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Politicizing water: Rescaling resistance to extractive development in Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

Many Indigenous and peasant movements denounce the expansion of extractive development as a threat to their lives, livelihoods, and territories that reinforces legacies of colonization and armed conflict. Grassroots resistances to extractive projects converge on concerns over water access and contamination. This essay draws on politically-engaged ethnographic research with Indigenous territorial defense organizations in Guatemala and political ecological perspectives on water politics to examine how the strategic politicization of water affects the scalar potential of Indigenous and peasant environmental movements. I describe how Indigenous and peasant communities, political organizations, and NGOs use water as a transfer point to demonstrate the harms of extractivist projects; pursue legal strategies; form local, regional, and national networks; and to articulate resistances across a range of industries, environmental paradigms, and geographic and ethnic divides, strengthening alliances for alternative ways of being on the land.

1. Introduction

Since 2008, convergent global crises in food, finance, poverty, and climate have intensified natural resource enclosures for extractive development, framed as essential to poverty-reduction and sustainable energy and food futures (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Borras et al., 2018). Rather than resolve these crises, land and resource control grabs create a "convergence of multiple social justice issues around agrarian, food, labor, environmental and climate justice themes" (Borras et al., 2018: 1228), presenting new challenges and opportunities for social movements and engaged scholars. Neoliberal globalization reinscribes colonial geographies of racialized exclusion through processes of "accumulation by dispossession" which undermine subsistence agriculture, labor protections, social welfare, public sectors, and democracy and drive an "escalating depletion of the global environmental commons'' to maximize market freedom (Haraway et al., 2016; Harvey, 2006: 153). Thousands of Indigenous and peasant communities across Latin America have mobilized to defend their lives, livelihoods, territories, and waterways against the "commodity consensus" (Svampa, 2015; Farthing and Fabricant, 2018). This essay examines the strategic consolidation of Guatemalan territorial defense movements around water.

Water pollution, overuse, privatization, and the destruction of hydrological systems are unavoidable dimensions of land grabs and resource extraction and increasingly salient themes in Indigenous and poor peoples' environmentalism (Bebbington et al., 2010; Franco et al., 2013; Perrault, 2014; Rodríguez-Labajos and Martínez-Alier, 2015; Wilson and Inkster, 2018; Estes, 2019; Li and Velasquez, 2022). Political ecologists have drawn attention to the dynamics of grassroots scalar politics in water justice movements (Hoogesteger, 2013; Hoogesteger and Verzijl, 2015), highlighting the unique capacity of water to motivate and coordinate collective action at local, regional, national and international scales (Boelens et al., 2016; Boelens et al., 2018), as well as the significance of water in alliances against mining and hydrocarbons (Bebbington et al., 2010; Velásquez, 2022; Li and Velasquez, 2022). How does the strategic politicization of water by post-extractivist movements transform their scalar potential?

This essay examines the evolution of anti-extractive movements in Guatemala since 2005, with particular attention to the period between 2015 and 2022, when water emerged as a unifying theme and strategic axis in the *defense of territory* (DT). The DT is an umbrella frame for a range of local and national organizations that oppose extractivist development—understood as an expansive category that includes mining, hydropower, agrarian monocultures, logging, and more—which emerged in the mid 2000s (Mérida and Krenmayr, 2008; Yagenova and García, 2009; Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). DT partisans and constituent

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organizations evoke Indigenous values and epistemologies of *buen vivir* (living well) to frame a defense of a collective right to water and territorial self-determination against neo colonial capitalist extraction. DT discourse frames water as a commons and a collective right and as an intrinsic element of *territory*–a fragile and precious living network of mutually interdependent relations among human and nonhuman beings integral to Indigenous identity and survival and which Indigenous peoples have a historically grounded right and obligation to govern and protect (c.f. Wilson and Inkster, 2018; Estes, 2019). Movements view water as a weak point in the hegemony of the neoliberal extractive economy, whose multiple water violences are aggravated by inequality, corruption and the regulatory vacuum created by the absence of a national water law. Water has surged to the forefront of DT discourses, demands, tactics, and alliance building strategies, and traverses a rich array of initiatives.

Drawing on insights gained through politically engaged ethnographic research with water justice movements between 2018 and 2022 and engagement with political ecology perspectives on grassroots scalar politics, I describe how the strategic politicization of water enhances territorial defense movements' capacity to interrupt extractive enclosures; to explain the effects of industries on communities and ecosystems (and to frame an industry as extractive); to draw connections and harness synergies between resistances across diverse industries and movement paradigms; and to build networks and alliances for alternative models of development and territory. I also explore ways to leverage water's scalar possibilities.

