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The “Greening” of Empire: The European Green Deal as the *EU first agenda*

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ABSTRACT

The recent past has seen the proposal of multiple ‘Green New Deals’ across geographies as a means to fight against the climate crisis and ecological breakdown. Of these, the European Green Deal- EGD represents the world’s first public commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions of at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Because the EGD plans to “transform the EU,” in this paper we examine how it fits within a historical continuum of colonial and neo-colonial relations. We argue that the EGD is the latest discursive strategy for the ‘greening’ of empire through four registers: (1) turning ecological crises into profitable opportunities; (2) portraying the EU as a ‘moral’ intervener; (3) building on a ‘green’ “will to improve”; and (4) securitizing and consolidating the empire. We find how the EU acts in key policy arenas of diplomacy, trade and investment leading to the ‘greening’ of the empire that ensures its continued economic and political leadership while fundamentally maintaining a status quo. We conclude with some reflections on the role of the EU to cede place to other possibilities of building anti-colonial ecologies.

1. Introduction

In the recent past, proposals for “Green New Deals” (GND) have emerged as comprehensive policy packages involving states, civil society, and private actors in the fight against climate change and ecological breakdown. In many cases, these Deals involve considerable public investment and focus on green jobs and dignified living conditions (Aronoff et al., 2019; Mastini et al., 2021). Around the world, ‘green’ Keynesian approaches to climate change have been advanced by policy makers and environmental groups alike, with contents being adapted to political contingencies and pressures (Ajl, 2021; Mastini et al., 2021; Tienhaara and Robinson, 2022). These Deals have not only been discussed in the Global North, with the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), the United States and Canada at the forefront of ‘green recovery’ policies, but have also been at the centre of policy proposals in China and South Korea (Leonard et al., 2021; Yoon, 2021) and

grassroots initiatives such as the [World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth \(22 April 2010\)](#), the [Green New Deal For Europe \(DiEM25, 2019\)](#), the [Latin American Pacto Ecosocial del Sur \(2020\)](#) and the [Red Deal \(Nation, 2021\)](#).

The EGD was presented as the *world’s first* public state-led commitment to *climate neutrality*. According to the European Commission, the EU Green Deal (henceforth EGD) aims to reduce EU net domestic production of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels and attain *climate neutrality* by 2050 (European Commission-EC, 2019a). For the European Commission (EC), the EGD is “... Europe’s structural response and new growth strategy that sets out ambitions to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy” (EC, 2019). The multi-pronged plan covers an array of policies, premised on the common goal of boosting ‘green’ economic growth (recently repackaged as ‘post-COVID recovery’), and its commitment for decarbonization, dematerialization and decoupling

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economic growth from carbon emissions and other ecological impacts. Above all, the EGD is about forging a more resource-efficient and technologically advanced EU economy that not only reinforces its position as a global economic leader, but also better distinguishes the bloc geopolitically from competing actors in a globalized world.

Despite the enthusiastic engagement, the mainstream focus on the EGD misses a consideration for the social and ecological effects that the promotion of “eco-conscious” economies in Europe implies elsewhere, particularly how they generate what [Zografos and Robbins \(2020\)](#) call “green sacrifice zones” located beyond the boundaries of Europe. Also missing is a serious engagement with the historical unevenness of Europe’s contribution to ecological breakdown as being inseparably twinned with its colonial legacies abroad and how such legacies are reproduced through a universal approach to a ‘green’ transition. In this article, we critically assess both its continuity with the colonial past and its global epistemic and material implications for the future. Particularly, we are interested in unpacking how non-European societies and economies are brought into the EGD’s radar as territories to be subjected to its ‘greener’ policymaking, trade and investment strategies.

While not aiming to reduce the EU’s ethical position to a homogenized and non-shifting prescription, we look at the EGD as a regime imbricated in colonial and neo-colonial motivations viewing peripheral countries and societies as policy deficient, climatically unambitious and in need of ‘capacity-building’ for sustainability and development ([Rutazibwa, 2010](#)). Our aim is to explore how the pro-growth orientation of the EGD reproduces a *colonial and capitalist ecology* by deepening the hegemony of resource imperialism and in greening a historically Euro-centered empire. By ‘empire’, we refer to the implementation of an economic, social, and cognitive order historically birthed through violent colonial subjugation by Western European powers, and subsequently constituted and defended by multinational corporations, multilateral trading and military arrangements, global financial and trade institutions, among others ([Hardt & Negri, 2000](#); [Wood, 2003](#)). Empire here also refers to the unspoken hegemony of the modernizing project, which involves the structural imposition of a universal Euro-centric system of knowledge ([Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2005](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021](#)). This manifests in the case of the EGD through the obfuscation of ecological crisis and climate debt, while foreclosing grounded social and political struggles, and the actors that work on their behalf, as new recipients of EU technical expertise.

In the next section, we describe the origins, design, and core elements of the EGD. In the third section, we identify four registers deployed in public discourses and policies that define the “greening” of empire by: (1) making ecological crises profitable opportunities; (2) portraying the EU as ‘moral’ intervener; (3) building on a ‘green’ will to improve; and (4) securitizing and consolidating economic interests. We complement each of these registers with specific examples drawn from the EGD policies. To do this, we discursively analyzed press releases, policies, statements, webinars and communications related to the EGD to elaborate a critique of three key policy arenas that underpin the EGD at a geopolitical level: ‘green’ diplomacy, ‘green’ financialization, and the ‘greening’ of trade and access to raw materials. We conclude by proposing questions for future research that reframe Green Deals in favour of alternative, anti-colonial ecologies.

2. EGD: origins, design and core elements

The EGD was presented in 2019 as the European Union’s hallmark for a comprehensive strategic package to prevent the planet from “being polluted and destroyed” ([EC, 2019a](#): 2). The EGD proposal was designed by a team led by Frans Timmermans as Executive Vice President of the EC for the EGD. It was presented as a communication to the European Parliament and adopted as a Joint Resolution by majority on January 15, 2020. ([European Parliament Press Release, 2020](#)). The Deal was supported by the parliamentary coalitions comprised of the center-right and majority party European People’s Party (EPP), the center-left and

second majority party Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the center pro-European with the third majority party: Renew, and the progressive forces coalition Greens/EFA ([Legislative Observatory of the European Parliament, 2020](#)). Contrary to other climate initiatives, parliamentarians from The Left did not support the Deal because of their criticism of carbon policies being reliant on market mechanisms. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group coalition mobilized against the EGD because of the possible implications on jobs, businesses and farms ([Stegrud, 2020](#)). One of the most contested aspects of the proposal revolved around establishing binding national targets in future energy legislation, which received a narrow majority of 51% of members supporting the targets and exposing a divide between conservative and progressive camps ([Europe Jacques Delors, Notre Europe Jacques Delors Notre Europe Vote Watch Europe, 2021](#)).

