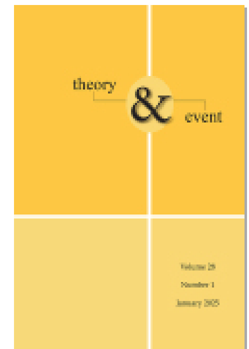
Progress, Technology, Nature: Life and Death in the Valley of Mexico



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Theory & Event, Volume 28, Number 1, January 2025, pp. 120-144 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2025.a947376*

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[129.128.216.34] Project MUSE (2025-01-01 18:17 GMT) The University of Alberta

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Didier Zúñiga

Abstract In the "history of the Aztecs" scholarship, recent debates reveal how work seemingly aligned with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist objectives can nevertheless reproduce the view that western science and technology are the primary means of improving human life. This corresponds to a type of performative postcolonial analysis that remains caught up in the power dynamics it seeks to dismantle. The essay's goal is to show that in order to understand, compare, and contrast the technological differences between Mesoamericans and early modern Spaniards, it is necessary to attend to the different ontological configurations that undergird their respective sociocultural renderings of "nature."

Keywords Ontology and ecology; Mesoamerican worlds; Indigenous and decolonial politics; history of the Aztecs; nature.

Three months after taking office, Dr. Claudia Sheinbaum, then Mexico City's head of government, announced the construction of a highway bridge in the south of the city that was met with fierce resistance from land and water protectors, most of whom form part of the Coordination of Indigenous Peoples of Xochimilco.[1] The reason for this is that part of the project includes extending the viaduct into the Xochimilco wetland, which is one of the last remaining wetlands in what was—prior to the Spanish invasion—a complex ecosystem comprising multiple lakes, rivers, and shallow water beds. The Mesoamerican peoples that made the Valley of Mexico their home some eleven thousand years ago organized their social systems in attunement with the fluid landscape they encountered, which over time resulted in a complex interweaving of a variety of life sustaining technologies and practices to the hydrology of the basin.[2] But as a consequence of colonial rule, and following what was perhaps the largest geoengineering project undertaken anywhere at the time, that habitat was irreparably damaged: the Valley of Mexico was artificially drained, its wetlands destroyed, and the peoples whose lifeforms depended on them were deterritorialized.

Theory & Event Vol. 28, No. 1, 120–144 © 2025 Johns Hopkins University Press

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Five hundred years after the invasion, the last remnants of the Valley's wetland ecosystem remain inhabited by Indigenous peoples and peasant communities who to this day protect and care for them. These "peoples of the Earth,"[3] as Enrique Leff calls them, play a crucial role in preserving and perpetuating the local ecosystems' life in accordance with ancestral knowledges and practices. The latter include agricultural technologies like the chinampa system that makes sustainable use of these biologically diverse territories in synchrony with their regeneration processes and the seasonal cycles of the wetlands. However, both the wetlands and the peoples whose lifeforms are attuned to them are under increasing threat from the dominant view of progress and development, which is rooted in the hegemonic model of modernity.[4] Despite the purported support of Mexico City's leftist government for the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples[5]—and despite Sheinbaum's claim that "the public work will not cause ecological damage"[6]—we are once again witnessing the erasure of nonmodern[7] worlds in the name of progress, development, and the national common good.

The essay examines how this Eurocentric view of progress continues to hold sway on a world that is now being described as "postcolonial,"[8] delineating the prevailing shapes that view takes in relation to the Mesoamerican worlds that persist in the face of ongoing national development efforts that seek to occupy, assimilate, and destroy them. By paying attention to recent debates in the "history of the Aztecs" scholarship, I show how even work that purportedly aligns with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist objectives can end up reproducing the view that western science and technology are the primary means to improve human life. I focus on Camilla Townsend's argument in *Fifth Sun* that although Spaniards had not reached a higher culture than that attained by the Mexica, their technological advancements were unmistakably superior—and that this, according to her analysis, is the reason why their "victory" was inevitable.

My purpose in engaging with Townsend's book is to initiate a dialogue on progress and development, Indigenous resistance past and present, and the life and death of human and more-than-human ecologies. My aim is to use her work as a catalyst to address broader issues extending beyond the scope of her research, and delve into the Spanish colonial legacies in Latin America's lived natural environments. More precisely, I employ her work as it epitomizes a specific kind of performative postcolonial analysis that remains caught up in the power dynamics it seeks to dismantle. The essay thus examines latent assumptions about science and technology, their relationships with "nature," and their role in driving "human improvement" within anti-colonial and anti-imperialist critiques.

Part of the essay's aim is to contribute to decolonial debates in political theory by "decentering Europe"[9] and expanding settler-colonial studies—along with research on imperialism and colonialism more broadly—beyond the "Anglo-world."[10] It also seeks to shift the focus of these debates to land, water, and biota, thereby steering political theory away from its anthropocentric limitations. In this regard, the essay draws inspiration from Paulina Ochoa Espejo's emphasis on the decolonial struggle to maintain, repair, and protect relations with ecosystems, which form the basis of diverse forms of life that resist incorporation and assimilation.[11] The essay is also inspired by Mauro Caraccioli's research on how Spanish chroniclers, explorers, and missionaries depicted and conceptualized Mesoamerican "nature," portraying "the "New World" as an untamed landscape that could serve the dual ends of imperial extraction: resource accumulation and knowledge appropriation."[12]

The main purpose of the essay is to provide normative and practical guidance that can direct the processes underlying life towards social and ecological thriving. To pave the way for this, I begin by analyzing Townsend's counter-narrative to the predominant account of the Mexica and their historical trajectory. This discussion allows me to show that despite the emergence and consolidation of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist critiques, we can still feel echoes of the ostensibly rejected "stages view" of progressive development today. I then closely examine and assess contrasting conceptions and configurations of land and water that emanate from Mesoamerican and early modern European ontologies. My aim is to highlight radically different scopes, objectives, and methods of human intervention in the natural environment. This allows me to compare and evaluate different kinds of disturbances of nature, thereby determining which ones are attuned to the diversity of life and which ones lead to its destruction. In the final section, I discuss the distinct Mesoamerican and European technologies of life and death. My goal is to underscore the deep rift between two profoundly divergent conceptions of life, its significance, and the responsibilities and obligations that humans have towards the rest of the living world.

One of my central objectives is to demonstrate that judging Mesoamerican worlds from the standpoint of "progress" rests on flawed and harmful assumptions about a universally self-evident "nature." I also aim to challenge the notion that complete and unequivocal knowledge about such nature is (and has been) acquired linearly and neutrally (by Europeans). These assumptions form the basis of a conception of science and technology that I take issue with throughout these pages. Finally, I argue that the attempt to reduce Mesoamerican ways of understanding and using "nature" to an alleged common

ground that would allow for mutual intelligibility serves instead to buttress the hegemonic view of modernity, all the while eschewing the possibility of thinking and acting with "nature" differently. But this does not imply the relativistic constraint that prevents us from evaluating different ways of relating to "nature." On the contrary, early modern technologies of life and death had devastating consequences for both the human animals and the more-than-human beings and ecologies of beings that form part of the Valley of Mexico. My purpose is to show that in order to understand and then compare and contrast the technological differences between Mesoamericans and early modern Spaniards, it is necessary to begin by paying attention to the different ontological configurations that undergird their respective sociocultural renderings of "nature."

