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The 'White Gold' Between Neoextractivism and Decolonization: A Discourse Analysis of the Bolivian Lithium Project

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Declaration

I, Kristine Vasland Flåt, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature…… Kristine Vasland Flåt

Date: 01.06.2021

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Abstract

The pressuring need for a sustainable energy transition has increased the global demand for lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles. The earth's single largest deposit of lithium is located in Bolivia, and the Bolivian government has made an ambitious plan to industrialize the sector and control the value-chain. Through a discourse analysis of a broad range of policy documents and interviews with key informants, I discuss the differences between neo-extractivist and neoliberal policies and assess to what extent the Bolivian lithium project can be considered decolonial. In order to assess this, I draw upon the works of Latin American decolonial scholars, along with debates of the Indigenous notion of Vivir Bien/Good Living. My findings suggest that although the current Bolivian government positions itself in clear opposition to neoliberalism, capitalism and colonialism, there are substantial challenges related to the persisting colonial patterns of dependency and uneven power structures. I argue that this has led to a continuation of unresolved tensions, and that there is a clear conflict between discourse and practice in the context of Bolivian politics. I conclude that the lithium project differs substantially from neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, and that it can be considered decolonial in the sense of resource sovereignty through its ambitions to capture and control revenue streams. It fails however, to engage with a broader set of decolonial arguments and thus, partly reproduces historical colonial power structures.

Key words: Bolivia, lithium, energy transition, Indigenous peoples, Vivir Bien, natural resource governance, neoextractivism, decolonization, (de)coloniality, resource sovereignty

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List of Abbreviations

CIRESU	Complejo Industrial de los Recursos Evaporíticos del Salar de Uyuni
COB	Central Obrero Boliviano, Bolivian Worker's Union
COMCIPO	Comité Cívico de Potosí, Potosí Civic Committee
COMIBOL	Corporación Minera de Bolivia, Bolivian Mining Corporation
FRUTCAS	Federación Regional Única de Trabajadores Campesinos del Altiplano Sur, The Unique Regional Federation of Peasant Workers of the Southern Altiplano
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MAS	Movimiento al Socialismo, Movement for Socialism
MESCP	Modelo Económico Social Comunitario Productivo, New Economic, Social, Communitary, Productive Model
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programs
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TCO	Tierras Comunitarias de Origen, Original Communal Lands
TIPNIS	Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WB	World Bank
YLB	Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos

Chapter 1: Introduction

We live in a world marked by environmental degradation and global warming. As an attempt to tackle these pressing concerns, The United Nations presented the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015. The SDG number 7 states that by 2030 we should have "ensured access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" (United Nations, 2015). This is an ambitious goal as it implies a radical change in the way we produce and distribute energy. In this context, there is a growing demand for new sources of energy that can replace fossil-fuels. And, in order to prevent further global warming and climate change, there is a strong need to develop efficient large-scale methods of storing electric energy. Lithium is considered a crucial part of this green energy transition because it is an essential component in lithium-ion batteries used in electric commodities, such as electric vehicles (Fornillo, 2018).

Approximately 80 percent of the world's easiest available lithium resources are located in the so-called "Lithium Triangle" in the Andean highlands, bordering Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile (Fornillo, 2018, p. 181). The increasing global demand for lithium has drawn attention to this region, and it is estimated that the resource could potentially lead to economic growth and development for the lithium-dense countries (Lencina, et al., 2018, p. 406). Thus, it is not surprising that this lightweight metal is called "the white gold" (Fornillo, 2018, p. 181). In Bolivia, the earth's single largest deposit of lithium is located in the Salar de Uyuni (Obaya, 2019). Lithium mining consists of extracting lithium carbonate from large salt flats through an evaporation process, which is later purified into metal (Roger, et al., 2017, p. 17). A problem with lithium, however, is that even though it is considered part of a sustainable energy transition, the resource itself is not renewable. Furthermore, the extraction of lithium involves a broad variety of negative socio-environmental impacts. For instance, the Lithium Triangle is one of the world's most arid areas, and lithium mining requires vast amounts of water (Fornillo, 2018, p. 196). This has led to a broad range of local socio-environmental conflicts and raised questions about whether it can really be considered sustainable to extract the lithium.

Over the past four decades, different international actors have made attempts to get a hold of the Bolivian lithium reserves without succeeding. In contrast to other lithium-dense countries where the natural resource management is heavily influenced by neoliberal policies, the Bolivian government has nationalized the lithium industry and positioned the economic

policies in opposition to neoliberal doctrines (Obaya, 2019). Moreover, the government together with Indigenous and social movements have tried to establish an alternative to the concept of sustainable development based upon the notion of Vivir Bien, in which decolonization and respect for nature are central notions (Waldmueller & Rodríguez, 2018).

Bolivia's approach towards natural resource management has led to a large number of contradictions. On one hand, the international community and dominant states are not particularly excited about Bolivia's resistance towards neoliberal policies. On the other hand, the state-controlled lithium project has led to internal conflicts and debates related to the implementation of the project. These conflicts have revolved around concerns regarding socio-environmental impacts, distribution of revenues, along with legal aspects related to Indigenous rights to self-determination and autonomy over territories. Moreover, the debate about the Bolivian lithium has raised fundamental questions about the governmental discourse on decolonization and sovereignty.

This thesis aims to explore the main differences between neo-extractivist and neoliberal economic policies regarding natural resource management in the context of Bolivian lithium extraction initiatives. It also aims to discuss how, and in what ways, the Bolivian lithium project can be considered decolonial. I argue that there are several significant differences between the neoliberal and neo-extractivist approaches to natural resource management, but also internal conflicts related to the meanings of decolonization. The lithium project may be considered decolonial in the sense of resource sovereignty, but it struggles to accommodate for the broader and deeper semantics of decoloniality.

Research question

With this introductory problem statement in mind, this thesis is guided by the following research question:

How does the Bolivian lithium project differ from neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, and in what way(s) can it be considered a decolonial project?

This question consists of two different parts, in which the first one is concerned with the differences between the neoliberal and the Bolivian approach to natural research management, while the second asks how the lithium project can be understood as a decolonial proposal.

Thematic background

During the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s, various foreign actors attempted to privatize Bolivia's natural resources and initiate mining projects (Obaya, 2019). They succeeded in some sectors, but the lithium deposits were left unexploited, mainly due to local resistance. When Evo Morales, and his party Movement for Socialism (MAS), won the Election of 2005, the country's "strategic" and "vital" resources, including lithium, were nationalized in order to finance social programs. During the electoral campaign of 2005, Morales spoke against the neoliberal policies that had been dominating the political scene over the past decades and promised redistribution and sovereignty over natural resources (McKay, 2018). The purpose of the nationalization of resources was to free Bolivia from its dependent role as an exporter of raw materials by taking control of the entire value chain (Fornillo, 2018). Ambitious plans were made to develop a sustainable method for lithium extraction, and a pilot project for battery production was initiated (Obaya, 2019).

By defining Bolivia's economic policies as anti-neoliberal, Morales placed the country in clear opposition to how the resource is managed in neighbouring Argentina and Chile (Fornillo, 2018). Bolivia is the only country in the Lithium Triangle where the state has obtained control over the lithium reserves (Fornillo, 2018). The Argentinean state does not have direct interference with the mining activities which are mainly controlled by foreign actors that generate minimal amount fiscal revenues through low taxation and only pay 3% of royalties (Fornillo, 2018, p. 189; Roger et al., 2017, p. 17). The lithium mining in Chile is controlled by various national and international actors, but the country has prohibited new mining concessions (Fornillo, 2018, p. 188). In 2008 the Bolivian government launched a concrete strategy for extraction and industrialization of the lithium deposits of the Salar de Uyuni (Obaya, 2019). It was characterized by state control of the access and extraction of the resource, nationalization of the lithium sector, and plans to obtain control over the value chain (Obaya, 2019). This strategy was part of a larger political project that has led to an ongoing debate regarding how the resource should be managed in the most efficient, sustainable, and economically beneficial way.

Ever since the European colonialization, extractivism has played a key role in Latin American national economies, in which natural resources have been extracted and exported to serve the global demand (Gudynas, 2010). Extractivist activities have occurred in different forms, from colonial exploitation to neoliberal policies and structural adjustment programs to more recent

progressive governments who financed social programs through extractivist activities. In the late 2000s, a new wave of extractivism emerges in Latin American countries, labelled "neoextractivism" (Gudynas, 2010; Hargreaves, 2019). This trend was accompanied by a global rise in commodity prices and coincided with the rise to power of left-leaning governments in the region (Svampa, 2013).

According to Samantha Hargreaves "neo-extractivist policy includes outright nationalization of some or all extractive industries, growth of public shareholding, a renegotiation of contracts, efforts to grow resource rent through innovative taxation mechanisms, and value-adding beneficiation activities" (2019, p. 62). Neoextractivism rejects neoliberal policies such as privatization, free-trade, and monetary orthodoxy, which are trademarks of traditional extractivism where private (often foreign) actors exploit the resources. Even though neo-extractivist economic policies still relies on the extraction of natural resources, the projects and industries are often controlled by the state in order to finance social programs, ensure national sovereignty, and become less dependent on the external actors (Gudynas, 2010, 2011a). In some cases, the state may introduce progressive tax regimes instead of directly controlling the industries, which implies increased fiscal revenues. In Bolivia, however, this strategy was part of a larger political project that aimed to include elements of both neoextractivism and the notion of Vivir Bien (Obaya, 2019).

The concept of Vivir Bien, or *Sumak Kawsay* (in Quechua language), *Sumak Qamaña* (in Aymara), and *Buen Vivir* in other parts of Latin America (e.g., Ecuador and Colombia), is understood as a distinctive Indigenous “Latin American” vision that opposes to mainstream utilitarian development models. An abundance of scholarship on the notion of Vivir Bien has emerged (e.g., Acosta 2013b; Gudynas 2011a, 2011b; Waldmueller & Rodríguez, 2018; Walsh 2010), emphasizing its Indigenous ideas, cosmovisions, and related knowledges. There is also an increased interest in Indigenous terminologies as alternative epistemologies and knowledge orientations within the philosophical stands of postcolonial critique (Escobar 2010a; Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; Quijano 2005). Some argue, however, that there is a lack of practical translations of these visions into empirical settings (Ranta, 2018).

In English, the term can be translated into “Good living” or “Living well”, but according to leading scholars, such translations do not cover the complexity of the concept. Rather than being centralized around the individual’s well-being, it contains a focus on the good life in a broader sense in which the subject to well-being are the individuals in the social context of their community and environment (Gudynas, 2011b; Acosta, 2013b). Hence, in Indigenous

contexts, the concept refers to a mutual relationship of humans and nature in community with respect for cosmic cycles and spiritual understanding that should lead to a life in complete plenitude (Waldmueller & Rodríguez, 2018).

In Bolivia, the notion of Vivir Bien was included in the new constitution of 2009 after a massive participatory constitution-making process (Postero, 2017). In state policy, Vivir Bien is defined as "an alternative civilizational and cultural horizon to capitalism and modernity" (Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4). Additionally, the Constitution of 2009 declared Bolivia as a plurinational state, and the government stated that decolonization of the state would be achieved through the incorporation of multi-ethnic and plurinational forms of governance (Ranta, 2018, p. 10). However, as mentioned, Bolivia has depended heavily on state-controlled resource extraction which has led to a large number of contradictions and conflicts. The neo-extractivist approach to resource management may be opposing neoliberal policies, but it could also be considered conflicting with the decolonizing principles and ecological values offered by the notion of Vivir Bien (Ranta, 2018). In chapter 3 I will address these terms and discuss the issues and contradictions related to them.

Over the past two decades, social and Indigenous movements have challenged the ways of doing politics in Latin America (Ranta, 2018). Indigenous movements, scholars, and activists who had been politically, economically, and socially excluded for centuries, have increasingly questioned, and criticized neoliberal policies, economic globalization, and universal development schemes (Blaser 2007; Escobar 2010a). The dominant understanding of development as a linear process based on the idea of modernization has been labelled "euromodernity" (Escobar, 2010a; Harvey, 2006). In the case of Bolivian, the lithium project is presented as a way to "develop" the region in which the lithium is located. Some scholars (Gonzáles Casanova, 1965; Quijano, 2000) has labelled this state-led development "internal colonialism". This "euromodernity" has been linked to the European colonialism that led to the consolidation of the capitalist world-system (Escobar, 2007, 2010a). It could also be analyzed as part of what scholars from the decoloniality group, such as Quijano (2000), Escobar (2007), and Mignolo (2000), calls "coloniality". I will further elaborate on this in chapter 3.

The place

Bolivia is a land-locked country located in South America, bordering with Peru, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay. The country can be divided roughly into two geographical areas: the highlands and the lowlands. In this thesis, I will concentrate on the highlands, called the "altiplano" in Spanish, since this is where the department of Potosí and the lithium reserves are located. This part of the country is situated in the Andean mountains and shares a long history with its neighbouring countries. According to Klein (2003) "The arrival of early man in the Andean area dates back at least twelve thousand years" (p. 10). This part of Bolivia was the scene of an early domestication of the American camelids (the llama, alpaca, and vicuña) and holds an extraordinary mineral heritage (Klein, 2003). These minerals that were only "modestly exploited in pre-Columbian times, would become the basis for Bolivia's importance in the world economy once the region was discovered by Europe" (Klein, 2003, p. 9).

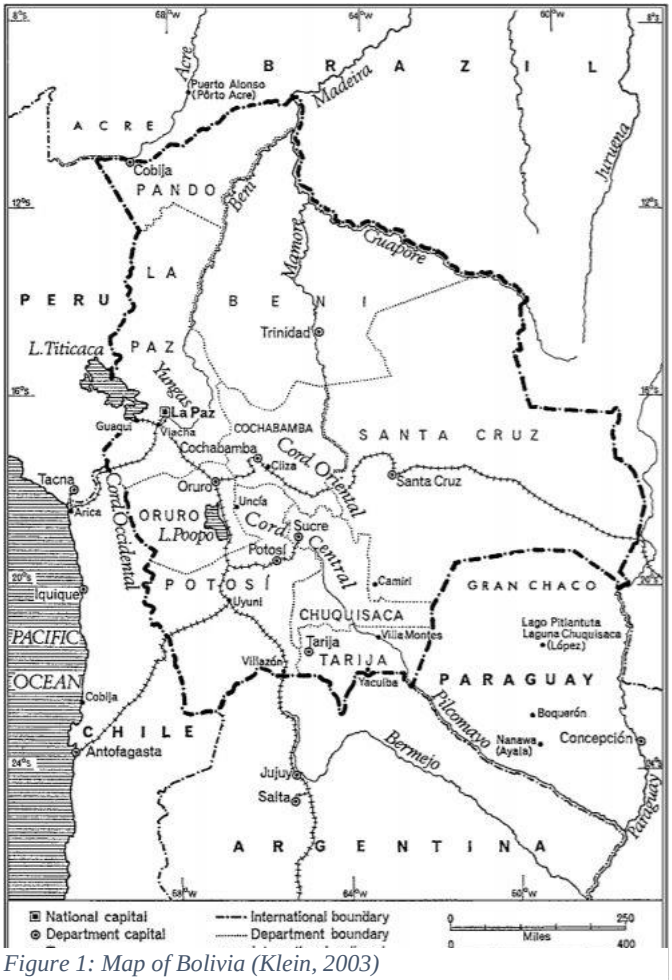

Figure 1: Map of Bolivia (Klein, 2003)

The departments of Oruro and Potosí are considered one of the greatest mineral zones of the world. Not only do they contain abundant amounts of tin and silver, but also a variety of rare metals and minerals such as lead, bismuth, zinc, and antimony (Klein, 2003, p. 8). In fact, "the only minerals or hydrocarbons Bolivia lacks are coal, bauxite, chrome, platinum, and precious stones" (ibid.). As mentioned, the earth's largest salt flat, Salar de Uyuni, located in the department of Potosí in Bolivia, also holds the world's single largest lithium deposit. It is estimated that the Bolivian lithium reserves correspond to at least 21 million metric tons (Obaya, 2019). The historical significance of the Bolivian mining sector will be further addressed in chapter 4.

Bolivia is a diverse country, both in terms of geology and demography. The constitution of 2009 recognizes thirty-six Indigenous nationalities, in which the Quechua (31%) and the Aymara (25%) are the largest groups (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2004, p. 104). These two groups, along with other minor groups such as the Guaraní, Mojeño, Chiquitano, represent more than 60 percent of the total population (ibid.). According to Postero (2017) "There is an enormous diversity among these self-identifying groups, with big differences between highland and lowland communities and between urban and rural residents" (p. 7). The ethnic categorization of Indigenous peoples began in the early 1500s when the Spanish colonizers defined all the native peoples of the Americas as "Indians" (Postero, 2007, p. 25). Despite the vast ethnic diversity between the different peoples of the different regions, this categorization has continued until present time.

The department of Potosí is considered the country's most marginalized region, with high levels of poverty and undernutrition, lack of sanitation and healthcare, poor infrastructure, and a weak educational system (Obaya, 2019). Apart from these material aspects, the population of Potosí is mainly Indigenous and shares a collective memory related to the model of extractivist exploitation that has historically affected them negatively ever since the colonization (Obaya, 2019). In other words, the Bolivian Indigenous population is a majority in numbers, but can historically be considered a minority in questions of social inclusion, representation, and political power. These aspects will be addressed in chapter 1 and 4.

For the sake of analytical clarity, I use the general term "Indigenous peoples" throughout this thesis. However, I am aware that it is a highly contested concept in both the Bolivian and the global context (Postero, 2017; McNeish & Eversole, 2005, p. 6). The Bolivian Indigenous population is divided into different categories, both by the national imaginaries and in their self-representation. These differences and numerous definitions derive from the multiple

histories and relations with global processes and the Bolivian nation-state (Ranta, 2018, p. 8). In chapter two I briefly touch upon some of the reasons why this concept has been changing over time in the Bolivian context. Still, I chose to use the generic term "Indigenous peoples" to facilitate the readers' comprehension, as it is a term commonly used by international institutions and conventions on Indigenous rights. I have also chosen to consistently capitalize the word Indigenous throughout this thesis in order to recognize it as an identity, rather than an adjective. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), this is the correct spelling and an important principle to ensure that the language is free of bias (APA, 2020).

Methodological framework

As suggested by my research question and objective, this thesis aims to analyze how the Bolivian lithium project differs from neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, and how it may be understood as a decolonial project. Methodologically speaking, the analytical weight is placed on governmental discourses related to the lithium sector, under the broad umbrella of qualitative research approach. According to Bryman: "qualitative research tends to be more concerned with words rather than numbers" (2008, p. 366). Moreover, qualitative research is inductive, rejects the norms of natural scientific model and of positivism, along with viewing "social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation" (ibid., p. 22).

In order to respond to my research question, I have decided to analyze my data through a critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Bryman (2008) this approach "emphasizes the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change" (p. 508). Such analysis draws particularly on the theories and approaches of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1977), who "sought to uncover the representational properties of discourse as a vehicle for the exercise of power through the construction of disciplinary practices" (Bryman, 2008, p. 508). According to Phillips and Hardy (2002) the task of CDA "is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality" (p. 3). Hence, its purpose is not only to deconstruct, but to *reconstruc*t the way we understand the world. There is a great deal of power in the way we speak about different phenomena, which means that discourses have the power to shape the way we understand them (Grue, 2011). Finally, CDA is also concerned with demystifying simplified narratives, which is particularly relevant in this case, as

narratives often play an important discursive role in the context of Indigenous struggles and environmental change (Grue, 2011; Robbins, 2012). Throughout this thesis, and particularly in chapters 5 and 6, I will examine how discourses regarding the Bolivian lithium project are presented in various policy documents, interviews, and academic debates. I will also explore whether there are differences between discourse and practice, along with discussing the purpose of the dominant discourses.

In social research, it is particularly important to reflect upon ontology, epistemology, and axiology. The word “axiology” originates from Greek and means "theory of value", and addresses questions related to “what is valued and considered to be desirable or ‘good’ for humans and society” (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016, p. 140). Where I come from, what time I am living in, and what opportunities I have in life are all factors that influence my values and how I understand the world. My own values will necessarily influence the way I conduct this research project, as well as the choice of topic.

Accordingly, it is important for researchers to be aware of their own values and positionality (Sundberg & Dempsey, 2014, p. 176). Social research is not a representation of reality because it will always be influenced by the researcher’s physical location and power relations organized around the consensus of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Sundberg & Dempsey, 2014, p. 176). This is what Mignolo (1994, 2002) has referred to as “locus of enunciation”, which entails that the location and positionality cannot be ignored in the process of knowledge production. The fact that I am a privileged white Norwegian female might obscure the socio-economic challenges people from other parts of the world are facing. At least it conditions my frames of interpretation along with the influence of my personal life experience, preferences, and sympathies. Accordingly, if I let my values influence the data uncritically, there is a risk of an undesirable bias. Hence, in the case of an informant telling me something I do not agree upon, I will have to accept other points of view to assure trustworthiness in the study. Along with sustained self-reflection (including being explicit) on my locus of enunciation, this is how I tackle this issue.

In social research, ontology is concerned with the nature of social entities, in particular the question about whether entities can be considered objective and external to social actors, or whether they should be considered social constructions (Bryman, 2008, p. 18). I would consider myself leaning towards the ontological position of constructivism, which emphasizes that social entities or social phenomena are influenced and built up from the actions and perceptions of social actors (Bryman, 2008, p. 19). In this particular research project, I find

this position most applicable, because I believe that the topic cannot be understood separately from other social actors and their interactions.

Whereas axiology is concerned with how one acts based on inherent values, and ontology is concerned with how one experiences and views reality, epistemology is about how one thinks and understands the world. Epistemological considerations in social research are concerned with what should be considered acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Bryman, 2008, p. 13). A central question is whether the social world should be studied according to the same principles as the natural sciences (ibid.). The epistemological position that views it as a goal to imitate the natural sciences is called positivism, and the opposite position is called interpretivism (Bryman, 2008, p. 15). Interpretivism recognizes that a social phenomenon is subjective and can be interpreted in different ways (Bryman, 2008, p. 16). In a sense, interpretivism shares the view of social constructivism, by emphasizing that phenomena are created and negotiated by social actors. Thus, my epistemological position in this research project is interpretivism.

From a different angle, a major concern while conducting this thesis was related to the covid-19 pandemic. Initially, I had planned to spend several months in Bolivia conducting fieldwork, but due to travel restrictions I had to reshape my project. I will elaborate on these implications in the limitation-section below, but first turn to position the project as a case study and explain my data collection.

Case study

This thesis can be considered a case study as it revolves around a detailed analysis of a single case (Bryman, 2008, p. 52). The study area chosen for this research project is Bolivia, with an emphasis on the lithium reserves at the Salar de Uyuni in the department of Potosí. The Bolivian lithium project will serve as the case. This is linked to the study area (Salar de Uyuni, Potosí, Bolivia), but the case is not only presented in the geographical sense. A case study is commonly associated with a location, but it could also apply to other entities (Bryman, 2008, p. 54). According to Bryman "the case is an object of interest in its own right, and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth elucidation of it" (ibid.). Especially due to the limitations regarding access to the field, the case is more centred around the discursive features of the lithium project rather than empirical data from the geographic location. It is

therefore a case study in the sense that I focus on a project that is linked to a specific space and time, and not merely limited to the geographic location.

There are various reasons why I chose to focus on this case. Lithium itself is an interesting topic as it is highly relevant in the context of global warming and environmental degradation. As the SDGs has placed a sustainable energy transition high on the global agenda, it is important to investigate what this demand for battery components entails for the lithium-dense countries. Although there are several other countries already extracting lithium, which would have been easier to study, I found it appealing that the Bolivian lithium project is still in its initial stages. Bolivia differs from other lithium-dense countries in the sense that it is centred around resource nationalism, sovereignty, and industrialization of the value chain. The lithium policies of Bolivia are presented as an alternative to the traditional extractivist model, and I found it interesting to examine what this entails in practice.

Another significant difference is that the Bolivian government has included the notion of Vivir Bien as part of its development plan and emphasized that the Bolivian economic model should be based on decolonization (Farthing & Kohl, 2014; Pellegrini, 2016). In this sense, the state-led industrialization project of lithium has been centred around the capacitation of the domestic workforce for the production of value-added products and has been considered as an opportunity for scientific and technological learning (Obaya, 2021). This desire to control the resource and the processes of industrialization forms part of a goal of breaking free from the colonial heritage and the collective memory of exploitation (Revette, 2017; Obaya, 2021). Thus, another reason behind this choice of case is that I consider it important to study how a country that has historically struggled to take control over its resources and industrialize, has developed such ambitious plans for the lithium sector. I also found it interesting that, as far as I am concerned, the decolonial perspective of the lithium project has not been previously analyzed in depth.

Data collection

This thesis draws on various sources of data. First, I have conducted three in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants, including one former minister, one former employee at Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos (YLB), and one representant from the local perspective who is an Indigenous activist and a founding member of “Comunidad Andina del

Litio" (Andean Lithium Community). Secondly, I have reviewed a large set of policy documents, including development plans, governmental programs, and reports about the Bolivian lithium project. Finally, I chose to include public discourse (i.e., social and conventional media) regarding the recent development of the lithium sector, and legislation related to natural resource management.

Hence, the analysis will be mainly based upon qualitative data from secondary sources, such as policy documents, but the interviews serve as primary data to complement my findings. As such, I ensure triangulation by combining empirical data with a broad range of policy documents, laws and legislations, statistics, and newspaper articles related to the case (Bryman, 2008, p. 700). In the following sections, I present the sources in greater detail.

Interviews

For this thesis, I have conducted three semi-structured interviews. According to Bryman (2008), this method is particularly useful when the purpose of the research is to understand a topic rather than obtaining answers to a specific set of questions (p. 438). This type of interaction-based data collection is flexible in the sense that it provides space for the informants to elaborate on topics of particular interest and focus on what they consider most important (Bryman, 2008, p. 466). I was particularly interested in the informants' *perceptions* of the lithium project, which would have been difficult to measure through other methods. According to Fangen (2010), interviewing is an adequate tool for obtaining insight about a phenomenon that cannot be measured in numbers (p. 141). Moreover, interviews can provide insight that the researcher is not able to understand through other types of data collection (Weiss, 1994; Fangen, 2010). It is however important to remember that interviews should not be interpreted as an actual representation of reality, but rather as informants' perceived reality, or how they want to be perceived (Fangen, 2010, p. 141). In this study, this is particularly relevant, as the informants are specific actors with particular affiliations.

The informants were included in this study based on their knowledge about the topic, which was deemed necessary to secure a certain level of accuracy and credibility (Bryman, 2008, p. 384). It is important to ensure that the sample size fits the purpose of the study, otherwise, the credibility of the findings could be limited (Bryman, 2008, p. 417). The most important consideration when choosing a sample size is to ensure that it serves the purpose of the study

(ibid.). Due to the limitations related to the lack of fieldwork and informants from the local perspective, I chose to include the interviews as part of a broader analysis. The sampling criteria for this study was that the informants had to have some degree of knowledge and/or be familiar with the lithium project. This means that other criteria such as age, ethnicity, gender, or political orientations were excluded. In total, three semi-structured interviews were conducted, whereas all of the informants were recruited through a form of purposive sampling approach called "snowball sampling", which entails getting in touch with informants through other people (Bryman, 2008, p. 184, 415).

