

# Three implications of political ontology for the political ecology of conservation

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## Abstract

Within political ecology, an important and timely critique has emerged which questions ontology and the nature of reality. This turn to ontology has been expressed in a new and influential paradigm, Political Ontology. In this article, I interrogate the politics of three tenets that seem central to this ontological turn within a political ecology of conservation context: (a) the insistence on the local, Indigenous and homogeneous subject and its corollary, the homogeneous Modern, Western subject; (b) the hegemony of the (green) neoliberal project, and (c) the incommensurability of non-modern and Western ontologies. I base my arguments on two case studies of resistance and/or struggle against green and un-green grabbing, the Skouries gold mine in Greece and the Lodge Hill development in England.

**Keywords:** political ontology, neoliberal nature, conservation, Indigenous, Greece, England

## Résumé

Dans le domaine de l'écologie politique, un important courant critique a émergé, interrogeant la nature de la réalité. Cette perspective s'exprime dans un nouveau paradigme, l'ontologie politique. Mon article s'adresse à trois questions qui semblent au coeur de ce questionnement, dans le contexte d'une approche de la conservation à partir de l'écologie politique: (a) l'emphase mise sur le local et l'indigène comme sujet homogène, ainsi que son corollaire, le sujet occidental moderne; (b) l'hégémonie du projet néolibéral « vert »; et (c) l'incommensurabilité des ontologies non-modernes et occidentales. Mon argument repose sur deux études de cas de résistance et/ou de lutte contre l'appropriation de l'environnement: celle de la mine d'or de Skouries en Grèce et celle de Lodge Hill en Angleterre.

**Mots clés:** ontologie politique, nature néolibérale, préservation, indigène, Grèce, Angleterre

## Resumen

Dentro de la ecología política, ha surgido una crítica importante y oportuna que cuestiona la ontología y la naturaleza de la realidad. Este giro hacia la ontología se ha expresado en un nuevo e influyente paradigma, la ontología política. En este artículo, interrogo las políticas de tres principios que parecen centrales para este giro ontológico dentro de una ecología política del contexto de conservación: (a) la insistencia en el sujeto local, indígena y homogéneo y su corolario, el sujeto homogéneo moderno, occidental (b) la hegemonía del proyecto neoliberal (verde), y (c) la inconmensurabilidad de las ontologías no modernas y occidentales. Baso mis argumentos en dos estudios de caso de resistencia y / o lucha contra el acaparamiento verde y no verde, la mina de oro Skouries en Grecia y el desarrollo de Lodge Hill en Inglaterra.

**Keywords:** ontología política, naturaleza neoliberal, conservación de la naturaleza, indígenas, Grecia, Inglaterra

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## Περίληψη

Μια σημαντική και καίρια κριτική έχει αναδειχθεί πρόσφατα στο χώρο της πολιτικής οικολογίας, η οποία έχει στη βάση της οντολογικές ερωτήσεις, που αφορούν τη φύση της πραγματικότητας. Αυτή η στροφή στην οντολογία έχει εκφραστεί μεταξύ άλλων και στο νέο και ανερχόμενο παράδειγμα της Πολιτικής Οντολογίας. Σε αυτό το άρθρο εξετάζω τρεις από τις βασικές ιδέες που μοιάζουν σημαντικές για την στροφή στην οντολογία στο χώρο της πολιτικής οικολογίας της διατήρησης: την επιμονή σε ένα τοπικό, ιθαγενές και ομογενές υποκείμενο, και το συνεπακόλουθό του, το ομογενές δυτικό αντικείμενο· την ηγεμονική θέση του 'πράσινου' νεοφιλευθερού παραδείγματος· την ασυμβατότητα των μη-μοντερνών με τις Δυτικές οντολογίες. Βασίζω τα επιχειρήματά μου σε δεδομένα από δυο περιπτώσεις στις οποίες τοπικές (και μη) κοινωνίες αντιστέκονται στην 'πρασινή' αλλά και μη-πράσινη υφαρπαγή (το ορυχείο των Σκουριών στη Χαλκιδική, και την οικιστική ανάπτυξη στο Λοτζ Χίλλ, Νοτιο-ανατολική Αγγλία).

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** πολιτική οντολογία, νεοφιλευθέρη φύση, διατήρηση βιοποικιλότητας, ιθαγενείς, Ελλάδα, Αγγλία

## 1. Introduction

The struggles of Indigenous people, along with renewed demands for decolonisation, have emerged as key and interrelated socio-environmental movements across the globe. Together, they have provided important, timely, and sometimes devastating praxes and theoretical critiques of global-to-local political ecologies, including conservation as science and practice.

The impact of this renewed emphasis on Indigenous, decolonial and post-colonial ways of viewing "nature" has been widely felt, including in critical conservation studies. In particular, questions related to "ontology" have been raised as significant – and to a certain extent self-evident – in a variety of forums, including the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (Diaz *et al.* 2016) as well as agenda-setting interdisciplinary (Saxena *et al.* 2018) and political ecology literature (Goldman *et al.* 2018; Neimark *et al.* 2019). Relatively novel conservation concepts, such as ecosystem services and natural capital, have been forcefully singled out as neoliberal conceptualizations of nature that clash with Indigenous ontologies (Kull *et al.* 2015). As its more visible manifestation, the concern with ontology is best exemplified by the actively debated proposal that the IPBES should adopt the concept of 'nature's contributions to people' instead of the neoliberal 'ecosystem services' concept. As Kenter notes, with this change the "IPBES seeks a pluralistic approach to knowledge and values, incorporating a broad set of western and non-western *ontologies*, epistemologies and axiologies of human-nature relations" (2018: 40, emphasis added).

Arguably, this scholarship and practice is part of the diverse "broad turn to ontology" identified by Kohn (2015). According to Kohn (2015: 313), this broad ontological turn is symptomatic in part of a wider reaction to the global ecological crisis and the way it "is changing our understanding of the relations we humans have to that which is other than human" in fields as diverse as history, political theory, earth system science, literature, geography, anthropology and indeed political ecology. The broad ontological turn is not monolithic, and scholars, thinkers and activists identify and engage with different parts or through different lenses.<sup>2</sup> Within political ecology, the most important elements of this scholarship are a concern with non-human agency and well-being, the attempt to dismantle binaries (such as human/non-human, nature/culture or object/subject), the attempt to critique science coming from institutions of Western countries (mainly as related to the natural sciences but not only), and respect for the ontological and epistemological worlds of Indigenous peoples.

In this article, I will focus on a particular strand of this scholarship. Influenced mainly by the Ontological Turn in anthropology (hereafter OT; see also Kohn's (2015) "narrow turn to ontology"), Political

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<sup>2</sup> Space does not suffice to review the whole multi-decadal programme; hence I will mention some key thinkers that have been influential. Latour's Actor Network Theory (and its offshoots) is among the most prominent theoretical frameworks, as is the work of Phillipe Descola and Viveiros de Castro. Donna Haraway's past and recent work has been hugely influential, as has Annamarie Mol's work on the multiple ontologies of diseases has also been very influential. Other scholars include Karen Barad, Manuel DeLanda, Jane Bennett, Eduardo Kohn and many others.

