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ABSTRACT

Contemporary postcolonial urban geographies aim to challenge dominant knowledge production by providing a more in-depth understanding of the frontiers of capital reproduction. This article explores extractive frontiers in the Amazon through the lens of Rent Gap Theory, introducing the concept of the *Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap* (APRG) as a means of integrating political economy with postcolonial thought. The APRG is empirically developed using a comparative framework across three cases of extended urbanization in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Each case is shaped by distinct trajectories of extractive economies, contestations over urbanization, and the formation of indigenous subjects. Employing spatial-historical and ethnographic methods, the research examines how rent gaps are produced and resisted at the edges of capital expansion. In doing so, it challenges dominant urban theories through postcolonial critique and broadens the conceptual vocabulary of urban frontiers and extended urbanization by incorporating discourses on indigenous urban territorialization.

Introduction: an Amazonian contribution to critical urban theory

Debates between Marxist and postcolonial thought have intensified in recent scholarship and often appear polarized and irreconcilable (Kapoor, 2018). Postcolonial critiques often view Marxist theories, which were developed in the Global North, as universalizing frameworks that undermine epistemic diversity. In urban geography, for instance, this tension is evident in critiques of concepts such as gentrification and planetary urbanization, which are accused of overlooking theoretical contributions from the Global South (Parnell & Robinson, 2012). Conversely, Marxist scholars often criticize postcolonial approaches for their complicity with multicultural neoliberalism. They argue that the integration of relational ontologies and pluriversalism distracts from class struggle at the frontiers of capital (Swyngedouw & Ernstson, 2018).

Drawing on ongoing debates in critical urban theory and the intersection of political economy and postcolonial thought (Hart, 2018; Horn, 2018), this article presents a

theoretical framework that promotes the decolonization of urban geography. It does so by exploring how relational ontologies can sharpen our understanding of capitalist urbanization frontiers, while also engaging with Latin American approaches on extractive land rent. Simultaneously, we explore how the lens of class struggle may provide new insights for postcolonial theory, particularly when examined through the dynamics of territorial mobility and the resulting ontological conflicts that arise from them.

The comparative analysis of three contrasting cases of IIRSA-induced urbanization in the Ecuadorian Amazon[1] contributes to the development of the *Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap* (APRG) as our central conceptual tool, an exercise in what Roy (2016a) terms "historical difference" within postcolonial theorization. The APRG provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how uneven development and extended urbanization produce contestation against dispossession. In Providencia, the construction of a multimodal port as part of the transnational infrastructure corridor drives urban land incorporation, met by imaginative indigenous strategies that successfully prevent the foundation of a rent gap. In Puyo, urban planning designed to attract middle-class investment seeks to erase a plurinational peri-urban neighborhood, leading to demands for indigenous territorial claims based on collective ownership and a rejection of commodified land markets. In Tena, meanwhile, mining concessions threaten the social and economic integration of peri-urban indigenous communities that rely on spa tourism. This has triggered a response of renewed territorial and community claims, and political mobilization by urban indigenous actors.

However, our analytical ambition extends beyond a case study approach. Rather than focusing on local particularities, which are often dismissed as non-theoretical, or advancing global generalizations that risk reproducing colonialist logics, the article adopts a comparative perspective that seeks to generate insights through critical dialogue (Nijman, 2015). The theoretical discussion invites a reconsideration of Neil Smith's Rent Gap Theory (Smith, 1979, 1987) alongside more recent efforts to conceptualize planetary rent gaps (Slater, 2017). At the same time, it contributes to the provincialization of urban theory by examining how rent gaps are produced and contested at extractive frontiers in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Gillespie & Mercer, Forthcoming; Sheppard et al., 2013). This comparative approach seeks to move beyond traditional interpretations of rent gap struggles, rooted in Harvey and Marx's conception capital circulation, in which the cycle is completed by converting the commodity into monetary capital (Harvey, 2010). Instead, we focus on ontological contestations that challenge both the formation and closure of rent gaps, thereby obstructing the realization of capital at its frontiers. These struggles open what Wyly (2023) describes as "portals into multidimensional transformations of space and time produced through diverse, competing moral claims to the benefits of urban life".

Dialogues between political economy and postcolonial thought – A theoretical framework for understanding rent from the frontiers of capital

Rent Gap Theory remains a significant and versatile theoretical approach within contemporary critical urban studies (Christophers, 2022; Gray & Kallin, 2023). It has been the subject of continuous debate and reinterpretation, including in relation to the paradigm of planetary urbanization, which has recently reshaped debates in the field (Slater, 2017). Although Rent Gap Theory and class-based analysis have at times drawn criticism from

postcolonial scholars, the concept is increasingly being applied to examine urban processes in cities across the Global South (Gillespie, 2020; Lees et al., 2016). Notably, it has been expanded to contexts where classical perspectives encounter apparent contradictions, thereby expanding its theoretical scope.

In this context, our framework aims to extend Rent Gap Theory, further by integrating insights from political economy and postcolonial theory. This is achieved by formulating the *Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap* (APRG), consisting of four core dimensions: *(i)* the constitution of rent through extractive mechanisms; *(ii)* commons configured through discourses and practices spanning territorial boundaries; *(iii)* migration and territorial mobility as integral to class struggle; and *(iv)* relational ontologies to understand the limits of rent gap realization.

