

The Political Ecology of Development and Bioeconomy Discourse in the Colombian Amazon

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Colombian/Colombia)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies

(AFES)

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The Hague, The Netherlands
November 2024

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List of Acronyms

CBD	Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
CCC	Colombian Constitutional Court
CEPAL	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
CEV	Colombian Truth Commission
DNP	Colombian National Department of Planning
FARC	Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia
ICAHN	Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace
OCDE	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPIAC	National Organization of Indigenous Peoples from the Amazon
RAISG	Red Amazónica de Información Socioambiental
UNFCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Abstract

This research underscores the Amazon as both a contested landscape within global discussions on ecological preservation and an expression of the larger tensions between development and nature. Exploring the Amazon as more than just a resource for extraction, it examines the region as a critical geography that unveils the power and capital dynamics currently driving environmental degradation. Through an analysis of state interventions and competing discourses, this research paper highlights the ongoing negotiation between the interests of capital and nature. It also explores the emergence of bioeconomy as a framework for rethinking development, identifying the perspectives that emphasize its potential to either reinforce or challenge the logic of capital.

Relevance to Development Studies

Recent debates regarding the Amazon's fate emphasize the need to design and deploy a *bioeconomy model*. Yet the prevalent viewpoints, when mentioned, miss a clear expression of their contents. (Re)Framing development discussions on the concept of bioeconomy without clarifying the substance of such proposal, nor of the assumptions and rationalities that underpin it, could lead to misguided policies that might fail to address the specificity of the biome. It was the diversity of understandings built until today around this concept that caught my attention, as it is how we name and frame things –and which assumptions we start from– what influences their orientation and, therefore, the effects and implications they have in specific contexts.

Keywords

Amazon, development, sustainable development, bioeconomy, environmentalism

*“Nunca diga que va a construir maloca. Trabaje tranquilo y callado, cuando haya comida, mambe, am-
bil, lo publica y eso es para construirlo. Si lo anuncia sin ningún trabajo, esas palabras se las lleva el viento.
Cuando se tengan los elementos en la mano, es cuando se habla.”*

Tomás Román. Investigador indígena Uitoto.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the Gaia Amazonas Foundation for the opportunity I had to accompany their work with the indigenous peoples of the eastern Colombian Amazon. My main intention with this research is to contribute to this process while acknowledging that this contribution is just a piece of a broader landscape of efforts and paths that many others have already helped build before. I also appreciate the inspiring and lengthy conversations with Juan Camilo González and Sebastián Santacruz about some of the questions I sought to explore in this research paper.

Y como siempre, a Marlen, José Guillermo, María Camila, Juan Sebastián, y nuestra Michi Dalia Simona Parra Borda, por sostener mi mundo siempre. ¡Gracias!

Introduction

On October 2024, at the opening of the 16th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, the Secretary-General of the United Nations pronounced a speech calling for action to a crisis moving us closer to the tipping points that “could fuel further hunger, displacement and armed conflicts” (UN Secretary-General speech, 2024). His last words claimed: “The survival of our planet – and our own– is on the line”. Fifty-two years before¹, this now often-heard claim emerged as an awareness of how certain human actions disrupt the necessary conditions for sustaining life (Arsel, Dasgupta, Storm, 2021). Since then, things have changed, and as important as asking how the discussions have unfolded to the present is the question regarding *for how long* this claim has been raised. This question might be of equal importance not only because it tells us about the inert way in which *humanity*² has kept conducting itself through a will for profit that still drives the deterioration, if not the complete collapse, of the planet but because it makes visible some of the most controversial, and yet unresolved, tensions that have shaped our present: How to conduct development in a way that keeps balanced the conditions for the reproduction of life, for it is those conditions that life depends on.

It is this very dependence that raised certain landscapes to a now-called “strategic” status. While the structures that sustain the relations between nature and capital continue to work, most of these landscapes remain important to the extent that they have been the object of several policy frameworks, most of which have as their objective the will to protect them. From Southeast Asia (Papua New Guinea and Indonesia) to Central Africa (Congo Rainforest), South America (Amazon rainforest), and other biomes of the world, what seems to grow is a global consensus that renders them as important landscapes, either for the reproduction

¹ As pointed out by different scholars early international debates on the relationship between humans and the environment can be considered one of the starting points for multiple ongoing discussions regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, and rights of nature. As emerging debates, they were first brought up at an international instance in 1968, during the 23rd session of the United Nations, whose following resolution stated: “The relationship between man and his environment is undergoing profound changes in the wake of modern scientific and technological developments [...]. [...] These developments, while offering unprecedented opportunities to change and shape the environment of man to meet his needs and aspirations, also involve grave dangers if not properly controlled” (United Nations General Assembly, 2398, XXIII Session, 1968, 2). Regardless of the prevalently instrumental terms in which the environment seems to be understood, the resolution acknowledged the potential impacts of rapid transformations occurring since the 19th century. Although it mentioned those impacts by signaling science and technology – while remaining silent about the bonds with the economic system that fueled those changes - it is considered to be one of the first international precedents that prepared the ground to place environmental consciousness on the field of international politics and law. (Parra-Borda, 2024).

² The action of humans has different scales and impacts depending on specific geographies, particularly those that depend on high levels of energy use to fuel capitalist economic systems (Hickel, 2022, 4). As Hickel points out, aggregate resource use is directly tied to specific geographies, and “ecological breakdown [...] is driven overwhelmingly by a small handful of high-income countries” (Hickel, 2022, 5). From this follows that saying that all humanity causes equal damage disregards the differentiated historical circumstances that made it possible for certain countries to achieve high levels of development (Shue, 2015). Moreover, it implies overlooking societies and cultures that maintain relations with nature beneficial for the entire planet. That is the case of certain indigenous peoples who, as it has been widely documented and recognized in IPCC and IPBES reports, through the exercise of their knowledge systems, contribute to the reproduction of the conditions that sustain life on earth.

of life or for maintaining the prevalent structures of capitalist economies. As pointed out by Martínez-Allier, “saving the forest is [...], with the possible exception only of saving whales, the great environmental cause of our times” (1998, xiii). Yet critical issues regarding their fate continue reframing debates on the relationship between nature and development.

To situate the various forms in which these debates reemerge and the specific character they take, I will focus this research paper on the Amazon rainforest. Amazon rainforests are today’s largest tropical forests in the world. They are shared by eight South American countries³, one of which is Colombia. Although the Amazon is often thought of as a primarily Brazilian landscape – due to the large and predominantly extensive forests within its borders – its shared extension with other countries and, particularly, the large, continental-scale dynamics of its ecosystems make it a wider biome. In Colombia, the Amazon comprises 44% of the continental territory (RAISG, 2019). 69,6% of its territories are protected, which signifies that they are subject to a specific form of land-use regulation that, in a broader sense, determines what is permitted and what is restricted. Out of the 69,6%, 53,6% have been recognized as Indigenous Territories, and 22,4% have been designated as a National Protected Area (RAISG, 2019; MapBiomass, 2023).

As it is often held, the Colombian Amazon is not homogeneous. Due to different historical and geographical circumstances, the region is often characterized according to the ‘patterns’ of two different areas: the western and the eastern. That the processes of the western and eastern Colombian Amazon have been different does not mean that the scope through which the state orientates development planning has not worked, in general, with a similar logic. In that sense, at a geographical level, instead of choosing a particular location or area, I seek to encompass the Colombian Amazon as the interconnected region it is, without ignoring that both its western and eastern areas have their specificities. This choice responds to the fact that – even with contradictions, ruptures, and continuities to which I will refer – the Colombian state, for at least the last four decades, has thought and intervened in its landscapes, acknowledging that it is part of a biome. The fact that the Amazon is a set of ecosystems of great extension whose well-being is expressed in terms of the connectivity that exists between them has gained such significance, that it has shaped most of the planning perspectives of the region.

However, and as it has been widely studied before, from the 16th century to the present, the Amazon has been and (despite the privileged protection perspectives) still is a source of multiple extractive processes (Hugh-Jones, 1981; Dominguez, 1988; Goodman & Hall, 1990; Serje, 2020; Hetch, 1989, 2021). Different processes demonstrate how the Colombian Amazon has been shaped and influenced by interests tied to capital. The establishment of religious missions (Cabrera, 2002; Jackson, 1984); the continual extraction of raw materials⁴ (Dominguez, 1988); the colonization processes of its western areas (Fajardo, 2002; Hetch *et al.*, 2021); and, for the last decades, the set of different policies aimed at the preservation of its ecosystems sometimes through its commodification (Scoons, 2015; Arsel, 2012; Bayrak *et al.*, 2016; Sunderlin *et al.*, 2015), show how the region has been frequently linked to global markets (Del Cairo, 2010; Hetch *et al.*, 2021). Even though within specific historical circumstances and in particular locations, it could be argued that these processes are an expression of the large history of dependency of South American economies on extractive industries (Arsel *et al.* 2016).

³ Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Brasil, Guyana, and Surinam.

⁴ Such as quinine, rubber, skins, coca, coltan, and oil.

Either as a source of resource extraction or as a source of labor for exploitation, the Amazon region has been frequently linked to the logic of capital (Del Cairo, 2010; Hetch *et al.*, 2021; Serje, 2020). In dialogue with this stance, what I claim in this research paper is that, rather than being a mere resource of extraction, the Amazon is one of the geographies whose discussions, from the local to the global, unveil the uneven power relations that distribute environmental damage at a pace that threatens not only the biome itself but the whole biosphere. From this, it follows that the Amazon serves as a force that mobilizes measures aimed at tackling the environmental problems of our present as what they are: historically and politically grounded issues that require mechanisms to hold accountable those who, to a high degree and intensity, create huge environmental damage across the globe. In other words, the Global North economies that rely on high levels of energy use to fuel their economic structures (Hickel, 2022; Shue, 2015). With nuances to which I will refer later, the state and other forces shaping the trajectories of the region have been triggering what could be understood as a process of mediation and negotiation – whose course is still under dispute – in which Amazon forests have played a key role on discussing the extent to which capital could advance its frontiers. In that sense, development planning discussions in landscapes such as the Amazon and large existing biomes bring to the forefront the broader question of the existing possibilities for the logic of capital to hollow or undermine remaining vestiges of nature, or for the potential that these landscapes represent to hollow the logics of capital.

