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TOWARDS A CONCEPT OF ECOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract

Sovereignty is mostly articulated through a paradigm of inter-state competition over resources and borders, in order to facilitate accumulation and control. Although its current appeal dates back to the seventeenth century and the Westphalian system, the definitions thus far privileged by the so-called international order have mostly worked against the interests of peoples and territories subject to (neo)colonial power, imperialism, and resource grabs. This working paper interrogates how the ideology of 'national interest' is mobilised by states to advance expansionist interests in ways that disregard planetary boundaries and solidaristic cooperation among peoples, ultimately to the detriment of demands for self-determination, and to the possibility of building the ecosocial just transitions necessary for overcoming the polycrisis. In counterpoint, the paper it suggests the need for a framework of popular and ecological sovereignty aimed at securing mutual survival and longevity. This , which will means learning from movements and political organisations that challenge the capital-nation-state fantasy of limitless growth, in order to reformulate the basis for production and consumption in accordance with radical sustainability and a good life for the world's majority.

Keywords

Ecological sovereignty, internationalism, ecosocial transitions, planetary boundaries, national interest

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The dominant sovereignty paradigm is taken for granted. Ever since the Westphalian system was established in the 17th Century, sovereignty has generally been considered the preserve of national states. The state's determination of exceptions appears as the only legitimate way to exercise sovereignty, and it is implied that the national interest espoused by states actually conveys the common material interests and needs of the nation and its communities. In theory, as long as each state acts freely only within its own borders – respecting other states' self-determination – its sovereignty is rightful and secure.

In practice, the ideology of 'national interests' behind state sovereignty legitimises state power even when contrary to popular interests. The idea of the nation, once attached to cultural expressions, community recognition, and territorial belonging, was subsumed into the state until nationalism became equated with chauvinism and endless competition, even rivalry. This subsumption allows the state to mobilise the discourse of national interests to advance expansionist interests and those of capital accumulation. Whereas the material interests of the nation could conceivably align with working-class emancipation and the restoration of sustainable planetary conditions, what we find is a paradigm of sovereignty that allows and even encourages colonial and imperialist practices, where the right of self-determination of others can be limited in order to open new markets, grab resources, and over-exploit workers.

This has been so normalised that even states on the periphery behave as if their own self-determination, autonomy, and security should be defined by assertiveness over territories and resources in a system of international competition. The national-state sovereignty paradigm evolved alongside capitalism, whose expansion also relied on the state's power to propel its national elites and enterprises against those of other states and to cooperate with other states to integrate markets and facilitate labour and supply chains.

This has led to a predictable contradiction, where a state is only sovereign over its own ecosystems and peoples, to compete with other states, or to collaborate if necessary, if the goal is to advance control and the accumulation of capital. If state sovereignty is exercised in ways contrary to this end, its own sovereignty is questioned, threatened or diluted – by other states or capitalist agents. Moreover, as states exercise their sovereignty to plunder the planet for resources, widely disregarding the boundaries imposed by Earth's metabolisms, they are only sovereign until the next ecological collapse.

This irrational paradigm of inter-state competition for capitalist advancement is neglectful of the billions of people on Earth whose life and own bodily sovereignty should be the basis for collective interests. Considering that the conditions for human life and the welfare of peoples cannot be severed from the biogeochemical flows of the Earth System – the planetary metabolism – a contradiction arises between the borderless logic of ecosystems and the bordered predatory logic of capitalist sovereignty.

As we reckon with a planetary polycrisis¹ that results from a system of infinite pursuit of finite resources and disregard for nature's metabolism, the mainstream answer remains to use state and corporate power to manage the contradiction between the borderless logic of ecosystems and the bordered predatory logic of capitalist sovereignty. Even as climate change suggests the end of life alongside capitalism, national states continue to compete (even when they claim to cooperate) for resources, hoping to reform the system at the root of the crises. Sovereignty is exercised as control, usage and consumption, not as care, responsible tutelage and species preservation. This suicidal tendency that can amount to mutual annihilation is enabled by many factors. One of these factors is the equivalence of national-state sovereignty to capitalist sovereignty.

This paper argues that the idea of 'national interest' has been used primarily to advance capitalist interests through the 'national-state sovereignty' paradigm. This undermines the pursuit of popular goals of human development and well-being, sustaining the illusion that capitalist production and the interests of the capitalist class can be good for the many communities and peoples connected to their territories.² In other words, the promises of progress through national-state sovereignty are based on a practice of planetary plunder, endless conflict, and unequal exchange. It should therefore be excluded from any political framework aimed at justice, emancipation, solidarity, and ecological stability.

To challenge the use of capitalist sovereignty as a totem for national-state sovereignty, I suggest we consider our 'metabolic interdependence' to guide a logic of popular and ecological sovereignty that is centred on longevity, radical sustainability and peoples' emancipation across territories. This exercise can open space for other territorial and plurinational frames of sovereign life, both contesting and transforming state relations. While I do not examine whether the modern state form can exist outside of this situation, I argue that the pursuit of popular and ecological sovereignty will at least transform relations among states and territories, to transcend the chauvinistic, resource-hungry, and competitive dynamics, prone to mutual destruction, at the basis of the current sovereignty paradigm.

Capitalism's sovereign subsumption of the national interest

In order to ensure loyalty and compliance, the modern nation-state generates dependence, exercising its hegemony through a combination of consent and coercion. The more unitary a nation is, the easier it is for the state to make use of a national consciousness through the dominant language that appeals to a specific set of values and ideas.³ These values inform the

¹ Michael J. Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth* (The MIT Press, 2024).