Although in purely legal terms the EGD is a communication by the EC—an instrument of soft-law—, its content, guidelines and targets inform a multiplicity of EU and national actions ([Sikora, 2021](#)) (See [Fig. 1](#) for a complete set of EGD policies). This means the EGD is not technically binding, but derivative laws will produce legal effects through implementation by each Member State. The key areas EGD Strategic Framework include: (1) Climate ambition for 2030 and 2050, which focuses on carbon pricing; (2) Clean, affordable and secure energy; (3) Industrial strategy for a clean and circular economy; (4) Sustainable and smart mobility; (5) Greening the Common Agricultural Policy/“Farm to Fork strategy”; (6) Preserving and protecting biodiversity; (7) Zero pollution ambition for a toxic free environment; (8) mainstreaming sustainability in all EU policies (including trade and foreign policy); (9) positioning the EU as a global leader, and (10) European Climate Pact ([EC, 2019a](#)). All measures involve a combination of EU and national actions, and heavily draw on market mechanisms.

Within these areas, specific Strategies, Action Plans, and Laws have been issued defining objectives and identifying more specific initiatives to achieve them, all under the paradigmatic umbrella of the Deal. So far, about 20 strategic documents have been adopted as part of the EGD Strategic Framework. Recent policies are the Circular Economy Action Plan (implemented on March 11, 2020), the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Farm to Fork Strategy (both implemented on May 20, 2020), the Action on Critical Raw Materials Supply (implemented on September 29, 2020) and the European Climate Law (implemented on 30 June 2021). Along with this, the EGD will require significant investments, with an estimated 260 billion euros a year (about 1.5% of EU, 2018 GDP) to achieve the 2030 climate and energy targets. Climate and environmental risks of these investments will require public and private to be integrated into the financial system, notably through the European Green Deal Investment Plan launched in 2020 ([EC 2019b](#)).

The EGD is not limited to Europe. It is also officially accompanied by climate diplomacy and the redefinition of international trade and carbon tariffs, and transnational investment relationships ([European Climate Foundation, n.d.](#)). The ‘global turn’ of the EGD allows the EU to reinvent itself, amidst competition from global actors, and deploy an “eco-friendly” narrative. Much in line with its foreign relations more generally, this allows the EU to inject “a sense of moral responsibility and ethical concern in all areas of its international relations as well as in the domestic affairs” of the countries it intervenes in ([Rutazibwa, 2010](#), p. 210). In the following section, we further assess how the EGD encompasses a distinctive set of narratives that are translated to a set of policies with specific material consequences beyond the EU’s borders.

3. The “greening” of empire

To understand the material and cognitive consequences of the EGD as a futuristic vision, it is essential to revisit what European moral standing and managerial agenda has historically meant for the rest of the world. In the course of over 500 years, the world has been driven by a European-initiated civilizational project fundamentally premised upon

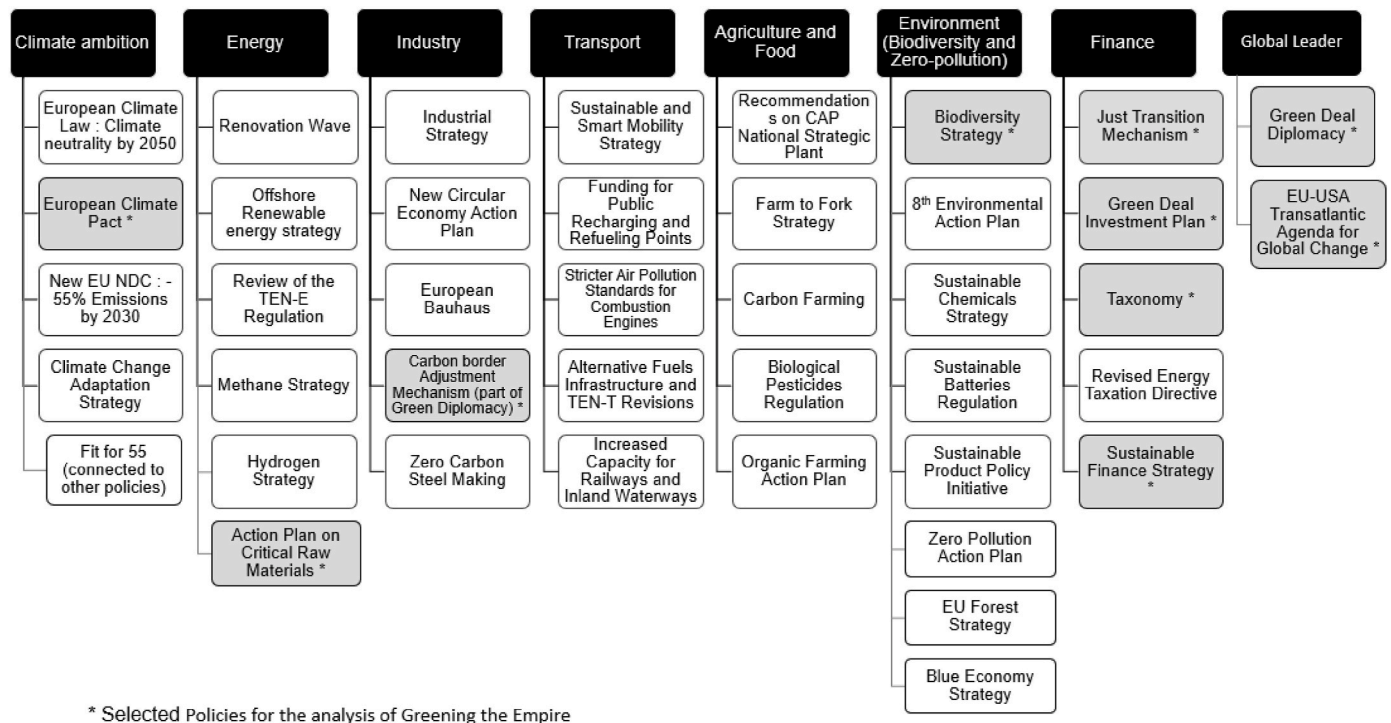


Fig. 1. Set of policies derived from the EGD.