To advance these arguments, the paper is organized into three sections, each covering a specific period. This periodization is aimed at making a general approach to the interventions that have occurred when the Colombian state has focused on the Amazon. Through this periodization, I do not pretend to build a linear description of the events, as different measures in various settings – sometimes also in contradictory ways – may overlap, but to outline and understand how the planning perspectives of the Amazon have turned into a nominative, visible and describable problem.

The first section (second chapter) describes how the first period, which comprises the decades of the 70s and the 80s, unfolded. It makes a general description of the increasing interest of the state in governing vast peripheric territories and approaching its realities through the scope of a modernization project (Hetch *et al.*, 2021). It also traces the emergence of environmental discourses and what at first could be seen as its clear convergence with the Amazonian indigenous rights agendas. The second section (chapter three) focuses on the main shifts driven by the emergence, by the mid-80s and the 90s, of widespread political action at a national and local level. Following the description of this context, I seek to analyze and demonstrate how the two main languages that influenced the sight of the state towards the Amazon created, from the very beginning, a contradictory orientation: the language of indigenous rights -informed by discussions on the right to self-determination- and the language of environmental protection, this latter being framed on the conceptual framework of sustainable development. To further analyze the rationalities underpinning the main policies triggered by the state during this period, I use the characterization of environmental currents developed by Joan Martinez-Allier and the critical approaches on recent development framings and the structural determinants that affect them developed by Arsel (2016).

In this second section, the environmental currents identified by Martinez-Allier serve as a tool to understand the tensions between environmental discourse, nature, and development. Building on this conceptualization, the section advances a critique of the often-held idea (Hetch *et al.*, 2021) that environmental and indigenous agendas work on a seamless convergent logic. While reviewing the planning perspectives of the region, I noticed how the Amazon came to be central to the state's international affairs agenda. Tracing how it gained

the status not only of a ‘strategic ecosystem’ but that of an ‘asset’, I defend the argument mentioned before of the ongoing mediation and negotiation process that puts the Amazon forests, and the country in general, not merely at the expense of capital interests but at a more ambivalent place where the political issues of our time gain a place on global discussions.

As I will further describe, the second-period dynamics, which cover the decades of the 80s and the 90s, were, however, overshadowed. The violent fate of the region - where frontiers have played a functional role in the spread and maintenance of coca economies (CTC, 2022)- began to grow. By the first decade of the 2000s, the state shifted its focus towards the idea of recovering Amazonian geographies from armed groups. It exceeds the scope of this research an in-depth examination of the painful, overwhelming, and widely well-documented history of violence that took place during those decades. The brief mention I make of this moment serves the purpose of explaining why the strong protection frameworks created during the 90s continued to grow on the margins, though in a context that not only hindered the continuity of certain actions but also paved the way for triggering others. As noted at the beginning of the third section, one of the effects of these circumstances was the reduction of funding to advance protection frameworks, including the reduction of those coming from international cooperation, which had played a central role in the Amazon (CEPAL, 2013).

The third section (Chapter Four) starts with a short description of how, after a decade of armed conflict⁵, things have changed. As said before, some of them grew on the edge, while others, particularly the measures for ‘stabilizing’ the country after armed conflict, were privileged. Within these changing circumstances, the retreat of the logic of capital - due to the armed conflict- seems to be finding the path for its re-emergence. As I will argue in this section, what is reasonable to see as a renewed push by capital could also be seen as a lively debate where different forces dispute the possibilities of reframing development discussions for the Amazon, now in the bioeconomy concept. In this last section, I try to characterize three prevailing perspectives on the table and the puzzling questions they raise.

Before beginning the three sections I have mentioned, I dedicate the first chapter to outline the methodological choices and decisions that guided this investigation, along with the background of the questions I sought to address, mentioning the previous studies upon which I built my arguments, as well as the key concepts and conceptual frameworks with which I guide most of the analysis.

⁵ The armed conflict in Colombia has a long history that exceeds the time frame of a decade, but I refer here to what could be interpreted as its most violent moment.

Chapter 1 Methodological and Conceptual Remarks

To advance this qualitative research, I use primary and secondary data sources. As primary sources, I examine *National Development Plans*⁶, focusing on the topics that predominantly guide Amazon's planning perspectives: environmental protection, indigenous people's rights, and international affairs. Although an in-depth examination of the policy guidelines of Indigenous authorities is not the focus of the research, at certain points, I refer to the planning perspectives contained in *Life Plans*⁷. As secondary data, I review existing academic literature and policy guidelines framed by national and international actors⁸. Academic literature could be classified into at least three dominant approaches that might intersect with discussions I address but have specific scopes related to other issues or topics.

The first approach, built in the field of anthropology, focuses on reviewing the contestations and interactions of Amazonian indigenous peoples with the processes of transformation triggered by different forces (Chaves and Del Cairo, 2010; Serje, 2005, 2020, 2024). This first approach encompasses either studies aimed at understanding and analyzing how different historical processes have had implications on the social reproduction of Amazonian indigenous peoples, or fieldwork in specific locations focused on describing and analyzing indigenous people's strategies to contest, interact, or negotiate within those processes (Hugh Jones, 1979; Hugh Jones, 1981; Jackson, 1984, 2010; Dominguez, 1988; Cayón, 2010, 2022; Roza, 2024). The second approach analyzes from a historical viewpoint the transformation processes of the western (Fajardo, 2002, 2008) and eastern Amazon (Cabrera, 2002, 2012), as well as its bonds with extraction processes (Dominguez, 1988; Gómez, 2021; Acosta, 2022). This historical analysis of the Amazon's trajectories was recently complemented by the Colombian Truth Commission, whose Final Report includes a chapter on the region. The third approach, focused on policy analysis, analyzes policy frameworks aimed at the protection of the region, its impacts, unintended outcomes, and complexities (Hein *et al.*, 2020; Veschoor, 2020). Most of this literature, however, is focused on specific processes of the western Amazon, such as deforestation (Revelo-Rebolledo, 2019), infrastructure building (Uribe, 2018), or land and environmental policies of that side of the region (Hein *et al.*, 2020).

The closest approach to what I pursue has been made with a broader scope, approaching the orientations of Amazon development discourse at a scale that involves the eight countries that share the biome (Hetch *et al.*, Science Panel for the Amazon, 2021). More than lacking a focused analysis of Colombia's specificity, the broad focus of this approach could be enriched by that very specificity, as different debates regarding land rights and protection

⁶ The National Development Plan is the official document that, every four years, sets the working route of the Colombian government, establishes the vision that will guide policies, and defines the budget required to implement them.

⁷ Life Plans are an Indigenous official policy document that serves as a tool of dialogue with the non-indigenous society and with other state authorities. In these binding policy documents, the will and the idea of the well-being of indigenous peoples are expressed. It is a tool that seeks to protect their view of the world – from external interests- but also to entail a dialogue with other world views and to define the limits or boundaries, as well as the alliances they are willing to create to address different issues in their territories.

⁸ From the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, CEPAL and United Nations institutions that influence policy-making processes in Colombia, to international and national NGOs or CSOs such as World Wild Fund Colombia, Tropenbos Colombia, Amazon Conservation Team, The Nature Conservancy, Gaia Amazonas Foundation, Etnollano, and FCDS

frameworks have had significant progress in Colombia, and they could, therefore, inform their perspectives.

Regarding timeframe decisions, I choose to start the analysis from the decade of the 70s due to the following reasons: i) as said before, it was during this decade that early debates on the relationship between humans and the environment were emerging (Arsel, Dasgupta, Storm, 2021). While those discussions served as a precursor of national debates on the importance of the Amazon for the planet that later influenced a broad set of environmental policy frameworks, it was also during the 70s that ii) the World Bank and the Colombian state pointed out the region as the place for the materialization of agrarian reform policies (Fajardo, 2010). In line with regional discussions on the biome's fate, in the 70s, the state also iii) created the first institutions leading the prevalent research-based planning perspectives of the region. The decade of the 70s, therefore, served as a starting point as its processes shaped and reshaped the ecological, political, economic, and cultural circumstances of the Amazon.

Regarding the conceptual tools and frameworks I worked with to complete the tasks described in the introduction, specifically to understand how the planning perspectives of the Amazon have turned into a nominative, visible, and describable problem for the Colombian state, I first follow the approach of the *governmentality studies* (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1978). Following Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France (from 1977 to 1979), governmentality studies take as their point of departure a broad understanding of the concept of government. From this perspective, the concept of government refers to the set of actions aimed at guiding and regulating life through discourses and practices triggered and deployed by various instances (i.e., the state, school), all of which act in continuity with the interests of a specific rationality. For Foucault, the act of governing is characterized by reflection. Government is, in a broad sense, a reflection, a meditation, on the best possible way to guide life (Foucault, 2007, 17). It implies the historically conditioned emergence of specific problems and modes of reflection. It thus follows that problems stem from a set of conditions and historical circumstances that make them enunciable, describable, and comprehensible. While making problems (or certain realities and phenomena) intelligible, various instances, including the state, intervene to conduct or manage their direction. From this perspective, contemporary reasons (i.e., neoliberal reason) drive the action of the state serving as "technologies of government" (Brown, 2015, 32-34) in which individuals are compiled, through different domains of life, to act and conduct themselves in a specific way (Parra-Borda, 2023).

Following this perspective, I will refer to the state as a key regulating instance that is built upon a complex set of norms, institutions, mechanisms, procedures, and narratives that acts in contiguity with the interests pursued by specific rationalities. As a regulating instance, the state creates a set of interventions, dynamics, practices, and frameworks aimed at conducting, regulating, producing, and triggering specific circumstances and subjectivities, even when they turn out to have unsuccessful, unexpected, or failed outcomes (Foucault, 1978). Taking this comprehension of the state as a point of departure, I try to unravel the rationalities that orientate the state's main interventions in the Amazon.