Culturally Equal But Technologically Inferior: The So-Called "Conquest of the Aztecs"

In her important book on the history of the Aztecs, Camilla Townsend posits that the Spanish "victory" over the Mexica[13] in the early sixteenth century can be explained by the "great technological power imbalance" that existed between the conquistadors and Mesoamerican peoples.[14] Contrary to the prevailing narrative, which attributed Iberian defeat to their cultural superiority—a narrative that permeates European accounts of the so-called "conquest of the Aztecs'[15]—Townsend argues that "technological superiority" ought to be separated from "cultural superiority," and that the two must not be confounded.[16]

According to the standard story, a small army of a few hundred men led by Spanish colonists[17] managed to conquer a force of tens of thousands of Mesoamerican warriors. It is now widely acknowledged that the military victories of the 1520s were due to the alliances that the Spanish formed with the Mesoamericans who were at enmity with the Aztecs—including, most famously, the Tlaxcalteca—as well as with those who were subject to Aztec rule.[18] But where Townsend's argument distinguishes itself from predominant narratives of cultural superiority is in her claim that the reason non-Mexica Mesoamerican peoples decided to join forces with the invaders to overthrow the Mexica is that they recognized the technological might of the Europeans.[19]

Townsend thus argues that non-Mexica Mesoamericans allied with the invaders because early on they reckoned with the Europeans' superiority and came to anticipate their victory in "the war to end all wars."[20] In this way, she ascribes agency to those whose roles have been neglected in the annals of history by showing that many Mesoamerican peoples deliberately sided with the Europeans because they "wanted to be on the side of the victors as they entered the new

political era"—one in which the Mexica would no longer control and dominate the central Valley of Mexico.[21] But what was the nature of this technological disparity and how did it manifest itself?

What separated the "Old World" from the "New," according to Townsend, is that the former had been practicing "full time farm[ing] for ten thousand years." Given that Europeans were the "cultural heirs of many millennia of sedentary living," she continues, they therefore had "a panoply of technologies," which included "not just metal arms and armor, but also ships, navigation equipment, flour mills, barrel-making establishments, wheeled carts, printing presses, and many other inventions that rendered them more powerful than those who did not have such things."[22] In contrast, at the time of encounter, "full-time farming" had been practiced by Mesoamerican peoples for about three thousand years, which is what leads her to assert that when the two worlds met, it "was almost as if Renaissance Europe had come face to face with ancient Sumerians."[23]

Before unpacking what this argument entails, it is important to note that the main purpose of Townsend's book is to tell a counter story of an event that was significant in the lives of the Mexica, but one that did not put an end to their culture, legacy, or even existence—"as they are among us still."[24] In this regard, her work falls in line with the spirit of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist historical scholarship that seeks to debunk the false ideas and theories ingrained by the Spaniards (and Europeans, more generally), such as the claim that Mesoamerican peoples saw the white men as gods to whom they had no choice but to submit.[25] That said, there is something deeply problematic about her assertion of technological differences, a perspective that is inherently intertwined with the modern imaginary.

There are numerous testimonials from the invaders themselves that indicate their amazement at Mesoamerican cities,[26] especially Tenochtitlan, which was about four times larger than Seville and Granada, Spain's largest cities at the time.[27] In the letters, pamphlets, and maps that the settlers produced and sent to Europe to spread word of what they were witnessing, they described with awe and wonder the houses, gardens, "zoos," "aquariums," as well as the agricultural systems, irrigation and hydraulic technologies, houses, bridges, causeways, and dikes that formed part of the architecture and design of Mesoamerican urban landscapes.[28] This is significant because the trope of western sedentarism and the agricultural complex that Europeans developed from it is used as the primary explanation for the power differences between the two worlds; indeed, Townsend's analysis is premised on the assumption that "farming peoples always developed mightier civilizations."[29] This, we are told, is why they were "able to defeat people who had not developed comparable weapons and

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goods, and whose populations had not grown equivalently."[30] And yet, it contradicts what we know about both the weapons they used[31] and the size of the cities on both continents at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It also conflicts with comparative historical cases providing evidence of sedentary societies defeated by nomadic ones, such as when successive Chinese dynasties fell to both the Xiongnu and the Mongols, to take well-known examples.[32]

But even if we bracket the above, Townsend's line of reasoning implies that the Europeans' undeniable "superiority" in the areas of transportation and communication—which included their use of "ships… compasses,… navigation equipment,… technical maps, and… printing presses"—is what "made the conquest possible."[33] Granted, Mesoamericans did not engage in oceanic exploration, nor did they have printing presses, but it is questionable to infer from this that their practical knowledges and skills were thus "inferior" to that of the Europeans, and that this was the source of Mesoamericans' inescapable demise. This is so for two main reasons: First, it directly opposes Townsend's overall aim of telling the story of the Mexica otherwise—that is, by straying from the usual path of reading and interpreting European texts, instead emphasizing the voices, roles, and agency of Indigenous peoples and—remarkably—Indigenous women. It contradicts her laudable goal because she reproduces the imperialist and colonial view that the Mexica were "conquered" by the Spanish. And as Federico Navarrete has argued, to refer to the 1519 encounter and the events that occurred afterwards as a "Spanish conquest" is to lend legitimacy to the violent and destructive invasion of the settlers, as well as to reinforce—however inadvertently— the view that the "Aztecs" were brought under the *complete* domination of the Spaniards, thereby effacing Mexica forms of resistance, defiance, and refusal.[34]

Second, and more importantly for my purposes, Townsend's argument for technological superiority—and her attendant claim that we must distinguish the latter from a hierarchical understanding of culture—adopts the contentious conception of "History" as a series of necessary stages of progress and development.[35] She clearly captures this in her analogy between the Spanish-Mexica encounter and the fictional face-to-face coming together of Renaissance Europe and the ancient Sumerians. This parallel is supposed to shed light on the difference between "lower" and "higher" stages of technological advancement, without nevertheless implying that these societies can be ranked hierarchically on a scale of cultural worth. In Townsend's view, it is precisely because technological development holds universally across space and time that we can separate it from cultural considerations. This is what leads her to affirm that Renaissance Europe and Sumer were "great" cultures of their time, that each made significant contribu-

tions to science and technology at their respective times in history, and that something similar can be said about sixteenth-century Spaniards and the Mexica: despite their respective cultural grandeur, they were just at different temporal points on the science and technology scale.