Ontology (PO) is becoming an increasingly visible part of political ecology (e.g. Blaser 2009, 2013a, 2013b). This scholarship, offering a 'strong ontological position', has been very influential in contemporary political ecology, including critical conservation studies (e.g. Goldman *et al.* 2016; Schulz 2017; Singleton 2016; Sullivan 2010, 2013, 2017; Theriault 2017). Mainly drawing from – but also extending – the work of anthropologists and Science and Technology Studies scholars Bruno Latour, Viveiros de Castro, Phillippe Descola and Annemarie Mol, this scholarship's central premise is that different peoples do not view a single world differently (c.f. the Cultural Turn, e.g. Escobar 1996), but look at and *enact* multiple worlds – a *pluriverse* instead of a *universe*. When the 'modern tribe' (including capital, the state, or Western science including the majority of political ecology) 'look' at a mountain, they can see and 'enact' only resources (e.g. gold, tourism revenues or fish stocks, biodiversity), an 'ontology' that according to the OT is in conflict with alternative ontologies that might, for example, look at and enact the mountain as an ancestor, or a spiritual entity they people can communicate with. Furthermore, again drawing from decolonial and post-colonial scholarship as well as ethnographies, a strong case is made that Western or Western-type ontologies are hegemonic or repress local/Indigenous ontologies. Finally, it has to be mentioned that PO is predominantly or solely reliant on ethnography, and less so on quantitative methods such as land use change analysis, counter-mapping, or ecological science.

Ontological theory and Political Ontology have revitalized certain debates within political ecology, produced some new ones and cast others in a different light. Chief among them, as the name Political Ontology suggests, is about definitions. For people working with OT, the environment-related conflicts and struggles that political ecology studies are neither just about competing claims to resources (Vaccaro *et al.* 2013) nor about (mental or discursive) representations of nature (Escobar 1996), but as we noted above, about the way different cultures, societies and actors view *and* shape the world *ontologically* (Blaser 2013). This line of thinking and research has opened up a rich terrain of investigations that is bearing fruit across a wide variety of contexts, from the Faroe Islands and whaling conflicts (Singleton 2015), to themes that are more central to political ecology like mining (Acuña 2015). Also, extending political ecology's critique of extractivism, OT has given prominence to the ontologies of Indigenous peoples and their conflict with ecology as a science (Blaser 2009), the role of conservation as a science and practice in fomenting green grabbing (Sullivan 2010, 2017) and Western environmentalism and its clash with Indigenous cosmologies (Blaser 2013).

However, OT rests on some explicit or implicit premises that, as I will try to show, run the risk of hindering our understanding of political ecological conflicts. In order to demonstrate this, I first present the theoretical framework that I engage with, which draws on Neil Smith's work on uneven development (Smith 2010) and nature as an accumulation strategy, and I justify my case study selection. Then I elaborate on three implicit or explicit premises of OT as it has been applied to environment-related conflicts (the homogenization of indigeneity and modernity; the *in toto* demonization of conservation and western science; and ontological incommensurability), and highlight their implications in light of Smith's theories of uneven development and 'nature as an accumulation strategy.'

## 2. Theoretical background and case study description

### *Theoretical background*

In the context of conservation, critical scholars have identified neoliberal conservation as a hegemonic discourse that suffuses conservation (Sullivan 2017). From biodiversity credit markets to global schemes like REDD+ and natural capital accounting, it has been argued that we are in the midst of a transformation: "[n]eoliberal conservation, then, is the contemporary push to making environmental conservation not only compatible with capitalism but also a source for economic growth" (Büscher *et al.* 2012b: 131).

Neil Smith (2008: 10) understood the process as the "vertical integration of nature into capital that involves not just the production of nature 'all the way down' [e.g. biotechnology], but its simultaneous financialization 'all the way up' [e.g. biodiversity or carbon offset markets]" (Smith 2008: 17). Crucially though, Smith is quick to point out that this does not mean that conservation is capitalism's new way of life

and that horizontal or expansive production of nature has ceased: "the extensive expansion of capital into nature remains a powerful frontier of capital accumulation, whether with bio-prospecting in the Amazon or oil drilling in the US Arctic" (Smith 2008: 18).

This process was put into sharp relief as the world economy plunged into crisis in 2008 and both the vertical integration of nature into capital (green grabbing) and the extensive expansion of capital into nature intensified (un-green grabbing, *sensu* Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). Green and un-green capitalisms left their uneven geographical mark on the world. Indeed, my two case studies in Greece and the UK, demonstrate the simultaneous intensification of un-green and green grabbing as it took place in the Global North. Greece, after several years of austerity imposed by local and international elites, is experiencing "a regression from a developed to an extractivist state, similar to the process many Latin American countries underwent in the 1980s" (Kallis 2013: np). As the activists from Chalkidiki, one of my case studies in this article, argue: "The crisis-induced blackmail has led us to the point of initiating crimes in Greece that up to now we only allowed – in guilty silence – to happen in so called Third World. What goes around comes around..." (Ανοιχτό συντονιστικό Θεσσαλονίκης ενάντια στα μέταλλα χρυσού, 2012: 12). Similarly, in the UK, after years of roll-out neoliberalism, the banking crisis provided the UK coalition government with the 'alibi' it needed "to launch the most radical, far-reaching (and irreversible?) social revolution since the war" (Hall 2011: 718), including privatization, austerity, anti-immigration rhetoric and policies, and novel re-/deregulation policy instruments.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that citizens of countries in the global North would have to (re)experience such blunt exploitation of their natural and human resources, akin to 'Third World' countries, was to a large extent unforeseen. The post-WWII consensus, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, along with a rising debt-based affluence in the 1990s and a gentler neoliberalism in the late 1990s/early 2000s, led to a misconception for the people of the developed world: the belief that liberal capitalism had triumphed and what remained to be done was to democratically reform its more obvious misgivings - Fukuyama's (1992) 'end of history.' While various anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberalism struggles did a lot to curb that misconception (e.g. the Zapatistas 1994 uprising and the anti-globalization demonstrations starting in the late-1990s), part of it remained ingrained in the subconscious of the global North. Even scholars critical of neoliberalism, writing just a few years before the 2007 financial crisis, seem to have believed in a variant of that misconception:

Yet the neoliberal project is not hegemonic ... In fact, the most nakedly extreme forms of neoliberal state rollbacks and market triumphalism may well be past ... and replaced by "kinder, gentler," Third Way variants. (McCarthy and Prudham 2004: 275)

What seems to have been obfuscated in some analyses was what Neil Smith called the see-saw movement of capital (Smith 2010), which since the late 20th century had become a "gentrification process ballooned into a global and systemic rather than local and incidental event" (Smith 2011: 262), increasingly related to the production and reproduction of surplus value:

To this end, capital stalks the earth in search of material resources; nature becomes a universal means of production in the sense that it not only provides the subjects, objects and instruments of production, but is also in its totality an appendage to the production process. (Smith 2010: 71)

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<sup>3</sup> See Willow and Wylie in this Journal for an similar observation regarding hydraulic fracturing in the US: "[w]hereas the structure of oil and gas development in the United States formerly stood as an exception to the enslaving practices developed in international and postcolonial contexts, these practices are now being re-imported into the United States to facilitate the present natural gas boom" (2014: 228).

After the 2008 financial crash, the entrenchment of fiscal austerity, deregulation, and privatization of public property is profoundly changing nature-society relationships across Europe. Critical scholarship, while rendering visible the unwelcome implications of green grabbing, has tended to obfuscate its relation to what Apostolopoulou and Adams (2015: 21) call "un-green grabbing", capitalism's strategic interest "to grab and exploit hitherto protected natures without any "green" or 'eco-friendly' argumentation."

What I aim to do in this article is take some claims made by OT and PO and discuss them considering the rise of both green and un-green capitalism in the post-financial crisis era. I want to show that OT and PO, while offering some incisive insights, run the risk of reducing our ability to resist and transform the unequal political ecologies of capitalism.