² My usage of communities, peoples and territories is heavily influenced by Latin American epistemologies regarding the colonial experience of the imposition of the modern state and its erasure of other forms of existing and organising in a space. From this perspective, the interest is in communicating collective relationships that exist within a state but also in spite of it. This informs debates and proposals of plurinationalism and self-determination that more easily remind us of autonomous organising by indigenous and other communities tied to traditions and shared history and culture (i.e. peasant communities, fisherfolk, people in favelas), but should not be exclusive to the local scale. When challenging the predominance of the nation-state in debates over the nation (or nations) that often lead to configurations of nationalism and national identity, our intention is also to question the basis for nations and self-determination where the state might be a tool for self-governance, but not a requirement for it, let alone a superior agent to the peoples and nations.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (Verso, 1991).

national interest, which must remain elusive enough to justify courses of action by the state, while remaining appealing as 'an overriding common good transcending the specific interests of parties, factions, and other entities smaller than the nation as a whole'.⁴

In this paradigm, the national interest is detached from the common interest, which is based on shared conditions and experiences by those in a given territory. It is rather an artefact of the modern state, whose meaning can be constructed according to different political projects and ideologies, which may or may not contribute to the well-being of people. Historically, the national interest has played a perverse role in justifying projects and enterprises that displace and exploit peoples, while reducing nature to resources to be plundered. While the common interest draws from material reality, the national interest has become an instrument for asserting elite interests within and through the state.

This is reflected both in domestic and foreign policy. Representatives of the United States government, for example, have often argued that invasion of other countries is legitimate under the Westphalian system due to national security concerns, even if it means risking the lives of soldiers or diverting billions of dollars from health-care or education into military spending. In the Global South, a state like Brazil can allow destructive mining activities and the expansion of local sacrifice zones to support the national economy and a specific brand of national development. In either situation, the national interest creates risks, prioritises specific economic activities and promotes policies that may be contrary to the common material interests of the majority of the people belonging to a state.⁵

The meaning given by the state to national interest is rarely subversive, since it is also in the interest of the state to reproduce its own authority and means. As such, most modern states seek to articulate and promote national interests compatible with the interests of other state allies and, especially, the advancement of transnational capital.

According to the United States Institute for Peace,⁶ the two decades of US military occupation of Afghanistan cost \$2.3 trillion and led to the death of 2,324 US military personnel (and even more contractors and members of allied troops). The death toll was far worse among Afghans: 70,000 military and police personnel and more than 46,000 civilians. All of this human and economic cost meant a gain of billions in weapons contracts for companies like Lockheed Martin and for armed security contractors like Blackwater (now named Constellis); in 2020 alone, US spending for all types of contractors amounted to \$420 billion.⁷ While many of these contractors are based in the US, their operations are spread throughout the globe and can be traded on the stock exchange or managed by large investment funds. The idea of a 'national interest', then, can also serve as a proxy for the interests of capital extending beyond national borders, as it can be mobilised to support allied states at the expense of domestic policies.

US relations with Israel provide perhaps the clearest example, with the US articulating protection of Israeli interests as protection of its own national interests in security and as a duty to an ally.

⁴ H. W. Brands, 'The Idea of the National Interest', *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 239, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00165>.

⁵ Especially when the state intentionally excludes other claims to existing as a nation, as is often the case with Indigenous and native peoples.

⁶ 'In Afghanistan, Was a Loss Better than Peace?', Research & Analysis, 2022, United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/afghanistan-was-loss-better-peace>.

⁷ William Hartung, 'US Empire Is Lining the Pockets of Defense Contractors', *Jacobin Magazine*, 2021, <https://jacobin.com/2021/09/united-states-war-iraq-afghanistan-profiteering-defense-contractors>.

Cheryl Rubenberg⁸ argued that, just like in Vietnam, US policymakers were convinced that 'by arming and supporting Israel to the fullest extent (validating the Jewish state's objectives of achieving "a Greater Israel"), US vital interests will be enhanced'. This conviction, however, was not a matter of mere falsification that US citizens would gain a lot by supporting the state of Israel, but as a reflection of how the national interest can be hollowed out to reflect the ulterior agenda of a dominant class and its transnational allies. Even as negotiation of the Abraham Accords advanced in the early 2020s, US involvement was not aimed at enhancing peace, security, sustainability and prosperity for the US American citizens, but at increasing trade, whitewashing wrongdoings, and promoting the normalisation of Israel in the region. The agreement with Morocco, for example, included US recognition of Moroccan state sovereignty over the Western Sahara, the territory of the Sahrawi people.⁹

But the idea of national interest is not only mobilised by imperialist and expansionist states. When Donald Trump announced heavy tariffs on Brazilian exports in July 2025, it was clearly in Brazil's national interest not to bow down.¹⁰ Because it was in the common (material) interest of Brazilians that they be protected from the immediate economic fallout of the tariffs, it was easy to perceive Lula's defence of Brazil as a matter of national sovereignty. The Brazilian state responded with the 'Sovereign Brazil Plan', a programme focused on offsetting the possible effects of the tariffs by working with other states in multilateral arrangements and with any domestic economic tools at its disposal. This meant finding other markets for Brazilian exports, extending fiscal benefits to export-oriented sectors, and creating purchasing avenues for these goods in-country too.¹¹

Although the tariffs were to affect Brazilian industrial goods, such as those produced by the aerospace corporation Embraer, most of the impact would fall on the agribusiness (meat, coffee, fruit) and mining (steel, aluminium) sectors, which hold significant sway over the economy and over politics in Brazil. The country's extreme land property rules, regressive tax regime, and continuous practice of subsidising and offering fiscal incentives to the private sector contribute to its wealth inequality – the worst in the world alongside that of Russia, with a Gini index of 0,82.¹² These sectors are also highly destructive to nature, leading to the creation of extractivist sacrifice zones,¹³ violence against rural and Indigenous communities, depletion of resources, and such high levels of deforestation that Brazil is now among the top ten greenhouse gas emitters of all time.¹⁴

⁸ *Israel and the American National Interest: A Critical Examination* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), 1.