Due to the covid-19 pandemic, I had to conduct the interviews virtually. Ideally, interviews are conducted in the informant's natural habitat (Weiss, 1994, p. 59), but due to practical reasons the next best solution, and quite frankly the only option, was through a virtual platform. This method of interviewing is considered viable if logistical reasons make it impossible to be physically present (Weiss, 1994, p. 59). Fortunately, I have a relatively large network in Latin America which to a certain degree facilitated the process of getting in touch with informants. As I was interested in understanding how the lithium project is perceived by different actors, and not only how it is presented in policy documents, I interviewed the following key informants:

Luis Alberto Echazú:
Engineer and politician. Former minister of Mining and Metallurgy (2007-2010) and deputy minister of High Energy Technologies (2017-2019). He was also the Bolivian Mining Corporation's manager of national evaporite resources and in charge of the initial planning of the lithium project.

Jazmín Valdivieso:
Social Communicator, former employee at Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos (YLB) and activist.

Donny Alí Flores:
Lawyer and Indigenous activist. Founding member of "La comunidad Andina del Litio". Resident of the community of Rio Grande, close to Salar de Uyuni in Potosí.

These three informants have different backgrounds and represent different perspectives and positions. Their perceptions of the lithium project are therefore influenced by their education, work experience, and geographic position. However, they are all highly educated, share a similar ideological position, and are all favourable of the lithium project. Although it would have been desirable to conduct more interviews with informants from the local communities, I believe that these key informants have provided sufficient valuable and relevant information to respond to my main research question, especially when combined with other sources of data.

When conducting a semi-structured interview, it is common to create an interview guide including the topics, or questions, that the researcher wants answers to (Bryman, 2008, p. 696). Before conducting the interviews, I made an interview guide that included topics I wanted the informants to talk about. I chose topics instead of specific questions because it made it easier to adapt to the context of each informant. Due to the high levels of flexibility during the interviews, many of the topics were covered without having to ask any specific questions. The interviews were recorded because I wanted to make sure that the quotes could be accurately transcribed afterwards. Moreover, it allowed me to focus more on what was being said without concentrating on taking notes, which also prevented the data from being influenced by my own biases and values (Bryman, 2008, p. 451). The recordings were later transcribed before deleting them due to principles of confidentiality.

Informed consent is an important principle in social research, as it provides the informants with the necessary information regarding the purpose of the study and how the researcher will utilize and handle the data (Bryman, 2008, p. 128). Prior to conducting the interviews, I sent a consent form to the informants, in which I explained that their participation was entirely voluntary and emphasized that I could anonymize them if desired. According to Fangen (2010), it is desirable to get written consent before initiating the interview process. However, due to the digital format, the informants gave me oral consent. Before the interviews, I also asked if the informants had any questions, and I asked how they wanted to be quoted in the study. They expressed no need for anonymization, likely due to all being public figures, but I ensured that their names, backgrounds, and occupations were included the way they desired.

Policy documents

Governmental plans, policy guidelines, and governmental programs are documents that can illuminate forms of knowledge and rationalities that are used to unify the discourse of the state (Bryman, 2008, p. 529; Riles, 2006). Documents represent key sources of data when analysing state-discourse because they are "paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices" (Riles, 2006, p. 2). Document analysis is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher interprets documents to give voice and meaning around a given topic (Bowen, 2009). In this analysis, I will revise certain aspects and dimensions of the following documents:

Plan Nacional de Desarrollo: Bolivia Digna, Soberana, Productiva, y Democrática para Vivir Bien 2006–2011
This is a national development plan made by the Ministry of development planning in 2006. This was the first plan made by Evo Morales' government and laid an important groundwork for further development policy. It contains goals, visions, and specific plans for the future.

Plan de desarrollo departamental 2008-2012: Potosí para Vivir Bien
This is a regional plan for the department of Potosí, which draws on the objectives of the national development plan. Additionally, it includes specific local and regional target goals and addresses the main social problems in the department.

Rumbo a una Bolivia Líder: 2010–2015 Programa de Gobierno
This document is a governmental program for the second period of Evo Morales. It highlights the main achievements from the first period and outlines the objectives for the following period.

Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social en el Marco del Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien 2016–2020
This document is also a national development plan, which was published in 2015 and is the most recent of its kind.

Agenda Patriótica 2025

This document, created in 2013, is not a development plan, but rather a governmental visionary document that includes a set of 13 development goals that are to be achieved by 2025.

Programa de Gobierno. Agenda del pueblo para el Bicentenario y el Vivir Bien. 2020-2025.

The last document is the most recent governmental program, published in 2020. This final document will be used to illustrate the latest changes in discourse by the MAS administration.

The purpose of this analysis is to highlight differences and similarities between the documents, especially concerning changes in discourse related to the lithium project. These documents are extensive and cover a broad range of topics. In order to narrow my analysis, I decided to focus on the sections related to the concepts of decoloniality/decolonization, sovereignty, the notion of *Vivir Bien*, natural resource management, and economic policies.

Additional data

The analysis will mainly be based on the above-mentioned documents and interviews, but in order to add more context to the analysis, I have included some additional data, such as quotes from political speeches, newspaper articles, information presented by YLB, and some legislation and elements from the Constitution of 2009. I have also included two economic models: one presented in 2006 by former vice president Álvaro García Linera named *El Capitalismo Andino-Amazónico* (Andean-Amazonian capitalism), and one presented by Luis Arce in 2014 when he was the minister of economy and finance called *el Modelo Económico Social Comunitario Productivo* (the New Economic, Social, Communitary, Productive Model). Finally, I also include the anti-neoliberal and anti-colonial discourses of former president Evo Morales and current president Luis Arce as depicted in Bolivian media, along with statements about the progress of the lithium project made by the Ministry of Energy.

Limitations and ethical considerations

The chosen topic and the methodological approach of this research poses several limitations and ethical considerations. A key issue is the lack of fieldwork that would have strengthened my empirical grounds to local, and particularly Indigenous peoples' meaning production in relation to the lithium project.

Besides the turn to documents, a means to compensate for this is through an increased focus on history. Throughout the thesis, I have included a variety of historical backgrounds as means to contextualize and provide sufficient background information for the reader to understand the case. Although a historical overview is certainly important in qualitative case studies, I do not strive to provide any kind of universal history. In this body of work, and in my inclusion of the history of colonialism and Indigenous peoples, it is especially important to bear in mind that history has been marked by the western discourse of the colonizers.

Linda Tuhuwai Smith starts her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, by stating that "the term research itself is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (2008, p. 1). A major point for Tuhuwai Smith is the importance of understanding western research through the eyes of the colonized because research has been used as a tool for dominion and classification (ibid). Similarly, yet earlier, Edward Said (1978) referred to this process as a western discourse about the "other", which is supported by "institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles" (p. 10). In this sense it is difficult to discuss research methods and Indigenous peoples together "without having an analysis of imperialism, without understanding the complex ways in which the persist of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 2).

According to Tuhiwai Smith (2008), "travellers' tales" have contributed as much to the western knowledge and understanding of the "others" as the systematic gathering of scientific data (p. 2-3). Thus, it is understandable that Indigenous peoples do not differentiate "proper" research from other forms of amateur collecting, journalistic approaches, film making, and other ways of "extracting" Indigenous knowledges that have occurred over the centuries (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 2). Research must therefore be decolonial, or else we end up telling people what they already know and "suggest things that will not work and make careers for people who already have jobs" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 3). Most importantly, "Research is

not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). As mentioned above when referring to my positionality, I have reflected a lot on these decolonial aspects of research, and despite all the methodological limitations, I have strived to accommodate for their relevancy in my approach to both context and case.

The impacts of the covid-19 pandemic

The covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly led to unforeseen consequences and had massive global impacts. This has also been the case for this research. I was forced to reshape the entire project when I realized I would not be able to conduct fieldwork. My initial plan was to spend four months in Bolivia, with a preliminary focus on the socio-environmental impacts of lithium mining. This would have included participant observation and in-depth interviews in the local communities.

As the first semester of 2020 went by, it soon became evident that fieldwork during fall would not be possible due to the covid-19 pandemic. I was therefore forced to reshape the objective of this thesis. After careful considerations, I decided to stick to the same topic through a different perspective. I quickly realized that an analysis of the socio-environmental impacts of mining in this remote area would be exceedingly difficult to conduct, both due to the lack of existing reports on the matter, along with the absence of local perspectives due to the lack of fieldwork. Thus, I ended up changing my research question and went in a different methodological direction in which I would mainly base my research on a discourse analysis of policy documents. Nevertheless, as mentioned, I wanted to include some interviews with key informants to supplement the findings from the documents.

I spent a lot of time trying to get in touch with different actors from different sectors of Bolivian society. Given the circumstances of the pandemic, this proved to be much more complicated than expected. I explored alternative ways to get in contact with possible informants without being present in the field. After spending several years living and studying in various Latin American countries, I realized that I could reach out to friends and acquaintances to get in touch with informants (see the abovementioned snowball-sampling approach). Drawing from my experience of living in the Jujuy Province of northern Argentina (also home to major lithium mining projects), which borders the department of Potosí in

Bolivia, I reached out to friends that I knew either had close contact with people in Potosí or worked in the Argentinean lithium sector. They put me in contact with people in Bolivia, but unfortunately, none of the workers within the lithium sector agreed to be interviewed through digital platforms. Nonetheless, they provided me with insight and additional data that became valuable in understanding the organization of the lithium sector.

After this somewhat failed attempt I was concerned that I would not be able to conduct any interviews. However, I then chose to do a second attempt, implying a different field and focus. In 2018 I worked with The Landless Workers Movement in Brazil. During this stay, I attended a course at their school for political education, in which several activists and local politicians from all over Latin America were present. I reached out to a few of them, and they immediately put me in contact with central actors in Bolivia who helped me get in touch with Jazmín Valdivieso and Alberto Echazú. Finally, I tried to contact several labour unions, organizations, and movements through social medias. Through several rounds of communication with different people that did not want to be interviewed, I finally got in contact with Donny Alí. Additionally, I spoke to former professors at the National University of Colombia who helped me with accessing relevant literature.

As touched upon above, a major limitation was that the interviews had to be conducted through digital platforms which implied a challenge to obtain the necessary level of trust (Weiss, 1994, p. 59). And indeed, I found it challenging to elicit my research intentions effectively and convincingly in the virtual space and suspect that this would have been easier (yet different) through physical fieldwork in situ. Yet, there was mutual understanding about this imposed limitation and despite the loss of many potential informants, I learned and improved my "virtual interviewing skills" to discuss both sensitive and political questions. As I will address in chapters 4 and 5, many Bolivians in this area share a collective memory of being exploited and taken advantage of. This is mainly linked to the history of colonialism, but as a researcher, I must also acknowledge that there is a history of scientists tending to "extract" knowledge from people in other parts of the world without providing anything in return. Fortunately, my network helped me approach informants which again, facilitated the building of trust.

Moreover, the language barriers and cultural differences become more visible when communicating online. Although I do speak Spanish fluently, I realize that I may have missed some colloquialisms and cultural references that I would have understood to a greater extent in the field. It is difficult to fully understand the case, without being familiarized with the

specific context of the location. Inevitably, my physical location as well as my position as a researcher was a limitation, but I have compensated for this at the best of my abilities under the given circumstances.

A more materialistic limitation was that the informants did not have access to proper equipment and internet connection. This proved to be a significant obstacle when attempting to get in touch with possible informants as some of them had limited access to Internet and technology. The interviews were conducted through digital platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. This format was not ideal, as virtual interviews include a lot of limitations related to understanding non-verbal communication forms, such as body language. This severely limited the possibility of adding a "thick description" of the interviews to my analysis.

From a different perspective, the pandemic did not only affect my research per se, but it also led to unforeseen consequences related to the informants' lives and health (e.g., high infection rates and decreased economic opportunities). It further became difficult for me to follow the news related to anything else than the pandemic as it overshadowed other information that would have been presented in the media under other circumstances.

As a researcher from the field of development studies, it is important to be reflexive about the colonial heritage and the problematic history of scientific colonialism related to the study of Otherness (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Said, 1978; Asad, 1973). As the chosen topic is related to Indigenous contexts, I need to keep in mind that the examination of Indigenous peoples has been subject to various forms of exploitation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). Throughout history, anthropological studies and deep descriptions of certain populations were unethically used for political, economic, and military purposes. Moreover, foreign scholars and NGOs have been criticized for romanticizing Indigenous struggles without fully comprehending them (see for instance Postero, 2007; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). Jeffery Webber (2011, p. 234) has similarly criticized left-wing thinkers and activists for romanticizing the Bolivian case. According to Anibal Quijano (2000) "each category used to characterize the Latin American political process has always been a partial and distorted way to look at this reality." (p. 573). He explains this as an "inevitable consequence of the Eurocentric perspective" (ibid.), which is based on a dualism that separates nature from society and the body from reason. According to Quijano: "it is time to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror where our image is always, necessarily, distorted. It is time, finally, to cease being what we are not." (2000, p. 574). I am aware that the notion of Vivir Bien is only one amongst many important and inter-related terminologies and dimensions, such as struggles for autonomy, gender relations, and

power structures. In the passing, I will relate to these occasionally, but I retain a focus on Vivir Bien because of its discursive importance and out of necessity to delimit my scope.

Thesis structure

The multidisciplinary nature of development studies provides me with space and opportunity to structure the thesis in a rather unconventional manner. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis should do more than merely identifying themes. Bazeley (2009) points out three steps to be included in a qualitative approach: *describe, compare, relate* (p. 10). The starting point is thus to describe the case, by outlining the context for the study and provide details about the sources of data. Accordingly, as means to provide a basis for the analysis, the first chapters are dedicated to contextualizing the case and provide historical background. Bazeley (2009) also points out that it is important to compare the differences between different actors or across variations in context. Chapter five will explore the discourses of different actors and analyze these perspectives, whereas chapter six is more concerned with relating the findings to a broader debate. In qualitative research divergent views cannot be ignored, which is why this final chapter is deemed necessary in order to challenge generalizations (Bazeley, 2009) and facilitate further research on this topic.

More concretely, the thesis is divided into six chapters. The first one being this introduction chapter, where I have introduced the topic, its guiding research question, my methodological approach, limitations, and some important concepts which will be further elaborated in the following chapters.

Chapter two tells the story of the political development in Latin America and Bolivia, emphasizing how MAS achieved its position of power, and the role of social and Indigenous movements in these political changes. This chapter provides the reader with a political and historical background necessary for understanding the consolidation of the Bolivian lithium project.

Chapter three addresses how the Bolivian lithium project fits into the notion of green growth, neoextractivism as well as outlining some main elements from the decolonial school of thought, which will be discussed further in the final chapter.

Chapter four is a history lesson on the Bolivian mining sector. Here I focus on the importance of mining in Potosí and how this is linked to the contemporary lithium project. Moreover, I elaborate on the consolidation of the lithium project by outlining the historical processes of the lithium reserves.

In chapter five, I analyze various policy documents and interviews with key informants along with additional sources of data. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a discourse analysis of these sources of data, by examining the discourses related to my research question. I look at how the lithium project is linked to the governmental anti-capitalist and decolonial discourse, as well its relationship with the concepts of Vivir Bien, sovereignty, and decolonization.

In chapter six, I zoom out by looking at how the lithium project forms part of a broader decolonial debate in Latin America. I will look at the critiques of the lithium project, discuss to what extent the lithium project is/can be framed as a decolonial proposal, and consider the prospects of the Bolivian lithium. Finally, I provide some concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Lithium as Part of an Alternative Bolivian Project

"Indigenous comrades, for the first time we are presidents!"

– Evo Morales (December 18, 2005)[1]

On the 18th of December 2005, Evo Morales was elected as the first Indigenous president of Bolivia. There had not been any Indigenous leader in the Bolivian territory since the arrival of the Spanish colonizers five centuries ago. On the night of his victory, he promised that this would be the beginning of the new history of Bolivia (Postero, 2007). The emergence of his political party, Movement for Socialism (MAS), was a result of decades of struggle and mobilization carried out by the Indigenous people and social movements. Furthermore, it was part of a broad Latin American trend where left-wing governments came to power in many countries as a reaction to the neoliberal policies which had dominated the economic and political scene for the past two decades. Rising rates of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, along with the attempts of privatizing natural resources, led to protest movements all over the Latin American continent. People started to fight for greater inclusion and participation in decision-making, sovereignty over natural resources and demanded to reverse the trend of privatization.

This chapter aims to assess how lithium came to be part of MAS' alternative Bolivian project. In order to do so, I will provide background information about the national and international political context that led to MAS winning the elections in 2005. The chapter will start by providing general information about the political left-turn, or the so-called "pink tide", which many Latin American countries experienced in the early 2000s. I continue with a brief historic overview of the Bolivian economic and political context and an explanation of the rationale and emergence of MAS as a political project. I will end the chapter by assessing how various social movements and labour unions have played a significant role in shaping Bolivia's current natural resource management.

1 Original quote: «Compañeros indígenas, por primera vez somos presidentes!"

The Latin American pink tide: From neoliberal policies to resource nationalism

During the 1970s, the international price of petroleum increased rapidly. This was mainly due to market manipulations by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (Skidmore et al., 2010). The oil price was eventually quintupled, and due to the great vulnerability to external shocks, this "OPEC-crisis" proved extremely harmful to the growth and stability of the less developed countries, including most countries in Latin America (Street, 1978). Governments all over the continent faced rising inflation rates and debt crises, and The International Monetary Fund (IMF) advised bankers to lend out additional money for "rescue loans" to combat the increasing foreign debt (Street, 1978., Skidmore et al., 2010). This was a short-term solution that essentially made the economic situation worse. To satisfy foreign lenders, most Latin-American countries were forced to adopt an orthodox IMF-austerity plan based on implementing neoliberal economic policies (Boås and McNeill, 2003; Riddell, 2007). This included cutting government expenditures and subsidies, reducing real wages, and tightening credit markets. The international financial community, led by economists and policymakers from the U.S treasury, the World Bank, and the IMF, concluded that Latin American countries needed a fundamental economic restructuring (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 369). This led to what came to be known as the Washington Consensus, as these international financial institutions have their headquarters located in Washington D.C. It included three main principles: support of the private sector, liberalize trade policies, and reduce the economic role of the state (ibid.).

The Washington Consensus resulted in Latin America functioning as a neoliberal laboratory during the 1980s and 1990s. Almost every country was forced to implement some neoliberal policies and structural adjustment programs (SAP) in accordance with the Washington Consensus. SAP was part of economic reform packages that heavily indebted countries were forced to implement in order to qualify for loans from the international financial institutions (Boås and McNeill, 2003; Riddell, 2007). Neoliberal economic policies, such as market liberalization, minimal state interference, and privatization of natural resources were visible in the vast majority of the Latin American countries.

Although some economists had high hopes that this could strengthen the economies and lift people out of poverty, it soon became clear that the opposite was happening (Prevost et al.,

2012, p. 4). The countries experienced increasing poverty- and inequality rates and the socio-economic situation for the most marginalized populations was deteriorating. Furthermore, labour unions and social movements' political power was severely debilitated and many of the social "rescue nets" disappeared. Although the policies may have been adopted by the governments as means to escape their debt crises, they left the majority of the Latin American countries in worse conditions than before. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, poverty increased all over Latin America during this period and investments in the social sector declined (Ranta, 2018).

After two decades of neoliberal policies, people were exhausted. Attempts of privatizing natural resources, lack of investments in education and healthcare, and increasing poverty rates contributed to the rise of social movements and new left-winged political parties in many countries (Skidmore et al., 2010). The first, and perhaps most famous example of this, was when Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998 (Pereira da Silva, 2018). Throughout the following years, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Ecuador, Bolivia, and various central American countries moved in a similar direction (Prevost et al., 2012).

By the mid-2000s, three-quarters of the South American population, or 350 million people, were ruled by different expressions of left-wing governments. In other words, during the first years of the millennial, candidates from the political left won the elections in the majority of South- and Central American countries (Pereira da Silva, 2018; Prevost et al., 2012). There were local variations between these governments, but they were all part of a political left that was discontent with the dominant neoliberal ideology. This wave of a left-wing government at the end of the 1990s and in the beginning of the 2000s in Latin America became commonly known as the "pink tide" (Lievesley & Ludlam, 2009). However, the extent to which they followed the socialist, or Marxist, ideology associated with the political left, varied. Webber and Carr (2013) have placed Bolivia within the category of the radical left, as a distinction to more the moderate centre-left governments in the region (p. 5-6).

One of the main concerns of these new governments was the processes of privatization initiated during the decades of neoliberal policies. Especially the privatization of natural resources, such as oil, gas, water, and large areas of land for industrial agriculture, was considered a threat to national sovereignty. Thus, one important goal during the pink tide was to reverse this damage. In some countries, this was easier said than done. For instance, in Brazil and Argentina, extensive areas of land and resources were already in the hands of

powerful foreign and national actors (Skidmore et al., 2010). This led to some governments, such as Chile and Uruguay, adopting a more pragmatic position. On the other end of the scale, Venezuela nationalized the entire oil sector and kicked out international corporations.

Explanations and characteristics of the pink tide

There are various explanations for the emergence of the pink tide in Latin America, and it would be an oversimplification to explain the pink tide as a part of a class struggle. There is no doubt that the neoliberal policies increased poverty, inequality, and unemployment all over Latin America, but the massive mobilizations happening in various Latin American countries was a result of various causes (Postero, 2007). In the following section, I will briefly provide some explanations and characteristics.

First and foremost, the pink tide could be considered a protest movement that rejected the neoliberal policies propounded by the Washington Consensus, as it addressed social problems related to this, such as poverty and inequality (Skidmore et al., 2010). It was also a protest against governments' inability, or unwillingness, to promote social justice for its citizens. The aim of the neoliberal policies had been to secure a minimal role of the state with an unregulated economy open to foreign investment, which in Bolivia was combined with a new conception of a proactive, multicultural citizenship (Kohl & Farthing, 2006, p. 84). This "neoliberal multiculturalism" became a central dimension of these neoliberal policies (Postero, 2017), but various civil society groups also made use of new formal instruments of participation, recognition, and decision-making to widen the scope of democracy. This will be further addressed at the end of this chapter.

The different actors involved in the different countries did not form part of a homogenous group of social movements but rather involved a broad range of organizations, movements, concepts, and ideas, including Indigenous traditions and cosmovision, nationalism, Catholicism, feminism, environmentalism, and, of course, socialism (Skidmore et al., 2010). Accordingly, the pink tide was hardly centralized nor consistently doctrinal in its articulation.

The pink tide could, however, also be viewed as an anti-colonial protest against the United States' foreign policy, especially concerning their anti-drug interventions and various expressions of imperialism. The Cold War had come to an end, and Latin America was no

longer dragged into a tug of war it had not agreed to participate in. This meant that the period of the United States attacking attempts of socialist ideology, and their support of dictatorships that almost every Latin American country experienced, appeared to be over (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 393). Yet, several Latin American scholars and activists were particularly critical of U.S president George W. Bush's interventions in the Middle East (Skidmore et al., 2010). This "war on terror" was by many considered equally harmful as the "war on communism" and "war on drugs" that the United States had historically used to justify interventions and presence in Latin America. Thus, the pink tide can be understood as an anti-imperial reaction to both the contemporary situation and the long history of interventionism and colonialism that Latin American countries had experienced from the United States and Europe.

There are multiple reasons why these new leaders were able to govern successfully. One key element was resource nationalism. In many countries, governments were able to take control over some of the important economic sectors and benefit economically from them in an unprecedented manner. This was influenced by the so-called "commodity boom", which led to high commodity prices in the early 2000s, and thus, facilitated the increased government expenditures in social programs (Svampa, 2013). Yet, according to Svampa (2013), the main difference between this period and the neoliberal period was the role of the state. During the period marked by the Washington Consensus, the state's purpose was to facilitate neoliberal policies, such as privatization of resources and market liberalization (Harvey, 2005; Svampa, 2013). This significantly changed as many of these new governments initiated massive state-led and state-regulated extractivist projects to generate fiscal revenues and finance new social programs which had been absent during the past decades (Svampa, 2013).

Another important aspect was that despite disagreements and different articulations of leftist ideologies in various countries, the leaders of united their forces in moving towards a common political platform. Not only did they go in a progressive direction at the same time, but they aimed to cooperate through initiatives and alliances such as UNASUR and ALBA. Hence, neighbouring countries that had been rivalling for decades, such as Argentina and Brazil, were suddenly willing to make alliances and treaties (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 373).

Brief overview of the political history of Bolivia 1952-2003

Zooming in on Bolivia and to the questions of how and why MAS gained such vast popularity it is necessary to take a look at its economic and political history. Although MAS has emphasized the importance of national sovereignty over Bolivia's natural resources, resource nationalism is not a new concept in Bolivia. The revolution of 1952, led by Paz Estensorro and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), was based on ideas about nationalization of mines, redistribution of wealth, and land reforms (Skidmore et al., 2010). Labour unions such as the Bolivian Worker's Union (COB) were established and gained power during this period, and the unions co-governed the nationalized mines through the Bolivian mining corporation (COMIBOL) (Klein, 2003, p. 213). The purpose of this was also to unify the nation through the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into a national project that focused on universal suffrage education and land reform (Ranta, 2018). This led to Indigenous peoples being identified through their class position as peasants, rather than as Indigenous peoples (Albó, 2008; Ranta, 2018, p. 48). According to Postero (2007), this has resulted in the "continuing ambiguity between class and ethnicity" which is still visible in Indigenous discourses and state politics (p. 11).

The revolutionary ideas of MRN were not welcomed by the international community, especially not in the context of the Cold War, which led to the United States supporting a coup in 1964. A few years later, in 1971, another U.S-backed coup occurred, when Hugo Banzer and the military overthrew newly elected, soviet-friendly president Juan José Torres (Skidmore et al., 2010). During this period, the United States subsidized "ideologically suitable" dictators throughout Latin America (Ranta, 2018). Between 20 and 30 percent of the yearly budget deficits were financed by the United States, in order for these dictators to remain in power (Moore, 1990, p. 41). According to Ranta (2018), this dominant role of the United States in Bolivian internal affairs "was a clear demonstration of the continuation of neo-colonial relations between Bolivia and other countries." (p. 48). Banzer would become the longest-ruling military dictator in the nation's history. This was a significant setback for the social movements and the political left in Bolivia, as Banzer ruled according to conservative right-wing ideology and became famous for his brutality and repression of all opposition. He banned left-wing parties, jailed hundreds of political prisoners, closed down universities to avoid any student agitation, and suspended labour unions, such as COB (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 179).

After turbulent years of dictatorship, political chaos, and economic crises, Paz Estensorro returned democratically to power in 1985. However, his previous ideals from the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement regarding resource nationalism and sovereignty, land reform, and redistribution were long gone (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 179-180). Instead, he built an alliance with former dictator Hugo Banzer and implemented the "New Economic Policy" (Decreto Supremo 21060, 1985) as a response to hyperinflation, declining tin prices, and increased foreign debt (Klein, 2003; Kohl & Farthing, 2006). It was based on neoliberal principles, and focused on macroeconomic stabilization, along with cutting government expenditures (Kohl & Farthing, 2006). Moreover, COMIBOL was dismantled, and the country was opened for unrestricted free trade (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 180).

