
**The dialectics between rural and urban spaces.
Critical reflections on modernization, coloniality and extractivism from an
agroculture in Argentina**

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Abstract

This article explores the dialectical relationship between the countryside and the city under the extractive matrix of development that is becoming dominant in the global rural South, specifically in Argentina. I put in motion this conflictual dynamic from the perspective of the global countryside (Woods, 2007) and in contrast to Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid's (2015) proposal of planetary urbanization. Positioning the extractive mode of development as the specific form through which capital is territorialized in the Latin American region, the article explores the environmental metamorphosis of a rice town in an eastern province in Argentina through the advancement of the agroindustry. Following three months of fieldwork in San Salvador (Entre Ríos), I explore violent relationship established with territory through the modernization of rural spaces—towns and their countryside—and its subsequent development as a "toxic geography" (Davies, 2019).

Keywords: extractive mode of production, sacrifice zone, dialectics, agroculture, environmental violence

Résumé

Cet article explore le rapport dialectique de la campagne et de la ville, dans le contexte d'un développement extractif en passe de devenir prédominant dans le Sud global rural, notamment en Argentine. Je mets ici en mouvement cette dynamique conflictuelle au prisme de la notion de campagne mondialisée ou *global countryside* (Woods, 2007), par opposition aux apports de Neil Brenner et de Christian Schmid (2015) sur l'urbanisation planétaire. Considérant ce mode extractif de développement comme une forme spécifique laquelle le capital est territorialisé dans l'espace latino-américain, ce texte examine la métamorphose environnementale d'une ville rizicole d'une province de l'est de l'Argentine sous l'effet de l'avancée de l'agro-industrie. Trois mois d'enquêtes de terrain à San Salvador (Entre Ríos), m'ont permis de m'intéresser à la relation violente qui s'établit avec le territoire lors de la modernisation d'espaces ruraux (villes et campagnes) et comment celle-ci produit une « géographie toxique » (Davies, 2019).

Mots-clés : mode extractif de production, zone de sacrifice, dialectique, agrovillage, violence environnementale

Introduction

This article explores the socio-environmental violence implicit in the spatial mode through which capital is structured in the Latin American region by looking at the transformation of territory and bodies in San Salvador, a rural city located in the province of Entre Ríos (Argentina). Known as the "Argentinian capital" of rice production, the city expanded thanks to the articulation of the agro-industrial chain, linking the town with the countryside. In the article, I explore the rural-urban dialectic, under the parameters of the extractive model of production, emphasizing the role of the environment in the relation between the rural and the city.

The article returns to Henri Lefebvre's metamorphosis (1989), applying it to the case of a *pueblo fumigado*¹. Departing from theories which emphasize the erosion of urban and rural difference—a planetary metamorphosis—or the advancement of an

1. The term of *pueblo fumigado* is given to all the rural villages, towns and cities surrounded by agricultural fields and affected by the agribusiness model that relies on transgenic seeds (mainly soybean) and agrochemical inputs. These sites are mostly found in the province of Buenos Aires, the pampas, and the Mesopotamian area, increasingly covering half or more of the national territory. The popular term of "pueblos fumigados" is used to denounce people's health issues due to the fumigations in their localities (Grupo de Reflexión Rural, 2009). It was born out of grassroot activism on the question as soon as 2001.

urban without an outside (Brenner, 2018), I explore the concept of metamorphosis as a toxic-biological process where the rural becomes the locus of organization for the city (Santos, 1994). With the intention of challenging a narrative of totalizing urbanization (Walker, 2015, p. 186) and giving space to the non-urban “outside” as well as its conflictual relation with the urban, I present a place-based study of a rural-city where I explore the uncoupling relation between the rural (as inhabitancy) and the agricultural, where the local population becomes disentangled from the agribusiness production model, but remains entangled in its toxic extensions.

In order to acknowledge the multiple transformations of the rural, I return to the literature of the global countryside (Woods, 2007), drawing on work that looks at specific developments in industrial rural-cities (Teubal, 2001; Gras and Hernandez, 2013; Cimadevilla and Carniglia, 2009; Albaladejo, 2009; etc.) in the Global South. Reflecting on this work, I problematize the premise proposed by Christophe Albaladejo (2009) that under the agrocitcity, modes of living become dissociated from the productive model. However, from an environmental perspective, I understand that both are still tied together through the toxic environment.