What I take from this discussion are two questions that bring us to the heart of what is involved in filtering difference through conceptual lenses and categories that subsume radical alterity under a structure of sameness. The first concerns what we mean when we talk about science and technology. Can we compare sixteenth-century Spanish and Mexica forms of warfare, communication, agriculture, and so on without referencing the specific function they played in their respective societies—which is another way of asking if it is possible to separate "technology" from "culture," to use Townsend's way of putting it? The second question is what contemporary political theory can learn from these historical debates to better study how practices of "sameing"[36] operate today, and hence avoiding reinforcing and reproducing imperialist and colonial logics, among other masterful forms of relation and practice.[37]

Two Conceptions of Nature: Fluidity Versus Fixity/Land *and* Water Versus Land-and-Water

It is crucial to remain alert to the sort of argument Townsend puts forward, as it rests on an understanding of human societies that has served and continues to justify the invasion, assimilation, and subjugation of those peoples deemed outside of western historical time. At the same time, it facilitates the domination and mastery of the ecological systems in which they are embedded, enabling both genocide and ecological catastrophe. And yet, this line of reasoning is still unwittingly reinforced by scholars, politicians, activists, and others otherwise opposed to colonialism and imperialism who are trying to enact concrete change on the ground. To take an illustrative example, it may seem puzzling that someone like Dr. Claudia Sheinbaum[38] is at the forefront of a series of policies that aim to break with prevailing Eurocentric, colonial, and patriarchal visions of Mexico's past,[39] while at the same time authorizing mega-development and extractivist schemes that destroy spaces where Indigenous communities protect and proliferate life in the city. One of these projects is the construction of a six-lane bridge in Xochimilco—a millenary *altepetl* (i.e., a Mesoamerican polity) that is now one of Mexico City's sixteen boroughs—that entails destroying at least thirty thousand square meters of wetland.[40]

Xochimilco is the last remaining wetland in a region that was once part of an extensive network of lakes and of "land" that became "water" during the rainy seasons, thus creating the wetland ecosystem

upon which the Mesoamerican social systems had been predicated since their arrival in the Valley of Mexico thousands of years ago.[41] The entire basin of the Valley was constituted by multiple lakes, including Lake Xochimilco and Lake Texcoco—the latter being where the Mexica established Tenochtitlan. All were desiccated by the Spanish colonists in an engineering project that began in the sixteenth century and was officially declared "finished" at the end of the nineteenth century.[42] The drainage and desiccation works of the Valley of Mexico, known as the Desagüe, are among the largest and most transformative projects undertaken by Europeans anywhere at the time.[43] The aim and effect of the project was to "reverse the geological clock to before the Quaternary period, when the basin of Mexico was still a valley, draining southward."[44] The engineering project succeeded in drying up the lakes and destroying most of the wetland ecosystem of the basin, but it never managed to achieve its intended goal—that is, to protect the city of Mexico from flooding.[45]

This is important because it illuminates a fundamental aspect of the scientific practices and technological devices that human animals create and use both to relate to "nature" and to support and sustain their own social systems. And the current situation of Xochimilco illustrates the ongoingness of the collisions and struggles that oppose radically different visions of how, to what extent, and for what purposes humans can and should transform the natural environment. Today, just like five hundred years ago, we are witnessing the deterritorialization of the peoples who protect and preserve habitats being destroyed by extractive infrastructures and development models based on the absolute control and mastery of nonhuman worlds. The Desagüe story is revealing in this regard: ever since the Spanish settlers set foot in the Valley of Mexico, they saw its wetlands and aquatic ecosystems as a burden and even a threat. This is so because both the urban design and agricultural economy of the colonists relied on "permanently dried land."[46] As Vera Candiani has shown, Spanish and Mesoamerican relations to "land" and "water" are premised on mutually exclusive ontological and epistemological orientations. What lies at the heart of the distinction between these two views is an opposition between a fixed and invariable conception of "land" and "water" as two separate things, on the one hand, and a fluid and variable understanding of land-and-water, on the other.[47]

The former view sees "land" and "water" as segregated entities whose mixing must remain under the control of humans to the greatest extent possible. This understanding of the earth's surface constitutes the bedrock of an agricultural model that relies on dry land that is to be artificially irrigated—as well as rain-fed, of course, but with complete human control of flooding and drying processes. Desiccated soil is also

needed for extensive grain production and livestock breeding, among other commercial activities forming the basis of the economic system forcefully introduced by the Europeans. This conception of land *and* water became the primary vehicle for transforming the nonhuman living world into inanimate matter that humans could then turn into quantifiable objects to be sold, bought, and made subject to "speculation and accumulation."[48] In other words, it provided the philosophical foundation for privatizing territories and commodifying biodiversity, thus steering the Valley of Mexico towards entropic decay by irreversibly altering the thermodynamic and ecological conditions of life in the basin. Moreover, this "attempt to bend the landscape to the human will," as Candiani has put it, constitutes the formation of early capitalism and developmentalism, as well as the colonization of not only Mesoamerican peoples, but also more-than-human beings, ecosystems, matter, and energy.[49]

In contrast, the Mesoamerican view is premised on a fluid relationship between land and water, one that does not rest on the separation of one from the other. In fact, the interdependent nature of their conception of land-and-water as a continuum makes it impossible to think of these elements independently of each other and the dense ecologies of beings making up a particular territory—including its human animal inhabitants. This has led Mesoamerican peoples to organize their social systems in synchrony with the ecological cycles and biological regeneration processes of the different regions they inhabit.[50] Their technical knowledges are attuned to the seasonal variability and to the climatic conditions of each territory, which is why their productive practices make integral use of the topographical conditions and agrobiodiversity of the soils they live in, including the lacustrine ecosystems of the Valley.[51] This is reflected in the economic activities that they developed over thousands of years and the knowledges and practices upon which they rely, which are based on the full use of the minerals, plants, fish, fowl, insects, larvae, reptiles, and other organic and inorganic beings and matter as sources of food as well as of their architectural and engineering designs.[52]

When the Mexica established Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico, they arrived in a place inhabited by peoples whose technologies, organizations, and practices were interwoven with the endorheic basin and its seasonal fluctuation.[53] The Mexica's most famous agro-ecological system, the *chinampas*—which are still used today in Xochimilco[54]—are based on earlier models built by the Xaltocanmecas, which in turn derive from Toltec technology.[55] Chinampas are plots of arable land built on wetlands by constructing fenced rectangular structures made entirely of organic matter, including soil, mud, turf, sod, tule, and other plants and components that are part of the natural ecosystem of

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the region.[56] These "floating gardens," as they were often referred to by Mesoamericans,[57] are artificial islets whose immensely fertile agricultural fields are nourished by the decomposition of plant residues accumulated from years of cultivation, as well as from the expansion of the chinampas, which sometimes cover entire lakes.[58] The advantage of the chinampa system is that it allows people to grow corn, squash, and other produce (which are at the foundation of Mesomerican societies) while also benefitting from the food sources—such as fish, algae, birds, etc.—composing the semiaquatic landscapes that sustain them. In addition to providing highly productive soil, the chinampa system and the social organization upon which it is based are oriented towards maximizing the benefits of the marshy environment in full harmony with the cycles of flooding and drying.[59] It is—to borrow Enrique Leff's terminology—an ecosystemic mode of production that is both guided by the negentropic potentials of life and based on the social and cultural creativity of humans *with* nature.[60]

This adaptation to seasonal change was not limited to the chinampas: entire urban infrastructures adjusted to the constant flux of land-and-water.[61] Mesoamerican cities and villages were built on or adjacent to shallow lakes and wetlands, which greatly exposed them to inundations given that the Valley's land is underlain by impermeable clay layers, enclosed by volcanoes and hills, and prone to heavy seasonal rainfall, thus creating a pool-like habitat.[62] Indigenous engineers developed hydraulic technology designed to make the most of the environment in which they lived, such as drainage systems for both potable water and wastewater, aqueducts to bring freshwater from distant locations into the cities and villages, dikes to keep freshwater and saline water separate—the most important of which resulted in the creation of an artificial freshwater lake around the twin cities of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco—among other works.[63] Their urban core—including the monumental Templo Mayor—rested on elevated platforms built on the lacustrine clays, providing stable foundations for developing a city under conditions of natural submergence.[64] This combination of urban planning, water management systems, and agricultural design was intended to ensure the subsistence of human animals in accordance with the ecological relationships, phenology, and reproductive cycles of the habitats and species that they interacted with.

