Confronting Climate Coloniality

Decolonizing Pathways for Climate Justice

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First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-73791-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-73785-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-46597-3 (ebk)

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A Theory of Fossil Imperialism

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003465973-5

The funder for this chapter is Helmholtz Centre Potsdam

earthscan from Routledge

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Introduction: Dead and Buried?

Imperialism has made quite a comeback. Not too long ago, bourgeois historians had confidently declared the age of imperialism “dead and buried”, a verdict reinforced by the supposed end of history and the triumph of “liberal” universalism (Mommsen 1982, p. 113). Even critical interventions, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s celebrated *Empire* sought to revise key assumptions about the global dispersion of power. Their message, aptly summarized by one reviewer: “Imperialism is dead. Long live Empire” (Chari 2003, p. 178). Not least since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, such conclusions ought to be reassessed: imperialism has once again become a category in the political lexicon of the day. European politicians like French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have both invoked the term to describe Russia’s aggression, while now regularly facing accusations of imperial conduct themselves (Fitzpatrick 2022; More 2022; Ossenbrink 2022). The invasion has also raised a range of new questions about an old term: What is the relevance of fossil capital and fossil infrastructure, such as pipelines, to the politics of imperialism? How will climate change affect the global distribution of power?

Theories of imperialism tend to bear the imprint of the respective historical circumstances under which they are formulated. The early groundbreaking analyses of J. A. Hobson, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir Lenin are ostensibly shaped by the inter-imperial rivalries of the early twentieth-century and their eventual culmination in World War I (Lenin 1963; Luxemburg 2003; Hobson 2005). The writings of Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin, and others bear witness to an era of decolonization amid the persistence of the Global North’s power by other means (Fanon 1963; Nkrumah 1966; Amin 1974). More recently, the theories of David Harvey, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik reflect the triumph of neoliberal globalization and the experience of the alter-globalization movement (Hardt & Negri 2001; Harvey 2005; Patnaik & Patnaik 2016). What most of these critical accounts share throughout different generations is an understanding of how state power and capital accumulation are intertwined. In our view, the theoretical added value of imperialism as an analytical lens lies precisely in the emphasis of this nexus.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003465973-5
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Contemporary theories of imperialism should likewise consider the specific circumstances of this era. For the foreseeable future, this includes accounting for an escalating *climate crisis*. As Farhana Sultana writes in the essay that inspired this volume, climate change reveals the "ongoing coloniality that governs and structures our lives, which are co-constitutive of processes of capitalism, imperialism, and international development" (Sultana 2022). This chapter contributes to this volume by shedding light on a key aspect of climate coloniality – fossil capital and its crucial role in shaping important aspects of the modern contemporary world. Fossil capital's position is critical in the perpetuation of climate coloniality "through processes of neoliberalism, racial capitalism, development interventions, economic growth models, and education" (Sultana, in this volume). Concurrently, this insight raises further questions about the centrality of fossil capital and infrastructure to the imperial world order and the potential impacts that a looming energy transition may have on its design.

While theorists since Lenin (1963) have written about the role of fossil fuel companies within imperialism, only in the wake of rapidly accelerating global heating have activists and writers started to invoke the term *fossil imperialism* as a distinct notion (Malm 2017; Samidoun 2021). Analytically, this reflects a reckoning with the crucial role that imperial states have played and continue to play in ensuring the continued expansion of the fossil fuel industry. Conversely, it also points to important ways fossil fuels have shaped the mechanisms of modern empire.

In this chapter, we aim to further contribute to an understanding of fossil imperialism as a global dynamic of domination, and to outline some of the most historically significant mechanisms of collusion between fossil capital and imperial states.

Sketching Fossil Imperialism

If imperialism is defined by the exogenous use of state power in the interest of capital, then fossil imperialism refers to its exertion in relation to *fossil capital* specifically. As per the Zetkin Collective, fossil capital refers to a particular material mode of accumulation – the "generation of profit through extraction and combustion of fossil fuels" – that became the base for most other forms of capital accumulation from the nineteenth century onwards (Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021, p. 15). Under fossil capitalism, the ceaseless accumulation of capital necessitates a continued expansion of its fossil base, most prominently coal, oil, and fossil gas (Altvater 2006; Angus 2016; Malm 2016a; Carroll 2020; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). Ensuring and controlling the flow of cheap fossil energy becomes, thus, the central task of the fossil imperial state (Patel & Moore 2020; Ghosh 2022).