I explain this socio-environmental entanglement as part of the colonial legacy of the development of the rural-city, discussing its spatial formation in Argentina’s countryside, as well as its emerging form as an agrocitcity associated with the extractive mode of development (Gras and Hernandez, 2013). Finally, by including the socio-environmental dimension as an active agent in this dialectic, I aim to show how the transformation of the environment functions regulating the dynamics of inhabitancy (Machado, 2015) and constituting a specific form of modern rural living tied to extractive geographies.

The article explores how through an extractive lens, the dialectic between the rural and the urban, rather than progressing into a model of planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2018), creates a new colonial spatial disposition, with the formation of “sacrifice zones” (Svampa, 2008) in the remaking of rural places under globalization (Woods, 2007; Santos, 1994). In this way, rural cities, specifically agrocitcities, become critical points for exposing the radical transformation of the rural environment in the entanglement of the human and the non-human under extractive capitalism. In this dialectic, as Milton Santos defines it, “the local city ceases to be the city *in* the countryside and becomes the city *of* the countryside” (ibid., p. 52, italics added by the author).

Of relevance to this article, is how Maristella Svampa frames this spatial formation in terms of a “radicalisation of environmental injustice” (2014). The notion of environmental justice “constitutes for Latin America the most direct antecedent in conceptual and political terms for spatial justice” (Salamanca and Astudillo, 2016, p. 27). In the last thirty years, communities struggling with the emergence of new environmental conflicts associated with extractive projects have provided a radical criticism of the extractive matrix of development, aiming to expand the boundaries of what can be claimed as a right (the rights of nature and ecological debt, for example) while also disputing the meaning of development.

Considering the focus of this special issue of *Justice spatiale / Spatiale Justice*, the article shows that we need to consider the violent agency of nature as one result of the extractive mode of production that has a structural impact on places and relations as well as on bodies and territories. As such, the analysis reflects on the transformation of the environment and its disciplinary social and spatial implications as towns are converted into sacrifice zones, places where death is expected.

Theoretical framework

Informed by a decolonial perspective, I address the export-oriented extractive model of development (Gudynas, 2009; Svampa 2012; Martin, 2021) by conceptualizing it as a form of colonial violence that extends across social, ecological, and political aspects in the dialectics of rural and urban life, particularly insofar as it reshapes rural cities, such as San Salvador. Under this mode of development, the control, domination and extraction of resources result, on one hand, in huge profits for producers and in city expansion; while, on the other, they transform the city into an environmental liability, where local forms of living, social reproduction and environmental sustainability become irrelevant to the production of space and territorial planning.

I bring Rob Nixon’s notion of environmental violence (2011) to the context of rural cities’ transformations, explaining high rates of death and the degrading of people’s health in terms of displacement. While the case of San Salvador shows us people neither moving nor leaving the city, it remains a case of displaced violence. As Nixon explains, this is a form of violence that occurs out of sight, a case of delayed destruction that is dispersed in time and space. It develops as a violence of attrition that is not recognized as violence at all (ibid., p. 2). Environmental violence can be understood as a form of

“displacement without mobility” or “stationary displacement” (ibid., p. 19; p. 42), where it is not an armed conflict or natural disaster that forces villagers to move, but, as I explore in this article, pollution that gradually erodes the conditions and sustainability of cities, converting them into hostile places causing illness or, eventually, death.

Furthermore, I put Nixon’s environmental violence in dialogue with toxic metamorphosis to explore how this form of violence is incorporated in people’s quotidian experience. In *pueblos fumigados*, the metamorphosis of everyday life goes unnoticed, operating as a quiet and slow biological process that occurs in the air, land and water as well as in living bodies. In this way, the dialectics between the urban and the rural acquire new meaning, incorporating the degraded and contaminated bodies that inhabit the polluted town.

Methodology

The research used a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach where I historicize the relationship between the city and the rural, focusing on the changing dynamics of proximity and distance along different modes of production. During the course of this research, I spent three months (2021) in the area of the city of San Salvador, located in the extra-Pampean zone of Argentina (Mesopotamian region).

San Salvador replicates the model of rural towns in the province of Entre Ríos and most well-off towns in the geographical center of the country. The town square is the pride of the city and marks its center—it is clean, tidy, and well illuminated. All public events take place there and people drive their cars around it daily to see and be seen by everyone in the town.

