



EDITORIAL

Exploring decolonial and relational paths to sustainability

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This special collection brings together a series of papers that were presented under the decoloniality and socionature entanglements panels at the Development Studies Association annual conference (Reading, UK; June 2023). The authors all share interests in advancing decolonial and relational perspectives on sustainability. In doing so, they engage with issues of global significance: the historical roots of contemporary socio-ecological crises; decoloniality challenges in sustainability and (post-) development; and the potential contribution of relational perspectives in overcoming colonial modernities. Providing theoretical and empirical contributions, the articles cover diverse geographies and mobilise new insights trafficking across disciplines and seeking to respond to ontological and knowledge politics. They share the aims of *Global Social Challenges Journal* to explore the creation of alternative justice-oriented futures that acknowledge past and contemporary injustices.

The collection aims to advance critical understanding and scholarship in several ways. Building on the recent decolonial and relational turns in human geography, political ecology, sociology, anthropology and, most recently, sustainability research (for example, [West et al, 2020](#); [Foggin et al, 2021](#); [Walsh et al, 2021](#)), the articles respond to the call to address the ontological crisis inherent in colonial modernities that created rigid dichotomies (such as mind–body and nature–humans) and imposed racial hierarchies enabling intensified accumulation ([Arora and Stirling, 2023](#)). Such

dichotomies continue to extensively inform sustainability sciences (including the notion of the Anthropocene itself) as well as the policies and practices underpinning sustainable development. Civilising progress (Savransky and Lundy, 2022) and racial stratifications have enabled exploitation and appropriation of people and nature during colonial eras and in the emergence of modernities that now spread around the globe (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Arora and Stirling, 2023). Orderings of the colonial mind (Adams and Mulligan, 2003) continue to be enacted in modernities, with current hegemonic formations being embodied in institutional legacies and path dependencies, causing intensifying concentrations of power and wealth.

The articles therefore build in various ways on the recent development of decolonial and relational academic perspectives, often informed by Indigenous and other relational ontologies, which are well placed to explore the co-constitutive processes and relations through which life unfolds. Such perspectives have the potential to illuminate socionature entanglements that characterise human–nature relations, with attention to ‘more-than-human’ assemblages and agencies, and to the politics of those entanglements. Highly relevant to (post-)development and sustainability debates are politically inflected approaches to the ‘more-than-human’, which address the risks of flattening agencies and accountabilities for socionature damage identified in critical science reflections on new materialism (Skiveren, 2023). The relations of domination that underpin ‘less-than-human’ thinking and effects (Büscher, 2022), involves an imposed hierarchisation of social groups, with some treated as less valuable than others, enabling racist exploitations, just as Nature is cast as external to humans and as a resource for exploitation. These colonial–modernity perspectives have shaped modernities and associated structures, leading to systematic, violent marginalisations of certain social groups and communities, while ‘Nature’ is rendered passive, separate from humans and without ‘active voice’ (Plumwood, 1995). It is also important to recognise that there are rapidly changing new natures, shaped by intensifying damage and disturbances (of synthetic biology, for example), while some species may thrive in the ruins of capitalist modernities (Tsing, 2015) and some ecological and geological processes far outreach human lifespans and temporalities (Lorimer and Hodgetts, 2024). Moving beyond simplistic ideas of restoring nature to an earlier baseline and embracing the committed, continuing and likely human impacts on ‘Nature’ and peoples, there is an opportunity to find hope in plural approaches to sustainability. The latter create space for more radical co-speculations on sustainability futures, supported by arts and humanities, critical social sciences and, in particular, new materialist insights, engaging communities, especially subaltern and marginalised groups (Banerjee and Wouters, 2022), to unmake capitalist (Feola et al, 2021) and colonial modernities (Arora and Stirling, 2023) and create counter-hegemonic and hegemony-transcending future possibilities (Valencia-Hamilton and Suominen, 2023).

Thinking to the future, after the dominant notions and ways of being related to progress, worlds must be composed ‘otherwise’ (Savransky and Lundy, 2022). This must be done not by thinking them into existence, but by living our way into other modes of thinking, to make lives and futures worth living outside of progress coordinates (Savransky and Lundy, 2022). This means not only ‘critical assessment of established values’, but additionally, ‘a much riskier, uncertain and speculative art of creating and experimenting with other perspectives of evaluation and other modes of habitation, of affirming and nurturing forms of social life at odds with the progressive times’ (Savransky and Lundy, 2022: 223). A possible example is that of

the Zapatista movement that has sought to apply communality in practice, through their revolutionary actions, embedding fundamental ways of reorganising life – as a mode of being, challenging dominant social orders (Escobar, 2015).