capitalist value creation and circulation through colonization of lands, bodies, knowledge-systems, and imaginaries (Naylor et al., 2018; Quijano, 2000; Tzouvala, 2020). Galeano (1971) and Rodney (1972) both masterfully illustrated the ways that poor nations were deliberately exploited by European-US-centered rule in a concerted effort that combined asymmetrical power politics, cultural norms of what ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ refers to; the imposition of legal and institutional infrastructure as well as asymmetrical terms of economic trade policy. The European colonial and capitalist empire pushed a cultural and socio-economic shift that replicated universal truths about human-nature relations, whereby production systems centered on primitive accumulation and the exploitation for mass commodity production (Federici, 2014; Mies, 2001). To this end, the independence of former colonies to the European powers meant very little in terms of continuing the siphoning of wealth, labour, and knowledge from resource frontiers to be accumulated in European and North American urban centers (Ferdinand, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). It is this continuation of unequal exchange that severs the regenerative capacities of the planet and exacerbates ecological disorder (Hornborg, 2009).

Science and technological innovation have played a pivotal role in constructing this economic blueprint, while violently categorizing and subjugating Indigenous Peoples, women and children as slaves and underpaid workers (Galeano, 1971; Moore, 2015; Rodney, 1972). Analyses of material, energy, land, and labour flows around the world illustrate how high-income countries overwhelmingly continue to appropriate embodied labour and resources to generate, own and circulate monetary surplus today through uneven ecological exchange (Dorninger et al., 2021; Infante-Amate et al., 2020). It cannot be emphasized enough that this uneven relation is not simply attributable to some nations being better at accumulating surplus value; it is a by-design vestige of colonial exploits which continues to not just maintain but reinforce a capitalistic uneven development predicated on both white supremacy and patriarchy (Amin, 2009; Arboleda, 2020; Escobar, 1995).

At the same time, eurocentric hegemony acts as a foreclosure of alternative ways of being and thinking to manage or tweak existing economic models, but never to openly contest them, under two circumstances. The first is when the cheapness of resource inputs for

economic expansion is viewed as aspirational under the oft-claimed guise of “efficiency improvements.” The second is when ecological breakdown is recast as risk prevention (e.g. Scoones & Stirling, 2020, pp. 1–30) and perceived as a threat to the security of continuing an “imperial mode of living” (Brand & Wissen, 2017).

The design and implementation of the EGD inherits this eurocentric vision for the future of the world by building on the imposition of a renewed round of direct and indirect geopolitical power amidst global ecological collapse. On the one hand, the EU attempts to cement itself as the world’s climate leader. On the other hand, the EU willingly fails to seriously confront its own imperialistic institutional and economic baggage that deeply circumvents truly sovereign political projects the world over. By replicating its stance as global leader, colonial legacies and debates on climate/ecological debt and historical reparations are conveniently silenced. Instead, the EU opts to maintain these uneven relations in service of greenwashed notions like decarbonization, dematerialization, and decoupling economic growth from socio ecological impacts (Hickel & Kallis, 2020) - none of which have occurred in absolute terms (Haberl et al., 2020). We contend that by strategically overlooking colonial relations of power and ‘sacrifice zones’, these policies and actions reinforce invasive and ultimately anti-ecological logics, maintaining and reinforcing unequal development.

Recent studies have focused on how the EGD proposal reproduces racial and colonial injustices and suppresses alternative voices and proposals from within and beyond the EU by placing the demands of the subalterns beyond the realm of political possibility (Equinox, 2021; Samper et al., 2021). In this article, we discuss how the ‘greening’ of the empire takes form through a range of narratives and strategies that employ regulatory power, depend on geopolitical sanctions and exercise the soft power of moral standing to frame urgency and direct the response to address climate change. We describe these nuanced forms of legitimization for ‘greening’ empire through four registers in the rest of this section (see Fig. 2 for a summary of registers).

In characterizing these registers, we provide direct examples of how the EGD advances each in specific ways. While we have described the registers of ‘greening’ empire as being distinct categories with distinct examples, they more often function as a cohesive strategy within the