In everyday life, people are used to living next to mills² and to cleaning the dust off their clothes after hanging them out to dry. Most people are not concerned about the dust in the air or the contamination of water or land. While people do not drink tap water, no one considers the environment of San Salvador to be dangerous. Ironically, during the pandemic, many people discovered that using a mask greatly improved their breathing.

2. There are currently 20 mills operating in San Salvador. The majority of them are middle size independent local companies, and there are three large mills (Ala, Schmukler, Cooperativa Arrocería) also owned by local producers. San Salvador is known as the “Argentinian capital” of rice production given the capacity to articulate the agro-industrial chain—sowing and harvesting, followed by storage, processing, and finally marketing. The city concentrates about 75% of all rice industrialization capacity in Argentina. By 2021 63,000 hectares of rice were produced in Entre Ríos.

People who are openly concerned by ecology and the environment are perceived with distrust and framed as “leftists” or “urbans”—people who do not understand rural living and the agricultural mode of production. However, most of the people interviewed knew or had lost someone due to cancer in the last 10 years, or they were sick themselves. During the fieldwork, I carried out 14 interviews with different relevant actors from the city—rural producers, mill-owners, workers, people affected by pollution, landowners and environmental activists—during which I asked them about their perceptions of living with pollution and if there were any changes to their habits and attitudes following the results of an environmental and health report (which offered evidence of the contamination in San Salvador) published in June 2016. One of the aims of my research project was to develop a collective map of avoided zones, areas, paths and walks, but people said that it was all “a big cloud” and that marked distinctions could not be made between neighborhoods or zones in the city (and beyond).



Figure 1: A nocturnal image of one of the mills located inside San Salvador
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Why San Salvador?

My interest in this town emerges from its largest ever protest by the end of 2013 (1,500 people in a town of 13,000) that was organized to demand a response from the municipality for the high rate of disease occurring in the city. According to information from the organization “Todos por Todos” (All for All)—a small group of organized neighbors, which worked together with the network “*Red de médicos de pueblos fumigados*”³—249 people died in San Salvador from 2009 to 2013, with 108 of those being victims of cancer⁴ (ANRED, 2015). After several requests from this organization, the municipality agreed to conduct an environmental and epidemiological study to determine the sources of the health degradation impacting the community. The main suspicions of the neighbors pointed to the dust cloud generated by mills spaced out along the city and the expanding agroindustrial activity surrounding the city.

The two studies were conducted during 2014-2015. One was an environmental study of the concentration of pesticides in environmental samples (coordinated by the Faculty of Exact Sciences at the Universidad de La Plata and directed by Damian Marino), and the other was an epidemiological survey of morbimortality (organized by the Faculty of Medical Sciences from the Universidad Nacional del Rosario, Department of Socioenvironmental Health of the University of Rosario). Two reports were provided: a Profile of Morbidity and Mortality of the Population (UNR, 2016) and an Environmental Report (UNLP, 2016).

The Environmental Report (UNLP, 2016) determined the historical presence of 31 pesticides of use and of current agricultural relevance to all the environmental matrixes tested (water, air and soil). The epidemiological survey on morbidity and mortality revealed that the main cause of death in San Salvador over the last 15 years is cancer, specifically, lung cancer (UNR, 2016, p. 17). The most common chronic disease was cardiovascular (following the general tendency of the region), but this was followed by respiratory and allergic pathologies (ibid., p. 13). In terms of geospatial distribution, it was noted that in 80 households there were 84 cases of cancer diagnosed between 2000 and 2014 (ibid., p. 17). The figure 2 is a map that gives a picture of the scale of the city and its

3. A network of scientists and doctors all working in healthcare and concerned by the effects on human health of the degraded environment resulting from extractive production.

4. Between 2011 and 2012, almost one out of every two deaths was the result of cancer, while in the whole country only one out of every five Argentines dies of oncological causes (Avila and Difilippo, 2016, p. 29).

location in a rural area. It combines the distribution of tumor cases, and the distribution of the mills within the urban area.