Technologies of Life / Technologies of Death

As I hope is clear by now, it would be a mistake to think that prior to the invasion of the Spaniards, human animals in the Valley of Mexico did not disturb their natural environment—I echo here Anna Tsing's notion

of "guided disturbance," which refers to the sustainable interaction and coexistence of humans and nature.[65] This is evident in Mesoamerican agricultural systems and urban design, engineering, and architecture, all of which presuppose the use, manipulation, and transformation of nature into human-built spaces. In this context, the larger and overarching objective of my work is to elucidate and emphasize contrastive ways of relating to natural worlds. Within this framework, I aim to show that Mesoamerican and Mesoamerican-derived social systems exhibit a significantly higher degree of harmony and attunement with nature in comparison to the dominant European systems.[66]

In a broader and more abstract sense, all living entities must to a certain extent use organic and inorganic matter to survive and thrive. The crucial question is not whether a self or an ecology of selves depends on the manipulation of external elements to flourish, but rather the implications of such reliance and whether it is governed by a logic of mastery and domination.[67] However, this is not as straightforward as it might seem, given that every human practice and intervention involving the use of "nature" will necessarily fall within a spectrum of disturbance—again, because it is impossible to sustain a living body, let alone a society of living bodies, without consuming and discharging. This is the inescapable predicament of all living beings: existence inevitably entails modifying our milieu of interaction to respond to bodily needs. In this sense, although "science" and "technology" are concepts deeply rooted in western history,[68] the well-being of every human society[69] rests on its knowledge of the natural environment in which it is enmeshed, and on the practical application of that knowledge to fulfill specific functions, which necessarily involve some degree of skillful influence over that environment.[70] What needs to be specified, therefore, is the criteria by which to adjudicate between forms of control, manipulation, and transformation in order to compare and contrast how technology is developed and used, and the implications these different uses bear on the environment.

Echoing the words of Anishinaabe/Ojibway scholar John Borrows, the idea is not to perpetuate the stereotype that "Indigenous peoples," regardless of time and place, have always been "natural environmentalists"[71]—or even worse, to associate them and their forms of life with some sort of "wilderness."[72] But it is nevertheless necessary to take heed of the worldings and practices—as well as of the ontological and epistemic configurations underpinning them—that diverge from and exceed modern taxonomical classifications and hierarchies.[73] The worlds of the Mesoamerican inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico were—and continue to be—radically different from and in many ways incompatible with the "objective" and objectifiable reality that the colonists have sought to enforce since their arrival.[74] This reality

is based on the tenets that a unified "nature" operates according to value-free and secular, autonomous, universal laws; and that human animals—irrespective of culture and geography—can grasp these laws through rational and empirical inquiry. Moreover, the purpose of knowing these laws is very specific: to systematically extract wealth from the natural environment with the aim of "improving" individual and social life in line with the hegemonic vision of modernity's prescriptions of progress and prosperity.[75] Needless to say, this view contrasts quite sharply with Mesoamerican social and economic priorities, as well as with their conceptions of and ways of relating to nature—which, although they differ in several respects, do share many basic features that directly oppose the early modern European mode of thinking of and engaging with the world.[76]

One of the features worth highlighting here is the strikingly dissimilar mode of production that characterizes the forms of life among the Indigenous inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico. As Candiani shows in her study, the Mesoamerican socioecological organization is antithetical to the private property regime and to the social and economic patterns of production and organization that the European colonists brought and imposed.[77] In this regard, the Desuagüe story in particular, but also the Spanish invasion and permanent occupation of Mesoamerican territories, are fundamental to understanding the processes and relations at the origins of capitalism as well as the modern European project of globalization.[78] And as already intimated above, the nature of this disjuncture[79] lies in the conflict between two distinct systems of valuation and understanding water, land, and all the more-than-human beings and ecologies of beings that inhabit a particular place. Fluidity and human adaptability to nature in the Valley, Candiani argues, were "an obstacle to the penetration of private property and capitalist forms and modes of production," whereas fixity and bending nature to the human will constitute their conditions of possibility.[80] This is why as soon as the colonists toppled Tenochtitlan, they transformed "the physical, hydrological, and biological environment of the basin" so as to "rende[r] it more amenable to Spanish patterns of production."[81]

But this disjuncture indicates a larger divergence between two radically different understandings of life: its meaning and value, and more specifically what humans owe to that which is alive. This is apparent not only in the ecological equilibrium that Mesoamerican peoples have striven to achieve and maintain for thousands of years—which is why for them "seasonal inundation of land was equivalent to life itself"[82]—but also in the way they conducted war. Indeed, to return to the discussion of Townsend and the contrast between technologies and practices of warfare, it is important to understand how their respective conceptions of life and death shaped their relationship to war.[83] As is well-

known, Mesoamerican societies ritualized death in both theory and practice, which is something that to this day continues to define significant aspects of "Mexican" culture, religion, and society.[84] As Eduardo Matos Moctezuma has shown, in Nahua cosmogony death is an essential process in the constant cycle of life—it is "the seed of life."[85] And in contrasting this notion with the dominant European understanding of death, especially with that which arose between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, we find again the theme of fluidity versus fixity: for most Europeans, death is reduced to "a choice between glory or hell," which in other words means that it is a static phenomenon that is "subject to a trial."[86] For Mesoamericans, on the other hand, death is a dynamic process that is required for the maintenance of a cosmic equilibrium, and therefore for the well-functioning of both the cosmic and social orders.[87] Unlike a common feature of Christian forms of thought, which are usually conceived as doctrines of salvation that reward or punish believers in the hereafter, for Mesoamericans, conduct is directed at pleasing the gods who reciprocate here on earth—whatever happens afterwards is an altogether different, uncertain matter.[88]