Rent Gap Theory: a view from the Amazon

Our point of departure is the substantial contribution of Marxist theory to the analysis of neoliberal urbanization. David Harvey's "*Limits to Capital*" and the broader debates on uneven geographical development, alongside with Neil Smith's "Rent Gap Theory", provide a solid framework for understanding the spatialisation of capital through its internal contradictions, and for recognizing urbanization as a central dynamic within these processes (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1984, 1987). The interplay between differentiation and homogenization is particularly relevant for peri-urban areas, triggering processes of devaluation and subsequent revaluation (Slater, 2017; Smith, 1979). In this context, suburban and extra-urban agricultural land emerges as a spatial fix, absorbing capital when central areas undergo devaluation (Porter, 2010). The state plays a central role in enabling this logic by shaping land use, legal regimes and investment, especially in the Global South (Janoschka et al., 2014; Krijnen, 2018). In recent years, financialisation has further intensified this dynamic, reinforcing trends towards spatial homogenization on a planetary scale (Bosma & van Doorn, 2022).

The Amazon has increasingly been analysed within this paradigm of planetary urbanization, especially with regard to urban expansion and the emergence of rent gaps (Kanai, 2014; Wilson & Bayón, 2015). From a Global South perspective, the new frontiers of urbanization and their associated rent gaps are closely linked to dominant modes of capital accumulation through land rent derived from commodities exports (Coronil, 1997; Echeverría, 2011). Ove the past two decades, state-led and transnational extractivism in Latin America has substantially reduced the institutional and infrastructural barriers to urbanization in the Amazon. Consequently, academic interventions have emerged that seek to reframe Rent Gap Theory in the context of extractive frontier urbanism (Burchardt & Dietz, 2014; Svampa, 2012). These approaches are an important step in theorizing from the Global South, foregrounding historical difference as a core principle for understanding global urban transformation rather than rejecting general processes (Roy, 2016b; Sheppard et al., 2013).

Territorial subjects "in movement" against the realisation of the rent gap

In Latin American Marxist literature, class struggle is often said to concern claims to evolving rent rather than efforts to subvert their underlying logics. Contestation over

the realization of rent gaps is therefore rooted in a battle for access to spaces that are being transformed for capital accumulation (Bartra, 2014; Echeverría, 2000). According to Rent Gap Theory, class struggle is inherent in the structural violence of urban transformations driven by capital, which primarily manifests as the displacement of "popular classes" from urban environments (Janoschka & Sequera, 2016; Slater, 2017). Consequently, struggles over housing and the right to the city are less linked to the sphere of production and more to the realization of capital. This gives rise to contestations that are rooted in everyday practices, particularly in popular contexts in the Global South (Caldeira, 2017; Zibechi, 2012).

Such struggles are closely tied to the idea of producing "the commons" as an alternative to the commodification of everyday life. Housing and the symbolic and material control over space thus become central arenas for enacting these commons in practice, challenging new enclosures and processes of privatization (Dardot & Laval, 2019; Hardt & Negri, 2011). Across Latin America, indigenous movements and other urban-popular actors have driven this struggle for the commons, making "territories" a central political category. In doing so, they have established unique institutional frameworks to protect and manage alternative spatial logics (Galafassi, 2018; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009).

In the peripheries of Latin American cities, cycles of financialisation have altered the spatial position of popular classes by affecting urban and agricultural land rents. These processes have also intensified rural-to-urban migrations (Schiavo et al., 2013; Walker, 2008). The relative impoverishment of popular neighborhoods, compounded by structural informality, is often interpreted as a defeat for popular classes (Pradilla Cobos, 2002; Sassen, 2014). However, rural-to-urban migration can also be viewed as a form of contestation and a means of and a means of establishing an identity, where individuals create space through movement (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2016).

Therefore, it is limiting to view residents of popular neighborhoods solely as fixed territorial subjects or to reduce migration to displacement through gentrification or assume that these actors have always inhabited the spaces they claim (Albet & Benach, 2012; Haesbaert, 2005). Instead, indigenous subjects in spatial transition should be understood as engaging in multi-dimensional and multi-scalar territorial relations. Their movement towards urban areas is not merely a story of dispossession, but rather a proactive effort to produce space and constitute new territories through mobility (Bayón Jiménez et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2017). In this context, mobility generates a continuum between rural communities and the city. In many cases, it is a deliberate strategy to access services, secure differentiated temporalities, and sustain the material and symbolic reproduction of communities (Galli, 2012; Peluso, 2015).

Ontological exercises against the realization of the APRG

To advance the decolonization and provincialization of critical urban studies, we must adopt a broader interpretation of Rent Gap Theory, and engage more deeply with alternative knowledge systems in the Global South, particularly those emerging from the Amazon region. In this context, the way in which indigenous populations produce urban space challenges the idea of a singular modernity as the basis for interpreting spatial transformations (Blaser, 2010; Descola, 1998). Relational ontologies intersect

with dualistic categories, such as nature and economy, body and mind, and life and death, but they are embedded in continuous cosmogonies. In the Amazon, such ontologies shape understandings of the cosmos, relationships between nature and society, and territorial struggles. They offer new ways to reframe knowledge systems through lived practices such as migration, spatial appropriation and resistance (Escobar, 2014; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). According to Roy (2016b), urban spaces in this context are characterized by "ontological multiplicity", necessitating a fundamentally different epistemological approach. In Latin America, the struggle for the commons, led by indigenous and urban-popular movements, foregrounds territories as a key nexus of material and symbolic reproduction. Consequently, these movements have established autonomous institutional frameworks and self-governance systems based on different spatial logics (Galafassi, 2018; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009).