Following the presidency of Paz Estensorro, the new president Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993) continued in the same direction. He strengthened the coalition with Banzer, followed the same neoliberal economic principles, and further weakened the position of the labour unions and social movements (Skidmore et al., 2010). The neoliberal policies were further enhanced with increased privatization of the largest state-controlled companies by transnational corporations (Kohl & Farthing, 2006, p. 107–108). Bolivia went from being one of the most nationalized economies in Latin America to becoming one of the most liberalized ones (Ranta, 2018). According to Grindle (2003), Bolivia served as an experimental ground for neoliberal economic policies and international development plans, as it became one of the first countries in the world to adopt Structural Adjustment Programs.

Paz Zamora's successor, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997) continued orthodox monetary policies but made some attempts to strengthen Indigenous movements' political representation through multiculturalist policies. He was the first president to declare Bolivia a pluricultural state, encourage decentralized municipal governance and allow for bilingual education (Postero, 2007). This is what Postero (2017, p.10) calls "neoliberal multiculturalism", in which the wave of privatization was complemented by multicultural reforms. I will explore this further at the end of this chapter. For now, suffice to say that Sanchez de Lozada also opted for joint ventures between state-owned industries and private actors, along with meeting U.S demands regarding anti-drug policies by implementing a controversial cocaine eradication program (Skidmore et al., 2010, p. 180).

In 1997, Hugo Banzer returned to power, this time democratically. He continued strengthening the neoliberal policies, especially concerning market liberalization and privatization. Furthermore, he strongly supported the U.S anti-drug agenda and encouraged

the sale of state-owned resources (Skidmore et al., 2010), including the unexplored lithium reserves of Salar de Uyuni (Obaya, 2019). These attempts of privatization of natural resources led to massive protests and revolts such as the Water War in Cochabamba. In 2002, Sanchez de Lozada returned to power after running against Evo Morales who lost by less than 2 percent. His ruling term was short, as he resigned in 2003 and fled to the United States, after a large series of violent encounters between soldiers and demonstrators (Skidmore et al., 2010). This political chaos was related to the unpopular neoliberal policies that had dominated the economy for the past two decades, which led to the water- and gas wars, which will be explained below.

Impacts of neoliberal policies and the social uprising

The neoliberal era had significantly weakened worker's rights and the power of labour unions and led to high rates of unemployment causing migration between regions (Postero, 2017, p. 29). The implementation of neoliberal policies favouring foreign investments also led to the closure and privatization of mines (Kohl & Farthing, 2006). This resulted in unemployment rates rising to 20%, which forced Aymara and Quechua miners from the highlands to relocate to the lowlands of the Chapare region where they could sustain themselves by cultivating coca leaves (Haarstad and Andersson, 2009, p. 11; Sanabria, 1993). Approximately 200,000 peasants depended on the cultivation of coca and suffered significantly from the income loss caused by the eradication policies enforced by the U.S Drug Enforcement Administration (Kohl & Farthing, 2006, p. 158). It should be mentioned that the cultivation of coca leaves has a deep historical significance in Bolivia previous to its use in the production of cocaine. The use of coca leaves is part of a distinctive Andean identity, as it forms part of both rituals and traditional medicine (Russo, 2015. See also Allen, 1988). Nevertheless, the growing demand for coca for its narcotic use made it more profitable than other sorts of agricultural activities.

The previous miners had strong traditions of mobilization through labour unions and soon began to organize themselves in "cocalero" (coca farmers) unions (Postero, 2017, p. 29). Evo Morales was one of these coca farmers that had migrated from the department of Oruro and soon became active in the regional cocalero union. In 1985 he was elected general secretary of the union, and in 1988 he became the executive secretary of a federation of various cocalero unions (Postero, 2017). The federation was both strongly against the neoliberal

policies and the government's cooperation with the United States in its war on drugs, which Morales considered an imperialist attack on Indigenous Andean culture.

According to a report developed by the Human Right Watch (HRW) in 1995, the Bolivian anti-drug law and its implementation led to serious violations of human rights. The anti-narcotics police used to barge into the homes in the cocalero regions, often in the middle of the night, and in many cases arrest and detain people only based on suspicion (HRW, 1995). Although there have been reports of serious abuse, violence and torture, impunity was the norm for the Bolivian law enforcement personnel. Bolivians charged with a drug offence were imprisoned without possibility of pre-trial release and had to remain in prison for years until the legal case had been reviewed by the Supreme Court (HRW, 1995). This anti-drug program was strongly supported and encouraged by the U.S Drug Enforcement Administration, and the coca eradication policies became a conditionality for Washington Consensus rescue loans and U.S development aid (Kohl & Farthing, 2006, p. 80). The local cocalero unions and social movements viewed this as an intrusion into Bolivian internal affairs, and in response, developed a discourse of sovereignty (A. Arce, 2000, p. 46). Thus, it was not without reason that the cocalero union criticized and protested against the U.S involvement and the anti-drug programs.

As a response to the aggressive suppression of the coca production, along with an increased presence of private and foreign actors in the agricultural sector, various cocalero and peasant organizations united their forces in 1995 and founded the political party MAS (Schilling-Vacaflor, 2011, p. 7). The creation of MAS initially served the political interests of the coca growing peasants, but it soon came to include a much broader part of Bolivian society. Postero (2017) points out that the unity between these different actors was possible due to the construct of an "Indigenous nationalism" (p. 26, 33). This meant that MAS did not only represent the coca farmers, but the Indigenous and peasant population in general. This was significant, because it gave, and amplified, the political voice of various marginalized sectors all over the country. Furthermore, MAS gained widespread support from other groups, such as urban intellectuals and workers, labour unions and various organizations (Schilling-Vacaflor, 2011, p. 7). As mentioned above, ideas about land reform, redistribution, and state control over resources, had already been central during the revolution of 1952, and many of these ideas were brought back on the agenda and popularized by MAS.

In the late 1990s the Bolivian government initiated a privatization process of the water in La Paz, El Alto and Cochabamba, in which they sold 30-year water concessions to the

multinational company Bechtel (Hicks & Fabricant, 2016, p. 89-90). It is necessary to remember that the economic policies during this period of time was heavily influenced by neoliberalism, which favoured privatization of natural resources. Moreover, the commodification of water was considered a "pro-poor" measure by the international development community (Hicks & Fabricant, 2016, p. 90). The idea was that it would "promote resource conservation", but this made little sense to the population of the areas that lost their water access or were unable to pay for the water due to increasing prices. Thus, as a response to this multinational company obtaining a monopoly over the water, people from various societal groups united to fight for collective water rights (ibid.). The massive mobilization culminated in violent clashes between protesters and police forces during the first months of the new millennium and ended in April with the government cancelling the contract with Bechtel.

Almost the exact same thing happened three years later. In 2003 the government planned to privatize and export natural gas through pipelines into Chile for commercialization in the United States and Mexico (Postero, 2007). People were furious after decades of attempts to privatize natural and vital resources that many Bolivian citizens depended on. For historical reasons, there was also a strong hostility towards Chile which led the vast majority of Bolivians to oppose this (Ranta, 2018). Many different actors took to the streets to demonstrate, and some set up road blockades to La Paz that cut off the food and gas-supply to the capital (Farthing, 2018). After several weeks of mobilization, the government declared a state of emergency and sent the military to deal with the demonstrators (Farthing, 2018). As previously mentioned, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada eventually resigned and fled the country due to the violent nature of the clashes, and the overwhelming support to the protesters (Postero, 2007).

Through these two significant "wars", and the rising poverty rates, it became evident that the neoliberal policies that had dominated in the past decades had not ensured either development or inclusion of the majority of the Bolivian population. By the turn of the millennium, more than 63% of the population lived below the poverty line (República de Bolivia, 2001) and one third in extreme poverty (McKay, 2018, p. 1255). A World Bank study from 2005 showed that the Indigenous population were significantly poorer than the rest, with 52% living in a condition of extreme poverty (Postero, 2007). Moreover, the study showed that while poverty rates had slightly declined for the non-Indigenous population between 1997 and 2002, it had increased among Indigenous people living in rural areas to an alarming 72% (ibid.). Both of

these wars symbolized a culmination of discontent with the strong influence of foreign economic and political interests, and these conflicts were seen as "a response to the perceived violation of Bolivia's 'national sovereignty'" (Albro, 2005, p. 446). This culmination of anger is one of the main explanatory factors behind the massive popularity of MAS. Evo Morales managed to capitalize on the dissatisfaction with the traditional political parties and the growing level of conflict and social protests related to the privatization of these natural resources (Ranta, 2018; Van Cott, 2008).

The political project of MAS and its initial achievements

MAS won the election of 2005 and Evo Morales became the first president of Indigenous background in the country's republican history. This was considered revolutionary - not only due to the socialist ideology, but also because the Indigenous majority of the Bolivian population obtained representation for the first time in modern history. It is important to understand that approximately 60% of the Bolivian population identify as Indigenous, yet they had been excluded from the political scene for centuries (Postero, 2007). One of the first actions by the new government was to reverse the plans of privatization by nationalizing the most important natural resources, such as natural gas. Furthermore, they stated that they wanted to create a new Constitution based on the participation of a broad range of civil society actors, such as social movements, organizations, and unions. Bolivia had already been declared multi-ethnic, but the new government wanted this multiculturality to be reflected in the new Constitution. In 2009, the Constitution changed the official name of the country to "The Plurinational State of Bolivia" (Postero, 2007). In the following, I turn to address the new government's main initial achievements and most significant changes related to the natural resource governance.

The social unrest and massive mobilization in the previous years, such as the water- and gas wars, had demonstrated how the neoliberal policies affected the natural resource management (McKay, 2018, p. 1247). The promises of structural change, social inclusion, and redistribution offered by MAS represented a radical change that many Bolivians found appealing (Farthing and Kohl, 2014, p. 22). Morales promised to end the historical injustice and suffering of the Indigenous peoples (Postero, 2017, p. 117). In contrast, Bolivia's economic and political elites found Morales' promises of redistribution and resource

nationalism as threatening their private interests. Approximately 70% of the arable land was controlled by a small group of landowners who feared that the new government would push through a land reform (Farthing & Kohl, 2014, p. 1). They were deeply discontent with the socialist agenda of MAS, which led to the opposition in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz mobilizing against Morales after winning the 2005 election (Farthing & Kohl, 2014, p. 47). The protests led to racial violence and right-wing mobs attacking government buildings and Indigenous people (Farthing & Kohl, 2014, p. 48). Although the situation calmed down, there are still sharp frictions between the MAS government and this segment of Bolivian elites. As I will return to address in chapter 4 and 6, this political turbulence manifested itself again in 2019 when Morales was replaced with an interim government.

According to Postero (2007), Bolivian socialism was not only linked to economic class but also to ethnicity. The Indigenous populations experience the highest poverty rates, regardless of which region they inhabit. This racially based inequality has deep historical roots that can be traced all the way back to colonial times. Accordingly, when MAS came to power, they addressed this structural racism and made attempts to implement inclusive policies (Postero, 2017). Nevertheless, explicit forms of everyday racism proved difficult to combat and Bolivia continued struggling with the Indigenous populations facing severe challenges related to poverty and inequality. The new constitution of 2009 was invariably a big step towards greater inclusion and participation, especially by recognizing Bolivia as a Plurinational state in which Indigenous people have the right to autonomy. Yet, despite the significance of highlighting the concepts of inclusion, participation, decolonization, and autonomy in the constitution, it is questionable whether this has really changed the structural racism and colonial patterns in practice. Various examples, such as socio-environmental violent conflicts related to demands for autonomy and natural resources, have demonstrated that it has been easier said than done to restructure the Bolivian society (López, 2018). This disparity between discourse and practice will be discussed in chapter 5 and 6.

However, it is evident that MAS policies have generated substantial social and economic changes in Bolivia. Levels of extreme poverty decreased to 15,2% by 2017, and the income per capita had more than tripled by 2017 (World Bank, 2018). This means that for the first time in Bolivian republican history the majority of the population were no longer considered poor (Castaño, 2019). Furthermore, levels of inequality have declined. In 2002 the distribution of profits was extremely disproportionate, in which private actors acquired 82% of the profit and the state only 18%. This has radically changed as the government

nationalized important companies and sectors of the economy, and thus increased the amount of fiscal revenues (Castaño, 2019). When Morales took office in 2006, he immediately corrected the unequal balance of profit, by readjusting the balance of profit on extractive industries to be shared 50/50 between the state and the private sector (ibid.). By doing so, the government obtained the ability to increase public spending on social programs. As mentioned above, this was also aided by the sharp increase in the price of natural resources, such as oil, gas, and other raw materials.

The opponents of MAS feared that this change from neoliberal policies to what they termed as "state paternalism" would have a harmful effect on the economy. The numbers have proven them wrong as Bolivia's economy has been constantly growing by an average GDP of 5% per year (Castaño, 2019). According to the World Bank database (2018), the Bolivian GDP was at USD 9,549 billion in 2005, and by 2018 it had increased to USD 40,288 billion. Moreover, the life expectancy in 2005 was 59 years, and by 2018 it increased to 72 years (World Bank, 2018). Even so, Morales himself has admitted several times that there are continuous health concerns that needs to be addressed and developed further. Although poverty rates have declined and there has been a significant improvement in the sectors of education and healthcare, there are still severe social problems in several Bolivian regions. One of the most marginal ones is the department of Potosí, in which the lithium reserves are located. I will elaborate on this chapter 4.

The role of social movements in the struggle for sovereignty and resource nationalism

The Bolivian Revolution of 1952 marked the first attempt in recent history of nationalization of the natural resources as the powerful tin barons and landowners were overthrown (Jenkins, 1997, p. 311). As demonstrated, this did not last long, but the idea of national sovereignty over natural resources remained a popular ideal to many Bolivians (Postero, 2017, p. 97). Thus, when MAS came to power, one of the first things the government did was to nationalize the gas and oil sector. This was done by staging a military take-over of foreign-owned oil and gas installations, followed by a renegotiation with the foreign actors to renew their contracts with significantly higher taxes and royalties that left the Bolivian state as the main owner (Postero, 2017, p. 97).

The popular uprising seen during the early 2000s demonstrated that social and Indigenous movements essentially had a voice, and the power to achieve political change through mobilization became visible. Due to this, the defence of natural resources became a central element in MAS' political project in the following years. The majority of Bolivians are in fact both Indigenous and poor, but since the revolution of 1952, they had mainly been organized on the basis of class rather than ethnicity (Postero, 2007). Many of the workers and peasants' unions had an ethnic component in their demands, but they were articulated around class-based structures corporate organizations. This slightly changed during the 1990s, when the Indigenous and social movements became characterized by more demands of recognition and ethnic differences (Postero, 2007). This, in turn, made room for struggles related to both class and ethnicity. Furthermore, this new political landscape in Bolivia was not only defined by left-wing ideology, but it was also shaped by Indigenous terminologies. Together with Ecuador, under the leadership of Rafael Correa, Bolivia implemented Indigenous ideas, such as Vivir Bien and the rights of nature and Mother Earth, into state policy (Becker, 2013; Walsh, 2008).[2]

As previously mentioned, Postero (2007) points out that during Sanchez de Lozada's administration between 1993 and 1997 the Constitution was changed to recognize Bolivia as a multi-ethnic and pluricultural nation. Additionally, a series of legal reforms were included that promised to alter radically the position of the country's Indigenous peoples. These reforms included a law of popular participation and decentralization, an agrarian reform that included collective titling for Indigenous territories and an intercultural bilingual education law (Postero, 2007, p. 5). This "neoliberal multiculturalism" was an integral part of Lozada's implementation of neoliberal policies, as part of minimizing the state's role and giving room for the market to operate freely (Postero, 2007, p. 6). These reforms however, proved insufficient for democratic participation and did not change the structural inequality and racism. On the contrary, neoliberalism in Bolivia reinforced the structures of exclusion that kept Bolivian Indigenous peoples poor and powerless (Postero, 2007).

Postero (2007) argues that these multicultural laws were not intended to benefit the poor, redistribute, or challenge the inequalities of power and resources. Nor were they part of a democratization process intended to give the Indigenous poor population greater political participation. Rather, they were part of an overreaching strategy for the neoliberal government

2 For comparison between Indigenous mobilizations within Andean region, see Albó (2008), Van Cott (2005), Yashar (2005)

to “tame” the Indigenous peoples (Postero, 2017). She points out that “for neoliberal politicians, the answer to the Indian question was to transform unruly Indians into disciplined political participants and responsible managers of their own territories and communities” (Postero 2017, p 10). Indigenous peoples were now considered citizen, and could participate in local governance, as long as they “were carefully inserted into the neoliberal system of governance” (ibid.). Indigenous peoples in the lowlands made use of this categorization to make claims to the state and access legal rights related to territory (K. Webber, 2012). On the other hand, Indigenous peoples from the highlands were less content with this framing as they had already successfully organized as peasant unions (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). Moreover, the apparent advance in the recognition of oppressed groups during the neoliberal era did little to change their economic situation (Postero, 2017). The frustration with these failures to make substantial change in social structures was one of the key components of the social upheavals and mobilizations that eventually led to MAS winning the elections in 2005.

As mentioned above, the protest that marked the beginning of the 2000s had various explanations. First and foremost, they were protests against the privatization of natural resources such as water and gas and anchored in a frustration related to the coca eradication laws and the government’s cooperation with the U.S-led war on drugs together with a rejection of national security laws. Furthermore, the protesters rejected the Latin American Free Trade Agreement that reproduced Bolivia’s historic dependence on the global market (Fornillo, 2018). Although many of the Indigenous peoples who protested were marginalized and subjects to racism and poverty, their main demands were centred around inclusion, and primarily, control over national resources (Postero, 2007, p. 4). This demonstrates that questions related to natural resource management is of historical importance in Bolivian politics. Bolivia’s astonishing richness in natural resources has historically been subject to all sorts of conflicts and the actors controlling them have been shifting. During Spain’s colonial rule the resources officially belonged to the Spanish throne. Following independence, they have been alternating between the state and private actors, both national and international companies. This will be further described in chapter 4. In short however, one could argue that natural resources have always been controlled by a political elite and rarely, if ever, by the people actually inhabiting the territories. Thus, hopes were high when MAS won the Election in 2005 and promised autonomy and redistribution.

The Bolivian economy has historically depended heavily on export of large quantities of raw materials, especially from the mining sector. Although it has been presented as an explicit target in the government's development plans to industrialize the hydrocarbon- and mining sector (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarollo, 2015, p. 125-128), statistics show that Bolivia has one of Latin America's lowest shares of export of manufactured goods, at approximately 5% (World Bank, 2018). Regardless of the large amount of silver, rubber, tin, and natural gas exported from the country over the past century, Bolivia have not managed to develop an industry for value-added production or change its internal production structures (Fornillo, 2018). McKay claims that Bolivia have increased its export of raw materials from 89,4% to 96% between 2006 and 2013 (2018, p. 1256). Thus, instead of moving away from this pattern as a primary-material exporter stated in the development plans, the Bolivian economy has increased its dependency. The Bolivian lithium project challenges this pattern of dependency by aiming at building an entire industry around the resource, in which the raw material is not only exported but also processed (Hancock et.al, 2018, p. 553). Moreover, it is sought to generate income for the state and finance public spending in social programs and infrastructure. More details on the lithium project will be provided in chapter 4.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this chapter I have described the historical, social, and political causes behind the Indigenous uprising that led to the victory of MAS in 2005. Struggles for sovereignty and national control over resources have far-reaching historical roots in Bolivia. Ideas about resource nationalism and independence, along with land reform and greater inclusion of the Indigenous population were present already during the revolution of 1952. Moreover, MAS' victory was part of a larger regional tendency, in which various Latin American countries voted for left-wing candidates. MAS' political project proved to be exceedingly significant for Bolivia. The fact that the marginalized Indigenous populations of Bolivia were able to mobilize to such an extent was astonishing. There are still many pressing issues related to poverty, racism, and inequality, but the Indigenous population has obtained political representation and gained unprecedented political power. Besides the accomplishments related to improved living standards, access to basic services, poverty eradication programs

and improvements in education, the perhaps most significant achievement has been the nationalization of natural resources and the redistribution of its revenues. Although Bolivia is still considered one of the poorest countries in Latin America, there have been substantial moves to break free from its role as a dependent provider of raw materials. The lithium project is a great example of this and accordingly the subject of attention in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Neoextractivism, Green Growth and Nationalization of Lithium

The negative environmental impacts of increased economic growth, industrialization and mass consumption has generated a growing awareness of how the current economic system affect both humans and nature (Okereke & Massaquoi, 2017). Already in the 1960s, a broad range of different scholars advocated for a need to change this model in order to avoid a global climate crisis (Okereke & Massaquoi, 2017). As a response to this, international institutions and multilateral environmental agreements were established, and a major overarching agenda has been the substitution of fossil fuels with renewable "green" sources of energy. In this context, the notions of "green growth" and "green economy" emerged as attempts to integrate environmental concerns into the existent economic system along with an emphasis on sustainability and sustainable development (see the Brundtland report from 1987).

Green growth subsequently became a central theme at the Rio+ 20 Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 and the dominant policy framework within the largest international institutions (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). The notion of green growth is based on the idea that it is possible to continue with the same model of economic expansion because the transition towards green energy and sustainable development can be facilitated through new technology, substitutions, and government regulations (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). As part of this transition there is an increased focus on new sources of energy. Lithium-ion batteries plays an important role in this new energy paradigm (Fornillo, 2018), and it is estimated that the importance of lithium will only increase as the we move towards a post-fossil era.

In this chapter the role of lithium within the green economy and as part of this green energy transition will be addressed. I will start by briefly explaining how Bolivia's economic model went from extractivism to neoextractivism, by addressing what this entails and how it is linked to lithium. Then I will look into how the Bolivian lithium project is met by the international community and discuss if it is in alignment with the green growth agenda. Finally, the significance of the Bolivian lithium will be assessed, especially by focusing on how it relates to resource nationalism and the national goal of controlling the value chain. Here, I begin to discuss whether the project can be considered decolonial or as part of an internal colonialism, a debate that I return to in chapter 6.

From extractivism to neoextractivism

Ever since the colonial era, Latin America has played a crucial role in the international division of labour and nature by relying heavily on the extraction of natural resources (Lander, 2014; Gudynas, 2010). This was also the case for Bolivia, which was considered the epicentre of silver mining during the Spanish colonial rule (see chapter 4). And as already mentioned, the extraction and exportation of minerals, gas, oil, and agricultural goods has played a vital role in the Bolivian economy for the past 500 years.

According to Alberto Acosta (2013a), extractivism "refer to those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export." (p. 62). Eduardo Gudynas (2018) traces the term back to the 1970s "as a means of describing developments in the mining and oil export sectors" (p. 61). Although the term had yet to be consistently defined, this mode of accumulation (see also David Harvey's theory on accumulation by dispossession, 2004) became established on a massive scale 500 years ago with the colonization of the Americas, Asia, and Africa (Acosta, 2013a, p. 62). These processes of colonialism laid the groundwork for the consolidation of the current capitalist system. In other words, extractivism is intimately linked to expressions of colonialism and capitalism.

The massive amounts of raw materials exported to Europe, marked the beginning of a new capitalist and colonial world system that facilitated the industrial revolution in the Global North (Lander, 2014). The extractivist mode of accumulation was determined by the demands of the colonizing European states, which led to some countries and regions specializing in the extraction of raw materials while others produced manufactured goods (Acosta, 2013a). Although it is typically the countries specialized in massive extraction of natural resources that are considered extractivist economies, it is a global phenomenon. Industrialized countries are part of this extractivism because their economies are unable to function without the access to primary goods. According to Acosta (2013a) countries rich in natural resources appears to be trapped in what he calls a "resource curse", which means that poverty in many countries around the world is related to the existence of natural resources. This is explained by the fact that the countries rich in resources have economies mainly based on the extraction and exportation of those resources, which again makes it difficult to develop industries of value-added products that could increase the flows of revenues within national borders. Moreover,

the reliance on a few major forms of resource exploitations makes the economy vulnerable to fluctuating commodity prices and highly dependent on the global markets.

The processes of colonization did not only lead to a commodification of natural resources, but also labour. According to Anibal Quijano (2000) “all forms of control and exploitation of labour and production, as well as the control of appropriation and distribution of products, revolved around the capital-salary relation and the world market” (p. 535). He further explains that these forms of labour were historically and sociologically new “because they were deliberately established and organized to produce commodities for the world market” (ibid.). This establishment of a new global model of labour led to “a new, original, and singular structure of relations of production in the historical experience of the world: world capitalism” (Quijano, 2000, p. 536). This means that the commodification and natural resources in the colonies laid the ground for the contemporary global capitalist system, which is still heavily reliant on extractivism.

Extractivism has been a mechanism of colonial and neo-colonial plundering that in turn, has been the key to development and prosperity of the global north (Acosta, 2013a, p. 63). These extractivist activities have taken place regardless of sustainability or the exhaustion of the resource. Furthermore, it is still a problem that most of what is produced by extractivist economies is mainly destined for export, not for consumption in the domestic market (Lander, 2014). While the scale of these extractivist activities is immense, it has historically generated minimal economic benefits for the countries directly involved in the extraction (Acosta, 2013a, p. 63). Bolivia is a prime example of this, as it has depended largely on extraction of raw materials destined for export, yet still remained one of the poorest countries in the world.

Although extractivism in Latin America was dominant during the colonial rule, it continued forming the basis of the economic activities after the independence. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016) points at tree key periods to understand the significance of the colonial heritage in Latin America. The first period is that of the European colonization in the fifteenth and sixteenths centuries, the second period was marked by the decolonization that led to the emergence of Latin American republics in the nineteenth century and the third one is that of the Cold War when the United States became a hegemonic neo-colonial power (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). The extractivist system based on colonial structures persisted, and it was not until after the second World War that this division became seriously questioned (Lander, 2014). A common element was that the profit of the extractivist activities tended to benefit a

small political or economic elite, or external actors such as multinational corporation and foreign States.

In order to change this pattern, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, leaded by Raul Prebisch, opted for an economic model called Import substitution industrialization (ISI) in the 1950s (Lander, 2014). The main idea was that the trade relations between industrialized and developing countries were disadvantageous for the latter, due to their dependence on export of primary commodities (Vanden & Prevost, 2012, p. 160). Thus, countries that had previously depended heavily on extractivism should develop domestic industries in order to decrease their dependence on industrialized countries and the global market, along with increase the regulatory role of the state.

Some of these attempts were relatively successful, especially in the largest countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, but other smaller and poorer countries did not succeed to the same extent in their attempts to industrialize (Skidmore et al., 2010). Bolivia maintained reliant on the exploitation of natural resources, and only experienced minor changes in industrialization (Morales, 2003, p. 216). Moreover, the Bolivian economy depended heavily on foreign aid. During the 1950s, one-third of Bolivia's national budget was financed directly by U.S funds and as such the largest recipient of U.S development aid in Latin America (Klein, 2003, p. 218). The ISI model came to an end with the debt crisis in the 1980s and the following implementation of neoliberal policies came to dominate the continent. Once again, the Latin American economies were mainly based on extractivism.

