



Methodological and Ideological Options

## Radical ecological economics: A paradigm from the global south

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## ABSTRACT

Radical Ecological Economics is a more appropriate way for collaboration with communities in the Global South. It transcends the conceptual and methodological premises of Ecological Economics, integrating realities that are not commonly considered, but exist and actively resist throughout the world. The text addresses three major areas: 1) the broadening of the understanding of the social, not only as “the human” but as the encounter of complex structures of organization, of biological and cultural reproduction, of identity reaffirmation and even the search for autonomy in the face of historical oppressions whose leadership is entrusted to a Revolutionary Communitarian Subject; 2) the understanding that, within this social complexity, there are realities that are not generally considered, in which the natural endowment and goods for consumption and enjoyment are not allocated by market mechanisms; where production is organized as part of the social fabric; in which surpluses take multiple material and non-material forms, and are distributed for the common good (human and non-human); and in which socioecological metabolic configurations are nourished by historical cosmologies that respect the biophysical limits of ecosystems; 3) REE has clear ontological, epistemological, methodological, and political foundations, taking into account a diversity of realities. This formulation offers a comprehensive method to understand the multiple worlds and approaches of millenarian societies that now are forging worlds outside the capitalist model by communities committed to alleviating the multi-scale crisis that afflicts them.

### 1. Introduction

As a paradigm, ecological economics (EE) was defined as a new field of study in 1989 during an academic meeting in Washington, DC, and formalized with the creation of the International Society and the launch of a journal of the same name. Since then, the field has exploded, attracting scholars from diverse fields interested in problems revolving around the interaction between economics and the environment. The professionals who publish in the journal primarily come from specializations within the broad economics field. Complementing this work is a rich literature in other journals and books, generally published by the major commercial and university presses where these scholars work. Analysts who base their work on the perspectives of Marxist paradigms also produced a considerable literature, offering substantially different analyses, focusing on alternative approaches (in English, see the publications from the Monthly Review Press and the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*).

In general, most of the literature in ecological economics focuses on

problems that have been defined for many decades: the allocation of resources and the policy prescriptions that might be effective in addressing the harmful impacts of the functioning of economic systems on people and the environment in general, or more specifically, the intensification of problems caused by climate change (e.g., Röpke, 2004, 2005). An important, pioneering school of thought and concern focuses on the social and political conflicts caused by the substantial environmental transformations resulting from the global expansion and integration of the productive system in response to the search for new sources of “natural resources” and markets (i.e., Martínez Alier, 2002; Martínez Alier, 2023). This critical school of EE considerably expanded the scope of the field, incorporating community activists and local scholars from around the world, contributing to our understanding of the magnitude of the damage wrought by the global expansion of production, which transforms and/or hijacks local political institutions, destroys ecological balance in myriad environments, and sickens or even kills countless millions of people in the process.

In contrast, scholars working in the Marxist tradition or its variants,

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such as ecosocialism, generally do not focus on the structure of the dominant productive system(s) (i.e., Foster, 1999, 2000; Burkett, 2014; Löwy, 2014, 2018). Their work draws on the corpus of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as on the abundant output of critical political economy on the rise of the capitalist market system and its profound impacts, transforming societies into competitive organisms that undermined people's ability to organize and promote their collective well-being. These analyses focus on understanding the underlying dynamics of the dominant system's productive processes and the possibilities of forging alternative systems that could overcome the inherent contradictions in these systems.

We offer a different perspective: one informed by countless communities around the world actively engaged in building their own “new worlds,” in keeping with their traditions, cosmologies, and current situations. The Radical Ecological Economics (REE) alternative was shaped by thirty years of collaboration with communities in Latin America and our participation in the international consortium “Territories of Life”. It is ‘Radical’ as it examines the root causes of the current systemic crisis and because it aims at understanding and joining grounded community initiatives actively involved in constructing alternatives, on the margins of the dominant global political and economic organization. Considering the profound socioecological disequilibria that challenge societies worldwide, it is crucial to examine radically different social and ecological approaches that promote sustainable societies (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021; Barreto et al., 2025; Borrini-Feyerabend and Jaeger, 2024).

In this process, we benefited from the active support of colleagues around the world, as well as constructive criticism from other members of the wider EE community. The REE project expanded substantially, integrating a broad set of critical thematic areas that encompass environmental, social, and economic innovations designed to promote social change. This approach extends beyond the dominant theoretical frameworks in the mainstream literature, consolidating through established social practices that hold the potential to address multiple dimensions of the proliferating socio-environmental crises (i.e., Acosta, 2013; Toledo, 2012; Barkin, 2022a). More recently, we have felt it necessary to challenge the approach of another “school” within the EE community, which seeks to expand the paradigm by including the concept of the “social,” as convincingly argued in Clive Spash's recently published book in Vienna (2024).

The REE paradigm is firmly based on the conviction, virtually universal among our collaborators, that society is an integral part of nature. This insight is central to the beliefs of all of the indigenous communities with whom we have come into contact and, significantly, was also central to Karl Polanyi's contribution his understanding of the destructive dynamics of capitalist development, a process he labelled “dis-embedding” (2001). This vision vitiates the notion that the remaining planetary wealth might be considered simply a set of “resources” that can be appropriated by the various actors who have gained individual access, by whatever means, whether through conventional institutional processes, outright theft, violent appropriation, or variations thereof. The close relationship between societies and their environment is not a simple statement of faith, but a deeply rooted understanding of the symbiotic relationship that recognizes the profound connection that contributes to the well-being and prosperity of the human and non-human parts of the complex environment on which both depend.