To do so, I think in hand with the characterization of environmental currents developed by Joan Martínez-Allier. For the author, environmental discussions and the distribution of conflicts they create have led to the emergence of at least three different currents that shape contemporary discussions regarding the access and management of resources. The first current, one of the first currents to appear in environmental discussions, is mainly informed by conservation biology approaches and characterized by a "cult of wilderness". It

is based on a conception of nature that emphasizes its sacred character and untouchable vocation. Its conception of nature as a pristine space with no relations with human societies led to policy frameworks aimed at the creation of protected areas free from human intervention. Being a perspective mainly aimed at preservation, it overlooks the more specific discussion on the link between economic growth and environmental damage. Representative of this current is the so-called ‘deep ecology’ movement (Martínez-Alier, 2002). Contrary to the preservation emphasis of the first current, the second one draws attention to the effects of economic growth. Specifically, the “environmental and health impacts of industrial activities, urbanization, and modern agriculture” (Ibid, 3). This perspective, which prevails at the climate change and biodiversity loss summits, is based on the idea of a possible coexistence between economic growth and the environment. Putting a significant amount of trust in technical efficiency, this viewpoint stands on the idea of triggering processes of *sustainable* use and management of natural resources. As pointed out in recent discussions on the concept of *sustainable development*, and following the critiques raised by Arsel (2021) (to which I will refer in detail later), from this perspective, environmental damage turns out to be a problem “reduced to the status of correctible mistakes rather than structural features” (Arsel, 2021, 264). A third current has been characterized since the 1990s “as one that combines environmental concerns with social justice, problematizing the power relations and impacts that rely on contemporary economic growth dynamics” (Parra-Borda, 2023), as well as emphasizing the dependent relations between nature and societies, for it is a source of livelihoods in different communities (Martínez-Alier, 2002). This perspective raises attention to how sources of livelihood are constantly threatened by the expansion of extraction frontiers and the increasing consumption of goods. Given that the Colombian Amazon has a broad set of policies aimed at its protection, reflections on the assumptions that underpin each current, as advanced by the author, serve as a tool to understand the broader debates framing those policies.

Lastly, to understand the structural determinants that have historically linked Latin American economies to extractive industries and the way discussions associated with this topic are reflected in current bioeconomy debates, I follow the discussions on the extractive imperative as developed by Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini (2016). According to the authors, the form of extractivist development policies in Latin America -specifically during the left-wing shift of the 2000s- is best described by the concept of the *extractive imperative*. This imperative, influenced by a Rostowian conception of development, “is marked by an ideological commitment to further extraction as a necessary and unavoidable step towards a higher level of development” (Arsel *et al.*, 2016, 884). This comprehension led left-wing Latin American countries to conceive rents of extraction as a means to finance investment “in physical, social and human capital in order to develop the capabilities to engage in productive sectors. These productive sectors can themselves be based on extractive industries and, as exemplified by Bolivia, this can include the drive to ‘industrialize natural resources’; that is, to transform commodities into intermediate or final goods in order to climb the value chain and acquire a larger share of the value added generated (Pellegrini, 2012)” (Ibid.). While following this discussion I describe its specific form in Colombia, which is closer to what the authors, different from the extractive imperative, identify as extractivism. A process driven by the intensification of natural resource extraction and neoliberalism.

Chapter 2 Tracing the Motives of the State's First Actions in the Amazon

The first extraction processes in the Colombian eastern Amazon were first documented in the 20th century (Cabrera, 2002, 125-126), while those that took place in its western geographies (particularly in the Andean-Amazonian foothills) were registered at least a century before. This is one of the reasons why the trajectories of both its western and eastern areas have had different outcomes and why, as shown in map No. 1, the eastern geographies have different conditions in terms of the creation of protected areas, the recognition of Indigenous Territories, as well as in terms of the existing interactions and connections with other regions of the country. Besides the important temporal and historical differences between the western and eastern sides of the Colombian Amazon, it could be said that in both cases, the State's first interests were part of the nation-state formation processes, concerned with the possibilities of governing and controlling its vast territories, most of them located within its territorial limits. The State's first actions unfolded driven by what Scott (1998) describes as the willingness to ensure enclosure, triggering transformations "[...] in the name of progress, literacy, and social integration" (Grubačić and O'Hearn, 2016, 11). This willingness, in which Amazon's landscapes and inhabitants were subject to policies aimed at making them "legible" and "assessable" (Scott, 1998, 3), and which to a certain extent continues to drive the motives of the state's interventions, was first driven by two processes: the processes of rubber extraction⁹, and the processes aimed at the settlement of religious missions.

Although at different paces and within significantly different temporalities and effects on each side of the Amazon (western and eastern), both processes triggered social and ecological change at a scale that affected the entire region. Several studies (Del Cairo, 2010; Serje, 2020; Hetch *et al.*, 2021) have discussed to what extent the extractive economy-based model that led the action of Amazonian states during the ninetieth century "completed the integration of the Amazon in the world economy" (Hetch *et al.*, 2021, 11). As a source of labor and exploitation that covers the demand for raw materials and then makes possible the maintenance of economic structures in other parts of the world (Charbonnier, 2021, 18), it could be read not just as a process of integration of the region at a global scale, but as a process in which the very existence of the Amazon (and other geographies subject to similar dynamics) was a condition of possibility for the development of western capitalist economies (at least at its first stages) and their then undergoing industrialization processes.

Next to rubber exploitation were the measures that allowed the arrival of catholic and protestant evangelization missions to the region. Their presence followed a previous agreement between the Concordat and the state to promote policies aimed at the "reduction to civilized life" (Law 89 1890) of indigenous peoples. As historians have documented (Cabrera, 2002), the impacts of these missions on the transformation of Amazonia's social and ecological structures and landscapes were significant, mainly due to the redefinition of indigenous

⁹ The rubber boom first unfolded during the nineteenth century. Its rise was driven by a growing demand from Western European countries undergoing industrialization. Rubber was required as a raw material for various industries, particularly the automotive industry. Processes related to rubber extraction were mainly based on the exploitation of indigenous labor. The cruel and atrocious treatment that Amazonian indigenous peoples were subjected to during this process and the way this boom in demand affected their traditional systems have been widely documented.

occupation patterns¹⁰ (Del Cairo, 2010). These two processes, which inaugurated the historical bonds between the Amazon rainforests and global markets and sought the assimilation of indigenous peoples, extended through the whole region from the 19th century to the 20th century. Following Hetch *et al* (2021), what followed from early policies guiding the state's action towards the region was, as with other countries that share the biome, aimed at i) controlling its territories and, later, ii) at the purpose of assessing its resources. Policy frameworks informed and conceptualized by a predominantly modernization rationality replaced previous attempts driving significant change in the region, particularly land reforms taking place during the 70s in Latin America, as I describe in what follows.

2.1 The Failed Pledges of Land Reform

In addition to the dynamics stemming from the cycles of extraction, and at the pace of the homogenization processes taking place since the 19th century, other circumstances triggered by the state took place. These processes were of particular significance and magnitude in the geographies of the western Amazon. In these areas, first through the military army (during the 50s and 60s) and then through a former entity called INCORA (Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform), the state tried to deploy the main agrarian reform policies of the 70s and 80s.

As it has been widely held (Fajardo, 2008; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2015; LeGrand, 1988), Colombian efforts to accomplish land reform have failed most of the time due to a narrowed and deliberate vision that keeps at the margins the discussion on transforming the structural conditions that reproduce inequality in the distribution of land. This distribution is mainly characterized by a large property structure that has remained unaltered, among other reasons, because of the strength and power of the so-called *latifundistas*; private owners of large units of land- some of them not private but public lands illegally appropriated by them (CCC, Verdict SU-288 2022) - who have historically stood against any distribution purpose. It is in this context of resistance to land distribution that explains the colonization-driven that the state decided to deploy in the Amazon during the '70s. The agricultural frontier expansion on which it was based did not threaten the historically established structure of property (Fajardo, 2008; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2015; LeGrand, 1988). This expansion of the agricultural frontier unfolded, however, at the expense of what later the Constitutional Court recognized as ancestral indigenous territories (CCC, Auto 173 2012) and gave rise to widespread land and ecological conflicts in the region. As stated by the Colombian Truth Commission's Final

¹⁰ These patterns were characterized by a dispersed and semi-permanent settlement dynamic that implied moving every 20 or 25 years. With the arrival of religious missions, this pattern - which entails an agroforestry system- as well as the landscapes, ecological and social dynamics of the region, started a process of change. This process was addressed by the settlement of an educational regime known as "linguistic and cultural homogenization" and by the so-called "reduction strategies". Strategies through which dispersed indigenous settlements were relocated and reunited within a specific, now permanent location. Changing the patterns of occupation of Amazonian indigenous peoples - through the construction of individual family houses- entailed a significant change in their social structures, for they were based on a multi-familiar dynamic (Cabrera, 2012, 78-221) that implied a communal form of life and an assignment of specific roles to each (male and female) member from birth. Consequently -as with the dynamics that tend to emerge from the rise of raw material extraction- the daily activities for making a living were significantly altered. Different anthropological studies have pointed out how the imposed settlement pattern created a burden on indigenous livelihoods since men had to hunt and fish further away, and women had to walk longer distances to work on their *chagras* (plots) (Jackson, 1984, 61-62).

Report on a volume focused on the Amazon, during the deployment of colonization processes “the original inhabitants of the territory were often forgotten, which led to conflicts between [new] settlers and indigenous peoples [...]” (CTC, 2022, 56).

Along with land distribution resistance, it was also a dominant representation of the Amazon as a pristine space with no human presence, which made possible the idea of conducting the colonization scheme toward its territories (Del Cairo, 2010; Serje, 2020). This scheme was financed by the World Bank and deployed within the purposes of the so-called “Integral Rural Development”. Not only did the World Bank finance the strategy but designed the framework of its purposes. According to a policy evaluation document published by the Bank (1988) after two decades of deploying these policies in different Asian, South American and African locations, the so-called rural development programs sought to “increase the productivity of small farmers in developing countries” (World Bank, 1988, ix). For the Bank, it was a poverty reduction strategy for rural areas focused on the financialization of rural infrastructures, social investment projects, and projects related to “irrigation, livestock, access to credit and colonization [processes]” (*Ibid.*, xi). Although it was conceived for “small producers” with assets, particularly land, its design in Colombia aligned with old unfulfilled pledges of agrarian reform (Fajardo, 2002, 73).

As even argued by the World Bank, in most cases, resources were driven towards infrastructure building. In the case of Colombia, “The first loan for the Caquetá [western Amazon] land colonization project was made over in 1971 and was for the development of roads, schools, health centers, and forestry projects. In the end most of the loan sunk on roads which were constantly in need of attention and on cattle” (Bunyard, 1989, 33). It could be argued that the centrality on private individual property rights as well as the market-based orientation for financing different kinds of projects -which were meant not just to guarantee a means of livelihood for those who were part of the colonization process but to raise their productivity and boost economic growth – triggered an accelerated processes of forest transformation that sought to integrate or connect the region with internal and international markets. It was thus this objective of achieving economic growth, framed on economic neoclassical reasoning, that led to the creation of different entities looking for a way to promote agriculture in a region whose soil nutrient-poor conditions (as the state realized later) are quite different from the rest of the country¹¹. As noted by Hetch and Cockburn (1989), “People not native to the region regularly found their ambitious plans thwarted in the collision between their visions and the reality of the Amazon itself. Their tropical Eden was more refractory than they had supposed” (Hetch & Cockburn, 1989, 16).