Communities and activists turn to water to demonstrate the harms of extractive industries to the environment, territory, health, and livelihoods and to build alliances across diverse communities. Water violence is a commonality between place-based defenses rooted in Indigenous rights and cosmologies and longstanding agrarian movements for land and food sovereignty, and water politics entwine contestations over development and democracy. The DT politicizes water to build solidarity between poor urban communities' demands for water access and infrastructure, urban, middle class anti-corruption politics, and the demands of rural movements. These findings illuminate broader dynamics in a global conjuncture in which concerns over water access and contamination infuse movements for racial, food, gender, and climate justice, post-extractive and degrowth economies, and decolonization (Escobar, 2020).

Section one describes the methodology. Section two introduces anti-extractive movements in Guatemala. Section three discusses the significance of water in the DT. Section four reviews and engages with the political ecology literature on the scalar dimensions of peasant and Indigenous water struggles in the Andes. Section five analyzes the scalar evolution of water politics in Guatemala since 2015. The conclusion examines the broader significance of these findings.

2. Methodology

This essay synthesizes insights collected through politically engaged ethnographic research with grassroots organizations, Indigenous governments, water alliances, and NGOs in Guatemala conducted between 2018 and 2022. I helped carry out water monitoring projects in numerous rural communities, co-organized water science workshops to train community scientists, and collaborated in other ways with DT movements, water alliances and allied NGOs. In 2019, I helped found the Guatemalan Water Network, (REDAGUA), an organization that formed to defend the collective right to water through alliance building and promoting community water monitoring and access to water science. Funds for monitoring trips and water-testing technology and my efforts to build collaborations between Virginia Tech scientists and rural communities made me useful to grassroots activists and created a context for water testing, advocacy, organizing, political analysis, and research. Working in alignment with the DT was a precondition for research that taught me more than I could have learned in any other way and gave me a perspective that is partial and still evolving (Hale, 2006).

Participant observation during the planning and carrying out of water monitoring with community organizations, collaborating with water networks and water alliances, and participation in public forums, virtual spaces, and regular communication in several WhatsApp groups provided detailed insight into the milieu of the DT and the role of water in it as did numerous conversations and informal interviews with grassroots water defenders and their allies. I reflected on these experiences through theoretical lenses from political anthropology, political ecology, and critical development and agrarian studies and understandings gained through prior ethnographic research on politics and development in rural Huehuetenango.

Working trips to communities across Guatemala helped me understand how water figured into critiques of industry, movement strategy, articulatory processes, and repertoires of contention in the DT. I also learned about the relationships between NGOs and Indigenous communities and the challenges to movement organizing in a society afflicted by extreme racial inequality, poverty, political violence, and mistrust. I draw on understandings gained through these methods and through scholarly and journalistic reports to examine how the strategic focus on water opens up new scalar possibilities for the DT and how to harness them.

3.1. Extractivism and the defense of territory in Guatemala

Influential Latin American social theorists define neoextractivist development as the high volume exploitation of natural resources, primarily for export (Acosta, 2011; Gudynas, 2009). The concept emphasizes ecological impact on nonrenewable resources beyond the narrow window of economic utility, from exploration to project afterlife, the negative effects on poor and Indigenous communities, and the region's subordination in the global political economic order (Svampa, 2017; Farthing and Fabricant, 2018). Argentinian Sociologist Maristella Svampa (2015) writes that rising materials demand consolidated an "agreement about the irrevocable or irresistible character of the current extractivist dynamic" among both conservative and anti-neoliberal governments in Latin America (67). Originally centered on mining and hydrocarbons, "the boom in natural resource sales […] has pushed the traditional boundaries of what has historically been considered extractivism" (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018: 5). Likewise, Guatemalan DT activists regularly use the concept "extractivismo" or a cognate to denounce a range of large-scale projects: from mining, agrarian monocultures, hydroelectric dams, and logging, to cement factories, cattle ranching, and shrimp farms. To many, it matters less whether these goods are *exported* per se than how these privatizing enclosures harm territories, ecosystems, livelihoods, and poor peasant and Indigenous communities.

