



# Shaping a Communitarian Ethos in an Era of Ecological Crisis

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In response to the deep social and ecological crisis for which the international community is proving incapable of attenuating, many Peasants and Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and in other parts of the Global South, are transforming their visions of their futures, shaping a new ethos of self-management and conviviality, consistent with a responsible relationship to their territories. From the vantage point of the Global South, these peoples constitute a social and economic force that is altering the social and productive dynamics in many countries, proposing models of organization and building alliances among themselves regionally and internationally to exchange information, develop common strategies, and provide political support. In Mexico, many continue to produce traditional crops, while modifying their techniques to incorporate agroecological experiences from other communities, diversifying output and protecting the environment. Recently, they are enriching local practices with a systematization of their inherited traditions and cosmologies, creating effective models of social, political and environmental organization that lend authority to their claims to be able to manage their territories autonomously. There is a growing body of scientific literature that substantiates this capacity, demonstrating that the collective knowledge of the global networks of local communities is more effective in protecting biodiversity and attending to their own basic needs while improving their quality of life than that of societies more fully integrated into the global economy. In conclusion, we describe how these visions are shaping international networks, defining new channels for collaboration, improving the quality of life for people in these communities, while protecting them from the continuing incursions of capital.

**Keywords:** Communitarian Subject, conviviality, community welfare, Radical Ecological Economics, *comunalidad*

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## INTRODUCTION

This thematic issue on the “Ethic of Sufficiency” is framed within the scope of “late capitalism.” In their announcement, the editors called for confronting the “daunting challenge of injustice” given the coexistence of stark material deprivation and overabundance. They posed the possibility of “economies oriented toward sufficiency.” They raised the question of whether this principle is inevitably rooted in an ethical and religious framework or whether it can be part of a “secular modern” in facing humanity’s biggest existential challenge: the environmental crisis.

This essay addresses the “ethic of sufficiency” from the perspective of a significant proportion of the peoples living in the Global South. In contrast to the discussions of injustice related to the stark contrasts between the needy and the wealthy in the recent period in capitalist countries, the societies we are describing have lived with this inequality and suffered from the effects of centuries

of colonial oppression, imperial destruction, and capitalist accumulation (and dispossession<sup>1</sup>) for centuries. The result has been the literal obliteration of myriad cultures, the enslavement of millions of persons, and the devastation of ecosystems around the world, erasing untold founts of biodiversity and threatening the very existence of many societies. In spite of this tragic history, thousands of peoples around the world continue to resist, evolving with the changing circumstances to create societies that are now displaying a new-found strength, forging institutions capable of self-governance, focusing on defending their territories, conserving and rehabilitating their natural endowments, attending to the basic needs of their members, while improving their quality of life.

For people in these societies, the question of “sufficiency” is not one having enough but rather creating communities that are organizing themselves to be in balance with their surroundings. They are acutely aware of the challenges of creating productive systems that are not unnecessarily destructive of their environs while developing social processes and technical approaches attuned to the possibilities of their territories. The resulting social metabolic configurations are a direct result of the centrality of traditional belief systems—cosmovisions—that combine the wisdom of inherited customs with the understanding of the need to incorporate new elements as natural and social conditions evolve.

In this article, I address the problem of “sufficiency” from the perception of a number of communities in the Global South. I suggest that the issue is not one of assuring an adequate basket of “satisfactors” for needy individuals, but rather a problem of a collective commitment to the welfare of all the members of the community while also assuming responsibility for the rehabilitation and conservation of the territory. This obligation is not simply one of attending to the material needs, for in many societies their underlying beliefs also encompass an obligation to care for all elements in the natural world—be the other living creatures (flora and fauna) or physical and geological features. As shall be evident, this extended concern is not simply a rhetorical acknowledgment of the significance of the “outside world,” but rather its intricate and intimate integration into the very essence of the collective beings, the societies that are forging the new worlds which are the building blocks to which this essay is dedicated<sup>2</sup>.

To develop this argument, I begin by contrasting the alternative paradigms within Euro-centric epistemologies

currently being employed to approach the relationship between social phenomena and the planet. This analysis employs a radical approach developed by a group of scholars in Mexico based on our collaboration with indigenous peoples and rural communities to identify alternative paths for confronting the multiple challenges facing humanity. Ecological economics (EE) emerged at the end of the twentieth century as transdisciplinary field of enquiry to bridge the gap between the social and natural sciences, positing the need for a pluralistic approach to understanding the complex interactions that were contributing to the profound planetary transformations that we now recognize as a global environmental crisis. In the face of the generally intransigent attachment to the existing institutional framework of the global world economic system, this alternative “radical” paradigm emerges from the inherited traditions and wisdom of peasant and indigenous communities and their evolving social practices to forge responses to the intensifying multidimensional crises that threaten their very existence. These contrasting paradigms are remarkably similar to the difference I am posing between the philosophical literature on “sufficiency” and the practical commitment of many “non-western” societies to organize inclusive institutions that leave no members behind.

With this background, I then explore the cultural and philosophical foundations shaping these societies. Their activities are generally not understood or misunderstood as part of senseless movements to stop the inexorable advance of “progress,” the mobilization of technological advances to efficiently extract the bounty that “nature” bestowed on humanity to assure its “development.” Our analysis starts from the vantage point of these actors, the myriad groups coalescing into increasingly strong organizations. As they associate with each other and formulate strategies to assert their demands, they are often adamant about the need to distance themselves from the system of nation-states and the array of institutions that has systematically marginalized and impoverished them.

Finally, I reflect on the nature of the emerging constellation of national, regional and international alliances that are consolidating new systems of governance to assure their viability and strengthen each of their members. Throughout the world these networks offer mutual support, while providing a diversity of approaches to confronting the practical problems of governance, social organization, productive diversification, and environmental management that provide the underpinnings for assuring that the communitarian ethos can contribute to overcoming the multiple crises that confront humanity at present.

## ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS: AN HISTORICAL EXCURSION AND A PARADIGM CONFLICT

Ecological economics emerged as a transdisciplinary field of enquiry to build an analytical bridge between society and the planet. The lack of an (academic) integration of social and ecological dynamics became woefully apparent as the cumulative impact of a critical literature pointed to an impending

<sup>1</sup>Luxemburg (1951) revised Marx’s early characterization of “primitive accumulation” asserting that it is a continuing process that will not cease until there are no more lands (resources) or “free laborers” to be brought under the heel of capitalist expansion, that is the extension of the social relation controlled by the owners of the means of production (Perelman, 2000). Harvey (2005) recently expanded on this analysis, labeling it “accumulation by dispossession”.

<sup>2</sup>This unity of society and nature was a controversial assertion in Western scholarship when proposed by French anthropologist Descola (2013). Indigenous communities around the world had long been vociferous and eloquent in asserting their intimate interrelationships with the planet and all of its component parts. The subsequent proliferation of literature advancing this perspective is testimony to the changing balance of sensibilities in this matter; see, for example, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017), de la Cadena and Blaser (2018), and Esteva (2019) for poignant examples.

multidimensional crisis: the inability of the capitalist world-system to provide for the needs of a considerable proportion of the world's population while it was devastating the planet's ecosystems (Arrighi et al., 1989). A number of activist scholars produced the foundations for a new wave of critical literature, building on the clarion cries of Kapp (1963) and Boulding (1966) as well as the earlier warning of Polanyi (2011 [1944]) that the system was resting on a house of cards, three fictitious commodities: nature, money, and labor. The Club of Rome issued its broadside: *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) while the “Brundtland Commission” more diplomatically tried to paint a path forward in its *Our Common Future* [World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987]. The International Society for Ecological Economics emerged in this context (1989), bringing together academics attempting to meet the challenge, counting among its earliest participants people who were already warning about the need to dramatically alter the productive system to consider the Second Law of Thermodynamics (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971) and the need for a different metabolic balance (Martínez-Alier, 1987).

Participants in a long tradition of analysis of metabolic systems and warnings of the destructive dynamics of the existing dynamics of the evolving productive structure, it seemed obvious that the assembled experts would muster their combined analytical prowess to design alternative paths for human development and environmental remediation and protection. Instead, much of the energy of the Society's members was directed to using the tired tools of the market place and their focus on ineffective public policy approaches to provide a smoke-screen for powerful corporate interests, intent on feeding the intensifying crises (Söderbaum, 2015; Spash, 2020a,b). The stopgap measures designed to channel “well-intentioned” social and environmental resources to attend the most pressing problems rarely seemed to reach the intended beneficiaries or to protect the vulnerable ecosystems. Another current within the organization, cognizant of the profound social and environmental damage that the global system was wreaking on peoples around the world, embarked an ambitious project to document the thousands of communities threatened by the advance of market forces and corrupt practices; their *Environmental Justice Atlas* (<https://ejatlas.org>) is proving to be a valuable tool for analysts, politicians, and communities attempting to rein in these practices (Martínez-Alier, 2021); the cumulative impact of this work is clearly improving their ability to wage more effective struggles against the voracity of capitalist expansion.

A different approach, which underpins the analysis of this essay, promotes collaboration with grassroots groups—mostly peasants and indigenous people—engaged in implementing their own strategies of political autonomy and defense of their territories, revealing a particular biocultural dimension in the interaction society-economy-nature, and, above all, giving rise to a deep critique of economic rationality supporting the Western civilizational project. It integrated the seeds of a socio-environmental alternative to the global climate emergency. The starting point of this “radical” current (Radical Ecological Economics, identified as REE in what follows) is the recognition

of the heterogeneity of the societies with which we collaborate (Barkin, 2017; Pirgmaier, 2021). It is not only a question of a multitude of languages, ethnicities or nationalities, but also the contrast with the relatively homogeneous image that the genealogy of the social sciences of the North Atlantic world produced and “simplified” compared to the variegated array characterizing the societies of the Global South. In this world, there are profound differences that start from the various cosmogonies and cosmologies of the different groups, as well as the customs, traditions, ceremonies, and social systems of reciprocity and collective organization that they engender<sup>3</sup>. A common element among these cultures is their attachment to the territory, to the geographical space they occupy, a space that has a deep meaning that transcends the concept of property or belonging transformed into (private) property by the Euro-descendent societies analyzed by most of the members of the ISEE.

A second characteristic, derived from the previous one, is the radical ontological difference of what in the Western world is known (and misunderstood) as “Nature.” This dimension has tangible and intangible meanings, sometimes expressed as “the web of life” (Moore, 2022) where everything is related to everything and in which many non-Western peoples do not make a distinction between the “I” and the phenomenal world, that is, they do not establish a separation between human beings and other species (Harding, 1986), since, among many indigenous and afrodescendent peoples, they are not only considered part of it, but they are “nature.” This profound difference stems from a great diversity of stories rooted in a long tradition to explain the origins of the world and societies (Kopenawa and Albert, 2013). The meaning of this reverence for the planet is central to the analysis of the various issues addressed by ecological economics. It implies not only recognizing the omnipresence of the dialectical relationship between human and non-human natures of the *oikeios* or the web of life, where there is “the creative, generating, and multidimensional relationship of species and the environment” (Moore, 2020, p. 18) and its importance not only to determine our lives, but also for the organization of social life and its institutions.

Just as important as the relationship with the environment, is the character of solidarity within the communities, encompassing responsibility for their own collective performance and for their relationship with the environment. In contrast to the heightened individualism of the “globalized” societies, as explored in the next section, this local solidarity facilitates the ability of individuals to pursue their own interests while contributing to the consolidation of the communities of which they are a part; solidarity, in this sense, also involves ties of reciprocity among

<sup>3</sup> Although this is not the place to explore the richness of these different traditions and heritages, perhaps it would be worth mentioning a few: the *Sumak Kawsay* or Buen Vivir of the Andean world (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010); the *comunalidad* of the Sierra Norte de Oaxaca, Mexico (Martínez Luna, 2010; Meyer et al., 2010; Escobar, 2020); *Lekil Kuxlejal* in Zapatista lands of Mexico (Paoli, 2003; Mora, 2017); South African *Ubuntu* (Terblanché-Greef, 2019; Mugumbate and Chereni, 2020); *Swaraj* of Gandhi's thought (Kothari et al., 2014). For an overview of some Latin American traditions in English, see Beling et al. (2021) and Brand et al. (2021) for a more global analysis.

members of the community. Unlike the globalized societies in which they exist, many of these societies enjoy a long history and a communal dynamic, despite the social forces that were pressuring them toward individualism and assimilation; in some cases, efforts to recover this heritage derive from the blows they suffered in trying to maintain their autonomy or rescue it after unhappy experiences of following the lure of developmentalism of past eras (Wolf, 1982). They are forging collective organizations and dynamics for decision-making by consensus involving the participation of all their members, including women and youth; the significant importance of women's presence is reflected in the flourishing ecofeminist literature that will be referred to below. This participatory or direct democracy enabled the integration of new voices in the formulation of strategies and programs. Of particular note in this regard is the relatively long history of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico (Villoro, 2007, 2015; Esteva, 2021).