2.2 Modernization Will and Faith in Western Science

Although the various attempts to implement agricultural plantations in the Amazon were unsuccessful, the state's interest in creating a model based on productivity and growth at whatever expense was so persistent that it led to the promotion of a long and permanent process of grassland conversion for cattle and livestock production (Fajardo, 2008; Bunyard, 1989). The long-lasting ecological and social consequences of those processes are currently expressed in the form of land grabbing and speculation. While serving the function of connecting global markets and international demand for meat consumption with the Amazon they also lead to the spread of deforestation on its western edge.

¹¹ Amazon soils are mostly nutrient-poor (which results in lower fertility) and highly weathered (SPA, 2021, Chap 1, 22).

The World Bank's rural development policy during the 70s and 80s coincided with broader discussions emerging at a regional (biome) scale regarding the Amazon's fate. These discussions led to the creation, in 1978, of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization. They were mainly framed in what Hetch *et al.* (2021) identify as the "technocratic strategy". A strategy that sought "scientific assessment of natural resources and land suitability" (Hetch *et al.*, 2023, 10) in the region. The means for the deployment of this strategy were based on the creation of planning agencies¹² aimed at understanding the dimensions, scale, and particular conditions of the region. As argued by Hetch *et al.*, the lenses through which these agencies approached the Amazonian realities were based on a conception of its ecosystems as a huge reservoir of natural resources (*Ibid.*). Following the same strategy of the Brazilian *projeto Radam*, the Colombian state created an institution that, although with a presence in the region, functioned with a centralized planning approach that sought to understand and dimension its scale by using technology, specifically through remote sensing. As described by Hetch, resource assessments, in which these emerging institutions focused:

*Were carried out to provide a comprehensive survey, largely focused on minerals, soils, and forest types, and to examine the physical geography in order to upgrade the regional cartography of resources and boundaries and to orient development enterprises. [...] Powerful remote sensing and computational technologies meant that significant analyses could take place remotely, with some ground-truthing, displacing what had previously been the sine qua non of Amazonian research: fieldwork. While many scholars continued to explore the Amazon from the ground up, and continued to contribute to understanding the historical importance of people's co-evolution with Amazonian natural systems, much of the environmental research continued to focus on "pristine" Amazonian nature, without humans. [...] The images of a vast agglomeration of resources and an unlimited forest underscored the idea of a demographic void and, fundamentally, of an experimental scape that could be transformed into something more scientific, uniform, and ordered, according to a centralized vision (Hetch *et al.*, 2021, 11).*

Equally important as the use of technologies and the implications it had regarding distance from fieldwork is the fact that much of their work (including the few approaches on the ground) relied on western scientific research methods. Therefore, the first state entities – which were created, amongst other purposes, to understand the specificity of Amazonian geographies and, on its basis, inform development policy-making– focused a significant portion of their work on biological exploration and classification of species. While anthropology perspectives (such as those built by the work of the ICANH¹³) played an important role in naming and making visible the inhabited Amazonia – in the Colombian case, largely inhabited by indigenous peoples, though with population densities often considered irrelevant due to their dispersed form of settlement and low numbers–, their role and influence in conducting research efforts or informing policy frameworks were marginal.

Although the advantages of western science and technology have had an important outcome in today's comprehension of the spatial and climate dynamics of the region (Hetch *et al.*, 2023; Nobre *et al.*, 2009; SPA, 2021), as well as in the comprehension of the immense diversity of its ecosystems, it could be argued that the tendency to privilege its tools and methods has led to a mostly permanent practice by which the state overlooks indigenous knowledge systems, which for millennia have had an in-depth understanding of those dynamics and their complexity (SPA, 2021; IPCC, 2022; IPBES, 2019). Considering them, as it

¹² In Colombia, the first attempt to do so was through the Geological National Institute, then through the creation of the *Corporación Araracuara* (nowadays the Sinchi: Amazonian Institute of Scientific Research).

¹³ Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History.

often happens, as being outdated, “traditional” and unable to contribute anything to the Amazon’s fate debates, means reproducing the colonial representation of Amazonian indigenous peoples as not existing or as inferior compared to the rest of the society.

The fact that the Rural Development agenda previously described overlooked their agroforestry¹⁴ and land use systems to understand soil use in the Amazon, serves as an example of this. It is, ironically, their way of life that not only allows them to live with a management system that makes life possible in the Amazonian conditions (SPA, 2021; IPCC, 2022; IPBES, 2019) but also shapes those very conditions. As noted by Hetch (1989), “There is a growing body of knowledge on how indigenous and local populations manage their natural resources and sustain them over time. Amplified by the dynamic view of the region’s ecological history, this knowledge permits an understanding of the forest as the outcome of human as well as biological history [...]” (Hetch & Cockburn, 1989, 28).

2.3 Rise and Alliance between Environmental and Indigenous Agendas

It can be argued, however, that it was also towards the ‘80s that the Colombian state started a long process to recognize vast territories of the Amazon as *resguardos*. A *resguardo* is a legal figure that in Colombia’s property regime proves the *collective* property of indigenous peoples over land. It is a land title with a special constitutional protection that raises it to the status of inalienable, imprescriptible, and unseizable property (Article 63). The process of recognition of *resguardos* in the Colombian Amazon started in 1982, along with a growing Indigenous movement advocating all over the country for the recognition of their right to self-determination. To date, Amazonian *resguardos* account for more than 50% of the region (See Map no. 1). Its rising creation during the decade of the 80s came along with a growing emergence of environmental debates and a setting of different environmental policy frameworks (Carriosa, 2013) to which I will refer later. Recognizing the co-dependent relations between Indigenous societies and ecosystems, from 1982¹⁵ onwards, several national parks and *resguardos* were established. By the end of the 80s, while celebrating the recognition of the “Predio Putumayo” *resguardo* (one of the biggest *resguardos* in the Amazon), the former president of Colombia, Virgilio Barco, pronounced a speech that reflected what at first could be seen as a convergent path of both, the Indigenous and the environmental agendas:

¹⁴ This agroforestry system is based on different activities that include hunting, fishing, shifting agriculture, and a complex system of seed management that allows the harvesting of fruits and plants. “[...] During centuries, thanks to their traditional knowledge, indigenous populations have developed a deep relationship with the surrounding environment [...] The result is the *chagra*, a [...] successful and sustainable system [that starts] from place selection and [ends] with the abandonment of the plot [...]. After the abandonment, the forest starts to grow again to allow the agroecosystem to recover and to take advantage of the residual vegetal material to avoid erosion” (Hernández, 2021).

¹⁵ Even before the 80s, in 1959, part of the region was already declared as a forest reserve but with a perspective that, following Martínez-Alier, could be understood as being informed by conservation biology approaches. This perspective, characterized by its “cult of wilderness”, was one of the first currents to appear in environmental discussions. It is based on a conception of nature that emphasizes its sacred character and untouchable vocation. Its conception of nature as a pristine space with no relations with human societies led to policy frameworks aimed at the creation of protected areas free from human intervention. It is a perspective that separates the aim for preservation from the more specific discussion on the link between economic growth and environmental damage. Representative of this current is the so-called ‘deep ecology’ movement, which from a biocentric perspective privileged the idea that agriculture (traditional or modern) “has historically grown at the expense of wildlife” (Martínez -Alier, 2002, 3). Some of the territories of reserve created in 1959 in line with this perspective were later excluded to be integrated into the territories of indigenous peoples (Bunyard, 1989, 6).

The Government has based its policy concerning indigenous matters on the following principles: the preservation of zones traditionally inhabited by the indigenous communities, the provision of basic social services, the protection of their fundamental rights, and the protection, in particular, of their social and cultural integrity. [...] This policy is closely linked to environmental policies, which are directed towards the regulation, protection, recuperation, and sustainable use of natural resources, particularly the fragile ecosystems of the rainforest. [...] Present-day Colombians, both indigenous as well as non-indigenous, have a responsibility to future generations. The Government is committed to protecting the natural resources of the tropical rainforest, whose characteristic fragility and low fertility have always required special care. Nothing could better ensure this objective than to entrust its care to the experience-based knowledge of indigenous people who have lived in and cared for the rainforests for thousands of years (Presidential Speech, 1989, 4).

Along with the significance of the recognition of the centrality of indigenous knowledge in Amazonian management as well as the recognition of the unfeasibility of previous policies aimed at expanding the agrarian frontier, the statement by the former president made visible what is often interpreted as the bonds between environmental and Indigenous rights discourses. As different authors have argued (Cayón, 2010; Conklin & Graham, 2010; Serje, 2005), the fact that the relational dynamics between indigenous peoples and nature (Descolá, 1996) work in a way that guarantees the continuity of the conditions that make life possible (SPA, 2021; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2022) has resulted in a strong and sedimented representation of their worlds as “ecological” or “environmental”. As I will argue later, although this representation has served indigenous peoples to play an important role regarding global environmental discussions, such as the climate change and biodiversity summits, as well as current discussions shaping environmental international law, including earth jurisprudence debates and rights of nature (Schillmoller & Pelizzon, 2013; Kauffman & Martin, 2021; Tănăsescu, 2022), the fact that environmental policies came to be framed on broader discourses such as the recent sustainable development approach, makes it unfeasible to discuss the structural economic dynamics that trigger and drive biodiversity loss and forest degradation. Building on critiques of sustainable development discourse (Arsel, Dasgupta, Storm, 2021), it thus follows that the objectives for which those policies are intended to be created not only fail to achieve their greater purpose but create a gap that separates them from the future perspectives built by Amazonian indigenous peoples. Perspectives to which I will refer later.

Chapter 3 The Language of International Cooperation

As described below, the decades of the '70s and '80s were a milestone in creating the first institutions conducting the planning perspectives for the region. Amongst other measures described, during those decades, the Amazon became the object of a resource assessment strategy now framed in a conception of its forests as a place of huge resource potential. By the end of the '80s, further policy frameworks were emerging at the pace of an active and growing Indigenous movement shaping the trajectories of the region from the mid-70s (Jackson, 1998, 2010). This movement peaked with the discussion of a new constitutional agreement for the country that sought to recognize the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination. Since then, along with constitutional changes, two main languages have informed policies towards the Amazon: the language of indigenous people's rights and the language of environmental protection. Environmental discussions emerged under the broader umbrella of global debates on environmental degradation (Arsel, Dasgupta, Storm, 2021) and within a new direction for national development policies driven by the so-called "economic liberalization".