This duality of life and death as well as the life-giving power of death was interpreted by the Nahuas of Tenochtitlan as a call of the gods to feed the cosmic cycle with the vital energy of living beings, especially that of human animals.[89] This is why sacrifice and ceremonial warfare had a central function in Mesoamerican societies, and most prominently in how the Mexica organized their social, political, and religious life. In Mexica ontology, given that Huitzilopochtli (the Sun God) is in constant struggle against his siblings (the Stars), their role as chosen people was to provide the Sun with food to help Him cast the night away and hence illuminate the world with divine light.[90] This is of course only part of the picture,[91] but what I want to underscore here is how this sacred relationship to death affected how they carried out and governed armed conflict with other peoples. The Mexica honored enemies killed in war, as well as war captives who were then sacrificed for the Gods; a special god, Teoyaomiqui, was entrusted with the task of caring for them in the hereafter.[92] Contrast this with the way most Europeans typically conducted war and treated enemies during the same period: despite their alleged outrage at what they described as the Aztecs' "savagery" and "extreme violence," Spanish soldiers slaughtered combatants en masse, massacred civilians, and forcefully converted and subordinated survivors, as well as enslaved and raped women and children, among other genocidal acts aimed at brutally and mercilessly destroying their worlds.[93] No wonder they were surprised when Mesoamerican soldiers brought them provisions between battles.[94]

Attending to the difference between these respective ways of relating to life and death is important because it sheds light on a

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broader discrepancy between their conceptions of and relationships with "nature." Contrary to a modern epistemological premise—as Townsend exemplifies—that upholds a form of cultural relativism while positing the universality of nature, the argument I have tried to develop in these pages is that how we think about both "culture" and "nature" cannot be disentangled from the ontological grounding within which these claims and the practices following from them make sense. My aim, therefore, is to challenge the prevalent view that treats development and its technologies of extraction as the inevitable result of universal scientific progress directed at the betterment of "humanity." As I hope is clear from the comparison I have drawn, there is a spectrum of control and manipulation of life, and where a particular society falls in that range has nothing to do with whether its people use "advanced" technology or not, but rather with the specific functions they assign to their technological means. In Anna Tsing's phrasing, it is the norms and criteria guiding their disturbances of nature that determine the extent of ecological well-being or destruction.[95] This becomes apparent when we compare the way Mesoamericans attuned their agricultural production to the Valley's geomorphology with how Iberians deployed a specific kind of knowledge to drain that Valley. The same holds true when we look at the Mesoamerican ritualization of death in light of the mass murder techniques originating in the European conception of "total war."[96]

Conclusion

The idea of progress and the assumption that technological innovation always and everywhere leads to the improvement of the living conditions of humankind are bound to one another within the hegemonic modernist imaginary. The traditional view of progress—which provided justification for and gave legitimacy to colonialism and imperialism—has typically painted the picture of a hierarchy of cultures, with "savagery" situated at the bottom and "civilization" at the top. On this view, the adoption of (early-)industrial agriculture and its commercialization within a (pre-)capitalist system, together with the mastery of metallurgy, are thought to constitute the driving forces behind this movement towards universal betterment.[97] As James Tully explains, modernization has historically taken the form of a process of cultural improvement that involves the "shedding [of] primitive customs and ways," as well as the assimilation of "lower peoples" into "modern nations within a European imperial structure or into independent modern constitutional nation states."[98] But now that the predicament of these polities is increasingly being cast as a postcolonial one,[99] this "stages view"[100] of progressive development, as Tully has called it, is no longer conveyed in such a form. In this essay, however, I have

tried to show that a similar structure of reasoning is still widespread today, although it is now expressed differently.

By way of a foray into recent work in the "history of the Aztecs" scholarship, I have argued that this pernicious idea of progress reveals itself in the assumption that there is a universally self-evident "nature," and that western science and technology provide the means of knowing, exploiting, and then restoring such nature. The essay's ambition is thus to contribute to the decolonial endeavor of unsettling ingrained narratives about western technological innovation and its presumed superiority over that of non-western peoples. In doing so, the essay seeks to challenge the optimistic reliance upon and attachment to the prevailing conception and application of science and technology that cast them as inherently positive forces.[101] Furthermore, this essay aims to provide a comparative study that counters the field's tendency to "focus on western political thought as the sole object of critique and analysis," as Getachew and Mantena have put it.[102] This move redirects political theory away from its fixation on individual thinkers—whether these are canonical figures or those disregarded by the canon—and, instead, channels its focus towards events, practices, and diffused systems of thought.[103] This also responds to Leigh Jenco's call for comparative political theory to move beyond methodological considerations and to genuinely engage with non-western knowledges and practices.[104]

To conclude, what I hope to have shown by focusing on the technological differences between early modern Spanish and Mesoamerican peoples is that the ontological configurations undergirding different social systems determine how the latter relate to the ecological webs in which they are embedded. Contrary to the modernist premise positing a comprehensive "natural" background that remains the same across sociocultural contexts, I have aimed to demonstrate that paying attention to the ontological dimension of the differences between knowledges and practices can help disclose fundamental aspects of how human animals relate to each other and to the Earth as whole. Moreover, it can also provide normative and practical guidance for steering the physical and biological processes forming the basis of life towards social and ecological thriving.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to Hasana Sharp, whose meticulous reading and insightful comments on various drafts of this essay have provided invaluable guidance. My heartfelt appreciation also goes to Yuna Blajer de la Garza and Sara-Maria Sorentino, who read and commented on an earlier draft and offered immensely helpful suggestions. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Yann Allard-Tremblay, Sam Frost, Juan

Heredia, Federico Navarrete, and Jim Tully for incredibly valuable conversations that helped shape the ideas presented in the essay. Many thanks as well to the editors and reviewers for considering my work and for the invaluable feedback they have provided. I dedicate this essay to the memory of my grandfather, Salvador Zúñiga Fuentes.

Notes

1. See Teresa de Miguel, "La obra que amenaza Xochimilco, el ultimo humedal de Ciudad de México," *El País*, July 15, 2020, https://elpais.com/mexico/2020-07-15/la-obra-que-amenaza-xochimilco-el-ultimo-humedal-de-ciudad-de-mexico.html; Fanny Miranda, "Sedema: humedal impactado por puente de Cuemanco quedará restaurado en 6 meses," *Milenio,* June 13, 2021, https://www.milenio.com/politica/comunidad/humedal-xochimilco-afectado-puente-cuemanco-pese-sedema; Milenio Redacción, "Puente en humedal de Xochimilco, la mole de concreto que amenaza una icónica reserva,", *Milenio*, July 5, 2021, https://www.milenio.com/politica/comunidad/xochimilco-pueblos-originarios-ven-ameniza-humedal; Martha Olivares, "Un puente vehicular devasta el humedal de Xochimilco," *Nexos*, August 2, 2021, https://medioambiente.nexos.com.mx/un-puente-vehicular-devasta-el-humedal-de-xochimilco/; among others.
2. See Vera S. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land. Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 15.
3. Enrique Leff, *Ecología Política. De la Deconstrucción del Capital a la Territorialización de la Vida* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores México, 2019).
4. I follow Amy Allen in defining this "hegemonic model of modernity" as having the following characteristics: it is grounded in the idea of historical progress, which in turn corresponds to a "never-ending, dynamic" process—which is "coincidently" led by Europe, i.e. modernity's main protagonist; it presumes that societies that fall outside of this "necessary, inevitable, and unified" course of historical action (i.e. "nonmodern, premodern, or traditional" societies) are less advanced, less developed, both with regard to ethical, moral, and political, as well as with technoscientific theory and practice; and it therefore assumes that, in order for a given people or society to be able to "reach it." they ought to follow a "certain developmental, unidirectional, and cumulative moral-political [as well as technoscientific] learning process." See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress. Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), esp. 3, 8–9. See also James Tully *Strange Multiplicity. Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); as well as Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume 2: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); among others. See also note 74 below.
5. See, for instance, Claudia Sheinbaum, "Mensaje de la Jefa de Gobierno Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, durante conferencia de prensa "500 Años de Resistencia Indígena en la Ciudad de México,"" Gobierno de la Ciudad de México, July 13, 2021, https://www.jefaturadegobierno.cdmx.gob.mx/comunicacion/nota/mensaje-de-la-jefa-de-gobierno-claudia-shein-

baum-pardo-durante-conferencia-de-prensa-500-anos-de-resistencia-indigena-en-la-ciudad-de-mexico.