### *Case studies*

I present evidence from two case studies from the global North, where people are resisting both green and un-green grabbing: Lodge Hill in the Hoo Peninsula, south east England and Skouries in Chalkidiki, northern Greece. Lodge Hill is a singular case in the sense that it is one of the few – perhaps unique in the global North – mobilizations of local people, NGOs, and other actors against a key neoliberal conservation tool: biodiversity offsetting. Lodge Hill is a decommissioned military camp, that has been scheduled for development since 1995 (Department of Environment 1995). But only in 2007, when house prices peaked (see Figure 1), did the UK's Ministry of Defence start the process of developing it. In 2011, after meeting resistance from local conservationists due to the presence of important fauna (mainly nightingales, *Luscinia megarhynchos*) and flora, the Ministry of Defence along with Land Securities plc., the developer (and with the support of Medway Local Council) decided to pursue a plan based on biodiversity offsetting (Bormpoudakis *et al.* 2019; Trimedia 2009). Biodiversity offsetting is a policy instrument and conservation tool that is inherently linked to green grabbing and market-based forms of conservation (Sullivan 2017): it allows for a development to proceed in one place and destroy the wildlife there, provided that wildlife is equally (or better) protected elsewhere at the developer's expense (the 'no net loss' or 'net gain' concepts, *ibid*). In its marketized forms, it involves the exchange of biodiversity (or species, habitat, wetland) 'credits' between the developer and a conservation bank that are valued at an open market (Robertson 2000). It was first introduced in England with the *Securing the value of nature* government White Paper (HM Government 2011), piloted in several case studies after this, and fully described in a 2013 Green Paper (Defra 2013). The attempted adoption of this tool by Medway Council and the developers in Lodge Hill caused even bigger reactions from the local community and conservation organizations, who either thought that offsetting was not used properly, or were against the development altogether. In the end, the development was put on hold by the Planning Inspector in 2013<sup>4</sup> and in late 2015 the developer pulled out citing high environmental litigation and compliance costs.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, the Ministry of Defence also withdrew its plans for developing the site and in December 2018, Homes England which had taken over the site announced a scaled back project for 500 homes.<sup>6</sup> Empirical data is taken from planning documents and interviews.

The Skouries case is about the struggles of (*always*) parts of a community to resist un-green grabbing, in this case the development of a gold mine in their area. Skouries (*Σκουριές*, rust) is the name of a gold mine in northern Greece currently being developed by Eldorado Gold Corporation, a Canadian gold mining company. After Eldorado obtained initial permits, taking advantage of a new (at the time) 'fast-track' planning process intended to bring growth to a rapidly slowing economy (Greece was plunging into financial crisis in 2011 and gold prices were nearing their peak, meaning close to all time high profits for the company, see Figure 1), a significant percentage of local residents, unevenly distributed along the nearby villages (and

<sup>4</sup> Planning Inspector Laura Graham Letter to Medway Council 21 June 2013.

[https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/471/letter\\_to\\_medway\\_council\\_21\\_june\\_2013](https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/471/letter_to_medway_council_21_june_2013), accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> From <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-kent-34225450>, accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/homes-england-proposes-new-approach-to-development-at-lodge-hill>, accessed 29 Dec. 2018. Homes England is a non-departmental body charged with funding affordable housing.

within the villages) and along other cleavages (see below), started peacefully and violently reacting. Mining activities in Chalkidiki have been taking place since antiquity, and the names of some of the villages in the area reveal this past (Mademohoria [*Μαντεμοχώρια*], is the collective name given to the group of villages in the area; *maden* means mineral or mine in Turkish). However, since the late 1990s the population has been split between those who support mining and those who are opposed to it for a variety of reasons, including competing land uses (mining is perceived as a threat to tourism, agriculture and forestry, foraging, fishing, water and air quality issues, forest conservation, local livelihoods, public health). In 2011, when Eldorado obtained the initial mining licence, a multifaceted movement (re-)erupted: local residents, activists from a broad spectrum of organizations (anarchists of many persuasions, communists of equally many persuasions, liberals), and scientific societies from nearby university towns, organized protests in the mountain and nearby cities and villages that were quite often dealt with extreme violence by the police and because of the strictness by the legal system. Similar to cases in other extractivist situations (e.g. de la Cadena 2010), activists were dismissed by the State and the company as obstacles to development and heavy police presence was employed to keep them quiet, with the Prime Minister arguing that the "investment will go on, at any cost."<sup>7</sup> It is crucial to note that locals resisting gold mining in Skouries were, and are construed as barriers to modernization by the national media, in ways that echo the characterization of Ecuadorian Indigenous people as "infantile" (de la Cadena 2010: 336).

[The national media] deploy every means of persuasion to calm the irrational fears of the locals, who "primitive-" and "uncouth-like" do not understand the beneficial consequences of progress and modernization, which are obviously understood by the rest of "society" (represented by the silent majority of TV viewers). (Κύκλος Αναρχικών 1996: 11-12)

"This kind of act cannot be tolerated. Greece is a modern European country, and we will at all costs protect foreign investment in the country", Mr. Samaras [Prime Minister at the time] said. "This is an investment that we very much want, and the whole procedure for the final approval will be finished within the next 10 days." (Granitsas 2013, np)

As of late 2017, the project was on hold due to issues with environmental permits while Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as of July 2019 the prime minister of Greece, in late 2018 told Bloomberg that "permits for the Skouries project will be issued within the first month" of his election, as part of his "top priority" to "unblock important and symbolic investment projects" (Chrepa and Nikas 2018). For the Skouries case I rely on evidence gleaned from brochures and books published by activists (in Greek), interviews, and the documentary *S.O.S. Chalkidiki*, which was produced, shot, and edited by members of the Circolo Culturale of the Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia in Ispra, Italy. Three Italian and one Greek members of the Circolo Culturale travelled to Greece in the summer of 2013 and filmed in Chalkidiki and Thessaloniki.

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<sup>7</sup> Aggelakis, NN. 14 May 2015 from the newspaper Agonas tis Kritis (Αγώνας της Κρήτης), <http://agonaskritis.gr/στο-eldorado-της-άγριας-γαλκιδικής-σκουριές/>, accessed 20/06/2017.

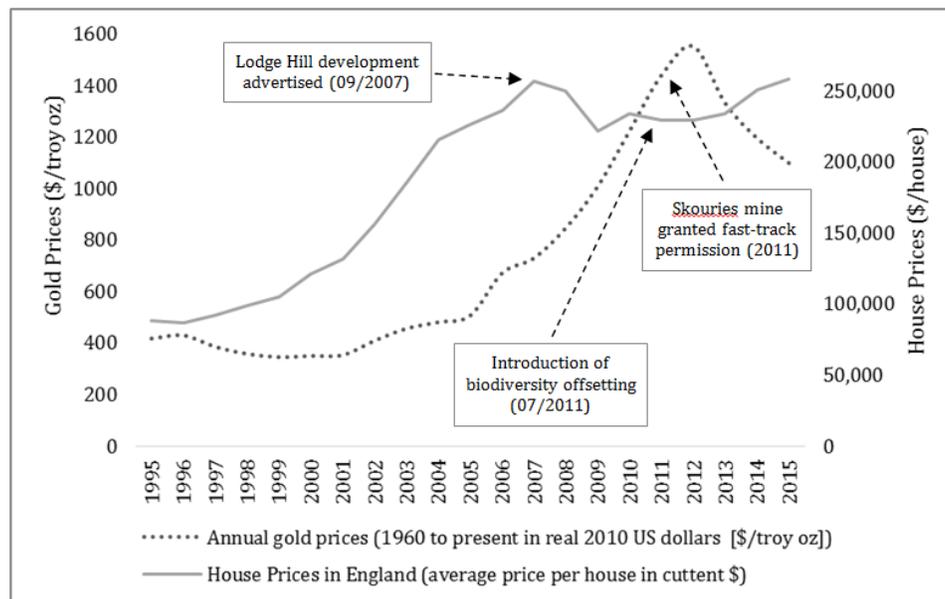


Figure 1: Profit maximization from un-green and green grabbing. Note that the timing of both Lodge Hill and Skouries, green and un-green capitalism respectively, are related to shifts in the geography of capitalism: crisis-hit England and Greece become places where capital attempts to produce surplus value either by extensive or by vertical integration of nature into capital (Smith 2007). Sources: World Bank Global Economic Monitor for the gold price series, and the UK Land Registry for the house prices in England.

