

Perspective

Indigenous Peoples and Land-Based Disputes: Paraguay and the Paĩ Tavyterã

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Abstract: This article discusses some of the long-term tendencies of the Paraguayan political economy, focusing, in particular, on impacts on indigenous peoples and, because of the ongoing agribusiness expansion in the northeast of the country, on the Paĩ Tavyterã nation. This analysis is warranted because of the growing recognition of the importance of land-related disputes affecting indigenous peoples, particularly in countries such as Paraguay that rely heavily on agribusiness exports and on the exploitation of natural resources. It is based on more than six years of research dedicated to the land struggles of the Paĩ Tavyterã (and members of the same ethnic group in Brazil, called Guarani-Kaiowa). Instead of a comparative study, this is a relational storytelling text that draws insights from various actors, communities and situations that were obtained through a qualitative and participative methodology, involving indigenous communities as co-participants and co-investigators in the study. Empirical results demonstrate that, despite the fact that Paraguay is a major exporter of agribusiness commodities the accumulation of multiple forms of subtraction is a prevailing geographical force. The reaction of indigenous peoples is in the form of anti-subtraction. The main implication of this research is that the process of decolonisation is, first and foremost, an anti-subtraction movement that aims to revert the deficit caused by the systemic subtraction of socio-economic and socio-ecological opportunities.

Keywords: territorialised resources; land conflicts; agribusiness; Guarani; Paĩ Tavyterã; Guarani-Kaiowa; agricultural frontier; South America; environmental justice



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1. Introduction and the Uneven Socio-Spatial Context

There is growing recognition from academics, activists and experts of the importance of land-based disputes affecting indigenous peoples around the world, particularly in countries such as Paraguay that heavily rely on agribusiness exports and on the exploitation of natural resources. In this challenging context, this article specifically investigates the long-term tendencies of the Paraguayan political economy, focusing, in particular, on the mounting impacts on indigenous peoples because of the ongoing expansion of agribusiness into ancestral territories. As such, the controversial side of regional and rural development in Paraguay involves wider national and international disputes, as well as the technologies and opportunities that shape lives and bring about socio-ecological change. This is explained by the subtractive impetus of mainstream development—that is, the production of situations that are, in aggregate, less than before, given that many socio-ecologies and opportunities are removed, reconfigured or ultimately lessened. It is also directly connected with geographical investigation into the production and destruction of space. The “structure of organized space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it simply an expression of the class structure emerging from the social (i.e., aspatial) relations of production [1] (p. 208). It represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial”. At the same time, it is well documented that the increase in capitalist production and accumulation depends on the mounting depletion of resources, labour and political liberties, which lead to unavoidable tensions and crises

manifested in, and mediated by, space. Socio-spatial dynamics are, therefore, at the centre of class and ethnic struggles that aim to recover what has been lost (grabbed).

This paper offers the reader both a long-term historical perspective and original empirical geographical information on the contemporary situation of indigenous peoples and their struggle for land, rights and resources. It is based on research carried out in the region bordering Brazil, which is principally dedicated to cattle farming today and to the large-scale capitalist production of transgenic soybeans for export, which are phenomena of great economic, political and social significance. The data presented emphasise the indigenous leadership's determination to keep their disputes within legal bounds, even when they are confronting land grabbers whose activity is plainly illegal. Although the processes that are subject to critical analysis often have parallels elsewhere, making them of comparative interest, the specifics of the history and geography of Paraguay also provide significant and valuable food for thought. Although the country's constitution explicitly recognises the land rights of indigenous people, the realisation of these rights in practice has continued to be thwarted by a national state that embodies the interests of an economic elite maintained in power through the Colorado Party, and whilst local and transnational agribusiness of a similar kind exist elsewhere in Latin America, these actors enjoy an especially strong influence in the politics of Paraguay. Although the first 60 years of Colorado rule were briefly interrupted by the election of Fernando Lugo to the presidency in 2008, with promises of land reform and measures to aid the urban working classes, Lugo's term was ended by a parliamentary coup in 2012, and the entire regime and system of power continues to reflect the legacy of the power relations encrusted in the land grabbing, patrimonial, violently authoritarian (and US-backed) dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (in office between 1954 and 1989) despite subsequently assuming a more democratic façade.