Peace accords in 1996 ended decades of armed conflict and marked a transition to free market, multicultural democracy. But their moderate reforms were blocked and watered down by successive governments which passed laws to attract foreign investment in sync with World Bank loans for mineral mining, hydropower, oil exploration and roads, the individual titling of communal lands (Holt-Gimenez, 2008; Solano, 2014) and conservation projects (Ybarra, 2018). Guatemala's 1997 Mining Law required companies to pay only one percent of their profit to the state (MEM, 1997). After 2008, extraction expanded globally as the solution to interlinked crises of finance, energy, food, and climate (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Borras et al., 2018). As investors saw opportunities in rising metals prices and demand for renewable energy, cheap food, and raw materials, the stage was set for an extractive boom in Guatemala (Alonso-Fradejas, 2021; Solano, 2005). This transnational corporate agenda advanced against the wishes and without input from rural Indigenous communities and in violation of newly recognized rights won by an emerging Pan Mayan movement (Warren, 1998; Bastos and de León, 2013). The DT emerged in the mid-2000 s and gained momentum as the failure of neoliberal democracy and development

became increasingly undeniable (McAllister and Nelson, 2013; Copeland, 2019a).

The Marlin Mine in San Marcos, a four-square kilometer open pit gold mine, became a flashpoint of resistance in the post-accords era: it launched the community consultation movement against mining, strengthened by International Labor Organization (ILO) treaty 169 (Mérida and Krenmayr, 2008; Yagenova and García, 2009). Since then, hundreds of communities have carried out consultations, frequently led by newly recognized autonomous Indigenous governments (Rasch, 2012). The state wants to define consultations as a procedural step in the awarding of licenses, whereas communities embrace a standard of free, prior, and informed consent and the right to cancel projects (Copeland, 2019b). The anti-mining movement became the "defense of territory," (DT) drawing on the language of territory in ILO 169 and the Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples to assert a fundamental Indigenous right to govern their ancestral homelands (Bebbington et al., 2010). Through numerous *encuentros* among Indigenous and peasant movements, Indigenous governments, and allied movements and NGOs, the DT expanded its conceptualization of territory and extractivism, playing a key role in opposition to genetically modified seeds after the passage of the "Monsanto Law" in 2015 (Grandia, 2017).

As in other Latin American contexts, the Guatemalan DT is a space of indigenous cosmopolitics (de la Cadena, 2010), providing a narrative frame through which grassroots actors bring Madre Tierra, mountains, rivers, and other non-human beings into the political sphere. DT discourse maintains that humans and nature are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent, enmeshed in relationships of mutual obligation, drawing on the Andean concept of *buen vivir* (living well), *utzilaj k'aslemal* in Quiché (Waqib' Kej, 2015, 2021; Svampa, 2015). The DT unites Indigenous values with struggles for food sovereignty, La Vía Campesina's (2007) vision of a democratic and ecological food system and alternative to the corporate food regime and multidimensional socioecological crisis (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Copeland, 2019c; McMichael, 2014). The political horizon of the DT is explicitly decolonial and anti-capitalist: it rejects the capitalist reduction of nature to commodities whose value is realized through exchange and narrates extractivism as a continuation of war and colonial dispossession (Dary et al., 2018; Batz, 2022). Many Indigenous and peasant led movement alliances throughout Latin America level similar charges against leftist governments who justify extractivist development to fund redistributive programs, opposing these to environmentalist concerns, as well as right wing kleptocracies like Guatemala. The *Coordinación y Convergencia Nacional* Waqib' Kej, the *Cuatro Congreso Nacional de Pueblos y Comunidades*, the *Marcha Indígena y Campesina* of 2012, among other national encuentros and mobilizations, are milestones in efforts to support local struggles against extractive industries and to weave them into a mass movement for an economic system rooted in Indigenous values of buen vivir and a plurinational state (Waqib' Kej, 2021).

Decades of ruthless counterinsurgency violently repressed all forms of independent collective action in rural Guatemala (REHMI, 1998; CEH, 1999), but political organizing resurfaced through the transition to democracy, foregrounding demands for human, Indigenous, and women's rights (Warren, 1998; Nelson, 1999; Bastos and Camus, 2003). Since 2005, Guatemalan communities have organized in defense of life, livelihoods, and territories and use legal strategies, protests, and direct action in addition to community consultations to stop projects with support from progressive NGOs, the Catholic Church, and other civil society organizations. Although legal and peaceful, industries and the state go to great lengths to defeat territorial defenses: bribing and threatening leaders, promising community projects, running PR campaigns extolling benefits and defaming resistors as "anti-development" alongside racially targeted violence that echoes the armed conflict (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020; Granovsky-Larsen and Santos, 2021; Nolin and Russell, 2021). They criminalize territorial resistances precisely because their nonviolent methods have been effective.