### 3. The three premises of the OT and their implications

#### *The Indigenous subject and modernity*

For (most) scholars subscribing to OT, an ontological 'war of worlds' (Viveiros de Castro 2015) is underway: the opposing camps are the "tribe of the moderns" (Blaser 2013a: 18) versus the tribes of Indigenous peoples from around the world. In this sense, OT is based on an essentialization of both 'amodernity' - or radical alterity, often conflated with indigeneity - and of the moderns-as-peoples that has been repeatedly noted (e.g. Cameron *et al.* 2014; Ramos 2012; Theriault 2017; Turner 2009). I want to focus here on the political effects of construing the 'amoderns' and the 'moderns' as opposing camps in the context of the political ecology of conservation, where both local and global cleavages and uneven development do matter.

In political ecology contexts, OT's major contribution is 'political ontology', i.e. the ethnographically-anchored proposal that political ecological conflicts are to various extents not conflicts about the use of natural resources but **conflicts over ontologies between amodern natives and modern capital, state and science** (including conservation). For example, Acuña (2015: 91) shows that "important socio-environmental conflicts that involve Indigenous peoples" are due to the "permanence of a colonial pattern of domination that denies Indigenous ontologies." De la Cadena (2010: 357) documents how the mountain *is* - not represents - different things for the mining company ("a repository of gold—four million ounces of it"), for the environmentalists and farmers ("a source of water for local agriculture"), and for Indigenous peasants ("an earth-being, translated ... as a 'sacred mountain'"). Blaser (2013: 18) shows how for 'moderns' the "forests are lumber, genetic pools, oil and water ... commodities for the growth of the economy" or "biodiversity for the benefit and aesthetic enjoyment of humanity", while for the Yrmo they are nonhuman relatives, spirits,

ancestors. The homogeneous native, usually Indigenous, is pitted against the 'tribe of the moderns'<sup>8</sup> (capital, state and science, including conservation and ecology), and only passing references are made to the internal heterogeneity of both camps. Goldman *et al.* (2016) document how drought is 'multiple' for the Maasai, for scientists, and for NGOs workers and government officials.

But this homogenization of the local, Indigenous, or native subject<sup>9</sup> in a political ecology context runs the risk of papering over differences that are central in local struggles against green and un-green grabbing. Several locals from the villages in Chalkidiki, both for and against the mine, were very explicit in highlighting several divisions along a variety of cleavages (e.g. class, gender, political party affiliation, origin) that were engendered by the planned gold mine. Family ties, people working in the mine, etc.:

Iorgos 1: [The company] divided the people, they are hiring massively creating an army of mercenaries ... Those who do not think a bit deeper, only see the surface and ways to make a day's wage, they are fertile ground for them and they are being used ... In the village the social climate resembles a civil war. Some of those who work for the company have become worse than the company – they even beat up a couple of girls.

Iorgos 2: I will talk specifically for a certain gentleman that went on TV saying "I have been a lumberjack since I was 13." This person should tell everyone – what is he? Is he a farmer? Is he a businessman? Is he a lumberjack? This person, currently, gets 100,000 euros per year [of EU subsidies] as a farmer ...

A. Delivogias, mine worker: We, the workers, will take the law in our hands. That's enough. Since the state cannot secure the investment, we will. We will start a civil war if they [people against the mine] if they interfere with our wages (cited in Vythoulkas 2013).

Mitsos: In some villages, the local community is also split along lines that can be traced back to the Greek Civil War [in the late 1940s].

Furthermore, as a group of anarchists involved in an earlier stage of the struggle against gold mines in the area, these conflicts not only "split" communities, but "split" individuals too.

The long submission of the wider area to one of the cruellest and most inhuman types of exploitation by capital (the mines in Madem Lakkos have been active since 1927) – considering that the mountainous and unproductive landscape does not allow for diverse modes of subsistence – creates schisms not only between villages, but in many cases within individuals, as the identity of the local resident fighting against the destruction of his village clashes with the identity of the worker fighting for his "right" to waged slavery as the only means of survival (Κύκλος Αναρχικών 1996: 11) .

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<sup>8</sup> But see Singleton (2015) for a more nuanced examination. Singleton avoids reifying 'the Faroese' and instead talks about Faroese pro-whaling actors and those against. However, even he discusses the moderns (conservationists) as a monolithic group.

<sup>9</sup> Which I, as a non-anthropologist, sometimes (possibly wrongly) identify in ethnographically-derived discourse in general: the 'Amerindian soul', the 'Amerindian mind' (Viveiros de Castro 1998); "For Sami people, the perception of the weather is multisensory"; "crucial to the people's experience of the weather in the far north is the cycle of seasons" (Ingold and Kurttila 2000: 189 and 190); however, my favourite, mainly because I was born and raised in Crete, is Herzfeld's (2003: 307, original emphasis) incredible finding that "[i]t is hardly a matter of surprise, then, that Cretans have professed themselves incapable of understanding why the *European* Union should be in the business of supporting, as they saw it, the outrageous and intrusive claims of Bosnian Muslims on what is, after all, European soil."

Similarly to Skouries, the locals in Medway were also split regarding the housing development in the Hoo Peninsula. This split is best illustrated by looking at the electoral politics of the 2014 Medway and Strood by-election. Mark Reckless, a member of the Conservative-led Medway Local Council, defected from the party and ran a successful by-election as a UKIP candidate with opposition to the Lodge Hill development a central part of his manifesto. Furthermore, the current Conservative MP elected in the 2015 national election, was also in conflict with the Conservative Local Council in opposing the development of the 5,000 homes in Lodge Hill. The local Labour Party sided with the Local Council in supporting the development, while the Green Party was against.

Some might argue that the within-community conflicts or differences dividing the local societies in Skouries and Medway are not relevant for the main arguments of political ontology, concerning Indigenous societies. However, where capitalism enters society (e.g. in the forms of mining, tourism or wind turbines), they transform: new cleavages arise and old ones are transformed or destroyed. This also occurs in Indigenous or non-western societies – whether that transformation drives towards to Western Modernity or not. Evidence suggests that conflicts such as the ones described by the two *Iorgides* and *Mitsos* above exist in different, less 'modern' contexts. For example Boutet (2014) argues against the homogenous understanding of Innu ontologies in Canada, by showing that the Innu did not uniformly oppose mining in their homeland and were also active during both the exploration and establishment activities of a mine in Quebec – like many locals are in the Skouries case. In other cases, and in the context of green grabbing, investors (local and external), and local elites (village and national) are afforded financial opportunities that create complexes of allegiance, accountability and conflict in local politics – and understanding them is crucial (e.g. Dunlap 2019). Leaving out this heterogeneity by pitting 'Indigenous ontologies' *en masse* against green or un-green grabbing, not only ignores communities' "specific historical trajectories" (Ramos 2012: 382), but also fails to problematize why such differences arise and how they relate to particular political ecologies and economies.

The divide "between Indigenous ontologies and modern ontology" (Blaser 2009: 11) can only be sustained if on top of the homogenization of the Indigenous/local/native, moderns and modernity are also construed as singular and monolithic. But that bounding can certainly be challenged, empirically and historically. As outlined above, 'modern' peoples, as the Greeks would undoubtedly be classed, do not hold to a monolithic 'ontology'; for example locals' (and non-locals') 'ontologies' clash with the 'ontologies' of capital and the state: "We want the forests, the land, and the water, not a grave made out of gold" (*Θέλουμε τα δάση, τη γη και το νερό, και όχι ένα τάφο, φτιαγμένο από χρυσό*) was a central slogan shouted during the massive demonstrations that took place against the mine in Skouries. Or a similar one, written on a banner hung in the Skouries forest: "gold is our topos [place], gold is our water, gold is the mountain and our beautiful village" (*χρυσάφι είν' ο τόπος μας, χρυσάφι το νερό μας, χρυσάφι είναι το βουνό και το όμορφο χωριό μας*); Or Mr Thodoros, who argued in a way that mixes 'Western' and 'non-western' 'ontologies':

In this forest I am familiar with every nook and cranny, every tree. Its biodiversity is unique. I never go to the doctor, I find all the treatment I need up there. As soon as I enter the forest, I feel young again.

