

Environmental racism and environmental justice: Decolonial inflections and new agendas in Latin America and Brazil

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Abstract

The idea of environmental racism has been gradually gaining visibility in the Brazilian environmental agenda after its emergence in the United States. It is present in academic narratives and environmental activism, generally associated with the concept of environmental injustice and based on political ecology, which has been occupying a prominent position in Latin America. We propose to discuss this concept without pretending to be exhaustive, considering its origin, trajectory, uses, controversies, and limits. We make a parallel between the U.S. and Latin America, underlining some common elements but also the differences in terms of posture, especially in the face of colonialism and capitalism. Then our attention is drawn to the Brazilian case, analyzing some peculiarities of the justice-injustice-environmental racism interface. Finally, we underscore the alternative horizons opened by this issue, based on local life models, ontologies, and cosmologies that increasingly find a prominent place on the environmental agenda, notably discussing the issue of human rights, the rights of nature and territories. In this article, the central ideas presented are guided by a critical and decolonial-inspired analysis of environmental issues.

Keywords: Environment, coloniality, racism, injustice, Latin America, Brazil

Résumé

L'idée de racisme environnemental a progressivement gagné en visibilité dans le débat environnemental brésilien après son émergence aux États-Unis. Elle est présente à la fois dans les récits académiques et dans l'activisme environnemental, généralement associée au concept d'injustice environnementale et basée sur l'écologie politique, qui a occupé une place importante dans la production latino-américaine. Nous proposons de discuter ce concept sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, en considérant son origine, sa trajectoire, ses usages, ses controverses et ses limites. Nous faisons un parallèle entre les États-Unis et l'Amérique latine, en soulignant certains éléments communs mais aussi des différences en termes de posture, notamment face au colonialisme et au capitalisme. Puis notre attention se porte sur le cas brésilien, en analysant certaines particularités de l'interface justice-injustice-racisme environnemental. Enfin, nous soulignons les horizons alternatifs ouverts par cette problématique, basés sur les modèles de vie locaux, les ontologies et les cosmologies qui trouvent de plus en plus une place de choix dans le débat environnemental, notamment en discutant de la question des droits de l'homme, des droits de la nature et des territoires. Dans cet article, les idées centrales présentées sont guidées par une analyse critique et d'inspiration décoloniale de la question environnementale.

Mots-clés: Environnement, colonialité, racisme, injustice, Amérique Latine, Brésil

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Resumen

La idea de racismo ambiental ha ganado visibilidad en la agenda ambiental brasileña después de su nacimiento en los Estados Unidos. Está presente tanto en las narrativas académicas como en el activismo ambiental, generalmente asociada al concepto de injusticia ambiental y basada en la ecología política, que viene ocupando un lugar preeminente en la producción latinoamericana. Nos proponemos discutir este concepto sin pretender ser exhaustivos, considerando su origen, trayectoria, usos, controversias y límites. Hacemos un paralelo entre Estados Unidos y América Latina, subrayando algunos elementos comunes, pero también las diferencias en términos de postura, especialmente frente al colonialismo y al capitalismo. A continuación, dirigimos nuestra atención al caso brasileño, analizando algunas peculiaridades de la interfaz justicia-injusticia-racismo ambiental. Por último, subrayaremos los horizontes alternativos abiertos por esta cuestión, basados en modelos de vida, ontologías y cosmologías locales que encuentran cada vez más un lugar destacado en la agenda ambiental, discutiendo especialmente la cuestión de los derechos humanos, los derechos de la naturaleza y los territorios. En este artículo, las ideas centrales presentadas se guían por un análisis crítico y de inspiración decolonial de la cuestión ambiental.

Palabras clave: Medio ambiente, colonialidad, racismo, injusticia, América Latina, Brasil

1. Introduction

The idea of environmental racism has been gradually gaining visibility on the Brazilian environmental agenda after its emergence in the United States. It is present both in academic narratives and environmental activism, generally associated with the concept of environmental injustice and based on political ecology, which has been occupying a prominent position in Latin American scholarship.

Almost forty years after its emergence, we can say that it is a fertile idea, from which several other concepts and ideas have derived. Besides its potential for scholarship, it is an inseparable notion of political action and a proposal for politicizing subjects made vulnerable by toxic waste and industrial pollution, favoring their capacity for action, struggle, and resistance.

Understanding the genesis and trajectory of a concept implies characterizing the context in which it was produced, identifying the key actors in this process, and analyzing the discourses generated. From this perspective, this article discusses the concept of environmental racism, and considering its origin, trajectory, uses, controversies, and limits without pretending to be exhaustive. After drawing a parallel between the U.S. and Latin America, attention is drawn to the Brazilian case, analyzing some peculiarities of the justice-injustice-environmental racism interface. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the theoretical debate about environmental racism at the international scale, underlining its new meanings found in Brazilian social realities, but also its link with other concerns, such as decolonial and systemic criticism, and the alternative options opened by intellectuals and activists. Indeed, many authors think of environmental racism in local or national terms, but remain limited to them.

The U.S. and Latin America have some common elements, such as the catalytic nature of environmental 'disasters.' But differences stand out, highlighting the tensions and contradictions surrounding the North-South relationship and the singularities of racial dynamics. At the center of the differences is positionality, or in other words, the position of each territory or social stakeholder in relation to colonialism and capitalism.

The article specially addresses in Brazil:

- i) the influence of the racial democracy myth, which persists in the national imagination in the (in) visibility of the environmental racism category;
- ii) environmental justice in various dimensions;
- iii) local leadership (indigenous, *quilombola*, and peasants) and cosmologies, and their presence in environmental agendas, especially among activists committed to the right to nature and ecopolitics.