Placing the cosmologies of the communities and their collective organizations in the foreground for the formulation of an REE generates another epistemic-political perspective, focused on the care and reproduction of life in all of its dimensions, rather than of capital. It contributes to a different methodology for conducting research and building theory. In this new framework, we identify the ontological and epistemological need to articulate with members of the communities in the work of building knowledge, structuring thinking differently, and promoting new practices and forms of action, since their perceptions, and those of their organizations, are those that will guide the formulation of questions and provide us with paths to look for models of analysis and clues to devise strategies for identifying and solving socio-environmental problems (Fuente-Carrasco et al., 2018; Sáenz Boldt et al., 2021). This indigenous form of consultation and consensual decision-making is based on a dialogical and reflective method known among the Tzeltal peoples as *tijwanej* that allows everyone to participate and consists of “taking out what is in the heart of the other” (Harvey, 2000, p. 83). It is a productive method that comes from the word *tijel* which means to move, and that is exactly the objective of this reflective model in the sense of appealing to the other, to arouse, that is, to put her in motion.

As a consequence, REE also transforms our appreciation of the character of the groups with whom we are collaborating. Without underestimating their knowledge, as collective groups, they are not incorporated as informants or repositories of information, of traditions; nor, do they limit themselves to contributing with their valuable abilities to interpret certain natural phenomena or to mix the ingredients that produce the remedies, the cures, or the prophylactic substances that have served to face different “evils” that they suffer. That is, we are undertaking a symmetrical relationship in the co-construction of new knowledge, and in the implementation of collaborative research strategies. Their traditions and cultural activities, as well as their integration to face the challenges that arise, generate another dynamic that translates into a **Community Subject**, an entity that assumes the responsibility to propose, to move forward with their own resolve, facing the socio-environmental problems (sociometabolic) that arise and overcoming them

whenever possible. Then, many of these actors become “social subjects,” understanding that they have to transcend both the concept of individuality as well as the institutions within which they have been constrained, forging new procedures to create new political spaces that would allow them a social appropriation of nature (to protect and conserve their territories; Barkin and Sánchez, 2020).

## FORGING THE COMMUNITY SUBJECT<sup>4</sup>

Community dynamics offer important contributions to advance in the process of building new socio-metabolic configurations<sup>5</sup> to assure environmental balance, improve the quality of collective life, and reinforce the capacity for self-governance and the advance of demands for autonomy. Among them, we have identified three of utmost importance: (1) in the variety of cosmologies of the different peoples is implicit the centrality of their various social organizations in contrast to the social contract that dominates the main cultures of the North Atlantic world<sup>6</sup>; (2) the possibility for the communities of workers, peasants, indigenous, and afrodescendants to generate significant surpluses through the participation of all their members in the different tasks identified by the assemblies and their leaders, and the commitment to use them for projects based on collective decision-making; and (3) the practical and analytical visibility of the perspective of women in the communities whose struggles opens new windows on their collective practices, as part of the community subject, and their contributions to sustaining life while maintaining the continuity of the territories. On the basis of their own narratives, they have become protagonists in the defense of lands and territories, active participants in the exercise of autonomy, the consolidation of their productive base, the management of the territory, and the consolidation of alliances with other communities. We now explore these core contributions:

- 1) A feature common to many of these societies is the integration of the service of individuals for the common good, as members of the community strengthening social and political unity. In this context, this service becomes a dialectic of a gift (Hyde, 2019), in the sense of consolidating societies based on redistribution and reciprocity, since it facilitates members' full integration, while generating avenues for each to find

<sup>4</sup>I use the singular form throughout this article to emphasize the collective nature of the participants that come together in each community to bring their projects to fruition. It in no way suggests that one community subject is the same as another, or that their beliefs, forms of organization, or goals are the same.

<sup>5</sup>An important concept that defines the way in which societies organize the relationship with their territories, from the appropriation of their natural endowments, their incorporation into production, circulation and consumption, and finally their disposition. This relationship is at the heart of the possibilities for societies to confront their impact on the planet. Its reorganization within the communities to reduce this burden is key to the profound differences in the configurations that are highlighted in the text (Barkin and Fuente, 2021).

<sup>6</sup>Villoro (1997, 2003, 2004, 2009) has been particularly insistent on analyzing the depth of the difference between the forms of social organization embedded in these communities and the social contracts that derive from the tradition of Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau.

ways of contributing to the whole. In this way, the individual can excel, strengthening their capabilities and follow their particular interests through agreements established with and by the community, ensuring that their performance contributes to communal projects as well as their wellbeing. The interesting and innovative thing about these contracts is their contribution to reinforcing institutional structures that govern traditional communities around the world, especially when they incorporate a post-humanist vision (Braidotti, 2013) that includes biophysical factors in a community that encompasses the terrestrial as well as the celestial and underworld spheres as suggested by Lenkersdorf (1996, 2005, 2008). This comprehensive relationship with the world around them generally stems from underlying cosmogonies deeply rooted in many of the cultures of the societies with which we are collaborating.

The community expression of the functioning of indigenous peoples has enormous significance for our inquiry into the emergence of a collective ethos or *telos*. They express themselves in different ways in the various indigenous cultures, but a common characteristic is the search for mechanisms to consolidate a collective governance capacity accepted by all of its members, a process that differs profoundly from its counterpart in the Eurocentric sphere. Perhaps the clearest way to characterize this difference is the contrast between representative and participatory institutions that are predominant in each of these “worlds.” This collective ethos is the point of entry for the community to avoid the dilemma of people going without: the scourge of deprivation that underlies the need for a discussion of “sufficiency”<sup>7</sup>.