Contemporary news coverage also hints at the cleavages between the ontologies of capital and state, and those of local communities:

"Maybe I will not be alive when this mine starts working. But I want my children to be able to enjoy this beauty, like I did all these years. If they dare try [to install the gold mine], they will have to go over my dead body", said Mr. D. Kotakis, firmly holding a hunting rifle in his hands ... "We are ready to die for our place. For these clean beaches, for this beauty; we will not become the Sahara desert", said Ms. Xhrysoula Anastasiadou. (Ethnos Newspaper, October 1996)

Similarly to Skouries, in Lodge Hill nightingales were not just a species to be scientifically managed by NGOs or the state. **Firstly**, the nightingale is an iconic species within British culture. According to Steven Moss (2014), a keen birder, TV presenter and recipient of the British Trust for Ornithology's Dilys Breese Medal, "of all Britain's birds, one species dominates [British] artistic culture: the nightingale." This particular bird has featured as a theme for all major Romantics who in turn have been significant in shaping British naturalism ('The Nightingale: a conversation poem' [1798] by S.T. Coleridge; 'The Nightingale' [1798] by W. Wordsworth and 'Ode to a Nightingale' [1819] by J. Keats). Later, in the 19th century, socialist author Oscar Wilde wrote one of most well-known and loved short stories about a nightingale that sacrifices its life for a human ('The Nightingale and the rose', 1988). Moving to the 20th century, the first sounds that BBC played as an outside broadcast were the nightingale in a duet with the cello of Beatrice Harrison.

**Secondly**, local residents retold stories to us that hint at the visceral and emotional experiences they had with nightingales. As an interviewee put it:

You can't replace the beauty of this place in my humble opinion. You know you can go to the first roundabout and hear about five nightingales competing against each other and I've brought up elderly relatives who were disabled and I got them up in the car and just opened the window and they heard their first nightingale, it's just brilliant.

Thus, for the locals, and in British culture in general, the nightingale is not just vulnerable bird species, but a non-human that has greatly affected and still affects the lives of people. By contrast, and indicating a break between locals and the state, for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, due to the delay they caused in the sale of public land, nightingales were 'feathered obstacles' to the 'economic revival' required after the 2008 financial crash (Pickard and Parker 2013).

I am suggesting that the moderns-as-people do not hold a single view of nature: nature-as-commodity or nature-as-separate from culture. Too often, OT's seems to conflate particular ways of (philosophical) thinking associated with modernity with 'modern', western societies. But modern societies are also suffused by differences between what the state sees (mountain as gold, nightingales as obstacles to growth), and what *certain* people see (nightingales as culture, mountains and beaches as beauty, goldmines as graves). I am arguing that such differences are not always ontological, and even if they are, the differences are not only between the Indigenous and modern/Western 'tribes.' I am trying to problematize the bounding of modern 'ontologies' (the 'tribe of moderns'), as well as the complementary bounding of Indigenous 'ontologies', because this risks leading to the obfuscations outlined above. Neil Smith explained the global seesaw of capital in the post-financial crisis era (2010). Extractivism, and green and un-green grabbing of nature are (re)appearing (or are being on-shored) in 'modern', Western contexts. At the same time they are intensifying in non-western ones. We should not view Indigenous peoples or the moderns as homogeneous objects and/or exploited subjects.

*The unstable hegemony of green grabbing and the in toto demonization of conservation*

Green grabbing encompasses a variety of types of conservation, but it is mainly linked – or is even identical to – neoliberal conservation and to the many ways whereby the market is encroaching on publicly, commonly, tribally, or individually owned goods. "Protected nature has become a commodity to be sold by governments, multinational organizations, or companies on international markets" (Vaccaro *et al.* 2013: 258).

Sian Sullivan is one of the foremost scholars to provide OT-informed critical conservation studies that tackle green grabbing in the neoliberal conservation framework. For Sullivan, the ontology of contemporary conservation is saturated by the techno-scientific discourses and practices of "fetishized commodities, financial transactions, private property and competition" (Sullivan 2013: 56) and green grabbing practices are a globally hegemonic symptom of modernity: they "extend and entrench modernity's perceptual reality" that separates "between culture and nature; that conceives of 'the environment' as passive 'external presence'" (Sullivan 2010: 122). Explicit in all this, is a suspicion towards ecology and 'quantification' in conservation sciences that allow for the assignment of a price to nature "thereby bringing them forth as new, albeit

fictional, commodities" (Sullivan 2010: 117; Sullivan 2017). I want to challenge (a) the extent to which green grabbing is hegemonic in contemporary conservation, and (b) the representation of ecology and conservation as a "discursive and calculative" technology for bringing the market into conservation (Sullivan 2013: 53). I will argue (c) that both (a) and (b) are in danger of positioning OTers against many possible forms of environmentalism in general, and outline some risks that lie therein.

Green grabbing, in all its diversity, as OTers have correctly argued and demonstrated, has taken a central position in contemporary conservation as it is practiced by many governments, intergovernmental organizations, and large Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) (Adams 2017). Its promises have also wooed a significant percentage of conservationists and ecological economists, who view marketized forms of conservation as a way to reduce biodiversity loss and habitat degradation/conversion, particularly in a period when public funding for conservation is on the wane (e.g. Marvier *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, while green grabbing originated in practices targeted at the global South (e.g. Latin America's debt-for-nature swaps in the late 1980s, and national parks in Africa) and in shock-therapies of the post-Socialist world (e.g. debt-for-nature swaps in Poland, see Apostolopoulou *et al.* 2014), it is currently a common feature of conservation toolboxes globally. But to speak of a global phenomenon that defines conservation as OTers often do (and critical conservation studies, see Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015) is mistaking the rhetoric around green grabbing and neoliberal conservation for the reality of its implementation (Dempsey and Suarez 2016). And that is simply because conservation is so much more than biodiversity credits trading and building wildlife parks like fortresses.

In Lodge Hill, England, in one the heartlands and birthplaces of "contemporary techno-configurations of circulating commodified nature..." (Sullivan 2013: 53), a variety of organizations, *including conservation-related* ones (e.g. ENGOS), grouped together with the specific goal to *oppose* biodiversity offsetting – as mentioned above, a core policy in what could be called the neoliberal toolbox – and in the process challenged the development drive that is saturating English housing policy. Several conservation organizations (Table 1) not only publicly opposed the use of biodiversity offsetting for mitigating the impacts of the development of 5,000 houses on the local nightingale population, but also spent their own funds for conducting surveys, visiting the closed-off military camp, and preparing for the public inquiry. At least for some of them, the specific forms of development and biodiversity offsetting were linked to political-cultural transformations fomenting since the 1980s. As an activist against the development told us:

No one should have to go through this when it's for the good of everyone.

Yes, but it doesn't work like that. And it started in the Thatcher era, you know neoliberalism, everyone for himself. You know, she said TINA [There Is No Alternative].

Furthermore, as the results from the UK-wide public consultation on biodiversity offsetting published in 2016 reveal, the Lodge Hill case is not isolated: half of the respondents were against use of biodiversity offsetting<sup>10</sup> either for scientific reasons or because it is "wrong to attach a financial value to nature" (Defra 2016: 2). But neither are English conservationists unique in rejecting offsetting. Rather, the situation in England is part of a reality where a significant number of organizations and individuals who self-identify as conservationists are either staunchly against neoliberal forms of conservation or are to a large extent aware of their limited value.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Some 486 responses that were part of a campaign to stop biodiversity offsetting were considered "formulaic" and hence "were treated as a single, numerical response." Eventually, 460 responses were considered "substantial" and of those, half were negative (Defra 2016: 1).