This idea of new horizons that challenge or provide lines of flight to escape from ‘colonial modernities’, has some alignments with Hartmut Rosa’s concept of resonance (Rosa, 2019; Celikates et al, 2019). Resonances are defined as intense encounters, involving co-transformations of identities, sharing of emotions as well as thoughts, all of which creates relationships with meaning, associated with positivity and potential to shape future relationships. This is in contrast to relations of domination that do not resonate; they are mute or silent, because they focus upon the instrumental. Conditions enabling multidirectional relations of care to thrive, across assemblages of life (plants, animals, micro-organisms, phenomena such as rivers or mountains, as well as infrastructures, technologies and so on) are needed for highly resonating, fulfilled lives, linked to other humans, land and life.

The relational turn is thus a potentially path-breaking approach that can advance a rhizomatic growth of pluriversal horizons. The articles in this collection seek to engage with relationality philosophies and praxis. The very existence of relationality philosophies plays out against the grain of colonial modernity (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Haraway, 2016) and provides a basis for advocacy and engaged research (Escobar, 2018; Walsh et al, 2021; McIntosh and Wilder, 2023). Relational ontologies, as well as academic theorisation and empirical inquiry, include many differentiated ‘non-Western’ ontologies (such as, for example, Indigenous ontologies grouped under the term *buen vivir* in Latin America, *Ubuntu* in Africa, some Eastern religions, ecovillages in ‘Global North’ countries) and have commonalities with quantum physics (Gudynas, 2011; Moore, 2011; Mabele et al, 2022). Relationality conceptualises reality as involving embodied, co-constituting processes of becoming within assemblages, which continually unfold, creating life (West et al, 2020). Shaped by situated imaginaries (collective identities of self and relations to place and others which themselves unfold in socio-material processes, Castoriadis, 1975; Taylor, 2004), such relational philosophies are lived, embodied and adapted by local communities (human, other-than-human) while being infused with power relations. Many relational philosophies have been sidelined, destroyed or transformed. There is a struggle to resist changes imposed upon subaltern ontologies, the latter struggling to keep their essence while interacting with others in what has been referred to as political ontology (Blaser, 2009). Myths of static Indigenous cultures and ecologies are generally important to challenge (Moore, 2017), but it is also necessary to recognise historical and ongoing struggles that are ontological in nature. Analectics (De Lissoy and Fregoso Bailón, 2019; Kim, 2019), an explicit intellectual intent of transcending modernity and the subject shaped by it, is thus highly relevant. Systematically privileging the voice and agency of the marginalised opens spaces for alterities, enabling non-Western modes of understanding of reality to expand through recovery and creativity.

A relational approach to sustainable socio-materialities critiques the ways in which mainstream scientific narratives portray a tamed nature whose processes and cycles are controllable, non-spiritual, reducible and for human benefit. In such dominant perspectives, value is ascribed through markets and techno-scientific assessments. Recent efforts to focus on ‘diverse values’ of nature, moving beyond the instrumental, to take account of intrinsic and relational nature values, is tactically potentially

useful in policy processes to a limited extent, but at the same time misunderstands the difference between relational values and relational philosophies and ways of being. The latter collapses distinctions between humans and nature, and all ‘human’ activities may be done relationally (that is, with respect and obligations of care, possibly involving spiritual dimensions). This includes activities such as hunting or cultivating, which under the Nature Futures Framework (NFF) might be seen as instrumental values, involving humans using nature for their own purposes (Luque-Lora, 2023). Relationality and ‘more-than-human’ thinking now traverses and traffics across diverse disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, education, geography, architecture, urban studies, development studies, human geography and political ecology, but also the arts, activism and social movements, challenging rigid interpretations of reality. Theoretical, methodological and empirical insights from across such fields today is raising renewed questions about the possibilities of finding solutions from neoliberal, colonial-modernity-infused academic systems (and societies). There is a demand for more voice in sustainability from decolonial movements and thinkers (Arora and Stirling, 2023) and potential to be found in progressive, pluralist coalitions and collaborations (Ojeda et al, 2022). Decolonial and Indigenous discourse and social movements, such as Zapatista movements in southern Mexico (Swords, 2007; Escobar, 2015; Maldonado-Villalpando, 2022; Maison, 2023), open up such paths of ontological exploration, prefiguring alternatives in practical experiences, education and relocating decision making within Indigenous values of respect, dignity and community. Their movement is a strong example of the political autonomy and relationality aspirations of pluriversal politics, additionally inspiring other movements (Escobar, 2015).

