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Re-thinking oil: compensation for non-production in Yasuní National Park challenging *sumak kawsay* and degrowth

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Abstract The Yasuní-ITT Initiative was an innovative development proposal based on the non-production of oil in Yasuní National Park in Ecuador, in exchange for international compensation, either in the form of direct payment or payment for environmental services. My aim is to investigate how the different actors understand this compensation for non-production of oil in Ecuador, an oil dependent country. Using a chronological review of the Initiative and forty in-depth interviews with key players, I critically engage the ‘environmental narrative’ around the Initiative inspired by *sumak kawsay* -a philosophy of life based on non-mercantilist values, known as “well living” in English or “buen vivir” in Spanish- and degrowth. In this article I argue that understanding the Initiative as an environmental matter and not as a problem of oil rent dependency exemplifies the limits of *sumak kawsay* and degrowth as proposals for an alternative to development. Results from Yasuní show that the Initiative ended up reproducing the fictions of nature valuation instead of de-linking nature from the valuation process. By drawing on a critical political economic framework, this paper shows that categories such as “dependency” and “rent” are fundamental in understanding the challenges of moving away from extraction-based development in developing countries. In summary, failing to differentiate between payment for the non-production of oil and compensation from the

environmental services, Yasuní was a ‘lost’ opportunity for a bottom-up debate on what to produce and what not.

Keywords *Sumak kawsay* · Degrowth · Yasuní · Nature · Rent · Dependency non-production of oil

Introduction

Ecuador is a clear example of a country that is opting for a different development strategy from the one that has been promoted in Latin America during the last 30 years. Ecuador’s transition towards a different development is at the core of its public policy: The National Development Plan 2007–2011 and the Energy Agenda 2007–2011. This strategy is characterized by its promotion of a different relationship between nature and society (Arsel 2012). Currently, this transition involves the ‘rejection of an economy of infinite resources in favor of a social economy of knowledge’ (Ramírez 2010, 2012; SENPLADES 2009, 2013). Moreover, a possible moratorium on oil activities in the South Amazon was proposed in the Government Plan of “Alianza PAIS” (2007–2011). However, the most ambitious social participation process occurred in 2008 when the Ecuadorian Constitution incorporated *sumak kawsay* as the central objective of its development (Arsel 2012). Its institutionalization represents a “break away” from traditional approaches to development (Acosta 2007). As a result, the “novelty” of *sumak kawsay* is its intention to construct an alternative to the development paradigm (Arsel 2012). This is exactly where the ‘novelty’ of the concept lies: in the fact that it is oriented towards and opens up new policy possibilities. However, in order for *sumak kawsay* guides and to give content to the development of Ecuador, the primary export

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dependent production and energy model has to be challenged and overcome. I approach the *sumak kawsay* philosophy through three schools of thought: the culturist, the post-extractivist and the neo-marxist (Le Quang and Vercoûtère 2013).

To begin with, it's worth mentioning that the culturalist school highlights the communitarian dimension of life and attempts to reconcile human beings with nature. Nevertheless, it is difficult to unearth "literature" written by indigenous people because most of their knowledge is produced orally (Thomson 2011). Despite this drawback, some indigenous thinkers place *sumak kawsay* within its "historicity" and present it as a non-productive rationality (Kowii 2009, Macas 2010, Cholango 2010, Chancosa 2010, Chuji 2009 in Hidalgo et al. 2014). These authors link *sumak kawsay* with the defense of the ancestral territory, multicultural and pluri-national states. Along this line, Albó considers that "to live well" means, "to coexist well" (Albó 2008). This approach generates conditions for an academic dialogue with the post-structuralist and the decolonialist studies that call for *imagining alternative productive rationalities* (Escobar 1996, 2012; Leff 2014) and thinking of *sumak kawsay* in the light of a non-capitalist modernity (Lander 2010, 2011). Furthermore, from the [de] colonial studies (Mignolo 2010, 2014) narratives such as *sumak kawsay* that strive to live in harmony with nature are considered an "alternative social existence" (Quijano 2011). Resembling the culturalist school, the post-extractivism one considers *sumak kawsay* to be a political platform from which to consider alternatives to development (Gudynas 2011a, b; Acosta 2009). They stress the predatory nature of the system and call for a post-extractivism development (Acosta 2013; Gudynas 2011a, b).

