



# Socio-economic geography and the land rights of indigenous peoples in Paraguay

Antonio A. R. Ioris<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

The article investigates the long-term tendencies of Paraguayan political-economy, in particular the mounting impacts of export-oriented agribusiness on its indigenous peoples. The analysis is based on the theorisation of the geographical force of subtraction, that is, the evanescent properties of capitalist development, in which economic growth takes place via an interconnected elimination of rights, opportunities and alternatives. The discussion is focussed on the land struggle of the Paĩ Tavyterã in the northeast of Paraguay and members of the same ethnic group who live in Brazil (called Guarani-Kaiowa). It is a relational narrative that draws insights from various actors, communities and situations. The main conclusions are that, despite the fact that Paraguay is now a major exporter of agribusiness commodities, what has prevailed is the accumulation of multiple forms of political, environmental, social and economic violence. At the same time, the decolonising reaction of indigenous peoples, in alliance with other sectors of the working class, aims at reverting the deficit caused by systemic socio-economic subtraction and in pursuit of transformative additions.

**Keywords** Land conflicts · Agribusiness · Guarani · Paĩ Tavyterã · Indigenous peoples · Agricultural frontier · South America · Environmental justice

## Paraguay's indigenous reality check

This article is about some fundamental socio-economic trends that have characterised, and continue to connect, Paraguay's past and present. The analysis is justified because Paraguay shares important politico-economic features with other neighbouring countries, but its own unique history, society and indigeneity remain poorly addressed in the international literature. The analysis will evolve on two scales, namely, it will scrutinise macropolitical and socio-spatial trends and, in addition, focus on the emblematic condition, struggles and reactions of indigenous peoples in areas of recent land-grabbing and agribusiness expansion. As detailed below, the Paraguayan economy has increasingly relied on agribusiness

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✉ Antonio A. R. Ioris  
IorisA@cardiff.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> School of Geography and Planning, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, Wales CF10 3WA, UK

exports and on the exploitation of natural resources, land, timber and water in particular. Agribusiness today represents around 30% of the GDP and 65% of national exports (Fogel 2020). The landscapes of large plantation farms reflect massive public and private investments in technology, machinery and infrastructure, but most economic outcomes have been syphoned by a small proportion of the national population. Although Paraguay recorded high rates of economic growth, at least since joining the Mercosur commercial block in 1991,<sup>1</sup> social and economic levels of inequality have been deepening (Gu 2016). It has experienced intensification rates among the highest in Latin America, but this process has not managed to reverse poverty levels above 25 per cent of the population and the persistent imbalance in the distribution of private income (Rodríguez Carámbula 2018). These predicaments have been, at best, only superficially mentioned, but remain largely understudied, aggravated by the widespread perception that Paraguay is one of the forgotten corners of the world, a country cut off from the rest of continent (something like the ‘Tibet of Latin America’) and “defined not so much by association as by isolation” (Lambert and Nickson 2013: 1). The current text will help to fill this lacuna in the academic literature.

The main claim here is that the Paraguayan path of nation building and economic development is not only subordinate to the priorities of stronger Northern, Asian and South American countries but has represented a subtraction of rights, opportunities and perspectives for the majority of its national society and the indigenous peoples, in particular. These are all elements that demonstrate the wider subtractive force of mainstream development, that is, the production of situations that are, in aggregate, less than before, given that crucial socio-ecological relations are removed, reconfigured and, ultimately, lessened. Paraguay offers an instructive politico-economic example of accumulated inequalities, missed opportunities and mounting socio-ecological degradation that, in the end, undermine present-day relations and future prospects of democracy and justice. It is an economic model that subtracts by adding, impoverishes whilst capital is accrued, and progressively shrinks the country’s social space. Although the national experience has parallels elsewhere in the continent, the specifics of the history and geography of Paraguay also provide significant and valuable food for thought. The 1992 constitution formally recognises social and economic rights, but the effective fulfilment of such rights 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 political influence. Since 1947, the Colorado Party has dominated Paraguayan politics and controlled the presidency since 1948, ruling as the only legal party between 1947 and 1962.

The first 60 years of Colorado rule were briefly interrupted by the election of Fernando Lugo (a laicised Catholic bishop) to the presidency in 2008, with promises of land reform and of measures to aid the urban and rural working classes. Lugo even appointed Margarita Mbywangi, an Aché indigenous leader, to serve as the minister of indigenous affairs and the head of the National Indigenous Institute (INDI), where she worked on funding for programmes for indigenous communities. Basically, this ‘political experiment’ brought hope for greater social equality and democratic consolidation; however, it was short-lived as Lugo’s term was ended by a parliamentary coup in 2012, and the regime continued to reflect the legacy of the power relations encrusted in the patrimonial and authoritarian (US-backed) dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989), despite subsequently assuming a

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<sup>1</sup> More information at: <https://www.mercosur.int/en>

more democratic façade. To a large extent, the conservative and exclusionary patterns of national and local development have been based on the expropriation of indigenous lands, exploitation of labour and grabbing of natural resources, although the ancestral peoples continue to struggle for their rights to land and socio-spatial difference. Their efforts are boosted by supportive interventions from various supranational organisations and civil rights organisations. The indigenous peoples of Paraguay have certainly entailed a desperate mobilisation to survive, what includes highly sophisticated knowledge and specialised community practices (IWGIA 2022). They are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the land who witnessed the arrival of Iberian conquerors, the struggles for resources and indigenous labour between Catholic priests and landowners, the formation of independent nation states (Paraguay and its neighbours) and the consolidation of highly oligarchic, exclusionary societies. It has been a reiterated production of enclaves where the indigenous person is treated as legacy from the past prone to disappear, either via assimilation or by sheer genocidal violence.

In recent years, explicit anti-indigenous violence was somehow mitigated by populist reforms and the cosmetic acceptance of indigenous rights, but subtraction, even dissimulated, remains the rule. However, those small concessions to indigeneity essentially conceal structural socio-spatial asymmetries and the highly marginalised condition of indigenous workers, who are doubly exploited due to their ethnicity and their class condition. Their socio-spatial experience demonstrates that national integration and development policies have provoked the cancellation of the indigenous contingent of the population. At the same time, it is a politico-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 both in the past and the in the present of Paraguayan life. As declared by the former Senator Miguel (Kencho) Rodriguez (interview given for this research in Jan 2023), the most pressing problem of Paraguay is the illegal appropriation of indigenous land. According to the senator, indigenous peoples have unquestionable rights over more than two million hectares, but national state and civil society have failed to accept it. Taking into consideration such mounting challenges and contradictions, the innovative contribution of this article is both theoretical and argumentative. It helps to question national development and cross-scale globalisation from the perspective of indigenous peoples. Our departure point is the indigenous geographical politics and their politicised geography provide a solid, meaningful and inspirational direction amidst highly complex and risky tendencies.