As well as many other Global South examples, there are also pockets in the Global North in ecovillages or communal territorial innovations (Fonseca et al, 2022), for example, which can expand solution horizons. Bendix et al (2019: 133) explore post-development examples in the ‘West’ relating to food, housing and energy, noting that impositions of universalising ‘Western models of economy politics and knowledge’ also occurred in the West as part of ‘conflictive historical processes’ – and ‘remain contested’. It is also important to note that arguments relating to colonial-modernity point to a need to challenge them wherever they occur, not only in the Global North but around the world. Other examples of efforts to actively challenge colonial modernities can be found in emerging arts-public-critical/relational scholar collaborations, such as the Embassy of the North Sea, that applies Latour’s Parliament of Things to give an active voice to nature in political representation and in public and legal realms.¹ Politically informed, emancipatory manifestations of participatory approaches aspire to emancipate participants through consciousness raising, but often struggle to escape colonial-modernity imaginaries, hence this is complex ground in terms of political ontologies. As a result, there is an increasing engagement with speculative design and futuring methodologies that embrace plurality, as part of a decolonisation process (Terry et al, 2024).

Relationality theorisation is complex, language can appear ‘esoteric’ (West et al, 2020), and such thinking inevitably challenges identities and sources of authority, creating discomfort, but also opening up new opportunities. Relationality provides new pathways toward sustainability, by creating space for alterities. Creating new possibilities means exerting ambitions not just to ‘stretch the present’ but to catalyse new vistas and configurations (Morton, 2016) and entails a pluriversal politics (Escobar,

2018). This implies making space for ‘many worlds in this world’, with world-making processes recognising plural ontologies, rather than the ‘diversity’ proposed in less politicised interpretations that fail to account for oppressions and how to overcome them. Pluriversality (Escobar, 2018) implies commitments to political autonomy and self-determination embedded, for example, in relational philosophies and associated ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Conceptually, pluriversal conviviality emphasises a celebration of plural ontologies and values. Many Indigenous philosophies and praxes, in differentiated ways, have cared for territories and earthly life, often over long durations. They have important lessons in terms of ontologies and values, beyond contexts where people identify as Indigenous. This is not to ‘over-romanticise’ Indigenous wisdom, just as there are many examples of relational thought beyond contexts of Indigeneity and in the Global North (as noted earlier, briefly), hegemonic relations flow through everyday practices in imperial modes of living (Brand, 2022), and these are not confined to settler countries, but have expanded to many places around the world. Hence action is needed very widely and, in this regard, there are lessons to be learnt from relational and care-oriented ways of being and knowing, including from Indigenous communities. Transformations design processes specifically shift control-based imaginaries and centralisation of authority and decision making, instead promoting communality via political (ontological) autonomy (Escobar, 2015).

A reparative approach to Indigenous onto-epistemologies could thus be considered part of sustainability initiatives (Stein et al, 2024). Growing efforts support ontological rescue and generation, through support for Indigenous rights and via the revitalisation of languages and cultures. But, although self-determination for Indigenous peoples is a key human right, achieving autonomy in practice is far more challenging when hegemonic formations remain untroubled. Intensifying accumulation and damages continue to wreak havoc upon Indigenous governance systems and land-care strategies (Kramm, 2024). Lessons from Indigenous ontologies and ways of organising society are highly relevant in terms of informing pluriversal principles for action, especially in contexts of intense colonial modernities, wherever these manifest, as well as creativity in terms of creating new ontological experiments. In the latter, there may be communities and decision makers resisting, complicit or active in promoting the hegemonic formation of colonial-modernities and even, for some, embracing contradictory, fluid and changing positions. Situated understandings of sustainability – in contrast to the imposed universalities of science and the imposed reductionism and violences of colonial modernities – will require relational ontological rescues and creativity.