2. The emergence of a political and scientific concept

The term "environmental racism" appeared in the United States in the twentieth century amid the struggle for civil rights, in which social movements protested against the racism that structured American society. The banner of a society that revolved around the idea of freedom concealed a history of land expropriation from Native Americans and the forced labor of enslaved Africans. Undoubtedly, "institutional racism has shaped the economic, political, and ecological landscape, and has supported the exploitation of land and the population" (Bullard, 1993: 16). An expanded understanding of racial issues can be traced over time, based on the fact that people of color (African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians) were subjected to processes of internal colonialism:

They enter the "host" society and economy involuntarily; their native culture is destroyed; white-dominated bureaucracies impose restrictions from which whites are exempt; the dominant group uses institutionalized racism to justify its actions; and a dual or "split labor market" emerges based on ethnicity and race. (Bullard, 1993: 16)

Segregationist policies relegated some people of color to the margins of American society, living in urban ghettos or rural pockets of poverty, more exposed to industrial waste, and unhealthy, polluted, and deteriorated environments (Bullard, 1993). In the late 1970s, the Love Canal environmental disaster in Niagara Falls, New York, resulted in a milestone in the formal complaint process against dumping toxic waste in residential environments. It affected a predominantly white working-class area and, as such, did not generate concerns about environmental racism. That happened in 1982, when residents of the black community in Warren County, North Carolina discovered that a landfill containing polychlorinated biphenyl would be opened in their neighborhood. This project sparked protests and arrests. The term "environmental racism" is attributed to Reverend Benjamin Chavis, who used it to describe this case. The leading minister of the United Church of Christ and his commission for racial justice, he embraced this struggle and conducted, in 1987, a groundbreaking survey, *Toxic wastes and race in the United States* (Chavis, 1987).²

In this first meaning, the term environmental racism designates "the (intentional or not) disproportionate imposition of dangerous waste to colored communities" (Capella, 1996: 331). It highlights the racist dimension of environmental problems in the United States (Pacheco & Faustino, 2013) and explains another expression of "racism spatiality" (Keucheyan, 2018) in a country still marked by racial segregation policies.³ Several cases were raised in the U. S. South where such policies were in effect in the past, and where a "spatial sedimentation of racial inequalities" persists (Pulido, 2000).

Besides Reverend Chavis, another emblematic figure in the fight against environmental racism in the U.S. is Robert Bullard, an internationally recognized activist who is sometimes considered to be the father of environmental justice.⁴ He considers that this movement started and was genuinely confirmed with the Warren County case in 1982 (Silva, 2012). Also, in 1991, the United Church of Christ Commission for racial justice held the "First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit" in Washington, which gathered more than 650 activists from all states in the United States and several other Central American and Latin American countries, such as Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Chile. This event was an extension of the movement "beyond its early anti-toxics focus to include issues of public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation, and community empowerment" (Bullard *et al.*, 2008: 377). An important result of

² Some authors, such as Keucheyan (2018), emphasize the importance of the role of the Churches (notably the progressive Black Churches) in consolidating the movement for environmental justice (and civil rights).

³ It is important to note that racial segregation in the United States was officially abolished in 1964, under the Civil Rights Act. However, this did not mean the end of several segregationist practices against the African American population, which has suffered (and still suffers) various forms of discrimination and expressions of racism to this day.

⁴ <https://drrobertbullard.com/>. We note that he was considered one of the 100 most influential personalities on climate policies in 2019.

the event was the collective document "Principles of environmental justice," which was written and translated into Portuguese and Spanish the following year (Bullard *et al.*, 2008).

The strategy of expanding the debate around environmental justice, including the term "colored people", broadened the movement's horizons, opening up the possibilities for an international movement to develop.⁵ "What started as local and often isolated community-based struggles against toxics and facility siting blossomed into a multi-issue, multi-ethnic, and multi-regional movement" (Bullard *et al.*, 2008: 376). The Washington meeting echoed in several countries, and today, one can speak of plural movements for environmental justice (Santos de Souza, 2015), some of which take place in Central and Eastern Europe, Asia (Sri Lanka notably), the Middle East (Palestine), Africa (Mozambique), and Latin America, which we focus on in this article.⁶

In 1991, a document produced by Lawrence Summers, an economist at the World Bank, intensified the movement's struggle. In it, Summers argued for the need for polluting industries to migrate to peripheral countries, providing disturbing justifications:

1) because most of the poorest do not even live long enough to suffer the effects of environmental pollution; 2) because the economic "logic" considers that deaths in developing countries have a lower cost than in the rich, because the inhabitants of the poorest countries receive lower wages. (Acselrad, 2013: 117)⁷

The document sparked outrage and demand for environmental justice, further expanding the movement beyond U.S. borders. In this statement the capitalist rationale engendered in the Washington Consensus was unveiled. International financial organizations, primarily led by the U.S., made political and economic decisions concerning Latin America guided by neoliberal principles. Since then, the socioenvironmental impacts in Latin American countries have received a great deal of intellectual and political attention. The understanding of environmental problems as products of social inequalities grew, shaped by a post-Marxist interpretation that shows the relationships between production regimes, social relationships, and relationships in nature. This debate in Latin America should also lead the so-called Northern countries to question how these same issues are also traversing them. For example, Asian countries have recently sent ships full of garbage back to their countries of origin, such as Canada and France.⁸

From the political ecology perspective, environmental racism is a type of ecological inequality. As Keucheyan (2018: 60) points out, "a process that started with the exploitation of slave labor continues with the exploitation of the health of their descendants."⁹ This issue is structural on the American continent. In this sense, the prism of analysis of decolonial criticism in dialogue with political ecology is of great relevance to these cases. Working in the Caribbean, Ferdinand Malcolm reminds us that the exploitative relationship between humans and the Earth was imposed by a minority of white European men on the rest of humanity, inseparably linked to the imposition of a hierarchy among humans based on skin color: race. By proposing a decolonial ecology, he refers to ontological work aiming at deconstructing identity essentialisms in order to recognize and encourage the plurality of modes of existence (Malcolm, 2019). Decolonial political ecology highlights the

⁵ The movie *There's something in the water*, by Ellen Page and Ian Daniel (2019), gives us a recent example of the struggle of minority communities from Nova Scotia in Canada against industrial waste's lethal effects in their territories.