<sup>11</sup> See for example Fern, <http://www.fern.org/campaign/carbon-trading>, British Ecological Society, <http://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/blog/2016/02/21/biodiversity-offsetting-cast-into-the-wilderness/>; Friends of the Earth, <https://www.foeeurope.org/take-action-no-biodiversity-offsetting-100914>.

Organization	Type
Campaign to Protect Rural England	Branch of national NGO
Frindsbury & Wainscott Community Association	Community Association
Kent Wildlife Trust	Branch of a national NGO
Medway Countryside Forum	Branch of a national NGO
British Trust for Ornithology	National NGO
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	National/global NGO
Natural England <sup>12</sup>	Non-departmental public body
Environmental Bank Ltd	Private company dealing with biodiversity offsetting
Greening the Gateway, Kent, Medway	Partnership for Green Infrastructure
Land Securities plc	Lodge Hill developers
Medway Council	Local government
Ministry of Defence (Defence Estates)	Lodge Hill land owner

Table 1: Organisations and individuals involved in the public examination regarding the Medway core strategy. Actors in grey background supported the development. For a list of the documents consulted to create this table see supplementary material Table 1.

Furthermore, OT is pervaded by a distrust in conservation sciences and ecology. Conservation and ecology are either construed as providing the quantification necessary for creating the 'credits' that market-based conservation 'trades' (Sullivan 2010, 2013) or as Western 'scientific studies' (Blaser 2009) in the service of the State, the extractive industries, or conservation-as-practice against a modern, Indigenous and local ontologies, epistemologies, and ways of life (Blaser 2009, 2013a; Sullivan 2010, 2013). Clearly, both of the above accusations capture a large part of the way conservation and ecology as scientific discourse and practice are put to use in the world, and several OT studies (and critical conservation studies in general) have done a lot to alert us to the dangers of taking an uncritical view of science including conservation and its often imperial and colonial facets (Sullivan 2010). This reading is in accordance with older, and wider, trends in political ecology (e.g. Escobar 1999), but it obscures other uses to which conservation science and ecology have been and can be applied.

In the Lodge Hill case, classic ecological population surveying was used in order to resist the use of biodiversity offsetting (see Blaser 2009 for an example of OT critical of population surveying). The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) surveyed the site, and quantified the actual number of nightingales (86) was >1% of the national population, allowing Natural England to declare Lodge Hill a protected site (Site of Special Scientific Interest), thus making the deployment of biodiversity offsetting (and therefore the housing development) very difficult. Furthermore, the BTO wrote a scientific report on the ecology and biology of nightingales as it relates to biodiversity offsetting (Hewson and Fuller 2012) that was given "significant weight" by the Planning Inspector who ordered the Council to withdraw its planning application – thus halting the development. Similarly, in Skouries, scientific and other scholarly organisations and individual scientists have conducted studies outlining the social and environmental impact of the gold mine, while toxic hazard measurements by the public authorities have resulted in fines and temporary revocation of certain operational licences.<sup>13</sup>

Such uses of ecology and conservation are anything but rare or confined to the global North, and the scientific literature is filled with studies that discuss the ineffectiveness of biodiversity offsetting and green grabbing in general (e.g. Maron *et al.* 2012; Spash 2015<sup>14</sup>). However, much more crucial and numerous uses

<sup>12</sup> Natural England, the public body charged with ensuring that England's land, fauna, flora, geology and soils are protected and improved, cannot officially adopt a position, but in the end its actions did not favour the development.

<sup>13</sup> These studies are in Greek and are available here: [http://soshalkidiki.gr/?page\\_id=239](http://soshalkidiki.gr/?page_id=239), accessed 27 June 2019.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, John Vidal (2014), the originator of the term green grabbing, reporting from the first global conference on market systems for conservation argued that conservationists are "split over 'biodiversity offsetting' plans."

of environmental quantitative sciences are to be found in the documentation of the detrimental effects of political economies on the environment. To borrow from Walker's (2005) landmark essay, it is worth considering if a (continuing) break from quantitative ecology and other biophysical sciences would be beneficial for political ecology, at a time when the earth sciences in general are an invaluable source of information (e.g. regarding global to local change) and influential claims to power.

The above is in no way meant to show that we should (re)adopt a blind and unquestioning stance towards science and conservation, nor follow mainstream conservation's epistemologies and ontologies as ontological theories rightly warn against. But they do show that both in the Lodge Hill case against biodiversity offsetting and the global fight against the capitalist appropriation of resources (un-green grabbing), conservationists, conservation science, and ecology are not *just* in the service of capital and the State, but in fact are often pitted against them. OT and radical conservation scholarship perhaps run the risk of throwing the baby – conservation *in toto* – out with the bathwater – neoliberal conservation – too. Especially as the neoliberal visions of "selling nature to save it" (McAfee 1999) "are in important respects failing to materialize" (Dempsey and Suarez 2016: 666), and since the 2008 financial crisis, un-green grabbing is on the rise. Examples include fracking in the UK and Poland, mining in Greece and Romania, waste disposal in Italy, enclosures, privatizations of natural resources, and land grabbing in several countries across Europe, and shrinking access and loss of green public spaces in Turkey, Greece, UK, Spain, and Italy. As Apostolopoulou and Adams (2015: 30) argue, the opposition of critical scholars to conservation *per se* "needs to be balanced by recognition of the rights of citizens to seek to oppose the degradation of ecosystems" by un-green grabbing. The latter goes through (reformed) conservation-as-practice and conservation-as-science as well. As Adams argues, traditional conservation "represents an emotional and intellectually superficial response to the changes wrought by capitalism, but it is, nonetheless, an oppositional response" (2017: 249).

#### *Ontological incommensurability and opposition to green/un-green capitalism*

The move to a 'pluriverse', which is populated by essentially different 'worlds' (see Blaser 2013a; Sullivan 2013; and Hornborg's [2015] critiques of Descola's [2013] schema of ontologies), invites us to view ontologies as entirely different realities, that are incompatible with each other. OT proposes that inter-ontological communication is at best partial (de la Cadena 2010), and a key term that is often applied is incommensurability (Blaser 2009). Thus, ecology and conservation (especially in their monolithic (mis)representations) are often considered at odds with Indigenous ontologies, with little to no chance of communication. To give one example, for Blaser (2009, 2018) the animal that is known by the Western state, scientists or NGOs such as Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), is different and incommensurable to what is known to the Indigenous Innu as *Atiku* in what is now Northern Canada. According to Blaser (2018: 65), the two are different "entities ... that, so to speak, occupy the same space at the same time."

My gold mining case study reveals the political dangers of accepting a position of incommensurable ontologies between ethnically/culturally/historically essentialized peoples of the world, whether they are Indigenous, Amerindian, Western, Euro-American, Asian or Cretan. I begin by quoting a question posed by activists against gold mining in Chalkidiki to Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis during a Q & A session (September 2015) after a screening of their documentary<sup>15</sup> *This changes everything* that featured five stories from frontline communities across the world, including Chalkidiki. The Chalkidiki activists noticed something crucial:

We've noticed other frontline communities around the world have spoken in similar ways as we do, sometimes using the same expressions, the same words. What is your experience regarding similarities around such diverse communities around the world?

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<sup>15</sup> The documentary was screened in Ierissos, Chalkidiki on the 26th of September 2015. A video of the Q & A session is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92qPwBWWj-c>. Accessed 28/9/2019.