This ontological conflict highlights how the realization of rent gaps is entangled with coloniality and racism as structural dimensions of urbanization. Capitalist actors, the new colonizers, often claim the right to transform natural environments while spatially enclosing populations that are symbolically racialised and culturally subordinated (Gill, 2021). Furthermore, the expansion of urban frontiers through road infrastructure and extractive activities frequently has a racialised dimension intended to control and discipline indigenous ontologies. As Cowen (2020) demonstrates in her historical work on railway infrastructure, these dynamics reproduce settler logics of domination. However, resistance can emerge not only through mass mobilization or encounters with mainstream society, but also through everyday ontological practices in urban spaces. In indigenous communities, these include collective labor (such as the "minka" in Kichwa), ritual celebrations and participatory forms of spatial planning (Galli, 2012; Mantel, 2017). Such spatial practices strongly express the social relations and use values associated with territorial commons and confront the exchange value logics of capital in rent gap realization. Conversely, capital investment is often reluctant to engage in areas inhabited by indigenous populations, which are perceived as "ungovernable", or incompatible with market logics, leading to devaluation of investment (Liu et al., 2018). In this sense, indigenous territorial practices within urban contexts serve not only to preserve cultural identity, but also to reframe the very basis of class struggle over urbanization by embedding alternative ontologies in contested spaces of urban expansion.

Requirements for developing the APRG

The preceding discussion demonstrates that Rent Gap Theory requires conceptual expansion, an endeavor that is pursued here by articulating the concept of the *Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap* (APRG). By incorporating postcolonial approaches, the APRG allows for a more nuanced approach to the key debates surrounding neoliberal urbanization in the Amazon. The APRG challenges and extends the conceptual scope of Rent Gap Theory in four key ways, which structure the analysis of the case studies presented int he following sections.

Firstly, whereas conventional accounts treat rent gaps as expressions of devaluation and revaluation linked to territorial homogenization and capital attraction, the APRG

Table 1. Theoretical contributions of the APGR in relation to traditional Rent Gap Theory.

Category	Rent Gap Theory	Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap (APRG)
Role of cycles of valorization	Cycles of devaluation and re-valuation drive dynamics of territorial homogenization and urban rent extraction	Valorization is differentiated through the incorporation and exploitation of new urban frontiers; extractive rents produce specific urban rents
Class struggle and contestation	Emphasis on neighborhood organization, defence of public infrastructure and individual/private property	Focus on collective subjects and the management of commons (e.g. land, water); emergence of autonomous social institutions
Mobility across space	Capital mobility triggers the displacement of urban popular classes to realize rent gaps	Territorial mobility is employed as a strategy to disrupt or subvert rent gap realization
Forms of resistance and everyday practices	Resistance through neighborhood organizing, daily routines, and property claims	Resistance includes ontological contestation; challenges to racialised urbanization and hegemonic spatial logics

highlights how the extractive rents that drive extended urbanization and the subsequent spatial valuation are actively contested in practice.

Secondly, whereas Rent Gap Theory interprets the realization of rent gaps as the outcome of a power struggle between financial capital and the inhabitants of devalued spaces, the APRG shifts the focus to the collective subjects engaged in these struggles. These actors contest not only the loss of private property or infrastructure, but also claim governance of territories that have been collectively produced and inhabited over time.

Thirdly, whereas traditional perspectives emphasize urban subjects resisting displacement from fixed places of residence, the APRG also considers strategic migration to peri-urban zones, where popular classes appropriate rents. Here, territorial mobility becomes a vehicle for shaping and contesting urban transformation.

Fourthly, whereas Rent Gap Theory usually focuses on resistance through neighborhood organizing and class-based everyday practices, the APRG incorporates cultural contestations that challenge racism as a co-constitutive force in rent gap formation. This reframes the analysis of everyday life by foregrounding intersecting ontologies that operate across and beyond spatial boundaries.

Although these four aspects are deeply interconnected, they will be examined individually through a dialectical analysis of the case studies (Table 1).

Methodological strategy for assessing the contribution of the APRG

This research takes a deductive approach to developing the Amazonian Periurban Rent Gap (APRG) as an additional tool for assessing rent gaps at urban frontiers in the Global South. This expands the scope of Rent Gap Theory. Comparing three distinct geographic cases, each characterized by specific relations at the frontiers of capital accumulation, transcends local particularities and generates new theoretical insights that bridge political economy and postcolonial thought (Nijman, 2015). The cases were initially analysed using inductive methods, which allowed for a deep understanding of the context and analogical reasoning (Lawhon & Truelove, 2020; Nijman, 2007). However, they were later revisited through the lens of the four analytical categories of the APRG. This iterative shift from inductive to deductive reasoning supports our aim of rethinking theory through comparative urbanism (Robinson, 2016).