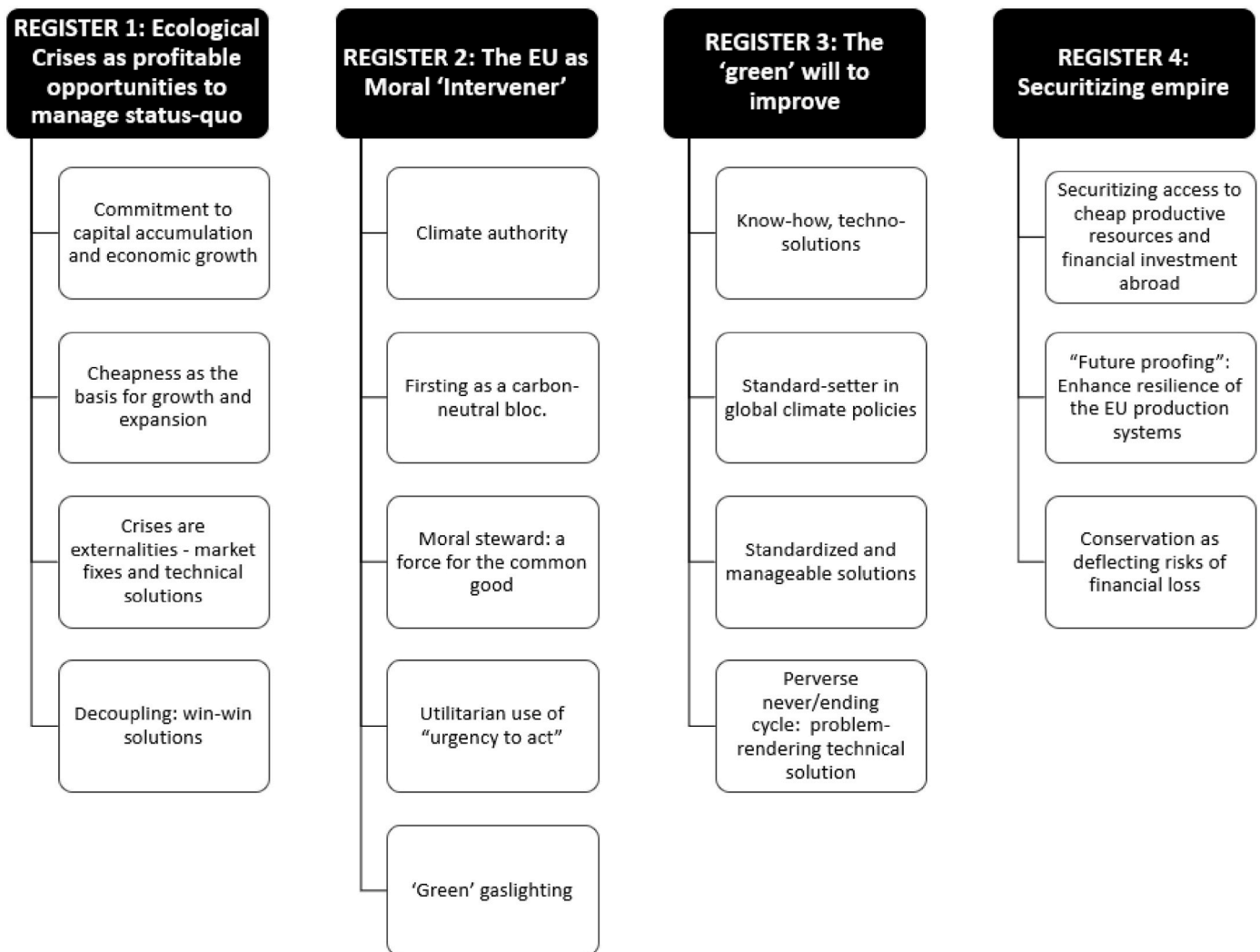


Fig. 2. The four registers of 'green' empire.

EGD. We draw upon secondary data and public quotations by EGD policy architects to illustrate the ways in which EGD attempts to 'green' the EU's influence in terms of *global trade, diplomacy, finance and access to raw materials*. We selected these policy areas because they reflect the four registers presented before and they are inspired by the geopolitical position of the EU in framing its relations to other societies and economies globally.¹ While our aim is not to discuss all components of the EGD, we illustrate how some of the Deal's principle programs replicate and reinforce the four registers of 'greening' empire, particularly in terms of their effects beyond the boundaries of the EU.

3.1. Ecological crises as profitable opportunities to manage status-quo

Attempts to respond to social and ecological injustices that are generated by a commitment to capital accumulation and economic growth are all too often translated into policies and actions that never actually interrogate the modernizing project itself. They merely aim at predicting, managing, and neutralizing crises in the name of enhancing the project's efficiency. Every new crisis that emerges from previous

¹ We consider international aid as another key aspect in defying international relations within the EGD. This area of analysis implies a large process of engagement with EU aid agencies that goes beyond the specific aims of this article.

rounds of managerial intervention serves as new profitable opportunities and the cycle continues *ad nauseum* (Ross, 2017).

Ecological crises are not simply emergent challenges, but the direct outcome of the colonial and capitalist project. Yet, these crises get strategically repackaged as isolated technical and thoroughly depoliticized externalities for humankind, particularly when they can be leveraged to generate new flows of surplus value and speculative returns on investment within preexisting, unquestioned and asymmetrical political and economic relations (Igoe et al., 2010). The dependence on "cheap nature" (Patel & Moore, 2018), and efforts to optimize (e.g. further cheapen) all inputs for the faster production of goods and services is rarely directly acknowledged as problematic (Moore, 2015). Indeed, it is the latter element of optimization and efficiency-orientation that has been recast as the "environmental-friendly" or "green" solution, when in fact, it is a requisite component to keep capital flowing. When the 'root causes' are dismissed (Marks, 2011), climate change from fossil fuel combustion, irreversible planetary tipping points, and the ongoing mass extinction are presented as a combination of public relations exercises and technical stop-gaps.

What remains deeply problematic is the belief that presumed 'external' socio-ecological effects offer opportunities to reinforce the relations of capitalist ecology that have invariably resulted in the ecological breakdown that the EGD claims to address (Selwyn, 2021). Despite the perverse circularity of how the EGD is rationalized, proponents of the Deal emphasize the "win-win" potential in which

economic growth can be decoupled from ecological and social impact. Yet, this “win-win” prophecy has remained in place for nearly 30 years as ecological breakdown has accelerated, extended from the concept of “sustainable development” in the early 1990s, to the “green economy” of the Rio+20 Convention in 2012, and to today’s eco-modernist “green transition”. In short, the climate emergency was supposed to change everything about how society should organize (Klein, 2014) yet has changed nothing (Gills & Morgan, 2021).

Financing for climate change adaptation and mitigation highlights how the environment has become a new frontier for private finance, which the EGD aims to set in motion. For instance, although the commitment to \$100 billion of climate funds per year adopted at the COP21 in Paris has never been respected, national and regional authorities alike have utilized their policy and regulatory powers to structure and uphold a new global market for ‘green and climate finance’ (EC, 2021f; Perry, 2021). The EU has been at the forefront of this endeavor and the EGD represents the policy umbrella under which multiple actions are undertaken in the establishment of this new global playing field for private investors, now organized in the European Green Deal Investment Plan (EGDIP) as a key component of the EGD (EC, 2020b).

The EGDIP was presented by the EC in early 2020 from the premise that sustainability requires significant investment in all economic sectors to interlink the policy objectives with the significant private financial resources available (EC, 2020c). The EGDIP includes a pluri-annual and multi-sectoral Public-Private-Partnership for the Green Transition aiming to utilize EU financial and regulatory capacity to attract more private funds (EC, 2020c). The quest to achieve sustainability thus translates to the notion that it is impossible to achieve the goal of building a “modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy” without the engagement of private capital. As such, EGDIP has become a regulatory and political platform to mainstream the role of global financial capital in the ‘green’ transition, a choice that engenders new opportunities for accumulation and to capture the value of untapped or underutilized wealth (Cerrato & Ferrando, 2020; Igoe et al., 2010).