In fact, the complexity of *sumak kawsay* has recently become more recognized; it is a philosophy with all the attendant mediation of (their-our own) non-indigenous cultural narratives and mindsets (Thomson 2011). For this reason, some academics prefer to talk about it as a concept 'under construction' (Gudynas 2011a; Acosta 2008). However, others affirm that the conceptual vagueness and ambiguity of *sumak kawsay* lie precisely in the insistence of introducing it as a concept whose origin is the indigenous world, but one still closely associated with the principles of "deep ecology" (Gudynas 2011a, b; Dávalos 2008): a philosophical tradition that is far from the indigenous world-. What is more, *sumak kawsay* is considered an "invented tradition" by the academic world (Recasens 2014), referring to the classic book 'The Invention of Tradition' by Ranger and Hobsbawm (1983). For Recasens (2014), some academics talk about the indigenous roots of the concept without mentioning the substantial ethnographic literature on the political economy of the indigenous world. For this reason, *sumak kawsay* is

considered a controversial concept, historically presented, without concrete political significance in the present (Sánchez-Parga 2012).

Finally, the neo-marxist school of thought links *sumak kawsay* with the need to change the socio-economic structure of society (Le Quang and Vercoûtère 2013). Relevant examples are the contributions of García Linera in Bolivia with his "the community socialism of good living" that proposes the social organization of use value rather than exchange value (García-Linera 2010, 2011), and René Ramírez in Ecuador with "republican bio socialism" (Ramírez 2010, 2012) which focuses on the need for an institutional state framework to address the inequity of development. Both authors deconstruct the trend to idealizing the relation between the indigenous world and nature (García-Linera 2007) and show the complexity and the social tensions related to the implementation of *sumak kawsay* as a development policy (García-Linera 2011) whose objective is to overcome dependence on the economy.

Degrowth, a concept mostly discussed in Europe, is generally seen as provocative, partly because it appeals to heretics in the economists' dominant church of growth, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fetish. It also sparks reactions because it is not an economic concept, but rather a complex matrix of alternatives promoting a socio-ecological transformation (Demaria et al. 2013). Degrowth, considered as a 'political slogan with theoretical implications' (Latouche 2012), is deeply committed to ecology, bio-economics, anti-development, wellbeing (frugal abundance, voluntary simplicity), democracy and justice (Schneider et al. 2010). Strongly rooted in the principles of thermodynamics, the concerns of degrowth range from development critiques to ecology, anti-utilitarianism, democracy, justice, and non-violence (D'Alisa et al. 2014; Demaria et al. 2013).

Inspired by bio-economic principles and values of simplicity (D'Alisa et al. 2014), degrowth emphasizes the role of consumption, arguing that excessive consumption is a threat to collective emancipation (Latouche 2012), a point situated within the realm of consumer decisions. This argument, alongside the search for autonomy through collective self-limitations (D'Alisa et al. 2014), operates in the sphere of capital circulation rather than capital production. The latter, however, is critical to address, as it is the realm where nature is being "appropriated", and because it is closely connected to capital reproduction.

Focusing on the issue of social organization in the sphere of consumption has resulted in the neglect of the mutual determinations between production and consumption, especially in "dependent capital" economies. Degrowth engages in a debate on the subject of production from the perspective of social metabolism, ecologically unequal exchange (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010) and

environmental justice (Martínez-Alier 2012), but has not developed a critique of dependency. Above all, degrowth has focused its concern on hyper-metabolic industrialized societies, but has not developed conceptual frameworks that permit an understanding of how degrowth could provide support to developing new imaginaries in countries that do not desire or are not willing to repeat the process of capital accumulation.

Degrowth is presented as a radical thinking (D'Alisa et al. 2014; Demaria et al. 2013; Kallis 2011) and *sumak kawsay* as a different conception of development that could be both post-capitalist and post-socialist (Gudynas 2011b). In short, the common political concerns of *sumak Kawsay* and degrowth are ecology, bio-economics (D'Alisa et al. 2014), anti-utilitarianism (D'Alisa et al. 2014), environmental justice (Anguelovski 2014), growth of the economy (Farley 2014) and the critique of development (Escobar 2011). However, how to make the transition towards an alternative to development is a pending task in the debate about degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013) and *sumak kawsay*. In fact, neither *sumak kawsay* nor degrowth discuss the role of oil income and its relation to capital dependency.

Parallel to this debate, in 2007 the government of Ecuador proposed to leave its oil in the ground¹ in exchange for international compensation. To justify such compensation, President Correa called '*for the launch of a new economic model for the twenty-first century to compensate the generation of use values and not only the generation of merchandise*' (Correa 2007b). This proposal is known as the Yasuní-ITT Initiative (hereinafter referred to as "Initiative"). With the Initiative, the unthinkable happened with regard to Ecuador's petroleum policy: a country highly dependent on oil revenue was willing to refrain from exploiting its largest oil reserves in exchange for partial compensation. This Initiative was linked to the incommensurable value of the high levels of biodiversity in Yasuní National Park and the enforceability of the human rights of the Tagaeri-Taromenane people.² Other issues such as the global energy crisis and the inability of the Kyoto Protocol to deal with climate change, generated international interest for the Ecuadorian proposal.