Figure 2: Tumor cases, mills location and urban area. San Salvador city, Entre Ríos province, Argentina

Elaboration by Lic. Maria Fernanda Zaccarìa, data provided from Morbidity and mortality profile report of San Salvador, Entre Ríos (UNR, 2016) and neighbors Nestor Luis Sarli and Richard Miguel Angel (2011)

In sum, the studies managed to resolve the main limitation of rural communities demanding environmental justice: to obtain empirical evidence of the correlation between the increase of disease and the degradation and toxicity of the environment. Nevertheless, after the results of the studies were made public, very little changed. The

forcefulness of the studies' results had no impact on the agribusiness model⁵, nor the lifestyle of local inhabitants. The hard evidence provided achieved little more than enforcing regulations that had already been established along with a few new responses from the municipality.⁶ Simultaneously, many of the people known to be involved in the campaigning were negatively impacted. As interviewees involved in the protest noted, after the social upheaval dissipated, nothing changed and people returned to their daily routine.

The roots of the city of San Salvador: spatial proximity and immobility

With the results of the socio-environmental study (UNLP, 2016), the iconic mill, an image of industrialization and prosperity, started to occupy a more ambivalent position. The image of the growing dust mushroom as a sign of productivity started to clash with imagery of the dust as the main agent of contamination in the town and of its people:

"And as it was part of the folklore, the dust, the landscape and from there people began to become aware and people began to protest and demand that this dust be reduced."
(local activist)

For a city founded as a provider of agricultural products, the productive relation is organizer of common sense. Such is the identification between the *sansalvadoreña* city and its role in production that it earned the title of the national capital of rice in 1951, with the first celebration organized by the city. But, since then, the changes in the mode of production have led to the material side of this representation affecting perceptions of the mills' innocuousness. What was developed under the premise of functionality and socio-territorial planning is today revealing a complexity not considered until 15 years ago. The virtuous relationship of productivity between the mill and the city that had aimed to increase proximity to the mills, so that workers could be as close as possible to their workplace, avoiding unnecessary delays and wasted energy (in the form of long walks or use of public transport) has been inverted, revealing the significant impact on the

5. The municipality, the main custodian of the extractive model of development at the local level, promised to control the toxic dust during the active season (expressed in policies over schedules for processing the rice and regulating the location of toxic infrastructures).

6. Infrastructures, such as the deposits with herbicides, rural trucks and power transformers which were placed at the margins of the city (coinciding with the poorest portion of the population) have been removed from the city. Aerial sprayers have also been prohibited in proximity to rural schools. Finally, rural producers now comply with international regulations and use herbicides of toxicity category IV (categorized as slightly toxic or practically non-toxic).

environment and public health. The dust becomes a traceable element from the fields which is processed in the city and becomes part of the local landscape.

“it became visible, what [the dust] was always the *vedette* [star] of the city. All around the mills were found pesticides, in the air, in the water and all that.” (local activist and biologist)

This spatial proximity between the mills, the deposits and the agricultural activity surrounding the city reveals the imbrication of both in organizing the economic, social and political life of the city of San Salvador. This was described by a local activist:

“It is a city that is considered a provider of agricultural services, it is not like Concordia that has the river [...] that has architecture, a port, nature, a dam [...] basically which has history. San Salvador was born as a city providing agricultural services. It built a railway and started to have a mill and began to export. Full stop.” (local activist and biologist)

This quote emphasizes the richness of characteristics and histories attributed to other cities in the area, thereby highlighting the local context of full subjection to capital in the structuring of space and socio-economic relations. Lacking any other physical feature or political relevance (to keep in mind) in comparison to other towns or cities in the province, the identity of the city is mostly connected to its production:

“[...] the people in San Salvador defend their place of rice identity, what is the cost? But we are also here, we decided to be here and we decided to stay here and it has certain consequences.” (municipal worker)

In the following section, I analyze the rural-urban dialectics at play under the extractive matrix of development, focusing on the rural-city as a critical space in organizing the extractive economy.

Rural cities in the Global South: the modernization of rural spaces

San Salvador is a town born out of the modernizing process of postcolonial geographies, grounded in colonial violence and the formation of private property. The expansion of the railroad and the opening of routes to the city, the urbanization of townships and the arrivals of factories or mills (as is the case with San Salvador) are a classic tale, becoming a model for rural development in South America at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The relationship of the Sansalvadoreños with land is utilitarian and affectionate. It is a resource meant to provide wealth as well as a home,

one type of relationship set up in the economy-ecology binomial—the non-human, an alien transformed through production, exploitation and accumulation (Moore, 2010). Advancing into the 21st century and under the current trend of reprimarization of peripheral economies, I frame the contemporary rural transformation in the region within the larger context of the “global countryside”:

“A rural realm constituted by multiple, shifting, tangled and dynamic networks, connecting rural to rural and rural to urban, but with greater intensities of globalization processes and of global interconnections in some rural localities than in others, and thus with a differential distribution of power, opportunity and wealth across rural space.” (Woods, 2007, p. 491)

But in order to situate the metamorphosis of San Salvador, I return to the conceptual developments of rural-cities developed in the region. The concept of rural cities in the Global South has been elaborated by several perspectives and has been given diverse names such as “agrocitity” (in Spanish: “*agrociudad*”, my translation; Albaladejo, 2009), “rurban”⁷ (in Spanish: “*rururbanidad*”; Cimadevilla and Carniglia, 2009), or “new ruralities” (Teubal, 2001). What these different theoretical and conceptual developments highlight is the transformation between the urban and the rural and, more specifically, the increasing modernization of rural spaces. As a common denominator, all of these concepts refer to a spatial, social, material and symbolic transformation, all intersected by the agricultural mode of production. While the terms are not in opposition to one another, they focus on different aspects of this transformation. On one hand, the concept of rurban developed for the “world periphery” (Cimadevilla and Carniglia, 2009, p. 5) proposes to unveil rural processes that take place in urban spaces theoretically defying Lefebvrian claims about the urbanization of social life. Thus, processes of rururbanization, (i.e., processes of ruralization of the city) are discussed to explore the margins and the marginality of modernity, looking at the expelled actors of rural life—peasants, for example, that become urban recyclers using horses as animal-powered vehicles for their searching circuits (ibid., p. 11-13). The concept of new rurality (Teubal, 2001), on the other hand, emphasizes vertical and horizontal expansion in the creation of corporate spaces in the rural sphere as part of its integration into the emerging global agri-food system. Miguel Teubal describes it as a new “agriculture without farmers” shaped by the use of new technologies associated with the widespread production of transgenic crops and the

7. The term was coined by the sociologist, Charles Galpin, who made reference to places which cannot typically be defined as rural, and which witness the increasing presence of “urban devices”, such as technological and financial technologies and productive routines (Cimadevilla and Carniglia, 2009, p. 5).

massive expulsion of farmers and peasants from agriculture (Giarraca and Teubal, 2009, p. 157). Finally, geographer Christophe Albaladejo coins the term “agrocit^y”, as cities that provide the fundamental services for the modernization of the countryside, such as agricultural inputs, technical advice and banking services, etc.

“They are also centers of consumption and invention of a new ‘modern’ way of life [...] This countryside, from the moment when it becomes essentially defined by the agricultural activity and even more by the ‘production’ dimension of this activity, will be more commonly called by the word ‘*el campo*.’” (Albaladejo, 2013, p. 10)

In this new spatial organization of the rural, “*el campo*” (named as such to frame land as a natural resource—but not the material basis for social reproduction) stands out as a key term to define the rural through its productive function, in contrast to the postcolonial period where the *estancia*⁸ was central to social life: “There is no more countryside, there are no more rural spaces, there is el ‘campo’ and there are towns and cities!”⁹ (Albaladejo, 2013, p. 11, my italic). What is highlighted in the agrocit^y model is a process of separation between forms of living and the mode of production.

Carla Gras and Valeria Hernandez (2013) update Albaladejo’s agrocities under the extractivist mode of production. They inaugurate this period in the 1990s, with the policies of structural adjustment and the liberalization of the market. Specific to the agricultural sector in 1996, Argentina fully embraced emerging biotechnological improvements with the approval of the transgenic soybean. In their book, *El agro como negocio*, Gras and Hernandez explore the territorial development of the agribusiness, highlighting the dissociation between urban life and the productive network:

“In effect, both the dynamics of fragmentation from below and concentration from above, as well as that of the decoupling between productive activity and the intrinsic logics of various pillars of the agribusiness model (financial, technological, fiduciary) promote and perpetuate the aforementioned dissociation. The main consequence is the divorce between the productive insertion of the actors in the agricultural fabric and the mode of sociability built in rural towns.” (Gras and Hernandez, 2013, p. 51)

8. The *estancia* was the nodal point of social life in the countryside of the Pampa, the most relevant space of population grouping in the countryside during the postcolonial period. In formal terms, the estancia was not a town or a space of public life, but “the private territory of a notable, a territory delimited not by a fixed border, but by the daily movements of cattle, horses and mules from the water points” (Albaladejo, 2013, p. 5).