This ‘blended’ approach to private and public financing reinforces the neoliberal ideology that there are insufficient public funds available and that some investments needed for the transition entail more risk to profits and growth-oriented portfolios than the private sector can bear alone. The discursive move towards ‘blended finance’ portends to the ways in which the role of the State is limited to that of facilitating private enterprise and showcasing its own entrepreneurial credentials in doing so (Mazzucato, 2013). Ultimately, the vision of the EGDIP shifts the political question of whether and how private financing is needed to the technical question of how to optimize private finance to shape the economic prospects of the EU (Amoore, 2014).

3.2. The EU as moral ‘intervener’

Greening the planet as a universalizing project offers a new means to showcase the EU as a moral ‘intervener’, or geopolitical steward for the common good to rid the world of emergent threats (Rutazibwa, 2010). Cognitive, discursive, and material imperial intervention have and continue to justify the issuance of an almighty rule in the name of general improvement of the uncivilized or uneducated (Koskenniemi, 2001). In doing so, the colonizer constructs a subordinated *other* and forces this *other* into an established framework and a specific social, religious, and cultural system of domination through moral superiority

(Said, 1978). For centuries, these acts were justified in the name of the *others’ incapacity* or *not-quite-there-yet* capacity to meet responsibilities expected by their more fully modern human benefactors (Mbembe, 2019). Extending this logic to today’s ecological crises, the presumed “firsting²” strategy of the EGD as an attempt by the EU to be the world’s *first* to legislate carbon neutrality and zero pollution by 2050 is invariably linked with its attempt to generate moral credo to justify its proactive stance as a ‘force for good’ while positioning others as continuously in need of “catching up” (Rutazibwa, 2010).

In ‘greening’ the empire, EU moral authority is intrinsically linked with universalism. Generation of wisdom of non-Eurocentric traditions that have fused thought, theory, and spirit with place and physical embodiments have been consciously supplanted throughout the history of the modernizing project (Murdock, 2018; Watts, 2013). Part of European exceptionalism creates a practice of hierarchization that dictates the rules of the game for the global climate fight, fomenting the idea that ‘we are all part of the same boat in the climate fight’, yet remaining blind to historical injustices in the name of “pragmatic/feasible solutions” and the need to “move forward”. The EU’s moral authority as the ‘intervener’ is by no means benevolent. The seemingly benevolent and innocent posture of the EU masks its larger historical responsibility for the ecological consequences of modern development felt most severely by people least responsible for them (Sultana, 2022).

In what we term “green gaslighting”,³ formal recognition of environmental crises and their “solutions” get reframed by those actively directing the very colonial and capitalist economic processes that have historically led to these crises, and in ways that positively reinforce the language, logics, and standing of the perpetrator. Those who have suffered across many generations from the violent dehumanizing and socio-ecologically destructive legacy of the perpetrator(s) actions are now to be schooled with (green) “solutions”, permitting the perpetrator(s) to emerge as the moral saviour and the world’s most ecologically distinguished (Chakrabarty, 1992). Uncomfortable discussions around systemic failures, ecological/climate debt, and the need for reparations, are eschewed in favour of reinforcing European exceptionalism, urgency, a TINA (‘there is no other alternative’) stance, as well as resigning to “moving on” from a regrettable past.

A clear example of the EU as ‘moral intervener’ comes in the way the EGD influences global politics through ‘Green Deal’ *diplomacy*. From its conception, the EGD aims at influencing decisions of foreign governments by organizing a joint effort of foreign policy and global governance in creating mechanisms of *soft regulatory power* for climate response. To build up climate diplomacy, the current president of the EC, Ursula von der Leyden, proposed a Geopolitical Commission to develop a “coherent strategy for the external aspects of the Green Deal.” (Leonard et al., 2021). The conclusions of this Commission establish the need to implement an external policy to fast-track the global energy transition through EU energy diplomacy. It does so by promoting energy-efficiency and renewable technologies and discouraging investments in fossil-fuel-based infrastructure in third countries, “unless they are aligned with an *ambitious climate neutrality pathway*, and will support international efforts to reduce the environmental and greenhouse gas impact of existing fossil fuel infrastructure” (Council of the European Union, 2021, emphasis ours). Incidentally, it is the EU who has the upper hand in determining what counts as an “ambitious climate neutrality pathway.”

² “Firsting” is described by Liboiron (2021) as publicly broadcasting being the “first” to discover something, do, or go somewhere. It is a form of virtue signaling that erases other experiences and histories as a means to gain greater standing or acclaim. Here firsting refers to the EU being the frontrunner of legislating climate action.

³ Gaslighting refers to a type of manipulation that successfully tricks the target into questioning their own perceptions of reality, replacing their actual experiences with those of the manipulator.

After the Trump administration left a void in global ‘green leadership’, the EU was quick to cement Europe as a leading steward in global climate policy and to reap the benefits of first-mover effects for its green interventions. As the following quote from the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), a European think tank focusing on the development of EU policies attests:

“The EU is a global leader in climate negotiations ... climate and environmental action have already contributed to a European ‘voice in the world’ and have been a part of *soft power*. It is also an example of a leading role for the Union in multilateral debates and institution-building, and of the global regulatory power of the EU.” (IEEP, 2021, emphasis ours).

This position alludes to the ways the EU assumes a “proven ability to be a global environmental and sustainability standard-setter and, through that, a market creator” for sustainable practices with EU’s trading partners (IEEP, 2021). The assumption is also underlined by the EU commitment to be the largest contributor to public climate finance, to “scale up the mobilisation of international climate finance” (EU Council, 2021, p. 5).

With increasing expectations for carbon neutrality in the EU, a key point of the EGD diplomacy is the EC’s concern about private enterprises transferring their production to countries with less strict regulatory frameworks for carbon emissions, resulting in carbon leakage and falling short in achieving the goal of reduced emissions. To address such concern, the EGD foresees the inclusion of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a carbon tariff on selected EU imports from carbon-intensive industries (e.g. steel, cement, chemicals, energy) with lower standards than those of the EU (EC, 2021i).