This article analyzes how different actors understood the compensation for non-production of oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It specifically examines the question: Could this be done through direct payment for non-production of oil or through compensation for the environmental services provided by Yasuní? From the very beginning, the

Initiative sought solutions that reached beyond the realm of domestic policy. Thus, considering the high dependence of Ecuador on oil exports, *the effort to obtain compensation for the non-production of oil in Ecuador had to be made on a global scale and not as the result of autarchic action from one developing country*. How to obtain that compensation was the core of the Initiative. In fact, without partial compensation for the loss of oil revenues, the Initiative would have to be cancelled.

In this article I propose to provide an understanding of why the "environmental narrative" about Yasuní, greatly inspired by *sumak kawsay*, eroded the political potential of the Initiative. The Initiative has received a number of awards for being pioneering and innovative and there is a large body of literature that links it with the values of conservation and the protection of the indigenous people (Martínez 2009; Warnars 2010; Martínez and Acosta 2010).

Its contribution to the conservation of the biodiversity of Yasuní (Christian et al. 2008) and the multi-criteria valuation of its ecosystem (Vallejo et al. 2011) have raised major interest within the international community and its contribution to the debate on climate change and thermodynamics has also been recognized (Vogel 2010). Interest has been renewed in the virtues of net emission avoidance mechanisms and in the replicability of the Initiative in a post-Kyoto context (Larrea et al. 2009). In addition, its link to payment for ecological services has been analyzed (Martin 2011a, b).

There is a growing body of literature both on the scope of institutional changes in Ecuador's petroleum policy and on the process of Latin American integration (Rival 2011) and on mechanisms of global governance. The latter have emerged from the Initiative and the role of NGOs from the South in shaping new standards of global environmental governance (Martin 2011a), as well as on the tensions arising from a new institution that changes the relationship between nature and society, but fails to de-commodify nature (Arsel 2012). The tensions that exist between conservation and development have also been explained from the point of view of the socio-political characteristics that shape the relationship between state and society (Pellegrini et al. 2014). Whilst this literature offers many useful references and entry points, there are some holes, which mean it is in fact an inaccurate picture of the meaning of compensating for non-production of oil.

One of the gaps is related to the "Yasunization" concept or the possibility of implementing proposals to leave the oil in the ground in other places. For the degrowth community,³ for example, "Yasunization" is considered to be a

¹ Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini are located in Yasuní National Park.

² The Tagaeri and Taromenane are two indigenous communities who live in voluntary and highly vulnerable isolation due to the expansion of the oil frontier and the illegal felling of trees, amongst other historical and cultural factors that influence patterns of violence.

³ Workshops of the Degrowth Conference held in Barcelona in 2010, Istanbul 2011 and Lille 2013.

tactic that will allow a “permanent reduction in extractive employment”.⁴

In general terms, “Yasunization” is considered a strategy aimed at preserving the fragility of some areas with high biodiversity. It also suggests the confluence between conservation policies such as a moratorium on oil extraction, human rights and the rights of nature (Temper et al. 2012) but all three elements are envisioned as part of national policy and the search for domestic solutions.

Nevertheless, the original aim of the Initiative was to achieve a global redistribution of capital/wealth by providing a substitute for oil rent. As a result, we need to understand the role of this rent in “dependent capital” economies (Dussel 1985). Above all, when Ecuador proposed that *non-production of oil* be partially compensated, it was attempting to convert the revenue from a finite resource into a sustainable income that would sustain the drive to a different model of development (Ministry of External Affairs 2007). This is why President Correa insisted that *the Initiative be presented as a development rather than one of conservation*.⁵ A further argument in this direction claims that Ecuador needs to replace oil rent to *create the material condition for a transition to a non-primary export dependent economy*.

Moreover, the ecological concerns about Yasuní and the need to reduce carbon emissions in industrialized countries have served to link the Initiative with ecological debt (Martínez-Alier 2011). In fact, the contribution of the Initiative as a mechanism to avoid greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions was recognized for the first time in the Durban Decision (2/CP.17) in 2012.⁶ In other words, the main contribution of the Initiative has primarily been related to the sustainability of the atmosphere and to the conservation of biodiversity (Vogel 2010). However, *my main claim is that the compensation for non-production of oil is not a call for compensating the environmental services of the Yasuní National Park, but a way to de-commodify oil itself by a direct payment*.

This article argues that understanding the Initiative as an *environmental problem* and not as one of oil rent dependency, exemplifies the limits of *sumak kawsay* and degrowth as proposals for an alternative development.