Drawing on Hart's (2018) postcolonial Marxist dialectical approach, the cases are conceptualized as heterogeneous and contradictory processes. Rather than pursuing a positivist comparison, this relational comparative method seeks to rethink theory through conjunctural analysis, foregrounding contradictions and context-dependent configurations as an alternative to formalist methodologies (Peck, 2023). In several instances, the comparative process also stimulated further inductive enquiry into the specific cases, creating a dynamic interplay between deduction and induction throughout the research process.

Methodologically, this approach combines collaborative critical (counter)cartographies with ethnographic fieldwork, including various interview formats. Community mapping and walking interviews with political actors were employed to explore the four analytical dimensions of the APRG (Pierce & Lawhon, 2015). Participatory cartography also supported relevant indigenous, peasant and urban actors in their ongoing spatial disputes while co-producing visual representations of contested spaces (Bayón Jiménez et al., 2021; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009). These mapping practices facilitate dialogue between Cartesian representations of capitalist development and relational ontologies (Oslender, 2021), and between Marxist and post-colonial geographies (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018).

During fieldwork, community mapping was combined with walking interviews to produce cartographies that directly supported ongoing territorial conflicts involving collective actors and the state. These interviews provided spatial data on everyday territorial practices and enriched the ethnographic understanding of subjective trajectories and the use values ascribed to space (Muratorio, 2004). Additional attention was given to self-representations expressed during rituals, ceremonies and local assemblies (Parekh, 2015), which we interpret as moments of subversion that strategically position communities in relation to the dominant "mestizo" society (Bartra, 2014).

Fieldwork took place between 2019 and 2022, although it was partially constrained by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Following the gradual easing of restrictions, in-person engagement resumed. A total of 18 weeks of fieldwork were conducted in Amazonian territories, supplemented by continuous social media monitoring and encounters with community leaders in Quito during political and social events (Schulte-Römer & Gesing, 2022). The research included 20 formal in-depth interviews, three community mapping sessions and three group walking interviews. These activities supported the cartographic representation of spatial conflicts (Taylor & Bogdan, 1996). In each case study site, at least one major community event was also attended to enhance the ethnographic understanding of the area.

Research results – an analysis of three different approaches

The increase in global commodity prices has reinforced the extractivist economic model in Latin America, triggering a new wave of oil, mining and agro-industrial ventures that require extensive infrastructures across the Amazon. These developments have significantly expanded the frontiers of urbanization (Betancourt Santiago et al., 2015). One of the most notable schemes is the Initiative for Regional Integration in South America (IIRSA), which brings together the interests of private companies and national

states, and has attracted significant political and academic attention (Arboleda, 2016; Monte-Mor, 2014).

Although some IIRSA-related infrastructure projects in Ecuador were unsuccessful, the area under oil concessions doubled, and large-scale mining activities expanded rapidly (Wilson & Bayón, 2015). Consequently, the colonization of the Amazon has accelerated considerably, with the Amazonian cities becoming the fastest-growing in the country. This has led to diffuse and extensive urbanization, particularly along linear infrastructure corridors (Cabrera-Barona et al., 2020). Urbanization in the Ecuadorian Amazon thus exemplifies the conditions under which Amazonian Periurban Rent Gaps emerge. As previously outlined, the analysis now turns to three cases (see Figure 1), each of which illustrates the distinct dynamics of urbanization, contestation and resistance.

Puerto Providencia: disputing the APRG in the context of oil extraction and IIRSA infrastructure

The first case study examines the consequences of state planning and the materialization of the Providencia port and its road connection, part of IIRSA's Ecuadorian-Amazonian corridor linking Manta (Ecuador) to Manaus (Brazil) (Wilson & Bayón, 2015). Unlike neighboring communities that secured collective land rights during the decline of the hacienda regime, the Kichwa community of Providencia, comprised of families displaced by a tourist lodge, only managed to obtain individual family plots. Faced with the threat of territorial transformation, the community founded the association "Sumak Ñambi" in
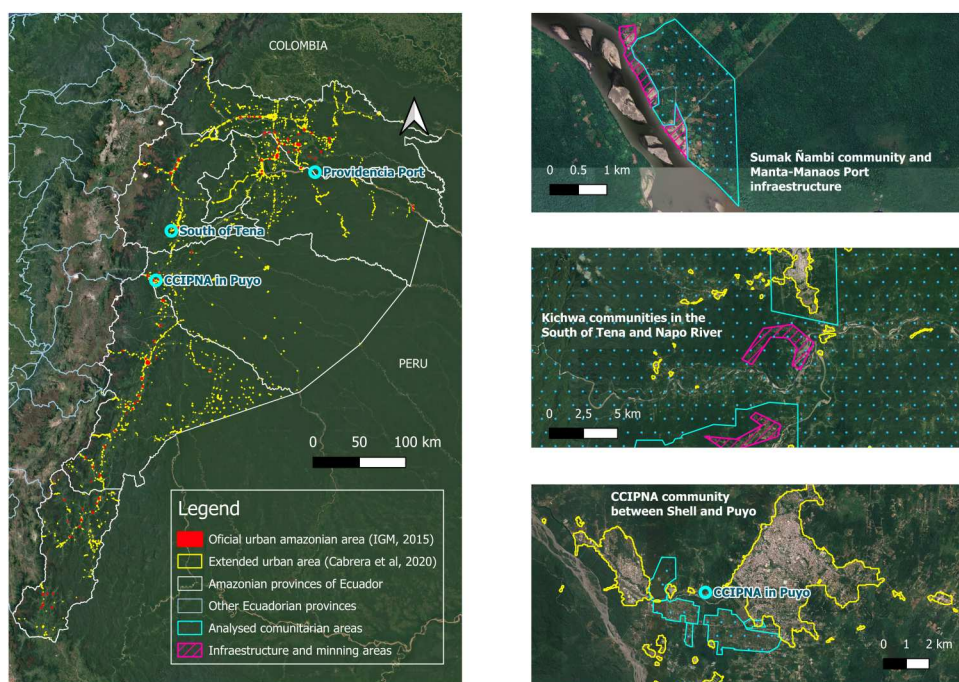

Figure 1. Amazon urbanization index and case studies. Source: Own elaboration.