As described in the previous chapter, the early 2000s was subject to a major political turn to the left in several Latin American countries and hopes were high that these new progressive governments could challenge the extractivist model (Lander, 2014). To some extent, changes related to environmental concerns were visible, especially in the formulations of Vivir Bien and the rights of nature in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions. Nevertheless, there were few de facto changes regarding the use and commodification of nature (Lander, 2014). Regardless of ideology, Latin American countries continued to rely heavily on the extraction and exportation of raw materials. Bolivia for instance increased its export of primary goods, particularly based on mining and industrial agriculture, from 84,2% in 2002 to 95,5% in 2011. Another surprising element was the fact that more neoliberal inclined governments such as the ones in Chile, Colombia, and Peru, did not export a larger proportion of primary goods than the countries with progressive governments (Lander, 2014).

Although little has changed regarding the economic dependency on extraction, it is still important to mention, in line with the accomplishments of MAS described in chapter 2, that there have been some substantial structural and social changes in the countries with progressive governments. Increased state-control, nationalization of natural resources to finance social programs and changes in the distribution of revenues are some clear examples (Lander, 2014). In essence, this means that there are some considerable differences between traditional extractivism and what has come to be known as "neoextractivism" (Gudynas, 2010). Although the economic activities based on the extensive use of land and natural resources may have remained intact, or indeed increased, neoextractivism differs from traditional extractivism in terms of who controls these activities, to what purpose and to whom it benefits. In a sense, neoextractivism could be considered just as much a development project as an economic model, as progressive governments have opted for neoextractivism with the purpose of increased public spending on social programs and redistribution of revenues. It is however important to bear in mind that there was a "commodity boom" during the early 2000s, which led to increased revenues and facilitated the implementation of such policies (Svampa, 2013). This was also the case for the Bolivian economy.

When MAS came to power in Bolivia, they nationalized several natural resources, such as hydrocarbons. The nationalization of natural resources can be considered neoextractivism as they aim to use the surplus profit to finance social programs. Furthermore, the Bolivian government nationalized the unexploited lithium reserves of the Salar de Uyuni, but in this case they took it one step further than merely following a model of neoextractivism. Bolivia did not only aim to control the extraction of lithium carbonate as a raw material for exportation, but they also made plans to control the entire value chain by producing value-added products, such as batteries (Fornillo, 2018). The income from this sector was planned to be spent on programs benefitting the Bolivian population, research on further development of the industry, and training-programs for the workers (Obaya, 2019). Thus, Bolivia has adopted a different approach to their lithium resources than for instance neighbouring Argentina. The lithium reserves in Argentina fits into a more classic extractivist model, in which several foreign companies control the entire extraction without any state interventions (Fornillo, 2018). Bolivia on the other hand is trying to change the colonial patterns of dependency.

Although it can be argued that national control over resources led to greater public spending on social programs, this was not without contradictions. Especially concerns related to socio-environmental impacts of the extraction of natural resources led to conflicts all over Latin

America (Svampa, 2013). According to Hargreaves "neo-extractivism induces natural resource conflicts, fails to create jobs, and externalizes social and environmental costs" (2019, p. 63). Even though environmental degradation was rhetorically posed as a major concern by the progressive governments, it appears as though environmental problems are considered as "secondary" preoccupations when compared to more pressuring concerns related to poverty, education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Svampa, 2013). From an environmentalist perspective it would be possible to criticize both extractivism and neoextractivism, as the massive extraction of raw materials remains the same. Nevertheless, in the context of lithium extraction it is relevant to consider the fact that this resource is considered "green" and environmentally friendly on a global level, even though the mining may have negative impacts locally. How lithium fits into the notion of "green growth" will be addressed in the following section.

The Bolivian lithium project as part of the international green growth agenda

For the past decade terms such as "green growth" and "green economy" have become increasingly popular buzzwords used by policymakers, economists, organizations, and media all over the world. As mentioned, the notion of a "green growth" has been placed on the agenda of the dominant international institutions since the RIO+ 20 conference in 2011. It has also become an integrated part of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially concerning the goal 7 of achieving a green energy transition. The idea is that it is indeed possible to save the world from climate crisis and environmental degradation by making the economic system more sustainable and "green" (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). Proponents of this idea frame a green energy transition as the solution to the climate crisis, which includes the shift from fossil to renewable energy sources. In order to achieve this, it is deemed necessary to produce cheaper rechargeable batteries for the transportation sector, and fuel them with renewable energy sources, such as wind, hydro, and solar power. This is where the increased demand for lithium comes into play, as lithium-ion batteries are currently considered the best alternative to substitute the fossil-fuelled cars (Fornillo, 2018). This explains the growing demand for lithium resources worldwide, and especially the lithium carbonate that can be extracted relatively easily from the salt flats of the Andean highlands.

According to Erik Gómez-Baggeturn and José Manuel Naredo (2015) there have been a substantial change in the international sustainability discourse. They have identified an analytical shift from a notion of growth *versus* environment to a notion of growth *for* the environment, a shift in focus from direct public regulation to market-based instruments, and a shift from a political to a technocratic discourse (Gómez-Baggetun & Naredo, 2015, p. 385). Moreover, the integration of the notion of infinite economic growth with sustainable development has led to a denial of a conflict between growth, equity, and ecological resilience (p. 393). This is highly visible in the international green growth discourse.

As a solution to challenges related to environmental degradation and climate crises, policy makers and economists started to opt for the notion of "green growth", as means to solve these pressuring problems (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). On a global level, the three main institutional proponents of this idea have been The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). Although related concepts already existed as part of a long-standing academic and political debate, the UNEP-report presented in 2011 was by far the most extensive piece of work on the topic and laid the groundwork for the following definitions. In the following I will pay special attention to this report, before briefly presenting other definitions.

The UNEP report *Towards a green economy* from 2011, refers to green growth as a green economy in which growth and human well-being can be combined with the reduction of environmental risks and ecologic scarcities (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). The thesis of the report is relatively simple, as it states that economic growth will be stronger and healthier if it is combined with sustainable development (Brockington, 2012). In a sense the report is radical because it outlines alternatives to the way we live, eat, travel and power our societies, but in other ways it is conservative because a central idea is that the market and new technologies can bring about all these changes with the right government regulations and enabling conditions (Brockington, 2012). Thus, UNEP is clearly positioning its ideas based on gaining maximum support from business and economic leaders. The report attempts to be true to neoliberal ideas while at the same time making it clear that this green growth will need a firm guiding hand by the state in order to achieve its goals.

Central to this report is Payment for ecosystem services (PES). PES is centred around the creation of new commodities from the performance and function of ecosystems (Brockington, 2012). These new commodities are what Polanyi called "fictitious commodities" (Polanyi,

2001 [1944]). This differs from “real commodities” which are discrete entities produced to be sold. Fictitious commodities such as land, labour and money are not created in order to be sold, but they allow nature and people to be treated as commodities (Brockington, 2012). The UNEP report on green economy is based on this organizing principle, as it expresses the desire to create more commodities out of nature and increase their circulation in order to obtain a global economy that is sustainable because it is less dependent on the earth’s limited resources (Brockington, 2012). Fictitious commodities like labour and land does not live easily in markets because their form as commodities only captures the commensurable part of their existence while struggling (or neglecting) the incommensurability related to social and ecological contexts (Brockington, 2012). The main problem of the report is its reluctance to account for the possibilities of change that are not driven by infinite growth of consumption and expanding markets. It assumes that the only credible alternative is increased economic growth, at any cost, and does not consider other alternatives such as degrowth or managed recession (Brockington, 2012).

The OECD has a similar point of departure, and a similar focus on reducing the ecological impacts of economic and extractive activities, without limiting growth (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). In an OECD-report from 2019 it is stated that “Green Growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies” (OECD, 2019). It is emphasized that green growth is no replacement for sustainable development, but a subset of it (OECD, 2019). Likewise, the World Bank (2012) also points at this link between economy and sustainability by stating that “green growth is *the* pathway to sustainable development” and stresses the possibility to achieve economic growth that is efficient, clean, and resilient.

These three international institutions operate with different definitions of green growth, but they agree on the mechanism for achieving it (Hickel & Kallis, 2019). The main idea is that it is possible to avoid human- and environmental degradation within the existing economic system through technological improvements, substitution, and governmental regulations (ibid.). The main critique of the notion of green growth is centred around the fact that it appears contradictory to solve a problem created by the current economic system through that same system. This raises several questions, especially concerning whether green growth is really green at all, or just a justification to continue “business as usual”. The dominant international institutions are however supporting this idea as a solution to the environmental problems the world is currently facing.

One of the main causes of environmental change and global warming is the CO2 emission from the energy matrix, which has predominantly been based on fossil fuels (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). In order to avoid a climate catastrophe. fossil-fuelled cars are to be replaced by electric vehicles, and in this framework the extraction of lithium for the purpose of battery production is placed high on the global "green growth"-agenda. Lithium is both presented as an opportunity for economic growth within the lithium-dense countries and as a necessary resource in a post-fossil era, and thus fits the interests of the international community regarding a green energy transition easily integrated in the dominant discourse of green growth. Hence, regardless of the possible local environmental impacts of the extraction, lithium is considered an important part of achieving a "green" economic and energetical transition on a global scale.

Currently the lithium producing countries of South America (Chile and Argentina) merely depends on the exportation of the raw material. The price difference between the raw material, such as lithium carbonate, and the finial product, lithium-ion batteries, is significant. A ton of lithium carbonate costs approximately USD 6000, whereas a car battery is sold for 10 000 – 20 000 USD (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). The production of one battery requires only 10 kg of lithium carbonate, making the cost for lithium in each battery minimal. Accordingly, the significance of lithium as a raw material in the value chain of battery production is minor both materially and economically speaking, as it only reaches a proportion of 0,5% of the total value. Moreover, considering that the batteries are only one part of the total cost of the car, the final value and amount of lithium is even less significant (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). In essence, this means that the lithium needed to produce an electric vehicle is so insignificant that it does not holds the capacity to influence the price of the final product.

Although lithium is considered a necessary part of a sustainable future, the economic potential for the lithium producing countries is minimal unless they produce their own batteries or cars. Visions about Bolivia, Chile and Argentina being the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" does not consider this limitation (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). In fact, it is Japan, Korea and China who currently occupy prominent market positions and benefit most from the global value chain of lithium. These three Asian countries imported 51% of the global lithium carbonate in 2013 and exported almost the equal percentage of batteries and battery-fuelled electricity (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). Their battery production depends on the importation of components such as lithium and cobalt.

Due to these countries advanced technology and dominant position, the lithium-producing countries of South America will face severe difficulties if they aim to initiate full battery manufacturing (Zicari & Fornillo, 2016). The Bolivian government is aware of these challenges, but nevertheless, aims to follow a different pathway than its neighbouring countries. The nationalization of lithium and the plans of developing a national industry of producing value-added products, such as batteries and cars, is part of a goal to break free from the role as a dependent exporter of raw materials. As mentioned, Bolivia is still heavily dependent on the extraction and exportation of raw materials, but the lithium project does not follow the same neoextractivist model.

As the global market demands sources of energy, and the international community has placed green growth high on the global agenda, it is understandable that interest is drawn to the Bolivian lithium reserves for its potential in battery-production. The problem however, at least from the point of view of the dominant international institutions, is that Bolivia's resource governance regarding lithium does not fit into the capitalist logics of green growth. In contrast to neighbouring Argentina where foreign actors are welcome to operate freely within the mining sector, Bolivia has chosen a different approach.

The MAS administration has placed Bolivia in opposition to the capitalist system and proclaimed that their goal is to obtain national control over the lithium resources and its value chain. This was not what the international institutions had in mind when they established the idea about green growth, as it assumes that the only viable economic model is the capitalist system. It is however questionable whether Bolivia have managed to oppose capitalism as an economic system, and to what extent that is possible in a highly integrated global economy. It is still noteworthy that the nationalization of the lithium, and the project of industrialization, is developed as an alternative to the "resource curse" mentioned above. Hence, it can be argued that the Bolivian lithium project challenge the assumption that the Global South is destined to follow the same historical colonial patterns of dependency.

Resource nationalism in Bolivia: A decolonial project, or internal colonialism?

> Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.
>
> Franz Fanon, 1963, p. 35

As I have argued, the Bolivian lithium project does not fit into the neoextractivist model, and neither aligns with the rationale of "green growth". In this section I will discuss how the Bolivian lithium project can be understood from different perspectives. I will start by defining different terms related to colonialism and decolonization, followed by an overview of how different forms of colonial patterns may be present at the same time in the context of lithium and natural resource management. The purpose of this section is to introduce and outline some of the themes that will be analyzed in the final chapters of this thesis.

In order to address issues related to colonialism, definitions of the terms need to be established. This is not an easy task as the Latin American debate about decolonization is complex. Latin American scholars, such as Quijano (2000), Escobar (2007) and Mignolo (2000), have approached and developed concepts such as colonialism, dependency, modernity, coloniality, decoloniality, internal colonialism and neo-colonialism since the 1990s. There are many different, and sometimes conflicting standpoints, but their works are characterized by the postulation of the decolonial perspectives.

The concepts of coloniality emerged as a response to the dominant development model and the notion of "modernity". Already in 1966, Foucault described what he called the "modern episteme" and stated that "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice." (Foucault, 1970, p. 183). I will not go into detail about Foucault here, but in my opinion, he perfectly sums it up by saying that "Modern thought has never, in fact, been able to propose a morality" (1970, p. 357). Latour (1991) also reflected around what modernity means in his book *We have never been modern*, where he explores the dualistic division that modernity makes between nature and society. These ideas were picked up by Latin American scholars, who began to criticize the perceived universality of Eurocentric production of knowledge and western hegemony. Besides their emergence

within an academic debate, these ideas have also been adopted by a wide range of Latin American decolonial movements such as the Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil along with informing a wide array of Indigenous struggles across the continent.

Latin American scholas has worked extensively on these perspectives. Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano developed the concept of "coloniality of power", which has been exceedingly influential in the field of decolonial studies. The concept identifies the legacy of colonialism in former colonies, by pointing at how the colonial power structures became integrated in succeeding social hierarchical orders. The concept was further developed by different scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, Sylvia Wynter, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Catherine Walsh, among others. One of the outcomes of this academic debate was the creation of the decoloniality group (grupo modernidad/colonialidad), which is an active interdisciplinary network of different decolonial scholars. According to Quijano (1992), the goal of decoloniality is to recognize that the instrumentalization of reason by the colonial matrix of power has produced distorted paradigms of knowledge and spoiled the liberating promises of modernity. By recognizing this, the only alternative is the destruction of the global coloniality of power (ibid.).

The concept of coloniality has been elaborated and divided into subcategories, such as coloniality of power, knowledge and being. They are centred around the same idea about colonial patterns affecting the contemporary societies of former colonies. A central argument is that, although Latin America, and other former colonized territories, are no longer controlled by foreign states, the colonial power structures have, to a large extent, remained intact. This is explained through the observation that the transition into republican independence translated into a continuity of political and economic power in the few hands of elite and privileged groups (Lander, 2014). The subalternate groups of society, such as Indigenous peoples and afro-descendants, did not achieve the same representation, inclusion, or rights as the white elites. This phenomenon was visible across Latin America but perhaps more dominant in countries with a large percentage afro-descendants and Indigenous populations.

The coloniality of power refers to structures of power, control, and hegemony that have emerged as a result of colonialization and the notion of "modernity". The coloniality of knowledge is thus related to the Eurocentric ways of knowledge production and education, which marginalize and erase the existence of other ways of understanding reality and

producing knowledge. The processes of colonization led to a systematic denial of Indigenous forms of knowledge and strongly affected how knowledge is currently produced and reproduced. Relatedly, the coloniality of being, refers to the lived experience of colonization, and its impact on language, ontology, and the view of oneself (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). These expressions of coloniality are still very much present today, both in the economic inequalities and racism on a global scale, as well as expressed through the hierarchization of certain parts of the population and their geographical location that reproduces these patterns locally (de la Cadena, 2000; Cusicanqui, 2012; Harvey, 2006).

This is also related to what David Harvey has described as "uneven geographical developments", in which income, profits and technology from the capitalist system are unevenly distributed around the globe (Harvey, 2006). These structural inequalities are rooted in colonialism, as the colonial patterns of exploitation are reproduced in the former colonies to serve a small minority in the Global North. This has led to some parts of the world benefitting from the capitalist system through economic growth, development, and modernization, while the vast majority are forced to cope with the destruction of their environment, along with receiving little in return for their exploitation of labour and resources.

In order to grasp the concepts of coloniality it is also necessary to define modernity. According to Escobar (2010a) modernity is referred to as "the kinds of coherence and crystallization of forms (discourses, practices, structures, institutions) that have arisen over the las few hundred years out of certain cultural and ontological commitments of European societies" (p. 9). In other words, the notion of modernity is based on the European way of understanding development and how society should be organized. This "universal" understanding of modernity is based on capitalism, the state, the individual, industrialization, and ideas about progress. Here, modernity is understood as the dominant type of Euro-Modernity, but that does not change the fact that other modernities exists (Escobar, 2010a, p. 9). The point is that there is a clear distinction between this "universal" European modernity and other ways of understanding modernity. As Escobar points out, this universalization of modernity ends up treating other groups as inferior through knowledge-power relations, previously explained as coloniality, and this Euro-Modernity denies the ontological differences of those others (2010a, p. 9-10). Thus, there is a co-existence of two projects: the world as a universe and the world as a pluriverse. This has also been expressed by the

Zapatista movement in Mexico, advocating for "A world where many worlds fit"[3] (cited in de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 3, 15).

In the Bolivian context the debate is centred around whether the political project of MAS can be considered decolonial, or if it has turned into an expression of state-led colonialism, and modernization project. Aymara sociologist Silva Rivera Cusicanqui has criticized the Bolivian state for not tackling issues of colonialism from within, and openly criticized "decolonial scholars" for appropriating the language and ideas of Indigenous scholars without understanding their context, and thus, reproducing the patterns of coloniality of knowledge (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). In the case of the lithium project and other megaprojects there has also been debates regarding how this type of neoextractivist activities fails to take into consideration the needs and concerns of the local communities. There are various examples of how the Bolivian state has put local needs aside in favour of pushing forward their own agenda. This is of course not exclusively related to the MAS government, as different projects have historically created conflicts regardless of ideology (as addressed in chapter 2). Nevertheless, the current government have been criticised for speaking about decolonization, decentralization, and inclusion, while at the same time using the State's centralized power to initiate extractivist megaprojects.

One example of this occurred in 2011, when the construction of a road through the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) led to a massive conflict between the government and a large proportion of the Indigenous population (McNeish, 2013; Delgado, 2017). The project was led by the Brazilian company OAS and justified by the argument that it would bring "development" to isolated localities by linking the departments of Cochabamba and Beni. This was met by protest from the local Indigenous communities in the lowlands who received support from the Indigenous people in the Andean region and culminated in a march that was violently dispersed by armed forces (Delgado, 2017). The conflict was centred around both autonomy, territorial rights, environment and as a reaction to the disrespect of the principles established in the constitution of 2009 that had proclaimed Bolivia a plurinational state. Furthermore, the premise about bringing "development" to certain locations could be viewed as an expression of coloniality. This conflict is by no means directly linked to the lithium project, but it exhibited facets of the same governmental discourse.

3 Original Zapatista dictum: Un Mundo Donde Quepan Muchos Mundos.

However, the narrative about Indigenous peoples fiercely opposing fundamental modern notions such as growth and technology is questionable. According to Escobar (2010a) these notions do have a place within a pluriversal perspective. Bolivian scholars, such as Pablo Mamani and Félix Patzi, points out that Indigenous groups do not oppose growth or technological changes per se, but the notion of growth needs to be seen from the perspective of other rationalities that differs from the economic one (Escobar, 2010a). In other words, the idea about "development" is seen as necessary in some areas of social life, but the understanding of what this entails should not be limited to the European definition of the term.

As described in chapter 2, the rise of the new left, or the pink tide, in Latin America was a reaction to failed neoliberal policies. Moreover, it can also be considered a reaction to the notion of "modernity" brought to the continent by the European colonization (Escobar, 2010a). Bolivian social movements, and to some extent the MAS government, have embarked on what Escobar calls "an alternative modernization project", which breaks with the constructed division "between nature and culture, us and them, individual and community" (p. 4). This is what Aymara sociologist Félix Patzi Paco (2007) has called "the total transformation of liberal society" referring to the end of the hegemony of liberal European modernity based on the notions of private property and representative democracy. The idea is that communal forms of organization based on Indigenous practices could play a larger role in the future.

Escobar further argues that the "contemporary transformations call for moving beyond Right-Left formulations" (2010a, p. 6). Similarly, Walter Mignolo (2006) proposes that a third formulation of political form should be added, which is that of the decolonial. This transformation does not only involve a turn to the Left, but a decolonial turn (ibid.). As explained in chapter 2, the political turn to the left in Latin America was a regional phenomenon, but in some countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador, it could make sense to speak about this as (at least an attempt of) a decolonial turn. Mario Blaser (2007) further suggests that the political transformation observed in Latin America should be seen in terms of both a crisis of the hegemony of the neoliberal modernizing model of the 1980s and 1990s, and as the crisis of the project of bringing about modernity to the continent that has lasted for more than 500 years.

Although it is possible to argue that the transformations brought about by the progressive governments are more rhetorical than de facto, there have been some substantial changes

regarding redistribution implying the reversal of neoliberal reforms and elements. For instance, the state is back as the main actor in the management of natural resources and the economy, important companies in the field of energy resources have been re-nationalized and redistributive policies are attempts to change the social structures (Escobar, 2010a). Although this political tendency appears to be shifting in some Latin American countries, the Bolivian government still maintains a strong focus on nationalization and sovereignty. I return to elaborate on what this entails for Bolivia in chapter 5 and 6.

Nevertheless, there are several concerns related to Bolivia's natural resource management. First of all, it is questionable whether the political discourse regarding resource management reflects what happens on the ground. Bolivia still relies heavily on foreign actors for their extractive sectors, and the economic model is still in alignment with capitalism. Furthermore, both Bolivian and Latin American scholars have criticised the Bolivian state for being too authoritarian, for instance through processes of internal colonialism. This term was launched in Latin America by Pablo Gonzáles Casanova (1965) and later used amongst Bolivian and Latin American scholars to explain regional inequalities within countries that are considered as expressions of uneven capitalist development and state intervention (Ranta, 2018, p. 44).

In the case of Bolivia, internal colonialism has often involved an ethnic dimension, as it has been used to explain inequalities caused by ethnic and racial domination of one group by another (Ranta, 2018, p. 44). The constitution of 2009 clearly states that Indigenous communities can apply for being entitled autonomous territories and that they have the right to greater inclusion and participation in issues concerning their territories. Unfortunately, empirical evidence, such as the TIPNIS conflict, have demonstrated that this is rarely fulfilled. What this means for the lithium sector will be further addressed in the following chapters, but the fact that the entire Salar de Uyuni has been declared a state-owned reserve has been criticized as an expression of internal colonialism that is also linked to the abovementioned neo-colonialism. As addressed in this chapter there is a clear distinction between decolonization and decoloniality, as the former revolves around the independence and sovereignty from foreign actors or state, whereas the latter is more about breaking with established dominant ontologies and epistemologies. When MAS administration speaks about the lithium project being decolonial, it is, in my opinion, necessary to understand the difference between these notions in order to discuss how the lithium project can (or cannot) be considered decolonial.

Concluding remarks

The Bolivian lithium project is undoubtedly an alternative project because it does not align well with the notion of neither neoextractivism, nor the capitalist rationales of green growth proposed by the dominant international institutions. In this chapter, I have provided a distinction between extractivism and neoextractivism and pointed out contradictions related to the Bolivian natural resource management. Furthermore, I have addressed how the notion of green growth is presented as a global solution to the climate crisis and demonstrated how is related to the Bolivian lithium project. Finally, I have assessed some central elements related to the extensive decolonial debate regarding coloniality and modernity, which will be useful for the analysis in chapter 5, and the discussion in chapter 6. In the following chapter I will give brief a history lesson on the Bolivian mining history, and the following consolidation of the lithium sector.

Chapter 4: Bolivian Mining History and the Lithium Project

- ***From the "mountain who eats men" to the "white gold"***

This chapter aims to provide a history lesson about the department of Potosí, Salar de Uyuni and the Bolivian lithium sector. The mining activities in this region go back more than five centuries and is heavily tied to the socio-political and economic challenges the people of Potosí face today. I will start by providing a brief overview of the mining history of Potosí by looking at how the Spanish colonialization exploited the silver mines. Although the silver-mining is not directly linked to the current lithium extraction, I find it necessary to underline how important the mining sector and questions regarding the natural resource management have been, and still is, in Potosí. In other words, I intend to explain how the history of this mountain that "eats men" still affect the population of Potosí today. Following this section, I provide a contextualization of the Salar de Uyuni and a historical overview of the Bolivian lithium project from its discovery to present time. The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of how Potosí went from being the main global provider of silver to being/becoming a possible future global provider of lithium.

Historical overview of mining in Potosí

> *"You could build a silver bridge from Potosí to Madrid from what was mined here – and one back with the bones of those that died taking it out"*
>
> – Eduardo Galeano (1971)

According to the local government, Potosí was born as a modest mining settlement when the Spanish colonizers took control over the silver-dense area in 1545 (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009). The Andean highlands were already largely inhabited by Indigenous people, but in this particular region there were no major cities or settlements at the time. During the rule of the Incas, before the Spanish colonization, mining was a small-scale activity that was run as a state monopoly conducted through "mita labour" (Rowe, 1957, p. 179). The Incas did not use silver and gold as currency, but rather as decorations and ornaments. Thus, mining was only a minor part of a self-sufficient economy that was

organized through a rotation corvee of labour, called “mita”, in which people worked for a few months before they returned to their villages and regular agricultural activities (Taussig, 1980, p. 199). The Spanish colonizers rapidly adopted the mita-arrangement, as a means to ensure access to cheap labour (Rowe, 1957).

When silver was “discovered” in the Cerro Rico (meaning “Rich hill”), the Spaniards rapidly started to exploit this precious metal. The Spanish king was so ecstatic about this newfound source of fortune that he gave Potosí a special status as “Villa Imperial” (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009). The Spanish colonizers may not have found El Dorado, the mythical golden city, but they certainly found vast amounts of silver in Cerro Rico. Thus, Potosí was rapidly transformed into the global epicentre of silver extraction (Machado Aráoz, 2020). Mining became the keystone of the colonial economy in which precious metals played a vital role in the early stages of capital accumulation (Taussig, 1980, p. 199, 201). In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, 75 percent of the global extraction of silver came from Spanish controlled mines in the Americas, and approximately 60 percent of this export of silver came from the mines of Cerro Rico (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 80).