⁹ Bruno Huberman and Sabrina Fernandes, 'Descolonizar futuros palestinos: o papel da comunidade internacional para a resolução justa da Questão Palestina/Israel', *Revista Marx e o Marxismo – Revista do NIEP-Marx* 11, no. 21 (2024): 22, <https://doi.org/10.62782/2318-9657.2023.574>.

¹⁰ 'Brazil's Lula Hits Back at Trump over Bolsonaro Trial and Tariffs', 15 September 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj3yxkdklvo>.

¹¹ 'Governo lança Plano Brasil Soberano para proteger exportadores e trabalhadores de sobretaxas dos EUA', *Notícia, Agência Gov*, 13 August 2025, <https://agenciagov.ebc.com.br/noticias/202508/governo-lanca-plano-brasil-soberano-para-proteger-exportadores-e-trabalhadores-de-sobretaxas-dos-eua>.

¹² UBS, *Global Wealth Report 2025* (UBS, 2025), 35, <https://www.ubs.com/global/pt/wealthmanagement/latamaccess/wealth-planning/global-wealth-report.html>.

¹³ Sabrina Fernandes, 'Old and New Sacrifice Zones in Latin America', in *Contesting the Anthropocene: Latin American Perspectives beyond Coloniality and Capitalism*, ed. Luisa Raquel Ellermeier et al. (Routledge, 2026).

¹⁴ When accounting for all types of greenhouse gas, from all sources, including land-use change and deforestation, Brazil is part of the ten biggest emitters in history. When accounting only for all types of greenhouse gas, excluding land-use change and deforestation, Brazil is still a top-10 emitter globally. This is because its emissions pattern is heavily influenced by agrarian production (because of the destruction of biomes for the expansion of agrarian land and methane emissions from heavy animal exploitation). Brazil is only excluded from the category of a 'climate villain' if one considers only domestic CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and industry. See data at: World Resources Institute, 'Historical Country-Level and Sectoral GHG Emissions Data (1990-2022)', *Climatewatch*, 2025, <https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions>; Johannes Friedrich et al., 'This Interactive Chart Shows Changes in the World's Top 10 Emitters', *World Resources Institute*, 3 February 2023, <https://www.wri.org/insights/interactive-chart-shows-changes-worlds-top-10-emitters>.

In this case, Brazil's sovereign defence and defiance of Trump follows two logics: one based on non-interventionism; and another based on the conflation of the national interest with the interests of Brazilian corporations and commodity exporters. While explicit protection from foreign intervention mobilised popular support for the Sovereign Brazil Plan, the government made exaggerated efforts to defend the interests of its export-based capitalist class. Rather than using the opportunity to review the weight of these commodity exports in the Brazilian economy to incentivise options better suited for job creation, food price control and sustainability, protection of the corporations was prioritised. JBS, the world's largest meat producer, was a key subject in the Brazilian government's negotiations with Trump, to the point that some of the communications about it were put under government secrecy for five years.¹⁵ There are even reports that the owners of JBS helped to mediate the tensions between Lula and Trump, which is not surprising given that a JBS subsidiary made the largest registered donation to Trump and Vance's inauguration committee, at \$5 million — more than any US Big Tech company.¹⁶

Since the power of a capitalist corporation is based on economic dependencies and strong political influence, the corporation's interests can be fused with the national interest, eventually eclipsing any notion of sustainability, well-being and people's material common interest that could present an obstacle to expansion, profit and growth targets. Just like an imperialist state equates its national interest with global capitalist domination, it becomes entirely possible for a more subaltern state, where appeals to national sovereignty are a historical necessity against colonialism and imperialism, to allow the interests of their national capitalist class (and their multinational corporations) to subsume national interests, displacing working-class, grassroots, and other non-capitalist interests. This manipulation of one interest into another gives rise to even more contradictions, wherein the state is more likely to use public funds to rescue private corporations from obligations to repair and indemnify victims of their destructive and exploitative practices and to cover the continuous cost of growth and operations based on creating metabolic rifts. The result is irreparable damage to the Earth-System metabolism, caused by irrational production that ignores planetary boundaries, ecosystemic balance and the finitude of resources, with clear consequences for human society.¹⁷

¹⁵ 'Tarifaço: Governo Lula impõe sigilo de 5 anos em telegramas sobre negócios dos irmãos Batista nos EUA', O Globo, 24 October 2025, <https://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/malu-gaspar/post/2025/10/tarifaco-governo-lula-impoe-sigilo-de-5-anos-em-telegramas-sobre-negocios-dos-irmaos-batista-nos-eua.ghtml>.

¹⁶ 'Empresa da JBS fez a maior doação para a posse de Donald Trump, de US\$ 5 milhões', O Globo, 23 April 2025, <https://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/malu-gaspar/post/2025/04/empresa-da-jbs-fez-a-maior-doacao-para-a-posse-de-donald-trump-de-us-5-milhoes.ghtml>; 'Química Trump e Lula aconteceu após ação da dona da JBS junto ao governo dos EUA', G1, 25 September 2025, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/blog/octavio-guedes/post/2025/09/25/atuacao-empresarios-governo-trump-quimica-lulca.ghtml>.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume III*, Original work published 1894 (Penguin Books, 1981); John Bellamy Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (Monthly Review Press, 2010).