Considering the diverse 'worlds' the activists featured in the documentary inhabit (a Greek activist and housewife, an American goat rancher couple, a First Nations female tribe leader, an Indian matriarch), the OT-faithful position would be that communication between these diverse 'tribes' would be nothing but impossible. The similarity in ways spoken, expressions used and words uttered that the activists from Chalkidiki noticed, would in fact be an 'uncontrolled equivocation': the same words but different meaning, since we inhabit a 'pluriverse' of incommensurable ontologies/realities (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

Considering the planetary scale of gold mining (Figure 3) and the possible ontologies and epistemologies it involves, insisting on incommensurability as a meta-ontological fact denies peoples lived and *fought for* commensurability. As Vigh and Sausdal (2014: 63) note, such a move is "puzzling": while OTers argue that we are facing ontologies that are "worlds apart", the political and economic world, relating to "the global distribution of ideas, resources and power" – crucial elements of global to local political ecologies – "is becoming increasingly interconnected" (see also Temper *et al.* 2015 for an Atlas of global environmental conflicts). These interconnections are uneven, and occur at a multiplicity of scales from the urban (e.g. gentrification) to the global (Smith 2010). Standing Rock activist and Lakota tribe member Aldo Seoane, speaking from Greece<sup>16</sup> points precisely to the *realized* possibilities for inter-movement communication fostered by the uneven development of capitalism and the possible unification of struggles across several lines:

... I can be in Greece having conversation, meeting relatives here, that are going through similar struggles. We are starting to see ourselves as people, and not as silo-ed or isolated communities, or being broken apart because of ethnic backgrounds, or cultural stands or perception ... The fact that we recognise each other as being people in similar struggles and seeing how governments choosing to be unethical in their approaches to dealing with situation and individuals that are standing up for their lives, has caused a movement that can't be silenced.

Tellingly, the Greek activists in Skouries often see parallels in their struggles against 'extractivism' and the struggles of activists, including the aforementioned Standing Rock (Figure 3) but extending elsewhere<sup>17</sup>, including other Indigenous communities. For example, in February 2019, local activists organised a meeting called 'From SKOURIES to MEXICO: The struggle for the protection of historical heritage across the world', which drew parallels between what is happening in Skouries with what is happening in Chiapas, Mexico. As the organisers argued<sup>18</sup>:

Examples of historical heritage being exploited can be found globally; a recent one involves the full "touristification" of Chiapas in Mexico, which as the Zapatistas argue, puts hundreds of Mayan heritage sites in danger of being "grabbed" by tourism conglomerates.

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<sup>16</sup> Aldo Seoane visited Greece and Chalkidiki in May 2017. He witnessed first-hand the destruction caused by the gold mine and discussed with local activists. He was interviewed by journalists from the national radio and TV broadcasting agency (EPT3) and his interview (in English) is available here <http://webtv.ert.gr/ert3/15ion2017-antidrastririo-to-kinima-tou-standing-rock/>), accessed 28/9/2019.

<sup>17</sup> Other attempts by Skouries activists towards transnational linking of struggles include meetings/collaborations with the NO TAV (against high speed rail) and ZAD (against airport construction) movements in Italy and France respectively.

<sup>18</sup> [http://ierissiot.es.blogspot.com/2019/02/blog-post\\_7.html](http://ierissiot.es.blogspot.com/2019/02/blog-post_7.html), accessed 7 July 2019.

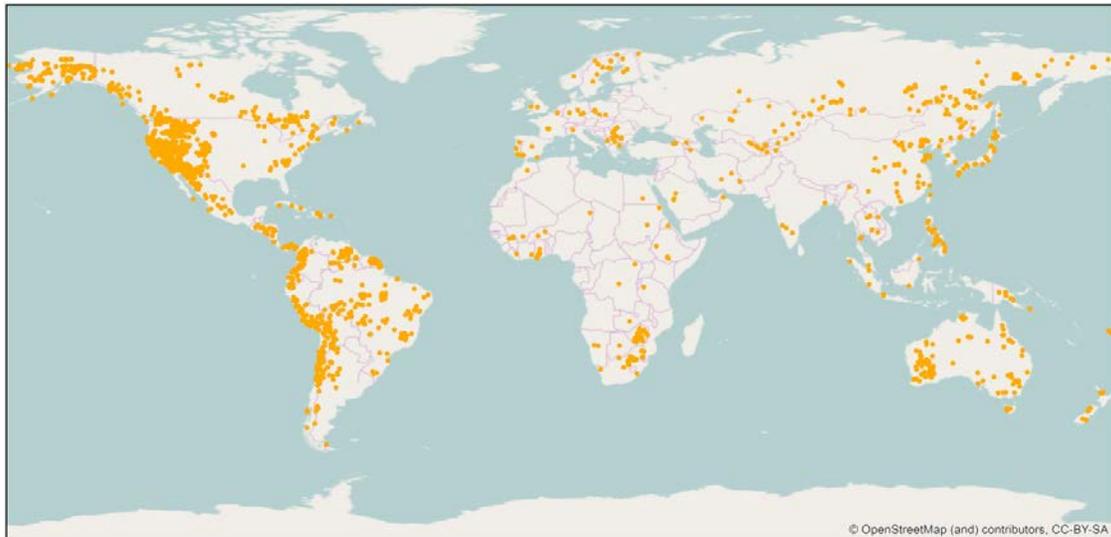


Figure 2. Global map of active mines and plants that produce gold (including mines where the main mineral is not gold). Sources: Background map from OpenStreetMap, mining data courtesy of the US Geological Survey (<http://mrddata.usgs.gov/general/global.html>).

Due to its ontological incommensurability thesis, PO cannot help but erect what Kirsch and Mitchell have called an "unbridgeable binary" regarding inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, or modern/a-modern communication (Kirsch and Mitchell 2004: 693). For OT, either we (Westerners/scientists-anthropologists/political ecologists) leave unquestioned the world-making capacities of 'alter' actors (human and nonhuman) or we must impose our ontology upon them – leaving no room for a universe of alternative possibilities that are being weaved in practice, as the quotes from the Skouries and Standing Rock activists imply (also see Figure 3). As Escobar (2016: 19), argues, the "One-World world", his opposite to the pluriverse<sup>19</sup>, "denies the mangrove-world its possibility of existing as such." However, examples of alternative possibilities abound. As Martinez-Alier *et al.* (2014) have documented, a plethora of concepts were developed and introduced into western scientific discourse by Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists across the world, illustrating the rich inter-cultural, inter-ontological and inter-epistemological "exegetical exchange" (Geismar 2011: 7, cited by Vigh and Sausdal 2014: 57) that has been enriching political ecology. These concepts have had a significant impact on environmental justice and sustainability research and practice, and they include, among others: environmental justice, ecological debt, environmental racism, climate justice, water justice, biopiracy, food sovereignty, 'green deserts', land grabbing, ecocide, and Indigenous territorial rights.

More importantly, this exchange I just mentioned alludes to another limitation of PO for the political ecology of conservation. For while the incommensurability thesis has proven its usefulness in elucidating the "politicoconceptual" (Blaser 2013) elements of environmental conflict that were so far obscured when political ecologists were trying understand "the consolidations and impacts of particular environment and development policies" (Sullivan 2017: 222), the same thesis can be a limitation when trying to understand

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<sup>19</sup> As he puts it (Escobar 2016: 22): [they are correct] "The 'pluriverse' is a way of looking at reality that contrasts with the [One-World world] assumption that there is a single reality to which there correspond multiple cultures, perspectives, or subjective representations."

how to build inter-cultural or inter-ontological<sup>20</sup> alliances against green or un-green grabbing (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). Often, these alliances are not based on differences but, as the Indigenous activist Aldo Seoane cited above argues, on similarities.