The conservative and exclusionary patterns of national and local development have been greatly based on the expropriation of indigenous lands, although the Paraguayan communities continue to struggle for their rights to land and cultural survival today, in an environment improved by supportive judgements from various supranational organisations. Despite the stereotyped image of passivity and degeneration, all indigenous nations have remained active, mobilised and able to somehow react to spatial subtraction [2]. The 19 indigenous peoples of Paraguay have undergone a desperate struggle to survive, in a process that includes highly sophisticated socio-spatial knowledge and specialised community practices [3]. They are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the land who witnessed the arrival of Iberian conquerors, struggles for resources, indigenous labour commissioned by Catholic priests and landowners ['encomenderos'], the formation of independent nation states and the organisation of highly oligarchic, exclusionary societies. Spatial exclusion has seen itself historically reiterated within these enclaves, where the indigenous person was treated as a legacy from the past that was prone to disappear, either via assimilation or by sheer genocidal violence. In recent years, explicit anti-indigenous violence has somehow been mitigated by populist concessions and the surface acceptance of indigenous rights, but subtraction, even dissimulated, remains the rule. However, these small concessions to indigeneity conceal both structural socio-spatial asymmetries and the highly marginalised condition of workers, including the doubly excluded indigenous peoples—that is, indigenous peoples exploited due to their ethnicity and their class condition [4].

One of the indigenous peoples more severely impacted by recent rounds of land grabbing, discrimination and violent attacks by drug dealers, the state and paramilitary forces are the Paĩ Tavyterã who mainly live in the eastern section of the country, especially in the Department of Amambay on the border with Brazil (where the same ethnic group, known as Guarani-Kaiowa, live in the Brazilian State of Mato Grosso do Sul [5–8]). The Paĩ Tavyterã/Guarani-Kaiowa is one of the sub-groups of the large Guarani population that inhabited and continues to occupy hundreds of South American locations [9]. In the beginning of the last century, their territory in Paraguay amounted to around two million hectares, but their territory is now restricted to a much smaller 5.3% of the original territory

(99,524 hectares in 2020), with around 16,000 people divided into several family nucleuses spread around eight large clusters [10]. The Paĩ Tavyterã's unique geographical question is of great interest, not only for indigenous studies but also to interrogate the basis of agro-neoliberalism and rent extraction activities [11]. For instance, the Paĩ Tavyterã are the least urbanised of the indigenous peoples of Paraguay [12] and are now confined to a remote corner of the country that has become a hotspot of agribusiness, land grabbing, resource extraction and globalised drug trafficking [13]. Before the examination of this case study, the next section will present details of the methodology adopted for this research.

2. Methodological Approach

This paper is based on more than six years of research dedicated to the land struggle of the Paĩ Tavyterã and communities of the same indigenous group who live in the Brazilian territory (the Guarani-Kaiowa). Most empirical results shown here come from fieldwork conducted in the first half of 2023 in Paraguay (among the Paĩ Tavyterã and also with authorities and organisations in Asunción and in the Department of Amambay). Instead of a comparative study, this is a relational storytelling text that draws insights from various actors, communities and situations, as well as documents and archives, to describe a broad array of socio-spatial trends and complex practices [14]. This investigation followed a strict ethical standard for research involving indigenous partners, which entailed the active and autonomous involvement of the indigenous communities as true co-investigators and not just passive informants. This project is situated in a broader social agenda of restorative justice, socio-spatial inclusion and the self-determination of indigenous peoples. Instead of any advocacy of neutrality, this research was designed to examine and reflect on accumulated violence and injustices manifested through subtraction. Needless to mention, research conducted with and for the studied population, or the targeted communities, is not necessarily less rigorous or worse than long-term, more conventional research; most of all, it is further scrutinised [15].