- 2) The possibility of generating and distributing surpluses is directly related to that of the communal organization. It begins with the deep current of reciprocity imbued in social relations, a characteristic that transcends any accounting system, generating new economies of gift and forms of redistribution that are incomprehensible in the capitalist “world system”<sup>8</sup>. Reinforcing these elements is the social character of the recruitment of community members to carry out community tasks and responsibilities. Among most traditional peoples, there are tasks and functions that they have to fulfill on a regular basis, many of which cannot be remunerated. Their assignment depends on customary processes, often carried out within participatory bodies, such as the Assembly or its committees.

<sup>7</sup>In a text defining their heritage and way of life, a woman in a highland community of Mexico explained: We “is a word born from the heart. I mean what is yours or mine, or is ours. Even so, when we die, that ‘we’ remains for others, and it is a relationship that never ends because ours, from the moment we make it part of us, we take care of it, we try to do it, but we also do not let it die” (Boege Schmidt and Fernández, 2021, p. 23).

<sup>8</sup>A classic text on the subject of the “Gift” is Mauss (1970 [1925]), whose discussion was updated by Godelier (1999). Another text that explores concepts in contemporary terms is Hyde (2019). Graeber and Wengrow (2021) describe the protagonism of the Community Subject and the constancy of the generation of surpluses for collective wellbeing in an historical context, dating back thousands of years.

The social character of community mobilization, requires varying commitments from those who are involved. In all communities, there are essential tasks to be assumed, generally recognized, for the maintenance or improvement of built infrastructures or ecosystems; in these cases, it is common to observe the forms of generalized participation through mechanisms that take the name of *tequio*, *mano vuelta*, *faena*, or *minga*, among others, depending on the region. In these processes, the active participation of children, young people and the elderly in activities appropriate to their age and gender is also observed<sup>9</sup>.

They also engage in other activities that produce and mobilize surpluses not evident in market economies. Some have a symbolic importance, contributing to enrich cultural and traditional heritages, involving celebrations that strengthen social and political ties for community life. On certain occasions, greater material and monetary resources are required that serve to limit the accumulation of great wealth among community members (Scott, 1985). In other cases, the assignment of administrative, political or technical responsibilities reflects the proven capabilities of those selected; in several instances, the rotation of these positions also corresponds to deliberate strategies for minimizing individual ambitions and training new cadres, reflecting ideas for promoting greater equality in the organization. This practice is essential for maintaining and strengthening collective services, such as education and health, and ensure the environmental conservation of their territories. The commitment to promoting deliberate systems for ensuring egalitarian practices is an oft-mentioned concern within these communities, reflecting their cultural practices and the long histories of abuse in the societies from which they are trying to distance themselves.

In this sense, the Communitarian Subject offers an analytical framework and a methodology to accompany these collective processes. It involves enhancing the willingness and solidarity of its members to generate surpluses, permitting them to consolidate their own projects in the construction of post-capitalist societies. It is not a question of devising new utopias, but of forging “anti-systemic” alliances with other equally committed communities and having the strength to move forward in the face of the considerable pressures that the governments of their countries are exerting to integrate them into the world market (Arrighi et al., 1989).

- 3) REE was born from our interaction with the communities rooted in their territories, but it deepened with the transformation of social relations within them. We witnessed and participated in the emergence of a renewed force of “eco-territorial” feminism that defends not only geographical spaces but also personal ones, opening a new dialogue that

<sup>9</sup>The significance of this form of participation for the present analysis of sufficiency cannot be overstated. Not only is it a fundamental social obligation and a basic principle for organizing communal production in societies throughout the Global South, but it is also the foundation for ensuring the community’s ability to provide for the basic needs of all members. The Electoral Court of Mexico explained: “Without *tequio* there would be no infrastructure that many indigenous communities currently have; that is, schools, hospitals, roads, and other services” (Bustillo and García Sánchez, 2016, p. 11; see also, Salazar Zarco, 2018).

confronts the dominant geoculture and proposes relational paradigms and epistemologies from an intersectional perspective where the ethics of care and the sustainability of life are at the center. This is crucial: in the question of sufficiency, the matter of the quality of life in paramount, and the role of people left on the margins by the market in providing this support offers a meaningful substitute for commodities.

In this regard, it is essential to reflect on the transition observed throughout the Global South: the decline of patriarchal domination as a result of the recognition of the significant contributions that women played historically and the leadership they are exercising at present. This was succinctly phrased in a meeting with leaders from a number of indigenous communities in an analysis of the contribution of Zapatista women:

...patriarchy goes well-beyond the exploitation of women; it explains the systematic destruction of nature. Conversely, matriarchy is not defined by the predominance of women over men, but by an entirely different conception of life, not based on domination and hierarchies, and respectful of the relational fabric of all life. This is why, for all cultures, it can be said that “in the beginning, there was the mother” (in the last instance, Mother Earth), that is, the relation, as ends to still be the case today for many indigenous peoples, who retain a range of matriarchal practices (von Werlhof, 2015).

In the process of adapting to this important social transformation, the Communitarian Subject is strengthened by recognizing the changing situation of women, acknowledging the non-mercantile subjectivities that are vital in the framework of the current ecological and social devastation. By explicitly incorporating women, along with the young and the aged in an intergenerational dialogue, these societies are strengthening their valuable heritage of the dialectic of reciprocity and gift, recognizing the non-economic dimensions of the relationships among members and with the other living beings of their environment “mapping the bodies-territories, in search of the ways of healing and resilience, in dialogue with local and ancestral knowledge” (Svampa, 2021, p. 9).

This evolving ability of women within their communities to assert their importance and the need to upend the behaviors of the past that violate them and make them vulnerable, is forcing communities to recognize the importance of every member. This process has not been easy and continues to pit women and certain groups of leaders against their own relatives and the powers embedded in many areas. In the context of the present essay, it highlights the significance of tackling the challenges of “sufficiency” with extra-market institutions, thereby avoiding the predicaments highlighted in the mainstream literature (e.g., Casal, 2007; Huseby, 2020).