While avoiding carbon leakage through the CBAM is one of the main strategies (EC, 2021i), it is not the only intention of the CBAM. CBAM is a market mechanism whose implementation aims to make sure that international partners “share the same ambition as the EU” and will not “frustrate the efforts of the EU” (EC 2019b,; 6). According to the IEEP, its crucial goal is to “level the playing field for EU and non-EU producers” (IEEP, 2020). The EU’s concern is that the “lack of ambition” by countries outside the EU (EC, 2021i) may jeopardize the efforts undertaken at the EU level. Put differently, a “level playing field” for the EU acts is an egregious instance of ‘green’ gaslighting whereby colonial exploitation and reinforced EU-led patterns of “underdevelopment” of ex-colonies are conveniently converted as equal trading partners when they adhere to the EU’s self-defined climate ambitions. Considering that the EGD claims multiple times how the EU is a global leader and mentions a just transition with a ‘leave no one behind’ clause (EC-European Commission, 2019a; EC 2020e), the intertwined international relations of the EGD make the expected beneficiaries of the green transition to be within EU member states only.

Furthermore, the CBAM operates through a process of categorization and the creation of hierarchies. According to the IEEP (2020, October 27), “the Commission will need to carefully evaluate which third country climate policies it deems comparable to EU climate policies, or which developing countries are eligible to receive exemption so that the CBAM is not perceived as an unfair trade measure.” Citing Davidson Ladly (2012), the IEEP (Blot et al., 2020, p. 5) states: “The CBAM indirectly extends the EU’s climate policy beyond its own borders, potentially conflicting with the principle of “common but differentiated and historical responsibilities” as enshrined in the UNFCCC treaty and Paris Agreement.” Furthermore, if the EU is to “carefully evaluate” which third countries’ policies are comparable (or not) to EU climate policies, it remains unclear as to how this can be accomplished in a transparent and democratic manner.

It is expected that CBAM will *mainly* cover carbon-intensive sectors for the emissions of the production of raw materials but would exclude downstream manufacturing or the in-use phase of products (Blot et al., 2020). This means that the CBAM is not considering decarbonization of the whole value chain and is primarily shifting the burden to resource

extractive countries. Consequently, the carbon intensive stage of added value to products are cushioned from the effects of the policy. Furthermore, even though it is expected that CBAM will help reduce carbon emissions inside and outside the EU, its reduction only represents a small percentage of global carbon emissions (UNCTAD United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2021). Europe, therefore, shifts its responsibility for achieving carbon-neutrality of raw materials production to countries it depends upon within the supply chain. This perverse logic adopts an eco-modernist environmentalism in which environmental concerns are conveniently used against rights to sovereign development in the South (Ajl, 2021, p. 45).

3.3. The ‘green’ will to improve

Several authors have discussed how environmental policies have become post-political managerial stop-gap measures designed to technically tweak rather than entertain structural transformation (Ajl, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2010). Li (2007) uses Foucauldian and Gramscian analysis to explain how forms of power are not always coercively imposed but result from the ‘will to improve’ what is presumed to be “common sense” rational measures sedimented as a kind of manufactured consent to a singular interpretation of reality. In the context of manifold ‘Green Deal’ proposals across the world, the EU’s “green” *will to improve* operates by determining the scope of a problem (i.e. diagnosis, prescription) that needs to be fixed or improved and is always linked to an identifiable solution that comes from within its own rhetorical and political toolbox (i.e. governed by specific scientific expertise and technical know-how), never questioning whether existing power hierarchies might need to be considered. The self-defined role of experts is the one that knows what’s best for other people and claims specialized and privileged know-how on how people *should* live and behave (Li, 2007). The intention of this approach is not for overt domination but to facilitate action and direct change in specific ways that invariably erase recourse to alternatives. Subsequently, social and ecological problems and solutions are “rendered technical”, through a set of practices that make crises legible and manageable, with techniques devised for directing solutions in specific ways under the illusion of societal transformation from potential threats (Myers et al., 2018).

‘Rendering solutions technical’ legitimizes the centrality of a scientifically sanctioned authority and provides it with the standing to diagnose deficiencies in others. The knowledge systems of ‘non-experts’ is seen as that of people who are only capable of improvement through the guidance of expert direction, or whose non-expert views can be put to better use in direct function of a more “holistic” form of expert knowledge (Lave, 2012). Empire advances through an outward expansion of the frontiers, whereby “receivers are expected to integrate and assimilate Western realities as opposed to primarily focusing on local, internal needs or preference” (Rutazibwa, 2010, p. 219).

The know-how of European expertise commands new global policies by *standard-setting* for regulatory frameworks in uneven geopolitical relations (trade, investment, finance, tariffs, sustainable norms). Ultimately, when fragmented interventions are (inevitably) revealed to be unsuccessful, affected groups and jurisdictions get blamed for their inability to improve their own living conditions. The moralizing weight of this blame and its psychological effects is what we have referred to earlier as ‘green’ gaslighting. The perverse consequences of trying to technically-fix socioecological “externalities” generates a never-ending cycle of emergent “externalities” associated with failed interventions, accumulating in highly unpredictable and unequal ways. This cycle circumscribes any and all attempts to confront uneven relations of power, essentially demanding then that the poor are “to pay the cost of empire as a way of life.” (Ajl, 2021, p. 9).

One way in which the EGD exemplifies a ‘green will to improve’ is via the Green Taxonomy Regulation (e.g. EC, 2020a; EC 2021d; EC 2021e; TEG, 2020), which aims to consolidate the EU’s regulatory power to set “expert” standards and demarcate what is considered

'green' and how this influences EU finance. The Green Taxonomy Regulation is a EU legislative act that empowers the EC with the help of an ad hoc Technical Expert Group (TEG) on Sustainable Finance, to produce a selected list of "environmentally sustainable" sectors, establish technical criteria for meeting environmental objectives and define 'sustainability benchmarks'. This process has raised legitimate criticism regarding the eligibility criteria for representativeness, given that the vast majority of the TEG members and the overall EU sustainable finance expert group belong to sectors that advocate for a stronger role of private financial markets (Ferrando & Tischer, 2020). The first taxonomy list produced by the EC (2021c) is a technical exercise that defines what it means to be 'sustainable' (or not) in the framework of the EGD: the practices and activities that appear on the list normalize selected practices in an effort to 'improve' future economic growth prospects of the EU and in the investment plans of private actors within Europe and abroad (EC 2020d; EC 2021a).