Numerous scholars have recently begun highlighting and analyzing the connections between fossil capital and imperial states. In a series of contributions to a research project tentatively titled *Fossil Empire*, including a 2016 essay and a 2017 talk, Andreas Malm built on his work on fossil capital to theorize the expansion and globalization of the fossil economy throughout the nineteenth century at the hands of the British Empire (Malm 2016b; Malm 2017). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh explores the entangled lineages of modern empire, militarism, colonialism,

and fossil capitalism in his parable *The Nutmeg's Curse*. Ghosh also stresses the relevance of this nexus to understanding the present historical moment: "Fossil fuels are the foundation on which the Anglosphere's strategic hegemony rests. […] Five centuries of history […] have given the world's most 'advanced' countries a strategic interest in perpetuating the global fossil-fuel regime" (Ghosh 2022, p. 110). Other scholars have focused on more recent conjunctions between fossil capital and state power, such as Timothy Mitchell's (2013) account of the twentieth century rise in the importance of oil *vis-à-vis* coal and its implications for imperialism. James Goodman (2020) has proposed the term "climate imperialism" to articulate how the present climate crisis entrenches existing imperialist hierarchies. In *Reconsidering Reparations*, philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (2022) develops a compelling analogy between the struggle for decolonization and the ongoing fight for climate reparations. Citing the work of political theorist Adom Getachew, Táíwò argues that most influential activists and thinkers in the era of decolonization "understood that European imperialism had been 'world-constituting', concluding that this history and its consequences must be met by worldmaking resistance on the same scale" (Táíwò 2022, p. 72). Connecting the history of racial capitalism to that of the climate crisis, Táíwò holds that climate reparations, too, should not be merely thought of as compensation for damages, but serve "a larger and broader worldmaking project" on the scale and scope that previous generations of anti-colonial thinkers envisioned (Táíwò 2022, p. 74).

To appreciate the origins of fossil imperialism would require us to take a broad world-historical understanding of the emergence of capitalism. After all, the genesis of modern "fossil capitalism" in nineteenth-century England was premised on a steady supply of cheap raw materials from its imperial holdings – most notably, slave-picked cotton from the North American colonies and sugar from the Caribbean (Moore 2015). Colonial capital also built the first fossil fuel infrastructure projects. As Kathryn Yusoff (2018) describes, many slaveholders used the compensation they received as part of the nominal abolition of slavery in Britain to finance much of the infrastructure that transformed the island into the first modern industrialized nation with railroads, mines, and factories. In this sense, many aspects of fossil imperialism are directly based on previous episodes of imperial worldmaking that utilized "renewable" sources of energy like forced human labor, wind-powered ships, and solar energy. In light of this history, even a possible transition towards alternative energy sources may not necessarily bring an end to imperialism, which could continue to structure various aspects of the energy transition (Riofrancos 2020).

Our theoretical contribution is, thus, not meant to relativize the horrors of "non-fossil" imperialisms, but rather to highlight the remarkable concentration of imperial power that fossil capitalism has enabled and keeps enabling within today's world order. Understanding how fossil imperialism works, we believe, is a *sine qua non* condition for devising effective strategies of resistance to the fossil capitalist status quo. Likewise, anti-imperial movements that fail to break definitively with the logic of fossil capital are historically prone to become embroiled in various social and ecological contradictions. Consider the Pink Tide governments of the

first decade of the twenty-first century, which, as Donald Kingsbury wrote, when "faced with a choice between extraction and the local movements that made their governments possible, sided with extraction" (Kingsbury 2021, p. 979).

The following section aims to sketch the most prominent ways in which imperial states exert their power to ensure and control the flow of cheap fossil energy. We argue that most instances of fossil imperialism can be categorized in three ways: by mode of intervention (expansion or obstruction); by type of fossil fuel (coal, oil, and gas); and by the specific mechanisms employed to exert control (colonization, projection of military power, suppression of anti-extractivist movements, economic warfare, and the domination of global institutions). Figure 4.1 provides an overview of these categories.