This new dynamic is emerging from the demands of many communities in other areas. The renewed awareness of the meaning of their cosmovisions and cosmogonies highlights the enormous contribution of women as guardians of much of traditional knowledge, of the ways in which they relate to their environments, and of the possibilities of staying healthy and

united. In political affairs, the heritage of machismo contributed to disparaging the material contribution of women, both in terms of their role in the reproduction of family and community life, and in the various traditional social and productive activities in which they are leaders.

With the consolidation of these social dynamics, new paths for generating and distributing surpluses are emerging. As this becomes a theme of open discussion, it is surprising to many, to realize how the daily work of women, and the incorporation of the young and the elderly, has facilitated a much more effective mobilization of the community as a whole for collective chores and the organization of traditional and new productive activities<sup>10</sup>.

But this recognition and acceptance of the need for equity has other impacts on the daily life of the community. The broadening of the field of analysis to integrate the feminist ecoterritorial vision facilitates the methodological and theoretical “decolonization” tasks so essential for deepening the communitarian ethos (Lugones, 2008; Millán Moncayo, 2011; Escobar, 2020; Smith, 2021). The very action and subjectivity of the Communitarian Subject obliges a reconsideration of the ways in which we interact with institutions that try to condition the rules of social and political organization and the ways in which we build alliances and participate in the spaces of exchange. This decolonization requires profound changes with respect to the ways in which we collaborate with the Communitarian Subject (Fuente-Carrasco et al., 2018) and possibly new directions for the academic agenda of committed researchers.

Accepting the need for a feminist vision is the result of the protagonism of eco-territorial feminisms in the effective defense of the commons and an important force of resistance against extractivism, which although at the beginning of the structural adjustment reforms in the nineties was led by indigenous movements in Latin America, it is now driven by women who understand that patriarchal violence to their bodies, is analogous to what extractivist violence does to territories. However, the inclusion of the feminist perspective is not restricted to recognizing a limited number of rights, but to acknowledging a relational epistemology that requires, among other things, decolonizing and depatriarchalizing the interactions between economy, society and nature. It also underlines the obligation of the researcher to reflect on structures of personal, academic and work relationships, in the same way that it is promoting new dynamics within peasant and indigenous societies.

This vision was translated into action in 2011, in Cherán, Michoacán, when a group of women and young people organized to stop illegal logging and drug trafficking in their forests, recuperating indigenous traditions and language; in the following decade, the community reorganized itself,

<sup>10</sup>This is vividly apparent among the younger generations in the ranks of the Zapatistas in Chiapas. An eloquent first-hand account of this interaction with young women is presented by Mora in Millán Moncayo (2014, p. 155–181). The book presents 13 other essays with a wide range of feminist visions relating to the “decolonization” of “civilization,” recounting experiences of peoples moving their communities forward toward a “full and dignified life” (an inadequate translation of the concepts mentioned in textfootnote 3, *supra*).

creating a self-government and local enterprise structure that was recognized by the State which is now obligated to transfer tax revenues for local administration (Gasparello, 2021). Of course, as a consequence, the quality of life has dramatically improved, illustrating the basic tenet of this article.

In summary, one of the most relevant contributions of Latin American eco-territorial feminisms is the need to take seriously the change and displacement of the center/periphery binomial because (against all predictions) the cities that cluster the economic and political power of the global north are no longer the center of the world; instead, it is the forest masses of the planet that in the context of climate change play a strategic role in carbon capture, and therefore, they are where the future of humanity is at stake, in an increasingly clear challenge between capital or life. Similarly, it is the small-scale food producers, concentrated in the Global South, who are the principal producers of food for human consumption, contrary to the exaggerated claims of the international agroindustrial corporations; it is generally agreed that they nourish about 70% of the people with less than one-third of the land (Grain, 2022). It is no surprise that the Anthropocene marks a before and after in the history of humanity, and that women, peasant, afrodescendent, and indigenous peoples are the main victims of social or environmental change; it is in the same process that they have become the main protagonists in the defense of the commons and in underlining their importance for the sustainability of the web of life.

Additionally, feminism has insisted on deconstructing the binomial identity/otherness to think about difference in a different way (Lugones, 2015), post-human and intersectional, to problematize both the male cosmogony that feminizes territories as “virgin” spaces that must be conquered, colonized, and exploited in the name of the mythology of progress and modernization (Brum, 2021). In any case, we must question and dismantle the white political-racial identity that subalternized the world’s population in criteria of race, class, gender to adjust them to the objectives of value extraction and capital accumulation (Tornel, 2022). If the above is valid, then Aguilera Klink’s (2021) critique of the Anglo-Saxon hegemony of ecological economics becomes more trenchant, in which he proposes to recognize the importance of theoretical contributions from below that comes from the Global South, particularly Africa, Asia, and above all, Latin America.

Finally, in the perspective of understanding and strengthening the Communitarian Ethos, I propose, in the manner of Illich (2008, p. 112), not to make a science *for* people, but a science made *by* people. In this case, what is needed is not only a pluralistic but intercultural methodological perspective, one that goes beyond the pure dialogue of knowledge systems, making evident the power of the subjugated and displaced knowledge systems of indigenous and afrodescendent peoples and eco-territorial feminisms to propose an intercultural epistemic dialogue, to the extent that it responds to this construction from below of the processes of transformation of the structures of domination, whether cultural (epistemic), economic or political, since this subaltern knowledge is a

key resource for the agenda of a research that decolonizes the relations of power-knowledge between hegemonic and subaltern sectors. This critical interculturality already constitutes a Eurocentric detachment and a strategy to transcend it (Estermann, 2010; Robert and Rahnema, 2011; Millán Moncayo, 2014).

## CONSOLIDATING A COMMUNITARIAN ETHOS: THE MILPA AS A METAPHOR

The communitarian ethos is a complex amalgam of cosmology, tradition, history, political organization, and environmental management that is enabling many communities to forge the post-capitalist societies that are empowering them to confront constructively the multiple crises facing humanity in this historical period. This ethos creates a framework for understanding the relationship of society with nature and of the individual with the community. As pointed out above (see textfootnote 3), the ethos takes many different forms, depending on each society’s history and context. *Comunalidad* is one such formulation that emerged from the experience of peoples in the Mexican state of Oaxaca (Díaz, 2007; Martínez Luna, 2010).