The environmental impacts of extractivism on Indigenous territories and livelihoods, their failure to reduce poverty, rampant corruption in their implementation, the capture of profits by national and foreign capital, and their violent imposition by a predatory elite who has abandoned the accords while poverty and environmental calamity grow worse has radicalized the ongoing rearticulation of Indigenous identity (Bastos and de León, 2013; Dary et al., 2018; Copeland, 2019c). The DT is a dynamic political imaginary and set of organizational practices distributed across grassroots resistances, social movements, progressive NGOs, alternative media, and allied scholarship with echoes across many rural communities and urban ladino/mestizo (nonindigenous) environmentalist, youth, and student groups.

The DT responds to the sheer scope of extractivism. In 2021, due to a 2005 law that incentivized renewable energy, over thirty hydroelectric dams were operating in Guatemala, another two dozen in construction or authorized (Rodríguez Carmona and de Luis Romero, 2016), as well as over three hundred mines, and approximately 600 slated for future exploitation.[2] Between 2010 and 2020, companies sought 233 licenses for mining exploration and exploitation and over 130 thousand hectares were planted with African Palm and another 280 thousand with sugar cane with an additional 800 thousand hectares dedicated to petroleum exploration and extraction (España, 2021). Cane and palm alone expanded the equivalent of 85 parcels the size of Manhattan. Before 2010, Guatemala lost 73,148 ha annually to deforestation, nearly half to illegal logging (INAB, 2010), with oil palm and sugar cane as primary drivers (Gamazo, 2017). Alberto Alonso-Fradejas (2021) describes the advance of agro-extractivism in the northern lowlands as:

> A process of 'impairing destruction' [that] works by means of a job-poor, culturally insensitive, toilsome and unpaid labor-based 'productive' model, and the manufacturing of environmentally and socially toxic landscapes, to 'leave no one unscathed' (134).

Such realities stand in sharp contrast to discourses celebrating green development.

From the Andes to El Salvador, water has united regional and national movements against mining and hydrocarbons (Bebbington et al., 2010; Boelens et al., 2016; Montoya, 2021; Li and Velasquez, 2022). Although hundreds of organizations link their work to the DT frame, unity is often more aspiration than reality. Through the strategic politicization of water rights violations, the DT aims to strengthen local struggles and alliances against a wider range of extractive industries and overcome structural forces that limit democratic movements in Guatemala.

3.2. Water and Resistance to Extractivist Development

Dominant approaches to water management in Guatemala depart from an affirmation of a direct relationship between water use and development, as measured by economic growth, exports, and energy production (Colom de Morán and Morales de la Cruz, 2011). These approaches reinforce an understanding of water as an abstract resource divorced from society, history, and power (Linton, 2014). Franco et al. (2013) describe water grabbing as a growing dimension of major capital investments in natural resources accelerated by converging crises of energy, food, climate, and finance whose scale and effects are often difficult to grasp but have major implications for water quality and access.

In Guatemala, water is at the heart of resistance to an array of industries which are framed and understood as extractive in large part due to the ways they contaminate or overuse water, two forms of water privatization that deprive communities of access, damage hydrological systems, human health, and food production–sometimes all of these–in addition to other serious environmental harms, rights violations,

[2] https://mem.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Derechos-Mineros-Vigentes-EXPLOTACION-enero-2021.pdf

inequities, and illegalities. Opposition to extractivism is not reducible to water, and water concerns vary across industries, but water is intrinsic to local, regional, and national expressions of the DT. This is especially the case after the 2016 March for Water, Mother Earth, Life, and Territory which inaugurated a new cycle of water and territory politics. "Territory defender" is synonymous with "water defender" in movement spaces.