In line with register 1 on viewing ecological crises as profitable opportunities, the Green Taxonomy Regulation is embedded in narratives of an 'urgent need for private funding', 'net-zero carbon emissions', 'decoupled growth' and 'carbon neutrality' as both threats and opportunities. In particular, the invocation of urgency and the need for investments has resulted in the adoption of a depoliticized definition of sustainability defined by separating a so-called "environment" from social justice and subsequently being achieved in relation to how much it contributes to economic growth. Put differently, sustainability is about creating the conditions for generating new 'green' investments that can land liquidity (equity or debt) and from which rent can be obtained. The result is that social and cultural components are rendered as technical details to be managed, while the historical responsibilities of financial actors in the production of new commodities are dismissed.

Furthermore, the Taxonomy Regulation is not limited to EU projects or EU investors. On the contrary, it includes any economic activity abroad that aims to receive 'sustainable' financing from a European investor or any business that aims to report its practices as 'sustainable'. The bloc's financial and diplomatic powers are then deployed to universalize sustainability categories rooted in a specific episteme of decoupling and net-zero growth as defined by a limited number of EU 'experts'. Once these lines of 'green' arbitration and good governance are drawn, the role of the EU as the first provider and first recipient of Foreign Direct Investment in the Global South becomes par for the course. Despite already existing definitions and categorizations of 'sustainability' in these third countries, EU capital that follows the EGD will have a commanding role in claiming authority in setting the ultimate standard of what kind of 'sustainability' matters in its push to establish a supposed 'green level playing field'. Investments in afforestation, reforestation and forestry conservation as defined in the Commission delegated regulation 2021 (EC, 2021h), but also in the production of heat/cool from bioenergy (wood), the acquisition and ownership of building, carbon capture and storage, along with tens of other 'green' activities contained in the technical documents (including gas and nuclear power plants) may be realized across the globe in the name of the EGD, its parameters and objectives. A list defined by a limited group of 'experts' and adopted by the EU institutions may thus have profound material repercussions in the lives and territories of the Global South, likely to be the sacrifice zones where green investments are realized, and the reproductive capacity of ecosystems appropriated into private profit.

3.4. Securitizing and consolidating empire

Resounding interest to address climate change and ecological breakdown by the EU's ruling class and the corporate sector that bankrolls them is not a surprise. Securitizing the empire implies sustaining the conditions that both expand the commodity frontier and enhance the resilience of capitalist production systems from ecological risks. The frequent use of the words "risk", "threats", and "emergency" when describing ecological breakdown in EU policy documents is the

outcome of a scramble to maintain growth forecasts, ensure "just-in-time" global trade and same-day deliveries, sustain, and reinforce existing built infrastructure and other asset classes. It also serves to displace blame from an increasingly agitated European populace in an era where climate impacts are becoming ever-more palpable. As a result, the accurate "emergency" and "urgency" stance of ecological breakdown is strategically instrumentalized to frighten people into accepting soft-power initiatives framed by technical experts working in service of preserving the empire.

By framing the alleged problem as a security issue, securitization can be understood as the conservation of 'capitalist' nature and the practices of dehumanization and ecological simplification that accompany it. This means framing problems, identifying stakeholders, and proposing solutions that preserve uneven relations of power by "future proofing" or enhancing the resilience of (and thus the continuation of cheap conditions for) capitalist production systems. Furthermore, it also puts forward Europe's interest in securitizing the lives of (European) people by recognizing the "intrinsic link between climate change and security and defense" and the importance of "maintaining and strengthening the energy security and resilience of the EU and its partners" (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 9).

By securitizing the empire, ecological consequences are merely external risks to be neutralized and absorbed into the primacy of imperial overtures (Ferdinand, 2019). Nature conservation is repackaged in financial terms in line with a recognition that biodiversity loss is a "top-five" risk to the global economy according to the World Economic Forum. Globally, the threat of financial loss from biodiversity (i.e. life-sustaining relationships of non-human species) is framed to the tune of US\$44 trillion and harnessed to justify the importance of the EU's commitment to conserve 30% of its territory (and in line with a global 30% conservation coverage goal) by 2030 through protected area conservation (EC, 2021g).

'Securitizing empire' to maintain and reinforce US-EU hegemony is evident in the way that 'greening' is strategically employed, and in the roll-out of the EGD. In joining forces with its main geopolitical partner, linked to the EGD, the EC put forward a new EU-USA Transatlantic Agenda for Global Change in December 2020, summarized through the following joint communication:

"Today, our combined global power and influence remains unrivalled. We are home to nearly a billion people and are the two largest blocs of advanced democracies. We account for about a third of the world's GDP and trade, and 60% of foreign direct investment. This combined power and influence is indispensable to anchor global cooperation in the 21st century – whether it be on health, security, climate, trade and technology, or on the *multilateral rules-based order*. Our joint commitment is essential in a world where authoritarian powers seek to subvert democracies, aggressive actors try to destabilise regions and institutions, and closed economies exploit the openness our own societies depend on." (EC, 2020b, p. 1, emphasis ours).

The joint agenda specifically proposes that both power blocks work together in setting ambitious global proposals for net-zero emissions by 2050 and lead the fight against deforestation and protection of oceans. The quote both recognizes the "unrivaled" power of the EU and the USA and their categorical dismissal of competing authoritarian powers as a means to consolidate efforts and manage global risks. By leveraging 'greening' to secure their interests, the EGD contributes in invisibilizing the historical legacies of imperialism and colonial oppression that have generated their "unrivaled" and "combined global power". EU global leadership, in alliance with the US, means claiming the legitimacy to normalize the geopolitical posturing of "green" technical expertise that less developed countries could benefit from, including internally within its own member states (Skjærseth, 2021). As such, the EU-USA entente are attempting to redefine the rules of the game as standard setters in global green diplomacy. This is evident in the need to work together on emissions trading, carbon pricing, taxation, and frameworks for

sustainable finance (EC, 2020b).

The analysis of the EU's 'green' responses to global social and environmental crises reflect securitization of the empire contextualized within global competition for strategic resources and through its need to secure investment of EU companies abroad. Indeed, access to key natural resources is of utmost importance for EU security as its transition to carbon neutrality is based on internal extraction as well as an expected transformation of the trading relations between the EU and the rest of the world (European Commission, 2020f). The EU-28 trade is one of the largest importers of raw materials (ores and intermediate products) from abroad and is currently in need of securing a steady supply of raw materials (Ankersmit & Partiti, 2020). Indeed, mineral extraction has steadily increased in the last decade and is forecasted to keep growing with the constant demand for energy transitions (Ayuk et al., 2020). Raw materials are typically extracted from key primary-producers with whom the EU has been negotiating or renegotiating several free trade agreements (FTA). These have included the EU-Chile agreements, the EU-Mercosur agreement, and the EU-Indonesia agreement. In these negotiations, "sustainable" extraction is at the core of the FTAs in securing access to natural resources for the European energy transition.