REE also departs from its dominant institutional origins by recognizing the centrality of the collective organization of society and the numerous consequences this entails for each of its members as individuals and for the community as a whole. The peoples with whom we have been fortunate to collaborate generally organize themselves

collectively and develop resilient governance institutions to ensure their well-being and defend the autonomy of their territories.<sup>1</sup> As we explore in the following pages, in many cases, this communal authority finds itself taking on a revolutionary character, guiding its members toward improving their quality of life, ensuring that no one is left behind or left out, and that everyone participates in collective tasks to ensure its continuity. As such, the community subject becomes a constructive force for situating itself and society outside the nation-state in which it exists, forging the foundations of a post-capitalist society.

## 2. The ghost in the closet: “the social” in radical ecological economics

In his careful treatise on methodological individualism, Hodgson dismissed Schumpeter's original formulation that the actions of individuals “need not [be]... analysed in terms of superindividual factors”, concluding that “explanations of social phenomena should be in terms of both individuals and social structures” (Hodgson, 2007: 213; 223). This reflection is particularly relevant for EE, where “the social” has taken on especial relevance: “Ecological economics was founded upon the importance of placing the economy within its biophysical limits, while recognising the need for the ethical conduct of human society with respect to others, both present and future, human and non-human” (Spash, 2024:197). However, the social and political nature of the economy has been raised for years, highlighting that ecological problems cannot be understood or resolved outside of social structures, power relations and distributive conflicts (Özkaynak et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the social is not only humanity as an abstraction, much less homogeneous; it is comprised of the multiple societies throughout the world, with their specific political, cultural and environmental heritages. This diversity has become the “ghost in the closet,” as conventional analysis ends up reducing the social to the atomization of individuals and the homogenization of a globalized society.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1. The ineffective figure of the individual

Spash (2024) characterizes four types of heterodox economics schools that address the environment and that have included, in a greater or lesser degree, “the social” into their analysis: Neo-Marxists and Eco-Socialism, Critical Institutional Economics, Feminist Economics and Eco-Feminists, and late Post-Keynesian Economics. Nevertheless, none of these (save perhaps communitarian feminist economists and some anarchists) approach the communitarian social organization, the focus of our approach. Our criticism below goes in that direction.

Within the tradition of modern economic thought lies the idea that society is a set of markets where subjects are linked as autonomous and independent individuals, who calculate their material interests based on the maximization of their consumption and income, that is, they are economic agents who only respond to their personal interests, adopting rational behaviour basing their analysis on the logic of individual calculation. This individual-based perspective is also frequently present within EE (i.e., Söderbaum, 2000).

One of the most profound criticisms of the liberal system is the fallacy that the sum of individual decisions makes up the “whole” (cf. Durkheim, 1893). This is understood to come about through summation

<sup>1</sup> Following Haesbaert (2013), we understand territory as a multidimensional concept, integrating symbolic, cultural, economic, and political aspects. We would add to this the physical, material and living features of space.

<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to examine the constructive ontological and epistemological critiques of individualism in the EE literature, save to note that they do not move forward to consider the collective nature of governance and ensuring the welfare of all the members of society as well as their common responsibility for caring for their environs that characterizes the societies with which REE collaborates.

(cf. [Badcock, 1988](#)). It is this paradigm of the whole that must be analysed and debated. In the analysis of socioeconomic phenomena, the emphasis on the individual neglects interactions within social structures, such that “the social” focuses on the ineffective figure of the individual. Along with other authors ([Markus and Kitayama, 1994](#); [Martínez Navarrete and Stahler-Sholk, 2024a,b](#); [Zahavi, 2022](#)), we affirm that it is ineffective because it is impossible to separate the subject from their social, community and natural environment. Within the individualistic logic, the existence of social conflicts and classes, gender roles, and cultural differences that encompass other types of relationships with nature, including relationships with non-human beings in their environment, are excluded.

As [Polanyi \(2001\)](#) shows, the economists' idea differs from human relations throughout history; we would add that it is not applicable to many parts of humanity today. Before the 19th century, the economy was always embedded in society. This concept expresses the idea that the economy is not autonomous, but rather subordinated to politics, religion, social relations, and the limits of nature that contribute to ensuring the conditions for social reproduction. Polanyi placed special emphasis on the social consequences that capitalism brings, pointing out the conditions that the subordination of the social order to the market implies, and at the same time warning about the implications and consequences of adopting the fiction of turning man and nature into commodities:

“Production is the interaction of man and nature; if this process is to be organized through a self-regulating mechanism of barter and exchange, then man and nature must be brought into its orbit; they must be subject to supply and demand, that is be dealt with as commodities, as goods produced for sale [...] But, while production could theoretically be organized in this way, the commodity fiction disregarded the fact that leaving the fate of the soil and people to the market would be tantamount to annihilating them” ([Polanyi, 2001](#): 136–137).

The impossible monetary valuation of the human, culture and the environment, highlights the one-dimensional and reductionist path of instrumental economic rationality. At the same time, it opens the possibility of thinking about alternative futures and generating other values and principles to build new civilizing senses. Thus, the economy must move toward forms of institutional re-embedding that reorganize production and exchange based on collective well-being and ecological sustainability ([Adaman et al., 2007](#)). Polanyi's analysis leads us to problematize the mechanisms involved in social dynamics and to reintroduce into Marxist analysis the appeal to the community as an organizing principle, replacing the market as a guiding mechanism, as well as beginning to investigate the conditions of viability of processes that concern a substantially different interaction with nature, leaving out the task of capital accumulation and thus proposing a primordial model of a post-capitalist society ([Saitō, 2017:20](#)).