The table below clarifies how capitalist interests shape the national interest and, as a consequence, transform the exercise of sovereignty by the national state into a totem for capitalist sovereignty:

Figure 1. Capitalist subsumption of national-state praxis

	Agency	Ideology	Frame	Telos to
Action	To impose	To mobilise	To exercise	To achieve
Subsumption	Representation	National interest	National-state sovereignty	Limitless growth
Result	Capital-nation-state trinity	Corporate or capitalist class interests	National and global capitalist hegemony	Metabolic rifts and planetary polycrisis

This process of subsumption is dialectical. The form of the national interest as a mobiliser of peoples, businesses and states is maintained because it is an integral part of the rhetoric used by the state, whether imperialist, colonial, or hoping to establish itself as 'modern'. The content of national interest, however, has been hollowed out and replaced with the interests of the dominant class. The abstract idea of a nation, with a weak regard for the shared needs and relations for the national community in their territory, provides the ideological justification framing capital's interests as the national interest. As a result, when states exercise their national-state sovereignty, they do it by providing administrative and coercive machinery for capital accumulation, contributing to capitalist hegemony.

This is also possible because sovereignty has become bound to the influence and leadership states play in the international arena, including markets, which leads us to look at the third element in our table: the unquestioned and ultimate goal of limitless production of goods and services.

Sovereign to expand production, unsovereign to conserve resources and protect

The capitalist system is driven by ceaseless accumulation. Globalisation and urbanisation added new layers of complexity to human life, expanding the needs of transportation, for example, to cover big daily commutes, to tackle the challenges of traffic and gridlocks, to deal with safety issues and fuel access. This expansion of needs that must be fulfilled to realise basic tasks, like going to work or dropping one's kids off at school, already **places a significant** burden on the Earth System, involving a variety of processes across the goods and services supply chain, from sourcing and extraction to waste management.

The concept of the 'metabolic rift' is valuable because it makes explicit how the multiple and overlapping processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation of production and consumption have fractured delicate nutrient, chemical and biological metabolisms. If more than half of the world lives in urban settings, the added convenience of finding many types of foods in a big grocery store is enabled by live animals that are shipped across oceans before they are slaughtered, the petrochemical fertilisers (i.e.: urea and ammonium nitrate) that normalise petroleum operations in order to maximise crop yields for exports, and anthropogenic imbalance caused by waste deposited in ecosystems far away from the original source of materials.

And while much of capitalist production is intended to satisfy these growing needs – caused by changes in human society but also driven by the capitalist structuring of life – the remainder of the production today is oriented towards new and growing desires, all of which must be addressed in the most complex and commodified ways possible. As argued by political ecologist André Gorz:¹⁸ ‘The object is always to satisfy needs with the greatest possible flow of commodities, to produce these with the techniques which permit the greatest profit and, lastly, to accord prime importance to those needs which are most profitably satisfied’.

This tendency is rarely questioned. On the contrary, capitalism’s need for growth (as enabler of accumulation) is mistaken for human society’s own imperative for survival. We could find more optimal ways to satisfy needs, transforming our mode of life over territories to even *reduce* needs, while submitting our wants to the physical thresholds imposed by nature’s metabolism. But we choose to equate a system oriented towards infinite production through finite means of production (with different combinations of labour and other resources) with the only way to exist on Earth. We are even told that this is the only way to thrive, even if socio-ecological collapse is the actual norm. The crises and disasters programmed within the system can be acknowledged, but only insofar as solutions do not challenge the system.

István Mészáros (1995, 105) described this irrational relationship to the natural metabolism better than most:

So long as the scope for unobstructed expansion is objectively present, the process of displacing the system’s contradictions can go on unhindered. When things do not go well, i.e., when there is a failure in economic growth and corresponding advancement, the difficulties are diagnosed in terms of the circular proposition which runs away from the underlying causes and highlights only their consequences by saying that ‘there is not enough growth’. Dealing with problems in this perverse circular way, constantly repeating even at times of major recessions that ‘everything is in place’ for healthy expansion, creates the illusion that capital’s mode of social metabolic control is in no need of fundamental change. Legitimate change must be always envisaged as limited alteration and improvement of what is already given. Change must be brought about by innovation undertaken strictly at the instrumental level, which is supposed to make it self-evidently beneficial.¹⁹

This complete disregard for the material metabolism that forms the basis of life and generates the necessary conditions for human society and all other species is so dangerous that we cannot speak only of climate change, but of crossing seven out of nine planetary boundaries and reaching the points of no-return capable of setting off mass extinction.²⁰ The metabolic rifts are now extreme, threatening the stability of life as we know it.²¹ It begs the question of whether it is possible to fight over and assert national-state sovereignty on a dying planet. How worthwhile is it for states to use national interest to advance the interests of capital and wage war, expand diplomacy, extract resources and open up markets in the name of national-state sovereignty, if the long-term result will be catastrophic? If sovereignty is the

¹⁸ André Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (Verso, 1994), ebook version.

¹⁹ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (Monthly Review Press, 1995), 105

²⁰ Boris Sakschewski et al., ‘Planetary Health Check 2025: A Scientific Assessment of the State of the Planet’, in *Planetary Boundaries Science* (PbScience) (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), 2025), application/pdf, 144 pages, 22 MB, <https://doi.org/10.48485/PIK.2025.017>.

²¹ Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*, 17-18 (Kindle Edition).

practice of authority, does the ecological crisis not present material and temporal limits to this authority?

The current frame of national-state sovereignty can only result in *sovereignty with an expiry date*. Unlike interpretations of sovereignty focused on self-determination, peace, harmony, longevity and care, the dominant modern expression of sovereignty is a tool for legitimising the unthinkable. In order to assert authority over others, the sovereign must be willing to destroy the conditions of production and reproduction of life itself. Because power, success and authority are conflated with limitless production and growth, a state's political dominance is measured by access, control and use of resources. The idea that a sovereign nation whose territory is filled with large iron and cobalt deposits may choose to keep them in the ground instead of extracting them seems completely absurd in today's system. One is sovereign to exploit, but caring and protecting is a weakness in a system based on continuous competition and plunder.