Ecuador’s call for compensation for non-production of oil is a political action to organize society around use values and not exchange values. This is what Samir Amin calls a “de-linking” of the capital valuation. *Using the category of use instead of exchange value, it might be possible to create a different relationship with nature*. To elaborate on this argument, the second section presents the “**Materials and methods**” of investigation. A theoretical exploration takes place in section three where the role of nature, rent and use values are discussed. The results are presented in the fourth section, while section five discusses *sumak kawsay* and degrowth in light of the case study. Concluding thoughts are provided in the final section.

Materials and methods

The research findings discussed in this article are based on a unit of analysis; the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. However, I am not merely describing a phenomenon but also presenting my arguments (Yin 2003). Through my case study, I stress the material conditions of an oil dependent country such as Ecuador in making a transition to an alternative development (national level), taking into account the dependency problem (international level) and the discursive practices and conditions needed for this transition. A chronological press review of the 6 years of the Initiative was carried out. Structuring my case study in three periods according to the main discourses used to promote the Initiative and the conceptual twists and turns present in the Initiative’s approach, helps me to identify the “context” of my case study (Castré 2005).

Second, I did an extensive literature review of the Initiative and government publications. Moreover, (40) semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out: (12) interviews with official authorities including three ex ministers; (17) interviews with environmentalists including five interviews with members of the collective ‘Yasunidos’; (5) interviews with stakeholders in the oil sector including two who asked to be cited as ‘political reporters’; (5) with people from the academic sector including journalists and communication experts; (6) interviews with international actors including one politician and environmentalists from international NGOs who supported the Initiative. The semi-structured interviews focused on the following questions: How did social actors understand the need to compensate for use values in Yasuní?; Why should Ecuador be compensated for its non-production of oil? What discourses are used to justify this compensation?; Do you think these languages are relevant to the transition to an alternative development?; How and why? The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min. They were held during two different periods of fieldwork of 2 months each, during

⁴ Workshop of the 9th International Conference of European Society for Ecological Economies 2011.

⁵ Meeting with President Rafael Correa, María Isabel Salvador - Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 2007.

⁶ “Emphasizes that various approaches, including opportunities for using markets, to enhance the cost-effectiveness of, and to promote, mitigation actions, bearing in mind different circumstances of developed and developing countries, must meet standards that deliver real, permanent, additional and verified mitigation outcomes, avoid double counting of effort, and achieve a net decrease and/or avoidance of GHG emissions”.

2013–2014 (Table 1). Furthermore, (10) speeches given by Correa about the Initiative (2007–2013) were reviewed to understand the government's discursive language related to compensation for the non-production of oil. Finally, I gathered participatory observations during the time I was an environmental advisor to the Initiative (June 2007–December 2008). Direct observation also took place through my attendance at public press conferences: at the presentation of the Initiative in September 2007 and at its cancellation in August 2013. The chronological review, the interviews, the speeches, and my personal memos were codified using grounded theory and the Atlas'TI program.

Theoretical framework

Nature, rent and use values

Marx refers to nature as a non-produced productive force: nature is transformed into a productive and reproductive force of capital (Dussel 1985) through its 'appropriation' to realize its capital profit (Marx 1975; Dussel 1985; Echeverría 1998; Amin 2011). Echeverría uses the category wealth/capital to define the process whereby nature is subsumed to the value form (Echeverría 1994). According to this analysis, oil needs to be socially mediated, because oil by itself has no value. This formulation has two significant political effects: First, that of situating nature outside the valuation process, and second, it provides an understanding of how nature as wealth (without economic value) is integrated into the process of generating capital (value). When one considers oil in its fiction as a commodity (Polanyi 2007) the use values that differ from the exchange values are a "cover up".

For Echeverría, the integration of nature as a non-produced productive force into the circulation of capital, in exchange for a fee or income, is the deciding factor in the game of wealth/capital (Echeverría 1994). Here lies the key to figuring out the importance of production for social organization and, in our case, the social relevance of non-production of oil. Hence the social decision regarding what to produce and what not to produce is fundamental to the capital accumulation process. When discussing the social decision for non-production of oil, one faces the social process, which connects social/wealth with the production of profit. In fact, profit is made during circulation, but at a deeper level profit is generated from production (Marx 1975). Thus a non-production of oil has the potential to "interrupt" the process of capital accumulation. The discussion about compensation for non-production of oil should be located here, in the concrete process where capital accumulation is generated or interrupted. In brief, a non-production of oil derives from the same process of

social organization, but is aimed at de-linking a fundamental factor in social reproduction, such as oil, from the realm of extended circulation.