This analysis of Polanyi's thought converges on three key conceptual pillars of radical ecological economics: (i) the economy understood as a socially and ecologically embedded process, (ii) the critique of the commodification of nature, labour, and money as fictitious commodities, and (iii) the recognition of social counter movements that seek to reintegrate the economy within the fabric of society and nature—the so-called double movement. Collectively, these principles reinforce the critical and transformative orientation of ecological economics, guiding it toward the reconstruction of socioeconomic systems aligned with ecological boundaries and the imperatives of environmental and social justice.

From our perspective, considering society as an integral part of nature entails recognizing that all social and productive activities unfold in continuous interaction with natural systems. This perspective embodies both an ontological and epistemological principle, reflected in the cosmologies of peoples around the world, which shape their existence, culture, social symbolism, and productive and economic practices. This interrelationship with nature produced ancestral knowledge, particularly an understanding of planetary phenomena, such as telluric

movements and climatic dynamics, as well as the management of genetic resources, which has been crucial for addressing past and present challenges such as food scarcity and biodiversity loss in the context of climate change. In this way, community societies address the uncertainty through historically accumulated ecological knowledge ([Wolf, 1982](#)). Such practices demonstrate a dynamic capacity to respond to climate change and socio-environmental injustices, reinforcing the argument that uncertainty must be understood as socially mediated and context-dependent rather than as a purely stochastic variable.

Thus, understanding the multiple interactions between society and the planet as an integral whole goes beyond a mere critique of economic activities divorced from the natural patrimony that sustain them. In the context of the current socio-environmental crisis, this understanding entails the pursuit of sustainable solutions grounded in the diversity of the planet's social and ecological contexts, drawing upon the knowledge and practices primarily held by Indigenous peoples and local communities.

## 2.2. Community as an organizing principle

The argument discussed in the previous section allows us to refer to societies that are governed by dynamics that are not focused exclusively on the economic, but by principles that have to do with their governance systems and their cosmologies, where reciprocity and mutual aid are present and where their social organizations generate a logic of reproduction different from the capitalist one. In this sense, it is necessary to rescue ideas from Marx himself, who already early in his theoretical production conceived of a metabolic model between the social and the natural, which we could reinterpret in terms of permanent feedback and co-support between the social subject and nature ([Burkett, 2014](#); [Foster, 2000](#)).

These societies are local communities and indigenous peoples, primarily from the Global South, in which individuals have a collective commitment, an obligation to contribute to the common good, and a reciprocal service. Since pre-modern times, many of these local communities forged local institutions that enabled them to successfully govern themselves and create relatively egalitarian societies ([Graeber and Wengrow, 2021](#)). In the case of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples, their normative systems are carried out by a system of “responsibilities” that are formed hierarchically and through a rotational system by members of the community to regulate community life ([DeWalt, 1975](#); [González-Fuente, 2011](#)). This is very distinct in scale and political mechanisms from Western democratic planning models, based on the Nation-State (cf. [Akbulut and Adaman, 2020](#)).

These types of societies share philosophies and practices such as good living (*Buen Vivir*; *Sumak Kawsay*) from the Andean region of Latin America; *Lekil Kuxlejal* and *comunalidad* in Mexico; rural Taoism in China; or *Ubuntu*, a South African concept that defines humanness as a process of becoming (I am, because we are). These refer to the development of the human being in relation to other human beings and the more-than-human world (non-human nature). Ubuntu suggests that a human being is not the typical atomized individual of Western tradition, but is immersed in social and biophysical relations ([Mabele et al., 2022](#)).

“We recognize that our existence is only possible with the others by constructing a We, thereby distinguishing ourselves from the Others. We open ourselves to all beings and forces because even if the We manifests itself in the actions of concrete women, men, and children, yet in that same moment, all that is visible and invisible below and, in the Land, also participates, following the principle of ‘complementarity’ among all that is different. The communal is not a set of things, but an integral fluidity” ([Guerrero Osorio, 2019](#): 174).

The community systems we refer to in REE are distinguished from a “contract society” of modern liberal democracies in which the outcome of individual decisions is guided by particular interests. In contrast, communities (community subjects) are guided by the collective interest, the common good, in which individuals are considered first and

foremost as members of the community, in which each has the opportunity to realize their full potential to contribute to the collective well-being (Villoro, 2003). A fundamental characteristic for understanding the reproduction logic of these societies is the historically prevailing conception of community. “Society pre-exists the individual. Individuals are born and develop within the framework of a social horizon that precedes them. There is a collective, historical subject to which the individual belongs” (Villoro, 2007:95). In this context, the community is a central element of society and the individual is understood as part of a collective subject.

Community is not a quantitative, mathematical operation; it is qualitative, prioritizing other types of connections and ties, such as the common good, solidarity, and respect. It is all encompassing: each individual is taken into consideration by the communitarian subject, selected to be the representative of the whole. In this sense, the community is not only a space of belonging, but also an ethical horizon that guides processes of social transformation (Villoro, 2003). In other words, these are societies historically constituted as a community, whose foundation is the common good above individual interests.

### 3. Understanding other economic realities from the REE

The character and centrality of the “social” in the economy begins with the recognition that society is part of nature and that this relationship is decisive for the development and existence of humanity. In this sense, the paradigms of orthodox economics that base the relationship between society and nature on the market system uproot the economic process from society and nature (Polanyi, 1957, 2001), leaving out many aspects of culture and nature by treating them as externalities. This belief that the market has the capacity to efficiently allocate “resources” is the main mechanism that disconnects the economy from its social meaning.