6. Milenio Redacción, "Puente en humedal de Xochimilco, la mole de concreto que amenaza una icónica reserve." All Spanish-to-English translations throughout the text are mine.
7. A note on terminology: I acknowledge the limitations and potential pitfalls involved in the usage of terms like "modern" & "nonmodern." "Western" & "non-Western." as well as "Mesoamerica" and "Indigenous" (among others). It is true that in the postcolonial literature, the dichotomies between modern and nonmodern, Western and non-Western, are often used in a somewhat totalizing and homogenizing way. I also recognize the reductive character of employing terms like "Mesoamerican" and "Indigenous" to encompass such a diverse range of peoples, many of whom reject these notions as inadequate and/or problematic representations of who they are. That said, I also think that it is sometimes useful and perhaps even necessary to resort to these kinds of shortcuts, especially when what is at stake is the survival and sustaining of ways of understanding and relating to the world in contexts of imperialism and colonialism. In the scope of this essay, the aim of delineating a narrative of how "modernity" has predominantly unfolded is to wield it to further specific decolonial ends. These include undermining the false yet widespread view that certain processes and movements are necessary for achieving a fully developed and hence "rational" form of existence. These ends also comprise the on-the-ground struggles against the attempt to erase the ways of understanding and relating to the lands and waters of the earth that are unaligned—and often incompatible—with this "hegemonic model of modernity" in the broad sense of the term. In a parallel manner, I have decided to use the term "Mesoamerica" to refer to the lands, waters, and peoples inhabiting what is today Mexico and northern Central America. Besides being a geographic classification, it also holds historical significance, denoting the lands, waters, and peoples who underwent European invasion. Thus, the term designates them as existing despite the colonial endeavor to assimilate and incorporate them, initially within the Viceroyalty of New Spain, and then within subsequent postcolonial processes of nation-building and mestizaje, among others.
8. The "postcolonial" scholarship is of course diverse and wide-ranging. However, what I am trying to capture here is the distinction that is made (sometimes implicitly, other times explicitly) between "postcolonial" bodies of literatures, on the one hand, and "decolonial" and "anticolonial" ones, on the other. It is indeed possible to argue that the main difference between the two is that the postcolonial view conceives of decolonization as a historical process that happened at a particular moment in time. The main problem with taking the historical "fact" of postcolonialism for granted is that it occludes ongoing processes of dispossession, and other forms in which colonial injustices and harms manifest themselves today. In other words, it prevents us from paying attention to what James Tully refers to as the indirect or informal forms imperialism, colonialism, and rule over peoples since formal decolonization. To take a prominent recent example of this form of "postcolonialism." see Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking After Empire. The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,

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2019), where the author casts decolonization as a nationalist "project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order" (2). Compare this with the "decolonial" and "anticolonial" stance of foregrounding Land and Indigenous-Land relationships, in addition to the ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies that these relationships entail. In this regard, see, most prominently, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40; and, more recently, Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), esp. 26–27; among many others. See also Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key.*

9. Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the post-colonial turn," *Political Theory*, vol. 44, no. 6 (2016): 821–845. See also Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, "Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2021, 359–388.
10. Adam Dahl, "Beyond the Anglo-World: Settler Colonialism and Democracy in the Americas," *Polity*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2023): 241–440.
11. See Ochoa Espejo, "Territorial rights for individuals, states, or *pueblos*? Answers from Indigenous land struggles in colonial Spanish America," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2023, 94–108.
12. See Caraccioli, *Writing the New World: The Politics of Natural History in the Early Spanish Empire* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2021), 14.
13. In this text, I use "Aztec" and "Mexica" interchangeably. However, it is important to note that the word "Aztec" came to be used retroactively to refer to the Mexica—and, more specifically, to the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco, and Tlacopan.
14. Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun. A New History of the Aztecs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
15. I use scare quotes to signal the fact that the narrative of "conquest" is contested. Indeed, it is a European construction intended to efface the role and agency of non-Mexica Mesoamerican peoples in the toppling of the Triple Alliance. For an interesting discussion on whether the 1521 events can be described as a conquest, an invasion, or a rebellion, see Federico Navarrete, "¿Qué pasó en 1521? ¿Conquista, invasión o rebelión?," *Noticonquista*, 2019, http://www.noticonquista.unam.mx/index.php/amoxtli/2599/2592.
16. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 7. See also Townsend's text in Rolena Adorno, Federico Navarrete, Matthew Restall, Mauricio Tenorio, and Camilla Townsend, "El mito de la conquista. Una ronda revisionista," *Nexos*, August 1, 2021, https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=58736.
17. It is important to note that this army was not composed exclusively of white Spaniards: there were "conquistadors" of African descent—in addition to the fact that the entire settler army had and relied upon African and Taíno (among other Indigenous) slaves. As Matthew Restall has put it: "Africans were ubiquitous not only to the Conquest of Mexico but also to the entire endeavor of Spanish invasion." See Restall, *Seven Myths of the*

Spanish Conquest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52–53. He also writes that "Black African slaves were brought to the Americas beginning with the earliest voyages of Columbus; a small but unknown number of black slaves and freedmen fought in the Spanish-Aztec war, the best known of whom was Juan Garrido." See Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting that Changed History* (New York: Ecco Press, 2018), 300. On Juan Garrido, the West African "conquistador," see Restall, *Seven Myths*, 44, and 55–63.