Crucially, the verb "control" implies two opposing modes of imperial intervention. On one hand, it may refer to the acquisition, takeover, expansion, and protection of new fossil fuel resources and infrastructure, which are crucial to keeping the engine rooms of fossil capital well-supplied. On the other hand, maintaining "control" often also entails the obstruction or destruction of the infrastructure of rival capital factions and states in order to manipulate pricing and distribution (Mitchell 2013). Thus, the workings of fossil imperialism reflect the more general nature of capitalism as a mode of production *and* destruction (Lazzarato & Hurley 2021).

It is also important to consider the specific characteristics of the three dominant fossil fuels (coal, oil, fossil gas) when analyzing concrete cases. While all three energy sources still represent a significant share of the global fossil economy, each also corresponds to a distinct phase in the history of fossil imperialism: coal powered the rise of the British Empire, the switch to oil marked the ascent of American hegemony in the twentieth century, and fossil gas is at the core of the US's bid to continue projecting its global supremacy well into the twenty-first century. Each fuel also requires different methods of social and political control.

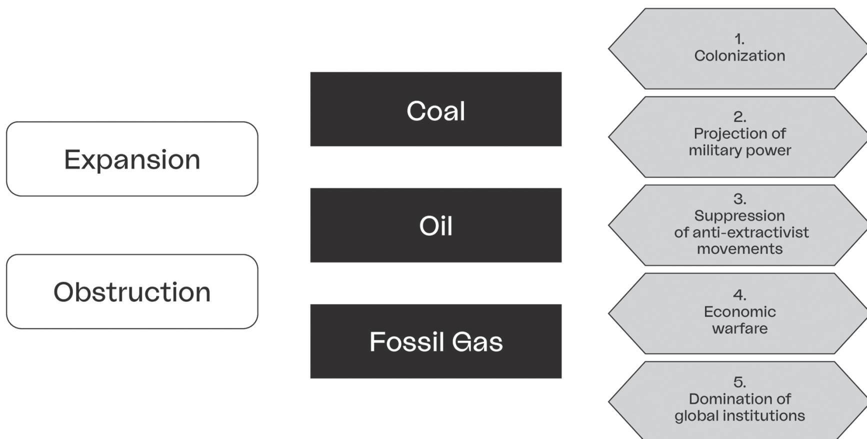

Figure 4.1 Categorizing instances of fossil imperialism.

The extraction of coal, for example, necessitates a large, disciplined work force, and control over surface land areas. With oil and fossil gas, it is relatively easier for producers to adjust the output quantity and exert pressure on market prices. Additionally, a significant percentage of oil and fossil gas (in its liquified state) is sold on spot markets and transported in tankers, meaning supplies can easily be rerouted to the highest bidder. This in turn raises the importance of controlling supply routes, in particular maritime choke points.

Lastly, we identify five mechanisms through which imperial states facilitate the interests of their local fossil economies: through colonization, the projection of military power, the suppression of anti-extractivist movements, economic warfare, and the domination of global institutions. The subsequent sections will discuss each of these mechanisms in greater detail.

Imperial Mechanisms of Control

Colonization

Colonization designates forms of direct political domination and subjugation of one people by another (Kohn & Reddy 2023). It is perhaps not accidental that the high period of colonization coincided with the "golden" age of coal, the fossil fuel that powered the rise of the British Empire. Since coal extraction requires a large amount of disciplined labor, it also necessitates more comprehensive forms of social and political control than oil and gas extraction. Attempting to meet the energy demands of its growing steam-powered merchant fleet, Britain "scanned the planet for coal", establishing respective industries in places as distant as Canada, Australia, India, South Africa, and Borneo (Malm 2016b). At the same time, the British often obstructed the rapid expansion of foreign coal industries beyond a necessary level of production to protect their domestic industry. As Vincent Seow's work shows, the quest for coal was also at the heart of the first modern non-European empire. The Japanese occupation of Manchuria was principally motivated by the desire to control the coal resources and the railway networks in the region. The specific forms of technocratic control developed and pioneered during this era continue to shape the political landscape of East Asia today (Seow 2021, p. 4).

