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Green colonialism in the European Green Deal: Continuities of dependency and the relationship of forces between Europe and Africa

Abstract

In 2019, the European Union set a new course for a sustainable Europe with the European Green Deal (EGD), which included not only energy strategies but also mobility or clean water for a green Europe. The European Green Deal policies have implications and global effects on other world regions, e.g., the African continent. As I would argue, the EGD has a new EU-Africa strategy, which is marked by a continuity of dependency and might be an enabler of green colonialism. Existing patterns of dependency between Africa and Europe are reproduced, but new demands are made vis-à-vis African states which are supposed to implement European ecological transformation plans.

This article discusses two fields of the EU-Africa strategy in the EGD: hydrogen and biodiversity. It shows that the EGD preserves the existing asymmetric relationship between Africa and the EU by highlighting the elements of green capitalism and green colonialism. Furthermore, it discusses alternative socio-ecological transformation methods in Africa, e.g., the South African Climate Justice Charter.

Keywords: European Green Deal, hydrogen, biodiversity, Europe-Africa relationship, social-ecological transformation

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1. Introduction

In 2019, the European Union (EU) launched the European Green Deal (EGD), which aims to reconcile the idea of a "sustainable Europe" with economic prosperity. The EGD was embedded in the global debate on green economy and growth and addressed several policies like mobility, agriculture, and generating electricity. This involves the reorganisation of the European economy, and the internal restructuring also impacts other regions. Europe's development cannot be viewed in isolation from other global developments. Global interconnectedness is visible in the fact that economic and political conflicts do not only have regional effects but can manifest themselves everywhere in the world. The increasing inflation in 2022, especially for food and energy, is not only a problem in Europe but is already showing in the global South. Restructuring in Europe towards a green economy, e.g. the search for new energy sources, has implications for other regions.

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This is particularly evident in EU-Africa relations. In order to fulfill the plan, the EGD streamline its focus on cooperation with African countries. Europe demands African states to realise the European ecological transformation. I argue that this green pathway cannot be resolved in Europe alone and that we need a global perspective on the European Green Deal, even though the EGD wants to transform Europe. This also involves whether the dependencies between the EU and Africa will deepen, or whether there is room for manoeuvre for the African states.

This article draws on Global Ecological Political Economy and (green) colonialism for conceptual considerations. These considerations lead to an understanding of green colonialism and of the question whether we can observe a form of green colonialism through the EGD. As I will show in this article, in the long run, we will see a form of green colonialism. The policies on energy/hydrogen and biodiversity exemplify how green colonialism is manifested in the European Green Deal. Therefore, it remains to be seen if the EGD benefits African societies or if EGD policies could again lead to limiting the scope of African states' social-ecological transformations at the national level.

2. Conceptual considerations

"In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (Fanon, 2004, 5).

The quote of Fanon shows that the relationship of forces has different layers, and several aspects play a role in shaping the colonial state and capitalism. Fanon also demonstrates that the colonies have a dependency on an unnamed superstructure including racism that has control over the colonies. In this context, we must root long historical EU-African relations based on colonialism, racism, and its continuities.

For post-colonial studies, historical materialist concepts like imperialism are central to their beginning (Bartolovich, 2002, 3). However, the conversation between Historical Materialism and post-colonial studies has often not been fruitful; post-colonial perspectives have been declared as disregarding political economy Marxist perspectives as being too economistic (Chakrabarty, 2011, 23–24). Therefore, the quote provides a wonderful starting point to show that critical political economy, in particular "Marxism and 'postcolonial studies' have something to say to each other" (Bartolovich, 2002, 1), even if they are not entirely complementary to each other. Within the social sciences, research on the Global South, postcolonial structures, and dependencies are indeed peripheral research foci. At the same time, research on Africa is also peripheral to the political and social sciences (Ziai, 2011, 24). A point of departure to bring the European Green Deal more into the debate of North-South relations is the concept of the Global Ecological Political Economy (Katz-Rosene & Paterson, 2018). It urges to include ecological, colonial, and impe-

rialist structures in concrete analyses (see a more in detail debate in Claar 2020). To understand the dependency of African states in the greening and transformation debate, green capitalism and green colonialism are intertwined macro-theoretical concepts. Bhambra puts forward these arguments (2020). She argues that "colonialism is constitutive to the emergence and development of capitalism and its political institutions" (Bhambra, 2021, 13) based on identifying the historical development of capitalism, for example the role of private property, the growth of the wealth in the North on the back of the colonial state, and the inscribed racialised structures. Capitalism is more than just capital-labour relations (see also Claar, 2018, 18–21). Against this backdrop, it is necessary to consider that the terms green capitalism and green colonialism are theoretical concepts.