In fact, military conflicts to expand control and advance plunder through conquest are an intrinsic part of a system of undivided capital-nation-states. This is a contradiction of the Westphalian system premised upon peace through mutual accords and the principle of inviolability of a state's territory and domestic politics. Imperialist and neo-colonial politics reflect the capital-nation-state disregard for other forms and expressions of autonomy, territorial life and human-nature relationships.

States that attempt to bar violent extraction of resources and the overexploitation of citizens' labour soon find out that they are not as sovereign as suggested by the principles of the formal international system. When the people of Panama took to the streets to demand the closure of the Cobre Panamá open-pit copper mine in 2023, Panama's supreme court ruled that the mining company's contract with the government was unconstitutional. Those who protested the mine, owned by Canadian First Quantum Minerals (FQM), explained that the company restricted the movement of the local community, that the water supply was no longer clean and safe, and that saying no to mining meant saying yes to life and 'dignified environmental conditions for future generations'.²² In a region where national interests are so frequently framed as extractivist interests, the Panamanian state decision to shut down one of the largest copper mines in the world was surprising.

One of the court's major concerns was that the contract did not respect Panama's sovereignty over its copper resources. This kind of reasoning could posit that the problem with loss of sovereignty was not extraction itself, but the ownership and distribution of income from resource extraction. This is a major concern in developing countries, especially those where mining activities lead to the exports of primary goods, with an under-industrialised economy and dependence on imports of industrial parts and technology. It is, for instance, how Lula, has approached Brazil's large deposits of rare-earth minerals: not an issue of whether they should be extracted or not, but of how countries willing to access the materials must cooperate to industrialise them within Brazilian territory.²³

²² Chris Taylor, 'Panama's Vast Cobre Mine Is Closed. So Why Is Their Security Still Restricting Access to Local Villages?', *Global Development, The Guardian*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/21/panama-cobre-mine-first-quantum-minerals>; Viviana Herrera and Paulina Personius, 'Organizaciones Panameñas Suenan La Alarma Sobre Una Posible Reapertura de La Mina Cobre Panamá de First Quantum', *Mining Watch Canada*, 25 March 2025, <https://miningwatch.ca/es/blog/2025/3/25/organizaciones-panamenas-suenan-la-alarma-sobre-una-posible-reapertura-de-la-mina>.

²³ 'If They Want Critical Minerals, They Will Have to Industrialize Our Country, Lula Says', *Business, Folha de São Paulo*, 25 November 2025, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/business/2025/11/if-they-want-critical-minerals-they-will-have-to-industrialize-our-country-lula-says.shtml>.

Yet, in Panama's case, the court also expressed that its legal system considers nature a subject of rights. If nature is a 'collective, indivisible, and self-regulated entity, comprising biodiversity and ecosystems', the state is mandated to ensure the protection, permanence, restoration, maintenance, and conservation of ecological functions and structures.²⁴ The ruling echoed an understanding from the streets, where protesters declared that Panama could prosper without mining, framing it as 'no to mining, yes to sovereignty'.²⁵

The mining contract annulment provided a lesson in how popular interests are fundamentally linked to nature's metabolism and not necessarily to commercial balances and GDP growth. Panama's economy depends mostly on services and tourism, with a strong trade deficit (not export-based), and the copper mine only started to play a substantive role in the country's exports after 2019. While FQM and the Government of Canada have claimed that the mine was responsible for 75-80% of all exports from Panama, the OEC database shows that, in 2023, when copper ore exports peaked in proportion to other goods, it amounted to 44.7% of all Panamanian goods.²⁶

The Canadian minister of international trade showed concern regarding a comment by Panama's president José Raúl Mulino that 'the mine – and all assets there, including the \$300 million concentrate stockpile mined by FQM under contract – belong to Panama'.²⁷ Canada has a history of coercive mining in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), with contested operations throughout the region.²⁸ Due to the Canada-Panama Free Trade Agreement, Panama was subjected to an Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) lawsuit by First Quantum Minerals, which seeks over \$20 billion (24% of the 2023 Panamanian GDP) as compensation for the ruling that halted the mine's operations.²⁹

²⁴ Diego Lacayo-Jaén, 'Estudio Del Fallo de Inconstitucionalidad de La Ley 406 de 2023', *Diego Lacayo-Jaén*, 20 March 2024, <https://diegolacayojaen.com/en/blog/estudio-del-fallo-de-inconstitucionalidad-de-la-ley-406-de-2023/>.

²⁵ Gonzalo Ortuño Lopez, 'Protestas en Panamá: comunidades indígenas denuncian agresiones y detenciones por rechazar la mina a cielo abierto más grande de Centroamérica', *Environmental News, Noticias ambientales: Mongabay*, 27 May 2025, <https://es.mongabay.com/2025/05/panama-protestas-mina-violencia-defensores-indigenas/>.

²⁶ 'Panama (PAN) *Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners*', The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/pan>. According to the same set of data, Panama's economic complexity in trade also declined around the time the mine began to export more heavily. Its total income from exports in 2023 (\$6.55 billion) was lower than in 2018 (\$9.44 billion), when Panama exported more dollars in manufactured and industrial goods such as chemical products and machinery. Because of this, the rise in the proportion of copper exports is not explained only by the fact that the mine began producing after 2019, since the less diversified Panama's export sector became in 2018-2023, the bigger the role the newly productive mine played in exports. This information validates protesters' claim that Panama could prosper without the mine, since its economy did not rely on it before 2019.

²⁷ Government of Canada, 'Question Period Note: Panama – First Quantum Minerals – Cobre Panamá Mine', Open Government Portal, 2025, <https://search.open.canada.ca/qpnotes/record/dfatd-maecd%2C00031-2025>.

²⁸ Todd Gordon and Jeffery Roger Webber, 'Canadian Capital and Secondary Imperialism in Latin America', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25, no. 1 (2019): 72–89.