18. See e.g. Townsend, *Fifth Sun;* Matthew Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting that Changed History*; David Carballo, *Collision of Worlds. A Deep History of the Fall of Aztec Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Federico Navarrete, *¿Quién Conquistó México?* (Mexico City: Debate, 2019).
19. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 7.
20. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 7.
21. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 7.
22. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 98.
23. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 98.
24. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 8.
25. This false idea has been repeatedly expressed throughout history. To take two famous, recent examples: in *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov talks about the "Indians'… paralyzing belief that the Spaniards are Gods." See Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. C. Porter (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 75. J.-M. G. Le Clézio holds a similar view: "… the Spaniards earned the reputation of being invincible warriors, "gods," which ultimately led to the defeat of Montezuma." See Le Clézio, *The Mexican Dream. Or, The Interrupted Thought of Amerindian Civilizations*, trans. T. L. Fagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 12. Exaggerated claims of human sacrifice and cannibalism and other famous false ideas have been widely disseminated as well (along with many others). In this regard, see Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, chapter 3, 75–116. These views have been voiced, for instance, by Mexico's very own Octavio Paz, who attributed the country's current violence to its Mesoamerican roots, and, much more recently, by *Vox*, the Spanish right-wing political party that boldly stated that "Spain had freed millions of people from the Aztec's bloodthirsty reign of terror." See Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999); Redacción El Universal, "España liberó a millones del regimen sanguinario y de terror de los aztecas: Vox," *El Universal*, August 13, 2021, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/mundo/espana-libero-millones-del-regimen-sanguinario-y-de-terror-de-los-aztecas-vox. My translation.
26. Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote that "some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream." Díaz del Castillo, cited in Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 169. See also Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2009).
27. In the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, Tenochtitlan was comparable to Paris or Constantinople in size. Other Aztec cities, e.g., Cholula,

Tlaxcala, and Tetzcoco, were of comparable size to Castilian ones, such as Toledo, Córdoba, and Valladolid. See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 108–109. It is also worth noting that "[o]n visiting the marketplace at Tlatelolco, Díaz reports how impressed the Spaniards were with the range of products bought and sold, its orderliness, and its size, which was deemed to have been larger than those of Rome and Constantinople in the judgment of men who had visited those cities." See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 202.

28. See, e.g., Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, especially 117–148; and Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, especially 139–143; as well as Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. by A. Pagden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Fray Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2006); Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la Conquista de México* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2006); and Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera.*
29. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 18.
30. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 18.
31. The Spanish sword made from Toledo steel was indeed more "destructive" than the Mesoamerican macahuitl, which was made of wood and obsidian blades—but not much more so. But this is not the case of all their weapons and armors. As Carballo writes, "[d]uring the wars of conquest, many Spaniards switched to Native cotton-quilted armor, since it provided better maneuverability while still offering defense from obsidian-tipped projectiles." It is therefore clear that the Spanish technology of warfare was not absolutely and inherently superior to the Mesoamerican one, each having advantages and disadvantages. See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 122.
32. See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 227. Townsend argues that when this happened it was because nomadic peoples "bought, borrowed, or stole" the farmers' "cleverest inventions and their best weapons." See Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 18. For a more general rebuttal of the "technological superiority" argument, particularly concerning the purported superiority of agriculture and farming, and thus, of sedentary societies over nomadic ones, see David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2021).
33. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 127.
34. See Navarrete, *¿Quién Conquistó México?*; and "¿Qué pasó en 1521? ¿Conquista, invasión o rebelión?." See also Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 1.
35. I am referring to what James Tully calls the "stages view of human history." See Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 64.
36. I borrow the term from Marisol de la Cadena. See her *Earth Beings. Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), esp. 276.
37. In this regard, my aim is for this essay to offer a distinctive contribution to the burgeoning sub-field of comparative political thought. So far, limited attention has been given to Mesoamerica and Indigenous politics within the Latin American context in the comparative political theory scholarship. I therefore hope that this essay can stand alongside the important recent works of scholars such as Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Mauro Caraccioli, Adam

Dahl, and Arturo Chang, among others. See Ochoa Espejo, "Territorial rights for individuals, states, or *pueblos*? Answers from Indigenous land struggles in colonial Spanish America," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2023): 94–108; Caraccioli, *Writing the New World: The Politics of Natural History in the Early Spanish Empire* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021); Dahl, "Beyond the Anglo-World: Settler Colonialism and Democracy in the Americas," *Polity*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2023): 241–440; Chang, "Restoring Anáhuac: Indigenous Genealogies and Hemispheric Republicanism in Postcolonial Mexico," *American Journal of Political Science*, 2021, Online First.

38. Claudia Sheinbaum served as the Head of Government of Mexico City at the time, and is currently the leading presidential candidate in Mexico.

39. Sheinbaum—the first woman elected as head of government of Mexico City—has furthered what could be described as a "decolonial" agenda since the beginning of her tenure, and has implemented changes such as replacing a statue of Christopher Columbus with a statue of an "Indigenous woman," renaming areas of the city to reflect its Indigenous roots, and bluntly asserting that the events of 1519–1521 must be considered as an invasion, not a conquest (among other things—many of which are deemed "superficial" by critics). See Claudia Sheinbaum, "¿Por qué una mujer indígena en Paseo de la Reforma?," *La Jornada*, September 15, 2021, https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/09/15/capital/por-que-una-mujer-indigena-en-paseo-de-la-reforma-claudia-sheinbaum/; Milenio Redacción, "Lo ocurrido en Tenochtitlán fue invasión, no conquista, dice Sheinbaum," *Milenio*, March 21, 2021, https://www.milenio.com/politica/cdmx-tenochtitlan-fue-invasion-no-conquista-sheinbaum; as well as Aristegui Noticias Redacción, "Renombran al árbol de la "Niche Triste" como la Plaza de la Noche Victoriosa," *Aristegui Noticias*, July 27, 2021, https://aristeguinoticias.com/2707/mexico/renombran-al-arbol-de-la-noche-triste-como-la-plaza-de-la-noche-victoriosa/.

40. See de Miguel, "La obra que amenaza Xochimilco, el ultimo humedal de Ciudad de México."

41. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 292.

42. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land.*

43. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 2.

44. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 2.

45. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 3.

46. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 292. See also Candiani, "The Desagüe reconsidered: Environmental Dimensions of Class Conflict in Colonial Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 92, no. 1 (2012): 30.

47. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land.*

48. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 281.

49. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 13. One of her main theses is that instead of thinking of colonization in terms of nations or peoples subjugating other peoples or nations, we should pay attention to how particular classes forming part of early capitalism colonized land, water, and

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biota. Although I am overall sympathetic to her approach, I nevertheless think that an analysis that focuses exclusively on classes will inevitably miss important ontological considerations—which are the main focus in my work.

50. See Leff, *Ecología Política*, 57–60.
51. See Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 22–24; as well as Leff, *Ecología Política*, 58.
52. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 18–19 & 25.
53. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 20.
54. The last remnants of the chinampa agricultural system are found in Xochimilco and Tláhuac, in the south and southeast of Mexico City.
55. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 20; see also Ángel Palerm, *Obras hidáulicas prehispánicas en el sistema lacustre del Valle de México* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1973); as well as Palerm and Eric Wolf, *Agricultural y civillización en Mesoamérica* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1972).
56. See José Porfirio Camacho Ortuño, "La chinampa, ejemplo de paisaje y sustentabilidad," *Esencia y Espacio*, no. 6, vol. 4 (1998): 11–14.
57. José Porfirio Camacho Ortuño, "La chinampa, ejemplo de paisaje y sustentabilidad," 11.
58. See Jorge Isauro Rionda Ramírez, "Breve historia económica de Iberoamérica," *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 141 (2009): 63.
59. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 27.
60. See Leff, *Ecología Política,* 22.
61. As Candiani puts it: "cities were solid but not dry." Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 19.
62. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 15.
63. See Jorge Legorreta, *El agua y la Ciudad de México. De Tenochtitlán a la megalopolis del siglo XXI* (Mexico City: UAM-Azcapotzalco, 2006). See also Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 24.
64. See Marcos Mazari, "Algo más sobre la Isla de los Perros, el Colegio Nacional y el agrietamiento de arcillas lacustres," in *Memoria del Colegio Nacional* (Mexico City: El Colegio Nacional, 1994), 313–333. Cited in Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 23.
65. See Anna L. Tsing, "Arts of inclusion, or how to love a mushroom," *Manoa*, vol 22, no. 2 (2010): 191–203; as well as Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).
66. For important work in political theory and philosophy that seeks to carve out contrastive distinctions similar to those emphasized here, albeit in a very different context, see Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); and Robert Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); among others.
67. For analyses of mastery and domination, see Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking. The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2006); and Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery. Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). See also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); and Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

68. See Sandra Harding, ed., *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

69. For the purposes of this essay, I restrict the scope of my analysis of "science and technology" to human animals, although it is fundamental to note that nonhumans also learn from and about, as well as modify and transform their milieux.