This discussion is focussed on the land struggle of the Paĩ Tavyterã indigenous people, who are currently at the hard end of agribusiness expansion, drug trafficking and state negligence in the northeast of Paraguay. The case study is based on secondary data, government reports and statistics, historico-geographical documents and empirical research (making use of interviews, community meetings and regional workshops) carried out in indigenous areas on the border between Paraguay and Brazil, which are today dominated by cattle farming and transgenic soybean plantations. The investigation is broadly located in the emerging sub-discipline of indigenous geography and draws insights from various actors, communities and situations to describe a broad array of socio-spatial trends and complex practices. The analysis followed a strict ethical standard for research involving indigenous partners that entailed an active and autonomous involvement of the indigenous communities as true co-investigators. Instead of any advocacy of neutrality, the research was designed to examine and reflect on accumulated violence and injustices in the search for restorative justice and decolonisation (Barker and Pickerill 2020). It must be acknowledged that the relation between research and politics may be sometimes difficult, but has a

lot to offer to each other. Kirsch (2018) has emphasised that an engaged approach reveals other aspects of the world and can lead to new ideas and theories because of the responsibility and reflexivity of the researcher. The following pages will examine the synergies between subtraction and conservative socio-economic development, which is first conceptualised in the next section.

## Subtractive development

Mainstream development, as it has been promoted by multilateral agencies, northern countries and most scholars since the post-World War II decades, is an intrinsically contradictory and contested process. The economic platform that underpins development is one of the many offsprings of the advance of Western modernity—just like imperialism, the atomic bomb and global warming—and was raised by a distorted politico-economic theory that has misinterpreted values, needs and poverty in the name of material changes and capital accumulation. Such development-related controversies have been on the agenda for several decades, but little progress has been made towards genuine alternatives and restorative measures. The difficulty to recognise the deeply political and civilisational shortcomings of development comes from the emphasis on northern (Western) values and concepts, instead of creating possibilities for the majority of the global society, formed by workers, peasants and indigenous peoples, to take an active role in the production of fairer and more inclusive socio-spatial conditions. The Western economic regime is obviously dominated by capitalist institutions and procedures, such as the commodification of labour and everything else, the extraction of value through socio-ecological exploitation and the elimination of non-market freedoms. In the minds of most politicians and economists, development has been reduced to aggregate or sectoral economic growth, as much as material and financial accumulation. Moreover, development pursued along the lines of capitalist rules is not just one-sided and highly selective, but it is also inherently destructive. Abstraction, followed by destruction, is inbuilt in the very configuration of capitalist relations of production and reproduction. As argued by Rist (2022), development is a highly seductive process that is supposed to command universal acceptance, but that fundamentally requires the general transformation and destruction of social relations and the natural environment.

These are the evanescent properties of capitalist development, in which economic growth takes place via an interconnected subtraction of rights, opportunities and alternatives. That is, the hegemonic agenda of development depends on the subtraction of socio-ecological systems and socio-economic factors, as well as on the destruction of other practises, technologies and infrastructures for the production of its own socio-spatialities that pave the way to the accumulation of capital. The more fundamental driving force of capitalism, which permeates the agenda of development, is evidently the exploitation of labour power. As demonstrated by Marx (1976), the success of a capitalist economy is directly derived from the production of surplus value, whose rate is the expression for the degree of abuse of the labourer by the capitalist. Before those class-based relations could take place, some primitive accumulation and the proletarianisation of subordinate social groups had to occur. It all indicates that capitalist development relies on the exhaustion of what exists and the reconfiguration of local and global socio-spatial settings according to the priorities of capital. As further contended by Marx (1991: 362–364), any tenuous equilibrium “will be restored by capital’s lying idle or even by its destruction, to a greater or lesser extent”, given that the “over-production of capital never means anything other than overproduction

of means of production—means of labour and means of subsistence—that can function as capital, i.e. can be applied to exploiting labour at a given level of exploitation; a given level, because a fall in the level of exploitation below a certain point produces disruption and stagnation in the capitalist production process, crisis, and the destruction of capital”.

Conservative, exclusionary development is, basically, a process of accumulation by subtraction that sets in motion the productive destruction of as many bio-physical and politico-economic features as possible. This is connected with the unilinearity and tautology of development, as famously described by Rostow (1960), in the sense that the same economic path must be followed by all countries—from ‘traditional’ economies to high mass consumption societies—what creates an insurmountable gap between the West and the rest of the world. The model proposed by Rostow and his followers is predicated on the structural distance between North–South countries that condemns the poor ones to a perpetual spiral of subordination and into an predetermined subtraction of resources and assets for the pursuit of development. Ferguson (2006: 2) demonstrates that Africa, for instance, is the elemental other of Western societies, “a radical other for their own constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, modernity, and, indeed, history” that, even so, has been forced into the same development path, despite the high socio-ecological costs. The critical reinterpretation of the shortcomings of development is associated with what Badiou (2009) has described as the production of ‘truths’, which are not only articulated with and through the world but are excepted or subtracted from it. In that sense, the most pronounced socio-spatial truth of mainstream development is the imposition of a perverse, exploitative order that relies on the subtraction of socio-economic relations and structures. It is a truth that emerges out of the subtractive tendencies of mainstream development that, according to Badiou, can only be meaningfully reached by breaking with the established criteria for judging opinions and understanding.

The truth of mainstream development reveals that it leaves minimal opportunity for a person or an organisation to become a subject, considering that, as Badiou claims, the subject is neither solely a material element, nor a warranty of the uniformity of experience. More precisely, Badiou argues that “a subject is neither a result, nor an origin. It is the local status of a procedure, a configuration that exceeds the situation” and it is, therefore, rare (in Besana 2010: 40). Nonetheless, absence is also an integral element of world truths and tells a great deal about its organisation and functioning. The truth is, for that very reason, invested with an eternal potentiality to alter and revert any given circumstance (i.e. the truths of development can contribute to its overcoming). In other words, those subtractive tendencies do not lead to a total removal or complete destruction of reality, but dialectically retain 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 but, according to Badiou, without a totalising whole. For Badiou (2013: 14), the real is what passes through by the force of scission, but this split (the main law of the dialectic, the ‘One divided into Two’) has the seed of new determinations and takes forward new limits. This follows the logic ‘scission-determination-limit’, what gives rise to unpredictable outcomes, either to the right (conservative politics) or to the left (transformative politics). It is a destruction that Badiou calls the negative part of negation, or the negativity of negation. This negation is therefore a struggle to turn the oppressive subtraction on its head. In that regard, “The most difficult question is precisely to maintain the complete concept of negation from the point of view of subtraction” (Badiou 2007).