In this section, I will discuss the emergence of environmental discourse in policy planning as part of those broader discussions taking place on a global scale and how the Amazon and other regions of the country¹⁶, now considered to have huge resource potential, came to shape Colombia's position on those global debates. As I will demonstrate in this section, what began as a clear political strategy for the negotiation of environmental issues turned into a call for cooperation. This call for cooperation underwent various transformations over time depending on the political orientation of each government. Initially, it was expressed in terms of technological transfer and financial resources. Then, in terms of establishing relations among equals to tackle environmental global problems with differentiated responsibilities. Regardless of the form that the idea of cooperation took, what seems to be clear is that since the 90s the Amazon has occupied a privileged place in Colombia's international affairs agenda and has served as one of the main means for political negotiation in global discussions.

The working hypothesis for this period is that in the decade of the 1990s the state, despite making a significant shift towards consolidating Indigenous and environmental policies in the Amazon¹⁷, continued a view of its landscapes as an object of transformation now framed through cooperation discourse and its promises of scientific research and technological transfers. The specificity of the Colombian context during that decade, however, created discontinuities in the course of these discussions and its following policy frameworks. As coca economies increasingly expanded in the western Amazonian geographies¹⁸, by the end of the 2000s, cooperation shifted towards the funding of drug policy. This last shift led to militarization and a strong focus on security policies. The emergence of the coca boom, closely linked to the armed conflict, sidelined the two central languages and policies of the

¹⁶ The *Pacífico biogeográfico* in the Pacific, the *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* in the Caribbean.

¹⁷ It is important to note that those policy frameworks were informed by different forces (inside and outside the state's bureaucracy) some of them being the indigenous movements already mentioned.

¹⁸ During this period, part of the Amazon (mostly its western side) became the landscape of growing coca economies. What later came to be a coca boom turned the Colombian Amazon into one of the key territories of dispute among armed groups. As argued by the Colombian Truth Commission, the rise of coca economies was "a determining factor in the onset and persistence of the armed conflict" in the region for at least one decade (CTC, 2022, 32).

90s (indigenous and environmental) for at least a decade, rendering them merely rhetorical. This rupture led the state to treat the region as a periphery of conflict and a geography of war (CTC, 2022). In what follows, I will briefly review how the political landscape changed since the decade of the '90s as it can help understand why indigenous and environmental concerns, despite armed conflict and even at its margins, have mobilized relevant legal-policy frameworks of protection in the Colombian Amazon. Then I will further elaborate on the already mentioned idea that what initially seems to be an alliance between indigenous and environmental agendas, at a closer look reveals a gap that yet separates them. This gap is related to the terms and underpinning rationalities with which environmental discussions were first framed.

3.1 The Advancement of Indigenous Rights Frameworks

One of the first instruments that paved the way for building protection policy frameworks for the Colombian Amazon was the then recently signed ILO Convention 169, an international legal tool created to protect the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples (Gilbert, 2016). With the establishment of the ILO Convention 169 “unprecedented international support for local Amazonian struggles” (Conklin & Graham, 2010, 160) began to grow. International actors provided platforms for indigenous peoples that later served as a means for influencing matters of growing concern at a global scale, such as environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and rights of nature. The indigenous movement in Colombia, including that emerging in the Amazon two decades earlier, found a channel for global political action that has long worked as an alliance with those actors, most of them being NGOs, international organizations, and donors.

As Conklin & Graham (2010) argue, “indigenous activists and their allies in environmental NGOs were able to channel diffuse public sentiments of solidarity with indigenous peoples into concrete forms of political support. This has been one of the most significant developments in the history of indigenous struggles for rights” (160). Various authors have noted how these support dynamics stemmed from a broader context of multicultural reforms taking place in the 90s (Jackson, 1998; Hall, 2010), as well as from Latin America’s long-standing debates on *indigeneity* (Rozo following Segato, 2024). As argued by these authors, although multicultural reforms were based on a celebration of diversity, the tendency to produce fixed and, at times, exoticized representations of indigenous peoples reinforced their place or status as the “other”; an otherness strongly shaped by the specific relations their societies establish with nature which, as said in the first section, created a now sedimented image of their worlds as environmentalist.

As pointed out by different scholars (Del Cairo, 2010), this ‘othered’ status has shaped formations of alterity “that work through different discursive and material practices that define who counts as ‘other’ or ‘indigenous’ (Rozo, 2024, 4). “In the context of the Colombian Amazon, missionaries, rubber bosses, state officials, settlers, traders, [NGOs], and teachers deployed specific ideas about who native Amazonians were and should be. Indigenous communities were also part of how indigeneity was constructed and practiced in Amazonia.” (*Ibid.*, 4-5). Although those ideas or images of “the native” have changed over time, the legacies of the colonial past remain present in some, but not few, practices or representations¹⁹.

¹⁹ These legacies are better described in Hetch’s words: “[...] The portrayal of native peoples as Rousseauian creatures of the forest has served several functions. It has permitted a view of them

Either way, more than focusing on the discussions about indigenous world representations, what I want to emphasize is that the mentioned alliances with NGOs, activist scholars, and others have played a significant role that has effects on shaping planning agendas. An illustration of this occurred in the 90s at a national level, particularly during the discussions that led to a new constitutional agreement for the country. The National Constituent Assembly, established in 1991, included the indigenous leader Lorenzo Muelas and the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda among its representatives. Both were responsible for overseeing indigenous matters and led the second Commission, which focused on what was then referred to as “special cases”, specifically the so-called *differentiated territorialities*.

The need to contemplate “special cases” of territoriality entrusted to this Commission stems from a fact: the 1886 political constitution did not contemplate them. And it could not have contemplated them as it was based on a political conception of unity, in which territoriality could only be considered within an eminently centralist and hegemonic State model. Hence, it was impossible to explicitly recognize any territorial diversity. However, the evolution of State action and its gradual modernization during the twentieth century has led to the formation of other forms of territoriality in the country. [...] The force of events established [...] another approach to unity, one that is based on the idea that there can be unity based on diverse territorialities (Muelas & Fals-Borda, 1991, 2).

Historical, political, social, and environmental reasons were argued to conceive and reshape the state’s structure through an idea of diversity. Amongst those reasons, the document argued that guarantying territorial autonomy to “those who, through their practices, have proven to be fully capable of conserving these areas, such as the Amazon and [others listed by the document], is the best option for Colombia regarding the environmental policy and management in those territories” (1991, 8). As I will further elaborate following the categorization by Martínez-Alier regarding the various environmental currents that have emerged in different places and times, Colombia’s case has oscillated between a perspective of environmentalism that i) draws attention to the environmental and health effects of economic growth but relies on the idea of its coexistence (Martínez-Alier, 2002, 3), as it is technical efficiency that can lead to sustainable use and management of natural resources; and a perspective that ii) combines environmental concerns with social justice, problematizing the power relations and impacts that rely on contemporary economic growth logics²⁰ (*Ibid.*, 11).

It is this oscillation, expressed in the prevalent policy frameworks established for the Amazon (environmental and indigenous), that creates the gap I referred to before. As already recognized by Martínez-Alier, these currents do not necessarily exist in opposition, as one often overlaps with the other or both unfold simultaneously. In some cases, it is not merely about the coexistence of both orientations but rather the dominance of one over the other. As I intend to argue in the following pages, this dominance sometimes results in languages

as children, incapable of wise decisions or the exercise of adult responsibilities [...] To perceive native peoples as stone-age remnants who lie in the same relationship to nature as a tapir or a deer has made it easy to claim that these peoples’ contribution to modern society amounts to little. The enormous economic contribution [...] of their domesticated plants has been disregarded. These peoples are accomplished environmental scientists and, contrary to patronizing supposition, indigenous groups have been involved in market activities for decades. Many native economies have been shaped by such market pressures and have often adapted well, at least enough to keep the forest and many features of their societies intact” (Hetch, 1989, 30).

²⁰ In that sense, it questions the unequal distribution of property rights, income, and wealth.

that, while appearing to align with indigenous languages, ultimately serve the function of promoting exploitation. With this, I seek to problematize an often-held interpretation of the protection frameworks for the Colombian Amazon, which presumes an always unproblematic, clear-cut, alignment between environmental and indigenous agendas.

But before elaborating on the critique of the often-perceived seamless relations between environmental and indigenous languages, what is important to note for the early '90s decade is that debates about indigenous rights recognition played a significant role in the National Constituent Assembly. The vision of a pluralist and decentralized state that came up with the new Colombian Political Constitution (1991) was a significant milestone in advancing indigenous rights as it explicitly named, enunciated, and made visible what they did in their territories²¹: conduct and govern life according to their rules, methods, will, and knowledge systems. Willing to break monocultural and homogenizing relations, since 1991, considering ethnic groups as authorities in their territories is a condition protected by the political constitution. In the case of indigenous peoples (Article 286), this authority is exercised in areas recognized as *Indigenous Territories*. "Indigenous Territorial Entities" are, therefore, part of the political-administrative organization of the State (Article 286). A State that, although built upon a Western tradition, is organized through the principles of decentralization and pluralism (Article 1), which in the new constitutional framework implied that indigenous people's "territorial entities" were meant to be part of the State in a manner that acknowledges their cultural and political structures. Their authority status is thus specific as it is driven by their ways of conceiving, experiencing, and organizing the world (Parra-Borda, 2023).

Although the many challenges that Colombian indigenous movements have had to overcome for the realization of the constitutional mandates, it could be said that the space gained after 1991 is not just rhetorical, as resguardos continued to grow, some of them today organized – as a consequence of the exercise of the right to self-determination by Indigenous peoples– in the Colombian Amazon as Indigenous Territories. Indeed, to date, indigenous territories comprise more than 53,6% of the Colombian Amazon (RAISG, 2021). The political-administrative organization of the Colombian state is structured by departments (regional authorities) and municipalities (local authorities). The Amazon was divided into departments but, unlike other regions, its territories were not organized by municipalities (especially in its eastern areas). This was largely due to the region's sparse population (CCC, 2023). Currently, rather than implementing the conventional administrative model, one of the main struggles of the Amazonian indigenous movement in Colombia²² is related to the realization of the principles encouraged by the constitution in a way that does not emulate or merely 'copies' how municipalities in other regions of the country operate. This is important to note for one reason, which is crucial in the development discussions that this paper aims to trace: because these discussions directly involve the exercise of the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples. Therefore, tracing development discussions and how planning perspectives toward the region have been constructed implies understanding not only how the state exerts its will on the region but also how indigenous peoples shape and reshape that will from their view of the world.