It must be acknowledged that the relation between research and politics may sometimes be awkward but that they have much to offer to each other. Foucault observes that the "role of ideology does not diminish as rigour increases and error is dissipated" [16] (p. 205). In addition, Gregory further claims that "the practice of making geographies ('geographing') involves both writing about (conveying, expressing or representing) the world and also writing (making, shaping or transforming) the world" [17] (p. 287). Our departure point is indigenous geographical politics and the politicised geography of the Paĩ Tavyterã in a political-economic context, involving advancing agribusiness and violent land grabbing, which provides an emblematic example of subtractive tendencies and their complex repercussions. The innovative contribution of this article is both theoretical and argumentative. It helps question national development and cross-scale globalisation from the perspective of indigenous peoples. Their socio-spatial experience demonstrates that national integration and development policies have provoked the annulment of the indigenous contingent of the population, but, at the same time, it demonstrates how this is a political-economic process that presupposes the indigenous person as the reservoir of land, resources and the (frontier) other, to be converted into a (generic) citizen or labourer. Although widely silent and silenced, the indigenous question is immanent in both the past and the present in Paraguayan life. The next section examines the synergies between subtraction and enclave making due to the erosion of geographical "truths" (in the sense of long-lived spaces shaping and being shaped by socio-ecological relations).

3. The Unambiguous Connections between Colonisation and National Development

3.1. Colonisation and the Production of a Subordinate Space

The widespread process of production, based on the destruction of previous circumstances, helps to illuminate the many dilemmas faced by a country such as Paraguay, whose geography is ultimately the product of long-lasting clashes between asymmetrical forces. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, signed between Portugal and Spain and endorsed by

the Pope, stipulated that the new continent was the property of the two Iberian crowns, which did not preclude the parallel incursions of England, France and Holland, as well as German and Italian navigators, in pursuit of riches and resources. Papal and royal authority evidently rested on the assumption that they had jurisdiction over American lands. The conquest and exploitation of the Spanish Province of Paraguay—then with a much larger territory that included the current south of Brazil, Uruguay and north of Argentina—took place in the first decades of the Iberian invasion and played a very important economic, political and military role in the entire colonisation project. It was marked by the rationalisation of an imperialist, extractivist and mercantilist capitalism that served the Spanish aspirations of grandeur and power. Reliance on minerals and other resources from the American continent never prevented the implementation of the most terrible acts of socio-ecological degradation and systematic violence against the indigenous inhabitants. From the perspective of the invaders, the natives did not seem to have any organised legal code or private property institutions; it was easy for them to conclude that the indigenous were not entitled to own the land.

The main effect of colonisation was the production of a reality smaller than the sum of pre-colonial parts, given that both the European and South American societies were downgraded by their forced interaction. Since the sixteenth century and the conquest of the centre of South America, the indigenous peoples of Paraguay, in particular, have been subjected to this unflinching subtractive geography, which was predicated upon their conversion into non-subjects and confined to an increasingly belittled (physical and political) space. The Guarani population is often referred to as the cornerstone of Paraguayan society, but they have never taken any meaningful part in national affairs, as the country remains functional via the constant actualisation of subtraction in the form of violent land and labour grabbing. This population has only paradoxically taken part through sustained subtraction, which has gradually reduced their possibility to be recognised as social agents. Voltaire, on his celebrated eighteenth-century novel *Candide*, already critiqued the seizure of vast extensions of land from the Guarani by the Jesuits when Cacambo, one of the main characters, explains that “Los Padres own everything, and the people own the rest; it is a masterpiece of justice and reason” [18] (p. 34). Later, throughout a feeble independence process initiated in the 1810s [19], the country adopted imagery distinctively associated with Guarani symbols, but it was a controlled narrative of indigeneity by subtraction. This vague indigenist allegory of the Paraguayan republic, nurtured by an idiosyncratic fusion of nationalistic, romantic and predatorial penchants, has provided ample populist legitimisation for a small military–bureaucratic ruling coalition.