⁶ The *Environmental Justice Atlas* (<https://ejatlas.org>) led by Leah Temper and Joan Martinez Alier among others, maps the situations that can be called environmental injustice worldwide. We note that the virtual map is a tool that has been widely used in the fight against environmental injustice due to its simple handling, the rapid dissemination of information, and the procedural dimension of its proposal (the content is fed in continuously and corrected).

⁷ Denilo de Souza Santos has translated the Spanish and Portuguese quotes.

⁸ See for example https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2019/07/30/l-indonesie-renvoie-vers-la-france-des-dechets-illegalement-importes_5494837_3244.html

⁹ Regarding the United States, Silva also emphasizes in this sense that "the movement for environmental justice reaffirmed the need for discussion regarding the condition of blacks in the North American social context, as a result of the development and maintenance of colonial-type relations, in a reproduction of the situation of economic, social, and political domination to which black men and women in western history have historically been subjected" (2012: 89-90).

power relationships still in force in economic development models – put into practice by large companies and extractive industries – and the racialization that this implies.

3. The internationalization of the movement and the Latin American reinterpretation of the concept

The approach adopted in Latin America to address the issue of environmental racism highlights North-South relationships of exploitation. Even the name "Latin America" (named after Amerigo Vesúpcio) can be interpreted as a product of racist colonialism that transforms territorial invasion into conquest (Walsh, 2017). As a counterpoint, the use of the term 'Abya Yala', which means "land in full maturity", is a claim to the right of self-determination (Walsh, 2017: 20):

In these lands of Abya Yala, a system of classification from superior to inferior of beings, knowledge, and visions ways and practices of life begins, starting from the ideas of "race", "gender" and "nature", and as part of a civilizational, Eurocentric and Christian project whose axis – or heart – has been – and still is the capital (Walsh, 2017: 22).

The analysis of North-South colonialist relationships in the debate on environmental justice revives Frantz Fanon's (1961) idea that colonialism is the creator of social classification and differentiation techniques. The naturalization of race-based hierarchies was part of a domination strategy imposed by the white European male minority on the rest of humanity in order to conquer these territories (Quijano, 2007; Malcolm, 2019). In the words of Aníbal Quijano:

Coloniality is one of the constitutive and specific elements of the world pattern of capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial / ethnic classification of the world's population as the cornerstone of this pattern of power, and operates in each of the planes, areas and dimensions, material and subjective, of daily existence and on the social scal. (Quijano, 2007: p. 93)

Exploitation of the environment and racism are articulated processes since "domination is always, to some extent, the negation of the other, which is valid for peoples, ethnic groups, groups or social classes, and nature" (Porto-Gonçalves, 2012: 21). Thus, a close relationship is observed between racism and environmental injustice in Latin America, expressed in the most diverse processes of discrimination, exclusion, and violence. In the words of Horacio Araóz (2011: 139): "In the present, as in the origins of the modern colonial order, there are bodies that matter and others that not so much." In this way, a dynamic of deterritorialization deepens within countries and threatens communities.

Martínez Alier's concept of 'environmentalism of the poor' (2007) was of fundamental importance in this process of reinterpreting the North American approach of environmental injustice. In his major contribution to political ecology, he analyzes the relationship between the local and global and points out, through a critical reflection, that local episodes of environmental racism are part of a larger structure of global power, marked by relationships of dominance. The imposition of Western logic on the world is an "ecological imperialism," as Machado-Araóz also notes:

The concept of ecological imperialism refers to the historically variable mechanisms of forced appropriation and systematically asymmetric transfer of environmental goods and services from the subalternized territories to the centers of power and consumption, to the 'financing' of the economic power of the dominant economies based on the ecological degradation of the peripheries, it is inherently associated with the racial classification of the world. (Machado-Araóz, 2010: 1902)

Latin American scholars have been strongly involved in this interpretative line (Carruthers, 2008; Latta & Wittman, 2012; Leff, 2001; Salamanca Villamizar & Astudillo Pizarro, 2016; Walsh, 2017; Quijano, 2011), forming the field called 'Latin American political ecology': "a specific political-intellectual tradition, with a dynamic and structure of enunciation that have no equivalent in other areas of political-intellectual elaboration" (Alimonda, 2015: 163). Many scholars focus on the exploitation of natural resources, with particularities that depend on national political regimes. There is agreement that environmental destruction is a new way of conquering and erasing the other – the local populations (Alimonda, 2011; Serje de la Ossa, 2011).

This asymmetrical relationship established with the invasion of Europeans and the extermination of a large part of the original peoples since the colonial period across Latin America, has found ways to perpetuate itself (Salgado, Menezes & Sanchez, 2019). In the peripheral countries, the 1990s were marked by the expansion of extractivism and agribusiness, generating intense environmental degradation. The so-called developed countries proclaimed a 'consensus' that this was the best path of development. There was no consensus, however, but rather an ethnocentric imposition of logic in which progress and development appeared like a beneficial path for all humanity (Acsehrad, 2014; Svampa, 2013).