In the last paragraphs it was briefly outlined the phenomenon of accumulation by subtraction, which is the main theoretical reference for the study of Paraguayan

politico-economic trends. The next sections will test and demonstrate the national socio-economic and socio-spatial metabolism based on subtraction, notably indigenous peoples. Like most South American nations, Paraguay is paradoxically a country with vast terrains and major socio-political shortages. Subtraction has not only been employed to profit from relatively abundant resources, but to block any possible politico-economic alternatives. Its social and economic configuration has been organised according to the algorithm of ' $x + y < \rightarrow 0$ ', taking into account that 'x' being the non-indigenous Paraguay society and 'y' the indigenous peoples who live in, and are the legitimate owners of large segments of, the Paraguayan territory; '+' is the tense, multivalent relationship between the natives and various segments of the national society, and the expression '<0' is the aggregate of all socio-spatial and politico-economic activities in the country that tends to a negative sum. In the following pages it will be related the historical progression of subtraction with the more recent aggression against indigenous peoples, but also their mobilisation and creative reactions.

## Evolution and the accumulation by subtraction

Colonial mercantilism—the economic regime of the European Renaissance that primarily depended on the subjugation of colonies and the adoption of far-reaching trade restrictions to privilege the interests of the metropolises—was powerful enough to define and shape the conquest of most of the American continent by Spain since the inaugural 1492 voyage. The main net effect of colonisation was the production of a reality smaller than the sum of pre-colonial parts, given that the European *conquistadores*, missionaries and the South American native inhabitants were all downgraded throughout their forced interaction. Spanish settlers, soldiers and priests moved to the New World in very utilitarian search of riches and souls, which were supposed to boost the power and wealth of the elites. In that process, ecosystems, resources and living organisms were preyed upon and many landscapes were severely devastated. As observed by Lévi-Strauss (1993: 7), “not only the Indians, but also the whites, were threatened by gold greed and the plagues introduced by latter”. Unquestionably, the human cost paid by the natives was exceedingly higher since they suffered the worst genocide in human history—there is huge disagreement about the number of deaths, but the best estimate is around 56 million individuals died as a result of European exploration in the New World (Madley 2015)—largely due to murderous attacks and the introduction of contagious diseases. The opulence of most Iberian and European palaces, towns, universities and monuments was essentially paid for by the plundering of American resources and the blood of the indigenous peoples. Colonialism and mercantilism, industrial-imperialism and, eventually, international development eroded and drained significant socio-ecological resources, native societies and human lives. The main consequence is that not just the colonial Paraguayan space was subtracted and 'less than before', but also the affluence of Habsburg Spanish was an inherent deficiency (because grounded on an accumulated deficit).

The persistent component of subtraction was also manifested in the very transformation and reduction of the colonial territory. In 1617, with the declining importance of Paraguay due to the absence of gold or silver and the dominant power of Buenos Aires, the Spanish crown split the La Plata administration and created the Governorate of Paraguay [*Gobernación del Paraguay*], originally called the Governorate of Guayrá and part of the Viceroyalty of Peru. As a result, Paraguay lost access to the sea and became a land-locked colony.

The Governorate lasted until 1782, after which Paraguay became an intendency [*intendencia*] of the newly formed Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata (Prado et al. 2021). Later, throughout a feeble and protracted independence process initiated in 1811 (Brezzo 2016), the country had its image distinctively associated with the Guaraní people and other indigenous symbols, but it was a controlled narrative of indigeneity-by-subtraction. This vague indigenous veneer of the young Paraguayan republic, nurtured by an idiosyncratic fusion of nationalistic, romantic and predatorial penchants, has provided ample populist legitimisation for its small military-bureaucratic-agrarian ruling coalition. Those widespread spatial tendencies help to understand the many dilemmas faced by a country such as Paraguay, which has had its geography produced out of subtractive pressures. Even the national borders, as currently depicted on any cartographic map, are testimony of accumulated losses and hardly fought legacies.

At the same time, the Paraguayan elite has always maintained a self-serving attitude with the systematic appropriation of opportunities at the expense of the majority of the population and of indigenous peoples in particular (Chesterton 2013). Squeezed between larger neighbouring countries, the subtractive tendencies of Paraguayan geography came to a head as a result of the devastating continental war of 1864–1870, a megalomaniac and impossible conflict simultaneously against Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay that decimated the population, took away a large part of its territory and destroyed a hitherto thriving economy. Historians have insisted that it was the only example of ‘total warfare’ between Latin American nations that involved the whole population and not just the army, because the aim was to destroy Paraguay rather than just the removal of the dictator Solano López (Lambert and Nickson 2013). One of the most horrifying events was the battle of Acosta Ñu, in 1869, when the allies—commanded by the son-in-law of the Brazilian Emperor, the French prince Gaston of Orleans—defeated an army composed of around 4,000 Paraguayan children wearing beards, along with elders and women. Children were said to cling to the legs of Brazilian soldiers amidst the furious skirmishing, pleading for mercy, but only to be decapitated without hesitation (Bondar 2017).<sup>2</sup> Because of the disastrous war<sup>3</sup> and the almost annihilation of Paraguay as an independent country, from the 1870s, there was increasing selling of rural areas to foreign companies and the attraction of (preferentially) white colonists, including many protestant communities (Kohlhepp 1984). Among these, three ships with almost 900 British ill-fated migrants—the Lincolnshire Farmers—left England in 1872 only to be ‘rescued’ from their subtractive condition in 1873 and the survivors transferred to Buenos Aires (Godward and Nickson 2021).

The first decades of the last century represented a period of great political instability, which involved another major conflict with Bolivia, the Chaco War, between 1932 and 1935, fought over the control of fossil fuel reserves in the region. One of its main protagonists, Colonel Rafael Franco, seized power in 1936 and laid the first foundations for a nationalist reinterpretation of the social identity. To ease internal tensions after the war, the improvised president created the national myth, still effective today, of a united and mestizo past. Post-war nationalism led to a resurgence of Guaraní as a symbol of Paraguayan mixed race, and Franco officially made it the second national language (Horst 2007); however, in practice, it maintained the (mestizo) majority of the population systematically

<sup>2</sup> Children’s Day is celebrated on 16 August in Paraguay to commemorate the memory of the children who lost their lives in the battle.