In the context of international trade or that of globalized capital (Amin 1997, 1998, 2011), or in the process of extended accumulation (Luxemburgo 1968), or that of the reproduction of social wealth (Echeverría 1994), competition is established between countries and, on a more profound level, between capital (Dussel 1985). If it is capital that competes, a peripheral nation is above all a capitalist nation and at a more specific level, it is a dependent nation (Ibid.). Equally, capitalist expansion is identified with the polarization on a global scale between central and peripheral social formations (Amin 2011; Dussel 1985). Political ecologists have furthermore, insisted on issues of ecologically unequal exchange (Martínez-Alier 2012; Hornborg 1998). These approaches help to understand that the integration of 'underdeveloped' societies into the global capitalist world system is in fact the integration of capitalist societies (Dussel 1985), because they have at their disposal productive and commercial structures, which are linked to the logic of global markets. In the process of expanded accumulation, the integration of unproduced wealth into international trade requires relationships of unequal exchange (Frank 1978, 1981; Luxemburgo 1968; Dussel 1985).

It is therefore, these systems of appropriation that allow for a greater or lesser distribution of revenue and profit to take place, states that govern from the principle of sovereignty attempt to maintain a monopoly or keep control of these reserves and a share of the profits (Marx 1975). The monopolizing of oil income or the nationalization of oil resources are important conditions in achieving a balance in power relations, but are not sufficient to de-link a "dependent capital" from the expanded reproduction. Of course, some domestic corrections could be made. In Ecuador, for instance, legal measures were taken to guarantee a major appropriation of both the oil rent and the extraordinary profit (Pellegrini et al. 2014; Rival 2011; Arsel 2012).

However, with regard to the international oil trade, these are not corrections in domestic regulations, as the law of accumulation does not function on a national but on a global scale (Amin 1997, 1998). From this premise stems the political relevance of the search for institutional mechanisms for the distribution of capital profit on a global scale (Amin 1998). One of these mechanisms could be the Daly-Correa tax proposed for Ecuador with the aim of getting a global scale redistribution of oil revenues. President Correa presented this proposal to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 2007 (Correa 2007b), to the Summit of South American-Arab Countries in 2012 (ASPA) (Correa 2012a), and during his official visit to Europe in April 2013 (Correa 2012b).

Table 1 Research strategy and corresponding methods addressing research questions

Research question	Study focus	Methods	Data collection
How do you understand the use values of nature?	Social perception of actors	In deep—case study	(5) Interview academics (6) international actors (12) environmentalists (5) stakeholder oil sector (12) government officials.
Why compensate to Ecuador for a non-production of oil?	Social perception of actors	In deep case study/critical content analysis of key policies	(5) Interview academics (6) international actors (12) environmentalist (5) stakeholder of the oil sector (12) government officials.
What languages are used to justify this compensation?	Exploration of discourses analysis of the official documents and speeches. Identify the languages prioritized by different actors.	In deep case study/critical content analysis of key policies	Chronological review of (1000) hundred thousand press releases. (10) President Correa's speeches/(3) Official documents of the Yasuní- ITT Initiative.
Do you think these languages are relevant for the transition to an alternative development?	Identify the languages of valuation of the different actors	Grounded theory/ Atlas Ti	Chronological review of (1000) hundred thousand press releases. (40) Semi-structured in-depth interviews

The Daly-Correa tax is an eco-tax on carbon dioxide emissions attached to the export of oil, placed on the carbon content of each barrel of oil (Ministry of External Affairs 2008). Through this tax, the imported oil countries those mainly responsibility for climate change should pay a tax that permits a fair international compensation for non-production of oil in producer countries. The compensation would allow revenue to be allocated to poverty reduction and the financing of renewable energy.

Despite this, the most interesting aspect of the Yasuní-ITT proposal is President Correa's call for an international compensation based on use values (Correa 2007a). Theoretically, use value has a double quality, it expresses both the potential value but also its capacity of emancipation from the valuation process (Echeverría 1998). Echeverría considers use values to be the basis of exchange values and exactly for that reason use values have the potential to subvert the process of valuation. In fact, all the different forms of social organization that are articulated around use values are currently being subsumed into a single form of value: "the" capitalist (Echeverría 1994; Escobar 1996). Currently, oil is not thought of other than as a commodity because it has no value. Thus it is important to de-commodify oil production.

Here, the thesis of "de-linking" of Amin (1998) turns out to be relevant. *The interesting element is that the 'de-linking' of Amin is not autarky, but the abandonment of the capitalist value* (Amin 2011). Following the author, *it would mean a coalition-type strategy where use values opposed to the self-valuation process of capital resist the expansion of capitalism and create a different development path* (Amin 2011). The thesis of Amin is a materialist

perspective of "de-linking" from capital valuation, but Echeverría rounds out this thesis by placing the category of use values at the core of the critique of capitalist modernity (Echeverría 1994, 1998, 2010). This means that capitalist valuation is directly opposed to others ways of in which society has historically been related to nature and has or has not used nature. (Echeverría 1998, 2010). As a result, it is extremely difficult to think of different ways of social reproduction other than the laws of capital.