The international borders of the Paraguayan nation, established over several centuries of conquest and conflict, are in themselves testimony of accumulated losses and unequally fought legacies. Squeezed between Brazil and Argentina, Paraguay is a subaltern nation state par excellence, at least since the end of the devastating continental war of 1864–1870 that decimated the population, stripped a large part of its territory and destroyed a hitherto thriving and self-sufficient economy. Like most South American nations, Paraguay paradoxically became a country with vast territories and major socio-political challenges. On the one hand, the country has continuously lost territory and land resources to its larger neighbours, a process that began since early colonial times when the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church competed for the control of the South American centre. On the other hand, Paraguay has managed to secure and maintain its independent status, despite the initial lack of international recognition (in the early nineteenth century) and the perennial threat of Argentinean, Brazilian and North American geopolitical and economic capture. Reflecting the subordinate position of the country, the indigenous peoples of Paraguay have been, like other marginalised groups, considered *homo sacer* who could be killed or exterminated—but not sacrificed because it was placed beyond divine and human law, as argued by Agamben [20]. Their “capacity to be exterminated” is inherent in their liminal, bare life conditions and in the deterioration of their socio-economic situation [21], seeing as

they are not formally excluded from Paraguayan society but not meaningfully included either [22].

3.2. Economic Evolution: Indigenous Land Grabbing

There is abundant evidence of the self-serving biases of the ruling Paraguayan elite and the systematic appropriation of opportunities at the expense of the majority of the population and indigenous peoples in particular [23–25]. From the 1870s, the selling of land to foreign companies and the attraction of (preferentially) white colonists increased, which included many Protestant communities [26]. Indigenous labour was essential in colonial farms and towns for the exploitation of quebracho and yerba-maté from the second half of the nineteenth century, typically in the form of seasonal jobs on estancias or with large forestry enterprises [changa], which were often a dissimulated form of semi-slavery [27–30]. Later, the first decades of the last century were a period of great political instability, which included another major war with Bolivia (for the control of fossil fuel reserves in the Chaco region), and by the 1940s, several agrarian colonies were organised in the eastern region, leading to increasing deforestation and the displacement of Guarani communities. The attack on common lands, especially those held by indigenous peoples, was directly associated with subjection (or abandonment) to a narrow development agenda, even at the cost of physically and economically subtracting the country from itself. As argued by Hegel [31] (p. 474), always an important source of critical reflection, the “immediate movement” (direct relations) is as much a “mediated movement” that presupposes itself; that is, in the South American case, the grabbing of Paraguayan land (the direct outcome of territorial denationalisation) was also mediated by the subtraction of politico-spatial alternatives.

Similar to the previous colonial and early republican phases, the main contact between the national state and the indigenous population was through violence and always for the disbenefit of the ancestral residents. It was interpreted by Kleinpenning as follows:

“Because the Indians could claim no rights to the land and no thought was given to reserving land for them, the state land used by them passed almost entirely into the hands of non-Indians. They became, without exception, occupiers on private estates unless they were able to take refuge on the remaining fiscal lands [state properties]. Their presence was sometimes not tolerated on the private estates, but sometimes it was. Not only did the Indians form a welcome labour force, but many newly-acquired latifundia were exploited in such an extensive fashion that sufficient space still remained for the native population to make a living, at least in the early years. They had no right to the land, however, which meant that their existence remained legally insecure.” [32] (p. 29)

3.3. Dictatorship, Conservative Agrarian Reform and the (Anticyclical) Paĩ Tavyterã Project

The old tendencies only intensified as a response to development pressures. With the consolidation of Alfredo Stroessner’s brutal regime after the 1954 coup d’état and the sharing of the proceedings of illegal activities with other generals and political leaders, it was possible to promote a highly conservative and authoritarian process of agriculture expansion [33], partly funded by the North American government and aimed at concentrating land and specialising production units [34]. For many generations, Paraguayan agriculture had largely been based on small family farming, and most of the land maintained its original vegetation, which started to change in the second half of the last century with agrarian development programmes and extensive land grabbing [35]. The 1960’s March towards the East aimed, along the lines of the Green Revolution, to occupy, deforest and convert the borderland with Brazil into private properties where a similar agrarian phenomenon was taking place. In 1963, a new agrarian law was passed, and it established the formal principles for the distribution of land among peasants, particularly in collective units (colonies), although it also led to the seizing of large private areas by political allies. The aim was not to produce food or equal agrarian distribution but to export commodities, speculate over the land and contain the indigenous population in dwindling enclaves.