We reject the notion that the market is the sole mechanism for allocating satisfiers and patrimony. Instead, we recognize that, given the social and ecological diversity found in the world, goods are distributed through different forms of social and community organizations rather than solely in the marketplace. REE constitutes an analytical approach that allows for a more coherent understanding of the interrelationships between natural and social processes, based on a holistic and integrative perspective. This theoretical framework is configured as a trans-disciplinary space where diverse knowledges and situated social practices converge, originating primarily from the Global South, providing key elements for processes of structural transformation. These community experiences cannot offer global solutions to the major problems afflicting humanity, such as climate change. Rather, they are creating societies that are in balance with their environments. Many of these communities around the world are recovering native seeds that are more resistant to drought, restoring their forests, and developing strategies to improve their quality of life. In this sense, the REE not only contributes to critical analysis but also promotes the articulation of strategies aimed at the social, economic, and ecological emancipation of peasant and indigenous peoples and communities.

By recognizing the social nature of the economy, REE seeks to identify community dynamics that are independent of conventional market relations and designed to be in balance with the environment and susceptible to exchanges with other communities. As Polanyi (2001) insisted, the economy is embedded in broader social and ecological structures, where price systems and conventional valuation mechanisms occupy a subordinate position compared to the social, cultural, and environmental factors that guide productive organization (Bernard, 1997).

In this sense, the existence of these economic dynamics is rooted in the collective organization of peoples who seek to preserve and enrich their ways of life, cultures, and cosmologies. Through these projects, technology, territory and sociocultural capacities such as solidarity are articulated, creating mechanisms for social-ecological reintegration

(Rajan and Duncan, 2013). These include, in particular, local communities and indigenous peoples of the Global South who, despite having historically faced processes of extermination, domination, exclusion, and dispossession, are sustaining social structures and productive systems integrally connected to their natural environment. In these societies, collective decisions are based on cosmovisions that posit a profoundly different relationship between human beings and nature, oriented toward the care and preservation of life in all its manifestations (Pascual et al., 2023).

Their cosmovisions play a highly relevant role as they configure a complex network of beliefs, values and social practices in which several fundamental principles stand out: (1) a conception of balance between society and nature, in which the relationship with the environment implies a profound ecological responsibility; (2) a notion of communal property that promotes the collective use and care of natural resources and the territory, without conceiving possession as dominion or as a right of alienation over nature. In Mexico, social land ownership has been constructed historically, covering a major percentage of the national territory (40%), with communal lands held by peasant and indigenous groups. This is the main difference between our approach and Ostrom (1990), which is based on the concept of community private property<sup>3</sup>; (3) a form of work organization based on non-capitalist logics of valuation, focused on the collective and supportive sense of production; and (4) a participatory democracy that is expressed in its own forms of governance and co-responsibility (Huanacuni, 2010). In this way, the territories of indigenous peoples and local communities constitute spaces for the construction of alternatives to development, based on relational, plural and ecocentric cosmovisions (Escobar, 2018).

From the perspective of REE, the construction of alternatives for social, economic, and ecological transformation is articulated around the notion of the revolutionary community subject (RCS) (Barkin and Sánchez, 2020; Barkin and Napoletano, 2023). This concept represents a structure of collective life expressed through new social and political practices, guided by rationalities distinct from those of the dominant system. The RCS emerges as an active agent in the creation of productive relationships that prioritize both community and individual well-being.

The RCS reorganizes economic processes from an integrative perspective, where interdependence with nature is central, yet inseparable from other fundamental dimensions such as the social, political, familial, and educational. This holistic vision allows for the construction of an alternative socio-environmental metabolism, characterized by relations of production and reproduction of life that move away from capitalist rationality. For example, Community Subjects who develop agroecological production models promote relationships and interactions to generate social metabolisms with lower entropic levels (Toledo and González de Molina, 2014).<sup>4</sup> These collective subjects redefine economic relations by linking productive activity with community sustainability; in these processes, women are protagonists, proposing approaches consistent with the balanced reproduction and sustenance of life, as well as the generation of surpluses for community well-being. They are also cognizant of their responsibility to assert the centrality of autonomy, environmental justice and defence of the territory (Carcaño et al., 2022).

These unique characteristics are the basis for their socio-ecological

<sup>3</sup> Our interactions with Ostrom during her visits to Mexico allowed us to discuss the differences between her vision of private collective property and our vision of social collective property.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of social metabolism comes from the work of Marx, who used it in the context of the Industrial Revolution (Foster and Magdoff, 1998; Saitō, 2017), to describe the material exchange between society and the rest of nature. We use the term socio-environmental and/or socio-ecological metabolism to emphasize the social and ecological processes of matter and energy exchange. Of course, this analysis was central to the contributions of Georgescu-Roegen (1971) who is often considered the “father” of Ecological Economics.

transformation, creating the possibility of forging post-capitalist societies (Camacho Benavides and Barkin, 2025). In his late writings, Marx himself recognized the possibility that societies could transition to higher forms of collective property without needing to go through the capitalist stage. Such a perspective implies a break with the unilinear and Eurocentric evolutionary scheme of historical development traditionally attributed to Marx. This recognition of the revolutionary potential of communal forms of social organization in the context of many indigenous societies around the world reveals the meaning attributed by Marx to the capacity for sustainable reproduction models and a more harmonious metabolism between society and nature, in clear contrast to the expansive, cumulative, and destructive logic of the capitalist mode of production (Anderson, 2025).