9. Translated from Spanish: “*Ya no hay más campaña, no hay más espacios rurales, hay un campo y hay pueblos y ciudades!*”

Thus, the territorial expression of the agribusiness model presents a distancing, expressed in a double process: first, through a differentiation between the agricultural and the local rural, and second, with the separation of the urban from the productive. On one hand, the agricultural is treated as a production field and a site of value extraction; this becomes distanced from “the rural town”, which is the space of socialization. On the other hand, the urban network and the urban living of the agribusiness sector are also dissociated from the production system.

The agrocitry as a sacrifice zone: distant but close

In the case of San Salvador, the decoupling implicit in the formation of the agrocitry is expressed through a simultaneous process of depeasantization, characterized by the rapid loss in the fields of craft-based manual laborers (Villulla et al., 2019) as well as an increase in the urban population, associated with the increased presence of services. This started with the service and maintenance of rural machinery (for the mills and storage infrastructure) in the 1950s, followed by inputs for the agroindustry (pesticides, transformers, agricultural implements, etc.), and later by the appearance of new forms of consumption, with bars, cafes and kiosks, as well as technology shops, schools and high schools in proximity to tertiary institutions in the 1990s. The city expanded, becoming more service-oriented.

But in contrast to the increasing fragmentation between the rural and the city proposed by the agrocitry model, from an environmental perspective, the reorientation of “el campo” towards the principles of agribusiness started to expose a continuation, rather than the apparent demarcation between the city and the rural. The physical closeness of the mills to the city, as well as to agricultural production, appears not only as an obsolete sociospatial organization for the agrocitry (and its productive and social dissociation), but as the optimal set-up for the formation of a sacrifice zone. This form of spatial organization connects the agrocitry to the agricultural fields through its environmental liabilities, which implies a double and concatenated process of the destruction of territory and the destruction of life (Svampa, 2014, p. 86). In the case of San Salvador, this sacrificial disposition is established as a collateral effect of the agribusiness development model to which the population is exposed through the pollution of air, land and water, most visibly due to its proximity to the mills, but also through the daily closeness of its links to the agribusiness.

Through the development of the agribusiness model, people's bodies are withdrawn from critical participation in agricultural production (whether urban or rural), yet they are still affected as much or more than before. Many, if not most, of the inhabitants of San Salvador, while having a deferred or passive role in agribusiness production, are potential victims of its presence. Diseased bodies and territories are assimilated as the cost of development, as described by an inhabitant:

"We are going to put the mill next to the house! Today, most of the mills are within the urban common land next to your house, that generates a very high social risk, and I think that people... When you get used to it, you live with this violent situation, the local people minimize it." (municipal worker)

Following the format of the agrocitcity, the relationship between the urban and the rural is productively, symbolically and in terms of inhabitancy more separated than ever before. On the one hand, the city is becoming more connected to the service sector and developing urban rhythms, by increasing for example labor intensity and working hours, while becoming increasingly disconnected from its rural components (with the elimination of the work break or napping time). On the other side, the rural becomes more clearly expressed as an exclusive site of production with no social or affective bonds to the land. In both instances, however, the modernization of the agrocitcity and the rural has never been better understood than through its inherent violence.

Specifically, the dust and the agricultural enclosure of the city, more than "symbols" of violence, are effectively part of a tangible polluted environment that operates as a means of spatial ordering. The disciplinary role of extractivism in the topography of rural cities operates as a slow displacement of local people by affecting people's health (i.e., diseases, reproductive issues and deaths) and their possibilities for social reproduction.

In what it follows, I want to return to the history of San Salvador using a postcolonial framing to show how the violent colonial footprint that founded the city reemerges under the extractive matrix of development.

Extractivism and the rural-urban dialectics: peripheral fields

The founding of San Salvador occurred during the colonization and creation of agricultural colonies of Entre Ríos.¹⁰ Colonel Malarín founded the city to support the policy of welcoming immigrants. Malarín belonged to the *porteño* bourgeoisie and was an important adviser to General Roca.¹¹ He was responsible for the strategic management of the indigenous population during the military campaign of territorial conquest south of the Pampas and in Patagonia. In 1877, he was appointed military *attaché* and traveled to the United States and France. For both visits, his objective was to study how the state handled the establishment of its interior frontiers as well as its relations to the natives and colonies respectively. As described by the head of the Rice Museum in San Salvador, this aspect of the founder of the city offers a particular perspective on the sensitivity of the inhabitants of San Salvador.