Indeed what to produce and what not to produce should be the result of social decisions. For example, the Uwa's Indians in Colombia consider oil to be the blood of mother Earth [personal talk with the ex-parliamentary indigenous leader Lorenzo Muellas]. The intention of this brief discussion about use values is to stress the emancipatory potential of the use value category (Echeverría 1994) and the need for "de-linking" (Amin 1998) oil from capital accumulation.

Results

Environmentalist position on compensation

The Initiative was presented on the international level as a call to compensate the use-value of nature (Correa 2007a). One of the Initiative's main spokespeople from an environmental ONG said 'it was Correa who introduced the issue of use value of nature and I think this was a step forward, I think it was an impressive leap forward (...)' (author interview with 1 environmentalist). It is from here that a direct payment for the use-value of nature becomes

relevant. However, in 2009 the Initiative led by a prestigious team of environmentalists was linked with the carbon market through the Yasuní Guarantee Certificates (CGY) proposal. This certificate would be issued for the nominal value of the contributions, up to the total amount of 407 million tons of avoided carbon dioxide emissions (Larrea et al. 2009; Larrea 2010).

For the leader of the Initiative, ‘it was a matter of getting the CGYs to be accepted as if they were carbon credit’ (Sevilla 2010). The CGY proposal was supported by a study funded by a German international aid organization which recommended that the Initiative design a payment system for ecological services (Silvestrum 2009). It concluded that the proposed CGY credits could not be traded under the European Union Emissions Trading System, but they could be negotiated under the voluntary emissions trading schemes (ibid.).

Hence, the Initiative was co-opted by the traditional economic paradigm of the valuation process of nature (Arsel 2012). Therefore, as Escobar explains, by rationalizing the defense of nature in economic terms, this advocates the economization of life (Escobar 1996). Some interviewees agree that *through the carbon market the notion of use value was quickly dismantled and transferred back to the vulgar value of exchange of environmental services* (author interview with 4 environmentalists). For example; ‘under Sevilla’s leadership the idea of carbon debt was abandoned and became a part of the carbon trade, with the invention of “Yasuní bonds” (author interview with 8 environmentalists). Some environmentalists were conceptually opposed to the market strategy; however, they believed that despite this drawback, the Initiative at least in this way, would have “retained the possibility of succeeding” (author interview with 6 environmentalists, including one ex-official leader of the Initiative).

Ultimately, in an attempt to *save the planet* (Sevilla 2010) or *save Yasuní* (the slogan of *Campaña Amazonía por la Vida*) environmentalists were willing to sacrifice the issue of commodification. Environmentalists were confident that the market would provide them with a technical solution to a political problem, and in an attempt to *save the Yasuní* they stripped it of its only possibility of becoming de-linking from capital accumulation. The environmental narrative focused on biodiversity, carbon sequestration or the anthropological value of the Tagaeri and Tarmenane people, could not help to understand the political implication of the economic valuation in the Yasuní.

Currently, through ecosystem service valuation, nature as a non-produced productive force is subsumed under the logic of the market. Even though environmental services do not have an exchange value, their valuation expresses market dominance over the economy and politics and the

deepening of the mechanisms of appropriation of nature by capital. The environmental narrative was trapped in the discourses and practices that proposed to save nature by selling it (McAfee 1999). In summary, with Sevilla’s CGY the Initiative was co-opted by the traditional economic paradigm of the valuation process of nature (Arsel 2012) with all the inequalities and contradictions that the market generates (McAfee 2012). In sum, the ‘novelty’ of the Initiative was the possibility of “de-linking” oil from capital accumulation, and to do it, the Initiative did not need to create a new “commodity” in its place. Regrettably, the Initiative proved to be no exception to the trend of protecting nature by selling it.

Germany position on compensation

From the very beginning, the Initiative sought solutions that went beyond the realm of domestic policy. In particular, the call for international compensation for non-production of oil required herculean efforts to give shape to something that was simply unthinkable for an oil dependent country; to exchange its oil revenue for a direct payment for the non-production of same. The first country to support the idea was Germany through the German Parliament which considered that the Initiative was particularly important for the conservation of a global biosphere reserve and the protection of settlements of the indigenous people (...)’ (Deutscher Bundestag Declaration Deutscher Bundestag Declaration 2008). Nevertheless, the German Government was also the first to regret supporting it. On September 16th, 2009, (the same day that Chile was the first country to contribute to the Initiative Trust Fund) Dirk Niebel—Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development—decided not to support the Initiative (Niebel 2010). Other European countries such as Norway expressed an interest in supporting the Initiative but under an environmental services framework (Pellegrini et al. 2014) and refused to link the Initiative with the non-production of oil (Personal talk with 2 ex ministers). France was also willing to pay “to protect” biodiversity but disagreed with the idea of a direct payment for leaving the oil in the ground (Le Quang 2013).