Communities in the defense of territory are collectively rethinking water rights alongside Indigenous identity, conceptions of territory, and notions of the commons (Perera, 2015). Many see recovering traditional ways of knowing, relating to, and governing water as key elements of revindicating Indigenous cosmologies, environmental relations, and self-determination (Wilson and Inkster, 2018). In a focus group I organized in collaboration with Ixil authorities and the Foundation for the Development and Strengthening of Grassroots Organizations (FUNDEBASE) in 2018, an Ixil elder from San Gaspar Chajul explained his opposition to the installation of hydroelectric dams in Ixil territory:

> *The businesses installed here to export our rivers diminish the force of what is ours (de lo nuestro), some dry out and this leads us to poverty and water scarcity, [water] has such a great value for us because it permits a good life (tichajil). We oppose the extractivism of our river because it affects our environment.*

This echoes common attitudes toward hydroelectric projects in other regions (Rodríguez Carmona and de Luis Romero, 2016). For him, these dams extract what is theirs (*lo nuestro*), causing poverty and disrupting *tichajil,* an Ixil translation of buen vivir. Lo nuestro is an assertion of a collective right to water related to historical claims to territory.

For their part, monocrops poison rivers as they contort them to extract water and wealth. In the dry season and during droughts, sugar cane and oil palm companies dam and divert rivers and run mechanical pumps to irrigate vast plantations, slowing rivers to a trickle, and lowering water tables (Reina, 2016; Cabañas, 2017). Deforestation for monocultures further disrupts rainfall and riverine and hydric recharge systems. In the rainy season, rivers flow with unknown quantities of chemical runoff that harm aquatic life and human health (CIV, 2007; MARN, 2016; Alonso-Fradejas, 2021: 135). In 2015, the oil palm company Repsa dumped agrochemicals into the Passion River in Petén, killing fish for 150 km and contaminating the main water source for thousands living downstream in Q'eqchi'-Maya farming communities, provoking national outcry over ecocide and monocultures (Escalón, 2015).

Mines pose multiple threats to regional water systems (Kirsch, 2014). Located at the top of a hydric recharge system in an area with naturally occurring arsenic, the Escobal silver mine in eastern Guatemala risks contaminating the water supply for several towns and the Monterrico protected area on the south coast (CECON-USAC, 2019). The mine also pumps over 280 gallons of water per minute when in operation and has reduced the flow of the Esclavos river and lowered the water table, drying up springs and risking the dewatering of the watershed.

The absence of a national water law aggravates extractive injustices, greatly diminishing the ability of underfunded and reluctant state institutions to regulate industrial use, despite a clear constitutional mandate to pass a law to govern water as an "inalienable" and "imprescriptible" public good (Del Águila, 2018; Padilla, 2019). The failure to pass a law distinguishes Guatemala from most Latin American countries and creates an outcry in civil society. On a panel titled the Necessity of a Water Law organized by the Instituto de Problemas Nacionales (IPN) from Guatemala's University of San Carlos (USAC) in August 2020, the environmental attorney, Diana Monroy, attributed the failure to pass a law to the capture of Guatemalan democracy by a corrupt economic elite: *"a very clear example of how the impact of these political-economic networks transcends public officials stealing public money; it's also the omission of legislation to hinder the totally improper use by large water users"* (my translation). Her analysis extends corruption beyond typical middle-class concerns to encompass the environmental injustices of development.

Moreover, severely inadequate water planning and infrastructure leaves millions without regular access to clean water (IARNA, 2016; Morales de la Cruz 2020). The COVID 19 pandemic raised serious hygienic concerns in communities without reliable water access. Meanwhile, climate change worsens both drought and flooding from intensified rainfall and hurricanes, threatening food production, infrastructure, and water access for poor communities (IARNA, 2016; Arteaga, 2021). The Global Climate Risk Index ranks Guatemala at high risk for "weather-related loss events" (Kreft et al., 2017). These realities contribute to misery and forced migration, as well as growing concern about water in nearly every Guatemalan community.

4. Scalar politics and hydrosocial territories

Water struggles seek material control of water while simultaneously contesting the rules and assumptions that govern and naturalize unequal patterns of water use and distribution (Boelens, 2008). One key assumption is "modern water," enshrined in popular models of the hydrological cycle, which abstracts water from social, political, and historical contexts to facilitate state and institutional water resource management (Linton, 2014). By contrast, critical geographers Linton and Budds (2014) propose the "hydrosocial cycle": a dialectical process through which water and society, both internal hybrids, remake each other. This perspective emphasizes how water flows and cycles are indistinguishable from social relations–the mutual constitution of nature and society (Mosse, 2003). Neoliberalism has created a crisis in modern water, fueling social movements that aim to re-embed water in society and resignify it as a human right (Linton, 2014). Indigenous movements in Latin America have further redefined water rights following collective and cosmological understandings (Perera, 2015).