²⁹ ICSID, 'First Quantum Minerals, Ltd. v. Republic of Panama (ICSID Case No. ARB/25/18)', Case Details | ICSID, 2025, <https://icsid.worldbank.org/cases/case-database/case-detail?CaseNo=ARB/25/18>.

The arbitration for this ISDS lawsuit falls under the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) Convention treaty, which Panama signed in 1995. Such treaties propel an international legal system made to protect capitalist investors, but sold to countries as a way to attract foreign direct investment. A study conducted by Bettina Müller and Luciana Ghiotto (2024) showed that 28.5% of all ISDS suits until the end of 2023 were against LAC countries and that investors benefited from awards or final settlements in 60% of the cases.

As of April 2026, the FQM-Panama suit is suspended.³⁰ FQM hopes to engage with the government about a potential reopening, especially now that it has been granted permission by president Mulino to commercialise copper stockpiled in the mine. An open letter by Mining Watch Canada (2025) expressed concern that Cobre Panamá may be allowed to resume full operations, despite a strong signal by Panamanian civil society that the mine 'does not align with their vision for their country and economy' and the Supreme Court's imposition of a national mining moratorium.

The case illustrates how capitalist sovereignty is able to influence and dilute claims of national-state sovereignty,³¹ especially when national interests begin to reflect the shared interests of affected peoples and nature, instead of the interests of corporations. The common interests of the Panamanian people aligned with an ecological sovereignty framework, which was supported by the Supreme Court's interpretation of the state's sovereignty to protect ecological structures. But, in the end, the position of the Panamanian nation-state in the capitalist world order showed two things: (1) Westphalian state sovereignty can be subjected to capitalist authority by the multilateral system, where investor's interests must be protected to the point of threatening the economy of an uncooperative state; (2) that despite popular protests and court ruling, a government is able to continue negotiating with polluting and environmentally destructive corporations in order to pursue economic growth and a stronger role in the world economy.

Green economy and green growth proposals have tried to appease concerns for the planetary boundaries by proposing that it is perfectly possible to decouple continuous growth from intense resource use. Some decoupling is possible and entirely desirable. But given that green economy policies have generally led to a race for more minerals, more land use, and the commodification of ecosystems, we should 'have major concerns about the predominant focus of policymakers on green growth, this focus being based on the flawed assumption that sufficient decoupling can be achieved through increased efficiency without limiting economic production and consumption'.³²

Copper in Panama and rare-earth minerals in Brazil are considered strategic inputs for the electrification of the world economy, in a system in which 'critical' resources have been defined according to security and warmaking considerations and through a flawed energy transition framework distorted by simple decarbonisation efforts.³³ In the meantime,

³⁰ First Quantum Minerals, 'First Quantum Provides Update on Arbitration Proceedings in Panama', 31 March 2025, <https://www.first-quantum.com/news/first-quantum-provides-update-on-arbitration-proceedings-in-panama/>.

³¹ Gabriel Casnati, 'O regime dos acordos internacionais de investimentos e a capacidade regulatória dos Estados: estudo de caso sobre o Energy Charter Treaty' (MA Thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo PUC-SP, 2023), 87.

³² Timothée Parrique et al., *Decoupling Debunked* (European Environmental Bureau, 2019), 3.

³³ Amir Lebdioui and Thea Riofrancos, *Critical Minerals & Resource Nationalism 2.0: Why the Policy Is More Critical than the Mineral*, Working Paper 92 (Technology and Industrialisation for Development (TIDE) Centre,

land-grabbing for meat production, imperialist wars and fossil fuel expansion are not only the norm, but are intensifying with the capture of the state by fascistic tendencies. This toxic co-existence can only provide 'resilience' if this term is taken to mean extension of the durability and plasticity of capital as catastrophes multiply – contrary to the type of resilience found in nature, derived from a healthy metabolism. The result has been an update of colonial and extractivist practices as green colonialism and green extractivism, which promote resource-based accumulation over the satisfaction of people's needs.³⁴ But if those in sacrifice zones dare question this logic, they soon find out that their own state's sovereignty is undermined by capitalist sovereignty, revealing the sacrifice zone to be the exemplary site of *unsovereignty* today.

Ecological sovereignty: common metabolic interests and a post-polycrisis society

Sovereignty based on a physical contradiction – or, indeed, a physical *impossibility* – cannot be considered sovereignty at all. To add insult to injury, states and their governments continue to uphold this framework of sovereignty even when vulnerable to lawsuits and threats of capital flight by national and transnational capitalist classes. When states cave and allow for destructive operations in their territories, continue to pursue fossil-fuel extraction, and allow for agribusiness expansion, they sell out the fundamental interests of their communities for only marginal gains of development – especially on the periphery of capitalism. When ecological collapse comes knocking, workers lose their personal property, their job security and often their lives, while the state is left to pay for loss and damage.

After thirty years of multilateral climate negotiations, there is still no effective mechanism for climate-change reparations compatible with the level of impacts. Yet, treaties and agreements assure investors of state compensation for loss of prospective gains in case operations are shut down, even if they are interrupted for solid environmental reasons. While companies can seek compensation through these instruments, states cannot sue the companies back and must instead rely on their own national courts and legislations. But as the Panamanian case shows us, the national law is not sovereign enough compared to ISDS and global market pressures.

If one state threatens to intervene in the political scenario of another state, this is considered a threat and disrespect to national sovereignty. But when this is done through capitalist disputes, the immediate solution is not to rework domestic policies, question the basis of production, or even protect people and resources from exploitation. On the contrary, states favour negotiations, settlements, and the prospect of opening new markets.