The city of Potosí was transformed from a small remote settlement at the foot of a mountain in the Andean highlands to becoming one of the largest and most significant cities in the world. Half a century after its founding, in 1610, the city of Potosi had 160 000 inhabitants - a larger population than both London, Amsterdam and Sevilla held during the same period (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 80). It was not only a highly populated city, but also a city of both extreme luxury and extreme poverty (Machado Aráoz, 2020). The mine of Potosí did not only represent the change from pre-colonial, small-scale superficial mining to more advanced subterranean mining, but it literally became the largest and most significant exploitation of humans and resources at the time (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 79). According to Ranta (2018) “Rather than ensuring the wellbeing of local populations, the building of elite-led administrative bureaucracies and institutional structures supported the Spanish imperial structure and the early birth of a capitalist economy” (p. 43). The global significance of the silver mining from Potosí transformed the city into the most important economic and geopolitical centre in Spanish America (Machado Aráoz, 2020).

As mentioned, the Spanish colonizers quickly realized that the Andean population was used to mining through the existing mita-system, which they could take advantage of (Taussig, 1980, p. 201). The mita-system of Potosí became the largest and most arduous of the colonial mita-arrangements, as it drew labour from large areas including current Andean Peru and Bolivia

(Rowe, 1957). This system facilitated the mandatory recruitment of the male population between the ages of 15 and 50, from the entire highland between Cuzco and Tarija. One seventh of the male population was forced to go to Potosí each year to work in the silver mines (Rowe, 1957). This included between 13.000 and 17.000 mita-workers every year, and it is estimated that almost 5.000 of them remained underground digging every day (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 79). The problem was that the Andean populations were not used to high-intensity mining and such harsh working conditions, which in turn led to extremely high mortality rates (Taussig, 1980, p. 201).

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (1971) suggested that one could have built a bridge between America and Europe with the silver from Potosí and another bridge in return with all the bones of the people who died extracting it. This is not based on actual measurements, as there is still no consensus about the amount of people who lost their lives in the mines. LaBarre (1948) stated that as much as eight million Andeans, most of them Aymara, lost their lives in these mines (in Taussig, 1980, p. 201). This number is still debated, but there is no doubt that a large number of miners died due to the harsh working conditions, and that new recruitments occurred through both the mita-system and shipments of African slaves. It is unclear how many slaves were forced to mine in Potosí; however, it is estimated that as many as 1,5 million Africans were destined for forced labour in plantations and mines in the Spanish colonies in Latin America (Borucki et al., 2015).

In the silver mines of Potosí, a double-shift system was introduced in the sixteenth century, in which the miners were kept underground from Monday to Saturday evening. They had no choice but to adapt to the dark, cold, and extremely polluted environment, timing their shifts by candle lengths (Rowe, 1957, p. 174). In the eighteenth century, this system was replaced by a quota-system. This was not supposed to improve the working conditions, but rather to increase the productivity. Each miner was expected to carry out 25 sacks weighing approximately 45 kilograms each, within their twelve hour-shift. This was an almost impossible task leading many workers to subcontract other people in order to meet the quota, which heavily indebting many miners (Rowe, 1957, p. 175-76, in Taussig, 1980, p. 202). In other words, the working conditions were terrible. Many died from respiratory diseases, collapses of tunnels and exhaustion. Even some Spaniards at the time referred to Potosí as a “mouth to hell” and stated that ″what is carried to Spain is not silver but the blood and sweat of Indians" (Hanke, 1956, p. 25).

Potosí truly was a hostile place, both due to harsh climate conditions and social problems. Located at approximately 4000 meters above sea level, the environment was arid and cold, and little could be cultivated. According to Lane (2019), Potosí could be described as an "early modern nightmare". Nevertheless, Potosí was famous worldwide for being a city of opportunities, as both formal and informal economies thrived (Lane, 2019). This gave birth to brothels, gambling dens, hotels, restaurants, a large entertainment sector and different sorts of organized crime (Lane, 2019). However, the miners themselves gained little from these activities. Similar to what Galeano (1971) expressed, anthropologist June Nash (1979) described that the Spanish colonizers took enough silver from Bolivia's mines to build a transatlantic bridge to Madrid but left little in the mining centres from which these riches came.

Spanish rule would never have lasted as long as it did without the mines of Potosí supplying Spain and the rest of the world with silver. Some historians, such as Machado Aráoz (2014, 2020) and Lane (2019) suggest that it was not the factories of Europe during the industrial revolution that represented the start of modern capitalism, but the silver mines of Potosí. According to Lane (2019*)* "the city, mines, and refineries prefigured industrial capitalism at its best and worst, its most innovative and its most destructive". The mines appeared to be magical because they never ran out of silver (Lane, 2019). But the availability of silver did at some point decline, and so did the wealth and population growth of the city. By the time Simon Bolivar came to liberate the area from Spanish rule in 1825, the population had decreased significantly, and the mines had been overexploited to the point where most of the tunnels were too dangerous to use.

The mining history of Potosí is a tragic story, but it is a story that has had enormous impact on the region. The fact that Potosí as a city and region was founded upon mining activities makes its history closely tied to mining and extractivism and the continuance of this legacy. According to Machado Aráoz (2020), Potosi could be considered a prime example of the world division between centre- periphery, or the division between subaltern places that provides resources and imperial centres of appropriation and consumption.

One can hardly exaggerate the role of mining as the main colonial activity, which has heavily influenced the structure of the modern world (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 91). What we call "modernity" is a result of the exploitation of natural resources based on the logics of capitalism and colonialism (Machado Aráoz, 2020, p. 91). Machado Aráoz (2019) argues that capitalism could not have existed without colonialism, and that modern capitalism could not

survive without this structure of colonial mining. Sociologist Maristella Svampa (2019) similarly emphasizes that the mining history of Potosí represents a model of appropriation of nature that the world had never seen before, and that this gave birth to a capitalist logic based on the export of raw materials and the subordination of certain sectors within the global economic system (p. 16).

Potosí today

It was not until after Bolivia had obtained its independence that the region of Potosí was assigned status as department in 1826 (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009). Today the department covers more than 10 percent of the country's national territory and is divided into 16 different provinces (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009). It is located in the Andean highlands, and its altitude varies from 2000 to 5930 meters above sea level (ibid.). The climate varies between the different altitudes, but Potosí is generally characterized by extreme conditions such as low temperatures, frost, hail, and aridity. These conditions have led to severe difficulties related to agriculture, such as quinoa cultivation, and animal breeding (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009).

Despite centuries having passed since Potosí was born as a silver-mining settlement, other kinds of mining activities are still present in this part of the country. For instance, tin, zinc, and small amounts of silver are still extracted from the Cerro Rico (Waltham, 2005) and tin-mining plays an important role in the Bolivian export economy (Bull, 2015). Interestingly, parts of the nearly 500-year-old mines are still in use. Around 15 000 miners are still working in the dangerous, collapsing tunnels hoping to find what is left of value inside the mountain. The average life expectancy of today's miners is 40 years, and according to the local widow's association, 14 women are widowed every month due to the dangerous working conditions (Moh, 2014). Anthropologist June Nash (1979) explained that the miners view the mines as a living organism, and that there is a cannibalistic quality in the relationship between the workers and the mines; hence the famous quote and title of her book "We eat the mines, and the mines eat us".

Besides traditional mining there is an increased focus on the possibilities of lithium extraction from the vast salt flat, Salar de Uyuni. In stark contrast to traditional mining which involves digging in the ground, lithium can be extracted from the salt flats through an evaporation

process of the brine. By evaporating the water and separating the different salts and minerals, it is possible to extract lithium carbonate, which is later purified into metal (Roger, et al., 2017, p. 17). This process involves less dangerous and harmful working conditions, but requires a lot of time, technology, money, and knowledge about complex chemistry. Furthermore, a high global demand is necessary because lithium is highly reactive with other elements (UNCTAD, 2020), which means that it cannot be stored over time in the same way as other metals.

Despite its rich mineral reserves, Potosí is one of the departments with the highest levels of inequality and underdevelopment in Bolivia (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009). It is considered the country's most marginalized region, with high levels of poverty and undernutrition, lack of sanitation and healthcare, poor infrastructure, and weak education system (Obaya, 2019). Apart from these tangible aspects, the majority of the Potosí population is Indigenous, mainly Quechua and Aymara – sharing a collective memory related to the model of extractivist exploitation that has historically affected them negatively ever since the colonialization (Obaya, 2019). This has led to local conflicts and frictions surrounding the lithium project. Some parts of the local population look at the project as an opportunity for social and economic development, while others are concerned about the potentially negative socio-environmental consequences (Obaya, 2019). The fact that the extraction of lithium is complex and requires specialized workers likely means that the local communities will not benefit directly from the project. To many, it appears that their best hope is a share of its revenues, but no direct employment in its management. Additionally, many are concerned with the emergence of prostitution and gambling, echoing the detrimental effects of this in the silver mines of Potosí. In other words, this recent development related to lithium signifies both opportunities and challenges for Potosí and Bolivia. This will be discussed below and in the following chapters.

History of the Bolivian lithium reserves: From discovery to extraction

As mentioned in chapter 1, approximately 80 percent of the world's easiest accessible lithium is located in the so-called Lithium Triangle bordering Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile (Fornillo, 2018, p. 181). Lithium is in fact not a rare metal, and can be found in both sedimentary rocks, pegmatites, and brines, but in order for lithium mining to be economically beneficial, the

concentration of lithium needs to be high (Gruber et al., 2011, p. 762). Lithium is a necessary component in batteries used in electric vehicles, but is also used in the production of glass, ceramics, and medicine (Fornillo, 2018). The increasing demand for lithium has drawn global attention to this region, and it is estimated that the resource could potentially lead to economic growth and development for the lithium-dense countries (Lencina, et al., 2018, p. 406). The most accessible lithium is located in brines, which is defined as "saline waters with high contents of dissolved salts" and is found right below the crust of salt flats (Gruber et al., 2011, p. 762). The majority of these reserves are located in brines in the salt flats of the Andes, such as the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia.

Salar is the Spanish word for salt flat, which are flat expanses of ground covered with salt and other minerals. They are usually found in deserts and are relatively common in the arid Andean highlands of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The earth's biggest salt flat, Salar de Uyuni, covers more than 10 000 square kilometres. It is located at around 3650 meters above sea level and forms part of the department of Potosí in the southwestern part of Bolivia. Its history began about 40 000 years ago as a result of uplift of the high plateau of the Andes. Due to lack of drainage, water from the surrounding mountains gathered and created a huge lake named Lake Minchin. Later on, a rise in temperature caused the water to evaporate and eventually dried this lake. The high salination levels left a thick crust of salt which is characteristic of the current Salar de Uyuni. It is below this crust that the brine is located from which both lithium carbonate and other minerals, such as magnesium hydroxide, potassium chloride and boron, can be extracted (Gruber et al., 2011, p. 762).

Despite harsh weather conditions and lack of infrastructure, archaeologists and historians believe humans have populated the surroundings of the Salar de Uyuni long before Spanish colonization (Lecoq, 1997). Archaeological findings suggest that different ethnical groups inhabited this area before the arrival of the Spanish, and that people have been extracting minerals and salt from the Salar for centuries, both for personal use and exchange of goods (Lecoq, 1997). Unfortunately, there is limited information available regarding the Salar de Uyuni's pre-Hispanic history due to lack of studies on this particular area that integrates different fields of study, such as archaeology, anthropology, and history.

According to Sanchez-Lopez (2019) who has studied the symbolic meaning and significance of the Salar de Uyuni for the local populations, the area used to be considered a "white desert". This makes sense, given the fact that the area has largely been overlooked both by the Spanish colonizers, the Bolivian state, and the local governments. Nevertheless, these

perceptions are changing and depends on the uses of, and activities related to the Salar (Sanchez-Lopez, 2019). For instance, small-scale extraction of ulexite started in the 1980s and gave new meaning to the Salar as a source of income for the local communities and "contributed to a peculiar form of resource governance that prioritises local arrangements with the less possible involvement from the State" (ibid.). In other words, besides small-scale mining, transport, and tourism little governmental attention has been afforded to this area. This has changed over the past decades, in part due to increased tourism related to its spectacular scenery, but more importantly because of the discovery of high concentrations of lithium (Sanchez-Lopez, 2019).

First period: Discovery and exploration of the lithium reserves

The lithium deposits of Salar de Uyuni were first investigated in the 1970s when the geology department of the Universidad Major de San Andres (UMSA) together with the French "Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer" (ORSTOM) conducted a study of the economic possibilities of the evaporite resources in the salt flats (Nacif, 2012). This happened during the regime of Hugo Banzer, who during the same period of time (1974-1976) initiated a variety of projects related to the lithium reserves in the Salar de Uyuni and its possible economic potential (Obaya, 2019). These investigations were carried out in cooperation with different organizations and institutions, such as the United Nations Development Programme, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Bolivian geology service, and the Mining corporation of Bolivia (COMIBOL) (Obaya, 2019).

By the end of 1976 more than a billion perforations had been conducted in the salt flat, mainly related to the UMSA-ORSTOM project and the conclusion was that there were large concentrations of lithium in the Salar (Nacif, 2012). During the early 1980s the investigations continued, and the first attempts were made to make a business deal between the state and the North American firm, Lithium company of America (Lithco) (Daza, 2017). The idea was that Lithco would be the shareholder of 45% and the Bolivian state 51%. Moreover, Lithco solicited an area of 200 hectares in order to conduct a study over three years to get an overview of the exact amounts of lithium and potassium available before initiating any mining activities (Obaya, 2019).

After a decade of investigations, the Bolivian government created the Interministerial

Commission of the Salt Flats with the purpose of "exploiting the potassium, boron and lithium". The commission was responsible for giving advice on how the resources should be handled, and to establish the terms of reference for a possible international call for bids (Obaya, 2019). In 1984 they published a report in which they recommended that the state should be the owner of the salt flats, but extraction of the resources to occur in association with a private company (Obaya, 2019).

It should be mentioned that this period of time was marked by the ongoing Cold War, which for the first time had increased the global demand for lithium. The metal was considered a strategic resource and a necessary component for the production of thermonuclear weapons (Nacif, 2012). Up until this point the global market of lithium had been controlled by two companies, Lithco and Foote Mineral Company, but the increased demand for lithium forced the companies to look for new lithium resources (Nacif, 2012). At the time, Bolivia was by no means in the position to meet this demand because it was still in the process of investigation and evaluation of their resources. Nevertheless, the increased focus on the potential of the lithium was of great significance in the years that followed.

Second period: Neoliberal policies and failed attempts to privatize the lithium resources

The period between 1985 and 2000 was characterized by structural reforms and neoliberal policies (Obaya, 2019, p. 27). In 1985, president Victor Paz Estenssoro implemented readjustment policies, known as the "New Economic Policy", with the purpose of distancing the state from the economic activities by opting for foreign investments and privatization of natural resources (Obaya, 2019, p. 31). During this period various attempts to privatize the lithium reserves were made. In 1985, the government created CIRESU (Complejo Industrial de los Recursos Evaporíticos del Salar de Uyuni) with the purpose to take command of the governance related to the natural resources in the Salar. CIRESU was composed by a wide range of different actors from the national, regional, and local levels (Obaya, 2019).

In 1986 Salar de Uyuni was declared a state-owned reserve in order to facilitate a process of international bidding (Obaya, 2019, p. 27). The idea was to make a public international call for bids and get an overview of the different actors interested in extracting lithium from the Salar. This did not happen. Instead, the minister of mining, Jaime Villalobos, told the Lithco,

who had previously shown interest, that they could initiate negotiations about a direct contract instead of going through a bidding process (Obaya, 2019, p. 28). The negotiations started in 1989 and none of the local and regional actors or organizations that formed part of CIRESU were invited to participate (ibid.).

In this period, between 1989 and 1993, during the presidency of Paz Zamora, policies strictly related to the Washington Consensus were implemented. They followed the basic logics of neoliberal economic policies, such as market liberalization, free trade of goods and capital, privatization, and minimal state involvement (Daza, 2017, p. 179). These policies also affected the lithium sector, as the negotiations between the government and possible investors were held behind closed doors, excluding the national and regional civil society actors (Daza, 2017, p. 179-180). In 1989, after six months of negotiations, the first draft for the contract were signed by Lithco and the Bolivian government. It stated that Lithco was given the permission to explore and exploit the minerals of the Salar for the next 40 years (Obaya, 2019, p. 28). The Bolivian state would not participate in the extraction but receive taxes and revenues from the exportation. The problem was that these taxes were assigned the central government, and not directed to benefit the department of Potosí or the communities in which the mining activities would occur (Daza, 2017).

This contract led to massive protests, mainly initiated by the actors that had been excluded from the negotiation process. The most significant actor in this context was the Potosí Civic Committee (COMCIPO) who managed to create a sense of regional unity through participation and collective action (Daza, 2017). The contract was supposed to be signed on the 30th of April 1990. Approximately one week before this, COMCIPO organized a massive strike and a march with the purpose of pressuring the government to cancel the contract (Obaya, 2019, p. 28). Their main argument was that the contract had been made without a round of bidding, which was established as a formal requirement by law (ley Nº 719) (Obaya, 2019, p. 28). Another important reason for the protest was the lack of integration of the local actors in both the negotiations and the project, along with what was deemed an unfair distribution of benefits. The protests lasted for days in Potosi and La Paz, and included hunger strikes and blocked roads. Eventually, the mobilizations against the deal pressured the president, Paz Zamora, to cancel the signing of the contract with Lithco on the 4th of May 1990 (Daza, 2017). According to Daza (2017) the current state-controlled project would not have been possible without this massive resource defence.

In the following year there was an extensive debate about how the evaporite resources should be handled in the most beneficial way, a debate that included the actors that had previously been excluded from the discussion. This eventually led to an international call for bids in which three different firms presented their projects: Sochimiq (Chile), COPLA (Bolivia) and Lithco, which had now changed name to FMC (Obaya, 2019, p. 29). The latter won and a similar contract to the previous one was signed in 1992. Only a few days later, the Bolivian congress decided that the amount of tax should be raised from 10% to 13%, even though the contract stated that this could not be changed (Orellana, 1995). After months of negotiations, FMC decided to cancel the contract and instead made a deal with neighbouring Argentina to extract lithium from salt flats in the province of Catamarca (Obaya, 2019, p. 29).

During this period of time, it became clear that the conflict level between different actors was increasing. On one side there was the national government and actors interested in the lithium, and on the other there were different civil society groups from Potosí, that had initially been included in the CIRESU (Obaya, 2019, p. 29). As explained, the protest that followed the negotiations between Lithco and the Bolivian government was formally based on the violations of the law Nº 719, but it became evident that the local actors were not happy with the distribution of economic benefits. The national government aimed to establish a market-based economic model in which privatization and foreign investments were central elements (Obaya, 2019, p. 30). Thus, the increased international interest in lithium as part of an energy transition, especially after the two petroleum crises in 1973 and 1979, aligned well with the government's neoliberal visions (Obaya, 2019, p. 29).

The organizations and actors from Potosí did not agree to the involvement of foreign actors and emphasized that they preferred a local firm and a more beneficial tax regime. The discontent towards the deal with Lithco was not only regionalist in nature, but also anti-neoliberal. It became evident that there was great friction between the centralized government and the regional actors, a friction that is still present today. It is important to remember that Potosí is not only the least developed and most marginalized department of Bolivia, but also the region with the most invasive and abusive colonial history. The history of exploitation of natural resources in Potosí still hurts and has made the population extremely cautious when it comes to a potential repetition of history. This collective historical memory of how the mineral wealth was extracted from the land without benefiting the people will be further addressed below, and in chapter 5.

Third period: Nationalization and industrialization

The first few years of the 2000s were marked by severe political discontent and protests against attempts to privatize vital resources such as water and gas. Many Bolivians, especially the poor and Indigenous populations, were frustrated after years of neoliberal policies and lack of possibility to participate in the decision-making (Postero, 2017. P. 42). Massive mobilizations that convoked various civil society actors, labour unions, Indigenous organizations, and peasant movements, eventually led to President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada resigning in October 2003. The protests were fuelled by fury related to austerity plans sponsored by the IMF along with government plans to privatize natural gas. After what is known as the "gas war" in 2003, Movement for Socialism (MAS) came to power as a response to this massive discontent (Postero, 2017. p. 42). Even though the uprising against the economic policies had already started, these first years of the millennial were of great importance for the popularization of MAS (Obaya, 2019).

As described in chapter 2, the victory of Evo Morales and MAS in 2006 represented a radical shift in the natural resource management in Bolivia (Obaya, 2019). The new government declared most of the natural resources as of strategic interest to the state and nationalized them. Although the Salt flats has already been of national ownership, the industrialization of the Salar de Uyuni was declared “national priority” in 2008 (Obaya, 2019, p. 34). The government made it clear that the evaporite resources would remain under the control of the state, and that they would only collaborate with external actors in technological aspects. Moreover, COMIBOL, which had been founded during the Revolution of 1952, was declared a strategic national public company in 2008. The new constitution that was approved the 7th of February 2009 explicitly states in article 348, that the natural resources are of strategic character and public interest for the development of the country. The Bolivian state is the one in control of all the natural resources and the state-controlled reserves, which includes the direct control over the extraction, industrialization, transportation, and commercialization of all strategic resources.

The anti-neoliberal program of MAS became evident already in May 2006, when Morales “nationalized” the oil and gas sector. This was done by sending the Bolivian army to take over the natural gas installations that foreign actors controlled (Postero, 2017). The gas and mining resources in Bolivia were nationalized by the state after the 1952 revolution but became

privatized again under the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s. According to Postero (2017) these historical attempts of nationalization has led to a long collective memory of the state's involvement in the mining sector, which is considered a national patrimony (p. 97). The mines constituted a large sector of public employment, with benefits, good salaries and high status associated with working for the Bolivian nation (Nash, 1992). As a consequence of the neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s, many miners were laid off. This was perceived by many as a blow to the dignity of Bolivia's working people (see Nash 1992 & Postero 2017). This explains the immense support that Morales received when he chose to re-nationalize the mining sector in 2007 (Postero, 2017).

The Unique Regional Federation of Peasant Workers of the Southern Altiplano (FRUTCAS) suggested that a state-run company should be in charge of the lithium reserves (Ávila, 2017, p. 13). In 2010 the government tried to establish a public state-owned company, EBRE, that was supposed to be independent from COMIBOL. This was met with resistance and protests, especially on behalf of the Potosí Civic Committee (COMCIPO) who felt excluded and opposed the centralization of the main office in La Paz (Obaya, 2019). These protests led to the cancellation of this plan. Thus, the lithium sector remained under the control of COMIBOL, but the government created the Gerencia Nacional de Recursos Evaporiticos (GNRE) which was supposed to deal with the lithium-sector under the mandate of COMIBOL.

In 2017, seven years after the first attempt, an independent state-owned lithium company was created: Yacimientos de Litio Boliviano (YLB), this time without major protests on behalf of COMCIPO or other actors (Obaya, 2019). The reasons behind this are unclear but might relate to COMCIPO being exhausted from all the years of resistance. At any rate, YLB was liberated from COMIBOL and transferred from the Ministry of Mining to the Vice Ministry of High Technology and Energy, under the mandate of the Luis Alberto Echazú, who had previously been the one responsible for GNRE [4]. This meant that there was only one independent entity that could be entirely in charge of all stages of the lithium project, without having to focus on the other forms of mining that COMIBOL had been occupied with (Ávila, 2017, p. 13).

4 Luis Alberto Echazú was one of the informants for this thesis, and his current perceptions about the lithium project are addressed in chapter 5.

As mentioned, the MAS-administration created a plan to obtain control over the lithium resources already in 2008. This resource was considered a particularly strategic resource and the aim was to control the entire value chain in order to obtain a structural change in the country's economy (Obaya, 2019, p. 45). The strategy and design of the national lithium project was divided into three main stages:

1) investigation and construction pilot plants
2) national extraction of lithium
3) battery production

Each of these phases required massive investments, which was to be derived as loans from the Central bank of Bolivia in order to avoid dependency on foreign financial institutions. From the beginning, MAS declared Bolivia's economic policies as anti-neoliberal, and the natural resource management related to the lithium sector is an example of this (Fornillo, 2018). In contrast to neighbouring Argentina and Chile, and actually all other countries in South America, Bolivia is the only state that has both prohibited concessions and aimed to nationalize the entire lithium industry (Nacif, 2012, Fornillo, 2018).

In stark contrast to its colonial history of exploitation of raw materials to serve the global market, Bolivia has created an alternative strategy for the lithium project. The idea is to take control over the entire value chain, which means that Bolivia will not simply export the lithium carbonate they extract from the Salar de Uyuni, but rather aim to purify it into metal and furthermore, create their own batteries. This is an ambitious goal, but the project has advanced past the pilot-phase, and there are indeed possibilities of a large-scale industrialization. A pilot plant for battery production, La Palca, has been built, in addition to various infrastructure-projects to facilitate the industrialization of the lithium. In this context, the federation of workers in southern Potosí (FRUTCAS) became a central actor, especially regarding "sensibilization" of the local communities for the approval of the project (Obaya, 2019). In other words, FRUTCAS tried to integrate the local populations that had previously felt overlooked in the project.

Nevertheless, a project of this dimension involves a wide range of consequences, and there are limits to the extent of local integration. As previously mentioned, the mining of ulexite have been of local relevance as the extraction and distribution can be organized by cooperatives, without much state involvement (Sanchez-Lopez, 2019). This is not the case for

the lithium-mining since the project is state-led and requires advanced technology and knowledge that obstructs local populations from directly involvement (Sanchez-Lopez, 2019). Hence, the communities surrounding Salar de Uyuni have more hope in capturing future revenues from the extraction than being directly involved in the mining itself (Sanchez-Lopez, 2019). Salar de Uyuni is today most famous for its spectacular white landscapes, which has made it a popular tourist destination for people travelling through Bolivia. Thus, an important source of income for the local populations is related to tourism. Furthermore, activities such as cultivation of quinoa, alpaca-farming and small-scale extraction of salt and other minerals are also important part of the local economy and self-sustainment. In fact, the cultivation of quinoa represents the main source of local income, accounting for 59% of local revenues (Ávila, 2017, p. 16).

According to Postero (2017) both activists and scholars have expressed deep concerns regarding the environmental impacts of the lithium project (p. 105). One of the concerns is related to how the mining may affect the access to water for quinoa production (Postero, 2017, p. 106). Moreover, the ecosystem of the Salar is extremely fragile, and an increased salinity of the rivers or toxic waste of magnesium hydroxide could be potentially harmful. Scientists are especially concerned about how the environmental impacts could affect the flamingos and other birds, breeding in the area (Postero, 2017, p. 105). The groundwater of Salar de Uyuni regenerates extremely slowly, and thus, the water reserves of this area is classified as non-renewable. In fact, there is already a shortage of water in the region today, as there is a competition for water between mining operations and crop irrigation (Hollender & Schultz, 2010). There are 90 active mining concessions around the Salar that already rely on the scarce water resources, such as the immense San Cristobal Mine that uses water for the extraction of tin, silver, and zinc (López & Quiroga, 2015). In order to produce one ton of lithium from brines approximately 2 million litres of water are needed. The government has not been entirely transparent about all the details of the lithium project, but the Bolivian anthropologist Ricardo Calla Ortega has investigated the different forms of extraction and fears that the government has chosen the most dangerous option (Calla Ortega, 2014). Nevertheless, it is difficult to conclude on the long-term effects as the project is still at its initial stages and there is a lack of documented potential environmental impacts.