The government also used agrarian reform as a strategy to secure political support and to also compensate members of the regime, especially the senior officers of the armed forces (74% of the land was allocated to only 2.8% of the beneficiaries [36]); these areas are the infamous “tierras malhabidas” (i.e., ill-gotten lands), comprising around seven million hectares transferred to military officers and political allies [37].

The farse of the agrarian reform paved the way for what has been happening since the 1980s. The Paĩ Tavyterã were left scattered over a 40,000 km² space, mostly in the Amambay Department, as a consequence of centuries of migrant wage labour in yerba-maté and cattle ranches and plantations [38]. The collective ownership of land by extended indigenous families was gradually replaced by refuges and settlements on isolated parts of large latifundia, until an increase in agrarian pressure in the 1960s due to conservative land reform and the increase in the number of Brazilian migrants. In 1972, the Paĩ Tavyterã Project (PPT) was launched, which was managed by Friedl and George Grünberg (Austrian anthropologists) and was aimed at regularising the most urgent indigenous lands; its operation was approved, and “with this authorization in hand, the project’s survey team determined that 31 communities, taking in some 80% of the Northeast’s indigenous population, could be secured on the basis of the 1963 agrarian reform law [26 Paĩ communities]. 23 were on tierras fiscales [fiscal lands, that is, state-owned lands], 11 were on private holdings, and one site overlapped private and public lands. (. . .) By 1979 a majority of the 31 communities had been surveyed and officially recognized, and a few of them on private land had been granted title. (. . .) By 1977 eight of the eleven communities on private land had been secured through ‘donations’, trades for public land, and indemnification at prices below market value” [38] (p. 91).

The most tangible consequence of the PPT was the consolidation of a fragmented landscape of precarious enclaves (reservations or encampments) that remained under attack by farmers and speculators. Because of sustained land, labour and resource grabbing, most Paĩ Tavyterã were forced into an enclave situation that is, in practical terms, the recurrent actualisation of subtraction. It is no surprise that they now consider both Brazilians and Paraguayans as invaders and threats to their 100 lived places [39]. The subtractive geography of the Paĩ Tavyterã is increasingly fragmented and under attack, not just by the national state but also by anti-state guerrillas associated with drug trafficking. The Paraguayan People’s Army (EPP), a miniscule group of insurgents, has maintained operations in the northeast region of the country and, on several occasions, confrontations with the army resulted in the killing of Paĩ Tavyterã people (as in October 2022, when two died and one was injured in Jasuka Venda, whose relatives were interviewed during this research). Since the 1990s, with the demise of the Stroessner administration and the growing insertion of Paraguay into market-based globalisation, there has been a growing reconcentration of rural land and the expansion of cattle ranches and transgenic soybean plantations [40], which continue to fuel high levels of exclusion and racism.

3.4. Lasting Racism and the Marginalisation of the Indigenous Peoples

Because of the socio-spatial fragmentation and juridical instability nourished by land grabbing and political–economic asymmetries, there are renewed pressures to further subtract—that is, grab and commodify—land and resources from the Paĩ Tavyterã. The annual IWGIA report explicitly denounces this subtraction, stating that “although Amambay department has been the scene of widespread violence linked to the production, transit and illegal sale of drugs for decades, the current situation seems to have reached new levels of concern and threats to the lives of the communities” [41] (p. 442). According to Glauser and Villagra, 16,152 hectares of forestlands were cut down by invaders between 2001 and 2018 in areas that lawfully belong to the Paĩ Tavyterã [10]. The illegal removal of vegetation in indigenous lands has even more negative consequences than elsewhere, because the indigenous way of life (teko) includes both the plants and the ecosystems as social agents (notably, their spiritual leader has the ability to speak to the trees, plants and animals as a means of understanding the world and protecting the community). Forest fires, related to

deforestation and intrusion, have systematically affected indigenous territories. However, the national state and its indigenist agency, INDI, persistently refuse to take proper note of the problem and utilise heavy bureaucracy to basically do nothing (Sofía Espíndola, personal communication, 2023).