“San Salvador was the first city established privately in the province. Malarín was a guy that, because of his military character, had a lot of influence in the *Campaña del Desierto* (Desert military campaign). This event is fundamental for me, because this is also our idiosyncrasy, this thing of: ‘I appropriate, I have power over certain things’ [...] Even though the community doesn’t know this or is not conscious of it, it stays. Malarín, out of the two strategies that Roca had to advance with the Campaign to the Desert: killing them all [the natives] or not, Malarín, said ‘no, the soldiers won’t want to kill to all the Indians.’ Some of them, the babies, the little ones were appropriated. What did Roca do with them? He took them to the landowners in Cordoba, Mendoza, Buenos Aires and some of them to Entre Ríos. What a chance! I believe the appropriation of those children was later the basis of those who became the creole in this area.” (municipal worker)

This same appropriating and utilitarian spirit from the inhabitants in San Salvador is expressed in the perspective over nature and the rural. The folkloric fable highlighted by the locals and the municipality is associated with migrants’ arrival to the colonies and the growth of the town. However, the material history of the formation of the city of San Salvador was forged during the transition to capitalism, when the production of nature is

10. In Entre Ríos, 171 agricultural colonies were established, 21 of them were initiated by the national and provincial government and 12 by the local municipal government, while 138 were private.

11. Julio Argentino Roca (1843-1914) was twice president (1880-1886, 1898-1904) and the leader of the military conquest of Patagonia, ironically called the “Campaign to the Desert” (1879). His main concern was to establish a modern state, expanding control of the territory and affirming Argentinian sovereignty over the south of the country, known as Patagonia. He led the “Campaign of the Desert” with the objective of occupying the land, displacing and eliminating the native population, seen at the time as barbaric and an obstacle to progress.

developed under the premise of maximizing capital gains and departing from the formation of private property (Wood, 2002).

“Much has to do with the fact that the inhabitants of San Salvador have an idea of nature as *'el campo'*. Nature is worth it as long as it is an agricultural field. There is a concept of the native scrublands as a vegetal formation with native species, which it is read here as a 'dirty tract of land'. 'Dirty' means that it has trees and a whole functioning ecosystem which is not leveled to be put into production.” (local activist and biologist)

The perception of nature as primary input or agricultural service replicates the practices and horizons of the colonizers of the 19th century. As Fernando Coronil highlights, land became a constitutive element in the making of modernity. This account recognizes the role of the colonial space and its resources as a fundamental aspect in the configuration of capitalist social relations (2000, p. 248-249). Land is then reduced to a resource and an economic asset. Following the modern episteme, the natural state of the land is read by the producer as abandoned or wasted land. For them, this is a materially and symbolically peripheral field, something that is outside of productive and extractive relations. For the producer, the countryside is a production field and nature is the raw material, an object of monetary valorization (Machado, 2014, p. 240).

Conclusion: a violent continuum

The socio-environmental response challenges the dominant perception of a separation between the rural and the city while allowing us to explore other forms the rural-urban dialectic can adopt. This lens shows that rather than deepening a neat separation between a service and consumption city and a peasant(less) biotechnological extractive field, a continuum of toxic residue within these different planes concerning the use of the territory ties them together in the formation of a “toxic environment” (Davies, 2019).

Under the extractive mode of production, the separation between the different uses of the territory (urban and rural) loses its distinctiveness by highlighting the violent continuity between the one and the other. The violence is evident in disposable bodies of people who do not know how they became sick, and who accept their complicity in the process of turning their city into a sacrificial zone.

The condition of this peripheral modernity, organized through the parameters of extractive capitalism, shows us that urban and the rural are not disconnected, and that rural and city are very much still connected by the appropriation and exploitation of land and nature. In this sense, the agrocitry operates as the main provider of products (fertilizers, agrochemicals, etc.) and services (deposits, machinery, etc.) for the agricultural fields. As Santos and Silveira highlight, the agrocitry model achieves a variable geometry that considers “the way in which the different agglomerations participate in the game between the local and the global” (Santos and Silveira, 2001, p. 281).

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