Maristella Svampa (2013) argues that the Washington Consensus was a 'Consensus of Commodities' that assigned Latin America the role of supplier of raw materials (food products, hydrocarbons, metals, and minerals) to industrialized countries. This analysis stressed relationships of dependency and domination between developed and peripheral countries:

The configuration of capitalism as a world-economy will be based on an asymmetric geographical order in which inferior territories and peoples were constituted as subordinate suppliers of environmental goods and slave labor to supply the processes of accumulation and predatory consumption of 'civilization' dominant.' In this process, it is evident how the colonial configuration of the world inevitably supposes a structure of double exploitation, racial and environmental. (Araóz, 2010: 1902)

Extractivism continues to be a dominant economic model. Its updated version combines the power of multinational companies with technological advancements and the support of national governments with neo-developmental projects based on public-private partnerships (Muñoz & Villarreal, 2018, 2019). Northern colonialism is reappropriated by the Southern leaders, so that the national elites are in line with neoliberal developmental projects, mainly through flexible legislation, shaping internal colonialism (Rodriguez Mir, 2012; Muñoz & Villarreal, 2018). Many national projects based on ideas of progress and development addressed to Latin American countries often rely upon colonialist ideas of delay and development (Salgado, Menezes & Sanchez, 2019; Muñoz & Villarreal, 2018). Despite the promise of development and wealth, "Latin America and the Caribbean is currently considered the most unequal [region] in the world and one with the highest concentration of wealth, land and income" (Muñoz & Villarreal, 2019: 309).

Extractivism is linked to other forms of cultural oppression, which threaten the lives of populations "radically affected by large economic enterprises that settle in their territories" (Losekann, 2016: 132). As Catherine Walsh puts it:

They are territories where the epistemes of collective beings and knowledge dwell, the structures of collective memory and of existence-life, where nature is understood as an integral relationality in which human beings together with other beings are part and play a fundamental role. Today the coloniality of nature represents the conjunction of the coloniality of power, knowledge and being; it is the coloniality of existence-life. (Walsh, 2017: 25)

To overcome this process, mobilization strategies configure the so-called 'policy of the affected,' marked by the feeling of injustice (*op cit.*). Between 2006 and 2013, Latin America was home to the largest number of protests for "environmental justice." Most were focused on the fight against growing extractivism and its effects

(Losekann, 2016) and were often accused of "anti-modernity or the denial of progress, or simply of irrationality and environmental fundamentalism" (Svampa, 2013: 3).

It is worth remembering that, in Latin America, it is often women who stand in militancy against this "new and deeper form of extractive colonization" such as industrial mining and a monoculture of transgenic foods (Puleo, 2012: 39). Severely affected by western models of development, "...they are protagonists in the defense and the maintenance of life before, during and after conflicts" (Muñoz & Villarreal, 2019: 319). Sadly, the criminalization of social movements has produced a record number of murders of environmental leaders and activists in Latin America and the Caribbean. As Muñoz & Villarreal (2018: 155) remind us, "In 2017 alone, of the 197 environmentalists killed worldwide, 116 died in the region and more than half (60%) are directly related to extractive or mining activities." More specifically, Brazil saw an increase of such crimes during the Bolsonaro government¹⁰, related to the intensified attacks upon the forest and its inhabitants in the context of a policy of agrobusiness and mining expansion.

Ultimately, academic/activist work around the concept of environmental injustice has denounced the very idea of domination of nature and an anthropocentric view that is part of a tremendous Eurocentric colonizing enterprise, widespread and naturalized in the western world. In this sense, it can be argued that all counter-hegemonic efforts to revive Amerindian and Afrocentric conceptions of sociability and a relationship with nature are ways of breaking with this dominant logic and consequently breaking with racism.

Some authors are also bringing academic visibility to indigenous ontologies related to "*Buen-Vivir*"/"*Bem-Viver*" ("living well") and highlighting cultural aspects that extrapolate from the Western cultural matrix (Losekann, 2016), with its perception of nature as a resource to be exploited (Salgado, Menezes & Sanchez, 2019). As Muñoz and Villarreal phrase it:

The critiques of development that multiply in Latin America and the Caribbean, value the traditionally relegated knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and women, allow the questioning of development based on economic growth as a promoter of well-being.... [and] value the care of nature or the importance of community relations and solidarity (Muñoz & Villarreal, 2018: 148).

Buen vivir also means that we need to overcome the idea that humanity is more important than all other living beings, in order to guarantee the rights of nature (the "Pachamama") and live in harmony, as part of the same system (Gudynas, 2019). It is not a coincidence that "*Buen-Vivir*" emerged in Latin America, claiming "an alternative social existence" (Quijano, 2011: 5).

4. Racism or environmental injustice? Vicissitudes of the Brazilian case

Brazil is the only Latin American Portuguese-speaking country and has similarities and differences compared to its neighbors. While the Brazilian sociology of the 1930s aimed to distinguish the processes of Portuguese and Spanish colonization (Holanda, 1936), there is no doubt that both were equally violent towards the land and the people who lived there. Since the colonial period, all of Latin America has been seen as a sumptuous Eldorado of inexhaustible nature, from which everything could be extracted.

Environmental conflicts have gained more visibility in the country with the murder of Chico Mendes in the late 1980s. Between the 1980s and 1990s, social movements in the struggle for indigenous and *quilombola* (fugitive slave, or maroon) peoples claimed their rights and gained space in the constituent movement. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution devotes a specific chapter to the environmental theme and recognizes indigenous peoples' right to traditionally occupied lands, and the rights of the remaining *quilombo* communities (Lachefski & Zhouri, 2019).

¹⁰ We think more recently of the murder of the British journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous expert Bruno Pereira in the Javali Valley, indigenous territory, in June 2022. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/22/three-charged-brazil-murder-dom-phillips-bruno-pereira>

As a local response to the first national conference of environmental leaders of color in Washington in 1991, Brazil hosted a major event the following year. The Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – UNCED) gave greater institutionality to environmental issues and encourages other countries to include environmental rights in their Constitutions. The event produced two documents, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Agenda 21, both impregnated with "the new discourse on sustainable development, which offered few novelties, since it proposed to solve world poverty and environmental problems again through economic growth" (Acosta & Machado, 2012: 76).