In the same way, the communities of Arroyo Ka'a, 63 km from Bella Vista (46 families with 176 inhabitants), have spent more than 30 years trying to recover and register their land comprising around 5900 hectares. Many generations of indigenous families have lived on this site and, before that, they lived on the fringes of the land. This population has suffered from a lack of potable water, deforestation and fires caused by neighbouring farms as well as contamination caused by pesticides and by an ethanol industry nearby [42] (p. 29). An exceptionally disturbing example of semi-official land grabbing, tolerated by public authorities, occurred during our fieldwork, when the Inmobiliaria [estate agent] Capitán Bado openly advertised the selling of a "property" with 1920 hectares with excellent soil quality at USD 1700 per hectare. This attractive "farm" was nothing more than a large segment of the indigenous land Yvy Pyté. The sellers used the expression "titulado" to indicate actual ownership and claimed that it was registered under the name Añareta Guasu, which was flagrantly untrue. The indigenous reaction was nonetheless swift and came in the form of an urgent call for support signed by the community leaders [43].

It is highly revealing of their internal logic that Paĩ Tavyterã leaders have repeatedly expressed a strong resolve to remain within the boundaries of the law, considering this the most effective and justifiable strategy to recover land, as stated in meetings with the Ytaguazu Community (near the big hills of the Jasuka Venda, the most significant site of the Paĩ Tavyterã, considered the place where humanity was created). Jasuka Venda was declared Paraguay's natural and cultural heritage and indigenous conservation territory, but the indigenous communities bitterly lament that it was left beyond their demarcated area [44]. Even so, there are no plans to carry out any forced reoccupation of ancestral areas or insist on their rights to reobtain the land through legal channels. In our interviews with one of the main leaders of Yvy Pyté, they reflected on the various internal and external challenges ahead, including the difficulty to confront the illegal activity of land grabbers within the official legal framework. From their perspective, despite the moral justification present for the moving of their struggle beyond the boundaries of positivistic legislation, so-called illegal action is contradictory, because it operates along the same lines of prevailing subtraction.

There are clear socio-spatial continuities between the colonial past and the neoliberal present that are intensely replicated in cross-scale connections between local and national trends of development and globalisation. The subordinate tendencies of the Paraguayan economy are related to the fact that the country could never emulate the import substitution path adopted in the other, larger Latin America nations but that Paraguay was at the receiving end of neighbouring developmentalist agendas. The fact that Paraguay is itself an enclaved, Mediterranean country is dialectically associated with its internal anti-indigenous subtraction and the confinement of the native population in ghetto-like reservations. Both forms of the enclave are always deeply racialised and present intense manifestations of socio-spatial power asymmetries. Violence and exclusion in and around the indigenous lands of the Paĩ Tavyterã are replicated in the sharp inequalities of the capital, Asunción, where a vast low-income periphery contrasts with wealthy neighbourhoods. The election of the economist Santi Peña for president (in office since August 2023) represents the continuity of the political pact around the Colorado Party and, more importantly, the immense hegemony of agribusiness in synergy with illegality and drug trafficking—the main subtractive element nowadays—examined below.

4. Discussion: Exclusionary Socio-Spatial Trends

The sustained attacks on the Paĩ Tavyterã world, following the long-lasting tendencies of Paraguayan society, evolves in tandem with the wider conservative propensities of economic development and the partial rule of law in the country. Absence is also an integral

element of world truths and says a great deal about its organisation and functioning. The truth is, for that very reason, invested with an absolute and eternal capacity to change any given circumstance [45]. In this sense, the very pronounced socio-spatial truth of Paraguay, as analysed above, has been the imposition of an exploitative order that relies on the simultaneous subtraction of the possibility to transform relations and structures. It is a truth that emerges out of the subtractive tendencies of mainstream development, which can only be meaningfully reached by breaking with the established criteria for judging the opinions and conceptions that prevent change. In other words, these subtractive tendencies do not lead to a total removal or complete destruction of reality but dialectically impede the possibility of a radical transformation. Subtraction is, thus, fully political and contested, as it is both an expression of power control and the anticipation of change. The reality of the world is the dialectical “one split into two”, fraught with truths yet without a totalising whole.