<sup>3</sup> The large-scale war also had major reverberations in Brazil and contributed to the end of the monarchy in a coup d’état launched by veterans of the Paraguayan War in November 1889.



subservient and marginalised (Corbo 2021). Already in the 1940s, several agrarian colonisation projects were implemented in the eastern region of the country, bringing increasing deforestation and displacement of indigenous and peasant communities. More importantly, 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 chiefs, it was possible to promote a highly conservative and authoritarian process of agriculture expansion, partly funded by the North American government and aimed at concentrating land and specialising production units (Pincus 1968). Over the last two centuries, Paraguay one way or another managed to retain its precarious independent status, despite the initial lack of international recognition (in the early nineteenth century), the perennial threat of Argentinean and Brazilian sub-imperialism (as in the case of the generation of hydro-electricity) and geopolitical pressures exerted especially by the USA. Nonetheless, the old subtractive tendencies intensified as a response to development pressures and were nothing else than the continuation of the subtractive logic of dispossession of the land of peasants and indigenous communities (Brunet-Bélanger 2022).

For several generations, the Paraguayan agriculture had been largely based on small family farming and most of the land maintained its original vegetation, what started to change in the second half of the last century with agrarian development programmes and extensive land grabbing (Yaluff 2006). The 1960's *March towards the East* aimed, along the lines of the Green Revolution, at occupying, deforesting and converting into private properties the borderland with Brazil. In 1963, a new Agrarian Law was passed and established the formal principles for the distribution of land among peasants, particularly in collective units (so-called colonies), although it also led to the appropriation of large rural areas by political allies. Stroessner's reactionary agrarian reform clearly followed the dictamen of subaltern capitalist development and oligarchic modernisation that characterised the Cold War period. The aim was not to produce food or promote agrarian justice, but export commodities, speculate with land and contain the indigenous population in dwindling enclaves. The government also used agrarian reform as a strategy to secure political support and also to compensate members of the regime, especially senior officers of the armed forces (74% of the land was allocated to only 2.8% of the beneficiaries, cf. Hetherington 2013); the latter are the much discussed '*tierras malhabidas*' (illicit lands), around seven million hectares illegally delivered by the dictatorship Stroessner to associated militaries and oligarchs, who often resold them to Brazilian landlords (Guereña and Rojas 2016). The Truth and Justice Commission (CVJ), created to investigate human rights violations during the Stroessner regime, presented a 6,000-page report in 2006, which demonstrated that nearly two-thirds of land allocated by the regime went to people close to the government and none of those beneficiaries were poor (Comisión Verdad y Justicia 2008).

A main expression of subtraction amidst Stroessner's populist agrarian reform was the migration of thousands of Brazilians (called *Brasiguayos*) in search of land and opportunities in Paraguay. The arrival of Brazilian farmers accelerated the displacement of peasants without legal titles to their land, as well as indigenous communities abandoned by the national state (even those with regular titles found it impossible to compete with agribusiness farmers and the dramatic increase in land values not only precluded the expansion of subsistence production but also worsened the pressure on poor tenant farmers and natives). The subtraction of space for peasants and indigenous peoples was aggravated when Stroessner revoked a law that prohibited land purchase by foreigners within 150 km of international borders, as much as the introduction of concession of land and financing of agribusiness activities, no taxes on agricultural production and minimal regulation of deforestation and labour exploitation. Migration to Paraguay was greatly encouraged by the construction



**Table 1** Land concentration trends in Paraguay, 1991–2008

Property size	Area in 1991 (million ha)	% Share of total area	Area in 2008 (million ha)	% Share of total area
Less than 200 ha	3.4	14.3	3.1	10.0
b. 200 ha and 10,000 ha	10.7	44.9	15.3	49.3
More than 10,000 ha	9.7	40.9	12.7	40.7
Total	23.8	100.0	31.1	100.00

Source: Galeano (2012)

Adapted from Pereira (2018)

of the Itaipu hydroelectric project, which expropriated 42,000 people, who joined those already ousted by the advance of the Green Revolution in Brazil (Wesz Junior 2022). It was a sustained process of neo-colonisation and gradual expansion of agribusiness farms marked by with a strong element of racism, given that most *Brasiguayos* came from the southernmost Brazilian states and have Italian or German ancestry (Souchaud 2002). The state-facilitated access to common land and the conservative modernisation of agriculture since the developmentalist post-World War II decades paved the way for the consolidation of a politico-economic and ideological hegemony of export-oriented agribusiness and the persistent concentration of land in large latifundia.

Land concentration continued to restructure the rural landscapes of Paraguay, as seen in Table 1. The most astonishing statistics is the small number of 600 properties (0.2% of the total number of properties) owning 40.8% of the agricultural land, whilst 276,160 properties (95.6% of the total) only hold 10% (Pereira 2018; also MAG 2023). Peasants, including indigenous communities, have suffered from a double marginalisation as they are simultaneously excluded and exploited, where the production of basic food is overlooked in favour of export-oriented commodities. Instead of economic and social agents, the rural poor are now reduced to mere targets of poverty reduction programmes (Riquelme and Kretschmer 2016). These trends expose a main socio-spatial contradiction of hegemonic capitalist relations of production and reproduction, which is exactly to bring forth increasingly complex techno-economic activities that nonetheless rely upon, and tend to aggravate, a subtractive dialectic of space. Higher levels of capital-dominated interaction bring about mounting socio-spatial asymmetries but also growing politico-economic and socio-spatial regularities and simplifications. The increase of agribusiness production and the restriction of economic gains in the hands of the landed elites have also depended on the mounting depletion of resources, labour and political liberties, which lead to unavoidable tensions and crises manifested in the production of subtracted, homogenised spaces.