The environmental injustice concept appeared in an organized way in Brazilian universities in the early 2000s. In 2001, Niterói hosted the first international colloquium on environmental justice, work, and citizenship, with influential researchers and activists on the international stage (Herculano, 2008). From there, a Brazilian Environmental Justice Network (RBJA) was organized that declared that "the term environmental justice is an agglutinating and mobilizing concept, as it integrates the environmental, social and ethical dimensions of sustainability and development, often dissociated from both discourses and practices" (Silva, 2012: 92). In the following years, the Network consolidated itself as an instrument for denouncing environmental injustices, such as deforestation, land grabbing, timber exploitation, ore extraction, and monocultures (Acsehrad, 2010). In 2005, a working group dedicated to this theme was established – Combating Environmental Racism – and the Brazilian seminar against environmental racism took place.

The blog *racismoambiental.net*¹¹ and the *Combating Environmental Racism Bulletin* were established in 2009. They aimed to consolidate and disseminate academic knowledge about situations hitherto invisible in Brazil and to coordinate and mobilize "different subjects for an environmental struggle that contains at its core the denunciation and confrontation of racism" (Pacheco & Faustino, 2013: 92). This took place in a period of affirmative policies and identity demands, especially for the country's black population. Besides this consolidation at the academic level, it is also noteworthy that a front is currently beginning to come together at the level of NGOs, supported by environmental activist and athlete Juliana Poncioni from *Parley Pelos Oceanos Brasil*¹², who directed an educational program in July and August 2020 on environmental racism in partnership with the NGO *Engajamundo* and the Black Evangelical Movement.¹³ Notably, young militant black women are the main actors in this build-up and are moving the debate forward on various types of racism in civil society.

There is no consensus, however, among environmentalists and researchers on the importance of addressing environmental racism in the fight against environmental injustice. The relevance of the racism debate is not apparent to everyone, and many people underestimate it. This is the case with orthodox Marxist tendencies, as emphasized by Pacheco and Faustino (2013), who say that "such tendencies are limited to recognizing, at most, a 'secondary' importance, among other structural biases of inequalities that transcend (albeit are irrefutably 'within') class struggles" (*ibid*: 111). The authors continue, ironically: "Who knows, once the revolution has taken place, will it be the moment to face institutional and environmental racism? Put another way, once socialist hegemony is achieved, will racism naturally fall apart into thin air, with the other deleterious effects of capital?" (*ibid*). The environmental injustice concept is considered by some to be more general and functional and could encompass a diversity of groups and social actors with the same class status as poor or working-class.

There is resistance and mistrust towards the environmental racism concept among university students and in the movement of the struggle for environmental justice itself. Several scholars emphasize two limits to its use. The first is its specificity, which would prevent "the movement from reaching an international unity due to the excessive focus on local issues" (Silva, 2012: 91). That is, the issue of racism is seen as reductive compared to the environmental injustice concept, which is more comprehensive and thus more far-reaching. The second limit refers to the debate on racism. As Silva puts it, "a large part of black movements in the country sees in the use of the term 'environmental racism' an attempt to minimize racism itself, since the 'environmental'

¹¹ <https://racismoambiental.net.br>

¹² <https://www.parley.tv/#fortheoceans>

¹³ <https://linktr.ee/parleybrasil>

qualification could restrict, according to this view, the broader and institutional content of racist practice in our society" (*ibid*: 95). These two limits highlight the risk of "dispersing groups that, without identifying with the concept, would end up looking for other flags of struggle" (*ibid*: 106).

While there is a possibility of dispersal, people and groups can also be brought together. In the case of the U.S., using the term racism amid the struggle for civil rights has shown great potential for bringing black activists into the historically white environmental debate. Everything points to the same potential for Brazil. We should highlight the complex articulation of environmental racism with other types of racism, as Arivaldo Santos de Souza shows when speaking of institutional environmental racism (2015: 57):

Let us suppose for a moment, hypothetically, that the expulsion of a *quilombola* community from lands (environment) occupied more than a hundred years ago is legitimately undertaken by a police organization (structure) with members of any ethnic/racial origin. And yet, a practice of institutional racism occurs, since the racist system gave rise to the impossibility of that community exercising ownership over those lands, due to race. While the judicial ruling that eventually authorized the repossession of property is legitimate and in accordance with the dictates of the system (the legal structure), the result is racist. (Santos de Souza, 2015: 55)

Thus, once the notion of environmental racism is defined and advocated, its complementarity with the environmental injustice concept outlines a coherent theoretical framework. As Silva points out: "We believe it means that, although racism and racial issues may not be the basis for analyzing all situations in which environmental injustice is identified, there will certainly be others that will be incomprehensible without their consideration" (2012: 92). Furthermore, showing and saying that environmental racism is a type of environmental injustice seems relevant and necessary, given the case of Brazilian society. The same author continues:

This concept allows that, in each case in which environmental injustice cases are identified, the presence of racism can be analyzed in its configuration, reaffirming its existence and building a mentality that escapes the social and institutional inertia born of the myth of racial democracy. (Silva, 2012: 107)

Several authors agree with the need to discuss environmental racism in a specific way in Brazil, where "racial inequalities can be analytically connected to the majority of impoverished and exploited people as factory workers, unskilled and unemployed urban workers as well as peasants without land" (Guimarães, 2007: 12). Moreover, racism interacts with other systems of oppression such as gender, religion, ethnicity and social status. The class approach is not enough to capture the complexity of a country where racial and social issues are deeply linked in situations of injustice (Fernandes, 1965; Guimarães, 2002; Harris, 1964; Hasenbalg, 2005). As Silva argues, the concept of environmental racism "allows us to reaffirm that most of the recurrent environmental injustice cases in the country are the result of a structural organization marked by racial injustice" (Silva, 2012: 107).