2010 (meaning "road of plenitude" in Amazonian Kichwa), envisioning a shift towards a biotechnological enclave that would bring improved services and employment opportunities (Del Hierro, 2014). However, this vision remained unfulfilled: no well-paid or stable jobs emerged, and the promised public infrastructure never materialized. Instead, oil companies began using Providencia as a logistics hub, turning it into a potential site for rent gap exploitation. In parallel, the municipality of Shushufindi initiated eviction proceedings, fueling land speculation triggered by the oil port boom and aiming to facilitate rent realization.

In response, the community implemented a strategy to transform their rural settlement into a consolidated "neighbourhood" *(barrio)*: In a barter agreement with a boat company, new access roads were constructed across family land, and individual plots were reconfigured as collective territory (Wilson & Bayón, 2017). This transformation was further reinforced through the construction of additional housing, enabling second-home use by relatives who had previously migrated to urban areas. These dwellings served both as a return strategy for retirees and as logistical nodes for family members traveling between fluvial and road-connected regions, while simultaneously transforming easily seizable rural land into a consolidated neighborhood, thereby raising the potential costs of expropriation.

Despite these shifts, Kichwa spatial practices remained central to everyday life. The community continued its deep relational connection to the Napo River, used traditional building materials and medicinal knowledge, and maintained cultural practices such as cultivating yucca and preparing chicha. Annual assemblies enabled collective decision-making and the reproduction of social bonds through celebration and reciprocity among families.

The road and port infrastructure intensified uneven development, raising land values and exerting pressure on indigenous landholders. In this context, corresponding state action and spatial planning logics further exacerbated displacement pressures, reinforcing the dynamics of dispossession inherent to rent gap formation. Yet, rather than retreat, the community asserted its presence within the emergent rent gap, actively reclaiming urban space as part of the urbanization process. This resistance was enabled by multi-scalar alliances that extended beyond the local territory, including kinship ties with other Kichwa communities and urban migrants.

Crucially, the community's adaptation to urbanization did not involve abandoning relational ontologies. Instead, it produced new spatial forms that embedded communal practices and cosmovision, particularly the role of water in Kichwa life. Through these innovative strategies to organize indigenous resistance to the IIRSA, the community effectively blocked the realization of the rent gap. As a result, the municipality of Shushufindi abandoned its eviction plans.

Puyo: the dispute over the real estate APRG through the strategic creation of a pluri-ontological neighbourhood

Founded in 1899, Puyo developed into a key site of exchange between the mestizo colonization connecting the Amazon and a mosaic of indigenous nationalities, shaped by successive waves of migration. Over time, missionaries, military personnel, oil companies and agricultural settlers arrived, creating a strongly hierarchical social structure in

which political and economic power remained in the hands of the white-mestizo population. Indigenous groups and their demands became increasingly marginalized and stigmatized (del Rocío Coba Mejia, 2021; Whitten & Whitten, 2008). Today, Puyo is a major node in the IIRSA network, located at the crossroads of the north-south Amazonian corridor and the road link to the Andean highlands. An airport further integrates it into national and regional development strategies.

Since 2010, an abandoned tea plantation, originally established in 1934 on indigenous land, has been progressively occupied by poor families in urgent need of housing. Over time, these occupations evolved into the formation of the Intercultural City Community of People and Nationalities (CCIPNA), an organization uniting the claims of around 3,000 families from 16 different nationalities, including 14 indigenous groups from the Amazon and the Andes, as well as mestizo and Afro-Ecuadorian communities. These families inhabit over 380 hectares of land alongside the main road between Puyo and the highlands. Opposing state proposals offering individual land titles, CCIPNA has demanded collective tenure for the entire settlement for over a decade, drawing on critiques of the historical indebtedness and land dispossession imposed by mestizo institutions in the city (Castillo Izurieta, 2022). However, the land's designation as a zone for middle-class residential expansion has attracted the interest of real estate developers and intensified efforts to displace the residents. This has included harassment from a private company claiming legal ownership, military threats and repeated eviction attempts by state forces.

Despite these pressures, CCIPNA has developed an ambitious and cohesive urban vision, which is grounded in indigenous principles of plurinationality and interculturality. Its community urbanization plans integrate traditional housing with areas designated for food cultivation, medicinal plants, and forest and waterfall preservation. Annual celebrations serve to strengthen political claims and enact ontological multiplicity, affirming alternatives to dominant mestizo spatial logics. Consequently, CCIPNA has become a refuge for mobile indigenous populations and a platform for asserting their right to migrate and access urban resources. By contesting the socio-spatial hegemony of mestizo colonization and the logic of commodified urban expansion, CCIPNA resists the creation of a rent gap.