Securing access for EU investors to mineral deposits and other raw materials is also a key element in EU-FTAs. Yet, EU corporations seek to optimize raw material for commodity production while preventing domestic regulation-setting for working conditions or job creation at the site of extraction. In a recent report on the EU-FTAs under negotiation with Chile and Australia, Ankersmit and Partiti (2020) critically analyzed the draft texts made public on the provisions to raw materials. The authors explain that the agreements have an "almost exclusive focus on trade liberalization commitments over trade regulation" and suggest that there is a "separation of economic interest from social and environmental interests in raw material extraction" (p. 11). In the mining sector for example, once a deposit is opened for extraction, it becomes an open bid for all EU corporations. Accordingly, FTAs infringe states' sovereign decisions for economic development and industrialization by imposing restrictions on the ability of exporting nations to add-value to raw materials. Put differently, they demand exporting nations to export raw materials cheaply to the EU.

Despite historically having a *carte blanche* for resource extraction, Western European nations are now economically profited off of disciplining economic protectionism to ensure "free and fair markets" that work in their favour (Nelson & Bigger, 2021). Moreover, the EU requires new strategies to (re)assert its hegemony in the face of growing competitors. "Greening" precisely serves this role; it permits protectionism to be jointly justified in the name of acting on a global climate emergency while simultaneously maintaining control over new and emerging markets by disadvantaging emerging economies for their incapacity to be as "green" as the EU is (Mehling et al., 2019; Pasgaard et al., 2017; Zachmann & McWilliams, 2020).

The provisions negotiated in the FTAs, together with carbon tariffs such as the CBAM, illustrate how the empire of carbon-neutrality is reinforced through technical mechanisms of trade imposition. While EU-FTAs get pegged to the condition of primary producers being restricted from adding value to materials exported to Europe and to capitulate to the unfair historical advantage of Europe's industrializing capacities, the CBAM directly punishes non-EU nations due to its carbon-intensive extractive economies in the name of decarbonizing production and "going green". The dependency on cheap labour and raw material as the very foundation of what 'green' technological development requires becomes inconsequential under the terms and conditions of trade demanded by Europe.

The 'global green agenda' for a 'green' transition generates financial incentives to establish new territories of extraction under the guise of "ecological consciousness". However, the production of "green" as a process of extraction and "ecological" as relational responsibility have been deliberately confused and the consequences could not be more fatal. Voskoboynik and Andreucci (2021) describe the new strategies of

intensifying production under the guise of 'greening' mineral extraction, while a report by GRAIN (2021) on digital agriculture highlights the decreasing autonomy that both farmers and non-human kin have to escape production logics under the guise of "climate-smart" agriculture strategies similarly proclaimed to be "greener." As Zografos and Robbins (2020) claim, the cost-shifting of harmful socio-environmental impacts from economic production away from Europe "is a pervasive rather than exceptional practice for production systems oriented toward increasing profit margins" (p. 544).

4. Conclusions

Pre-defining "solutions" that shift risks onto non-European societies and territories upholds a common historical thread in the development of Western Europe that fuses socio-ecological breakdown with racialized oppression. As described above, the EGD imposes itself on populations around the world through a discursive moral exceptionalism that necessarily puts both non-European labour and nature to work for its own realization. Yet, the EGD is oblivious to this impact, and more broadly to the power wielded by transnational corporations to shape supply and finance governance. In doing so, it works foreclosing cognitive, material and political spaces for alternatives.

Although critical, our aim is not to condemn European efforts for green transitions, but to contextualize the geopolitical implications of its narratives as embedded within historically colonial relations, globalized capitalism, and its future material implications for ecological homogenization and dehumanization. In our view, there is a need to destabilize assumptions being made through the EGD. Such destabilization requires dismantling the colonial structures of power while recognizing that the inherited (stolen) wealth from colonized peoples has always and continues to enable reproductions of cultural, political and technical superiority for Western Europe. In its current ahistorical form, the EU's stance as a 'force for good' -even with the best intentions-works simultaneously as a mechanism of erasure of its historical responsibilities towards reparative justice and dismissal of alternative futures beyond the domination of Europe and its sphere of influence. We do not suggest the EU does not have a role to play in an anti-colonial transition; on the contrary, deep processes of disassociation with colonial habitus will require significant commitment at the heart of the empire. To do so requires a genuine commitment from European actors to prioritize cultural, economic and territorial sovereignty, significant restructuring of production and consumption, as well as reparations aligned to historical ecological debt.

Europe could seize the opportunity of an EGD with emancipatory potential to cede place in the articulation of alternative visions of the future with clear historical responsibilities for global ecological crises as repercussions of five centuries of intertwined colonial and capitalist development. Such a Green Deal would do more than acknowledge generic responsibilities but establish targeted actions to hold political and corporate actors accountable for their historical and ongoing actions justified in the name of development. At the same time, such a Deal would need to be led by grassroots movements and organized struggles that hold economic powers like the EU and connected corporations liable for their actions. It would clearly define actionable justice-based public policies and commensurate forms of reparation. It would require much more than re-distributing financial resources, but be premised on setting anti-colonial ecologies in motion through: a) facilitating (but not intervening in) culturally and economic sovereign socio-ecological transformations in the Global South, b) engaging in material transfers of land back to Indigenous peoples and dispossessed peasant and pastoralist communities, c) re-centering invisibilized or erased knowledge systems; and d) defending abolitionist demands to end racialized state-sanctioned violence on migrants and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities.

Declaration of competing interest

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I confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed.

I confirm that I have given due consideration to the protection of intellectual property associated with this work and that there are no impediments to publication, including the timing of publication, with respect to intellectual property. In so doing I confirm that I have followed the regulations of our institutions concerning intellectual property.

I understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the Editorial process (including Editorial Manager and direct communications with the office). I confirm that I have provided a current, correct email address which is accessible by the Corresponding Author and which has been configured to accept email from (d.r.velaalmeida@uu.nl).

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