In this regard, Indigenous societies organized around community-based structures attempt to avoid the competitive economic logic of the global market system that threatens their collective well-being. Instead, these communities participate in economic, political, and social alliances and negotiations aimed at advancing their own processes of local autonomy. From this perspective, a relevant macroeconomic analysis grounded in these societies must begin by examining their collective capacity to negotiate, mediate, and selectively engage with the global capitalist market economy, a process that strengthens the transformative and revolutionary potential of communal social organization.

The social, economic, and ecological transformation that the RCS is capable of promoting stems from two central aspects: its social capacity and its ability to generate and manage its surpluses. Social capacity refers to the set of intangible resources residing in communities and channelled through collective processes based on consensus, with the purpose of designing and implementing strategies aimed at strengthening their well-being. This capacity is manifested through community cosmovisions, based on values such as reciprocity, mutual aid, and support networks, which promote social cohesion and collective benefit (Barkin et al., 2011).

In this sense, social capacity articulates various dimensions, among which collective organization stands out, which in turn enables the organization of work, productive systems, and forms of local governance. Thus, it constitutes a fundamental element for the mobilization and management of material and non-material resources, allowing for the satisfaction of common needs and improving the community's quality of life. Within these resources, alternative forms of surplus are identified that transcend conventional quantitative logic, typically represented in monetary terms. These surpluses, invisible to the market system, comprise material and social elements fundamental to social and cultural reproduction, such as traditional knowledge, technical skills, volunteer labour, community tools, and symbolic natural spaces necessary for social and cultural reproduction (Barkin and Sánchez, 2020). The incommensurability of values is fundamental to understanding community surpluses, as their valuation frameworks extend far beyond market-based metrics. Many aspects of life—such as relationships with nature, collective memory, identity, and spirituality—cannot be reduced to a single monetary scale. These plural and often incommensurable values reveal fundamental limits of market valuation and affirm the necessity of incorporating ethical, cultural, and relational dimensions into socio-economic analysis (Pascual et al., 2023).

In this context, the generation, appropriation, and utilization of these surpluses acquires an intangible dimension that expresses the values, principles, and ethical orientations of the community. An illustrative example of the contrast between the logic of individual financial accumulation and the communal ethic is the celebration of festivities (religious, historical, civil) in indigenous communities. These are organized collectively, channelling monetary resources, productive surpluses, intergenerational volunteer labour, specialized knowledge and tasks, the collective management of which results in the enjoyment of life and the strengthening of the social fabric. In this regard: "...if people are to maintain social relations, they must also work to build a fund to cover

the expenses they entail" (Wolf, 1966: 7). These activities expand the community's capacity to exercise autonomous territorial governance over its natural endowment and productive systems. Likewise, the management of these activities helps prevent significant wealth disparities from emerging within the community, since those with higher incomes are generally expected to bear a significant portion of the costs of collective events.

In short, social capacity constitutes the mechanism through which communities articulate and mobilize their resources to achieve collectively defined objectives. Within this framework, community surpluses—understood as both tangible and intangible resources, whose value is socially constructed—are configured as a central component for the materialization of social, economic, and ecological transformations that the community promotes for collective well-being. These surpluses express the communities' capacity to satisfy their own needs and ensure the conservation of their territory, consolidating ways of life that subordinate economic logic to their social and cultural principles, as well as their relationship with the territory. Therefore, within these societies—other realities—the economic process takes root; in other words, an economic process is subsumed by the needs of society and not by the market system.

From an REE perspective, these emerging practices in diverse experiences of the Global South are understood as manifestations of post-capitalist societies. These social configurations represent a practical break with the international market and a significant epistemological rupture with the foundations of orthodox economics, particularly with the assumptions of instrumental rationality and methodological individualism. In contrast, these practices are based on alternative rationalities that privilege the common good over individual interest, thus reconfiguring the very foundations of the economic and social process.

The processes promoted by the RCS in the construction of its post-capitalist societies entail a profound reconfiguration of the ways in which work is organized, by overcoming the capitalist model based on wage labour to foster individual accumulation. They challenge the logic of the capitalist market through the development of solidarity-based societies grounded on cooperation and reciprocity. In this framework, economic activity acquires an ethical, moral, and political dimension, as it is reintegrated into social life and as society is assigned responsibility for economic decisions and their consequences.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the role of REE within these processes of transformation and construction of post-capitalist societies. It represents both a paradigm and a practice that transcends the mere critique of conventional economics and an innovative research agenda. Its purpose is to understand, accompany, and strengthen the alternative solutions and practices already being developed to confront multiple social and ecological crises at local and regional scales. The goal is not to transform the global economy, but to support the myriad of local efforts that are reconstructing their realities and inspiring others.

Like Aguilera Klink (2021: 147), in his review of Spash's book, this paradigm argues that Ecological Economics must become a guide for changing how we live, taking into account its environmental and social impacts, learning to think in terms of an open economy and translating it into action; in essence, to return to the Aristotelian meaning of economics as managing the house. It is essential to look toward other forms of social organization, other rationalities, and other models of life and economy, to promote a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation; Kenter et al. (2025) explore more than 200 sources illustrating a wide range of societies examined by economists.

These ideas are exemplified in numerous community-based experiences, such as Tosepan, an indigenous collective involving about 250,000 people in nine cooperative enterprises that has learned how to defend its autonomy while maintaining its relations with the nation. To protect its economy and territory, there are no supermarkets, mining of its valuable patrimony is prohibited and exports of coffee, pepper and honey are communally controlled (Extract, 2025). Another community, Cheran, wrested control of its territory from organized crime in 2011,

asserting its autonomy by creating a structure of self-government, introducing bilingual education and forest enterprises to manage its natural heritage and provide employment, while gaining national recognition and budgetary support. A detailed analysis of other Latin American examples is presented in two monographic issues of Latin American Perspectives (Martínez Navarrete and Stahler-Sholk, 2024a, 2024b).