The shift towards oil and fossil gas as primary energy sources in the twentieth century helped strengthen the movements for self-determination and the end of colonialism, while at the same time often leading to new forms of internal colonization and social control (Mitchell 2013).

Even in the oil and gas industry, the imprints of the colonial era are easy to detect. British Petroleum (BP), for instance, is the direct historical successor of *Anglo-Persian Oil Company* (APOC), which has roots in Britain's control of Middle Eastern oil (Aronoff 2020). Similarly, Shell's roots are in the Dutch colonial empire in what is now Indonesia (Welvaart & van den Berge 2021). While in most cases, fossil imperial states now avoid resorting to full-on colonization to assert their oil- and gas-related interests *vis-à-vis* competing states, colonial logics are still at play when states and companies face competition along new oil and gas

frontiers. A clear example is the Arctic, where the prospect of widely available resources has prompted a new wave of settler colonialism (Silva 2022).

Projection of Military Power

By *projection of military power*, we refer to military interventions short of full-on colonization. Historically, states often deployed their armed forces to protect fossil infrastructure abroad, a practice that continues in various ways until today. Projection of military power has also occurred through proxy armies, and has been supported by a circuit of oil and weapons, such as with the Gulf monarchies. The recent anniversary of the Iraq invasion is a reminder of how current this remains: 20 years after the regime-changing military intervention in Iraq, the US still has 2,500 troops stationed there (Simon, Krause & Alshamary 2023), and BP and Shell, which had been barred from the country for decades, have extracted tens of billions of dollars in Iraqi oil since 2011 (Kennard 2023). Intervention can serve both to *secure* access to fossil fuels and supply routes, but also to *destroy/block* challengers to existing monopolies (Plucinska 2022).

According to Schrader, the quest for "armed primacy" is intended to uphold the US-led economic order. US security assistance has consistently sought to ensure the conditions necessary for the continued growth of capital, aiming to suppress and limit the influence and organization of marginalized groups and those most susceptible to exploitation by capital (Schrader 2018).[1] In the past, the perceived threats were organized labor or communist guerrilla movements, as they aimed to restrain capitalist exploitation. Even today, the descendants of these groups are still targets, with US security assistance being implicated in actions like supporting the suppression of environmental activists, and incidents where US personnel have been involved in harming of innocent civilians. Indigenous populations also remain highly vulnerable, especially as ongoing surges in commodity demand make their land and subsurface resources increasingly lucrative for multinational investors (Schrader 2018).

Suppression of Anti-Extractivist Movements

The *suppression of anti-extractivist movements* is another crucial aspect to the making of the neocolonial world economy, in which former colonies continue to play a subordinate role as providers of cheap raw material and fossil fuel to the industrial core (Harvey 2011; Garavini 2019; Bevins 2021). In the post-Cold War period, the communist subversive spawned three new subjects to be controlled: the urban criminal, the drug trafficker, and the migrant (Jurema 2022). This approach required continuing securitization of the Global South's social problems.

One classic example is the struggle of the Ogoni people, who engaged in peaceful civil resistance against oil extraction and pipeline spills on their land in the Niger Delta region in South-Eastern Nigeria. Their resistance, led by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), was met with heavy state repression, including the execution of nine organizers in 1995, and eventually an out of court

settlement in 2015. Another example of the suppression of grassroots movements is the War on Drugs, under which, as Stuart Schrader highlights, US security assistance safeguards the interests of capital and suppresses grassroots movements that pose a threat to it (Schrader 2018).

In the post-Cold War era, the US has adopted an approach that extends its extensive policing and surveillance infrastructure far beyond its own borders. This involves promoting close collaboration between law enforcement agencies across international boundaries and establishing buffer zones along the borders of Mexico and Central America. In essence, this adaptation involves the incorporation of military-style institutions, tools, policies, and practices into efforts aimed at controlling urban crime, drug trafficking, and immigration. As Oswaldo Zavala points out, specifically about Mexico, the War on Drugs was from the get-go based on National Security paradigms ("Episode 290: The Beast", no date). Elsewhere, Zavala notes that neoliberal societies often require a state of constant conflict to open markets and facilitate the capital flow (Zavala & Savinar 2022). In Mexico, this meant that the government needed a strong military to depopulate and secure resource-rich areas. Violence in Mexico typically correlates with extractive projects (Loudis 2019).