Agribusiness in the Global South evidently makes use of the same technological package that is widespread in Western countries, including transgenic crops, synthetic fertilisers, heavy machinery and agrochemicals (insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, etc.). As a result, Paraguay has become *the most transgenic country* in the world is also one of the most contaminated (Pedroso 2019). By far, the main crop is soybean—which in 2016 occupied 66% of Paraguay's cultivated area (Santos and Vasconcelos 2022). Soybean is the leading product and responds for 28.2% of national exports, followed by the export of electric energy (15.4%) and beef (14.8%) in the year 2021 (CEPALSTAT 2023). In the productive season 2020/2021, soybean cultivation occupied 3,640,000 hectares out of a total of 5.8 million hectares of arable land and produced 10.5 million tons (according to INE

2023a).<sup>4</sup> As expected, the expansion of soybean has occurred in tandem with new waves of violent oppression of small farmers and indigenous communities, who have been evicted from their homes and ancestral areas (Gu 2016). Agribusiness exports and the power of landlords currently dominate the national economies of most South American economies, even those led by left-wing, populist politicians, what is described as the ‘glyphosate consensus’ that undermined older calls for the eradication of poverty and redistribution of land (Santos and Vasconcelos 2022).

Agribusiness has flourished in the country not only because of state support and despite the demands of the majority of the national population, but also because of the formidable alliance between landowners and illegal trade of commodities, agrochemicals, cars, machinery and, in particular, illicit drugs. Drug trade is now the big elephant in the room, linking Paraguay to Colombian and Bolivian cocaine production zones, as well as its domestic marijuana growers, to illicit markets in Brazil, Europe and North America. In practice, drug trafficking is an extractive and highly lucrative economy. It is a form of ‘mafia capitalism’ that affects the whole Latin America, but because in Paraguay it benefits from the advance of the so-called agricultural frontier along the Brazilian and Argentinean border (Friggeri 2021). This booming legal-illegal economy has solidified through a combination of violence and cynicism, including the relationship of agribusiness with other illegal enterprises such as money laundering, smuggling and drug trafficking. Many farms are in effect camouflage for drug trafficking, smuggling and extermination groups, instead of agriculture production. What is worse, the nexus drug-agribusiness tacitly benefits from the attitudes and commitments of conservative political leaders. The political system is notoriously marked by accusations of corruption, personalisation of political parties, corruption scandals, public insecurity and drug trafficking (Dosek and Duarte-Recalde 2023). Probably the most acute evidence of marginalisation and subtraction is the dwindling space of indigenous peoples vis-à-vis the advance of agribusiness, contraband and drug traffic. The demands and rights of the indigenous population are typically ignored, and their existence is considered a relic from the distant past and prone to disappear.

As in the colonial past, the condition of the ancestral inhabitants of the land is the best expression of the subtractive pressures of (conservative) nation building and mainstream development. Their world has been systematically subtracted and, for farmers and politicians, is expected to vanish into itself via assimilation or by sheer genocidal violence (including ethnocide, ecocide, femicide and culturecide). The most explicit anti-indigenous violence has been somehow mitigated in recent years due to populist concessions and the cosmetic acceptance of indigenous rights, but subtraction, even dissimulated, remains the rule. It means that the largely silent indigenous question continues to characterise, from a negative, dialectical perspective, the hegemony of agribusiness and the supposed success of economic policies based on the export of goods and commodities (Ioris 2017). The international imagery of Paraguay preserves undetermined elements of indigeneity—the so-called Guaraní country—but these rhetoric and the semiotic instruments of national propaganda conceal socio-spatial asymmetries and the highly marginalised condition of the natives. The indigenous population is an important contingent of the Paraguayan working class, but it has remained doubly exploited: due to their ethnicity and also due to widespread poverty and marginalisation (for the condition of the indigenous nations, see DGECC 2014). On the other hand, indigeneity is also a node of resistance against

<sup>4</sup> In comparative terms, the area with soybean in the neighbouring countries is: Brazil (34.8 million ha), Argentina (16.3 million ha), Bolivia (1.4 million ha) and Uruguay (1.1 million ha).

the exclusionary tendencies of mainstream development, extending from the local to the national and international scales of socio-economic and political interaction.

Those widespread spatial tendencies help to understand the many dilemmas faced by a country such as Paraguay, which has had its geography produced out of asymmetric processes that continuously excluded and penalised its indigenous population. Indigeneity is an increasingly important concept in contemporary socio-economic studies and a central area of dispute of late modernity and in a greatly globalised world. Following Badiou, its truth is formed by subtractions but also the possibility to negate it through the disturbance (new subtraction) of the status quo. The fast growing international debate on indigeneity encapsulates the friction between ethnicity and class identities, which cannot be understood without a full consideration of differences and relationships between landowners, other economic sectors, non-indigenous workers and indigenous people. In the next section it will be examined the experience of geographical subtraction undergone by the Paĩ Tavyterã, which relies on primary data collected during fieldwork in 2022–2023, primarily in the north-eastern Department of Amambay.

## **An endured geography of subtraction**

As described above, the organisation of Paraguay both as a colony and as a sovereign country was marked by subtractive pressures exerted by settlers, missionaries, landowners and national elites on the majority of the population and on their socio-ecological relations. Subtraction remained strong during the authoritarian developmentalism of Stroessner, and it is much alive in the present political-economy dominated by agribusiness and its association with contraband and drug trafficking. Conservative agrarian reform and developmentalism policies in the middle of the last century paved the way to the neoliberalisation of the economy since the 1990s. Paraguay's subtracted past and subtracting present are particularly exposed in anti-commons and anti-indigenous trends. With most of the population with some level of indigenous heritage, Paraguay is one of the most ethnically homogenous nations in South America. The Paraguayan people, in general, refers to itself as *mestiza*, which designates a person of mixed European and indigenous origin, without distinction between degrees of ethnicity (Brunet-Bélanger 2022). However, this generic trace of indigeneity and *mestizaje* has not been translated into any benefit for the remaining indigenous nations. On the contrary, the indigenous segment of the population, around 140,000 persons or less than 2% of national society (INE 2023b), is the part that has only paradoxically taken part through sustained subtraction, which has gradually reduced their possibility to be recognised as socio-political agents. The Guaraní people, above all, because of the language and the symbolism of their colonial past, are often referred to as the cornerstones of Paraguayan society, but never took any meaningful part in national affairs, as the past constantly actualises itself through systematic social and political discrimination (Correia 2023).