Firstly, we must distinguish between green capitalism and the political debates on green economy that global institutions have been promoting since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007/2008. The talk of the need for a "green economy" creates more awareness of environmental issues; however, the overall free-market approach continues to be dominant and does not question the principle of growth on the exploitation of nature. A new development path emerges that creates new markets for investments and capital accumulation, mainly for Western companies. For the last centuries, nature was seen as a free resource for capitalist production and technical innovations, but this form of exploiting nature challenges our climate and ecosystem. While countries in the global North have mainly been responsible, the South secures the Northern lifestyle (Brockington & Ponte 2015, 2199), and the Northern imperialist way of living (Brand, 2012). The green economy strategy reproduces this uneven development pathway. In some terms, it also intensifies the dependencies of the South on the North; after all, the debates on greening the economy are taking place mainly in the North and in global institutions controlled by Northern governments. The green economy development strategy is part of the process to transform capitalist societies into a green capitalism, according to Brand (2012). These developments of the changing nature of capitalism towards green capitalism also shape the African economies.

Secondly, using those structural relationships and dependencies for combating climate change is a practice that I would subsume under green colonialism. The notion of a green economy is increasingly used in the fight against climate change. What is not regarded are the contradictions in the green transition envisaged. The standard of living in the global North can only be maintained through the exploitation of, among other things, resources, land, or labour in the global South. At the same time, many new green technologies are also even more dependent on depleting natural resources. The European Green Deal is one pillar of reproduction and reshaping the existing order by "green washing" the colonial relationships (Dunlap, 2021). According to Hamouchene, green colonialism is

"the extension of the colonial relations of plunder and dispossession …. and the displacement of socio-environmental costs to the green era, to the renewable period." (2022)

We can look at green colonialism on different levels. On the one hand, it is about the big question of "dependency", but also about implementation and political processes in the EU under the framework of the EGD. One aspect of green colonialism is energy colonialism. Hamouchene highlights this in his analyses of extractivism in North Africa:

"Displacing the costs of such a destructive industry from North to South is one strategy of imperialist capital that is bound up with racial and class hierarchies, where environmental racism is wedded to energy colonialism." (2019, 9)

This pattern is visible in most larger infrastructure projects in renewable energy in Africa, which are only feasible through funding from the EU or other donors.

At the same time, they also bear the risk if no solution is found for pipelines from North Africa to Europe. This also means that marginalised groups often carry the costs of the new green world (Earth.org, 2021; Hoeder, 2020), as I will discuss in the biodiversity section.

3. The European Green Deal and African states

In 2019, the EU announced the EGD, which aims to realise sustainable and environmental goals in the EU and contribute to the fight against the climate crisis. The roadmap focuses primarily on strategies and funding for European countries. Central themes are "energy transition" and implementing various financing models and funds (European Commission 2019, 18ff). It does not focus on development finance (e.g., Usman et al., 2021). However, the EGD programme is relevant not only for the European common market but also for many other economies. The EU develops, prioritises, and implements new policies, standards, norms, and rules – opening new markets for capital. This includes, for example, creating new international CO_2 markets or ensuring access to raw materials, such as cobalt for batteries, which is mined primarily in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It also includes the implementation of new standards for value chains. For example, imported food will have to comply with relevant EU environmental standards in the future (Pallinger, 2020; European Commission, 2019, 6). These measures, directly and indirectly, affect European trading partners. After all, trade restrictions are not just about the price of goods: non-tariff barriers, including in the renewable energy sector, are also to be removed (European Commission, 2019, 21). In this context, the EU relies on "deep integration" mechanisms, which include the transfer of institutions to the South (Claar & Nölke, 2013). Within the EGD, this is reflected, among other areas, in green jurisprudence. The EU wants to set new green standards.