Ecuador’s government promoted the idea of international compensation for 6 years but the Yasuní-ITT Trust Fund never became a reality (Annual Report 2011, 2012). The funds promised for the Initiative were well below government expectations (Pellegrini et al. 2014) and Correa cancelled the Initiative on August 15th, 2013. affirming that *‘unfortunately we have to say that the world has failed us (...) I think the Initiative was ahead of its time, and those responsible for climate change were unable to understand it, or did not want to (...)’* (Correa 2013). Nevertheless, the German government was well aware of

the political implications of a direct payment for the non-production of oil (author interview with 2 environmentalists). In fact, on June 9th, 2010 Germany officially announced that it would not finance the Initiative because ‘(...) the proposal is dangerous and might be a precedent for other producing countries to demand a similar amount to that requested by Ecuador’ (AGENCIA AFP 2010). ‘(...) A direct payment for a fund of this kind creates a precedent, one which may ultimately prove very expensive’ (ibid.) However, Germany’s position did not result in a total rejection of the Initiative. Germany suggested: ‘(...) it would be more advisable for Ecuador to integrate the plan for the Yasuní into the United Nations REDD program for the protection of forests’ (ECUADORINMEDIATO 2011). In 2013 Germany did in fact contribute 34.5 million euros directly to Yasuní National Park—but not through the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. The money was provided for conservation activities and not as a contribution to the proposal for the non-production of oil (AGENCIA AFP 2013). Evidently the German government understood the political effects of a direct payment for a non-production of oil, and therefore, Germany insisted on pigeonholing the Initiative in the field of conservation ‘(...) The German government shares the goals of the Initiative: the conservation of Amazonia, biodiversity and the protection of indigenous peoples ‘but does not support the idea of paying compensation to a country for renouncing oil exploitation’ (Henrichmann 2013). In short, the alternatives offered by Germany, in the words of Escobar ‘pretend to continue treating nature as a commodity, without any significant adjustments in the market system’ (Escobar 1996, 1998).

Government position on compensation

In 2007 when the Initiative was considered public policy, it was directly linked to economic compensation. In fact, without this, Ecuador would exploit its most important reserve to finance its development strategy (Correa 2007c). The Initiative was not a moratorium on oil activities but a call for substituting oil rent through international compensation.

Dussel (1985) explains that it is highly problematic for a “dependent capital” economy to stop receiving oil income or profits because of its own dependent economic structure. In Ecuador for example, oil income represents 66.7 % of its exports and about 20 % of its GDP, but Ecuador is not only dependent on its oil exports but also on its oil derivatives: 74 % of the derivatives (gasoline, naphtha etc.) Ecuador consumes are imported due to the country’s inadequate refining structure (Acosta 2007).

The conditions of the oil export-import trade are also affected by external decisions during the production process (international trade) such as prices and technological

dependency (Dussel 1985). Moreover, “dependent capital” suffers a higher capital depreciation than “developed capital” when generating profit (Dussel 1985). This means that the oil exports of a “dependent capital” country such as Ecuador constitutes a decrease of its social/wealth.

Thus Correa placed the Initiative in a broader strategy for changing the energy sector. Ecuador emphasized the need to replace oil rent to implement Ecuador’s development strategy under the *National Development Plan for Good Living 2009–2013*.⁷ In fact, in 2007 the official slogan of the Initiative was “*A different model for tackling climate change*” (Minister of External Affairs 2007) addressing the idea of the transition to a different energetic model. In the project “Leaving Ecuador’s Oil in the Ground: Avoiding Carbon Emissions and Saving the Yasuní Rainforest” (2007) the international compensation was to be invested in renewable energy and small hydro-power project for the diversification of the energy supply (Ecuadorian Government 2007).

Environmentalists have criticized the Initiative for being linked to economic compensation. For them, the decision of non-production of oil had to be a domestic decision independent from international compensation: both the richness of the biodiversity of Yasuní and the lives of the Tagaeri and Taromenane people were considered sufficient reasons for not exploiting the Yasuní-ITT fields (10 environmentalists’ positions interviewed by the author).

According to some interviewees, environmentalists could not understand the need to replace oil rent given the country’s high level of dependency on oil extraction. Some of them suspected that the government strategy was not to overcome extractivism as in the timeworn dispute between development and conservation, but in creating the material conditions necessary for planning the transition to an alternative development (3 academics shared this opinion when interviewed by the author).