²¹ Even in adverse conditions related to colonization processes; armed conflict and other processes in which legal and illegal actors pretend to subordinate their agendas to their interests.

²² For the past six years (in compliance with a Decree Law enacted in 2018, DL 632) 14 indigenous territories, that comprise 103,000 km² of the eastern Amazon, are leading the process to continue governing their territories through the realization of the constitutional promises.

3.2 Environmental Frameworks and Cooperation Discourse

The institutional changes resulting from enacting the 1991 Political Constitution were also accompanied by a series of discussions that prepared the ground for the emergence of today's prevailing environmental frameworks for the Amazon and other key Colombian ecosystems. Although environmental policy instruments existed even before the 1970s, by the 1990s, assessments on the topic highlighted the need to strengthen the existing tools. Considering that institutional fragmentation and lack of coordination between multiple institutions hindered effective action and prevented the implementation of coherent environmental policies (National Development Plan, 1991, 27-29), the state (through Law 99 of 1993) created a Ministry of Environment and a National Environmental System. This law was part of the broader global process that led various states to discuss the orientation of development policy worldwide and its connections between environmental degradation and economic growth (Arsel, 2021). Perhaps the document that better reflects how this new institutional framework was part of that broader global debate is the National Development Plan of the time (1990 to 1994). In a section titled "International dimension of Environmental Issues", aimed at presenting the perspectives regarding environmental policy and international affairs, the document argues:

Developing countries today bring up the concept of "ecological debt," demanding that developed countries take a more active role in solving global environmental problems and conserving natural resources in less developed countries. This concept is motivated by the environmental damage caused by developed countries at the global level, through the destruction of their own resources, the export of polluting technologies, and the adoption of consumption patterns that place a significant demand on the global environmental offer. Most developing countries have valuable and critical genetic resources and ecosystems essential for maintaining the planet's stability. However, they face great international and local economic pressures, leading to the over-exploitation of their natural resources to meet these demands. On the other hand, developed countries have human, physical, and technological resources that allow them to use biotechnology to manage the genetic resources of developing countries. They also have the technological tools to efficiently exploit the non-renewable resources of less developed countries. Although developing countries have a greater availability of natural resources and developed countries have the technological capacity to use them, international cooperation is necessary to ensure that relations between countries are fair. This cooperation should not limit itself to actions directed toward conserving resources but should be aimed at integral development, which at the same time ensures the greatest guarantee for preserving, conserving, and recovering the environment and natural resources (National Development Plan, 1991,29).

While the opening lines clearly demand that developed countries should take responsibility for the global environmental problems they have caused, and despite providing the reasons that justify this demand, the text takes an unexpected argumentative turn. The same countries being called upon to acknowledge their responsibility – and who therefore owe an "ecological debt" to developing countries – are the ones that have the capacity and means not only to solve the problem but to keep efficiently exploiting resources. The implicit suggestion seemed to be: "You may be responsible for the damage, but given your advanced level of development, we will entrust you to use your skills, knowledge, and technology to provide solutions". In this way, what initially seemed like a call for accountability on the part of developed countries ultimately turned into an invitation to continue resource exploitation, now framed under the principle of efficiency and, particularly, through the language of cooperation. Rather than a genuine call for accountability, the emphasis shifts towards maintaining the same extractive practices, merely rebranded as being more efficient through technological advancement.

What initially appeared to be a clear political stance became a demand perfectly aligned with other upcoming policies, particularly the then-inaugurated “economic liberalization” that would mark the beginning of Latin America's experiment with neoliberalism. Among the emblematic promises of the set of policies framed as neoliberal was the idea of “technological transfers”. The same Development Plan refers to this policy of liberalization as one embedded in a new theory of development, which implied redefining:

“[...] the purpose, form, and scope of the State's action. [...] The purpose of State action is not to replace markets and competitive conditions but to promote them, because the most competitive economies have been the most efficient, and the most efficient economies have generated greater growth and equity. [...] The perception that State action should create competition, rather than restrict it, has led to a shift away from protectionist mechanisms, especially in the external sector of the economy. [...] There is a growing consensus among economists on the benefits of removing trade restrictions and international movement of factors as a genuine source of economic and social development” (National Development Plan, 1991, 5).

As argued by different scholars, the shift toward the promotion of free markets to which the quote refers signaled “the end of the Import Substitution Industrialization model of development [...] focused on internal markets, urbanization, and industrial expansion; with tariff and currency controls” (Hetch *et al*, 2021, 16). Regarding environmental policies, particularly in Amazonian countries, some authors argue (Hetch *et al*, 2021) that while the increasing influence of neoliberalism in state policies aligned with the demands of the Washington Consensus, there was also a growing recognition of “historical rights to territories [...]” (Ibid., 16). The Constitutional Conventions that led to that recognition “laid the foundation for a rights-based approach to natural landscapes that was to be known as “Socio-environmentalism” (Ibid., 16). This approach included ideas that considered “inhabited forests (and their complex tenurial regimes) as part of a conservation and land management strategy” (Ibid., 16). Indeed, the frameworks for the protection of Indigenous peoples described above, along with the newly created environmental frameworks mentioned in this section, could be seen as complementary policies, as the latter recognized the role of Indigenous peoples in forest management and conservation. But contrary to that often-held interpretation, it could be argued that the course of environmental policies and its continued bonds with cooperation discourse, particularly its emphasis on technological transfers and the significant amount of trust in western scientific tools and knowledge it entailed, were perfectly aligned with the neo-liberalization process taking place since the decade of the ‘90s.

Martínez-Alier (2002) categorization of environmental currents serves as a tool to further develop the claim outlined before. As said before, for the author, environmental conflicts have led to the emergence of at least three different currents that shape contemporary discussions over access and management of resources: i) the “cult of wilderness” approach (see note No. 15), and the outlined before ii) eco-efficiency and iii) environmental justice approaches (Martínez-Alier, 2002). Although the three of them place the question of the environment at the very center of their concerns, each perspective expresses a certain challenge or critique of the other.

This, however, and as Martínez-Alier recognizes, does not imply that in some cases the lines that differentiate one perspective from another cannot be blurred. It could be said that the second perspective, the so-called eco-efficiency approach, informed policy frameworks

emerging in Colombia during the '90s- as they relied on the idea of the possible coexistence between economic growth and the environment. This perspective has been continued by the later emergence of the concept of sustainable development in which environmental problems are “reduced to the status of correctible mistakes rather than structural features” (Arsel, 2021, 264). From this viewpoint, technical efficiency can lead to sustainable use and management of natural resources (*Ibid*).

Informed by this current, for the second half of the 90s, policies regarding the Amazon were focused on using technology to ensure a “sustainable use of tropical forests” (National Development Plan, 1991, 36). As I said in the first section, due to research findings and failures of the past decade, the region ceased to be considered an open and free space for expanding the agricultural frontier. The prevailing idea was that western scientific research - which remained central to policy frameworks²³ - and international cooperation – particularly technological transfers – were the primary mechanisms to address regional development. Placing significant trust in them as the only sources and tools for answering questions on how to use the forests, technology transfers and financial support focused on initiatives for forest protection, agroforestry crops, biotechnology, and the production of biodiversity-based goods for trade (*Ibid*, 36). Genetic resources derived from biodiversity, their access, and the intellectual property of their developments began to be discussed after the First Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (National Department of Planning, 1994, 15). These measures came along with the designation of the Amazon as a “strategic” ecosystem, emphasizing its ecological and biological importance as well as its key role not only in the “development and well-being of the country” (*Ibid.*, 3), but also on mobilizing an international agenda that sought to place it in the forefront of negotiations with developed countries:

The objectives of the global cooperation program are to strengthen the country's international position on environmental matters and increase its negotiating capacity. International environmental policy will be governed by the principles established in Law 99, particularly the principle of shared but differentiated responsibilities regarding global environmental damage, the recognition of Colombia's contributions and environmental services provided to the international community, and respect for national sovereignty. (Ibid., 28)

Contrary to the approach mentioned before and its discursive orientation – from initial awareness of how over-exploitation leads to irreversible environmental damage and who should be accountable for it to advocating for its continuation letting the same developed countries lead the way through their technological and financial resources – what seems to be at stake in this quote, and on consequent debates taking place years after, is how cooperation is not merely a matter of perpetuating cycles of dependence or exploitation. At a closer look, cooperation policies are also conceived as an opportunity for strengthening the negotiating capacity on international instances, while placing the political issues of our time at the forefront. What at first can be interpreted as a continuation of dependency cycles acquires a more ambivalent form, in which Colombia's international agenda (along with other Global South countries) – with mutations depending on the ideological positions of each government – has placed the debates of our present as what they are: political issues (Hickel, 2022; Shue, 2015). Debates and initiatives such as debt swaps, offsets, and more recently global

²³ Indeed, the establishment of the National Environmental System led to the creation of the Amazonian Scientific Research Institute (in Spanish, Sinchi).

taxation have emerged within this purpose, even with all the contradictions they entail, as I will explore later.

Despite this ambivalence and the significant progress made in highlighting the political character of global debates on environmental damage, the macroeconomic policies of countries in the Global South (including Colombia) continue to prioritize or expand the frontiers of resource exploitation (Arsel *et al.*, 2016). In Colombia's case, the economic structures that sustain the country as a source of raw commodity extraction remain intact and have been strongly promoted since the 1990s, particularly with the deployment of the neoliberal policies mentioned before, which were further and intensively triggered after decades of armed conflict. Besides this, what is evident in the following development plans since the late 1990s is the continuous privileged position of the Amazon region on the international agenda. Over time, this has linked discussions about its future to broader debates concerning the tools and mechanisms available to the “international community” to assess its resources or so-called services, as well as to compensate for the damage that those economies inflict on its ecosystems.