70. See Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University of Press, 1990). See also Margaret Lock and Vinh-Kim Nguyen, eds., *An Anthropology of Biomedicine* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

71. John Borrows, "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation. Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, eds. J. Borrows and J. Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 49

72. Daniel Rück, *The Laws and the Land. The Settler Colonial Invasion of Kahnawàke in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 14.

73. See Emille Boulot and Joshua Sterlin, "Steps towards a legal ontological turn: Proposals for law's place beyond the human," *Transnational Environmental Law* (Online First, 2021): 1–26; Mario Blaser, "Ontology and indigeneity: on the political ontology of heterogeneous assemblages," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 49–58; Mario Blaser, "Is another cosmopolitics possible?", *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 545–570; as well as Philippe Descola, "Cognition, perception, and worlding." *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 35, no. 3–4 (2020): 334–340; among others.

74. In this regard, Ochoa Espejo's latest piece shows how present day *pueblos*—which, she argues, are polities with direct ancestral ties to Mesoamerican altepemeh—derive and justify their existence through "the value of place-based mutual obligations." These obligations are rooted in the specific ecosystems they inhabit and therefore reflect the mutual responsibilities and connections that *pueblos* have with the environment. See Ochoa Espejo, "Territorial rights for individuals, states, or *pueblos*?," 95.

75. Lock and Nguyen, eds., *An Anthropology of Biomedicine,* 17–18; See also Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*; and Harding, ed., *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader;* among others.

76. Although it is possible to argue that there are also "multiple modernities." it would be difficult to deny the fact that there is one hegemonic form of modernity that overrides all others. This is so precisely because it presents itself as positing a "single all-encompassing reality." See John Law, "What's wrong with a one-world world?", *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 16 no. 1 (2015): 126–139. For the idea of "multiple modernities" as well as some critiques, see e.g. Gurminder Bhambra, "Historical sociology, modernity, and postcolonial critique," *American Historical Review* 116, no.

3 (2011): 653–662; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and modernity," *Boundary* 2, no. 20 (1993): 65–76; Enrique Dussel, *Filosofías del Sur. Descolonización y Transmodernidad* (Mexico City: Akal, 2015); Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities* (London: Routledge, 2002); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1987); Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Volker H. Schmidt, "Multiple modernities or varieties of modernity?", *Current Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2006): 77–97; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Bjørn Thomassen, "Anthropology and its many modernities: When concepts matter," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no.1 (2012): 160–178; Peter Wagner, "Successive modernities and the idea of progress: A first attempt," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 2 (2010): 9–24; Peter Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); among others.

77. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 12.
78. See Álvaro Enrigue, "The Curse of Cortés." For an analysis of the imbrications between nature and space under globalized capitalism, see Neil Smith, *Uneven Development. Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2008).
79. For an Indigenous perspective on disjuncture and political theory, see Yann Allard-Tremblay's "Braiding liberation discourses: Dialectical, civic and disjunctive views about resistance and violence," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 55, no. 2, 259–278, as well as his forthcoming work.
80. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 12.
81. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 3.
82. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land*, 24.
83. See e.g. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *Muerte a Filo de Obsidiana. Los Nahuas Frente a la Muerte* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016): and *Vida y Muerte en el Templo Mayor* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998); as well as Miguel León Portilla, *La Filosofía Náhuatl Estudiada en sus Fuentes* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006).
84. See e.g. Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005). See also Paja Faudree, *Singing for the Dead. The Politics of Indigenous Revival in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); as well as Roger Bartra, *La Jaula de la Melancolía. Identidad y Metamorfosis del Mexicano* (Mexico City: Debolsillo, 1987).
85. Matos Moctezuma, *Muerte a Filo de Obsidiana*, 13–14.
86. Matos Moctezuma, *Muerte a Filo de Obsidiana*, 14.
87. Matos Moctezuma, *Muerte a Filo de Obsidiana*, 13–14; 53–54.
88. León Portilla, *La Filosofía Náhuatl,* 204–217. See also Alfonso Caso*, El Pueblo del Sol* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 78.

89. See e.g. Matos Moctezuma, *Vida y Muerte en el Templo Mayor*, 59. It is also worth noting that in Nahua cosmogony, the Gods sacrificed themselves to allow human animals to live, which is partly why humans now must reciprocate.
90. León Portilla, *La Filosofía Náhuatl*, 45.
91. For more on Mexica cosmogony, see Caso, *El Pueblo del Sol*; as well as León Portilla, *La Filosofía Náhuatl*; and Matos Moctezuma, *Muerte a Filo de Obsidiana*; among others.
92. See Caso, *El Pueblo del Sol*, 78–79.
93. In this regard, see Matthew Restall's chapter entitled "Without mercy or Purpose," in Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, 281–332.
94. See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 181; Navarrete, *¿Quién Conquistó México?*, 101.
95. See Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, esp. chapter 11, 155–166.
96. See Carballo, *Collision of Worlds*, 181; as well as Navarrete, *¿Quién Conquistó México?*, 96–97.
97. See, for instance, Allan Greer, *Property and Dispossession. Natives, Empires and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 56.
98. Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 65.
99. Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire.*
100. Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*, 64.
101. In this regard see also Mathias Thaler, *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate Changed World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), esp. 146–167.
102. See Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, "Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2021): 360.
103. I here draw inspiration from the work of scholars like Juanita Sundberg, Annette Watson & Orville H. Huntington, as well as Kate Lloyd, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Laklak Burarrwanga & Bawaka Country. These scholars advocate for a shift away from situating "thought" within individual minds and towards human and more-than-human events. See Juanita Sundberg, "Decolonizing posthumanist geographies," *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 21, no.1, 2014, 33–47; Annette Watson and Orville H. Huntington, "They're *here*—I can *feel* them: the epistemic spaces of Indigenous and Western knowledges," *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2008, 257–281; and Kate Lloyd, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Laklak Burarrwanga, and Bawaka Country, "Reframing development through collaboration: towards a relational ontology of connection in Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 6 (2012): 1075–1094.
104. See Leigh Jenco, "Recentering Political Theory, Revisited: On Mobile Locality, General Applicability, and the Future of Comparative Political Theory," in Melissa Williams, ed., *Deparochializing Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 60–92.