#### 4. The ontological, epistemological and methodological bases for the construction of a Radical Ecological Economics, from below

Radical Ecological Economics (REE) is inspired by cosmovision and cosmopraxis,<sup>5</sup> forms of organization, and theoretical propositions constructed primarily in the Global South. We draw on complementary disciplines, such as political economy, political ecology, ecofeminism, community feminism, and decolonizing perspectives, among others. Marxist political economy is the basis to understand the dynamics of class struggles within socioecological justice processes, and to incorporate theories and concepts from eco-socialism, such as the theory of metabolic-rift. Political ecology (i.e., Escobar, 1999), ecofeminism (i.e., Mies and Shiva, 1993), community feminism (i.e., Cruz Hernández, 2020), and decolonizing perspectives (i.e., Smith, 2021) complement an understanding where most community political dynamics occur at the margins of class struggles but are embedded in other battles such as territorial exploitation and dispossession; gender equity along with corporeal<sup>6</sup> and ecological depletion; racism; and epistemological and ontological domination. In this vein we also incorporate philosophies and axiologies such as the multiple valuation of nature, which recognizes values beyond the monetary and material for non-human beings and goods (Pascual et al., 2023).

Cosmovisions and cosmopraxis around the world encourage us to follow a relational ontology, that is, a way of being/existing in the world, where dynamics actively and continuously connect different living beings, both human and non-human. These relationships produce dynamic knowledge (socioecological learning) about the environment and how to act within it (De Munter and Note, 2009). Human existence is interwoven with all the life processes that surround and traverse it. For Montero (2002:48), “people and things exist because of the nexus that unites them and constitutes them”, what Guattari (2000) calls a social ecology, which in turn is territorially rooted,<sup>7</sup> decisive for the groups with whom we collaborate. Thus, for many Indigenous, Native, and Afro-descendant peoples, among others, human beings, their cultures, and societies are an integral part of the cosmos. In this way, complexity is intrinsic to community life, embedded in their cosmovisions, knowledge systems, and socio-ecological relationships. Rather than simplifying reality into linear causal relations, these societies operate within complex adaptive systems in which ecological, cultural, economic, and

spiritual dimensions are deeply intertwined (Mabele et al., 2022; Rivera-Núñez et al., 2025). This contrasts sharply with the Cartesian view prevalent in the West, where societies, humans and other living beings, are viewed independently and separately, as clearly expressed in orthodox economics.

We also share the widespread consensus that the planet and its assets are finite, so there cannot be infinite economic growth (Boulding, 1966; Meadows et al., 1972). Human bodies, being nature, also have limits and cannot provide unlimited labour in the service of capital without leading to discomfort, illness, and death (Betancourt, 2024; Foster and Clark, 2018). This leads us to understand that the systemic socio-ecological crisis, which generates great inequity and socio-environmental injustices, cannot be challenged with isolated actions, but needs to be understood in its complexity and addressed with profound changes, from its roots. To achieve positive socio-ecological outcomes, human activity should focus on ethics, aesthetics, and care for life, in its broadest sense (Barkin, 2022a), integrating nature, society, and the economy in a way that maintains the health of environmental and human systems in the present and for future generations. This implies that any socio-economic solution must respect the cultural foundations of different human groups.

This relational ontology necessarily leads to a relational epistemology; that is, we can only know the world through interactions between its elements; there is a participatory relationship between the knower and what is to be known. As social beings, we can only know together, through communication with others, in a relationship between two or more subjects who are learning about the world. Therefore, the research process is carried out ‘with’ and not ‘on’ other subjects. The positivist division between a knower who has will and agency and another subject who is to be known, without will or agency, is broken. Generating knowledge is not an individual act, but rather arises from the relationships between subjects, through action, reflection, and experience; dialogue allows subjects to see themselves, recognize themselves, and free themselves from the objectification of the researched, recognizing ourselves as others with the right to be different (Montero, 2002). This epistemology is also related to what has been called the “dialogue of knowledges and livings” (Salas and Wise Peoples Network, 2013),<sup>8</sup> a meeting of different subjects, each with their own voice, who engage in dialogue based on their experience and knowledge. Thus, generating knowledge and accessing reality requires more than academic activity.

This epistemological understanding leads us to follow a plural and collaborative methodological approach from the outset. REE advances collaborative research processes through the participants' experience, reflection, and dialogue. Research methods can be broad and flexible, including practical, conceptual, imaginative, and empathic tools, as well as the development of skills that deepen these approaches. This research often leads to actions that transform reality.

The legacy of Latin American popular education questions the premises of injustice and inequality, as well the limitations of knowledge, techniques and production (cf. Freire, 2005); they involve participatory action research (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991) and collaborative research, co-research (Heron, 1996) or research in co-labour,<sup>9</sup> and decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2021). These approaches imply continuous and complementary cycles of dialogue and reflection, of reflection-action, which result in praxis as “the dialectical unity formed by theory and practice, in which practice is cyclically determining” (Fals Borda, 1978:13) and which, in turn, ensure the validity of the knowledge generated. Co-research involves a dialogue of knowledge between co-researchers and co-subjects who meet to investigate and reflect on a specific topic, drawing on their own life experiences and research. Spaces that promote this type of work, such as focus groups, and the

<sup>5</sup> Cosmovision refers to the understanding of the structure and function of the world and universe; for many peoples it includes both material and immaterial elements, visible and non-visible realities, and human and more-than-human beings. Cosmopraxis has complementarily been described by Munter and Note (2009:89) as “[...] the actual praxis of living [the] unmediated experience [in the World]. [...] It refers to coping with the world in an active way.” So cosmopraxis encompasses the actions that people conduct to encounter with the world (other people, other beings, time and space), based on particular cosmovision.