With the changes in national and European policies, the EGD is also changing the thematic priorities in EU foreign, trade, and development policy. For example, sus-

tainability and green development will be the anchor for reorienting the EU-Africa Partnership. They are issues that are going to be discussed at the EU-African Union Summits. At the 2022 summit, an investment package of 150 billion Euros was agreed upon. It aims to address green transition, including energy transition and sustainable growth (European Council, 2022; Laporte, 2020). These sustainable development issues are not new territory for many African countries, which are already trying to implement SDGs through various measures. For example, many policy programs ensure access to energy (SDG 7) and energy transition processes. However, the opportunities to implement and provide renewable energy vary greatly depending on whether economically strong countries (for example, Nigeria or South Africa), emerging countries (for example, Ghana or Rwanda), or poorer countries (for example, Togo or Malawi) are considered (Müller et al., 2020).

A further point is whether governments have the will and capacity to provide the necessary setting. At the time of implementation, the renewable energy transition is mainly financed by private actors and transnational capital. In this setting, opportunities for local companies are limited due to the lack of access to financial lending (Elsner et al., 2021; Kvangraven et al., 2020; Claar, 2020). Moreover, since many measures envisaged in the EGD depend on natural resources and products from African states, the agency remains limited, and the asymmetrical relationship is reproduced between Europe and Africa. Usman et al. (2021) highlight seven consequences of the EGD for Africa. Two areas are discussed here as examples for demonstrating the effect and the practices of green colonialism: clean hydrogen and biodiversity strategy.

4. Clean Hydrogen and Biodiversity Strategy for Africa

Despite formal independence and the end of colonialism, the asymmetrical relationship between African and European states has hardly changed. This development is mainly reflected in the role of African economies, especially those that export unprocessed raw materials and food to Europe. In addition, global developments, like the high inflation in 2022, are also hitting African states with increasing world prices for oil, gas, energy, and food. Due to the EGD economic priorities and standards of the EGD, African economies must react to the EGD policies instead of setting their own priorities. Often the focus is either on economic development or an own social-ecological transformation (see, e.g., Neumann & Claar 2022 on Ghana). The dissatisfaction was also emphasised during the launch in May 2022 of the African Economic Outlook on "Supporting Climate Resilience and a Just Energy Transition in Africa" (AFDB, 2022). African leaders made clear that they need their policy space for economic development, as they are not the primary carbon producer. Therefore, the EU-Africa strategy in the EGD also tackles their demand. Climate and environmental goals are central to future cooperation between the EU and African Union (AU). This includes firstly renewable energy

and energy efficiency, and, secondly, ensuring biodiversity within the framework of the "NaturAfrica" program (European Commission, 2019, 21).

Producing clean hydrogen is a current political and economic trend in the energy sector. The EU must secure long-term access to resources for itself, as the energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine in 2022 demonstrates (in detail on the energy crisis in Europe, e.g. in Wolf & Zander, 2021). Furthermore, the renewable energy market is dominated by (new) European technologies that also need a sales market, for example, in African states (Müller & Claar, 2021). In the summer of 2020, the EU published its hydrogen strategy. It identifies Africa, particularly North Africa, as a partner and refers to its geographical proximity and potential for renewable energy (European Commission, 2020e, 19). At the same time, it calls for cooperating with the African Union, most importantly on an "African-Europe Green Energy Initiative" with a focus on clean hydrogen (European Commission, 2019, 21 & 2020e, 23). For a successful energy transition in Africa, investments and European technologies are needed (Kemfert & Müller, 2020, 12). For this purpose, a European Alliance for Clean Hydrogen was founded, which aims to develop new hydrogen technologies. In addition to government institutions and research facilities, various companies are involved in the European Hydrogen Alliance: RWE and EON from the energy sector; ThyssenKrupp from the steel industry; Deutsche Post DHL Group from the logistics industry; and Deutsche Bank AG from the banking and finance sector (European Commission, 2020c). Thus, a broad alliance of different corporate actors wants to promote hydrogen, benefit the technology, and secure access to it as a resource.