In this instance, the rent gap arose from the abandonment of an agro-extractivist site and its subsequent re-designation for urban development. However, this cannot be realized due to the formation of an urban-indigenous-popular movement that rejects private property and reclaims land as a commons instead. Through collective resistance, the community is able to prevent eviction and confront urban planning paradigms centered on market-driven development. This redefinition of property and land use generates enough political capacity to successfully contest the violence of eviction, reinforced by state institutions. Through this collective agency, a political subject emerges that is acutely aware of its impoverished condition but actively forges alliances based on an explicitly indigenous pluriculturality. This capacity thwarts powerful actors' attempts to realize rent gaps. By occupying public spaces with ancestral celebrations, CCIPNA asserts its symbolic presence in the city while expressing indigenous worldviews as spatial identities. These struggles thus shift the frontier of contestation, moving it beyond remote rainforests and into the heart of urbanization processes. Thus, peri-urban space becomes a field of transformation according to indigenous value systems.

In this case, the APRG is realized through the reclamation of ancestral territory, driven by ongoing dialogue with contemporary urban frontiers. Ultimately, CCIPNA's case illustrates that indigenous populations do not reject urbanization per se, but rather insist on participating in it on their own terms, preserving Amazonian logics through a powerful plurinational class alliance.

Tena: disputes over the mining APRG at the intersection of tourism and indigenous youth mobilisation

The third case study focuses on Tena, a city where indigenous accumulation strategies combining agrarian practices with tourism are increasingly being challenged by state-led urbanization plans. Similar to Puyo, Tena is connected to the Andean highlands via important transport routes and has been influenced by the historical dominance of white-mestizo institutions, particularly the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Kichwa organizations have amassed considerable political influence, securing representation and leadership in local and provincial governments, and thereby mitigating the institutional manifestation of urban racism. This has enabled the emergence of consolidated indigenous community-neighborhoods, and improved access to public services (Gutiérrez Marín, 2002; Tanguila Andy, 2018).

In the early 2010s, Tena's peri-urban area underwent rapid transformation as part of the IIRSA infrastructure push, with the construction of a new airport, a public university and paved roads facilitating the influx of tourism into indigenous territories (Uzendoski & Saavedra, 2010). These new infrastructures have encouraged Kichwa communities to engage more directly with the city's urban dynamics. The resulting increase in socio-spatial mobility has reinforced mutual economic support between families based in the city and relatives living in ancestral communities. Tourist activities have further strengthened these connections by linking mobility with economic cooperation.

Despite these developments, Tena's communal territories remain rooted in relational ontologies. This is evident through continuous and contingent occupation of rivers, forests, and mountains; religious rituals; community festivities; and traditional cultivation and hunting practices. However, the deregulation of Ecuador's mining sector has led to a rapid expansion of gold mining in the area over the past five years, facilitated by newly constructed roads. This has caused severe ecological degradation (Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador, 2021) and triggered a speculative rise in land value strong spatial transformations, threatening to convert peasant lands into high-value mining sites; a clear manifestation of the rent gap.

In response, the local indigenous organizations have intensified their efforts to limit mining activities and obtain collective titles for shared lands that were previously not titled due to the region's colonial history. Simultaneously, alliances have emerged that include both rural and urban actors, culminating in the formation of the "*Napo Resiste*" coalition. Led notably by indigenous youth and women, this platform has successfully mobilized public opinion and won legal victories against mining concessions.

Public infrastructure plays a contradictory role in this case: while it enables the valorization of space through tourism and enhanced connectivity, it also facilitates the

emergence of the mining rent gap. However, the full realization of this rent gap has been prevented in many areas due to contestations rooted in alternative spatial imaginaries. For instance, tourism is viewed as a less destructive use of land than mining, allowing for stronger communal control and the preservation of land ownership. These contested meanings of land reflect a broader defence of the commons and ancestral territories.

Permanent migration remains rare in this context, but there is a dynamic pattern of daily, weekly, and seasonal movements between the city and the ancestral territories. These movements have produced new cultural expressions, particularly among young indigenous women, who have become key agents in articulating collective demands. Through their actions, ontological practices are expressed in urban demonstrations and cultural performances, thereby halting the formation of the mining rent gap and reasserting indigenous presence in urban spaces.

The three case studies, Puerto Providencia, Puyo and Tena, demonstrate that the rent gaps that emerge in the context of Amazonian urbanization are actively shaped and contested by different social groups. In Puerto Providencia, for example, families strengthened intergenerational and kinship bonds to transform rural land into a consolidated neighborhood, thwarting planned evictions. In Puyo, the formation of a pluricultural class alliance resulted in the creation of collective urban commons that resisted commodified urbanization. In Tena, a broad coalition of indigenous and non-indigenous actors successfully opposed the realization of a mining rent gap, thereby reinforcing community ownership and territorial control.

These empirical accounts illustrate how indigenous and popular groups engage in multi-scalar strategies to dispute the realization of rent gaps, including collectivizing land, using ancestral and relational ontologies, and constructing territorial commons. In doing so, they transform peri-urban territories and redefine urbanization processes. Together, these cases highlight the analytical potential of the Amazonian Peri-urban Rent Gap (APRG) theory. The following section examines how the APRG expands the conceptual scope of rent gap theory by integrating postcolonial, relational, and ontological dimensions.

