

[When economic expansion transgresses all limits: indebtedness and extractivism as two major causes of social unrest in the coming decade](#)

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NOTE: The Early Career Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

Indebtedness and extractivism have reached unparalleled levels worldwide. The two phenomena are intimately associated with the growth-addiction of neoliberal capitalism, which relentlessly seeks new accumulation opportunities – both virtual (financial) and spatial (as in mining, logging and planting). Debt and extractive industries have generated massive socioeconomic and environmental destabilization, but also two major potentially counterbalancing forces: anti-debt and anti-extractive movements. The objective of this project is to draw from my previous research and work towards an integrated and global overview of these movements. What is the 'new' nature of these movements and how do they relate to each other? How do they differ from 'older' economic conflicts such as land or labour struggles? What actors, strategies and circumstances have generated the most successful movements? What alternatives do they embody? Do they lead to more sustainability? Some of these movements do not go beyond narrow local claims, while others have started to consider "post-growth" alternatives, a promising approach which links with recent work in ecological economics and political ecology. Instead of focusing on specific case studies, my methodological approach consists of analysing the largest possible number of case studies available in the academic, governmental and civil society literature. As very little research has been done on anti-debt movements, a new database will have to be compiled from scratch. In contrast, anti-extractive conflicts have been extensively documented in the Environmental Justice Atlas (www.ejatlat.org), a rich database to which I have contributed. However, the EJAtlas is still largely under-explored theoretically. Dialoguing with the works of anthropologist David Graeber, philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato and ecological economist Joan Martinez-Alier, this project will generate three academic articles and be expanded into a major book project. It will also produce analyses and bottom-up policy implications to be circulated among activists, practitioners and a wider public.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

While private and public debts have been mounting worldwide, so has the extraction of natural resources – as in mines, logging and plantations – culminating today in massive socioeconomic and environmental destabilization. Accordingly, indebtedness and extractivism are now generating an increasing number of conflicts and may become nothing less than the two major causes of social unrest in the coming decade. Both phenomena are fundamentally linked to power imbalance over two kinds of key resources – capital and raw materials – and both are intimately linked to the persistent pursuit of economic growth rates.

For the past ten years, I have carried out extensive research on environmental movements and on the consequences of indebtedness. My objective now is to combine these two lines of research and explore in a deeper way the nature, links and implications of these “new” economic conflicts. But instead of simply adding empirical material to an already huge list of available case studies, my purpose is to step back and work towards a theoretical overview. My goal is to address the following questions:

- What is the “new” nature of anti-debt and anti-extractive conflicts and how do they relate to each other?
- How do they differ from “older” economic conflicts – basically land or labour struggles?
- What actors, strategies and circumstances tend to generate the most successful movements?
- What alternatives do they embody? What are their limits? Do they lead to more socioeconomic and ecological sustainability? How do they link with post-growth proposals?

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

Steffen et al. (2011) argued that the human imprint on the Earth system has become so massive that it has led to a new geological era, the Anthropocene. The global metabolism increases every year and requires ever more energy and materials to be extracted. Yet counterbalancing forces are at play too, embodied in the growing global environmental justice movement (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

In parallel, indebtedness is mounting too and has become the condition of the “neoliberal man”(Lazzarato, 2012). It is also politically highly inflammable. Graeber (2011) noted that “Through most of history, when overt political conflict between classes did appear, it took the form of pleas for debt cancellation”. Recently in the West – for example in the United States, England, Spain or Greece –, grassroots anti-debt activism has been mushrooming as a reaction to mortgage, student, credit card, agricultural or public debts. It is therefore surprising that anti-debt mobilizations have received so little attention by researchers.

Two new major forces are thus at play in contemporary capitalism: anti-debt and anti-extractive movements. With the worsening of the growth-driven environmental and debt crises, these conflicts are likely to intensify. But this intensification may be our best hope for containing the devastating effects of unfettered growth rates. The link with the different theories of “post-growth” must be explored. Post-growth proposals, as in degrowth or steady-state economics, seek to stabilize the size of our global metabolism at a lower, sustainable level (D’Alisa et al., 2014; Gerber & Raina, 2017a; 2017b).

The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

What is the “new” nature of anti-debt and anti-extractive conflicts and how do they relate? Indebtedness and extractivism – and the associated resistance movements – have reached unparalleled levels and are linked in complex ways. Both result from growth dynamics seeking new accumulation opportunities, both virtually and spatially. While credit is central to investments, debt – the other side of credit – also plays a key role as a disciplining “whip” for market expansion and thus extractivism.

How do they differ from “older” economic conflicts? The “classic” forms of economic conflicts relate to class-based struggles in the firm and the agrarian context. In contrast to these older forms – which of course still exist – it appears that today’s class consciousness often falls along creditor/debtor lines rather than capitalist/worker lines. In addition, environmental justice movements often display coalitions of actors from various class backgrounds.

What actors, strategies and circumstances tend to generate the most successful movements? The “power-effect” of any given movement appears to be a key ingredient

in its success. How does it express itself? Through sheer mobilization size, symbolic force, ethical strength, legal battles, determination, disruptive tactics?

What alternatives do these movements embody? Do they lead to more socioeconomic and ecological sustainability? Some anti-extractive movements do not go beyond seeking to stop a particular project; others have started to recommend “post-growth” alternatives, a promising fresh approach which can link with recent work in ecological economics and political ecology.