The pursuit of national-state sovereignty through capitalist interests will only speed up catastrophe. Current efforts to transition are leading to new structural problems and even more injustice. These efforts will fail as long as they treat the symptoms and not the cause. The warming limits of 1.5°C and 2°C are not arbitrary; rather they are thresholds that, once crossed, will lead us into uncharted territory of cascading effects, greater economic damages and loss of life and living standards. The normalisation of overshoot also presents a myriad of new challenges to sovereignty, since it is followed by depoliticised support for technologies that warrant great concern, such as solar radiation management, which is tied to the military-industrial complex and has potentially catastrophic effects.³⁵

³⁴ Daniel Macmillen Voskoboynik and Diego Andreucci, 'Greening Extractivism: Environmental Discourses and Resource Governance in the "Lithium Triangle"', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 2 (2022): 787–809, <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211006345>.

³⁵ Martin Siegert et al., 'Safeguarding the Polar Regions from Dangerous Geoengineering: A Critical Assessment of Proposed Concepts and Future Prospects', *Frontiers in Science* 3 (September 2025): 1527393, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsci.2025.1527393>; Sofia Menemenlis, 'The Sunlight Managers', *The BREAK—DOWN*, 22 September 2025, <https://www.break-down.org/the-sunlight-managers/>.

A more metabolic approach is warranted to align economic production and cooperation between states and across territories with the Earth System. It calls for systemic change, which also requires another consideration of sovereignty that can move us from mere management of crises towards radical transformation. Thankfully, a strong research and political agenda has emerged to inquire about the concrete measures and parameters for developing alternatives. This includes the development of ideas and frameworks for how 'to fence and shrink the power of incumbent industries, to democratise decision-making also in the sphere of production and distribution and how welfare can be secured independently of the economic growth imperative'.³⁶ Planning and coordinating for people's welfare seems to be a good directive based on metabolic interdependence and a restructuring of production – including and especially industrial production – for needs and public goods.

Because policy and international cooperation are needed, questions arise about the role of the state. This is critical to confirm that green policies will abide by the science of nature's metabolism. It is also of special interest to countries in the Global South that look at the green agenda (on industry, technology, and infrastructure) as an opportunity not only to survive but also to thrive.³⁷ But since most states act as if green policies can be embraced while maintaining the same class structures, it is also important to question the contemporary form of the state and its structural limitations.³⁸ A new economic relationship has to be established between state authority, territories, political communities and the realm of production in order to break the capital-nation-state trinity.

As we wrestle with the possibility of a state transformed by the necessity to survive and overcome the planetary polycrisis, a framework for 'popular and ecological sovereignty' is of importance. To be ecological, a society's interests cannot be mobilised to achieve limitless growth, and a popular element is necessary to ensure politics that put people and ecosystems first, and not simply in terms of new legalities and formal political participation. Popular and ecological sovereignty refers to a politics of production, international cooperation, and the flow of people, goods and services guided by material abundance within nature's metabolism. Pursued within the limits of nature's metabolism, growth can be renewed through cycles, production and consumption can become more resilient to threats, and sovereignty can be measured according to our capacity to strengthen the planetary immune system. That is, self-defence can become 'common defence', inseparable from a democratic politics of care, and of public and common goods and spaces.

³⁶ Ulrich Brand et al., 'Structural Limitations of the Decarbonization State', *Nature Climate Change* 15, no. 9 (2025): 926, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-025-02394-y>.

³⁷ Amir Lebdioui, *Survival of the Greenest: Economic Transformation in a Climate-Conscious World* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

³⁸ Brand et al., 'Structural Limitations of the Decarbonization State'.

Figure 2. Political transformation through ecological sovereignty

	Agency	Ideology	Frame	Telos to
Action	To care	To answer	To actualise	Build
Basis	Workers and territorialised peoples and ecosystems	Metabolic material conditions	Ecological sovereignty	Abundance within means - true planetary resilience/immunity
Result	Internationalist cooperation	Ecosystemic responsibility	Territorial and worker's power	Good life - social emancipation and radical sustainability

This framework recognises the role states can play through policy and mediation to advance important and urgent politics. But since it challenges the privileged authority given to states over peoples and their territories in the international system, it also questions whether states can be rescued from capitalist hegemony and transformed by ecological politics.

The ecological sovereignty framework is not about ecological state sovereignty. Its basis of metabolic interdependence displaces sovereignty from the monopoly of the capital-nation-state trinity, repurposes sovereignty for the goal of welfare (or abundance) within means (the planet's metabolism), so that another sovereign may be constituted. With directed efforts to overcome the alienation of humans from nature, a political community of workers and territorial peoples may emerge through the shared and common objectives of a good life within planetary boundaries. Ecological sovereignty only works if the state is reduced to a space and an instrument for the engagement of political communities as a site of class struggle over the planetary future. The result may be a more socioecological accountable state, whose sovereignty does not derive from the coercive power of national-state sovereignty but from the ability to coordinate and interconnect the common interests of peoples across territories. It could also require and lead to a true withering away of the state, since without the capitalist drive, it could become an obsolete instrument, the more ecoterritorial politics are consolidated.

The notion of territory is fundamental, because territorialised communities are born of shared conditions and experiences. Territory is not the 'local' or a piece of property, but a place of belonging and political construction, 'founded on abundance of life'.³⁹ It can be multi-scalar, even moving beyond official state borders, through shared ecosystems and perspectives. For example, indigenous leaders from the nine Amazonian nation states issued a manifesto in early 2025 as a coalition named 'Indigenous Amazon G9' with political parameters that affect not only their local situation, but the state of the climate for the whole world.⁴⁰

Part of the disregard policymakers often demonstrate towards 'local communities' that resist megaprojects, corporations and activities that negatively affect their territories derives from a lack of understanding of how life at the local level is inseparable from the conditions for life. The territorial connection eliminates the modern option of just packing up and moving when local space is destroyed or insufficient. A territorial perspective contests the pattern of

³⁹ Joelson Ferreira and Erahsto Felício, *Por Terra e Território: Caminhos Da Revolução Dos Povos No Brasil* (Teia dos Povos, 2021), 43.