Contributions of the APRG for a nuanced understanding of contestation at the frontiers of urbanisation – a relational comparison

Analysing Puerto Providencia, Puyo and Tena reveals how state-led extractive urbanization and contestations by indigenous and popular actors unfold in the Ecuadorian Amazon through highly differentiated spatial and scalar dynamics. These confrontations are not uniform, but are instead shaped by a complex interplay of infrastructures, land regimes, ontologies, and alliances. Consequently, the Amazonian Peri-urban Rent Gap (APRG) emerges as a nuanced concept, characterized by inconsistencies and ruptures, yet rooted in the collective aspiration to safeguard shared territorial resources and commoning processes.

Crucially, these cases expand our understanding of rent gap formation. Rather than relying on a process of devaluation preceding revaluation, as originally theorized by Neil Smith, rent gaps in the Amazonian context often emerge directly through infrastructural investment and spatial transformation. In Puerto Providencia and Tena, new roads and extractive frontiers initiated valuation cycles without prior capital withdrawal. In

Puyo, the ex-hacienda lands' relative devaluation served as a precondition for communal re-appropriation. Together, these examples demonstrate that capital investment can generate rent gaps independently of preceding disinvestment, thus broadening the analytical scope of Rent Gap Theory.

In all three cases, the extractive infrastructures linked to IIRSA sparked particular disputes over the realization of rent gaps. In Providencia, the symbolic appropriation of the new *Sumak Ñambi* road infrastructure and its transformation into a new neighborhood prevented state-led displacement. In Tena, tourism became a strategic tool for territorial defence. These dynamics resonate with insights from Latin American Marxism, in which the predominance of land rent generates conflict among actors over how it is produced and accessed. Notably, these actors do not merely resist displacement; they actively work to prevent the realization of rent gaps.

Each case represents a distinct trajectory of how rent gaps were initially created; through ports, real estate or mining, and how their realization was prevented. The extractive violence inherent in these plans clashes directly with community-based territorial formations that support the material and symbolic reproduction of life. Consequently, the meaning of class struggle is reconfigured as different subaltern groups form alliances to defend spaces of life against capital-driven transformation and destruction. In Puerto Providencia, resistance emerges through class-ethnic alliances based on kinship. In Puyo, CCIPNA represents a pluricultural urban-indigenous front, and in Tena, it emerges through interethnic coalitions uniting communities, youth, and feminist actors under shared visions of the commons.

A key feature of all three places is the establishment of territorial commons as an alternative to private property regimes. These range from the conversion of family farms into collective neighborhoods in Providencia to the communalization of the former hacienda in Puyo and the legal recognition of common land in Tena. These practices inhibit the realization of the rent gap and reveal the APRG as a conceptual tool rooted in the struggle over the collective production of space.

Our findings further emphasize the strategic importance of migration, mobility, and multi-scalar relationality as concrete and vital strategies for preventing the realization of rent gaps, and for actively producing contested spaces and territorialities. In Providencia, circular migration based on kinship consolidates the neighborhood's territorial claim. In Puyo, intercommunal mobility supports the development of an integrated urban-indigenous identity capable of transforming into political action. In Tena, daily and seasonal mobility sustain community cohesion and enable resistance to extractive encroachment. These mobile territorialities are not merely background conditions; they constitute dynamic infrastructures of resistance that shape the possibility of spatial contestation and collective spatial production. Therefore, the APRG must be understood in terms of circulation, strategic mobility, and relational embeddedness.

However, the formation of commons and the transformation of peri-urban spaces are not solely influenced by class and mobility. They are also fundamentally grounded in ontological practices that redefine urbanization through indigenous modes of knowing, relating to, and caring for land and water. These include collective self-governance, reciprocal kinship relations, the spiritual and medicinal use of forests, the cultivation of food and medicinal plants, and ritual celebrations. In Puerto Providencia, the persistence of river-based practices and reciprocity reaffirms territorial attachments. In

Puyo, the spatial coexistence of at least 16 nationalities gives rise to "ontological multi-plicities" (Roy, 2016a). In Tena, the articulation of communal territories with tourism introduces new forms of re-signifying space and place. These ontological practices challenge structural racism and spatial stigmatization by refusing to accept the dominant representation of indigeneity as being incompatible with urban life. Instead, they embed alternative territorial futures within urbanization itself (Table 2).

Synthesizing these insights, we propose four central contributions of the APRG to Rent Gap Theory:

1. Ontological contestation at the frontiers of urbanization: The APRG sheds light on how extractive urbanization is confronted through the creation of affective, relational territories based on alternative worldviews and spatial practices.
2. Class alliances as spatial defence: Urban and indigenous actors form alliances with other popular classes to co-produce collective urban commons, particularly when facing the threat of displacement.
3. Territorial mobility as political tool: Migration and circulation are vital instruments of spatial appropriation and rent gap disruption, not secondary effects.
4. Disrupting racialised spatial regimes: By foregrounding indigenous commons and ontologies, APRG analysis exposes and counteracts the racialised foundations of rent gap realization. This repositioning of urban struggles within broader decolonial geographies is key.

Table 2. A diagnostic grid of the APRG analysis.