While the Amazon kept appearing in the international affairs agenda, the dominant indigenous and environmental perspectives towards the region were pushed into the margins and background after the state's failed attempt in the late 1990s to negotiate a peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The subsequent administrations – from the early 2000s to 2010- prioritized a view of the Amazon as a territory to be reclaimed from coca economies, drug trafficking, and guerrilla forces, consequently framing it as a geography of war (National Development Plan, 1999, 305-306; CTC, 2021). An in-depth examination of the relations between the state and the region during the years of armed conflict and its consequences for the effective protection of the region exceeds the scope of this research paper. Particularly the undeniable fact of how the rights of indigenous peoples and their territories were violated. Particularly the way in which the intergenerational relations – fundamental for social reproduction and the transmission of knowledge systems – were violently and profoundly affected (JEP, 2023).

Chapter 4 The Amazon as an “Asset”: International Negotiations and Bioeconomy

To this point, it is important to note that despite the growing global and national interest in environmental debates and the way they informed policymaking, between 1995 and 2002, funding for the National Environmental System, which included most of the institutions responsible for policymaking in the Amazon, accounted for only 0.38% of Colombia's GDP (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2002a, 458-459). Environmental policies were primarily financed through the national budget (World Bank, 2005, 53) but in the absence of national funding, international funds played a central role for the region, especially through bilateral donations (CEPAL, 2013, 161-163). Due to the Colombian state's limited capacity to deploy policies on the ground, non-governmental organizations have historically channeled and executed these resources. As noted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, in the Colombian Amazon Official Development Assistance is directly executed through cooperation agencies of the countries providing funding or through international and national NGOs²⁴ (CEPAL, 2013, 168). Both national and international financial resources were significantly low compared to public investments in other regions of the country. Up until now, the main source of funding for all policy sectors in the Amazon still relies on national budget transfers, as there are no consistent financing flows over time (CEPAL, 2013, 146).

Low resource allocation was not only linked to infrastructure conditions that have made it difficult to keep the Amazon connected with the rest of the country but to the increasing presence of armed groups in the region. The increasing classification of the country as a “failed” or “fragile” state not only reduced resources coming from bilateral donations but also made the United States the largest bilateral donor to the country (*Ibid.*). In the 2000s policy priorities aligned well with the US discourse established after 9/11 2001 framed within the concept of “war on terror”. Continuing to guarantee US influence in the region (given the growing emergence of leftist governments in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia), Colombia focused on deploying “Plan Colombia” and other policies driven by a securitization climate that, apart from being aimed at stabilizing the state's control over the country, sought the intensification of neoliberalism and extractive industries.

While Latin American left governments framed the continuation of extractivist industries as a way to achieve further development, increasing investment in public infrastructure and triggering ambitious social policies (Arsel et al., 2016, 881), the extractivist will – different from what the authors conceptualize as the *extractivist imperative* (see chap. 1) – in Colombia took a specific form that sought the intensification of neoliberal policies. Rather than driving the extractive processes directly by the state and making the state's presence stronger to benefit from its revenues in a moment of high commodity prices (*Ibid.*, 881), the Colombian state – after years of war aimed at weakening guerilla control over peripheric territories – focused on promoting Foreign Direct Investment. Different measures, such as reductions on corporate tax rates, high percentage tax deductions on the value of investments, and subsidies to companies for large-scale extractive processes such as coal mining (Galindo and Meléndez 2010; Rudas and Espitia, 2013; Strambo et al., 2018), were framed as incentives to

²⁴ Such as WWF, Tropenbos, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, Amazon Conservation Team, Fundación Natura Colombia, Patrimonio Natural, Gaia Amazonas Foundation and others

“attract” foreign capitals, as well as mechanisms for driving growth, increasing employment creation and expanding physical infrastructure.

The limited resources allocated to the Amazon, the increasing security policies in the first decade of the 2000s, and the following measures to foster foreign direct investment did not prevent the state from conceiving the region as strategic, even as an “asset” (PND, 2010), for global discussions. The Amazon then continued to play a central role in the international affairs agenda, particularly in mobilizing and channeling cooperation resources. Specifically technological transfers, investment in scientific research, and financial support. Although the national economy has not relied on cooperation funds (CEPAL, 2013), these three main mechanisms have often been seen as essential to promoting development policies in “strategic regions” with a “lag” compared to other regions of the country. Indeed, the mentioned dependence of the Amazon on national transfers has often been viewed as problematic because the region lacks the conditions to generate income.

This position stems from the assumption that there is a gap between the country and the region that must be addressed through its integration into capital flows. From this viewpoint, integrating the Amazon into the national and global economies (which, as I will mention later, already happens and, as I mentioned before, has always happened) would enable it not only to drive its policies but to reduce the ‘underdeveloped’ disparities (Serje, 2010) between the region and the country. At the center of this view is the fact that Amazon's contributions to the national GDP are minimal as they account for only 1% (CEPAL, 2013). Comparative analyses based on indicators such as Unsatisfied Basic Needs, Poverty Index, and Multidimensional Poverty Index demonstrate a disparity, which is often seen as a sign of the region lagging the rest of the country. From the notion of lag and imbalance follows that policies to be implemented must aim to increase the region's productivity, bringing it “up to date” (Serje, 2010) with the rest of the country. Although it could be said that this perspective has had a reduced and marginal influence on debates regarding the region's fate, as previously protection frameworks have been privileged, what seems to be clear is how these debates are still a field of dispute as a similar position, although taking various forms - of which I will describe its contents- keeps reemerging.

These debates start from a growing consensus that the Amazonian conditions require specific lenses and tools. This consensus is based on three arguments: first, that the fragility of the region hinders the deployment of economic policies on a scale that could lead to its degradation (SPA, 2021); second, that its cultural context demands assessing the quality-of-life of the Amazonian population based on local cultural indicators rather than predominantly western measurements (Sinchi, 2020); and third, that the Amazon is a source of so-called ecosystem services and therefore a key “provider” for the Colombian economy and an essential sustain of human and non-human life (PND, 2010). Departing from these three main claims, the consensus builds on the idea that rather than focusing on the region's contributions to the national GDP, its resources should be evaluated to determine how the region supports various sectors of the country's economy, and its planning perspectives addressed following its specificity. However, part of the reason why the debates remain so lively has to do with the fact that even though the prevailing perspectives shed light on the guidelines that could drive planning, they do little to address key questions on how to meet material needs defined as important – and unsatisfied – for its inhabitants, including the self-determination agendas of indigenous peoples. In addition, alongside this somewhat exceptional character that the state's view of the Amazon acquired, it contrasts with the fact that extractivism continued to be central to national development policy. Indeed, the concept of ecosystem

services came to be conceived as key to maintaining the so-called "development engines" (*locomotoras del desarrollo*) — serving as a means of sustaining and enabling the expansion of economies based on extraction (PND, 2010).

That the Amazon should be considered as key to various economic sectors of the national economy and thus a valuation of its services or contributions should be made is something that has been proposed since the 90s (PND, 1991). While this idea has been continuously reiterated up to the present, its lack of materialization has made it a marginal proposal with unclear objectives (Only measures Payments for Ecosystem Services have been made). This idea, in addition, has been overshadowed by the growing interest of current debates: the will to create an economic model based on the use, access, and transformation of biological resources. The state's interest in the potential to "generate high economic returns" (PND, 2010, 429-430), and promote "research and innovation to economically harness biodiversity" (PND, 2010, 34) has been, for the last few years, prevailing:

"In recent years, environmental issues have been a priority interest in trade negotiations undertaken by the country, consolidating a window for technical and financial cooperation that strengthens the country's environmental management" (PND, 2010, 436); "To strengthen Colombia's participation internationally, it will be necessary to: (1) promote a strategic vision of the country abroad through its [...] resources, particularly biodiversity; and (2) strengthen the international negotiation process to better leverage opportunities in the various conventions and protocols, recognizing the ecological and environmental strengths of the country" (Ibid., 524).

Before attempting to unravel the perspectives that shape the debate in which the Amazon appears as a region of economic potential -which is shared by the current left-wing government²⁵- I will revisit the discussion on its conception as an "asset" that serves the interests of international negotiation, both in the sense that it allows channeling cooperation funds and in the sense that it brings political discussions to the table. Discussions that have allowed, for instance, the negotiation of compensations with the paradoxical circumstance that they function as extensions of capitalism and continue the dynamics that link the Amazon - or nature - with global markets (Scoons, 2012, 2015; Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Bayrak et al, 2016; Sunderlin et al., 2015).

4.1 Compensations

Serving as planet carbon sinks, natural buffers that maintain the planet's climate stability, regulators of hydrological cycles, and rainfall regimes that work at a continental scale, Amazonian rainforests are part of the list of tropical systems about which a recurring question has been raised: who and how should their contributions be compensated?; By whom and who should they be protected?; "Who would mainly bear the costs and receive benefits?" who can claim property rights in climatic working, whether local, regional, or global?" (Pearce & Myers, 1990, 395). Debt for nature swaps, global taxation mechanisms (as recently proposed by Brazil in the G20), and the already negotiated carbon offsets have tried – to a certain extent- answering those questions. Yet the only agreement on it has been a measure with a market-based orientation, in which large multinational corporations remain tied to an economy that relies on the use of fossil fuels and the accumulation of capital, therefore

²⁵ Science Panel for the Amazon, Uniandes. Panel on "sociobioeconomy" April 2024. See on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1Vij2rjspU&list=I.I.&index=1&t=6s>

reproducing the conditions for the destruction of the ecosystems (Scoons, 2012, 2015; Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Bayrak et al, 2016; Sunderlin et al., 2015).

This measure emerged fifteen years after the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came into life. In 2005 measures for greenhouse gas (GHG)²⁶ emissions caused by forests and other land uses began to be discussed (Sunderlin *et al.*, 2015, 401) and, as a result, in 2007, the conference of the parties established a new mechanism for the reduction of deforestation and degradation: Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (also known as REDD+). “This mechanism, which came to be considered one of the main measures for forest management policy, relied on at least three assumptions: first, that when destroyed or damaged, forests can be a source of gas emissions (UNFCCC); second, that while standing they can maintain and reproduce their carbon-sequestering capacity; and third, that their preservation can be guaranteed through economic investment within a performance-based system that pays for its protection”. (Parra-Borda, 2024).

Contrary to what the mechanism seems to implicitly assume, keeping the forests alive is a practice historically guaranteed by those who inhabit them rather than by capital investment. “With few exceptions, in most settings where this mechanism works, it is not financial incentives that keep the forests alive, but a specific relationship with nature – mostly based on traditional knowledge and management systems- that Western societies interpret and frame as “practices” of “environmental protection” Although the deployment of the mechanism involves the participation and engagement of local actors, it does not necessarily entail the full recognition of these knowledge and management systems” (*Ibid.*). As Scoones points out, “aspects of participation argument for local involvement and a livelihoods focus were incorporated into the neoliberal paradigm, along with narratives of the retreat of the state and demand-oriented policy. [...] sustainability debates became part-and-parcel of market-oriented solutions and top-down, instrumental global environmental governance [...]” (2015, 7).