The most acute manifestations of the phenomenon of subtraction in Paraguay today, which unfold through the tension between determination and division, are the operations of its agribusiness sector, particularly the export of meat and soybeans, and its land grabbing, encroaching upon indigenous lands. Private farms currently occupy 30.4 million hectares, out of a country with 40 million, with most of these serving as cattle ranches and export-oriented plantations [46]. This is a typical example of an economy that rapidly and temporarily bloats due to growing international demand and facilitated access to common and indigenous land in South America. Soybean production has become the key sector of the current agro-neoliberalist *durée* of the South American economies [11], and this production is increasingly deindustrialised, dependent on Chinese and North American commercial orders and inserted into a context of transnational corporations, global banks and the agro-industry. Soybean production is a form of anti-agriculture, where large sums of capital circulate, but only a small fraction remains in the production zones and, instead of becoming a staple food, it serves as a source of agro-industrial commodities to be sent away. The agronomic technology involved in soybean cultivation is perilously dependent on the heavy use of agrochemicals, machines, genetically modified seeds and foreign digital equipment.

The pressures of development have entailed the conversion of a domestic economy, historically characterised by small family farming, into large agribusiness operations dedicated to commodity export and rent extraction. The agribusiness frontier that transformed the Alto Parana region in the 1980s has been expanding to the northeast of Paraguay, notably into the Department of Amambay [47] where the majority of the Paĩ Tavyterã areas are located. Subtraction caused by agribusiness is not just associated with a monoculture production system, but it also relies on land speculation and on the unrestrained degradation of ecosystems. It is an extractivist and ultimately rent-seeking agriculture that leaves behind heavy ecological and socio-spatial passive consequences [48]. Agribusiness is, therefore, part of a broader association between resource grabbing and rent seeking. Also part of the same nexus is the worrying synergy between the advance of agribusiness and the strengthening of a largely illegal economy based on drug trafficking and the smuggling of goods. It is no coincidence that the most influential and destructive players involved in the contemporary advance of agribusiness have been Brazilian settlers in alliance with the Paraguayan political elite [49].

The Hegemony of Agribusiness and of Illegal Activities

Paraguayan agribusiness is a very pronounced element of the institutionalised selectiveness that defines its national politics and most related state interventions. The separation between legal and illegal activities is highly debatable in a geographical context dominated by the violence of agribusiness, the connivence of the national state and prominent politicians (*vis à vis* the track record of past president Horacio Cartes) and the widespread operation of militias and drug mafias [50]. What prevails is a political regime that includes a high tolerance for various manifestations of corruption, explicitly authoritar-

ian or demagogic tendencies among political leaders and generally despondent attitudes toward elections [51]. It is what Tucker describes as an “outlaw capital”, which “is a mode of accumulation that works through dealmaking and rule breaking. (...) [It] helps us to better apprehend capitalism as a complex and mutating social formation working through worlds beyond wages and productive labour” [52] (p. 1459). As observed by Badiou, an illegal state typically has a veil of legality and pretends to observe the constitutional order, but really, justice only arises when what is supposedly illegal becomes the legal norm [53] (p. 159). In effect, illegality and institutionalised corruption in Paraguay have been the main catalyst of national politics and policymaking. Around 80% of the drugs smuggled into Brazil come from Paraguay (notably through Pedro Juan Caballero and Capitán Bado, the main areas of the Paĩ Tavyterã), and large-scale farmers are not involved in drug smuggling into the Brazilian territory but invest in land and cattle to launder money in Paraguay. Politics and the economy are largely dominated by the powerful interests of export companies and landowners, which has forged a decisive synergy with illegal trade [‘contrabandistas’] and, increasingly, drug traffickers [‘traficantes’] associated with politicians and senior authorities.