Figure 3. A banner held by Greek activists against gold mining, linking their struggle against mining to the struggle of Indigenous groups against the Dakota Access oil pipeline. On the day Barack Obama visited Athens in November 2016, the banner was placed in front of the building housing the US consulate in Thessaloniki, N. Greece. Source: Struggle Committees of Thessaloniki and Halkidiki against gold mining (Επιτροπές Θεσσαλονίκης-Χαλκιδικής ενάντια στην εξόρυξη χρυσού)

#### 4. Conclusion

I discussed three implicit and/or explicit premises upon which the OT in political ecology rests: the homogenization of the Indigenous and western 'tribes'; the incommensurability between Indigenous and 'modern', Western ontologies; and the *in toto* rejection of Western science and reason as that is embodied in ecology and conservation. I (hope I) have shown that these premises often ignore or obfuscate the attempts of activists, scientists, anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberalism organizations across the world to resist and transform destructive global-to-local political ecologies, often using traditional ecology and conservation as allies. Particularly as the globe continues to plunge into a geographically uneven combined financial and environmental crisis, in which old assurances about the global North and global South are increasingly put to the test, certain propositions by OT are perhaps risky – despite their authors' best intentions.

Critical conservation, OT scholars and above all conservationists, should rethink what conservation actually is. Currently, the dominant view of a singular modernity and Western science is found wanting, either as saviours of, or conversely as nemeses to the Earth system, local societies, natures, and socionatures. Unlike much of OT scholarship, I do not see a singular modernity or a 'tribe of the moderns' in service of capital and the Western state, and thus I think modern science as (awkwardly and wrongly) embodied in ecology has a central place in political ecology. Furthermore, I do not see any justification in elevating 'amodern' societies to the status of illuminated sages that can transcend capitalism, not because their ontologies or epistemologies are inferior, but mainly because these societies are also often fraught with their own contradictions and racial,

<sup>20</sup> *Sensu* Sullivan's soft ontological commitments, i.e. ontology as the way different "social groupings" understand the world to be: "Ontological assumptions and praxis, then, denote what entities can exist, into what categories they can be sorted, and by what practices and methods they can be known (i.e. epistemology)" (2017: 223).

gender, and class divisions (Htun and Ossa 2013; Laurie *et al.* 2005; Linnekin 1992; Richards 2005). I also see the conceptualization of radical alterity not as implying uncontrolled equivocations based on different ontologies, as that would negate (or even deny) the fragile networks of solidarity (past, current and future) between Indigenous communities, western communities, western scientists and activists and Indigenous activists that I came across in my research.

All the above should not be seen as a critique of the broader ontological turn. Moving further from the Ontological Turn and Political Ontology, there are other ways of, and frameworks for, incorporating the diverse ontologies of diverse social groups into political ecology, and possibly into conservation and ecology. In terms of ontological or epistemological commitments they do not have the same issues as OT and PO. For example, Paige West (2005, 2016) in her anthropology of dispossession and the environment in Papua New Guinea, takes seriously the ontologies of Indigenous Gimi people, but attempts to historically understand and present them as a critique of dispossession, and not as always present and unchangeable cosmologies of (all) the Gimi – always without claiming that their "ways of being are not translatable" (West 2005: 633). Similarly, Dressler *et al.* (2018: 442), while giving serious consideration and space to the Indigenous "ontological realms" around swidden agriculture in Palawan, engage in "exegesis" by interpreting them as "the relational life force and generative capacity of swidden assemblages that offer some farmers certainty in the world."

It is crucial to note that conservation as (very briefly) outlined above can work only provided we accept Sandbrook's (2015: 565) wider definition of conservation as "actions that are intended to establish, improve or maintain good relations with nature." This move would take us beyond traditional fortress conservation and market-based green grabbing, and could include a wide variety of activist, Indigenous, and not-traditional conservation actors and institutions. A **political ecology-informed conservation-as-science is needed**, that takes on on-board political ecology-inspired concerns about the role of science and is sensitive to different ontologies and epistemologies, gender, class, race and colonialism – but without risking its crucial link to quantitative ecology and biology.

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## Supplementary Material

Actor/organisation	Date	Letter or document submitted to the Medway Core Strategy examination
Medway Countryside Forum	10 May 2012	M5-44 Medway Countryside Forum: <i>Written Summary of case supporting Oral representations by the Medway Countryside Forum</i>
Natural England	8 June 2012	M5-54 Natural England (including appendices 1-9): <i>Natural England's position re Matter 1 – Legal Process and Matter 5 - Lodge Hill Strategic Allocation</i>
Medway Council	14 June 2012	M5-MC Medway Council: <i>STATEMENT BY MEDWAY COUNCIL</i>
Medway Council, RSPB, Kent Wildlife Trust	14 June 2012	EX16 RSPB and Kent Wildlife Trust (Nightingale Survey): <i>Statement of Common Ground between Medway Council, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Kent Wildlife Trust</i>
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	14 June 2012	EX15 Lodge Hill - BTO nightingale survey (presented by RSP): <i>BTO nightingale survey 2012, Lodge Hill, Kent (TQ77)</i>
Natural England	9 July 2012	EX18 Natural England re Matter 1 and 5: <i>Lodge Hill Strategic Allocation in the Medway Core Strategy</i>
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	18 July 2012	EX22 RSPB letter to inspector 18 July 2012: <i>Matter 5 - Lodge Hill Strategic Allocation</i>
Peter Court Associates	20 July 2012	EX23 Peter Court Associates response 20 July 2012 (pdf 495KB): <i>Response to letter from Natural England re. Lodge Hill</i>
Medway Magna Ltd.	12 July 2012	EX21 Medway Magna response: Representations by Medway Magna Ltd (45): <i>Comments on letter from Natural England re Lodge Hill</i>
Frindsbury & Wainscott Community	20 July 2012	EX24 Frindsbury & Wainscott Community Association response: <i>FWCA COMMENTS ON LODGE HILL STRATEGIC ALLOCATION</i>
Defence Infrastructure Organisation and Land Securities	24 July 2012	EX27 DIO and Land Securities response: <i>MEDWAY CORE STRATEGY EXAMINATION – RESPONSE ON BEHALF OF DEFENCE INFRASTRUCTURE ORGANISATION AND LAND SECURITIES</i>
Environment Bank Ltd.	July 2012	EX29 EBL Offsetting Assessment Lodge Hill: Independent assessment of the potential for Biodiversity Offsetting to compensate for nightingale habitat loss at Lodge Hill, Kent
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	19 October 2012	EX53 RSPB Letter to Natural England: The proposed notification of an extension to the Chattenden woods SSSI
Land Securities	2 November 2012	EX54 Land Securities Letter to Natural England: Lodge Hill

Greening the Gateway, Kent and Medway	January 2013	EX98 Nightingale Habitat Opportunities report: Summary of Nightingale Habitat Creation Opportunities
Natural England	11 March 2013	EX89 Minutes of Natural England board meeting: Natural England Executive Board Minutes
Natural England	13 March 2013	EX88 Chattenden Woods and Lodge Hill SSSI notification: Chattenden Woods and Lodge Hill SSSI Kent Notification under section 28C of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
Natural England	13 March 2013	EX91 Chattenden Woods and Lodge Hill SSSI extension map
Natural England	13 March 2013	EX93 Chattenden Woods and Lodge Hill SSSI map with nightingales
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	22-23 May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-65 Closing Statement RSPB
Peter Court Associates	31 May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-43 Closing Statement Peter Court
Natural England	30 May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-54 Closing Statement Natural England
Ministry of Defence and Land Securities	22-23 May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-40 Closing Statement on behalf of MoD and Land Securities
Medway Countryside Forum	31 May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-44 Closing Statement Medway Countryside Forum
Kent Wildlife Trust	May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-37 Closing Statement Kent Wildlife Trust
Frindsbury and Wainscott Community Association	May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-24 Closing Statement Frindsbury and Wainscott
Barratt Strategic	May 2013	M5(CS/FH)-04 Closing Statement Barratt Strategic
Planning Inspector	21 June 2013	EX111 - Inspector's response

Table 1: Documents consulted for the Lodge Hill case study related to the planning permission. All documents are available at [https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/download/29/matter\\_5\\_lodge\\_hill\\_material\\_post-september\\_2012](https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/download/29/matter_5_lodge_hill_material_post-september_2012).