According to the European Commission, 40 gigawatts of electrolysis capacity each from within and outside Europe are supposed to come from clean hydrogen by 2030 (European Commission, 2020b, 3). The plan is to obtain the gigawatts from outside the EU through strategic partnerships with North African countries such as Morocco. The African sun is powerful and can produce hydrogen for the world market (Kemfert & Müller, 2020, 12). Germany has already laid a foundation stone in the form of a loan to Morocco to construct the first green hydrogen plant (Riedel, 2020). However, it remains to be seen whether the clean hydrogen strategy will benefit the selected North African partners. In the German media discourse, the concern is expressed that Europe, respectively Germany, will become dependent on – and that the importing countries first must produce sufficient – renewable energies (Witsch, 2020). At the same time, older energy strategies already externalise risks to Morocco (Hamouchene, 2016, 40), which is also a consequence of the hydrogen strategy. These concerns are only voiced quietly due to the current search for additional energy resources.

In Africa, foreign capital, e.g., large transnational corporations, has better access to the green economy than African capital and local businesses. This concerns knowledge, technology, and finance: The winners of the tendering process for

renewable energies in South Africa, for example, are mainly transnational capital alliances (Claar, 2020; Kvangraven et al., 2020; Müller & Claar, 2021). In the process, old patterns were reproduced, and technology development remains in the hands of European corporations. Thus, European technology continues to be central to the hydrogen strategy. So far, African actors and knowledge are not involved in implementing the hydrogen strategy, and no provisions are made for their appropriation of the process. Furthermore, to be clear on this point: the African economies continue to send energy sources – this time hydrogen – Europe without embedding them into the local networks. I argue here that colonialism is perpetuated and the relationship of dependency is greenwashed with the help of the EGD so that it is transformed into green colonialism. Dunlap (2021) makes a similar point about energy infrastructures, and Kalt and Tunn (2022) also argue in the same vein: In an unequal global system, the gain of producing hydrogen in the Global South will not compensate for the costs for Southern countries that embracing this form of energy production will incur.

In June 2022, the EU launched the NaturAfrica programme, which aims to protect African biodiversity. Fern (2022), an environmental and social justice organisation, claims that the programme amounts to a paradigm shift in nature conversation. It addresses all sub-Saharan African countries and goes beyond the protection of the areas. The idea is to promote a broader perspective on greening by involving the population and private sector actors and creating it (European Commission, 2019, 21; Ngounou, 2022). The biodiversity strategy must be seen in the context of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity debates. One principle of the Convention is that there be a net gain, i.e., that more is given back to nature than is taken away (European Commission 2020a, 1, 19). This concept of biodiversity offsets has been pursued for some time. However, it is questionable whether this will protect existing biodiversity or entrench the commodification of biodiversity in international treaties and strategies (OECD, 2016). The Africa strategy mentioned in the EGD must also be interpreted in this sense. Part of this is the NaturAfrica project, which aims to protect African biodiversity by involving the population and private sector actors (European Commission, 2019, 21).

At first glance, this seems like an essential and meaningful approach, as Africa's biodiversity is unique in animal and plant life. What makes it difficult, however, is that there are already various problems with destruction, legal and illegal land grabbing, the militarisation of natural parks, and human rights violations that happen under European conservation programmes (Grünewald, 2020; Minority Rights Group International, 2020). Civil society is massively critical of the EU's unilateral action in the biodiversity strategy. Moreover, underlying problems, such as the question of land, land ownership, and poverty, are not addressed. Stakeholders are not talked to or involved in the processes (Rainforest Foundation et al., 2020). Researchers and activists demand an end to green colonialism. In addition to participation in the processes, they call for a redefinition of nature conservation:

The existing definition does not consider human rights and social justice. Other demands include, for example, that tourism not be considered nature conservation and that the actual living conditions of the population be recognised (Mordecai Ogada in Docip, 2020). In 2021, the European Commission emphasised the necessity of a "wide consultation". Nevertheless, the document in question says that the "EU delegation will define and implement NaturAfrica programmes" (European Commission, 2021, 2). It remains unclear whether the EU consults stakeholders and addresses their concerns and suggestions. This is in continuity with the colonial pattern. Considering this in the light of green colonialism, the non-consultation about the process draws on similar components like colonialism itself, as Chitonge (2021, 24) emphasises on colonialism that "securing their own interests is one strong reason to which one can point".