Economic Warfare

Modern-day economic sanctions developed out of mechanisms for energy control, and simply put, constitute a form of *economic warfare* (Mulder 2022). Other means include blacklisting, import and export rationing, property seizures and asset freezes, trade prohibitions, preclusive purchasing, and financial blockades. Initially the global sanctions regime was created under the auspices of multilateralism in the League of Nations and later the United Nations in New York. In the post-World War II period, the primary center for implementing sanctions shifted swiftly from the United Nations in New York to the national security institutions in Washington, DC. Significantly, in the period after World War I, more often than not sanctions were applied against peripheral countries, and thus were perceived by much of the world as a disciplinary mechanism of the Atlantic bloc rather than a new peacekeeping practice. The application of sanctions as a response to the violation of norms is a political question rather than a technical one: "as sanctions have become an accepted tool of liberal international institutions, the threshold for using them has declined" (Mulder 2022, p. 292).

The normalization of sanctions as a routine part of international politics is a consequence of the US rise to global political, economic, and military dominance immediately after World War II. Capital assets in the US were worth 65% more than before the war; its exports had experienced a four-fold increase; its gross national product (GNP) represented half of global GNP; it held two-thirds of the gold reserves in the world; it accounted for one-third of manufacturing exports and half of shipping business worldwide; and it consumed nearly half of the global production of copper, lead, zinc, and steel (Klassen 2014, pp. 65–6). Significantly, petroleum had become the most significant commodity in global trade, both in

terms of its value and quantity. By 1945, the US was responsible for producing two-thirds of the world's oil, and over half of the remaining one-third originated from Latin America and the Caribbean (Mitchell 2013, p. 111). Three factors have shaped the US's sanction regime: its unique military dominance; the ideological inflection of Cold War politics; and the role of US financial markets in the world economy. Today, global banks and corporate finance are "the frontline sanctions implementation and compliance" (Mulder 2022, p. 295).

As Grandin (2019) argues regarding the economic sanctions on Venezuela, sanctions are part of a larger strategy of global ordering. The sanctions regime also serves to police how Global South countries manage their resources, including fossil fuels. The blockade of Iran clearly illustrates this mechanism in practice. In 1951, when Muhammad Mossadegh's government nationalized the assets of the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company, Iran gained control over oil production but faced difficulties in selling it (Mitchell 2013). Current examples include the unilateral US sanctions imposed on Syria under the bipartisan Caesar Act, which have had devastating economic and humanitarian effects – as former Trump envoy James Jeffrey put it, they "crushed the country's economy" (Jeffrey 2021). Dana Stroul, now Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East and co-chair of the US Congress-founded Syria Study Group in October 2019, characterized the region under US occupation as "resource-rich" which contains "hydrocarbons" and is the country's "agricultural powerhouse" (Norton 2019).

In October 2015, United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and international sanctions Idriss Jazairy pointed out that approximately one-third of the global population resides in countries that are presently subjected to some form of targeting or sanctions (Jazairy 2015). These result from the use of unilateral coercive measures (UCMs) in international relations, as opposed to the unequivocally lawful multilateral sanctions endorsed by the UN Security Council. The evidence indicates that economic sanctions result in reduction in income and life expectancy analogous to those seen in armed conflicts, establishing them as one of the most lethal tools employed by Western powers (Rodriguez 2023). The Venezuelan case illustrates how unilateral economic sanctions lead to the entrenchment of the targeted regime and to the deterioration of the population's living standards (Bull & Rosales 2023).

Domination of Global Institutions

The *domination of the global (financial and political) institutions* is crucial in exerting control over the trade and distribution of fossil fuels**.** Washington's hegemony derived from international leadership in corporate, regulatory, technological, and financial structures – or what has become known as "economic statecraft". The fact that the dollar is the premier reserve currency and most popular medium for global trade and debt issuance means that a large share of international markets and firms falls under US jurisdiction in some way (Mulder 2022, p. 295).