This Oaxacan version approaches the matter of relationships within society and with the planet in ways that are similar to the dominant vision of “*buen vivir*” (good living) in the Andean area, the *Sumak Kawsay* (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010; Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2014). In the words of one of the formulators, it is a challenge to the dominant powers: Martínez Luna expressed it clearly in a dialogue with Noam Chomsky: “*comunalidad is the epistemological notion that sustains an ancestral, new and proper civilizatory process*,” the inheritance of thousands of years, without ceasing to be new because it is always renewing itself, that is, a dynamic process, capable of stopping the sickly individualization of knowledge, power and culture (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 175). Unlike community, *comunalidad* integrates four substantive elements: territory, authority or power, work and enjoyment or celebration, while the values that articulate it are respect, social justice, and reciprocity.

Perhaps one of the most vivid ways of illustrating this concept and its relevance for explaining how it contributes to advancing this civilizatory process is the “revolutionary” agroecological technology developed by pre-Colombian peoples more than eight millennia ago, a technology that dominates the Mexican countryside even today. Maize is not a naturally occurring grain; it was created by agronomic experimentation over the course of many generations from a native plant, teosinte, by Meso-Americans. Now one of world’s most important grains for human and animal consumption, this remarkable history only recounts part of its significance. During those centuries, these peoples advanced further, creating a complex agricultural system, the *milpa*, now widely recognized as one of the most remarkable agronomic innovations of early civilizations, pre-dating the emergence of the western European “civilizations”.

The *milpa* is a pluricultural wonder<sup>11</sup> (see **Figure 1**). The genius of the early agronomists and farmers became apparent as they determined to sow the corn together with beans, a very significant scientific advance. Today, we know that the bean is a legume that extracts nitrogen from the air, transfers it through its roots, acting as fertilizer to nourish the corn through the rhizome system: the underground networks of roots that interact and with which beans and corn intercommunicate. So, the nitrogen that the bean transports to the ground feeds the plant and helps the corn to prosper. They also found that it would be very good to plant pumpkin to protect the soil, thus generating a groundcover to prevent the land from drying out; this process of agronomic experimentation included taking advantage of the pumpkin flower, as a food delicacy, diversifying their diet, even before harvest times; to this emerging cornucopia, they added many varieties of chili peppers that add so much flavor to life! They also discovered the value of the wide variety of “*quelites*” that sprung up in the maize fields, flavorful leafy greens with important nutritional benefits. Finally, they discovered the culinary delight of a fungus that appeared on some maize cobs, the *huitlacoche*, a delicacy particularly cherished in “*nouvelle cuisine mexicana*!”<sup>12</sup>. The extraordinary invention of the *milpa* was based on a continuous arduous, scientific collaboration of Mesoamerican peoples, illustrative of a cosmic vision, a special relationship between nature and society that sprang from the very fabric of their societies<sup>13</sup>.

The *milpa* offers a different way of thinking about the dynamics of nature and society, or as Martínez Luna (2022, p. 1) puts it: “The separation between Nature and society is the logic of power.” In this description of the emergence of the *milpa* and its significance for the wellbeing of peoples, we cannot insist enough on the importance of the concept of rhizomes: the subterranean rhizomes in nature, invisible to the naked eye but essential for the wellbeing of the multiple forms of life on the surface. What is extraordinary, is the ability of these peoples in ancient times to realize their existence, their meaning, and the ways to encourage their proliferation. However, the perception and understanding of these rhizomes also extended to their own lives, as there is ample evidence that they went to great lengths

to generate and “densify” the social rhizomes, the political, and trade networks that drove a great diversification in the various productive, ceremonial, and cultural activities of which only a few have survived today. The importance of these cooperative organizations within communities is a significant factor that reflects on the way in which society has learned from nature; a striking contrast with the competitive and individualistic dynamics promoted by society in the “globalized” world<sup>14</sup>.

In different ways, and a variety of manifestations, we observe in this history of the *milpa* something of the fundamental ethical bases of communitarianism: respect, social justice, and reciprocity. They are the starting point from which many peoples are rejecting the individualistic methodology and market dominance, with the transformative effect on all aspects of life, everything not destined for the market, into positive or negative externalities. This history can contribute to our understanding of the difference between the approach to a “sufficiency ethic” in Eurocentric literature and that offered in this essay.

## STRENGTHENING TRADITION THROUGH INNOVATION: RECOVERING SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL METABOLISMS

Recovering a sustainable social metabolism is central to strengthening communities. Forging a sustainable social metabolism poses the challenge of reducing the demands on nature for maintaining the quality of life in communities while minimizing their burden on the planet. Generating local welfare plans is not enough; we find that many of the inherited and updated strategies for production, social care, and environmental management in communities offer solutions for the organization that ensure more balanced approaches to their environmental impacts and are less expensive to implement. This is the case of small-scale rural production, improving traditional systems in the *milpa*, for example, by applying agroecological experiences, transmitted in the peasant-to-peasant schools that have been convened in Mexico and elsewhere; this is an excellent example of the densification of organizational networks, the social rhizomes mentioned in the previous section (Mata García, 2013; López Valentín et al., 2020).

In our work, over 30 years we coined a motto to define how the university can collaborate in this process of the communities: *Strengthening Tradition Through Innovation*. This approach reflects an extremely important element in our relationships with communities: the recognition of their dynamism, and the importance of their ability to experiment, evaluate, and innovate, when it comes to finding new ways to solve problems or improve their conditions. In this sense, Wolf (1982) was emphatic in insisting that to assure their continuity, communities have to modify tradition to changing conditions, if they were to stay strong; that is, the survival of traditional societies depends on

<sup>11</sup>There is an abundant literature on the *milpa*, its agronomic qualities and significance, and its history. For an accessible English language publication, see Ventura Martínez (2017); a more detailed discussion in Spanish, with an ample bibliography can be found in Lozada Aranda and Ponce Mendoza (2016). A well-documented discussion of its evolution over 8000 years in the Maya region of Mesoamerica is Ford and Nigh (2009).