Ironically, it was the government that launched compensation within the framework of the inequality of development. For instance, Correa proposed that the mechanism for the net avoidance of carbon emissions should be recognized as an integrated concept for an international compensation (Correa 2012b). Ecuador has the right to extract its oil, but chooses not to do it to avoid pollution (ibid.). Therefore, an action—or in the case of

⁷ At least three different schools of thought are influencing the development of the *sumak kawsay* concept in the political sphere. It is therefore difficult to conclude which of them best represents collective aspirations. However, the National Development Plan for Good Living 2009–2013 is ambiguous in itself. While nature is recognized as a subject of rights, public policy is driving the energy and the production transition with more extractivism and not without it. This strategy of development erodes the possibility of implementing *sumak kawsay* as a transformative concept that confronts capitalist organization.

ITT—a non-action, i.e., leaving the oil in the ground, should be compensated (ibid.). In his speech, Correa insisted that the major contributors to the Initiative were the Ecuadorians who were making a huge sacrifice by relinquishing oil revenues (ibid.).

In 2014, after the Initiative had been cancelled, Correa insisted that compensation for environmental services in Yasuní would lead to a redistribution of income on an unprecedented global scale (Correa 2014a). He maintained this position in the lectures he gave at Harvard (Correa 2014b). In Barcelona he showed that what should be emphasized in the language of compensation was the need to overcome dependency (Correa 2014c).

Ecuador is trying to reduce its dependency on international trade. Thus, it is positioning knowledge as a public and common good, and trying to break its dependence on its primary exports by changing the productive model (Ramírez 2014). Indeed, with the Initiative or without it, Ecuador is attempting to substitute its oil rent with a technological one. The problem is that without considering the need for transforming the material form through which society organizes itself, compensation for the non-production of oil does not resolve the problem of dependency. As a result, the failure of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative is not only the decision to exploit the ITT oilfield in Yasuní National Park due to the lack of international compensation, but also the fact that the transition to a different development strategy in Ecuador will be made with more rather than less extractivism.

Discussion

The Initiative opened the discussion about the social value of not using something (Ramírez 2010). However, the value of non-production of oil must take into account the problem of development and dependency: Ecuador could be doomed to repeat the logic of social reproduction that views development as an inevitable line towards progress, or it could choose another path.

It is true that by means of the non-production of oil a new metabolic process is avoided. If the problem were technical, 'leaving the oil in the ground would undoubtedly be the most efficient response to the scarcity of atmospheric sinks. But the problem is essentially political. The non-production of oil has direct implications for growth, and therefore, on the desired form or model of development.

The possibilities for an alternative to development in dependent capital countries face not only the serious scarcity of the atmosphere as a sink (biophysical constraints to growth) but also the lack of development options other than that of capitalism (political constraints

exacerbated by dependency). This has occurred as a result of changing the way society reproduces and interacts. In the face of biophysical constraints, political decisions are needed that compensate the non-production of oil without reproducing capitalist valuation.

To connect *sumak kawsay* and degrowth with the problem of capital accumulation enables us to consider alternatives to development in both hyper-metabolic societies and in those who attempt not to repeat this growth based on the needs of self-generation of capital. Precisely because we do not wish to live for capital, or relate to one another through capital, a political strategy such as international compensation for the non-production of oil places the discussion about alternatives to development within the sphere of social needs. Therefore, social organization and social relations determine the way in which human beings transform nature (Toledo 2008).

The transition to an alternative development model must face the challenge of continuing valuation of nature and of its dignity (Dussel 1985), or trying to "de-link" it from globalized capitalism (Amin 2011). In summary, *sumak kawsay* and degrowth could direct their criticism at production, which is where capitalist profit originates from, so that new imaginaries of nature could be attempted during a process of transition to a different development. These could both be integrated into a common critique of capital, an understanding of how nature is 'appropriated' and commodified to become part of the game of capital.

Conclusions

This article attempts to locate Ecuador's transition towards an alternative to development within the framework of capital accumulation, where both nature and capital dependency are stressed. The challenge seems to be to simultaneously address *and* overcome dependency. But while overcoming extractivism is a necessary condition to overcome dependency, it is not sufficient. Breaking the fiction of oil as a commodity will not occur by preserving biodiversity to sell it.

Ecuador does not need the Initiative to comply with its regulatory framework for conservation of the Yasuní; it needs it to expose the fiction of oil as a commodity. De-linking oil from the metabolic process of the expanded reproduction of capital is essential to the construction of an alternative to development. However, without addressing the need for replacing oil rent, Yasuní became a lost opportunity for taking social decisions about what to produce or what not to produce.

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