Similarly to the previous colonial and early republican phases of the Paraguayan history, the main contact between the national state and the indigenous population continues to be through racism, violence and authoritarianism (including gender-based aggressions). Particularly their ancestral areas have been under pressure by the combined impact of land grabbers, agribusiness farmers and the forest industry, with the decisive presence of transnational corporations and Brazilian businesspeople engaged in the production of export-oriented crops (Codehupy 2022). It was interpreted by Kleinpenning (2009: 29) as

consequence of the fact that “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 had no right to the land, however, which meant that their existence remained legally insecure”. This subtractive power, which continues to underpin the functioning of the national state and most interpersonal relations, is also manifested in the attempt to contain political reactions. Despite their ubiquity, the indigenous population has remained the eternal, subordinate other prone to be undermined and forgotten. Nonetheless, indigenous communities and their associations are not passive, but have used all possible means to resist and protest, as the large-scale demonstration in the capital in September 2021 against a new legislation that makes it a crime to invade private property. The unrest started when the 80-member Chamber of Deputies (lower house of the parliament) approved an amendment to the land invasion law that increased the penalty to six years in prison from four for those who ‘illegally’ occupy private property (even those attempting to recover properties captured from indigenous peoples).

One of the indigenous peoples most severely impacted by recent rounds of subtraction—in the form of land grabbing, discrimination and violent attacks by drug dealers, state and paramilitary forces—is undoubtedly the Paĩ Tavyterã who live mainly in the Department (province) of Amambay, on the border with Brazil (where the same ethnic group, known as Guarani-Kaiowa, are found in the State of Mato Grosso do Sul, see Ioris 2012, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). The Paĩ Tavyterã/Guarani-Kaiowa is one of the sub-groups of the large Guarani population that inhabited and continues to occupy hundreds of locations (Bertoni 1922). In the beginning of the last century, their territory amounted to more than two million hectares but that is now restricted to a much subtracted 5.3% of the original area (99,524 hectares in 2020), with around 16,000 people divided several family nucleuses [*tekoha*] spread around eight large clusters [*tekohaguasu*] (Glauser and Villagra 2021). The Paĩ Tavyterã occupy a ‘remote corner of the country’ (from the perspective of the main urban centres), which in recent years has become a hotspot of agribusiness, land grabbing and drug trafficking (Costa 2023). Their deteriorating socio-spatial situation is of great interest, not only for agrarian and indigenous studies, but to critically interrogate the basis of agro-neoliberalism and its rent-seeking strategies. They and their ancestors have been suffering the impacts of subtraction since the early phase of the Spanish invasion.

During the colonisation of Paraguay, several historical records described the existence of an indigenous nation living in the northeast of the colony and designated as the Itatines. They lived in the Itatín region, were often described as ‘Caaiguás del Tarumá’ or more commonly ‘Itatines’ and comprised various Guarani-speaking groups from different areas, including those who tried to escape the colonial system, the Jesuit Missions, the *bandeirantes* (Luso-Brazilian trailblazers) and also the attack of other indigenous peoples (Combès, 2017). With the destruction of the Jesuit missions [called *reducciones*] and the demarcation of the imperial borders between Portugal and Spain under the 1750 Treaty of Madrid, and other subsequent treaties, the Itatines were left to fend for themselves and their descendants are the present-day Paĩ Tavyterã (Paraguay), Guarani-Kaiowa (Brazil) and, on the western side of the Paraguay River, Guarayos (Bolivia). Their circumstances did not significantly change during the process of national independence, but they were severely impacted by the disastrous 1864–1870 war. As reparation charges, Paraguay lost a significant part of its territory, including around half of the land of the Paĩ Tavyterã/Guarani-Kaiowa, which was relinquished to Brazil (Chamorro 2015). The fragmentation of their ancestral territory was a devastating blow on community life and on socio-spatial relations. It has also left lingering subtractive impacts ever since. At the turn of the twentieth century, the indigenous communities of both the Guarani-Kaiowa and the Paĩ Tavyterã

were increasingly involved in agriculture production. Indigenous labour was essential for the exploitation of quebracho and yerba-maté, typically in the form of seasonal jobs [*changa*] on the large estates [*estancias*] or forestry enterprises, which were often a dis-simulated form of semi-slavery through debt bondage (Cerna Villagra 2014; Chase-Sardi 1989; Kleinpenning 2009; Stanford et al. 2021).

With several generations living under an artificially imposed international border, in tandem with land grabbing, labour exploitation and racist discrimination, the condition of the Paĩ Tavyterã became an aporia between law and justice or, what is the same, between formalist citizenship and real life. That is interpreted by Nancy (1993: 44) as the “destitution of the abandoned Being” that “is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed”. Most Paĩ Tavyterã communities were left scattered in precarious settlements, largely neglected by the state and under attack by farmers and speculators (Maybury-Lewis and Howe 1980). In 1972, the Paĩ Tavyterã Project (PPT) was launched and tried to recover the main Paĩ Tavyterã areas, but, despite the good work of a competent international team, there were many operational obstacles. The most tangible consequence of PPT was the formation of dispersed enclaves (around 100 reservations or encampments) that remained vulnerable to abuse and illegalities (Grönberg and Grönberg, 2014). The annual report of IWGIA (2023: 442) explicitly denounces that although the “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”. According to Glauser and Villagra (2021), 16,152 hectares of forest were cut by intruders between 2001 and 2018 in areas that lawfully belong to the Paĩ Tavyterã.<sup>5</sup> Also wildfires, aggravated by severe droughts in recent years, have threatened indigenous areas in Amambay and in 2021 affected 70% of the Cerro Cora National Park (with 5,836 hectares), which is of immense ecological and historical importance but was then consumed by flames. Although forest fires, related to deforestation and intrusion, have systematically affected indigenous territories, the national state and its indigenist agency (INDI) repeatedly fail to take the appropriate measures (Amnesty International 2015).

In more general terms, the subtractive pressures of development have entailed the conversion of an economy historically characterised by small family farming into large agribusiness operations dedicated to commodity export and land speculation. The agribusiness frontier that transformed the eastern Alto Parana region in the 1980s has been expanding to the northeast of Paraguay, notably to the Department of Amambay (Palau and Heikel 2022) where the majority of the Paĩ Tavyterã areas are located. The subtraction caused by agribusiness is not just associated with the monoculture production system, but it also relies on land speculation and on the unrestrained degradation of ecosystems. It is an extractivist and ultimately rentist form of agriculture that leaves behind a heavy ecological and socio-spatial passive (Ioris 2016). Not just indigenous land has been illegally occupied by neighbouring farmers, but the vegetation has been cut and water has been contaminated in several ancestral areas (Morínigo Villalba et al. 2021). Agribusiness production is, therefore, part of a broader subtractive engine fuelled by resource grabbing and rent-seeking. It is well documented in Paraguay and in the other countries that are members of the Mercosur

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Law 904, of 1981, an ancestral land in Paraguay must be bought back from the current private landowners and transferred to the indigenous communities (which must attain legal personhood status to claim their land) and then maintained as collectively property (it cannot be rented, subdivided or resold).

trade bloc that input hungry monocultures are a form of anti-agriculture that relies on industrialised inputs to extract value from land, water, vegetation and labour (Ioris 2022). Agribusiness expands in the form of socio-spatial frontiers, championed by the national state, in a process that is both rent-forging and rent-dependent, that is, it depends on the (legal and illegal) grabbing of common land, the destruction of ecosystems and natural resources, the exploitation of labour and, ultimately, the imposition of a politico-ideological logic that perpetually self-reinforces its hegemony.