<sup>6</sup> Territorial community feminism considers that the bodies in resistance constitute the first territory to recover and defend from historical savagery and from implicit violences within accumulation by dispossession processes, within the land and territories (Cabnal, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Territorial roots involve not only living in a specific space, but also maintaining an interdependence with the landscape, based on biological and cultural structures derived from a socio-environmental history, with systems of production and reproduction of life adapted to ecosystems.

<sup>8</sup> A succinct discussion of this concept is Galvez-Campos (2025).

<sup>9</sup> Co-labor research (Leyva and Speed, 2008) refers to working with another person or people in its realization, taken from the Latin *collaborare*.

responsibility for training to conduct them appropriately, are essential to realize this methodological approach.

Likewise, by assuming that human beings are an integral part of nature and that our actions in all spheres have a positive or negative feedback impact on the rest of the planet, we integrate a broad systemic thinking approach. Beyond the biophysical exchanges between an open economic system and nature, described by ecological economics, we seek to understand the social mediations that enable and shape these processes, according to cosmovisions, cosmopraxis, values, organizational structures, distribution of labour, etc. A recent example of the application of these methodological approaches was our collaborative research and advocacy project that sought to: a) improve quality of life; b) prevent or reduce biophysical imbalances or metabolic fractures; and c) create more equitable societies (Camacho Benavides and Barkin, 2025).

## 5. The political-economic positioning

The theoretical and methodological frameworks described above contribute to understanding the structural causes of the contradictions between contemporary societies and the rest of nature. In ecological economics, contradictions are interpreted from the perspective of social (or socioecological) metabolisms that are shaped by biochemical, geological, and energetic dynamics, formed in an evolutionary and historical manner. We speak of a metabolic rupture or fracture when human intervention modifies the flows of matter and energy, negatively affecting these biogeochemical cycles and the life that depends on them in the form of biodiversity and ecosystem health (Foster and Clark, 2018). This rupture also alienates human communities from their territory, food systems and culture (Longo et al., 2015).

Thus, the contemporary multidimensional crisis, with its socio-environmental injustices, is the sum of the metabolic fractures in different territories and ecosystems across the planet, as well as the process of capitalist accumulation and speculation. Repairing them requires a systemic transformation, a radical change in current economic structures and rationality. These same structures and rationalities pose what is known as capitalist realism (cf. Fisher, 2009), a crossroads where there is no other possible world, where the market determines interactions with nature, and where the neoliberal capitalist system will continue to grow continuously.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, at the same time, thousands of communities and organized collectives propose and demonstrate the opposite: other worlds are possible and are already under construction. For decades, they have been urging us to comprehend that the world is far more diverse and goes beyond the capitalist understanding. They strengthen and build communal, post-capitalist, eco-socialist, and anarchist environs, to which we must give voice, political space, and listening in order to find ways out of this crisis. We must recover what, while present, is ignored and, therefore, absent (de Santos, 2014).

The theoretical category of the RCS was constructed in the processes of theorizing REE and in the encounter between academic work and the fount of social diversity in the world. The RCS contributes to explaining the characteristics and actions of these social subjects; it “emerges from the collectivity, to create alliances, incorporate ecofeminism, the ethics of care, and the sustainability of life, build autonomy, restore biophysical imbalances, improve the quality of life, and create more just societies” (Barkin, 2022b: 1). These RCS make collective decisions and implement actions to manage their territories, natural patrimony, and

productive systems that contribute to: a) strengthening autonomy for socio-environmental justice, b) healing or reducing socio-metabolic fractures, and c) generating and managing material and non-material surpluses (Barkin and Fuente Carrasco, 2021). Examples of RCS include Zapotec communities in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, who, based on their proposal for *comunalidad*, have built their own university network and are organizing ways to improve their quality of life and maintain their culture (Martínez Luna, 2010). We also look to networks as large as La Vía Campesina, which break with the discourse of neo-classical economic rationality and its derived agro-industrial models, proposing alternatives to sustain life, promote biological and cultural diversity, and achieve food sovereignty and autonomy for peoples (Camacho Benavides et al., 2022; Campesina, 2021). As a third example, thousands of local communities and indigenous peoples (some of which are part of the global Territories of Life Consortium), are already caring for and conserving the biodiversity and ecosystems of about 31% of the total surface of the planet, and are resisting the loss of biodiversity and climate chaos caused by the industrial paradigm (ICCA Consortium, 2021; Borrini-Feyerabend and Jaeger, 2024). Although international decision-making is needed to stop global damages, the actions of these RCS and other similar groups are currently healing, repairing and transforming relationships with nature, challenging capitalist realism, and a vision of societies catalogued as ‘underdeveloped’ unable to provide solutions to the crisis. This political position leads to the question of who takes decisions and in which spaces.

REE joins these struggles, supporting work processes and collaborating in efforts to improve their quality of life; but also theorizing to help understand, translate, and share these realities with the academic and Western world, for whom these realities are still foreign, but from which we can learn and whom we can support.