It is not without reason that the EGD repeatedly refers to the need to involve individual actors, such as farmers or consumers, in the process of creating a green, circular economy (European Commission, 2019, 7 ff.). However, looking at the two policy areas of hydrogen and biodiversity reveals that only a tiny share of the African population will benefit from EU measures in the long term. The majority of people will have little say in the transformation.

5. Green colonialism and just social-ecological transformation for Africa

My discussion of hydrogen and biodiversity strategies shows that dependency patterns between the EU and Africa are perpetuated to promote economic development. African states are expected to make their contribution to combating climate change. However, their interests and expectation of their economic development are pushed into the background. Moreover, the African states claim, e.g. in the debate of the African Economic Outlook (AFDB, 2022), that they need more financial support to implement a green transition. So far, the financial support offered is not enough and is based on bankable development finance, as Daniela Gabor (2019) emphasises. Fonds are also a part of this strategy, and during COP 27 in November 2022, the states agreed on a global fund to address climate damage (The Guardian, 2022).

In addition, it is also essential for African countries to make their own decisions regarding economic development. It is striking that the EU imposes its institutional framework on them (see Claar & Nölke, 2013), e.g. through green legal norms or standards for products. Importantly, the framework conditions in African states are entirely different from those in Europe. Even if there are different historical, economic, and political contexts in the respective African states, general conclusions can be drawn. In discussions of ecological modernisation and a green circular economy, it becomes clear that what is at stake are reforms of the capitalist world market, supported primarily by the global North (Brockington & Ponte, 2015).

There is little regard for changing structures, and from the perspective of the permanent dependence of African economies, it will be challenging to implement a just social-ecological transformation. The dependencies of African countries also inscribe themselves in the EGD and its past practices, as capital, investment, and development do not change – only nature is commodified further (Claar, 2020).

For this reason, it is crucial to highlight the question of one's own power to act and what a just social-ecological transformation that includes everyone could look like. What are new opportunities that do not only consider the interests of Africa's political and capitalist elite? In the discussions about social-ecological transformation, the concept of a *just transition* is invoked repeatedly. It focuses on social justice and emphasises the need to engage populations and stakeholders actively and provide them with access to information on the plans to be implemented (on the different energy justice concepts, see Jenkins et al., 2016). This also means ensuring that people have access to energy and that workers' concerns in "brown industries" are taken seriously. In this context, it is essential to note that there is little in the way of social protection through the state in African contexts, and unemployment rates are very high.

There is a wealth of approaches, including many from African contexts, that deal with social-ecological transformation and introduce their own ideas for combating climate change. Therefore, there is no need to transfer the institutional setting of the EU to Africa. A recent example is the *Climate Justice Charter* published in August 2020, an alternative to the current system. Over six years, an all-encompassing vision of a just social-ecological transformation was developed with civil society actors in South Africa and called for a deep transition. While the European Green Deal operates within the existing system, the Climate Justice Charter develops a vision of a systemic economic alternative necessary for ecological transformation and a future on this planet. It also involves the population's participation in planning and implementing this transformation (COPAC & SAFSC, 2020). Indeed, this is an alternative if populations are involved in the processes and address, at the same time, inequality and poverty. Nevertheless, globally, it seems that the green circular economy is more a process of transforming capitalist societies into green capitalism, regulating social relations with nature (Brand, 2012), and reproducing existing North-South relations, which can be described as green colonialism.

While the world's political, security, and environmental problems intensify, the green growth paradigm remains the preferred international solution for those problems among political decision-makers. It has become clear that the EGD is not enough yet to tackle climate change and its economic and social challenges. Due to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the sense of insecurity has increased sharply in Europe, which is especially true regarding energy security. European countries have actively failed to pursue energy mix diversification and face significant energy challenges. The search for alternative energy sources has become even more impor-

tant than ever to rely less on fossil fuels. In this context, Bloomberg headlines that "the energy transition has become a weapon" (Rutkof, 2022). If the EU managed to tap new energy sources, it would become more energy-independent. But what would happen, in the process, to other world regions?

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