<sup>12</sup>In present-day commercial agriculture the *quelites* are considered weeds to be done away with using herbicides and the fungus, known as “corn smut”, makes the grain unsuitable for sale!

<sup>13</sup>We have omitted here an equally important discussion of the invention of nixtamalization, as a process to transform corn into a food with nutritional qualities superior to many basic grains in other cultures. This technological advance was decisive for their health, involving adding lime to the mixture that releases the amino acids in the maize that are fundamental for the formation of the complete proteins when combined with beans; the diet was further enhanced with chili peppers and tomatoes, also native to these regions. In this way, ancestors developed a cuisine that offered a source of protein, minerals, and vitamins, affording the Mesoamerican peoples one of the healthiest diets of all the populations in the world before the conquest. An introduction to this important cultural transformation is: Serna Saldivar (2015).

<sup>14</sup>In this context, it is essential to note the importance of the activities of social and solidarity economies in capitalist economies, and the little attention directed to them by researchers of orthodox economics (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).

## Traditional System- La milpa

LA MILPA ES UN COMPLEJO SISTEMA AGRÍCOLA Y CULTURAL CON MUCHOS SIGLOS DE EXISTENCIA. LA ROTACIÓN DE SUS CULTIVOS MANTIENE LA FERTILIDAD DEL SUELO Y REDUCE LA EROSIÓN.

**MILPA MEXICANA =**  
maíz + frijol + calabaza + chile + quelites



**FIGURE 1 |** The traditional mesoamerican milpa.

their resilience (Fuente-Carrasco, 2012; Boege Schmidt, 2021). This feature continues to be fundamental in our university work and, for this reason, we ask ourselves: How can university research collaborate, integrate and complement the work and concerns of the communities, with regard to productive activities as well as in organizational, social and political matters?

Two examples of this approach to innovation in our relationships with communities are illustrative. In one project we started by collaborating with a medical doctor from the state university whose pioneering research established that avocados—an important local fruit—are a source of beneficial fatty acids for the human population, reducing the concentration of high-density cholesterol in the blood (contrary to the previous assumptions of the medical community). Combining this result with research among Purépecha communities (the local indigenous group), we proposed a project to produce “lite pork” in backyard plots managed by women. They organized to market the meat to the nearby urban population at a substantial premium, directly benefiting the local economy and empowering the participants (Barón León and Barkin, 2001).

Another example reflects an extremely serious problem throughout the country (and the world): the progressive imbalance between the availability of water and burgeoning demand. In the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca, the overload on the natural springs caused alarm in a Zapoteca community, which asked for our collaboration to diagnose the situation; from the beginning, they rejected the solution of the State Water Commission to bring the liquid from another source, since this would affect the wellbeing of other communities. Initially, they

realized that their pattern of exploiting the forest was part of the problem, calling for a long-term management plan to restore the underground aquifers. But, there was also a need to reduce consumption in the short term; the community assembly was informed of the situation, with a proposal for a radical solution from the local water committee: replace the household faucets with neighborhood hydrants (at a maximum of 25 m from each house) so that families could carefully supervise and reduce their consumption; it also proposed replacing the “English” toilets in the houses with composting units that would be maintained by a collective to guarantee hygiene; as expected, these proposals provoked considerable discussion, but after a long debate, they were approved and implemented with collective work<sup>15</sup> (Fuente-Carrasco et al., 2019)<sup>16</sup>.

With these principles, *comunalidad* necessarily confronts collective actors with the “individualistic” approach dominant in our society. The obligation to communicate, to dialogue from this vision, similar to the principle of Andean good living (*Sumak Kawsay*; Huanacuni Mamani, 2010), and similar cosmologies among the peoples in Panama (Kuna; Bley Folly, 2020), the Amazonians who are trying to defend their forests against the encroachment of oil companies, cattle ranchers, miners, and many other corporate enterprises. This heritage of ancient cultures generally incorporates a collective Assembly as an institution to make decisions; in recent years this has resulted

<sup>15</sup>Important exceptions were agreed upon for families with elderly and disabled people, and for community facilities.

<sup>16</sup>Other reflections on this strategy are Barkin and León (2005) and Barkin (2012).

in a dramatic transformation within communities, creating new roles for women, a recognition that patriarchy and machismo were limiting the opportunities for the whole community. There is a new recognition of overcoming this legacy from different historical contexts and social relations, creating conditions for equality in participation, where the productive contributions of women are recognized along with a meaningful role in the political and social process (Millán Moncayo, 2014; Mora, 2017).

## FORGING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITARIAN SUBJECT

The concerted efforts of communities across the globe to demand their autonomy, strengthen their local identities, and forge the institutions necessary to enable them to govern responsibly, did not occur in a vacuum. During the past half-century, they have been organizing to rise above the long history of oppression and discrimination, to demand recognition as groups with their own identities and abilities to govern themselves and protect the territories that they inherited or to which they have been relegated by the expansion of the colonial and capitalist systems (Barkin and Sánchez, 2020). In order to construct “a world of many worlds” (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018), they are implementing new social, productive, and territorial management strategies that are fruitfully confronting the effects of the economic, social, and environmental crises facing humanity. This approach is not an ideological or political occurrence of a new emerging political group, but rather the logical outcome of the flow of a deeply embedded “cosmopolitics” “that rejects politics as a universal category and allows modern scientific practices to peacefully coexist with other forms of knowledge” (Stengers, 2010–2011); as Stengers coined the concept, it reflects the variety of methods for organizing life within and among communities as well as the different tactics when negotiating with the “powers” within the nation-states of which they are a part. These alternatives are rooted in the vibrant and diverse histories of peoples in the Global South, actively engaged in interconnected struggles for an ecosocial transition in the face of the profound social and environmental emergencies facing humanity today.