The exponential growth of agribusiness in the east and northeast of Paraguay in recent years has been responsible for the concentration of land and wealth, contaminates the environment, human health impacts and erosion of the traditional livelihoods of small-scale farmers and indigenous communities (Guereña 2013). More than 80% of all arable land is used for the cultivation of soybean and the majority of what is harvest is exported and only around 40% is traded in domestic markets. As above-mentioned, 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 politico-economic elite (14% of the Paraguayan territory is currently owned by Brazilians). This powerful politico-economic model has even affected the traditional relation between indigenous families and their land. According to the last census (INE 2023a), there are 4,958 individual properties with indigenous owners (including three with more than 500 hectares), versus 252 collectively owned properties. Only in the Department of Amambay, there are 281 properties managed individually with an average size of 1,822 hectares. Also part of the same nexus is the worrying synergy between the advance of agribusiness and the strengthening of a large illegal economy based on the smuggling of goods (including both items produced in Paraguay and those imported from Asian markets through Brazilian ports and later smuggled back). There is no secret also about the association between agribusiness, the large conservative majority of politicians and drug cartels that operate along the international border. Around 80% of the drug smuggled into Brazil comes from Paraguay (notably through Pedro Juan Caballero and Capitán Bado, the main areas of the Paĩ Tavayerã in Amambay, which includes marijuana cultivated in indigenous lands). Some large-scale farmers are not just involved in drug trafficking into the Brazilian territory, but invest in land and cattle to launder money in Paraguay.

Institutionalised violence, including forced labour, brutal displacements and the assassinations of indigenous people, is all forms of rent extraction that, in the words of Tucker (2020: 1461), constitute a mechanism of “accumulation by transgression”. Subtraction is evidently a major consequence of transgression which is also constantly reinforcing the prevailing socio-spatial structures (the ‘splace’ cf. Badiou). Indigenous communities with countless generations of relation with their ancestral land continually struggle to recover and maintain their areas. For instance, the communities of Arroyo Ka’a, 63 km from Bella Vista on the border with Brazil (46 families with 176 inhabitants), have entailed more than 30 years trying to recover and register their land with around 5,900 hectares. Many generations of indigenous families have lived on the site, and before that, they were living on the fringes of the land. The population has suffered from the lack of potable water, deforestation and fires caused by neighbouring farms and the contamination caused by pesticides and by a nearby ethanol industry (Morínigo Villalba et al. 2021: 29). In an interview with a female resident of Arroyo Ka’a, in September 2023, it was stated that:

We were born here, [where] the forest was very tick back then, we had many beautiful trees, we called it ‘the marrow [*karaku*] of the forest’; but during the eviction they took us and our trees out, but we came back... They built the business, I don’t know



what kind... we came to an agreement with the owner which was 'we are not going to pay attention to you nor do you pay attention to us' but they destroyed everything.... We had to denounce it; that was the story of Arroyo Ka'a (...) Alberto Brites, our recognised leader, went to jail for three months, he went through the worst to get Arroyo Ka'a for us. I am a victim of that, the military came, in front of the children they made a mess for Don Alberto. And later with bullets, they destroyed our trees, I was 8 or 9 years old, and I saw how they had Don Alberto, they played with him, they took him to the road to torture him or do anything to him. I always remember everything that happened in Arroyo Ka'a, but this place has always been ours, that is our history.

Reflection on those challenges, a leader of the Cerro Akängue community stated in another interviews in 2023, originally given in the Guarani language:

A major problem for us is increasing number of wildfires every year, which are related to the deforestation of our land. We have been working hard for 18 years now, trying to control the fires, but the situation is getting worse. This is evidently connected with the fragile tenure of our land. (...) In the past, the PPT left the situation incomplete; we understand, the PPT did what was then possible. Our problems remain more or less the same. Some people arrive here with false titles and claim ownership over the land. Others come and start extracting timber and stones [quarrying]. We carry on, slowly but steadily. But the youth have to join the elders, participate more. (...) We work as a community, and each community has its own complexity, but we are all Paĩ Tavyterã. We are in a different situation, but we also share the same problems of the Guarani-Kaiowa.

In effect, the reaction of indigenous peoples and other sectors of the working class has been increasingly prominent and challenges the precarious legitimisation of mainstream political and economic trends. The violence of mainstream policies is a devastating experience any social group could endure, but it can be resisted through the mobilisation of spatial and ethnic core identities and, more importantly, the willingness to fight and the importance of united political action. Being is not resistance in itself, but being as multiplicity in the world conditioned by events can lead to the subversion of a given socio-spatial order. The struggle of the Paĩ Tavyterã has been happening through the denunciation of abuses, national and international protests, alliances academics and NGO activisms, recruitment of lawyers to represent them in the courts (sometimes lawyers of the indigenist agency INDI) and, more important, cross-community and family support. The Paĩ Tavyterã have engaged with allied socio-environmental NGOs, academics and international organisations to draw attention to their land struggle. As a result, there are a growing number of reports and web-based articles denouncing land grabbing and the lenience of the authorities. Likewise, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has condemned the situation and, after a visit in 2014, published a document with numerous recommendations, which include the full reparation for all the violations of human rights and the effective enforcement of legislation relating to the protection of lands claimed by indigenous communities with appropriate penalties for intrusions when they occur and compensating the affected communities for any damage (UN 2015).

