is to reduce local authority from a paternal, colonial position and reproduce, in a new guise, the Catholic mission quest of converting the barbarians.

While emphasizing the value of local resistance to extractivism, some critical scholars with experience in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the narrative uniformity of resistance stories (Van Teijlingen & Dupuits, 2021). Bayón Jimenez *et al.* (2021), for instance, address what they term a *conflictofilia* (an overemphasis on conflict), and problematize statist, essentializing and romanticizing renderings of subaltern subjects. In a similar vein, Lyall (2021), drawing on fieldwork in northern Amazonia, argues that studies framed by resistance need to account for the longue-durée and attend to historical moments invoked by local people in their struggles. What is sinking in here, is Sherry Ortner's argument that topics such as resistance to extractivism exceed the relation between (essentialized) dominators and subalterns. To point this out is not to relativize what is morally good or bad, but rather to argue that any attempt to answer what is going on needs to attend carefully to the empirical complexity, including internal contestations, that conditions its articulation.

Inescapably, stories written by political ecologists, are contingent upon their positionality. Most political ecologists are well-trained in methodology, most often qualitative, that contain certain objective requirements as to how data is produced and interpreted. But many are also committed to Marx's credo: "…philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it." (1886). This combination of rigorous analysis with an activist heartbeat animates the PE community. Nevertheless, there is a difference to producing research aimed to mobilize against injustice and that of producing triangulated, rich and reliable empirical accounts. And whilst the difference is largely about the amount of empirical complexity afforded into the analysis, it is also a question of how to process data, how to include the tradeoffs of certain methods and theories compared to others and ultimately, how to balance between humbleness/curiosity on one side, and the moral imperative to act upon (the injustice of) the world on the other. This epistemological dilemma has been known since ancient Greece; and is encapsulated by the humble Socrates saying: "I neither know nor think I know."[27]

Unlike positivists holding on to an objective pursuit of knowledge, political ecologists, increasingly in the wake of poststructuralism, mobilize against truth-production in the guise of hegemonic narratives (Neimark *et al*., 2020; Sullivan, 2017). Ideally, PE counter-narratives, derived from ethnography and other methodologies, are strong enough to both describe the world, and act upon it. Likewise, EJ with roots in ecological economics and more quantitative methodologies, has come a long way to produce empirical evidence to sustain its normative framework. And yet, there are risks involved and although PE aligns with a wide range of social mobilizations, the move from diagnosis (critique and counter-narrative) to remedy (policies and solutions) is a minefield not only because critique is comfortable, but also because most remedies imply reducing and fixing complexity, let alone the ghosts of potential side-effects.[28]

In contrast to short-term interview and survey-driven methodologies, ethnography based on long-term participant observation yields a different kind of empirical material. This is not to say that the former is bad, nor to say that ethnography is good – surely this is highly, if not totally, contingent upon the researcher's efforts and talents, not to mention her labor conditions. A main distinction, however, is that ethnography is premised on discovery and that it generates interaction data, that is, data derived from doing things together with interlocutors in everyday settings and particular events.[29] Apart from ethnography's inductive insistence, this repeated praxis of doing things together also produces insights about the difference between saying and doing, which most anthropologists (and poets) would point to as a recurrent, human trait.

When studying sensitive matters such as illegal mining, interlocutors will perform and express themselves along the lines of what Goffman (2002 [1959]) conceptualized as "frontstage" and "backstage."

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[27] For a discussion of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge see Lesher (1987).

[28] On this point, including her choice to stick with diagnosis see Li (2007a: 3-4). This also echoes the well-known critique of anglophone PE as mostly concerned with the "hatchet" while offering few "seeds" towards progressive change (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen, 2017, pp. 202-203).

[29] A related point here is Ingold's insistence that: "To study anthropology is to study *with* people, not to make studies *of* them" (2017, p. 21, emphasis in original).

Activists and journalists entering a context such as AN, will undoubtfully find frontstage data to frame the controversial ASGM event as a story of dominators vs subalterns.[30] And partly they would be right since ASGM emerged due to a combination of colonial/state marginalization and a deep regional history of capitalist mining with actors that eventually made their way upriver. Political ecologists thinking with Foucault would also be able to argue that the effect of this combination has produced new subjectivities among the Shuar, and that some of these subjectivities aspire to the similar (material) desires and values as the dominators.

However, the empirics presented in this article emphasize the importance of slowing down (Savransky & Stengers, 2018, p. 145) when analyzing complex social phenomena such as mineral mining. Again, echoing Ortner's critique of resistance research, this is not to dismiss the value of showcasing "the violent technologies of extraction" (Dunlap & Jackobsen, 2020), but to warn about the dangers of jumping into (normative) precooked analytical frames without attending to internal, empirical complexity. Surely, political ecologists have provided important counter-narratives to state-corporate framings of responsible mining as a means to economic development (e.g. Ferguson, 1999; Kirsch, 2014). The danger is, nevertheless, a reductionist narrative, or what Haraway, in reference to essentializing stories of subjugated women, calls: "the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history…" (1988, p. 586). Hence, when ecological economists such as Gómez-Baggethun (2022) asks if there is a future for indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) in international policy agendas, without presenting any empirics, my interrogation is how such a question can be sustained given the enormous complexity and diversity of indigenous worlds.