Calla Ortega furthermore argues that the lithium project has already led to serious cultural and socio-political changes. Negotiations between FRUTCAS and MAS has led to three vast tierras comunitarias de origen/Indigenous community land (TCO) being entitled to local

peasant communities in exchange of the Salar de Uyuni remaining under state control (Gysler, 2011). Although this could be considered a victory for those fighting for the establishment of these TCOs, it was considered an enormous loss for some of the local Indigenous communities who perceive the Salar itself as part of their territory (Calla Ortega, 2014, p. 51, Gysler, 2011). Regardless of this, there are many other actors who support the project. The government's main argument is that this project is of national priority and that Bolivia could benefit greatly from the extraction, both in terms of income and resource sovereignty (Postero, 2017, p. 106-107). Regional and local governments in Potosí support the project because they hope that the income can benefit the marginalized department, while the mining sector have high hopes for employment and some parts of the tourism sector also believe that the project can provide the region with necessary infrastructure, such as airports and roads (Postero, 2017).

The mining history of the Potosí department has also contributed to a strong mining-identity. As Taussig (1980) pointed out when referring to the Bolivian miners: "They are forced by the management hierarchy to struggle with the rock face and to hate the work that destroys their lungs and shortens their lives. Yet, at the same time they care for the mine." (p. 146). This mining identity may however change over time with the technological advances and changing dynamics of the mining activities. As mentioned, lithium extraction differs substantially from traditional mining in a variety of ways. The fact that the workers will not have to dig into a mountain in order to extract the lithium from the Salar is one major difference, but it is also highly unlikely that the marginalized people who traditionally worked in tin and silver mines of Potosi will be the ones mining the lithium. As Taussig (1980) explains: "mineral ores are often spoken of as alive, resplendent with movement, colour, and sound. They may be said to be flowing like water, moving, asleep, pure, beautiful, growing like a potato, like raw sugar, sweet, screaming below the ground" (p. 147). However, the difference between the ores of silver, and the lithium in the brine of the salt flats suggests that the latter entails a much more knowledge and technology intensive mining model, which again might result in resentment and alienation on behalf of local miners and mining labour unions. The salt flat has provided the people of this area with income and self-sustainment from the salt, as well as being a route of transportation and a tourist attraction.

According to the MAS administration's plan for the lithium sector, foreign actors are only welcome to join the extraction from what they call the "residuals" of the evaporation process of the brine. The problem is that it is estimated that the extraction from the residuals may

actually be more profitable than the direct extraction from the brine itself (Obaya, 2019, p. 41). Furthermore, the high ratios of lithium/magnesium and challenging climate conditions makes it expensive and complicated to extract the lithium carbonate directly from the brine. The original process of extraction is estimated to provide the Bolivian state with 15.000 tons of lithium carbonate per year, whereas the extraction from the residual brine amounts to 30.000 tons of lithium hydroxide (Obaya, 2019, p. 41). Thus, it is understandable that there was marked scepticism when YLB signed a contract with the German company ACI Systems in 2018 on the use of residual brine. This joint venture with ACI Systems, led to massive protests on behalf of COMCIPO, forcing the government to cancel the contract a few days before the regime change/coup in November 2019 (Davis, 2020).

Concluding remarks

Even though Bolivia is rich in natural resources, it has been rated as one of the world's poorest countries for a long time. There are many reasons for this, but an overarching explanation points to extraction policies and exploitation models that have favoured colonial and foreign interests. For centuries foreign actors capitalized on the country's resources with minimal profits being left in Bolivia. This changed in 2006, when Indigenous leader Evo Morales and MAS won the election. The new government broke with the neoliberal policies that had dominated the economic politics for the past decades, and nationalized the country's strategic national resources (Postero, 2017, p. 97). In the beginning this included the oil and gas sector, but more recently other resources have also been included in this nationalization strategy. In 2008, the evaporite resources of the Salar de Uyuni were declared a national priority. This was the first step in the process of industrializing the lithium, with the purpose to generate income and contribute to the social and economic development of the department of Potosí. As we have seen, this region holds the highest rates of poverty and inequality in the country. Thus, there are high expectations for the lithium project and the promises of participation and just distribution of income.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the extraction of metals and minerals is nothing new in the department of Potosí. The mining history goes back at least 500 years to the moment when the Spanish colonizers became aware of the large amounts of silver accumulated inside the Cerro Rico. Nevertheless, there are some clear differences between the Spanish-controlled silver

mining and the nationalization project of the lithium resources. First of all, Bolivia is no longer a colony controlled by a foreign state. This should guarantee more income to the Bolivian state, but also put a lot more responsibility on the state regarding working conditions, socio-economic concerns, and environmental impacts. These factors were by no means respected during the centuries of colonial rule. Moreover, one of the main purposes of the nationalization of the resources is to avoid the role as a dependant exporter of raw materials by taking control of the entire value chain (Fornillo, 2018). This is easier said than done, as Bolivia lacks financing, technology, knowledge, and infrastructure to carry out this kind of project on its own. Even so, it could still be considered a better alternative than the attempts of privatization of the natural resources that were made during the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s when various foreign actors attempted to privatize the country's natural resources and initiate mining-projects (Obaya, 2019). Accordingly, lithium is currently part of a larger political project that has led to an ongoing debate regarding how the resource should be managed in the most efficient, sustainable, and economically beneficial manner.

Chapter 5: Discourse Analysis of Documents and Interviews

In this chapter I will provide an analysis as a means to respond to the main research question of this thesis: "*In what ways does the Bolivian lithium project differ from neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, and how is it understood as a decolonial project?"*. In order to do so I will conduct an analysis of governmental policy plans and documents, interviews with key informants, political speeches, academic debates, and project plans for the Bolivian lithium sector. As addressed in the introduction, I am aware that this study lacks first-hand collected data on the important perspectives of the local communities. As this limitation was a consequence of the pandemic travel restrictions, I have chosen to focus on the discourses of actors from the policy-level, the lithium industry, academia, and organizations. Hence, in this chapter I focus my analysis on how different perspectives of decolonization related to the lithium project are expressed in the Bolivian public debate and politics.

As detailed in chapter one, this analysis invokes a broad range of different policy documents and three interviews in order to respond to the research question. The objective is to discuss the differences between neo-extractivist and neoliberal policies by using the Bolivian lithium as a case study and assess in what ways the Bolivian lithium project can be considered decolonial. In order to achieve this, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis, which is a research method for critically studying language in relation to its social context (Grue, 2011., for detailed information, see methodology section of chapter 1). All translations are mine if nothing else is indicated, and the original quotes are included in footnotes.

I will start by exploring how the anti-neoliberal discourse is expressed in the different policy documents, before moving on to an analysis of the decolonial discourse and how the notion of Vivir Bien is presented in the documents and perceived by the informants. Finally, I analyze how the lithium project fits into the anti-neoliberal and decolonial discourses, along with a brief assessment of its related challenges.

Anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourses in Bolivian politics

Due to Bolivia's long history of colonization, exploitation and dependency, the MAS administration has repetitively proclaimed its aim to free Bolivia from these uneven power structures and achieve sovereignty over its natural resources. Even the name of the ruling political party MAS: "Movement for socialism", is indicative of its opposition to the capitalist system since socialism and capitalism have historically been opposing ideological positions. In this section I will analyze what the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourses consist of and examine what is expressed regarding economic policy and natural resource management. A central question is whether these discourses are related to different expressions of decoloniality (see Quijano, 2000) or mostly related to decolonization in the form of independency from the capitalist system and the global market.

The first National Development Plan of 2006, published right after MAS assumed power, is based on a strong political-economic critique of neoliberal policies, capitalism, globalization and explicitly links these concepts to colonialism. The plan opts for a plural economy in which a strong state, local communities and cooperatives are considered the most important economic actors (Ranta, 2018, p. 80). It points at the dependency on an export-based economy and the colonial and neoliberal fundaments that supports this model as a cause of inequality and social exclusion (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2006). In order to change this, the State should take control over the country's strategic resources by nationalizing them. Moreover, the idea was that the development plan should be applied by all the departments and municipalities in order to break down neoliberal and colonial structures across the country (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2006).

A few years after the National Development Plan of 2006 was published, the departmental development plan for Potosí was presented. It contained an analysis of the major issues of the department, along with the main local goals. As emphasized in chapter 4, Bolivia used to have the world's largest silver deposits, which for centuries provided Europe with the valuable metal. Today there is little left in the silver mines of Cerro Rico, and the Potosí region paradoxically has high levels of poverty despite their richness in other natural resources (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009, p. 25). The document strongly argues that this needs to change and points out issues related to inclusion, participation and social development that need to be considered, as well as economic and productive challenges. The central idea is to change the dominant neoliberal economic model based on the exportation of

raw materials. As the lithium reserves of Bolivia are mainly situated in the Salar de Uyuni, in the Potosí department, an industrialization of this sector is considered an opportunity for the department to move beyond the simple extraction of raw materials that has historically dominated the economic activities.

The national development plan from 2015 considers "starting the process of dismantling colonialism and neoliberalism and beginning the construction of a new society based on a plurinational and communitarian State" as one of the main achievements since 2006 (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 12). The plan argues for national sovereignty, both in a political and economic sense, and repetitively emphasizes the objective to liberate Bolivia from colonial patterns, uneven power structures and neoliberal policies. Furthermore, the document criticizes the notion of "green economy" for only being concerned with nature if it has economic value, and states that Bolivia should opt for anti-capitalist alternatives (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 141).

In the governmental program from 2020, it is stated that Bolivia will construct an alternative international process based on the recognition and respect of the rights of Mother Earth, a sustainable use of nature and approaches that are not based on market values. While the capitalist society is advancing towards the complete commodification of nature, and capitalism expands through the "green economy", the Bolivian government opts for a different development model (MAS, 2020, p. 43). According to MAS: "Our greatest enemy in the international arena is green capitalism and environmental colonialism"[5]. Accordingly, a declared goal is to include the Rights of Mother Earth as a fundamental right in the SDG-framework of the United Nations (MAS, 2020). The governmental program states that Bolivia's future foreign policy will be based on the expanding and deepening relations with states and governments based on a framework of mutual respect, cooperation and solidarity, social justice, dignity, as well as respect and harmony with Mother Earth. (The rights of nature and Mother Earth will be addressed below, in the section of "Vivir Bien".) Furthermore, MAS highlights the importance of including principles such as anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and sovereignty as part of the international agenda (MAS, 2020, p. 43).

5 Original quote: Nuestro mayor enemigo en el ámbito internacional es el capitalismo verde y el colonialismo ambiental.

In the document titled “Agenda Patriotica 2025” the anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal positioning could not be clearer. Already in the introduction it is proclaimed that the Bolivia has embarked on the path towards the liberalization from “the chains of colonial capitalism, liberalism and neoliberalism” (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2013, p. 4). The document consists of 13 goals, in which at least four goals can be linked to the lithium project, as they highlight the importance of sovereignty, independency, decolonization and nationalization of natural resources:

Goal number 4 is about scientific and technological sovereignty. It emphasizes that Bolivia cannot continue being a producer of primary goods for the industrialized world. It has to develop its own technology and industrialize the strategic resources to break the patterns of dependency. Goal number 5 states that Bolivia has to become liberated from the colonial dependency on foreign financial institutions and capitalism. Goal 6 is centred around productive sovereignty with diversification and integral development without the “dictatorship of the capitalist market” (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2013, p. 13). According to this document, Bolivia will by 2025, break with these colonial patterns that has left the country dependent on export of raw materials. The aim is to transform the economy, industrialize and become an exporter of value-added products. And finally, goal 7 is centred around sovereignty over natural resources through nationalization, industrialization, and commercialization in harmony with Mother Earth (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2013, p. 16). Although these four overarching goals speak of the development of many different sectors, they can all be linked to the lithium project.

Through an examination of these documents, it becomes evident that the governmental anti-neoliberal discourse focuses on the link between the capitalist system and colonialism. As addressed in previous chapters, the expansion of modern capitalism is intimately linked with processes of colonialism. Echoing this, the neoliberal policies that dominated for decades are viewed as a continuation of this colonial history, as it facilitated the exploitation of natural resources that mainly favoured foreign actors. Thus, the Bolivian government’s critique of neoliberalism and capitalism appears to be based on a desire to free the country from this colonial legacy.

Decolonial discourses and the notion of Vivir Bien

The development-plans and policy documents clearly oppose capitalism, by connecting it to it to the colonial history of Bolivia. Nevertheless, it is important to consider whether this anti-colonial discourse is mostly related to decolonization in the form of sovereignty and state control over resources, or if there are also expressions of decoloniality present within this discourse. Hence, I turn to the concepts of Vivir Bien, plurinationality and regional autonomy to consider how these are linked to the decolonial discourse, and whether it is possible to speak about a decolonization of more than just the Bolivian economy.

Vivir Bien as a decolonial alternative to development

The notion of *Vivir Bien* is often referred to as a distinctive Andean Indigenous vision that opposes mainstream utilitarian development models (Waldmueller & Rodríguez, 2018; Escobar, 2010b; Gudynas, 2010). As addressed in previous chapters, Vivir Bien is not based upon one specific vision but rather a set of different ideas that have been unified and defined by a broad range of actors, such as Indigenous peoples, scholars, peasants, and other activists.

Governments rarely turn Indigenous ideas and visions into policy principles for the state. Yet, the notion of Vivir Bien appeared as a central concept in directing development policies of the MAS administration. It was first officially presented in the National Development Plan of 2006, and later included in the Constitution of 2009, as a moral and ethical value of the state (Ranta, 2018, p. 10). The concept nearly disappeared in the governmental program for 2010-2015, which prioritized resource extraction, industrialization and state-led developmentalism. Nevertheless, it reappeared as an important element in the national development plan for 2016-2020, and it features centrally in the Agenda Patriótica 2025. It also appears as an important concept in the development plan of the department of Potosí. Vivir Bien would also prove to be a central point of discussion in the interviews I conducted for this study.

According to the Ministry of Development Planning (2015) Vivir Bien draws on ideas, cosmovisions and knowledges from Indigenous peoples, peasants, and afro-descendants in which principles such as solidarity, collective well-being, communitarianism, ecological knowledge, and sustainability are central principles (Ministerio de Planificación del

Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4). The National Development Plan of 2006 emphasizes that Vivir Bien is about living well as a community and does not mean "living better" (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2006, p. 8). Vivir Bien is further presented as “an alternative civilizational and cultural horizon to capitalism and modernity” (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4). This is in clear opposition to a “culture of individualism, mercantilism and capitalism that is based on the irrational exploitation of humanity and nature” (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4). In the departmental plan of Potosí, the notion of Vivir Bien is described as a relationship between humans and nature based on reciprocity and respect (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009, p. 8). Here, Vivir Bien is considered a Bolivian development model in alignment with the principles of sustainability, decentralization, equality, inclusion, and social transformation (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009, p. 134).

During the interview with former minister Luis Alberto Echazú it became clear to me that the definition of the concept depends on who is asked. He explained that “Vivir Bien has been created by Indigenous movements. It is a very complex concept, and it has many meanings, many interpretations. I would personally tell you that there is no precise definition.”[6] Yet, he attempted to summarize it by suggesting that “Vivir Bien is not exploiting, not stealing, not harming nature, not hurting others, not hurting the state, and to work honestly.”[7] Furthermore, he added that “Its implementation has important components which is precisely to create a society where income is distributed more rationally, where there are not as many political, social, and economic differences, and which count on the participation of all sectors.”[8] In the interview with Jazmín Valdivieso, who used to work in the state-led lithium company YLB, she expressed that “Vivir Bien is based on the idea of living harmoniously with your entire environment. Not only with human beings, but with all your surroundings”[9], before stating that “More than harmony I like to say balance, because nature itself is not harmonious, it is balanced.”[10] She further told me that “another interesting thing is that Vivir Bien does not

6 El Vivir Bien ha sido acuñado por movimientos indígenas. Es un concepto muy complejo y que tiene muchas acepciones, muchas interpretaciones. Yo personalmente te diría que no hay una definición precisa.

7 El Vivir Bien es no explotar, no robar, no dañar la naturaleza, no hacer daño al prójimo, no hacer daño al estado, y de trabajar honestamente.

8 Su aplicación tiene componentes importantes que es justamente crear una sociedad donde se distribuya más racionalmente el ingreso, donde no haya semejantes diferencias económicas, sociales, políticas, y que cuenta con la participación de todos los sectores.

9 El Vivir Bien se sustenta en la idea de vivir armoniosamente con todo tu entorno. No solamente con los seres humanos sino también con todo tu entorno.

think of individuals, but of community."[11] She explained that the notion of Vivir Bien is not based upon an individualistic anthropocentric understanding of the world.

Vivir Bien is evidently an important principle on both a national and local level because it is included and mentioned several times in every document included in this chapter. On numerous occasions, the term is applied almost as a synonym to sustainable development. For instance, in the development plan for Potosí it is stated that Vivir Bien is about improving the quality of life of the entire population, while ensuring the use of the natural, cultural, or human resources does not affect the necessities of future generations (Prefectura del Departamento de Potosí, 2009, p. 98). This is remarkably similar to the definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland report, in which development is considered sustainable if it "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987, p. 16). Even so, I find it curious observe that the term "sustainable development" itself is completely absent in the first national development plan from 2006, in the Agenda Patriótica 2025, and only briefly mentioned in the other documents. This might be because the MAS government has aimed to distance itself from the Western development models by introducing its own alternative.

There is however one exception: In the Governmental program for 2010-2015 there appears to be a shift in the discourse. In this document the concept of Vivir Bien appears to have been replaced by formulations about sustainability and sustainable development. The reason behind this change in discourse is unclear. It could be an attempt to justify the shift towards more neoextractivist projects, industrialization, and foreign investments, or simply a matter of diplomacy.

The specific goals of the Agenda Patriótica 2025 are also remarkably similar to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations from 2015, even though this document was presented two years before the SDGs. One might even consider the goals of Agenda Patriótica 2025 as more ambitious, as it puts more emphasis on redistribution, equality, the rights of nature and Mother Earth. This emphasis may be due to the fact that the concept of Vivir Bien does not create the same division between humans and nature as western policymakers tend to do. Furthermore, the principles of Vivir Bien opposes the notion

10 Mas que armonía a mí me gusta decir equilibrio, porque la naturaleza en sí misma no es armónica, es equilibrada.

11 Otra cosa interesante es que el Vivir Bien no piensa en individuos, sino que piensa en comunidad.

of modernity and capitalism by embracing other rationalities and ways of organizing society. It may also be related to the previously mentioned critiques of the notion of Green Economy and Green Growth that the international institutions have opted for.

As mentioned, Bolivia appears eager to do things its own way, which is perhaps why the government aims to keep to their own development goals as a national policy rather than embracing the agenda of the international community. This emphasis on defining its own alternative development goals can be viewed as yet another expression of breaking free from the colonial patterns, and thus, as an expression of decolonization. The fact that the expressions of Vivir Bien has become more in alignment with the definition of sustainable development may have had the intention to please the international community, but it still holds a stronger emphasis on decolonization, self-determination, and sovereignty than the SDGs. Some have criticised the government's use of the term as a means to justify activities that go against the essence of Vivir Bien. The term might have been adopted by too many actors in the same way as the labels "green" or "sustainable" sometimes makes the discourses appear more inclusive than they really are without changing the underlying structures that made the term gain popularity in the first place.

Vivir Bien as part of the lithium project

As we have seen, Vivir Bien is in Bolivia understood as a variety of knowledge that is based on the harmonious (or balanced) relationship between individuals, communities, nature, and Mother Earth (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015). By looking at the different definitions and perspectives, it becomes clear that the notion of Vivir Bien represents an alternative development model, opposing both capitalism and colonialism. In the National Development Plan of 2015, the government introduced four sets of rights related to Vivir Bien:

1. The rights of Mother Earth.
2. The rights of peoples to their integral development through the exercise of their fundamental rights.
3. The rights of people to live without material, social and spiritual poverty.
4. The rights of native Indigenous people and peasants

(Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015. My translation.)

There are many possible contradictions related to these rights, especially concerning economic policies and the rights of Mother Earth. The development plan from 2015 addresses this concern by pointing out that there is a need to find a balance between environmental concerns and the right to "integral development for all" (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 10). This idea of integral development appears as an attempt to unite conflicting principles of Vivir Bien, multiculturality and plurinationalism with developmentalism and neo-extractive initiatives. Moreover, there is a clear contradiction between the idea of a unified state, plurinationalism and autonomy. It appears as though the government intends to unify these conflicting ideas by introducing the term "Communitarian socialism for living well" (Socialismo Comunitario para Vivir Bien) (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015, p. 4), which suggests that it is possible to combine neoextractivist initiatives, community values and well-being, public spending, and environmental concerns.

During the interview with Jazmín Valdivieso she stated that "I think to understand the idea of Vivir Bien it is important to question the idea of development, because they make us believe that the idea of development is competitiveness within the international market, but it does not consider the importance of a dignified life."[12] She explained that the concept of Vivir Bien is as much about increasing the standards of living, as being concerned with how people can live in "harmony" with nature. This resonates with the idea of "integral development" proposed in the national development plan, mentioned above. She emphasized that "It's about how you can live with dignity, without being a slave to the system, but contributing to your community"[13]. She also said that it is problematic to assume that the local communities want to live without the social security that other Bolivians have obtained, including access to water, electricity, education, and health care. She explained that "It is very problematic to idealize the life of the peasant, and to idealize the life of the Indigenous, without considering their living conditions."[14]

12 Creo que para entender la idea de Vivir Bien es importante cuestionarnos la idea de desarrollo, porque nos hacen pensar que la idea de desarrollo es la competitividad dentro del mercado internacional, pero no considera la importancia de una vida digna.

13 Se trata de cómo se puede vivir dignamente, sin ser esclavo del sistema, pero aportando tu comunidad.

14 Es muy problemático idealizar la vida del campesino, e idealizar la vida del indígena, sin considerar sus condiciones dignas de vida.

However, Valdivieso pointed out that there are obstacles related to this and stated that "the implementation process it is very complicated, because in the end, beyond being left, right, totalitarian or democratic states, all these governments end up belonging to the same capitalist system of consumption."[15] When asking Luis Alberto Echazú about the role of Vivir Bien in Bolivian politics he had a similar view as Valdivieso, and said that "We are a capitalist society, where the great interests seek profit. Logically, the vision of the oppressed is to move towards a society where this antagonism is gradually surpassed. I hope it can be achieved peacefully."[16]

A main question is if the concept of Vivir Bien is compatible with the economic policies and prospects of resource management in Bolivia. When asked upon this, both Valdivieso and Echazú agreed that there are obvious contradictions related to this concept, and extractivist activities. Nevertheless, they both believed that in the case of the lithium project it could be less contentious. Echazú told me that the project "is based on a distribution and use of profits for the collective good, for the common good, and moreover it is also an exploitation that is friendly with nature, that cares for the water, the environment, and the earth. So, the lithium project is considered part of this concept of Vivir Bien."[17] As remarked above, Valdivieso was more hesitant regarding the actual implementation of Vivir Bien, but she explained that certain principles are visible in the national politics. She told me that "For example, the commitment to a sovereign lithium industry is historical, because it has not happened in Bolivia before"[18] In essence, this means that the notion of Vivir Bien could be compatible with the lithium project in theory, but that there are obstacles related to its practical implementation.

15 Sin embargo, el proceso de aplicación es muy complicado, porque finalmente más allá de ser estados de izquierda, derecha, totalitario o democrático todos estos gobiernos terminan perteneciendo mismo sistema capitalista de consumo.

16 Estamos en una sociedad capitalista, donde los grandes intereses buscan el lucro. Lógicamente la visión de los oprimidos es la de avanzar hacia una sociedad donde vaya superándose este antagonismo de a poco. Ojalá se logre por vía pacífica.

17 Se basa en una distribución y un aprovechamiento de las utilidades para el bien colectivo, para el bien común, y además es una explotación amable con la naturaleza que cuida del agua, del medio ambiente y de la tierra. Entonces el proyecto del litio es considerado parte de esta concepción del Vivir Bien.

18 Por ejemplo, la apuesta de una industria soberana del litio es histórica, porque no ha sucedido en Bolivia.

Strategic resources, Andean-Amazonian capitalism, and communitarian socialism

As described in the previous chapter, the lithium sector was first under the control of the Bolivian mining corporation (COMIBOL) before the state-led company "Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos" (YLB) took over the responsibility for developing the lithium project in 2017. According to the YLB website, the vision of the project is to industrialize the evaporite resources of Bolivia through public sustainable projects, that correspond to the regional and national development. This responsible supply of lithium and potassium for the international community will count with industrialization projects that respect the environment, the existing laws, the rights of Indigenous peoples, along with creating work opportunities, added-value, wealth, and sovereignty (YLB, n.d.). Furthermore, the mission of YLB is to be responsible of carrying out all the activities of the production chain: prospection, exploration, extraction, concentration, installation, implementation, and administration of the evaporite resources, as well as industrialization, and commercialization.

The goal is clear: To develop a national and integral project of industrialization, with investments and proper technologies, and parallelly develop the production of value-added products. This will enable the country to position itself in the global market in a sustainable manner, and impulse a change in the energy matrix towards alternative and clean energies (YLB, n.d). By looking at these formulations made by YLB, it becomes evident that the company operates with the same decolonial and anti-neoliberal discourse as the MAS administration. This is however unsurprising, given the fact that YLB is state-controlled.

As early as in 2006, the government stated that some sectors were considered strategic, and that these sectors would be subject of exploitation to finance social programs, infrastructure, and strengthening of the country's institutions. In all of the documents included in this analysis, strategic sectors are presented as a necessity to achieve the national goals and generate income. In the national development plan of 2006, lithium is not mentioned as a strategic natural resource, but this radically changes in the following documents. The lithium project was presented as a strategic resource for the Bolivian economy in 2008. In the documents published after the launch of the project, including the development plans, governmental programs, and the Agenda Patriótica 2025, the country's lithium sector is

presented as a massive opportunity to generate both national income and jobs, along with fighting climate change.

The governmental program from 2010 mainly focuses on the so-called "great industrial leap" (gran salto industrial), which emphasizes the importance of making the Bolivian state the principal actor in extractivist projects (MAS, 2010, p. 11). It also focuses on the added value of the production and the diversification of the economy, which was also mentioned as important in the development plan of 2006. The main difference is that the "great industrial leap" highlights the necessity to industrialize grand-scale and opens up for foreign capital investments and joint ventures (MAS, 2010). The development plan of 2006 was significantly more critical of foreign investments. Nevertheless, both documents state that the purpose is to take advantage of the country's valuable natural resources in order to finance the social programs for the most vulnerable sectors. In the governmental program MAS expresses that it is a goal to both industrialize large extractive projects, but also to create factories for processing and purification (MAS, 2010, p. 74).