The applicability of the term environmental racism to the Brazilian context derives from the close link between processes of marginalization linked to race/ethnicity, and environmental injustice in the country. However, some Brazilian race relationships are distinct from the those of North America as well as other Latin American countries. There are singularities in Latin America's system of classification. The fact that it is a fluid racial classification does not imply the absence of discrimination and disadvantage expressed in complex inequalities (Telles, Flores & Urrea-Giraldo, 2015). Columbia, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil can be considered 'pigmentocracies,' which means that in these contexts social stratification is based in the interaction between skin color and ethnoracial categories, producing ethnoracial inequalities (*ibid*). Darker skin tones are the ones with greater risk of discrimination and disadvantages, while lighter-toned individuals tend to escape from stigmatized categories as they try to be identified with dominant groups (*ibid*). This point is a very important

one for understanding Latin America and its own particular way of social organization. Understanding Brazilian race relationships also allows a better understanding of the environmental racism concept in this context.

Attempting to portray the "inescapable and inhuman prevalence of environmental racism" in conflicts involving environmental injustice and health in Brazil, researchers Tânia Pacheco and Cristiane Faustino (2013) propose a reinterpretation of the concept born in the United States in the 1980s, to adapt it to the Brazilian reality. The authors also highlight how racism in the U.S. was institutionalized through segregationist laws, how the Civil Rights Movement was important in reversing this process, and the incorporation of the fight against environmental racism emerged in the wake of this process:

The fact that they were a formally segregated and criminalized minority over the centuries has led American blacks from a subservience regulated by laws to the organization of the Civil Rights Movement, which was hard-won in the 1960s, mainly. Awareness of environmental racism and the fight against it emerged almost as a natural result of this organization and this insurgency. In a way, it was the struggle for civil rights that continued, now with a new, additional element: the environmental. (Pacheco and Faustino, 2013: 90)

In Brazil, on the other hand, racism was for many years concealed by an ideology of racial democracy, miscegenation and the whitening ideal that underpinned the construction of national identity in the first half of the 20th century. As Pacheco and Faustino argue, "the omission of race by the State and 'racial mixture'(...) led to the false idea of the absence of racism" (*ibid*: 74). The authors add that these elements "hinder the recognition of racism itself and the establishment of policies to deconstruct inequalities that disadvantage most of the 'non-white' population" (*ibid*: 90). As Silva points out, "it is precisely the lack of consideration of the existence of racial discrimination throughout the country's history that makes it even more urgent to reflect on racial issues in the search for a fair distribution of resources and natural risks" (2012: 95). The recognition of racism also allows us to consider the victims of such situations and question whiteness and its privileges (Pacheco & Faustino, 2013; Pulido, 2000).

While there is resistance to considering race, the context has been changing in recent years, with increased awareness and indignation against racism; what Kabengele Munanga calls a "global anti-racist conscience."¹⁴ This current movement has been gaining more and more strength globally and in Brazil in reaction to the murders of black people due to police violence. While these reactions are not new in communities and black diasporas in various countries, they take on an additional dimension today with the massive participation of whites, Latinos, and Asians in the protests, even with the social distancing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as Silva argues, "the use of the term environmental racism points to a practical utility in the legal field. This is because racism is typified as a crime in Brazil, which means the existence of an institutionality already established to combat environmental racism" (Silva, 2012: 106).

Regardless of the differences between the Brazilian and American contexts, Pacheco and Faustino (2013) believe that the definition proposed by Rev. Chavis applies to the Brazilian case because of the following shared elements: racial discrimination in environmental policies; compliance with regulations and laws; the deliberate choice to deposit toxic waste and install industrial polluters in communities of color; the official recognition that poisons and pollutants threaten their lives; and because they are the same population segments that were and are excluded from official policy decision-making processes. On the other hand, Brazil has other definitions of environmental racism, such as that proposed by Selene Herculano:

¹⁴ Santos, João Vitor. Demonstrations after George Floyd's death represent the globalization of consciousness about racism. Special interview with Kabengele Munanga. *IHU Unisunis*, June 15th 2020. Available in: <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/599927-manifestacoes-depois-da-morte-de-george-floyd-representam-a-globalizacao-da-consciencia-sobre-o-racismo-entrevista-especial-com-kabengele-munanga>. Accessed 30 June 2020.

Environmental racism is the set of ideas and practices of societies and their governments, which justify environmental and human degradation with the search for development and the implicit naturalization of the inferiority of certain affected segments of the population – blacks, Indians, migrants, extractivists, fishermen, poor workers – who suffer the negative impacts of economic growth and who are made to sacrifice for the benefit of others. (2006: s/p)

This author also revives the category of racism, which she considers to be the way we disqualify the other and cancel it as non-similar, against a white, Eurocentric model. In these terms, the northeastern Brazilian migrant – stigmatized as "rat-man," "flat-head," the "invader of metropolitan modernity" – is equivalent to a race and, as such, the target of racism (2006: s/p.).

For Santos de Souza, environmental racism "means that voluntary or involuntary racist practices are a factor in determining the environmental conditions to which vulnerable groups are subjected, due to some factor that confers identity, such as race, social class, gender and, national origin" (2015: 24). It is interesting to note that the dimension of racialization is not the only one highlighted in these definitions, which consider other social markers that are objects of otherness, discrimination and denial. It is, therefore, an expanded meaning of racism that is corroborated by Pacheco:

Among us, different economically vulnerable populations are equally subject to prejudice and, likewise – although they do not receive obviously racist labels – they are treated as non-citizens, as usable and disposable beings, to the extent that capital can dispense with them or come to consider them an obstacle to the development of a new project. This is the case of fishermen, shellfish fishermen, riverine populations, *geraizeiros* (locals in Minas Gerais), coconut-breakers and many other Brazilians. (Pacheco, 2007: 2)

This sense of racism dialogues with the concept of "differential" or "cultural" racism theorized by Michel Wieviorka (1993, 1998). Born out of the feeling of disruption to one's own community by others, this racism constructs the foreigner as an identity threat and postulates that differences between cultures are insurmountable. It is less about physical characteristics – such as skin color – and more about cultural or religious identity, seen as inferior.