In light of this irreducible diversity, ILK is, at best, a hyperbolic construction to push back on capitalist predation, whilst its assumptions of uniformity and homogeneity are deeply problematic, empirically speaking. In the context of ASGM research, Tubb identifies this propensity as a problem within "neo-extractivist critique" (2020, pp. 17-9) where:

> …there is a tendency to see extractive economies as crushing Indigenous and Black peoples. This misses the ways that rural peoples are both already articulated with their own resource projects into global networks of trade and how they can sometimes find their own forms of agency. (Ibid., p. 19)

Echoing this point in Tubb's Colombian ethnography, Vacas-Oleas, writing from the context of Shuar communities neighboring the gigantic Mirador copper mine in northern Zamora Chinchipe, argues that on the question of pro vs. anti-mining Shuar position themselves strategically according to kinship alliances and previous (sometimes very old) conflicts (2022, pp.16-7). Vacas-Oleas does not dismiss political ecologists working on the Mirador project with analyses that feature injustice and resistance of (Vela-Almeida, 2020; Van Teijlingen, 2016; Sacher, 2015) – these are relevant studies – but points to the importance of looking beyond frames of resistance to understand "what is going on." Similarly, my empirical material shows how ASGM can hardly be reduced to a story of resistance. ASGM is subject to continuous deliberations within the Shuar organization where the outcomes are expressions of political power that is always subject to change. Elected leaders play a key role in this, but they are foremost elected on the grounds of their internal mobilizing capacity and their ability to mediate with external actors, not necessarily on the moral grounds of PE. Despite all the merits of critically engaged PE and its adjacent fields of EJ and ecological economics, this is not a trivial observation but rather a reminder, especially to young scholars and activists, to be(come) empirically rigorous and allow discomforting observations into their analytical work.

6. Conclusion

During the POLLEN conference in Durban, South Africa, late June 2023, Maano Ramutsindela opened his keynote talking about the increasing tempo and shorter intervals of decolonization publications.[31] Important topic indeed, he contended, while also expressing (humorously, yet seriously) a discomforting feeling that much of this constant stream of publications could have been written by the AI, ChatGPT. His point was that the world, notably the African and Latin American continents, remain trapped within colonial configurations, yet when it comes to the question of what the future should look like there

[30] See, for instance: Illegal mining threatens one of the last forest links between the Andes and Ecuador's Amazon (mongabay.com) (accessed 26.09.2024)

[31] See: Pollen - The Fourth Biennial Conference (pollen2022.com)

is not one, but many visions (even) among the colonized subalterns. Instead of writing decolonization, he said, the normative point must be to practice it in our everyday lives. His reflections echo that of the Bolivian thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who upon observing the same phenomenon responded bluntly by saying that "there can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonializing practice" (2012: 56). According to Cusicanqui, influential decolonial scholars such as Walter Mignolo, in limited touch with indigenous worlds and their internal debates, appropriate indigenous ideas and discourse to develop exclusionary, academic decolonization careers and communities (see also Altschul, 2022).

The great bulk of political ecology on mining in Ecuador and Latin America, features corporate, LSM endeavors and articulations of local resistance. This resistance is often carried out by indigenous people in alliance with actors aligning ideologically with a struggle that echoes a violent history of colonization, the workings of capitalist hegemonies, and an array of contemporary environmental concerns. Political ecologists have approached these cases by deconstructing the hegemonic (legitimizing) narratives underpinning the rationales of LSM, provided empirical critique and counter-narratives featuring corporations and complicit states as villains, the environment and marginalized groups as victims and lastly, representatives of engaged victims in alliance with activists and/or collaborators as heroes. This critical approach is core to PE regardless of its current diversity and has its deep roots in the works of Marx, and later, the influential work of Foucault.

In this article, I have provided empirical details about why and how Shuar communities in southern Ecuador have turned to alluvial gold mining. The argument emerging from this material suggests that the counter-narratives produced by political ecologists on LSM expansion fail to capture crucial empirical nuances on ASGM expansion in Shuar territories, and thus generate a wider concern regarding the narrative predictability of PE and EJ. Shuar are not ideologically homogenous although a majority supports Pachakutik – the major indigenous, political party, itself currently haunted by substantial fragmentation. There are conservative Shuar, leftist Shuar, but also Shuar who aspire to material wealth at the cost of the environment. To Shuar families, as most families in the world, a main everyday concern is economic – how to make a living. And while the long struggle for sovereignty and territorial autonomy is a collective struggle to which many Shuar relate, the mundane concern of generating some kind of income is even more pervasive. This in turn, leads to a pragmatism where social, political and environmental costs are balanced against the need for cash. Indeed, in Shuar contexts, the need for capital may surely evolve into ambitions for accumulation, opportunism and consequentially all kinds of disruptions.

The point is that this should not surprise us at all. Instead, to assume uniformity, homogeneity and collective harmony within Shuar communities is to ignore a century of ethnographic research that indicates a fair deal of internal conflicts to say the least (e.g. Harner, 1984; Steel, 1999; Karsten, 1935). The regional ethnography also indicates that increased incorporation into state, religious and market structures is not a one-way train of acculturation but much more a search of finding new ways to prevail 'as Shuar' through selective appropriations and transformations (Juncosa Blasco, 2020; Ortiz Batallas, 2022; Mader, 2021).

This ethnographic take may seem as a relativizing position compared to political ecologists who emphasize "accumulation by dispossession" or "enclosure/access" as lenses to depict and interpret the working of power relations in environmental conflicts. However, my material suggests that even within a political economy framework (i.e. who wins and who loses?) such a rendering of the Shuar turn to mining would require too much empirical tweaking. At the same time, reports and satellite imageries of ASGM expansion in the Amazon and beyond, convey painful environmental concerns. Addressing the cumulative impacts of ASGM requires coordinated actions on the same level as the most progressive climate change policies, if not more, due to its notable dimension of poverty alleviation. Despite its multiple hazards and ambiguities, for the time being ASGM in Alto Nangaritza and the becoming of Shuar miners rests its case on local deliberations involving Shuar communities insisting to prevail and finding their own paths through the streams of colonial impositions.

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