US post-war planning pursued the continuation of its newly acquired global economic and military dominance, seeking to maintain the US "as the pre-eminent

state of global capitalism in light of new forms of economic competition and political resistance in the world order" (Klassen 2014, p. 79). In particular, "[a]n orderly political, military, and economic development" that makes possible "[a]dequate production [...] of, and access by the United States to, raw materials essential to US security" (National Security Council 1954, p. 82). As Glaser points out, the significance of raw materials in general, and oil in particular, stems not from US consumption needs, but from the US national security imperatives (Glaser 2013).

One reason why the United Nations features so prominently in US foreign policy strategy is because it plays a crucial "legitimizing role – through its purported neutrality – in helping these Western ideas become hegemonic and embedded in the ideology of international NGOs and human rights practice" (Turner & Kühn 2017, p. 8). The US-led block thwarted attempts to build a fairer world order, notably the Third World agenda, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the New International Economic Order (NIEO). For Global South countries, asserting permanent sovereignty over natural resources was essential in challenging ongoing colonial dependencies and unequal terms of trade (Dehm 2021, p. 146). It was a means of promoting both political and economic self-determination, which were deeply interconnected objectives for post-colonial states, crucial in the pursuit of "sovereign equality". Global economic governance institutions, which trace their origins back to earlier forms of imperial arrangements, exert significant influence over the domestic policies of many states through conditional lending and structural adjustment measures. Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) played a pivotal role in the post-World War II period as tools for the US and the broader Global North to enforce austerity, coordinate the policies of independent central banks, oversee development programs, and regulate commodity prices, all without provoking a strong backlash (Martin 2022). These institutions emerged in response to the decolonization processes that followed World War II.

Ways of Resistance: Towards a Non-Fossil Anti-Imperialism?

Despite its century-long history, fossil imperialism remains a major ecological and geopolitical driving force. Some of the most relevant political struggles of the twenty-first century will likely concern the impact of climate change and the energy transitions on the global order. These processes can be expected to disrupt and re-shuffle existing power arrangements, yet it remains unclear if this will entail a break with imperialism per se.

Given this outlook, it is crucial to explore ways in which the present imperial world order can be confronted without on the one hand reproducing the logic of either an extractive, "fossil" anti-imperialism or, on the other hand, contributing to the emergence of a new "green" imperialism. Two recent examples illustrate how governments have attempted to face this challenge, but also the limitations they encountered. At the fateful 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, Ecuador urged wealthy nations to contribute $3.6 billion to compensate for the revenue lost by not exploiting oil resources near Yasunis, an Amazon nature reserve. However,

this plan was abandoned in 2013 due to insufficient funding, with less than 4% of the target amount raised. Then President Rafael Correa's government, which originally hoped the plan would serve as a model for other developing countries looking to avoid the temptation of oil revenue, attributed its failure to the international community (*Reuters* 2016). At the summit of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), in August 2023, Colombia's President Gustavo Petro argued that the concept of a gradual "energy transition" away from fossil fuels was merely a tactic to delay the necessary actions to combat climate change and moved to halt new oil development in the region. Nonetheless, Petro's proposal faced resistance from both oil-consuming countries and from fellow Amazon countries concerned about extractive rent (Al Jazeera 2023). The "Debt for Climate" campaign articulates one possible solution to this dilemma, which is rallying grassroots movements behind the call for debt cancellation in Global South countries in recognition of the Global North's overwhelming climate debt – a move that could help allow progressive governments in the South to leave fossil fuels in the ground and concentrate funds on education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation (Morgan 2023).