In this definition of environmental racism, attention is drawn to the fact that different Brazilian populations have historically been seen as 'obstacles' to development. As a peripheral country and with a large percentage of poor or impoverished people, this 'identity' argument challenges the universal fight against poverty by social movements of different types. There is also no recognition that a large part of the expropriation of people from their territories is one of the causes of the "favelization" and impoverishment of particular populations (Herculano, 2008).

It is worth mentioning that for large extractive corporations and public authorities both in Brazil and in the United States, "the contempt for the common space and the environment is confused with the contempt for people and communities" (Herculano, 2008: 5). However, in Brazil, the situation of the so-called traditional peoples – riverside dwellers, extractivists, *Geraizeiros*, fishermen, wetland dwellers, *Caiçaras*, *Vazanteiros*, gypsies, Pomeranians, *Terreiro* communities, and *Quilombola* – who have been removed from their territories expands the debate on environmental racism, and "transcends the problem of locating chemical waste deposits and incinerators in the North American experience" (*ibid*). Between eradicating poverty and developing the country, these populations become disposable and are configured as expendable residents of 'sacrifice zones' (Acselrad, 2004). In this way, the struggles for environmental justice in Brazil range widely, from advocating for territories of populations, water, soil, and fighting against all other expressions of environmental market-driven inequality, without forgetting the defense of the "rights of future populations" (Acselrad, 2010: 114).

It is worth noting that on the map of conflicts involving environmental injustice and health in Brazil, the State of Bahia appears as one of the most affected in the country and the most affected in the Northeast. A portion of the conflicts in Bahia can be characterized as expressions of environmental racism (Pacheco &

Faustino, 2013). This is the case, for example, for communities in the black neighborhoods of Santo Amaro, in which children have frequently died at birth or were deformed as a result of the lead contamination caused by the Companhia Brasileira de Chumbo. This is also the case for the *quilombola* communities of Ilha de Maré, in Bahia de Todos os Santos, which suffer from the contamination of air and water caused by the industrialization of their surroundings – the Landulpho Alves refinery, Madre de Deus Maritime Terminal, and Aratu Industrial Complex (Rougeon, Terribili & Mota, 2022). The ethnography carried out by Main (2017), who explored another, mostly black coastal community in Bahia, found a context very similar to the Ilha de Maré case. She highlighted the consequences of regional coastal development based on "a new model of capital accumulation" that she calls "racialized environmental dispossession" (*ibid*: 4). In fact, this development model not only leads to the pollution of the region's primary rivers, thus compromising the livelihood of local fishing communities, but also legitimizes a system of privatization of coastal spaces, in which private security guards restrict the fishers' access to the river. Consequently, Main found that the community in Ilha de Maré lives in a permanent struggle for environmental and racial justice. The prevalence of environmental racism cases in Bahia is not surprising since it is the state with the largest concentration of black people¹⁵ in the country.

5. Alternative horizons opened by the fight against environmental racism

As we have seen, the increasing visibility of identified environmental racism cases in Brazil is accompanied by criticism of colonialism and capitalism in Southern countries. However researchers, environmentalists, and local leaders do not just complain; they also conceive and enact systemic alternatives to development and extractivism (Solón, 2019). These are possible utopian horizons based on local life models, ontologies, and cosmologies that increasingly find a prominent place on the environmental agenda, notably touching on the issue of human rights, and the rights of nature and territories. This critique and activism is a very complex process that involves challenging local and global political agendas that often serve more to maintain capitalist social structure and sociability. Considering this, Solón points out that "to decolonize is to dismantle the prevailing political, economic, social, cultural, and mental systems. It is a constant process, which does not take place once and for all" (Solón, 2019: 31). By defending decolonial ecology, Ferdinand Malcolm highlights the importance of ontological work aiming at deconstructing identity essentialisms in order to recognize and encourage the plurality of modes of existence (Malcolm, 2019).

Movements for environmental justice have different agendas, which vary, as Santos de Souza comments:

...according to the region (environmental racism, unsustainable development practices, globalization, and ecofeminism). However, in general, they challenge the environmental crisis, the result, and the vehicle of promoting injustice in unequal societies, and demand exercising human rights and expanding human development opportunities." (Santos de Souza, 2015: 41)

In the late 1990s, Arturo Escobar identified the right to territory as a new political requirement that promotes the formation of new territories motivated by new political perceptions and practices that boost social struggles (1997). The legal formation of these territories is one more step in the fight against forms of expropriation and the denial of the spaces occupied by minoritized local populations made invisible by large developmental enterprises. It is a step towards improved ways of life for these racialized social groups.

This demand for territorial rights falls within the scope of "ontological political practice." Contemporary social movements, particularly the actions and ideas of indigenous peoples, *quilombola*, peasants, and ecologists are "ontological struggles" that have acquired a planetary dimension (Escobar, 2015). The emphasis is placed on this ontological dimension as a way of affirming a multiplicity of worlds, the "pluriverse," as opposed to the modern and hegemonic project of One World (of the individual and the market), a neoliberal globalization project based on a naturalistic and dualistic ontology that opposes culture and nature, and has extended to the global level since colonialism (*ibid*). In this way, it is about affirming worlds or relational

¹⁵ We note that this identification in Brazil is based on a criterion of people's self-definition of ethnicity/skin color.

ontologies, where humans and nonhumans are always in interaction (Albert, 1993; Descola, 2005; Ingold, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1996). In many relational ontologies, the territory is a condition of possibility and is vital. For many communities, spaces that manifest themselves as mangroves, seas, rivers, mountains, or lakes are considered alive or lively spaces. There is a relationship from subject to subject and to the territory (Escobar, 2015). Nonhumans thus participate in the life community of these populations, and consequently the field of politics opens up to nonhumans.