In 2006, former Vice President of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, stated that Bolivia had chosen an economic model named "Andean-Amazonian capitalism" (Capitalismo Andino-Amazónico). In his own words, this means "the construction of a strong state that regulates the expansion of the industrial economy, extracts its surplus and transfers it to the community level to enhance forms of self-organization and a commercial development distinctly Andean and Amazonian"[19] (García Linera, 2006). "Andean-Amazonian capitalism" was thus presented as a form of state capitalism that depends upon the revenues from natural resources to ensure economic growth and integral development. The term has often been used synonymously with the notion of "neoextractivism" in academic debates, but it holds a stronger emphasis on industrialization. This outlook could appear different from, and even opposed to, the 21st century socialism that has dominated the political discourse of MAS. Nevertheless, Linera has defended this critique by explaining that the term is more a matter of honesty that reflects Bolivia's realities (García Linera, 2006). The former vice president argued that due to the historical processes of colonialization, the government could not undo in one decade what capitalism had taken centuries to construct (Becker, 2016). Thus, from an

19 Original quote: "la construcción de un Estado fuerte, que regule la expansión de la economía industrial, extraiga sus excedentes y los transfiera al ámbito comunitario para potenciar formas de autoorganización y de desarrollo mercantil propiamente andino y amazónico." (Álvaro García Linera, 09.01.2006).

orthodox Marxist perspective his argument has an internal logic, as Bolivia is located in the periphery of the global economy and thus does not meet the economic conditions necessary to move towards socialism (Becker, 2016). Although Bolivia's weak position in the global economic system has made it difficult to develop an alternative economic model, Andean-Amazonian capitalism has been considered in conflict with the discourses of autonomy, sovereignty, decolonization and Vivir Bien.

As mentioned, lithium has been considered a strategic resource since 2008. In the governmental program from 2010, the lithium sector is framed as the largest industrialization project in Bolivian history, that will guarantee regional and national economic growth and thousands of jobs (MAS, 2010, p. 86). The government has introduced various measures to facilitate this process. For instance, a new local airport has been constructed in Uyuni, centres for technical education related to the lithium industry are being created, and a pilot plant for lithium batteries was inaugurated in 2014 (MAS, 2010, p. 116; Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, 2015). The State, through the company YLB, has so far made an investment of 598 million USD for the first phase of the development of the industrialization of lithium and other products derived from evaporite resources (MAS, 2020). For the period 2020-2025, it is proposed to:

- Consolidate the industrialization of Bolivian lithium by diversifying the country's productive matrix.
- Specify a third phase of investments, to achieve the production of cathode materials and lithium-ion batteries, thus completing the industrialization of lithium.
- Consolidate export markets to generate new sources of income.
- Implement plants for the production of lithium hydroxide and magnesium hydroxide from residual salts, cathode materials and batteries, in association with national and foreign private companies.
- To develop the Coipasa and Pastos Grandes salt flats for the production of boric acid, sodium bromide and pure bromine, in association with the Chinese company TBEA-Baocheng.

  (Movimiento al Socialismo, 2020. My translation.)

Furthermore, Bolivia seeks to obtain a leading role in the international transport sector through the lithium extraction. According to MAS (2020) "No other proposal will better prepare Bolivia for its bicentennial and face the 21st century as a stronger recognized, more

inclusive, more diverse and more prosperous country"[20]. In order to resume the path of economic diversification and to play a leading role in the global energy transition, the Bolivian lithium reserves will play a major role. The document states that: "Our goal is to specialize and insert ourselves in the first links of the industrialization of batteries today, for the manufacturing of the future, in a world that aims to abandon fossil fuels"[21] (MAS, 2020).

In 2014, Luis Arce, who at the time held the position as minister of economy and finance, introduced a yet another economic model. Perhaps as a response to the critiques of Linera's model of "Andean-Amazonian Capitalism", it was called "el Modelo Económico Social Comunitario Productivo" (MESCP. The New Economic, Social, Communitary, Productive Model). This model is based on the idea that it is not yet possible to change the capitalist mode of production, but that this is a way of transitioning towards a new model of socialist production (L. Arce, 2014). Furthermore, he focused on the necessity to direct the surplus income towards social programs to meet collective necessities. Thus, this model opposes the capitalist modes of production and neoliberalism by emphasising national control over the economy, redistribution of revenues, and self-portrays as a transitional economic model towards socialism that could solve the social problems and inequalities in Bolivia. He states that the reason behind its name is its focus on solving social rather than individual problems (L. Arce, 2014). This draws on the ideas of Vivir Bien, that highlights the importance of moving beyond the focus on individuals. Nonetheless, this economic model is fundamentally similar to the Andean-Amazonian capitalism presented by Linear in 2006, but the change in discourse may have been more in alignment with the MAS government's ideological position.

In the electoral program presented before the elections in 2020, MAS highlighted the importance and achievements of this economic model. According to MAS (2020), the implementation of MESCP has permitted Bolivia to move away from the neoliberal policies of the past that conditioned the performance of the economy and subordinated it to transnational economic interests. Moreover, it is stated that Bolivia is today a sovereign country both in the political and economic sense, and the continuing dependency on mining and hydrocarbons is explained as a result of colonial heritage (MAS, 2020). In order to build a

20 Ninguna otra propuesta podrá preparar mejor a Bolivia para su Bicentenario y para afrontar el siglo XXI como un país más fuerte reconocido, más inclusivo, más diverso y más próspero.

21 Nuestra meta es especializarnos e insertarnos en los primeros eslabones de la industrialización de baterías, hoy por hoy la manufactura del futuro, en un mundo que tiene el reto de abandonar los combustibles fósiles.

plural and diversified economy the consolidation of strategic resources is an important pillar in the economy of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (MAS, 2020). The consolidation of MESCP, under a productive sovereignty approach based on diversification, requires both the strengthening of the strategic extractive and energy sectors, as well as a strengthening of the productive agricultural sector and tourism.

With an overreaching goal of achieving sovereignty over the country's natural resources, the strategic sectors of hydrocarbons, energy and mining are the fundamental pillars of the Bolivian economy. These strategic sectors are intended to contribute to the diversification of the productive matrix, generating added value and obtaining income for a sustainable redistribution in the remaining sectors (MAS, 2020). The governmental program from 2020 similarly suggests that the purpose of these strategic resources is to create an industrialization policy focused on new industries that allow import substitution to consolidate the economic sovereignty of Bolivia. As described in chapter 3, import substitution was a widespread economic model in Latin America until neoliberal policies became dominant (Skidmore et al., 2010). The reappearance of this term within the policy document can therefore be viewed as yet another example of anti-neoliberal discourse in Bolivia.

Sovereignty, independency, and control over natural resources

The idea about sovereignty is important in the Bolivian public debate and political discourse. As emphasized, the anti-neoliberal discourse is linked to a desire of breaking free from a capitalist and colonial system that has influenced the political and economic structures of Bolivian society. Even though the goals are clear, there are conflicting perspectives and contradictions related to how this should be carried out in practice. The lithium project presented in 2008 is characterized by a strong emphasis on state-control over the entire production chain, and the goal has been to move beyond the extraction of raw materials destined for export. It is thus both presented as a project that can provide the state with income, and as a way of breaking free from historic patterns of dependency.

Jazmín Valdivieso provided me with useful insight about how the lithium project can be considered decolonial. She told me that "I think it's quite possible to think of the lithium

project as a decolonial project, especially from a sovereignty perspective"[22]. When asked if she thought it would be possible for Bolivia to avoid being dependant on the extraction of raw materials she replied: "Within the economic system that we live in it is impossible not to talk about extractivism in any of its phases, from the industrial to the most basic. But it does not take away the idea of a sovereign project that can be considered a decolonial proposal" [23]. When asked to elaborate, she explained that it could be considered decolonial "in the sense that it would be the first time that Bolivia plans to close the entire industrialization cycle by offering value-added products."[24]

Indigenous activist and lawyer, Donny Alí, emphasized that "Evidently the lithium project is a way to break with that colonial and extractivist model."[25]. He explained that when Evo Morales assumed power and Bolivia was declared a Plurinational State, it guaranteed that the natural resources would belong to the Bolivian people. According to Alí "This means that no foreign company can obtain the rights over our strategic resources in the Salars, and especially the lithium. So, it is a national policy of decolonization of this old traditional politics that handed over our natural resources to foreign companies"[26]. This comment was essentially the exact same discourse that has been presented by the development plans and policy documents.

Alí further explained that the Bolivian state want to avoid simply exploiting and exporting raw materials and stated that "we want to add that added value, which is why we are training Bolivian personnel to be able to create a lithium battery factory"[27]. Alí is aware that Bolivia lacks necessary financing and technology and referred to the legal framework by explaining

22 Creo que es muy posible pensar en el proyecto de litio como un proyecto de colonial sobre todo desde la perspectiva de soberanía.

23 Dentro del sistema económico en el que vivimos es imposible no hablar de extractivismo en cualquiera de sus fases, desde la industrial hasta la más básica. Pero eso no le quita la idea de un proyecto soberano que sí puede ser considerado como una propuesta decolonial.

24 En el sentido de que sería la primera vez en que Bolivia se plantea cerrar todo el ciclo de industrialización completo, ofreciendo productos de valor agregado.

25 Evidentemente el proyecto de litio es una manera de romper todo ese modelo colonial y extractivista.

26 Esto quiere decir que ninguna empresa extranjera puede tener derechos sobre nuestros recursos estratégicos en los salares, y sobre todo del litio. Entonces es una política nacional de descolonización de esa vieja política tradicional que entregaba nuestros recursos naturales a empresas extranjeras.

27 Queremos añadir ese valor agregado, para eso estamos capacitando a personal boliviano, para poder ya montar una fábrica de baterías de litio.

that: “Our Bolivian lithium deposit law establishes that for these processes we can seek strategic partnerships, but with a state majority. That means that we can partner with some foreign company but keeping most shareholdings for the Bolivian state”[28]. He emphasized that the development of the lithium industry is important in order to ensure decolonization. He also took the opportunity to criticise neighbouring countries’ approach to their lithium resources: “We know that Bolivia is very dependent on what is the technology of Europe, Asia, or the United States, but we will be the owners of our own resources, owners of the deposits, and avoid what happened today in Chile and Argentina where the owners of the concessions are foreign companies”[29]. He concluded by stating that “This is our policy of decolonizing and sovereignly industrializing the resources of the Bolivian salt flats”[30].

Luis Alberto Echazú also explained that the idea has been to industrialize the lithium, not to just produce lithium carbonate for export, as an important step towards sovereignty and independence. The lithium project is presented not only as an opportunity for the Bolivian economy but considered part of a decolonial project. He stated that in order to obtain control over the strategic resources “No private domestic or foreign company can intervene in the salars. There is a possibility of making partnerships, but only to give added value”[31]. He highlighted that the purpose of the project is to benefit the Bolivian people by saying that: “25% of the company's profits goes to the nation's treasury. This tax is used for expenditures mainly on health, education, and public administration, as well as for public investments.”[32] He further added that: “The project also has to do with the gradual, hopefully intensive, replacement of fossil fuels by using batteries and implementing new forms of alternative energies. So, this project also has this benefit of developing an industry that allows the

28 Nuestra ley de yacimientos del litio boliviano establece que para estos procesos podemos nosotros buscar asociaciones estratégicas, pero con mayoría estatal. Es decir que podemos nosotros asociarnos con alguna empresa extranjera, pero manteniendo la mayoría accionaria para el estado boliviano.

29 Sabemos que como Bolivia somos muy dependientes de lo que es la tecnología de Europa, Asia o Estados Unidos, pero nosotros justamente vamos a ser dueños de los recursos, dueños de los yacimientos y así evitar lo que pasa hoy en día en Chile Argentina dónde los dueños de las concesiones son pues empresas extranjeras.

30 Esa es nuestra política de descolonizar e industrializar de manera soberana los recursos de los salares bolivianos.

31 Ninguna empresa privada ni nacional ni extranjera pueden intervenir en los salares. Hay una posibilidad de hacer asociaciones, pero solo para dar valor agregado

32 El 25% de las utilidades de la empresa va al tesoro general de la nación. Ese impuesto sirve para los gastos principalmente de salud, educación y administración pública, y además para la inversión pública.

replacement of fossil-fuel consumption."[33] All the informants mentioned the importance of the lithium project in terms of sovereignty, and linked the idea of decolonization to resource sovereignty, which is the same discourse expressed in the documents.

When asked upon the future of the lithium project, both Valdivieso and Echazú expressed that they believed in the continuation of the project, even though Evo Morales has been replaced with Luis Arce. Valdivieso explained that the political project of MAS has been revolutionary, by emphasising that "an Indigenous government ruling in Bolivia has really given hope to Bolivians. It has shown us that we could industrialize ourselves from our own capacities."[34] Echazú stated that "I am sure that President Arce is going to continue the strategy. During the election campaign he proposed to continue with the industrialization project."[35] Jazmín was a bit more reluctant, and added that "Right now, Arce's responsibility is very high, because they are expecting a lot from him. He is now a hope for Bolivia. From this can come a catastrophe, or happiness, but nothing more, there is no middle ground."[36]

Extractivism and socio-environmental impacts

As previously mentioned, especially in chapter 4, there are concerns related to the possible socio-environmental impacts of the lithium project. Both Jazmín Valdivieso and Luís Alberto Echazú made it clear that all sorts of extraction necessarily have an impact on its surroundings. Echazú pointed to the fact that it is impossible to extract natural resources without it affecting the environment, and that this has been a constant preoccupation in the plans for the lithium project. He explained that "Of course, the project needs to be continuously monitored, because logically there is an impact. The bigger the project, the

33 El proyecto también tiene que ver con la sustitución paulatina, ojalá intensiva, de los combustibles fósiles utilizando las baterías e implementar nuevas formas de energías alternativas. Entonces este proyecto tiene también ese benefició de desarrollar una industria que permita la sustitución del consumo de combustibles fósiles.

34 Un Gobierno indígena gobernando Bolivia realmente ha dado esperanza para los bolivianos. Nos ha demostrado que podíamos industrializar nosotros mismos desde nuestras capacidades.

35 Yo estoy seguro de que el presidente Lucho Arce se va a continuar con la estrategia. Durante la campaña electoral ya se ha planteado continuar con el proyecto de industrialización.

36 Ahorita la responsabilidad que tiene Arce es muy grande, porque están esperando mucho de él. Él ahorita es una esperanza para Bolivia. Realmente es una esperanza. De esto puede salir una catástrofe o una alegría, pero nada más, no hay ningún punto intermedio.

bigger the impacts."[37] Valdivieso believes that all kinds of activities that involves commercialization is essentially an expression of extractivism, but questions whether a critique of extractivism itself is even useful. She is bothered by all the negative attention Bolivia is receiving for their natural resource management, and states that "Extractivism is heavily criticized, but only when it comes to state-owned companies. When talking about international companies, the idea of extractivism is not judged in the same way"[38].

Echazú said that the engineers have had concerns regarding the water usage and the possible contaminations but stated that "we have a deep conviction of respect for Mother Earth and the environment. For instance, there is a vision of using as little pure water as possible"[39]. He further added that "In fact, this project was pushed forward by the communities themselves so there is a permanent care of everything that can negatively influence the environment."[40]. Valdivieso was similarly aware of the possible environmental impacts but focused more on the socio-economic factors related to the project. She explained that one of the main problems related to the establishment of the lithium project has been the lack of communication between YLB and the local communities, especially concerning the promised income from the projects. Even though the project is yet to be fully consolidated in order to become profitable, the main frictions stem from communities waiting for the economic benefits.

Another important aspect of this has been the fear of the local population that history is repeating itself. Valdivieso explains that "The sovereignty of natural resources is a complicated topic in Bolivia, because Bolivia has lived through the history of plundering of the natural resources".[41] The historical exploitation of Bolivia's natural resources has made people aware of a potential "robbery" of the lithium, which according to Valdivieso makes it a sensitive topic in national and regional politics. She explained that: "I think that there is a very strong *social wound* in Bolivia based on this feeling of being plundered all the time in

37 Desde luego igual hay que hacer un seguimiento permanente del proyecto, porque lógicamente hay un impacto. Mientras más grande el proyecto, más grandes los impactos.

38 Se critica mucho el extractivismo, pero solo cuando se trata de empresas estatales. Cuando se habla de empresas internacionales no se utiliza la misma forma de juzgar esta idea de extractivismo.

39 Nosotros estamos con una convicción profunda de respeto a la madre tierra y el medio ambiente. Hay una visión por ejemplo de utilizar la menor cantidad posible de agua pura

40 En realidad, este proyecto fue impulsado por los propios pobladores, entonces hay un cuidado permanente de todo lo que pueda influir negativamente al medio ambiente

41 La soberanía de los recursos naturales es un tema muy fuerte en Bolivia, porque Bolivia vive la historia de los saqueos de sus recursos naturales.

return of nothing"[42]. She also believed that one of the main concerns during the turbulent political situation in 2019, in which Evo Morales had to flee the country and an interim government replaced the MAS administration for 11 months, was partially based on this fear. She explained that "the main concern of the people was about that: The lithium! They are going to steal our lithium! They are going to steal our lithium![43]". She further emphasized this point by saying:

> "Already in school they teach us that we are like poor people sitting in a golden chair. Even though they teach us that Bolivia is a country rich in natural resources, they also teach us that we have never had the capacity to industrialize, and that we have never had the capacity to do anything positive with our natural resources, apart from letting ourselves be plundered. So, there is that social pain and that susceptibility all the time the resources we have are leaving us." [44]

Concluding remarks

I began this chapter by looking at what the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse of the MAS administration consisted of. I then analyzed the decolonial discourses and linked it to the notion of Vivir Bien and sustainability. Finally, I analyzed the lithium project by looking at the discourses regarding economic policies, sovereignty, and decolonization.

As addressed in the analysis above and in the previous chapters, there is a substantial difference between neoliberal and neo-extractivist approaches to natural resource management. The main difference lies in who controls the resources, and who benefits from the revenues. The Bolivian government has taken control over many of the country's strategic resources, through nationalization, state-led projects, and progressive tax systems. The anti-neoliberal discourse is clearly expressed by the MAS administration, and although much of the economy depends on the extraction of raw materials for export, there has been a

42 Creo que hay una herida social en Bolivia muy fuerte que es esa sensación de que todo el tiempo nos saquean a cambio de nada.

43 La principal preocupación de la gente era ese: ¡el litio! ¡Nos van a robar el litio! ¡Nos van a robar el litio!

44 Desde que estamos en colegio nos enseñan que somos cómo unos pobres sentados en una silla de oro. A pesar de que nos enseñan que Bolivia es un país riquísimo en recursos naturales, también nos enseñan que nunca hemos tenido la capacidad de industrializar, y que nunca hemos tenido la capacidad de hacer algo positivo nuestros recursos naturales aparte de dejarnos saquear. Entonces hay ese dolor social y esa susceptibilidad todo el tiempo de que los recursos que tenemos se nos van.

substantial change related to redistribution. Furthermore, I have argued the Bolivian lithium project should not merely be categorized as neoextractivist, because the goal has been to move beyond depending on the export of lithium as a raw material by industrializing the sector and produce value-added products. Thus, the lithium project could be viewed as an attempt of decolonization through resource sovereignty rather than a continuation of (neo)extractivism. Based on the policy documents, the political debates and the interviews conducted in this study, it becomes evident that the goal is to break with the colonial patterns of dependence on extraction and an export-based economy.

Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between neoliberal approaches to natural resource management favouring privatization and export of raw materials, and the economic model the Bolivian government has outlined for the lithium project. However, it is important to remember that a political discourse is not always a reflection of what happens in practice. The Bolivian lithium project could be considered decolonial in the sense of resource sovereignty, but it does not go far beyond that. Given the fact that the industrialization of the lithium sector is not yet fully consolidated, it is difficult to predict how these activities may have unintended negative social and environmental consequences. It is clear however, that there are contradictions related to the discourse on decolonization, with nationalization and sovereignty on one side, and plurinationalism, autonomy and Vivir Bien on the other. This strongly suggests that the decolonial discourse regarding the lithium project is problematically limited to the state's sovereignty over natural resources. In the next, and final, chapter I will elaborate on these limitations.

Chapter 6: Lithium and the Latin American Debate About Decolonization

Throughout this thesis I have provided historical information regarding the economic and political development leading up to the consolidation of the lithium project. In chapter 3, I touched upon some of its central discursive tenets by placing it within an international debate on extractivism versus neoextractivism, green growth and green economy along with presenting several perspectives related to decolonization. In the previous chapter, I analyzed both policy documents and interviews with the intention of interrogating these discourses in the Bolivian context. In this chapter I aim to "zoom out", by looking at how the Bolivian lithium project is related to a broader international debate on decolonization. I will start by briefly discussing the prospects of the lithium project by looking into the current governmental discourse before I examine in what ways and for whom it may be considered a decolonial project. The purpose of this final chapter is to link the empirical data to a broader analytical debate.

The prospect of the Bolivian lithium project

The recent history of Bolivia has demonstrated that the political situation can rapidly change. As addressed in chapter 2, Bolivia went from being one of the most neoliberal countries in Latin America, towards transforming into one of the most "radical" fractions of the pink tide. The economic policies changed from being predicated upon privatization and foreign investments, to processes of nationalization of strategic natural resources. Moreover, the country experienced an immense social transformation, in which millions of Bolivians achieved access to electricity, water, education and social programs. Bolivia is still considered a poor country globally, but the poverty eradication has been impressive. However, in order for Bolivia to achieve the goal of sovereignty and decolonization there are several factors that needs to be in place. The lithium project poses severe limitations related to the lack of financing, scientific knowledge, access to markets, environmental concerns, and perhaps most importantly, support from the local governments and populations.

Obstacles to a wider implementation of decolonization in the lithium project is due to several uncertainties related to the realization of the project itself. There are for instance serious potential environmental impacts related to the lithium project that could damage the fragile ecosystem of Salar de Uyuni, along with the main activities of the salt flat, such as agriculture, cattle farming, and tourism. A report issued by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) states that "As demand for lithium increases and production is tapped from deeper rock mines and brines, the challenges of mitigating environmental risk will increase" (2020, p. 46). Both Bolivian and international environmental organizations have questioned the adequacy of Bolivia's environmental strategy for the lithium mining (López & Quiroga, 2015). Besides the destruction of natural habitat, the main concern is, as mentioned, related to water. The extraction of lithium requires large amounts of water, and there are concerns related to the pollution of water by chemical processing (López & Quiroga, 2015; UNCTAD, 2020). The Andean highlands where the lithium reserves are located is one of the driest desert regions of the world. This is already heavily impacting the local farmers in Chile and Argentina, both in terms of water usage and ecosystem degradation.

Another serious problem in the Bolivian context is related to the import of other components essential for the battery production. Some of these components are rare minerals, such as cobalt, which Bolivia will need to import in order to produce batteries. Most of the cobalt originates from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, of which 20 per cent comes from artisanal mines where child labour and severe human rights issues have been identified (UNCTAD, 2020, p. 46). According to UNICEF, it is estimated that at least 35 000 children are working in extremely dangerous conditions for minimal amounts of money (2020, p 9). The importation of cobalt, along with other components, is an issue Bolivia will have to face as part of the industrialization of the lithium sector.

While the global demand for lithium-ion batteries and electric vehicles is considered great news for the efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions, the boom in mining for raw materials used in the production includes a wide range of socio-environmental concerns. According to UNCTAD's director of international trade, Pamela Coke-Hamilton "most consumers are only aware of the 'clean' aspects of electric vehicles. The dirty aspects of the production process are out of sight." (UNCTAD, 2020). Most consumers live in industrialized nations in the global north, but the raw materials are mainly extracted in developing countries in the Global South (ibid.). Due to these adverse environmental impacts, UNCTAD recommends that the

industry interrogates ways of reducing the need for mining in the first place (2020). Scientists are therefore currently looking into the possibility of improving the recycling technology and replacing some of the rare battery-components with more available ones. The aim is to reduce the use of minerals found in only a few countries, and thus, lead to lower prices for the batteries and more electric cars on the roads (UNCTAD, 2020). While this is good news for the environment, it could challenge Bolivia's long-term plan of industrializing the lithium sector. Easier and more profitable ways of producing batteries could both lower the commodity prices of lithium, along with challenging the production plans. Thus, in order for Bolivia to profit of their lithium, they will need to speed up the process.

By the end of 2019 it became evident that the political situation in Bolivia is fragile. Due to massive protest, supported by the United States, the MAS government was replaced with an interim government through what by many was considered a coup. This new government put the lithium project on hold for nearly a year (Davis, 2020). In November 2020, MAS regained power through democratic elections, and former Minister of economy and finance, Luis Arce, became Bolivia's new president. Although hopes are high that he will continue the with lithium plan presented in 2008, his recent statements demonstrates that this could be too much to hope for. The newly elected MAS administration is faced with the devastating economic impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, along with discontent from people who are still waiting for the promised income from the lithium project. To solve these pressuring issues there is an increased need for income. According to Jared Davis a major challenge "will be maximizing the public benefits from the sector without stifling private investment and innovation, as Bolivia competes with Argentina and Chile for foreign investment" (2020, p. 1).

As a response to this, President Luis Arce announced on the 30th of April 2021 that the industrialization of the lithium is a national priority, and that the government has designed a new strategy for the project towards the 2025 agenda (La Prensa Latina, 2021; Periódico Bolivia, 2021b). He further explained that the previous plan did not generate the income that satisfied the economy or the Bolivian population rapidly enough, and thus, in order for the industry to achieve its goals in the shortest possible time, he aim to listen to the proposals from private companies (La Prensa Latina, 2021; Molina, 2021). The Minister of hydrocarbons and energy, Franklin Molina, informed that the ministry had started a process of relaunching the plan for lithium industrialization, that includes speeding up some of the stages (Periódico Bolivia, 2021a, 2021b). He added that the goal of the national lithium policy is still

concerned with achieving the production of value-added products, and not only the exploitation of primary goods (La Prensa Latina, 2021).

Already in March 2021, during a visit in Mexico, Arce told the press that Bolivia had resumed the negotiations with Germany. Now it appears that the country has opened the door to other countries willing to participate as well. Chinese[45], Russian and U.S lithium companies were present at an event on the 30th of April 2021, where the government requested proposals from companies interested in forming part of the lithium project (Molina, 2021). The message was clear: The government welcomes firms that specializes in direct extraction of lithium that according to Franklin Molina will enable "a substantial advance" in the production process. Arce stated that "We have lost time and we must recover. And that recovery obliges us to improve the technology to get quicker results" (La Prensa Latina, 2021). He further emphasized that the lithium project will be a priority for his administration, and that the introduction of direct extraction will "accelerate" the country's inclusion in the global lithium industry (ibid.).

What this means for the lithium project is still unclear. During Evo Morales' presidency an emphasis was made on the need for Bolivia to build a value-added lithium industry in order to move away from the model relying on export of raw materials. As expressed in the policy documents and the interviews, foreign partners were only welcomed to participate in this industrialization as minor shareholders. This discourse may be changing now, as it appears that Luis Arce may be more eager to accelerate the extraction of lithium for export, instead of strengthening the industrialization through the creation of domestic battery factories. Arce was the minister of economy and public finance during Morales' administration, and has been credited for steering the country through a period of economic growth. Even so, he appears more pragmatic than Morales in his rhetoric, and appears less reluctant in welcoming foreign actors (Davis, 2020). This change in discourse does not necessarily change what happens in praxis. As addressed previously, both the "Andean-Amazonian" capitalist model and the "Modelo Económico Social Comunitario Productivo" had already opened up for foreign investments, as long as the projects remain under the control of the Bolivian state.