On the other hand, it is certainly helpful that the current Constitution of Paraguay (introduced in 1992 and amended in 2011) recognises, in Chapter 5, indigenous peoples as cultural groups dating back before the formation and organization of the state. Articles 62 and 67 of the national constitution explicitly recognise their existence, including ancestral rights over their land and customary rules, as well as their ethnic identity, participation, education and cultural features. In practice, however, those constitutional guarantees have proven to be mere false promises and are contained by the power of an agribusiness-based development. This is why the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights asked the government to enforce and implement, without further delay and with sufficient funds, the provisions of the Paraguayan Constitution concerning respect for and restoration of the community property rights of the indigenous peoples [54]. However, the juridical response has moved in a diametrically opposite direction, and, because of the procrastination of national judges, many organisations have had to resort to the Interamerican Course of Justice [55]. Law 6830, passed in 2021 (which amends Article 142 of the Criminal Code and its previous amendment, Law 3440/2008), multiplied the penalty for those who “invade” private property by four, which affects peasants and indigenous peoples attempting to reclaim lost areas. It increased the sentences for trespassing, increasing penalties by establishing that whoever “individually or in concert with other persons, violently or clandestinely enters another’s property shall be punished with imprisonment of up to six years”. In the end, recent policy and legislative reforms basically reinstate the same subtractive tendencies of the past.

5. Conclusions and Perspectives

The previous sections in this paper examined some fundamental elements of the production of Paraguayan socio-spatiality, legacies from colonialism and hierarchical nation building. This long and highly hierarchical process has primarily relied on the subtraction of the indigenous world and its conversion into a system basing itself on the lasting political–economic exclusion of the majority of the national population. Paraguayan society is organised as a pyramid of opportunities that spreads from the main political–economic centres in the Global North to the national political–economic–military elites and to local authoritarian leaders, resulting in the subordination of the majority of the population to powerful interests and agendas emanating from the top. In practice, the physical subtraction of the country (due to large-scale wars and conflicts with neighbouring nations) has evolved in tandem with the subtraction of rights and opportunities. These enduring tendencies are now especially evident in the northeast of Paraguay and along the border with Brazil. Agribusinesses have become consolidated in the northeast of the country, following what occurred in previous decades, and these are organically associated with drug trafficking and the smuggling of goods, which has created a new wave of impacts

on the remaining areas of the Paĩ Tavyterã nation in the Department of Amambay. As other indigenous peoples in the country, the Paĩ Tavyterã were, in the past, plagued by the genocidal violence of colonisation and nation building, by the semi-slavery of quebracho and yerba-maté extraction and the conversion of common land into private farms.

The persistent trends of subtraction that underpinned colonisation and nation building have again been demonstrated by the crucial economic and political role of the agribusiness–illegality–trafficking nexus in contemporary Paraguayan society and its exclusionary economic and political institutions. Despite the fact that Paraguay is a major exporter of agribusiness commodities, the accumulation of multiple forms of subtraction is the prevailing geographical force. Paraguay, as most other Global South nations, is inserted into globalised markets with a baggage of accumulated deficits and unfulfilled grassroots demands. Neo-colonisation and conservative national development not only promote but also depend on subtraction. In this challenging context, indigenous and non-indigenous workers have a central role in the functioning of national society, but they remain excluded from crucial decisions and the sharing of economic results. This means that decolonisation is, first and foremost, an anti-subtraction movement that aims to revert the deficit caused by systemic subtraction and collectively seeks social, political and spatial addition.

On the other hand, indigenous nations have become increasingly aware of their rights and have occupied new spaces of mobilisation and resistance. Specifically in Paraguay, due to the contradictions of national and international dynamics and the influence of other social movements, there is a stronger-than-before identification of communities as members of the Paĩ Tavyterã nation today, and this has had major repercussions in terms of their struggle for land and basic rights [10]. This demonstrates that there is indeed resistance in vulnerability; in other words, resistance is also a resource of vulnerability, because, depending on the political game, the relations of dependency that create vulnerability culminate in a state of being exposed and challenged [56]. This means that vulnerability, which is typically produced and used by dominant groups to buoy their privileges, can be defied once individuals become active subjects through a myriad of objects, bodies and demands. Against a spurious order, the indigenous person can become the “bearer of the nonlaw” [53], precisely because of the fact that he/she bears the possibility of retributive and restorative justice. There are, therefore, important lessons to be learned from both anti-indigenous violence and the wisdom offered by the Paĩ Tavyterã and other nations, as well as their resistance to the exploitation of their land and resources.

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