Besides the transition away from fossil fuels, another political challenge lies in the energy transition itself, and in the struggle against an emerging "green" imperialism. Notably, commodities associations may play a key role in this process. Talks are underway by Brazil, Indonesia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to create a "OPEC for rainforests" (Greenfield 2022). Indonesia's leadership is promoting the idea of an OPEC for battery metals (Dempsey & Ruehl 2022), while Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina are planning to form a "lithium OPEC" (Breda 2023). Such moves are reminiscent of initiatives put forth by anti-imperialist and anti-colonial leaders during the era of decolonization. As Getachew (2019) shows, control over natural resources was at the core of the anticolonial worldmaking project, a key feature of which was the creation of commodities cartels – akin to unions on the labor market – to protect the South's exports. Nevertheless, the focus on commodity associations should not distract from colonial arrangements that may exist *within* the post-colonial nation state and between different dependent countries – such as the historical rift between OPEC and oil-importing countries of the South, which played a significant role in the eventual demise of the twentieth century movement for self-determination. A second key component of post-colonial worldmaking therefore concerns the role of political federations and alliances as a means to consolidate power beyond the nation state and to strengthen solidarity between dependent nations, both regionally and in the context of global alliances such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77. At the same time, as several contributions to this volume highlight, anti-imperialist worldmaking of this kind is ultimately only effective when it also offers a space for self-determination on a local scale, including the strengthening of Indigenous self-determination and stewardship, resource sovereignty, the socialization of renewable energy, and the means of adaptation (see chapters by Butt, Carlson, Kuhl *et al*., Rivera & Breder, and Sène in this volume).

While the current climate crisis is unprecedented in modern human history, many lessons can be drawn from the anti-imperialist struggles of the last 200 years

in confronting the fossil imperialist world order of today. The best antidote to fossil imperialism, therefore, remains the long history of non-fossil anti-imperialism from which contemporary struggles can still draw hope and inspiration.

Conclusion: In the Ruins of Fossil Empire

The historical emergence and development of modern imperialism have been distinctly shaped by the attempts of imperial states to ensure and control the flow of cheap fossil energy in the interest of their respective fossil economies – a phenomenon we have termed *fossil imperialism*. We have further proposed a basic scheme to classify various episodes of fossil imperialism by the type of intervention they represent (expansion and obstruction), by the type of fossil fuel (coal, oil, and gas) and by the specific mechanisms employed to exert control (colonization, projection of military power, suppression of anti-extractivist movements, economic warfare, and domination of global institutions). In doing so, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the geo-political driving forces of our current predicament.

Imperialism, as the term is used throughout this paper, represents the process by which imperial states exert their power globally on behalf of their respective capitalist economies. This process is not always in the interest of fossil capital itself, which relies on restricting supply as one means to maintain control over pricing and maximize profits. Other sections of the capitalist class, as well as the state apparatus, may have a more direct interest in the abundant availability of cheap fossil energy. When analyzing concrete cases, it is therefore important to pay attention to the potentially conflicting interests of different sections of the ruling class, and to consider the kinds of class compromises usually contained in concrete policy outcomes.

Besides analyzing imperialism as a concrete historical process (the application of state power parallel to the ceaseless movement of capital accumulation), there is another important way in which to conceive imperialism: as a *structural* arrangement in which various states occupy specific roles as defined by their position within the global power hierarchy. Much remains to be said about dynamics of this hierarchy, in which certain states (first the United Kingdom, later replaced by the US through the twentieth century) were able to reach a hegemonic position within the world system, allowing these states to fundamentally shape global rules in the interest of their national ruling classes. Moreover, there are usually allied (sub-)imperial states, as well as potential challengers and rivals. The role of fossil fuels in shaping the relationship between different kinds of imperial states, and their competition amongst each other, deserves further investigation.

It will be crucial to further scrutinize and theorize these dynamics as fossil imperialism persists even in the face of unprecedented climate disaster. Yet, if there is anything hopeful in the long history of fossil imperialism, then it is the fact that it is paralleled by an equally long history of anti-imperialist resistance and the quest for a more just and sustainable world system. This tradition carries the hope that the ruins of fossil empire will one day be inhabited by relationships of solidarity, care, and repair – a future worth fighting for.

Note

1 Peck, Johnson, McCoy, Brzezinski, and others have demonstrated that the primary objective of US national strategy since the end of the Cold War has been to maintain America's position as the world's foremost superpower, often referred to as "armed primacy" by Stephen Wertheim in his work *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy* (Johnson 2001; Brzezinski 2006; Peck 2006; McCoy 2017; Wertheim 2020).

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