As Souza and Martins (2019) warn, it is important to discuss the consequences of these ethnic-territorial struggles and their ontological dimension from the perspective of human rights and through intercultural dialogue. They go further. Supported by the founding principles of so-called "Southern epistemologies," they propose a radical transformation or critical reinvention in the field of human rights, anchored in the adoption of a counter-hegemonic language that enhances emancipatory narratives committed to the dignity of all. Since this dialogue aims to make what "colonialism has achieved" flourish in the opposite direction from violence and exploitation, it must "gather the languages of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal struggles, through an intercultural translation process" (Lorca, 2019).

Boaventura de Souza Santos (2018) made a noteworthy proposal when he visited Ilha de Maré in Bahia in 2018 during the World Social Forum's "Toxic Tour" organized by local leaders. Observing the environmental disaster and health calamity affecting the local communities of fishermen and shellfish gatherers and the neglect and abandonment of public agencies, he argued that one way to "get out of this hell" would be to declare (and protect) the island as a subject of human rights. He thus pointed out the need to grant the place and its inhabitants, landscapes, mangroves, ecosystems, traditional fishing, and seafood culture the status of a legal person with human rights. "Women and men from Ilha de Maré may be at the forefront of a new conception of nature and human rights that is emerging in different parts of the world," he added (*ibid*), and suggested that the leaders should organize a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in the face of the Brazilian Judiciary's omission. Several initiatives of this nature, characterized by the relationship with a territory that is considered a source of life, have already become jurisprudence in Latin America (e.g in Bolivia, Ecuador) (Gudynas, 2019). Countless experiences offer an alternative to the exhausted development model and form a horizon that communities enduring environmental racism in Brazil can also embrace.

Another important contribution to this debate, from ecofeminism, makes a critique of the relationship between anthropocentrism and androcentrism, both part of the process of controlling nature and dominating women. Ecofeminism has denounced the "effects of environmental toxicity on women and their reproductive health" (Puleo, 2019, p. 167), but it has also drawn attention to the potential of women for reversing the process of environmental destruction (Puleo, 2012). It does not make this a natural attribute of women, but shows how it is a product of social and political processes that mark a history of exclusion of women in decision-making spaces (*ibid*).

Finally, it is worth remembering that rights need not always be human. As environmentalist and indigenous Brazilian leader Ailton Krenak rightly argues, the idea of humanity itself already produces a split with nature and conceals a history of violence. It also produces a false idea of homogeneity, covering up the relationships of exploitation that confer substandard citizenship or humanity for many. Krenak argues that the idea of humanity ends up justifying the exploitation and destruction of the planet as if it were only a natural resource for the enjoyment of human life. "When we depersonalize rivers, mountains, and void their meanings, considering that this is an exclusive attribute of humans, we release these places so that they become extractive industrial activity waste" (Krenak, 2018: 49).

6. Final considerations

The concept of environmental racism that is forming in Latin America opens up many fronts for discussion and is traversed by other equally essential concepts and notions that stimulate and renew the political ecology debate. Speaking of environmental racism returns us to the fundamental question of inequality as the driving force of capitalism, which differentiates populations in social hierarchies to better explore, enslave, colonize, and subdue. Mobilizing the idea of environmental racism is not dissociated from critical and political

advocacy for democracy, since any expression of racism is always an instrument of domination (Herculano, 2006, 2008; Pacheco & Faustino, 2013; Silva, 2012).

Environmental racism is a concept that brings together elements from the past, referring to how some societies were exterminated and others arose from these exterminations. However, it is also a concept that points to the future; to struggles, resistance, and new forms of sociability and interaction with nature. It is a porous concept that allows dialogues inside and outside academia, and which is oxygenated by and advances from the interaction with social movements. It is also possible to see that, like the environmental issues, environmental racism is not limited to national borders. An environmental crime can affect the entire planet, so the fight is global. While it is global, this fight is also local, committed to the territorial and identity struggles of historically violated peoples.

For all these reasons, talking about environmental racism implies committing oneself to a decolonial critique, producing non-hegemonic knowledge about environmental issues, and contributing to a Southern epistemology. It is a much-needed reflection in academic circles, and a debate that deserves more visibility and future academic production beyond Brazil and the United States, in other post-colonial societies (Portuguese-speaking, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and French-speaking), in order to continue this discussion at the international level, considering the national and local singularities of the expressions of racism. This discussion is inseparable from a legal approach to the subject aimed at transforming legislation, making ideas of environmental (in)justice and racism tools that can be activated in national and international legal systems (Santos de Souza, 2015). Only in this way will it be possible to fight effectively against these forms of discrimination and annulment of the other that generate what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics (2006), the ultimate expression of sovereign power that resides in the ability to decide who can live, who should die, and who may be exposed to death.

The role of actors such as the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), and of initiatives such as the World Social Forum (WSF), whose agendas have been based on dialogue and intercultural translation, have been transformational. Indeed, the central ideas addressed in this article are guided by a critical and decolonial-inspired analysis of environmental issues and present or echo the ideas and arguments associated with CLACSO and WSF. Finally, this discussion is nourished by and contributes to a 'Latin American political ecology' literature which "offers future research directions in 'first world' and urban political ecologies and represents fertile ground for geographic research into more relational, intersectional and hemispheric political ecologies of race in the Americas" (Van Sant, Milligan & Mollet, 2021: 6). Political ecologists from the south and the north of the American hemisphere will likely interact ever more closely in research and activism about how "colonialism and racial capitalism are co-constitutive of environmental politics" (*ibid*: 3).

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