Case	Role of extractive rent	Meaning of class struggle	Territorial mobility as a strategy	Ontological everyday practices
Case 1: Sumak Ñambi in Puerto Providencia	Strategic location near infrastructure (port and roads) attracts oil logitics and speculative investment	Collective resistance to displacement through neighborhood formation and land consolidation	Circular mobility of kin networks from other communities and urban centeres to consolidate territorial claims	Maintenance of river-centered life, agricultural practices, use of traditional materials, family reciprocity, and ritual assemblies
Case 2: CCIPNA in Puyo	Increased land value due to road access and real estate pressure for middle-class housing	Formation of a pluricultural class alliance to resist eviction and demand collective land titling	Settlement of 3,000 families from diverse origins (indigenous, mestizo, Afro-descendant) in peri-urban territory	Community urbanism, collective agricultural areas, ritual celebration, forest preservation, intercultural coexistence
Case 3: Kichwa communes resisting mining in Tena	Competing valorization dynamics through tourism and gold mining along new infrastructure	Inter-ethnic and inter-generational alliance to oppose mining concessions and preserve community livelihoods	Seasonal, daily, and circular mobilities between city and ancestral territories for education, tourism, and activism	Commoning practices around water, land, and forest; ritual use of territory; emergence of youth-led indigenous feminism
APRG	**Capital-driven frontier of extended urbanisation based on extractive and infrastructural rents**	**Popular alliances reclaiming the right to urbanisation through contestation of displacement and exclusion**	**Migration and multi-scalar mobility as key strategies for consolidating territorial commons**	**Reproduction and transformation of indigenous practices in peri-urban spaces: food sovereignty, self-governance, reciprocity, and symbolic reterritorialisation**

Together, these four dimensions demonstrate that the APRG is not merely a conceptual extension of existing Rent Gap Theory; it is a re-theorization emerging from the urbanizing frontiers of capital in the Global South. The APRG helps us to better understand how space and territory operate in accumulation processes, and how these processes are actively contested, reworked and sometimes decisively blocked.

Conclusions and outlook

As Wyly (2023) argues, Rent Gap Theory has helped to conceptualize the widespread outrage surrounding the ways in which corporate power and financial capitalism influence urban development. To contextualize this, as Roy (2016b) and Sheppard et al. (2013) suggest, requires an examination of how rent gaps emerge and are contested at the frontiers of capital. In contexts where dispossession intersects with extractivism and state-sanctioned racism, outrage takes different forms rooted in distinct materialities, subjectivities, and histories. Nevertheless, the underlying logic of capital accumulation and rent appropriation remains central (Gillespie, 2020; Slater, 2017). Rather than being resolved, theoretical tensions between Marxist and postcolonial perspectives should be mobilized productively. Through the formulation of the Amazonian Peri-urban Rent Gap (APRG), we have demonstrated how these perspectives can be brought into dialogue (Hart, 2018; Horn, 2018), anchored in a shared political indignation over the dynamics of dispossession in the Amazon.

Marginalized in urban theory, the Amazon is often perceived as an ecological, cultural or epistemic exception (Descola, 1998). Our relational comparison of Puerto Providencia, Puyo and Tena challenges this view. By focusing on the frontiers of urbanization and the extractive logics that shape them, we demonstrate how Amazonian cities can serve as sites from which to theorize broader urban processes (Monte-Mor, 2014). In this sense, the APRG enables us to engage with urban theory from a different perspective (Parnell & Robinson, 2012), providing a contextualized and nuanced interpretation of rent, territory and resistance. It also invites us to provincialize not only theory, but also the contestation that originally fueled the use of Rent Gap Theory in Urban Studies.

The APRG is not a prescriptive model for other urbanization frontiers; it does not offer a portable toolkit. Rather, it exemplifies the potential of disruptive deductive exercises that draw on empirical specificity to expand critical urban theory (Robinson, 2016). Although the APRG is grounded in the Ecuadorian Amazon, its analytical logic, paying attention to extractive rents, class alliances, mobility, and ontological practices, can inform comparative studies of other sites of extended urbanization and contested territorial transformation. As Rent Gap Theory is re-evaluated and extended, the APRG contributes to this effort by integrating insights from Latin American Marxism and postcolonial thought (Coronil, 1997; Echeverría, 2000).

Politically, the APRG highlights specific forms of knowledge production that transcend epistemic frameworks which are often detached from the lived experiences of those contesting rent extraction at the frontiers of capitalist urbanization. Rather than diluting them, it reconnects political economy approaches with the contradictory aspirations, experiences, experiments, propositions, and aspirations of indigenous populations (Escobar, 2014; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009). These communities' capacity to collectivize private property, assert ontologically powerful spatial practices in Amazonian

peripheries, and resist eviction in the face of racialised violence offers a powerful challenge to the limits of critical urban theory.

Future research should continue to build on such dialogues between Marxist and postcolonial approaches to improve our understanding of how rent gaps are formed, resisted, and reconfigured. Much conceptual work remains to be done, for example, analysing the historical circumstances that shape Amazonian rent formation or investigating the gendered aspects of reproduction and care in extractive urban areas. The formulation of the APRG, therefore constitutes a contribution to theory and a call to develop the emerging field of urban-Amazonian studies, rethinking the frontiers of capital in the places where they are produced, both violently and creatively.

Note

1. IIRSA is the Spanish abbreviation of the "Initiative for Regional Integration in South America", an emblematic infrastructure project, which was launched in the late 2000s (Kanai, 2016).

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