### 5.1. Productive organization and technical affinities

The path we present in this section leads to ways of life, productive approaches, and actions for sustaining life in its broadest sense. As mentioned before, the configuration of post-capitalist societies implies a social organization for production constructed at the margins of Western logics of political and economic organization (based on private property, competition and pecuniary incentives). Although these societies and the RCS may interact and exchange with circuits of capital, they are building collective projects that endure on their margins. Although eco-socialism is a crucial reference that sets production arrangements close to nature and distant to capitalist arrangements (Foster and Burkett, 2017), communal organization historically precedes, and surpasses eco-socialism in terms of world-views, collective values, social capacity to generate and manage different kinds of surpluses, and care ethics. Resources allocation and exchange is actively conducted according to those principles, ensuring that all members are included. Production is organized through collective decision-making mechanisms, such as assemblies.

The eco-socialist theory of metabolic-rift and its repair (i.e., Foster, 1999) allows us to understand the effects of productive organization within sociometabolic configurations. From this perspective, we understand that these RCSs focus on strengthening historical technologies and techniques that have proven effective and efficient for food production, local water management, non-timber agroforestry production, and other needs without rejecting innovations. Two notable examples are a) the massification or scaling of agroecology in Latin America, which includes traditional agricultural practices and innovations that seek to follow cycles and respect ecosystem limits (Giraldo and Rosset, 2018; Rosado-May et al., 2025); and b) the communal management of water in some Oaxacan communities (Fuente Carrasco et al., 2019) that aims to care for water bodies and basins, water cycles and to assure adequate water supplies for the population.

<sup>10</sup> The problem with focusing on one dominant model of reasoning is that we lose a large body of knowledge and experience. As a result, societies have suffered violence, destruction, and the silencing of untold groups of people outside the West, producing alienation, malaise, and uneasiness even within the confines of Western modernity

(cf. Santos, 2014: 165; 167–172).

## 6. Conclusions

We highlighted the preponderant role of local communities and indigenous peoples of the Global South and their Revolutionary Community Subjects, who are in the process of forging these new worlds. They are communities constructing alternatives based on paradigms and strategies that allow them to deepen their *comunalidad*, in the face of multiple challenges created by the socio-environmental crisis generated by the accumulation of capital.

We are challenging a significant view within critical literature of an inherent characteristic of capitalism: communities maintaining non-capitalist social relations coexist with and valorise capitalist societies as a *sine qua non* for their reproduction (Fraser, 2014:70). This view maintains the idea that non-capitalist societies are limited to mere subsistence activities.

In contrast, community subjects are capable of creating their own ways of *buen vivir* (in all senses of the term) or *comunalidad* outside of the nation-state or capitalism, implementing sustainable ecosystem management processes and diversifying production that contributes to the generation and appropriation of collective surpluses for their own welfare. These surpluses facilitate social transformation and strengthen the community ethos while reinforcing autonomy.

REE distinguishes the importance of other forms of social, economic and ecological organization, particularly in the Global South, implementing unique practices and structures. These societies offer significant transformative possibilities, creating viable alternatives for the construction of post-capitalist societies. As we mentioned, this had already been recognized in the later unpublished writings of Marx, who insisted on the potential of many indigenous societies in different parts of the world organized on the basis of advanced forms of collective ownership (Anderson, 2025). This acknowledgment of the revolutionary nature of communal forms of social organization is evident in the viability of societies that survive in spite of the hardships that they endured over the centuries (and millennia), perfecting socio-ecological metabolisms with a greater capacity for environmental sustainability, as well as other society-nature relationships.<sup>11</sup>

The inability of global economic development models to resolve their enormous social and environmental problems is the result of treating society, culture, and the natural environment as homogeneous entities and externalities, losing sight of the essential interdependence between human beings and nature, as well as the dependence of economic activity on the planet. In this sense, within the framework of REE, the economic process is understood in its sociocultural and environmental context; that is, as part of social dynamics, which in turn are integrated with nature.

REE rejects the conception that posits the market as the only legitimate mechanism for resource allocation. On the contrary, it recognizes that, in a context marked by broad social and ecological diversity, resources are distributed through a variety of forms of social and community organization, responding to specific social and territorial dynamics and reflecting distinct economic rationales beyond the logic of the marketplace.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that, from the perspective adopted in this essay, the construction of post-capitalist societies is configured

<sup>11</sup> Recently, a flourishing literature pointing to the emergence of communal egalitarian societies, has offered less sanguine analyses of the durability of these communities (e.g., Scheidel, 2017; Kemp, 2025). In contrast, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) offer an historical vision of egalitarian societies that managed to survive for lengthy periods in 'pre-modern times' without centralized states. Our experience in Latin America, on which this article is based, is grounded on collaborations with communities of millenarian societies that managed to persevere during the terrible history of 500 years of conquest, colonization and independence to emerge as self-confident groups positioning themselves as post-capitalist societies to meet future challenges.

around the notion of the RCS, restructuring economic processes through a logic of integration with nature. The transformative potential of this Subject is manifested in its capacity for social organization, in the collective management of surpluses, and in the exercise of its autonomy to control and manage its territories. All of this is supported by an explicit political stance oriented toward the preservation and enrichment of its cultural identity, its traditional knowledge, and its unique ways of life.

This understanding of community-based subjects and their power for transformation can be extended to non-Latin American geographies. We have exemplified this with international movements such as *La Vía Campesina* and Territories of Life. Furthermore, many urban and peri-urban environments and subjects are already engaged in their own transformative processes, as they draw on the ethics of care, the diversification of the economy and the economic values and surpluses, as well as local ontologies and epistemologies that challenge disintegrated visions of socioecological processes.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**David Barkin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Erika Carcaño:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Claudia Camacho:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Alejandra Sánchez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation.

## Declaration of competing interest

We declare no conflicts of interest!

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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