In this analysis, I suggest that the Communitarian Subject is consolidating and expanding. This involves all forms of struggle: ideological, social, political, and even economic. But it also encompasses the proliferation of many organizations that are supporting and broadening alliances among the communities and with sympathetic sectors of Mexican society; among the organizations that continue to play a significant role in this regard are: REMA, Red Mexicano de Afectados por la Minería; CMSS, Consejo Mexicana por la Silvicultura Sustentable; COMDA, Coalición de Organizaciones Mexicanas por el Derecho del Agua; MAPDER, Movimiento Mexicano de Afectados por las Presas y en Defensa de los Ríos; and CNI, Congreso Nacional Indígena. Although some of these coalitions involve important bonds with professional and social organizations committed

to accompanying the communities, their strength and vitality depend on an understanding and commitment to the need to create parallel structures that can support the activities of each of the participants.

The postcolonial and anti-systemic dynamics in Mexico analyzed in this text are becoming increasingly integrated into global networks and alliances that are strengthening each of the individual actors. Three of these networks are described below. The largest social organization in the world is La Vía Campesina, formed in 1993, now includes 182 local and national organizations from 81 countries, with a combined membership of more than 220 million small-scale food producers (<https://laviacampesina.org>). It operates more than 70 schools and training processes based on popular education, which is a method and an approach that puts forward the scaling up of agroecology at the territorial level and the strengthening of peoples’ food sovereignty. In addition to these productive activities, it plays an important role in supporting local struggles against land-grabbing and other incursions of national and international capital.

Territories of Life is a global consortium formally created in 2010 to support “indigenous peoples and local communities who are governing and conserving their lands, waters, and territories. Its membership in more than 80 countries is undertaking collective actions at the local, national, regional, and international levels across several thematic streams, including documenting, sustaining, and defending territories of life, as well as youth and intergenerational relations” (<https://report.territoriesoflife.org/>). It provides a forum for the exchange of experiences, training workshops, and collective action to secure their human rights, and particularly their rights to self-determined governance systems, cultures, and collective lands and territories.

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives is creating solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst an immense variety of radical alternatives to the dominant regimes in each of their countries. It locates itself in or helps initiate interactions among alternatives. It operates through varied and light structures, defined in each space, that are horizontal, democratic, inclusive, and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communicating. The initiative has no central structure or control mechanisms. It spreads step by step as an ever-expanding, complex set of tapestries, woven together by already existing communal or collective webs, building on already existing and new alternatives to dominant regimes (<https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/weavers>). It promotes or joins regional, national, and global encounters, when the conditions allow for them, as well as close and synergistic linkages with existing organizations, like the World Social Forum.

These national and global alliances are spreading the communitarian ethos, offering alternative mechanisms to remain at the margins and even counteract the profound crises occasioned by the capitalist system. They are creating new societies, shaping the tools for conviviality that Illich (1973) foresaw as necessary to overcome the dehumanizing effects of globalization. Esteva (2019) anticipated such developments as he accompanied many of these societies on their journeys, avoiding the wreckage strewn around them; he enshrined his on-going

practice of promoting an “inter-epistemic” “dialogue among living systems”<sup>17</sup> to strengthen this communitarian ethos in the Universidad de la Tierra<sup>18</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

An Ethic of Sufficiency, the subject of this special issue of *Frontiers of Sustainability*, poses an important challenge for societies in the Global South engaged in “delinking” from the dominant world system (Wallerstein, 1974). The mainstream literature is engaged in a laborious debate on how to define “enough” and whether the criteria should be established from below or above. Regardless, it seems evident that today’s capitalist system would not be willing to part with sufficient resources to attend to even the most precarious of needs of the world’s needy. Furthermore, it is extraordinary, that in almost all of even the wealthiest countries there are considerable masses of people who live below the minimal standards of existence that each of the polities sets for itself.

In contrast, this essay addresses the problem from a distinctly different vantage point. I suggest that the myriad societies with strong traditions for managing themselves, reinforced by unique belief systems and a commitment to communal organization are in fact advancing toward the goals set out in the discussion of “sufficiency.” They are generally implementing strategies of self-sufficient food production, as part of a plan to strengthen their autonomy, in collaboration with allies who share the same goals. Just as important, however, are the social dynamics that are becoming institutionalized.

In one region of Mexico, this significant process is called “*comunalidad*.” Evolved from the practice of Zapoteca and Mixe ethnic groups, it involves a multidimensional approach to attend the full panoply of social, political, economic, and environmental tasks that the societies establish for themselves. In this way, their communal management system is obliged to consider the complex interactions among the various activities in which they are engaged. Recently, a new element has been introduced into the process: the full recognition of the contributions that women have been adding to the collective endeavors as well as their unique ability to confront constructively many of the obstacles that have troubled their communities in the past; by recognizing this factor, communities have been able to appreciate the importance of their ability to generate surpluses that are strengthening their social fabric and facilitating other tasks.

This formulation, as well as similar ones developed in other societies mentioned in this article (viz textfootnote 3), directly addresses the problem at hand: the ethos of sufficiency. Although few of the peoples included in its broad scope of the analysis can be considered to be egalitarian, our collaborations in these communities clearly reflect their social commitment to assure that all members are provided for, on the basis of locally established standards for the quality of life. This is particularly evident in the attention lent to education: in the particular

cases mentioned in the text each of the societies has dedicated considerable effort to ensuring that they are effectively providing the means for their young people to learn the mores and skills that are necessary for them to fully participate in the society and contribute to its future development.

It is also evident that they are concerned with the appropriate stewardship of their territories. This involves not simply developing institutions to confront contingencies, but also to modify their social organizations and living patterns to adjust them to the possibilities afforded by their environments; this attention to the social metabolism has become a subject of increasing attention in recent years, as the example mentioned in the text illustrates.

In sum, the notion of an ethos of sufficiency in this analysis is not simply a question of providing a minimum basket of commodities. The Community Subject discussed in this article becomes Revolutionary in the process of consolidating the post-capitalist societies that they are building. Moving from disengaging from the world market to shaping increasingly complex social structures to effectively attend the needs of their members and their territories, involves a social process that progressively consolidates their ability to assure an ethos of sufficiency.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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<sup>17</sup>A poor translation of his Spanish phrase: “diálogo de vivires”.

<sup>18</sup>Gustavo Esteva died while I was completing this essay. His life-long accompaniment of Illich and those ideas will remain a vibrant tribute as we move forward in shaping the world of many worlds that are already emerging.

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