In the spirit of a relational and decolonial approach to transformation, the articles in this collection explore a plurality of values and perspectives on sustainability (Srinivasan, 2017; Staffa et al, 2022). They demonstrate an ethics of engagement and political struggle via transdisciplinary and transformative praxis (Eigi-Watkin and Koskinen, 2023; Reed and Rudman, 2023). By wrestling with path-breaking perspectives on relationality and the more-than-human, the articles add to lively debates on (post-)development, justice and sustainability futures for all earthly life. Each of the articles collected here seeks to contribute to such vibrant debates and praxis innovations, including radically questioning dominant notions of where expertise lies.

Gálvez-Campos (2024) provides a compelling case study that employs a visual ethnography approach with the Wet’suwet’en people in Canada. His study

explores territorial-ontological conflicts between a state, private company and the Wet'suwet'en. It explores the role of emotions in a territorial-ontological conflict between the state, a company, and a First Nation, unpacking the affective realm of environmental struggles. He challenges anthropocentric thinking by building upon a spiderweb metaphor that reflects the interdependencies and entanglements of human and non-humans and to give voice to the latter, which are being directly affected. Gálvez-Campos identifies the moves of dominant power players to delegitimise ancestral governance.

D'Alesandro (2024) explores how Maya Ixil culture and ontological perspectives embody reciprocity practices that are an inherent challenge to the oppressions of control-oriented accumulation. Maya Ixil imaginaries are researched specifically through Milpa cultivation practices as manifestations of earthly life in symbiotic balance, connected with spiritual and cultural norms, representing alternatives and counters to hegemonic formations, including expressions in biodiversity conservation. A rich empirical study, the article essentially points to pathways for challenging colonial modernities (Arora and Stirling, 2023). Such colonial modernities are suffused with control-oriented imaginaries.

Sönmez (2024) explores how displacements resulting from accumulation-driven dam development in Hasankeyf, Turkey, have shaped Indigenous social infrastructures and community life. Employing an innovative application of body mapping as a methodology, Sönmez identifies the affective consequences of the displacements that have occurred, drawing from residents' lived experiences. She explores the complex ways in which losses are experienced and sensed and highlights the importance of efforts to rebuild Indigenous social infrastructures.

Krauss (2024), in another example of efforts to overcome colonial modernities, chooses the specific institutional context of UK higher education. In the context of decolonisation imperatives, Krauss distils reflections from sustainability focused, arts-based co-production in counter-hegemonic efforts to create space for pluriversal futures, including lessons on storytelling to communicate marginalised academic research, role play and immersive audiovisual exhibitions. She reflects upon several empirical arts-based examples to consider their flaws and potential in opening up cracks in hegemonic knowledge production. Where the arts are located on the margins of hegemonies, they therefore provide specific possibilities for unsettling colonial modernities – simply by being undisciplined, and especially when in productive interaction with critical, relational and more-than-human theory.

Bernardini and Reed Johnson (2024) also analyse UK formal education systems, focusing upon a teacher education programme. They experiment with an approach called the Harawayan Bee Hotel (HBH), inspired by the insights of Donna Haraway on relational ontologies and ethics of care (Haraway, 2016). Drawing upon this theory, the authors sought to develop an approach to unsettle 'nature education' using the HBH to catalyse (un)learning among teacher trainers providing climate education. Challenging ontologies of 'Nature' as external to humans, the pilot shows how to practically enable unlearning towards a more nuanced, relational and care-based approach, in a context of intense colonial modernities.

The final article in the collection, by Valero Thomas (2024), draws on mapping methods from the fields of architecture, urban geography and visual cultures to critically engage with contemporary discussions around urban sustainability. He brings an international comparative perspective, considering three city cases from

across the Global South: Mexico City, Shanghai and Bangalore. The article details how actors at different levels (local governments, civil society and private developers) relate to and articulate narratives – termed infrastructural imaginaries – of urban environments in the respective cities. He reveals the conflicting visions of urban ‘utopias’ and ‘dystopias’ that this generates and situates these within long-standing struggles around the enforcement of colonial logics of water supply, food distribution and land use.

Combined, these articles present contributions to relational and decolonial pathways to sustainability transformations and futures. Decolonial, relational and Indigenous thinkers and movements are key, with reparative efforts needed to change academia and beyond in addressing colonial modernities especially in the places, social groups and relations which exhibit the most intense control-oriented imaginaries.

Note

¹ Welcome to the Parliament of Things – Embassy of the North Sea (<https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/projecten/>).

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Conflict of interest

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