The privileged position acquired by capital investment in this mechanism and its marked-based orientation has been criticized by various scholars who denounce it either as a measure that does not transform the structures that sustain the dominant relationships between nature and capital - and instead extends the boundaries for its expansion (Bücher, 2012, 58)-, or as a mechanism that, due to the complex network of actors it involves, ignores fundamental regulations and safeguards to ensure that its implementation does not lead to the mere commodification of nature (Fairhead et al., 2012, 238) and/or to the violation of the rights of those who inhabit the specific locations where the mechanism operates (ICHR, 2024). Questions raised by political economy about who owns what, who gets what, who defines the rules and the distribution of benefits (Bernstein, 2010, 22), and what the implications for livelihoods are, can shed light on alternatives to move the mechanism beyond the mere commodification of nature. After all, the mentioned critical perspectives do not resolve the questions of how to fund programmatic agendas that require capital resources. Agendas that have seen in these mechanisms the possibility of using them as means for other ends.²⁷

²⁶ By 2007 the percentage of emissions due to deforestation only amounted to 12% of the total emissions, most of them triggered by other activities produced in the global north (Sunderlin *et al.*, 2015) and not in the developing countries where the mechanism is meant to be deployed.

²⁷ As said in an essay discussing Sanyal’s reflections on development and *need economy*: “Indigenous peoples are not detached from development discourses and furthermore form capital relations. [Four

4.2 Reframing debates in the Colombian Amazon

Three contextual circumstances have played an important role in the re-emergence of development discussions for the Colombian Amazon. Beyond the still-active coca boom and other commodities (particularly gold), in the last nine years, things have changed. The first circumstance is the peace process signed between the Colombian state and the FARC guerrilla in 2016; the second is the ruling by the Constitutional Court (Sentencia C-063 2010) that established Prior, Free, and Informed Consent as mandatory (with binding effects) in all of the state's four-year planning exercises. This, together with the fact that Amazonian indigenous peoples have a specific negotiation instance for this purpose (called Mesa Regional Amazónica), where the region's plans are discussed. The third is an unprecedented decision that sought the fulfillment of a constitutional mandate postponed for decades, with which indigenous peoples of three Amazonian departments have the required conditions to organize their governance structures according to their *law of origin* (Decree Law 632 of 2018). Amid these three circumstances, debates on what to do with the vast Amazonian territories have re-emerged. Although the question might initially seem resolved — due to the broad corpus of protection established since the late 1980s — its re-emergence reveals unresolved questions regarding development. The forms these questions take are multiple. They arise in terms of how to avoid 'wasting' the benefit that the Amazon represents for the country; how to improve the material conditions of its inhabitants; how to transition from the historical dependency on commodity markets by creating the conditions to build a model based on biodiversity; how to build a model based on biodiversity that does not aspire to impose the logics of capital on biodiversity, among others. What follows is an attempt to outline the main positions that currently guide the debates, which are mostly framed on the concept of bioeconomy.

Recent perspectives on the bioeconomy concept have emerged to envision a transition from fossil fuel-dependent economies to alternatives that replace fossil fuels with renewable, bio-based resources. Its initial field of discussion was the energy transition of countries in the Global North (Dietz *et al.*, 2018). Later, its scope broadened to consider "the production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value-added products, such as food, feed, bio-based products, and bioenergy" (EC, 2012). In countries with high biodiversity levels, such as the eight Latin American countries that share the Amazon biome, the concept of bioeconomy is mostly associated with creating a structure that allows the access, use, and management of genetic and biological resources for various purposes (i.e. research, production). It is aimed at creating a "knowledge-based production and utilization of biological resources, biological processes, and principles, to sustainably provide goods and services across all economic sectors" (FAO, 2016). Discussions on the topic have evolved with at least three positions.

On the one hand, bioeconomy is presented as a means to abandon dependency on commodity markets. This orientation proposes the development of industrial production structures based on biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. It intends to transform the productive structures that keep developing countries as mere spaces for raw material exploitation, and in that sense, its emphasis is on changing the structural conditions that prevent economic diversification. Representative of this position is the idea of industrializing natural

Amazonian reviewed] Indigenous Life Plans highlight different needs" for which capital, as in development discussions of the 70s, is seen as a means to finance their proposals. The sense and direction that capital acquires is then specific as it is conceived as a way to serve other ends, especially those that emerge from indigenous people's ideas of wealth (Parra-Borda, 2023).

resources (Pellegrini quoted by Arsel *et al.*, 2016). Abandoning commodities would mean making biodiversity a source for internal production (with a focus on value-added chains) and for other productive sectors (generating bio-based services and products). It is often noted that this vision implies high costs, from which follows it has structural and challenging limitations related to creating the enabling conditions in terms of infrastructure (i.e. for export), and of building human resource capacity, technology, and innovation. I wonder in any case, if, beyond the structural limitations and the laudable intention of abandoning the extractive dynamics that have governed the development trajectories of different Latin American countries, a biodiversity-based industry can sustain the whole economy. Perhaps other complementary measures, such as the perspective of the current Colombian government focused on promoting development and social investment through tax reform, should be needed. Beyond it, can an industry that promises to use and simultaneously protect the resources offered by biodiversity genuinely avoid its destruction? Isn't it the potential imposition of the speeds and dynamics of capital into biodiversity dynamics? Is, once again, a high amount of faith in technology and innovation the answer offered when asking how to prevent this risk of destruction?

Contrary to the previous perspective, other points of view (most of them represented by different NGOs, indigenous organizations) suggest that industries or economic sectors engaged with biodiversity resources, along with any production proposals based on them, should align with biodiversity logics. This perspective raises the question of the terms and rhythms to which production sectors are willing to *adapt* in line with biodiversity dynamics. The emphasis is not on the broad and structural question of how to abandon the economies that keep Colombia in the commodity markets but on how to create small-scale economies that serve other industries, processes, modes of production, or sectors through the access, use, and transformation of resources offered by biodiversity. The underlying assumption is that if the Amazon has specific conditions, then it is up to those sectors to adapt to the specificity of the forests and its rhythms, and not the other way around. It can be said that it is a perspective aimed at changing the purely extractive logic in which the debate of creating economies based on biodiversity tends to be framed while saying little about the broader-scale production conditions²⁸. In a way, this is a perspective that seems to aspire to adapt the logic of capital or place limits to it — which would mean deactivating its expansive and accumulation-based logic? Other perspectives²⁹, to a certain extent similar to the latter, with an approach that critiques the industrializing perspectives, have been raised in regional debates (SPA, 2021, Chap. 30). This perspective starts from the unresolved question of how to create an economy that is not dependent on external sources and could improve the living conditions of its inhabitants without reproducing the conditions that lead to the degradation and destruction of the forests (Ibid.). They ultimately attempt to address one of the most contentious and contradictory questions for the Amazon region today: how to conduct development beyond the developmental approaches based on extractivist dynamics (Arsel *et al.*, 2016, 883).

²⁸ COICA and Inter American Development Bank <https://blogs.iadb.org/sostenibilidad/es/bioeconomia-indigena-forjando-un-futuro-sostenible-en-la-amazonia/>

²⁹ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/10/02/espanol/opinion/conservacion-selva-amazonica.html>; <https://www.futuribles.com/en/projet-amazonie-40-une-troisieme-voie-pour-lamazon/>

Conclusions

Development planning perspectives for the Amazon are a matter of political ecology as they entail questions about the distribution of access, use, and management of resources (“Who owns what, who does what? who gets what? what do they do with it?”). They also reflect emerging conflicts in which different forces and dynamics define the access to, and drive the destruction of, environments (Robbins, 2010, 3-5). As a political ecology matter, the development planning perspectives described and analyzed in this research paper shape, through different forces, the access, management, and transformation of the Amazon’s landscapes (*Ibid.*). In this research paper, I mainly referred to the state as being one of those forces, and I focused on tracing the main motives of its sight as well as the prevalent underpinning rationalities that drive its actions. Starting from the concept of the state that I referred to in Chapter 1, I assumed that the state’s planning perspectives and the way they unfold—although always problematized and therefore shaped by other forces (particularly those represented by Indigenous worldviews)—have effects on the material conditions that shape life in the region.

The prevailing discourses and perspectives on development in the region are, therefore, not mere formulations operating at a rhetorical, abstract, or prescriptive level; they have concrete effects on these realities, shaping and influencing their transformation. This, in any case, leads to a statement of one of the methodological limitations of this research and what could be a direction for future work: that the forces *from the ground* that shape the state’s perspective, often thinking and acting amid thresholds, pose critiques that should be examined in depth. In other words, a bottom-up approach is much needed if we are willing to understand the emancipatory potential within these perspectives and their capacity to challenge the language, concepts, content, and scope of current debates. Today, in the Amazon, these perspectives are guided and led—even with tensions, contradictions, and challenges—by indigenous political action. Their role is decisive if we revisit political ecology questions: who defines who has access to what and under which terms.

Aside from this limitation, what the methodological approach I chose to work with revealed and what I claimed through the paper is that the Colombian Amazon is not merely a resource for extraction, nor is it a natural landscape outside the dynamics of global capital markets. It is a geography that situates the environmental problems of our present as political issues, bringing back to the table discussions of the limits that should be imposed on capital to prevent the continuity of its destructive logic. The mobilization of these issues stems from a clear yet complex fact: “that our planet left its natural functioning state, sharply and irrevocably, in the mid-20th century” (Guardian, 2024), but no one is holding anyone accountable for this. As said in an essay for a course of this master’s journey: “If there are no specific actors held accountable, there’s no one to take responsibility” (Parra-Borda, 2024). One of the main tasks today “might be then focused on identifying [and clearly naming] the actions and actors that keep advancing damage to the biosphere without repercussions, and the conditions needed for them to take responsibility for their actions. Until there is no clarity on these actions and actors, we all are responsible, and yet no one is. Therefore, for the discussion to achieve a *fair distribution of responsibilities* (Hickel, 2022; Shue, 2015), there must be a clear definition of which actions entail assuming these responsibilities, which subjects or actors must assume them” (*Ibid.*) and which instances or mechanisms might be required to make it possible.

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