⁴⁰ G9 da Amazônia Indígena, 'Acordo Dos Povos Indígenas Da Bacia Amazônica Pelo Clima e Pela Vida', 2025, <https://coiab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Acordo-dos-Povos-Indigenas-da-Bacia-Amazonica-pelo-Clima-e-pela-Vida.pdf>.

destroying places and displacing people, and it can promote protection and repair of places for people to stay, live and prosper. This perspective is sometimes referred to as *ecoterritorial* to emphasise the ecosystemic connection between peoples and territories.

The disregard for the territory as a political space has too often reduced 'territorial sovereignty' to the integrity of a state's territory and borders. But ecoterritorial sovereignty, rooted in popular politics, claims integrity through care and respect for the social-nature metabolism. True territorial sovereignty cannot exist when authority is exerted from above to impose a series of metabolic rifts, displacing peoples and creating more vulnerability. It is why solutions from territories that promote different applications of sovereignty, such as food sovereignty, energy sovereignty, digital sovereignty, and so on, are generally developed in distinction from the modern state. In these frameworks, sovereignty is not exercised through formal authority – which can be external to the context and is often coercive – but through the material capacity to create, build and deliver. Authority is built and earned, not imposed.

If we want a true alternative, it makes sense to look at sovereignty from a territorial, ecological and people-centred perspective. The current framework is so irrational that states can claim sovereignty against each other even if they begin to lose their national territory to floods and rising sea levels. What happens when groups of people are forced to migrate far away, not because of war, but because their home has become uninhabitable due to a 2.6°C warming – our actual projected global temperature based on current policies?⁴¹ How much worse will it be if fascist regimes close down borders while supporting their multinational companies to exploit the rest of the world to produce solutions only for the few?

A polycrisis made of multiple metabolic rifts calls for this perspective of metabolic interdependence. When we alter the Earth System in one part of the world, there are consequences elsewhere too. Generally, neo-colonial states will disregard this as someone else's problem, as practices of othering are often necessary to justify gains made through negative impacts. In economics, these are just externalities, but they are not materially external to the system. They are only politically separated, localised, and temporally isolated – at least they were for a long time. As we cross planetary boundaries, the negative impacts once felt only at the margins will affect the core of the world economy too. Ecological sovereignty, however, demands that responsible management of our interdependence dictates authority, making it even possible to imagine moving from imposing sovereignty to *sharing* sovereignty across territories.

This consideration reminds us that the national-state sovereignty delirium is not exclusive to the capitalist order. In anticapitalist circles, there exists a persistent fantasy in the belief that toppling imperialism and capitalism will be enough to produce a national state capable of asserting full sovereignty over its territories and resources, with the goal of expanding production for the good of the people, but without regard for ecological questions. This rationale ignores that the modern national-state sovereignty framework is a fundamental part of capitalism and that post-capitalist sovereignty cannot be defined by the unlimited authority to use and exploit.

Challenging the national-state sovereignty delirium is a prerequisite for any meaningful post-capitalist project, but even for any state today hoping to escape the stronghold of imperialist and neo-colonial powers over their economies and resources. By treating nature as

⁴¹ Climate Action Tracker, 'Little Change in Warming Outlook for Four Years; New 2035 Climate Targets Make No Difference', 2025, <https://climateactiontracker.org/publications/warming-projections-global-update-2025/>.

simply a supply for the economy rather than a condition for life, states have made themselves and their peoples more vulnerable to the tendencies of capital accumulation and its thirst for resources. An ecological sovereignty perspective may already help to reorganise priorities, produce and plan for long-term society building, while supporting strategies to fight ecological imperialism and rethink the overall rationale of economic production.

It is also worth noting that since the perspective of ecological sovereignty requires transforming 'authority over nature' into 'care with nature', sacrifice zones need to be de-normalised and practices of extraction must be restructured for purpose and meaning, in true post-extractivist fashion. Use of resources for production and trade should be re-evaluated to form the basis for a good life for the majority of people, raising standards of living where necessary, and reducing conspicuous and wasteful consumption in other parts of the world. Tools for 'selective degrowth' must be considered to do away with polluting practices and dangerous industries (such as the gigantic global military authoritarian complex) in order to make room within our emissions and metabolic budget for a different and better kind of growth, focused on addressing real needs and reasonable and ecological wants.⁴²

Since this perspective requires internationalist cooperation, including by revamping trade mechanisms to remove redundancies and improve sharing, it cannot thrive under the national-state sovereignty delirium of competition through resource depletion. The perspective of popular and ecological sovereignty is a requirement for changing how communities, states and other agents approach the conditions for life and the crises of our time. Further, it reveals the necessity of post-capitalist projects, according to which decisions can be guided by dynamics other than that of accumulation and concentration of wealth.

In a world of so many billionaires with dangerous ideas and authoritarian tendencies, the pursuit of popular and ecological sovereignty is not an add-on but the very praxis through which other projects must constitute themselves, consciously overcoming the chauvinistic and competitive dynamics of the system they seek to overcome.

To go beyond capital is a requirement to live and produce within the borderless yet bounded Earth System – finally diverting from the path to catastrophe – but we can only succeed if we stop, as of now, to emulate predatory and destructive logics of production and international accumulation. By basing our strategy to fight the planetary polycrisis on ecological sovereignty, we can hopefully identify forms of cooperation capable of raising living standards for all without plundering nature for its finite resources. This can guide us to human emancipation within the Earth's metabolism, where the limits of the biogeochemical system are not read as impediments to development, but guidance for our common creativity and intelligence to determine how we live and produce within planetary boundaries for generations to come.

⁴² Sabrina Fernandes, 'An Ecosocialist Strategy to Win the Future', *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, 17 November 2022, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/49515/an-ecosocialist-strategy-to-win-the-future>.