Theoretical Novelty *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

This project aims at better theorizing the relationships between the current colossal extents of debts and extractivism and the new conflicts they generate. The basic idea is to broaden our previous conceptualization of “economic conflicts” by introducing the categories of anti-debt and anti-extractive conflicts.

In order to theorize these “new economic conflicts”, I will first investigate each one of them separately. Very little research – let alone theoretical work – has been done on anti-debt movements. I will conceptualize them in dialogue with Graeber (2011), Lazzarato (2012; 2015) and with my previous work on indebtedness (Gerber, 2013; 2014; 2015).

In addition, anti-extractive conflicts need further conceptualization too. The Environmental Justice Atlas (www.ejatlat.org) – a project with which I collaborate – is by far the most comprehensive database on such conflicts. Yet this exciting and huge database is still under-explored theoretically. Building on the concepts of “popular environmentalism” (Martinez-Alier, 2002) and “post-growth”, I plan to thematise further the similarities/differences between environmental justice and “older” labour and land movements and investigate to what extent these “new” conflicts can offer fresh solutions to pressing contemporary issues.

One way to conceptualize the shift from “old” to “new” economic conflicts is through our idea of “the greening of the agrarian question” (Gerber & Veuthey, 2010). Peasants appear to be particularly vulnerable to changes introduced by the growing world economy – be it indebtedness or extractive industries – and are therefore particularly disposed to resist and link these two types of problems (Gerber, 2011).

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

My methodology takes its roots in the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology and political economy – my two areas of specialization – but it branches out to other disciplines, especially anthropology, history and political science. This approach fits very well with my interdisciplinary training and research, and with my strong theoretical interest in integration (Gerber & Steppacher, 2012; 2014).

Instead of focusing on specific case studies, my methodological approach consists here in exploring what can be drawn from the largest possible number of case studies already available in the academic, governmental and civil society literature. Very briefly, I will (i) analyse a large number of case studies using a matrix of analysis targeted at my research questions, (ii) develop a detailed categorizations of the different factors, processes, narratives and causal mechanisms documented, (iii) evaluate their relative occurrence and context, and (iv) articulate the resulting observations theoretically.

Regarding anti-extractive conflicts, my analysis will mainly rely on the database of the EJAtlas (www.ejatlus.org) which has now documented more than 2000 cases of environmental conflicts worldwide (Temper et al., 2015). This database is managed by a team I know very well located at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and which I plan to visit (see next section).

Regarding anti-debt conflicts, I will have to build the database myself, taking an historical perspective and drawing on a wide variety of sources ranging from newspapers to academic articles and including activist websites. In addition, interview with key activists will be carried out (see next section).

Work Plan *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

The research project will extend over a period of 9 months. The work plan chronologically looks like this:

- 4 months: compilation of the database on anti-debt movements. These movements have never been systematically investigated and this database would therefore be the first of its kind. During this period, short-term field visits will be carried out in order to get first-hand information on current anti-debt mobilizations and/or organizations: “Strike Debt” and the “Jubilee Debt Campaign” in the United Kingdom,

the “Movement of Mortgage Victims” in Spain, and the “Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt” in Belgium around prominent activist-scholar Éric Toussaint.

- 1 month: research stay at the Autonomous University of Barcelona where a team of political ecologists – around Professor Joan Martinez-Alier – is currently supervising the compilation of the EJAtlas.
- 2 weeks: research stay at the London School of Economics, working with Professor David Graeber and his group on the anthropology and politics of debt.
- 3 months and a half: writing of three academic articles and presentation of my results at the 2018 biannual conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE). ISEE conferences have been particularly receptive to world-scale analyses of extractive industries and environmental conflicts. One article will present and analyse my database of anti-debt movements; one will theorize the differences/similarities between anti-extractive and “older” economic conflicts; one will synthesise all my results and explore the origin, links and policy implications of anti-debt and anti-extractive mobilisations.

Outcome *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

Instead of top-down capacity-building, the present research is interested in bottom-up solutions and in movements generating their own policy proposals. In particular, post-growth options – potentially bringing together grassroots activists and academic researchers – may represent truly new, yet still controversial, solutions to real world social problems (Healy et al., 2013). Focusing on this line of thought, a report summarizing my results will be sent to a list of civil society organizations involved in social and environmental justice movements as well as to three selected newspapers.

This project will also be prolonged into an important book project seeking to revitalize the field of critical development studies. The book will demonstrate that the integrative ambitions of the field can be improved and argue, from a policy-oriented viewpoint, that critical development studies should question more clearly the current growth addiction of neoliberal capitalism and start conceptualizing viable post-growth alternatives.

The book will be articulated around three integrative concepts which are seen as central to an integrated and critical study of development: (i) social metabolism (linking a given social system to its environment), (ii) institutional structure (integrating laws,

customs and internalized norms), and (iii) resource conflicts (linking “new” and “old” social movements over power imbalances). While the different chapters discussing the first two concepts are well-advanced, I have not been able to adequately explore the last issue. The present project would allow me to do just this, and to get the book published by 2020 at a major university press.

The following question relates to your research project budget. If you would prefer to provide a more detailed budget breakdown please attach the document in the next section.