Those measures have represented an active effort to overcome persistent genocidal pressures and to maintain key elements of their world through the recovery of ancestral areas lost to rural and regional development. It is also highly revealing of the internal logic of their political mobilisation that Paĩ Tavyterã leaders have repeatedly expressed a strong

resolve to remain within the boundaries of the law, as the most effective and justifiable strategy, as stated in meetings with the Ytaguay Community (near the hills of the Jasuka Venda, the most significant site of the Paĩ Tavyterã and considered the place where humanity was created by *Ñande Ru*, ‘our grandfather’). 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 (Espínola Oviedo 2021). Regardless of the systematic mistreatment by public authorities, in our interviews with one of the main leaders of Yvy Pyté, this informant reiterated their determination to prioritise the struggle to recover their ancestral areas mainly through legal and institutional channels. It demonstrates that, instead of any rigid separation, there is resistance in vulnerability, that is, resistance is a resource of vulnerability, because the latter is vulnerability is induced and maintained by relations of dependency, which need to be exposed and challenged (Butler et al. 2016). Against a long-lasting spurious order, the indigenous person is the ‘bearer of the nonlaw’ (Badiou 2009), exactly because of that he/she bears the possibility of justice. The socio-political place of the Paĩ Tavyterã is the non-space of the offsite that is always there, constantly tensioning the status quo, but is never recognised as a legitimate part. For them, subtraction is the name of an ongoing genocide (Ioris 2021) that daily removes some of what was left, but it is likewise resisted, day-by-day, because is and can be much more than the prevailing socio-spatial order of things.

## Discussion and conclusions

The overall result of centuries of nation building is a highly unequal Paraguayan society that only partially benefits from the questionable expansion and vibrancy of its agribusiness-based economy, which thrives at the expense of social and ecological abuses. There is a robust subtractive nexus that connects the activity of agribusiness, illegal forms of trade and socio-political authoritarianism. After more than two hundred years of independent history and geography, politics and economy in Paraguay remain dominated by the powerful interests of export companies and landowners, what has forged a decisive synergy with illegal trade and, increasingly, drug traffickers associated with politicians and senior authorities. At the centre of those contradictions lies the violence and racism against the native population, the Guaraní in particular. There exist a persistent driving-forces of exclusion and discrimination of indigenous peoples, hence the ontological and political importance of indigeneity. The tragic history of indigenous groups in Paraguay and throughout the American continent is well known, initially under the auspices of colonisation by the European crowns and, later, according to the pattern of a racialised power exerted by national governments after independence. This involves the appropriation, transformation and return of epistemes able to subvert racism and oppression imposed through the ‘colonial matrix of power’ (Mignolo 2011). The rejection of the perverse twins ‘modernity and coloniality’ (given that Western modernity being inseparable from the logic of coloniality) calls for a double translation between critical positions nurtured within Western modernity and the land-based radical alternatives as those embodied by indigenous peoples (such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Bolivian plurinational experiment, among others, despite the challenges faced by those alternative socio-economic development pathways).

The most acute manifestations of subtraction in Paraguay today, which unfolds through the fixing places through the outplaced (following the terminology put forward by Badiou) and the tension between determination and scission, are the operations of its agribusiness

sector, particularly the export of meat and soybean. Private farms currently occupy more than 30 million hectares, out of a country with 40 million, most of these as cattle ranches and export-oriented plantations (MAG 2023). It is a typical example of a subtracted economy that bloats due to growing international demand and the facilitated access to common and indigenous land in South America. Soybean, in particular, was converted from a flexible legume and a nutritious crop into a new ‘fossil fuel-like resource’ coming from the vast landscapes in the centre and south of the continent and encroaching the ancestral areas of the Guarani and other indigenous peoples. Soybean has become a key socio-natural actor of the current agro-neoliberalist *durée* of the South American economies, increasingly deindustrialised, dependent on Chinese and North American commercial orders, and inserted in the logic of transnational corporations, global banks and 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. Instead of staple food for the national population, it produces agro-industrial commodities to be sent away. The agronomic technology involved in soybean cultivation is perilously dependent on heavy use of agrochemicals, machines, genetically modified seeds and foreign digital equipment. Hetherington (2020: 80) argues that “soy is always a conspiracy”, it is everywhere in Paraguay, it is a new version of the old colonial violence—*la soja mata*, or ‘the soy kills’—a vast socio-economic poison for which it is supposed to be a remedy.

Paraguayan agribusiness is nowadays just a very pronounced element of the institutionalised corruption that defines national politics and state interventions. The separation between legal and illegal activities is highly debatable in a geographical context dominated by the violence of agribusiness, the convenience of the national state and prominent politicians and the widespread operation of militias and drug mafias (Ávalos 2013). What prevails is a political regime that includes a high tolerance for the various manifestations of corruption, explicitly authoritarian or demagogic tendencies among political leaders and generally despondent attitudes towards elections (Meyer 2018). Tucker (2020: 1459) describes it as an ‘outlaw capital’ which “is a mode of accumulation that works through dealmaking and rule breaking. (...) Like Marx’s general category of capital, outlaw capital is both a social relation and the product of those relations. (...) [It] helps us to better apprehend capitalism as a complex and mutating social formation working through worlds beyond wages and productive labour”. As observed by Badiou (2009: 159), an illegal state has typically the veil of legality and pretends to observe the constitutional order, but really justice only arises when what is supposedly illegal becomes the legal norm. Illegality and institutionalised corruption have been the main catalyst of national politics and policy-making, the only think that ‘really works’, at least from the perspective of landowners and businesspeople.

However, if the long subtractive pressures of national building and mainstream development have directly depended on the exploitation of indigenous peoples, there is also a growing realisation that their active continuation represents a political limit that nurtures the prospect of reversing subtraction. The ancestral inhabitants of Paraguay are the best hope of reconfiguring development along the lines of inclusion and justice, that is, addition. If the northeast of Paraguay became a contemporary frontier of coloniality and global agribusiness trade, the Paĩ Tavysterã have resisted and consistently try to maintain ethnic and class-based differences on their own terms, as the most basic ‘weapon’ in their struggle to recover and preserve their sacred ancestral land. The Paĩ Tavysterã have been able to creatively mobilise treasured elements of their collective existence and take them to diverse political arenas, reaching increasingly broader audiences with the support of social media. Contrary to the prevailing mainstream argument, a bottom-up defence of crucial

socio-spatial differences not only guarantees the endurance of indigenous people as such, but is also the cornerstone of their political struggle against a profoundly exclusionary reality that tends towards dilution of the most fundamental features of their existence. The final conclusion is that indigenous and non-indigenous members of the working class have a central role in the functioning of the Paraguayan society, but remain (as the active offsite, following Badiou) excluded from the crucial decisions and the sharing of economic results. It means that decolonisation is, first and foremost, an anti-subtraction movement, from the local to the national and global scales, to revert the deficit caused by systemic subtraction and collectively seeking for social, political and spatial additions.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** Author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** The papers contain a politico-economics and geographical analysis. No animals, sensitive issues or vulnerable groups were involved in the research. This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author. The research and the manuscript comply with all ethical standards, especially those put forward by Cardiff University.

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