45 China's increased presence in Latin America has become more visible during the covid-19 pandemic. For instance, China has provided Bolivia with large quantities of vaccines. Whether this has been a matter of solidarity, or to strengthen the political and economic relations between the two nations is unclear. But as China is one of the world's largest producers of lithium-ion batteries it is possible to speculate that the Chinese government has economic interests in the Bolivian lithium reserves. The relationship between China and Bolivia has not been the focus of this thesis, but it could be a fruitful perspective for further research on this topic.

According to Obaya (2021), “It is clear that the new policy represented a shift towards a more pragmatic approach open to the cooperation with foreign firms” (p. 5). Although the MAS administration has been characterized by a focus on sovereignty and resource nationalism, it had already opened up for partnership with foreign actors, such as the German company ACI Systems (Obaya, 2019, 2021). Even though the demand for lithium is high and expected to rise rapidly following the pandemic, “battery producers are already searching for the next disruptive technologies, threatening to upend the lithium industry as soon as 2030” (Davis, 2020, p. 3). This means that Bolivia will need to hurry up in order to be part of the global lithium boom.

In this context, it appears as though the new government attempts to move the lithium project more in the direction of neoextractivism, in which the income will be used to finance social programs, but the dependency on extraction and export remains high. Neoextractivism has facilitated increased governmental spending, but the capitalist model of accumulation remains the same (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 62). Gudynas (2010), has pointed out that when the state uses the surplus benefit to finance public welfare, it creates a new source of "social legitimacy". Hargreaves argues that although neoextractivism and resource nationalism may facilitate the implementation of some social reforms, it will fail to "resolve the deep contradictions between ‘capital versus life’, which is destroying humanity and the planet itself" (2019, p. 64). The state defends neoextractivism as being in the national interest, indispensable to development and necessary for economic growth. This leads to movements and communities challenging its impacts being labelled “anti-development" (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 63). According to Aguilar, "Latin American neoextractivism has demonstrated the limitations of this model of expecting exports and foreign investment to solve historical and structural problems of inequity, inequality, and above all, the destruction of the environment" (2012, p. 7).

As I have addressed throughout this thesis, the MAS’ objective has been to control the lithium resources as means to break with the colonial heritage and the dependency on foreign actors and markets. The sovereign industrialization of the lithium sector has proven exceedingly difficult, which is probably why President Arce appears to have chosen a more pragmatic approach than his predecessor Morales (Davis, 2020). The governmental discourse on the lithium project now appears increasingly concerned with rapid economic growth compared to the previous emphasis on sovereignty and decolonization. The future of the Bolivian lithium project is yet to be determined, but I would argue that the recent changes in discourse on behalf of MAS is yet another step further away from the project being considered decolonial.

Challenges related to the governmental discourse on sovereignty and decolonization

One of the main challenges related to the governmental discourse on sovereignty and decolonization is that it is mainly centred around natural resources and economic policies, and thus, criticized for being too narrow. At times, the discourse appears to be completely ignoring the principles of plurinationalism and Vivir Bien. The constitution of 2009 declares the right to autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, but this has proven a significant challenge to state sovereignty. Morales promised to alter the position of Indigenous peoples and decolonize the state through a "cultural democratic revolution" (Postero, 2017, p. 185). Indigenous intellectuals and activists have challenged the classic notions of sovereignty by opting for a shared decision-making, especially concerning natural resources. According to Postero (2017), the perhaps most revolutionary promise of MAS was the possibility of enacting Indigenous alternatives, such as the notion of Vivir Bien, to the liberal state and include them in the new constitution (p. 184).

However, the MAS administration diffused these alternatives by applying a rhetoric of Indigenous rights and plurinationalism, but essentially retaining the classic state structure of Western liberal democracies (Postero, 2017, p. 184). Although the constitution, and the different policy documents that followed, included promises about Indigenous self-determination, autonomy and decentralization, the central state is in control of all the country's strategic natural resources. This means that despite promises to the contrary, the nation-state retained full sovereignty over the country's resources. Accordingly, there is a disjuncture between Bolivia's policy and politics regarding plurinationalism and sovereignty. The autonomy of Indigenous peoples and plurinationalism fails to resolve questions of sovereignty that go beyond the state-sovereignty of natural resources, because it requires multiple and often competing sovereignties to be recognized within the state. These conflicting perspectives between the sovereignty of the state and Indigenous sovereignty lead to the latter being predominantly symbolic and part of an empty discourse of liberal multiculturalism. This has led to a re-creation of borders between different societal groups, that subjugates some under the (neo)colonial authority of the state. Hence it can be argued that the discourse on plurinationalism and sovereignty is trapped within a system of domination that conceals the ideological struggles within the country.

According to Aymara scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) “There can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (2012, p. 100). She explains that the discourses of multiculturalism and plurinationality does not address the fundamental issues of decolonization, but instead obscure and renew the practices of colonization and subalternation (ibid., p. 101). Following this logic, the discourse on plurinationalism and sovereignty subordinates the Indigenous peoples into symbolic functions which essentially renders the discourse as imperfectly to the Bolivian national-state’s control over its natural resources.

Thus, there is a dissonance between what is expressed in the governmental discourse regarding natural resource management, and what happens in practice. Moreover, the promises about full state-control over the lithium sector is questionable, especially as the government is seeking private investments from foreign actors within the lithium sector. The lithium project has since the beginning opened up for external actors in some stages of the project. This has been justified with the argument that they would only handle the “residual brine”, but as addressed in chapter 4, it is possible to extract even more lithium through this method. Currently the MAS administration, under newly elected president Luis Arce, is welcoming foreign companies for the direct extraction of lithium. Bolivia needs both technology and financing to meet the goals of the project before 2025, and thus it is somehow a reasonable strategic move on behalf of the administration. Nevertheless, it severely debilitates the discourse on sovereignty and decolonization.

As I have demonstrated, it could be too narrow to consider the lithium project decolonial, at least in the sense of decoloniality, because it is mainly centred around resource sovereignty. As analyzed in the previous chapter, governmental discourse mainly focuses on the link between decolonization and sovereignty, in terms of independence from foreign states, actors, and companies. The fact that Bolivia aims to industrialize the lithium sector and control the value chain is an important step towards being less dependent on an export-based economy, but the country is still intimately linked to the global capitalist system.

Hence, despite the relevancy of linking decolonization to sovereignty, there are some serious critiques regarding the centralized control of the Bolivian state. As stated in the constitution, each department and municipality are entitled certain degrees of autonomy. This also applies for Indigenous communities seeking autonomy. In the area surrounding the Salar de Uyuni where the lithium is extracted, there are several communities who have applied for increased autonomy and self-determination (Gysler, 2011). This does not include the Salars, as the state

has declared the area a state-owned reserve due to the strategic position of the lithium resources. This contentious decision entailed a long process implying the participation of FRUTCAS among other organizations. Nevertheless, several communities remain discontent with this resolution, as they perceive the salar as part of their territory where they have traditionally extracted salt and made use of the land nearby for agricultural activities and animal breeding. Additionally, the extraction of lithium requires large amounts of water, which is already a scarce resource in this arid area (UNCTA, 2020). Thus, and in relation to the state capture of the Salars, there are strong local concerns regarding both the environmental and the economic consequences of the lithium project.

Critical voices, both from the local communities and academic circles, have expressed their concerns regarding the state's discourse on the matter. The fact that the Bolivian government aim to control the sector means that they exclude foreign actors in the industry (at least to a certain degree), but it does not change the fact that local governance is overruled by the national government. As described, Potosí is currently a marginalized region, marked by poverty and social challenges. Moreover, its inhabitants have historically been delegated minimal power to control their own resources. Thus, from the perspective of local people, this state-led project risks being perceived as a continuation of this policy, and accordingly as new wrapping of a colonial pattern. The lithium project attempts to solve this by promising a fair distribution of revenues, but as Luis Alberto Echazú pointed out, the majority of the revenues will be directed to the national treasury, and not to the department of Potosí or the local communities. This has created frictions, as Jazmín Valdivieso pointed out, between the local communities waiting for their share, and the lithium sector who has yet to develop a profitable industry. In sum, there are major concerns regarding the role of the state and the politics of redistribution. And although the central government emphasises national sovereignty through exclusion of the hegemony of foreign companies, it is understandable that the local populations may feel like they are still being "robbed".

Resource sovereignty: decolonization or decoloniality?

As the purpose of this final chapter is to link the empirical data to a broader analytical debate, I will proceed by addressing the critique of the reductionist framing of resource sovereignty as something decolonial. As mentioned, a central proponent of this critique is Rivera Cusicanqui

(2012) who argues that the possibilities of decolonization through the "multicultural" Bolivian state is not possible. Although the multicultural laws from the 1990s, and the current MAS administration have recognized Indigenous peoples as citizens, this has been part of an ongoing practice of coloniality that only incorporates them as static, archaic figures that are defined by an idealized past and part of continuous relationships of domination (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Postero, 2007, 2017). This "recognition" subordinate Indigenous peoples by depriving them of their complexity and dynamisms and thus, of their potential to challenge the given order. Rivera Cusicanqui's main point is that decolonization cannot only be a discourse, or part of an academic debate, but must also be articulated in an affirmative practice (2012, p. 100).

Decolonial scholars from the Coloniality group, explained in chapter 3, have mostly produced philosophical accounts and have therefore been criticised for their lack of rootedness. Although Latin American decolonial scholars may offer conceptual tools for reframing the discourses, they may fall short in examining the empirical practices. Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) argues that the notion of coloniality is also linked to relations of domination, which is reproduced in the knowledge production of the decoloniality scholars that are primarily from the Global North. Many of these academics have appropriated the language and ideas of Indigenous scholars without understanding the relations of force that define their relationships to them. Building on this, she provocatively claims that "Walter Mignolo and company have built a small empire within an empire, strategically appropriating the contributions of the subaltern studies school of India and the various Latin American variants of critical refection on colonization and decolonization" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 98). She further argues that Mignolo has appropriated Quijano's ideas of coloniality, and that Bolivian scholars such as Félix Patzi has relied extensively on Quijano and Mignolo while ignoring the ideas of internal colonialism that origins as far back as the late 1960s (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 104).[46]

Rivera Cusicanqui is not alone in criticising the distance between decolonial discourse and practice. Several Indigenous scholars have refused to participate in the discussions about post-colonialism (or decoloniality), as it is viewed as a convenient invention by western intellectuals that reinscribes their power to define the world (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008, p. 14). MAS politician Rubén Chambi has criticized that the theoretical elaborations of

46 See Félix Patzi (2004). *Sistema comunal. Una alternativa al sistema liberal*. CEEA; and Fausto Reinaga (1969). *La revolución india*. Ediciones PIB.

decolonization have preliminary been developed at U.S universities, without reference to early Indigenous scholars, such as Fausto Reinaga (Chambi 2011, p. 78). Similarly, Escobar (2010b) has suggested that it is necessary to strengthen the empirical basis in order to understand the concrete processes of decolonization in Latin America, particularly in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador.

Related to the idea about decoloniality of knowledge and being, Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) argues that “Decolonizing thinking will allow us to create a different Bolivia that is genuinely multicultural and decolonized” (p. 107). Her argument is that this process must be part of new definitions of well-being and development, and include the construction of South-South relations that “will allow us to break the baseless pyramids of the politics and academies of the North and that will enable us to make our own science, in a dialogue among ourselves and with the sciences from our neighbouring countries”, with the purpose of confronting “the hegemonic projects of the North with the renewed strength of our ancestral convictions” (2012, p. 107). In essence, her critique is directed towards both academia and the increasingly dominant role of the Bolivian state that reproduces the colonial patterns through its emphasis on development, modernization and economic growth.

As the MAS administration has been pursuing goals such as the nationalization and industrialization of natural resources, which has led to the centralization of power, the Indigenous proposals and policy initiatives appears to be neglected. Although both the government and the Indigenous movements express their resistance towards capitalism and the dominant development model, they “differ fundamentally in terms of ideal governing patterns and the control of natural resources and other assets” (Ranta, 2018, p. 158). In essence, the state-led development schemes have partially taken over the role that transnational corporation and colonial states had in the past. This has led to frictions and the “social movements within the MAS have become increasingly split between those opting for indigenous schemes of improvement and those opting for the state-led initiatives” (ibid. p. 159). Hargreaves argues that "state owned mining enterprises often operate no differently from private companies, as they continue to destroy the environment and disrespect social relations" (2019, p 63). These frictions have led to disagreements over the content in the constitution and the national development plans, along with conflicts over territorial autonomy and natural resources in cases such as the TIPNIS conflict and the political revolts over the lithium resources in 2019.

As both Indigenous actors, social movements, and the state attempts to unify the discourses of Vivir Bien to fit their agenda, their purposes only partially meet. The different actors may agree on the portrayal of Vivir Bien as expressions of decolonization that opposes western development (Gudynas, 2011b, p. 443). However, the definitions and interpretations on how this should be carried out in practice "turn into a political battle over meanings – and resources" (Ranta, 2018, p. 65). This phenomenon has been discussed by Gudynas (2013) as a "domestication of Buen Vivir". In the context of Ecuador, Radcliffe (2015) has argued that the notion of Vivir Bien, when used by the state, can even be perceived as a "colonial move to police and manage Indigenous agendas" (p. 274-275). This is far from the original meaning based on a distinctive ontology that opposes mainstream development models, modernization, and the colonial legacy.

Escobar suggests that when decolonial projects and Indigenous visions are transformed into state policies, it is rather an "alternative modernization" that occurs. This alternative modernization is not the same as a decolonial project, because even though it opposes capitalism and neoliberal development models, it provides few alternatives to "euromodernity" (Escobar, 2010a, p. 10). This is present in the discourse about the Bolivian lithium project, as it is presented as a way to "develop" (and modernize) the country, but it does not include a broader emphasis on decoloniality. Even though the development plans and policy documents analyzed in the previous chapter aim to construct a decolonial development model based on Indigenous principles, such as Vivir Bien, the plans fail to concretize how these alternative ontologies and epistemologies are to be included in national policies. Moreover, the governmental discourse on Vivir Bien tends to present idealized generalizations about Indigenous peoples, which ends up placing all Bolivians under the same "Indigenous banner" (Postero, 2017).

In contrast, a fundamental aspect in the legacy of decolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Rivera Cusicanqui, is the decolonization of peoples' colonized minds, that is, their (colonial) internalized ways of thinking and acting that are intimately linked with old hierarchies of race and the hegemony of Western ontology and epistemology. As I have demonstrated, the governmental discourse is clearly anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial, at least this is - a position sustained in all policy documents, plans, newspaper articles, project plans and interviews included in the analysis. Yet, what we can observe here is a displacement of meaning attributed to the concept of decolonization, that is, between

MAS government's decolonial discourse related to resource sovereignty and "decoloniality" that explores much deeper grounds to untangle colonial legacies.

As such, a legitimate question, or critique, of the government's discourse related to the lithium project, is to what extent it is willing to, or capable, to accommodate for decolonial implications beyond resource sovereignty? Put differently, how genuine is its turn to decolonial discourse, and to what extent is the compromise with a broader decolonial agenda the result of economic pragmatism or lack of understanding? When MAS came to power in 2006, Morales promised to end the historical injustice and suffering of the Indigenous population. As means to combat structural racism and colonial patterns, attempts were made to implement inclusive policies. Although the Constitution of 2009 was a big step towards greater inclusion, participation, and recognition (at least formally), there are still various challenges related to this colonial heritage. Based on the findings and discussions throughout this thesis, I would argue that the MAS administration has relied too extensively on decolonization in terms of independence from external actors through resource sovereignty but moved away from its initial ideals of decolonizing the Bolivian society from within.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have addressed some important elements of the broader debate regarding decolonization and decoloniality. Evidently there is a large amount of critique related to the state-led development model proposed by the MAS administration, including its focus on decolonization and sovereignty. Critical voices, such as Rivera Cusicanqui, have expressed their concerns regarding the lithium project which they consider yet another expression of coloniality. Moreover, the recent change of governmental discourse regarding the lithium sector demonstrate that these concerns are highly relevant. The prospect of the lithium project in Bolivia remains unclear, yet it appears to be a shift away from the focus on complete state-control and decolonization through resource sovereignty. This recent change in discourse makes it even more challenging to consider the lithium project a decolonial proposal. Based on my findings in chapter 5, and the discussion provided in this chapter, I would argue that the aim of consolidating a lithium project based on decolonization is increasingly rhetorical and correspondingly; increasingly distant from an accommodating of decolonial implications in practice.

Conclusions

I started this thesis by asking "*In what ways does the Bolivian lithium project differ from neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, and how is it understood as a decolonial project?"*. Throughout this thesis I have explored the main challenges related to the implementation of the lithium project, by critically analysing the governmental discourses of decolonization. My findings suggests that although the MAS administration has stated that decolonization is a main objective, it struggles to overcome deeply rooted structures of inequality derived from a historical colonial legacy. My critical approach towards the Bolivian lithium project is by no means a direct critique of the country's efforts to break free from these colonial patterns and the historical dependence, but rather an attempt of assessing to what extent this discourse is carried out in practice.

As I have demonstrated, the lithium project can be considered decolonial in relation to the concept of resource sovereignty with reference to a deep history of colonial and neoliberal dominance in Bolivia. The industrialization of the lithium sector is suggested and considered an important project in a broader agenda to break free from a historic role of dependency. Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in the world and has had little possibility to take control over its own resources. This has slowly started to change over the past 15 years, through nationalization of various strategic resources which has generated income for the state which has been spent on social programs and infrastructure. This has been of great importance to millions of Bolivians, yet, Bolivia remains highly dependent upon the export of primary goods, and thus, on power structures of the international markets. Accordingly, a noteworthy trait is that the lithium project is predicated on a goal to change this dynamic. The project does not only aim to extract the lithium carbonate for export, but rather aims to purify it into lithium and to use it in the production of lithium-ion batteries, and possibly even electric vehicles. Because of this emphasis on control of the value chain and industrialization, the lithium project could be considered decolonial in the sense of obtaining independency from foreign actors, corporations and states that have historically influenced Bolivian politics and economics.

The idea about a diversification of the economy can also be linked to decolonization, as it emphasises that the economy should be less export-based and increasingly focuses on the extraction and production of a broader range of goods. As mentioned in chapter 2, Bolivia still

relies heavily on the export of primary goods, from sectors such as hydrocarbons and agriculture. Yet, the goal to diversify the economy addresses this vulnerability, and the lithium project is currently a major example of this.

However, there are several limitations related to the lithium project. As I have increasingly argued towards the end of the thesis, there is a difference between discourse and practice. Although the goal is to produce value-added products for sale on the global market, the project is still in an initial phase. The project lacks financing, scientific knowledge, access to necessary components for battery production, along with international actors willing to buy the products. Even though this has not been the main focus in this study, there are also unresolved issues and a lack of support from the local communities. One of the reasons behind the turbulent political situation in 2019 was the protests against the joint-venture between YLB and the German firm ACI-Systems on behalf of the population of Potosí. The industrialization of the lithium is projected as a project that have the potential to benefit the entire Bolivian population. From a macroeconomic perspective it is thus understandable that the government opts for cooperation with foreign actors, as it is necessary to finance the project, but this conflicts with the notions about regional and Indigenous sovereignty and several aspects of decoloniality.

As Bolivia forms part of the capitalist system, it has to play by its rules and logics. This means that although hopes are high that the lithium sector could represent an opportunity for Bolivia to break free from its historic dependency, it is unclear to what extent this is possible at all. The latest update from President Arce and the Ministry of energy, clearly demonstrates that although the goal of industrialization and sovereignty is clear and explicit, the country is currently opening up for foreign investments for direct extraction of the lithium. As the country needs income, both to combat the covid19 pandemic and other social problems, it is reasonable that the government is looking for foreign investments. Nonetheless, that does not change the fact that there is a dissonance between the discourse expressed in policy documents, and what happens behind closed doors.

The focus on (de)coloniality, as addressed in chapter 3 and 6, is also less present in the case of lithium. The notion of coloniality is centred around how the Bolivian society is still heavily marked by colonial patterns that influences everything from internal power structures, knowledge production and the way many Bolivians may perceive themselves as “subaltern”. Thus, in order for the lithium project to be considered a decolonial proposal in touch with the insights and claims of Latin American decolonial scholars, there needs to be a broader focus

on changing these structures and patterns. This is not sufficiently questioned in the governmental discourse on economic development and natural resource management. There is also an aspect of colonialism related to the state's dominant centralized power. Bolivia's natural resource management based on nationalization and industrialization of strategic resources does not necessarily take into consideration the needs and rights of the local populations, such as autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. As Jazmin Valdivieso pointed out in the interview, there has been a lack of communication and integration between the local communities of Salar de Uyuni and the government regarding the lithium project.

Bolivia has had a strong focus on decolonization by criticising capitalist rationales such as modernity, development, economic growth, commodification of nature and progress. At the same time, the narrative about development being brought by industrialization and economic growth is also present in the governmental discourse. This is reflected in the discourse about the lithium being considered an opportunity for development, economic growth, and employment in Potosí. Thus, it does not account for other forms of development, or modernities, that may be preferred by some of the Indigenous communities. This strong focus on growth and development could also be considered as conflicting with the principles of Vivir Bien, along with the principles of decentralization, autonomy, self-determination, inclusion, and participation stated in the Constitution of 2009.

However, the notion of Vivir Bien is a broad concept, and it would be wrong to narrow it down to an interpretation about Indigenous peoples wanting to live in harmony with the environment and their territory. As argued in chapter 3, Indigenous peoples do not necessarily oppose development, but they want to be part of defining what development means to them and partake in its "benefits". Thus, the government's visions about bringing development to the region through the lithium project is not necessarily the kind of development the local populations want. Although this has not been the central focus of my thesis, part of the critical discourse analysis has been to question the promises that the lithium project will benefit all and bring development to the region.

The problem with this type of narrative, in which economic growth and industrialization will automatically lead to development and prosperity, is that it does not necessarily benefit people in the way *they* would have wanted it to. Furthermore, it is also problematic to reproduce the narrative about Indigenous peoples opposing development. The moment a community opposes an extractivist project or any kind of industrialization, the dominant discourse tends

to be centred around them being opponents to modernity and development. Yet in fact, they may only be opposing a specific kind of euro-modernity and neoliberal development. This enforces the division between different parts of society, strengthen the notion of the "Other", and overlook the reasons behind the protests. Accordingly, these types of conflicts are reduced to a conflict between "primitive" Indigenous populations not willing to accept development, and the state, company, or NGO's desire to "help" them. People opposing such projects may not only become subject to political oppression, but they may also become portrayed as people who "don't know their own good". This is both discriminatory and paternalistic, and it ends up reproducing power structures and colonial patterns. Therefore, when addressing these kinds of conflicts, it is important to bear in mind that people do not necessarily oppose development per se, but rather wants to be part of the decision-making processes and be proposers and designers of proper alternatives.

The lithium project has been presented as a solution to both fighting climate change, and to bring development to the Bolivian population. Although both these promises might be well-intended, its potential to decolonize the Bolivian society, is a different story. As addressed, there are several socio-environmental consequences related to this kind of large-scale project. The lithium extraction in neighbouring Argentina and Chile has been associated with severe environmental impacts, especially concerning water-usage. As the Bolivian lithium industry is still at its initial stages, it is not yet possible to determine how the extraction could affect the local environment, but negative consequences related to water is clearly a risk in Bolivia as well. However, these environmental concerns appear to be overlooked or neglected by both the government and the international community, as the extraction of "green" resources are not considered equally harmful as more traditional forms of extraction. Thus, the main difference between the Bolivian approach to the lithium resources and neoliberal approaches to natural resource management, is that the government aims to obtain sovereign control over the resource in order to redistribute the revenues. However, Bolivia remains part of the capitalist system and the government fails to sufficiently consider the negative environmental impacts of the lithium project.

As addressed in chapter 3, the problem with «green growth" and its promise to solve the climate crisis, is that it is based on the capitalist system which cannot survive without the constant focus on consumption, growth, and the creation new commodities. Although the Bolivian government has been discursively opposing this system for the past 15 years, the country is still highly dependent on it. As Latour (1993) pointed out, the modern constitution

is based upon a clear separation between humans and nature, and between politics and science. This separation dominates the global discourse on sustainability and frames capitalism as the only viable alternative. The proponents of green growth and green economy denies that it is the constant exploitation of nature that caused the global warming and environmental degradation in the first place. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the capitalist system enforces colonial structures of dependency and unequal power structures between and within nations which leads to exploitation of humans and nature. This means that there is no way to achieve a profound decolonization, or solve the global climate crisis, as long as capital accumulation and infinite growth are considered the main goals. As David Harvey pointed out, capitalism leads to an uneven distribution of "development" based upon geographic location.

The discourse of MAS clearly opposes both capitalism and colonialism, yet their discourse includes conventional tropes about bringing development and economic growth to the population. The discourse of MAS draws on many of the central elements of Marxism, but in a Bolivian context these ideas does not necessarily fit as well as they did in 18th century Europe. The Bolivian society is much more heterogenous, as it is composed by a broad variety of Indigenous peoples, mestizos, and afro-descendants. Thus, the idea about a strong state controlling the economy is not easily applicable to a Bolivian context. I would even claim that it contradicts the essence of Vivir Bien and the rights to autonomy and self-determination established in the Bolivian constitution. I would therefore argue that the lithium project is in line with a weak conceptualization of decolonization, that is, MAS emphasis on resource sovereignty within a broader nationalist agenda, but not with the broader and deeper meanings of decoloniality. It is, however, difficult to imagine what a lithium project with a potential of decoloniality would look like. Breaking with the colonial heritage, including all the internal powers structures and colonial patterns, would necessarily require a complete transformation of the Bolivian society as a whole.

By looking at this in a broader perspective it becomes evident that the lithium project is not an expression of decoloniality. At least not as proposed by the decolonial scholars, explained in chapter 3 and 6. The project does not move beyond the emphasis on national resource sovereignty, and it does not tackle the issues of coloniality of power, knowledge or being. Moreover, it does not challenge the patterns of colonialism expressed in the subalternity of certain fractions of society, such as the population of Potosí or the Indigenous population in general. Neither does it challenge the dominant Eurocentric epistemologies or ontologies.

In conclusion, the lithium project is decolonial in the sense that it holds a strong emphasis on sovereignty, but not in the sense of coloniality (of power, being and knowledge). It is mainly concerned with economic development, and the state's dominant centralized role in the project goes against the principles of autonomy, decentralization, and self-determination. Although the informants pointed out that certain aspects of Vivir Bien have been considered within the lithium project, other important principles are absent. And although the governmental discourse opposes the western development models, modernity, and the capitalist system, it is a paradox that the discourse is centred around development and growth. Thus, my central conclusion is that although the lithium project clearly opposes neoliberal policies regarding natural resource management and colonialism, it can only be considered decolonial in the sense of sovereignty, and thus lacks an engagement with the deeper levels of decolonial insights.

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