Critical political ecologists also examine how water movements engage in grassroots scalar politics: "strategies by which local actors pursue their interests *through* engagements and alliances with differently scaled actors and networks" (Hoogesteger and Verzijl, 2015: 15, italics in original). Scale, or different 'levels' of human organization and interaction, is understood here as an important dimension of politics, and as continually made and remade in the dialectical interplay between divergent programs to organize social and economic life (Swyngedouw, 1997, 2004). Scalar narratives, politics and practices are not *about* scale, but exercising power and securing rights through reorganizing the spatial geometries of power and connection. This scholarship also draws attention to water's unique quality of connecting across various scales:

> Water flows through landscapes, technologies and cities, connecting places, spaces and people. The natural and/or human-induced variations in its flow create, transform or destroy social linkages, lived spaces and boundaries as they produce new social, land and water configurations (Boelens et al., 2016: 3)

Water control systems are bound up with specific livelihoods, cultural meanings, identities, and histories of political struggle; they are constitutive of economic, social, and political hierarchies and their contestation (Boelens, 2008). For these reasons, water frequently serves as an important platform for supracommunity collaboration (Boelens et al., 2016; Hoogesteger, 2013). Water rights movements form horizontal and vertical alliances and engage in politics at local, regional, national and international scales to defend water rights and challenge dominant "hydrosocial territories":

> [M]ulti-scalar network[s] in which humans, water flows, ecological relations, hydraulic infrastructure, financial means, legal-administrative arrangements and cultural institutions and practices are interactively defined, aligned and mobilized" (Hoogesteger and Verzijl, 2015; Boelens et al., 2016: 2).

The scalar expansion of extractive industries depends on their ability to physically and legally redirect water flows toward private industrial

needs and away from other users who use the means at their disposal to regain control of water. I expand on these theories to ask how DT actors and organizations strategically politicize water rights violations, to define them as inherent to the hydrosocial territories of extraction and use water as a pivot point to tap into new scalar possibilities for anti-extractive alliances.

Water is at the center of debates over extractivism and Indigenous rights and autonomy in Latin America. Anthony Bebbington et al. (2010) highlight the role of water in regional and national confederations in the Andes that emerged to challenge hydrocarbons and mining which clashed directly with Indigenous territorial governance: "the two most contentious topics" in the advance of these industries being "water and Indigenous territorial control" (4). Whereas state and industry attempt to separate water from territory, Indigenous communities insist on their indivisibility. Writing about oil palm expansion in Marialabaja, Colombia, Catalina Quiroga and Diana Vallejo describe how "water is integrated into territorial resistances in such a way that it converts into a fundamental part of the perception of space and the resignification of nature" (2019: 79). I build on this scholarship to examine how focusing on water expands the repertoires of contention, scalar strategies, and possibilities for territorial defense movements. In Guatemala, the politicization of water privatization and water rights violations are used to articulate and critique a broader conception of extractivist development, beyond mining and oil exploration, and harnessed to build a national alliance for a post-extractive economy and a plurinational state.

Water serves as a prism through which DT movements define extractivism, critique colonization and imagine and articulate alternative conceptions of territory and development. I examine how the emergence of grassroots organizations to defend water rights in response to extractive industries created new scalar opportunities for DT to establish connections between groups and locations at multiple levels from the local to the national, and to bring together a diverse range of actors and movement paradigms. The following section tracks the scalar evolution of water and DT struggles since 2015.

5.1. Guatemalan movements for water and territory, 2015–2022

Andean water networks, many of long standing, expanded alongside Indigenous organizations in the 1990s and influenced the development of regional and national water policy (Hoogesteger et al., 2016). In Guatemala few autonomous Indigenous water governance systems survived the counterinsurgency, with Totonicapán, one of the strongest Indigenous governments, a notable exception. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, fledgling civil society organizations and NGOs grappled with the aftermath of state violence, refugee reintegration, and the negotiation and implementation of peace accords and multicultural democracy (Nelson 2009). State decentralization laws relegated water management to municipalities and Community Development Councils (COCODES), both of which were increasingly Indigenous led, but without sufficient funds, institutional support, or regional linkages (Gamboa et al., 2008; Del Águila, 2018). Authoritarian parties abandoned the accords and implemented a militarized extractive project (Bastos and de León, 2015).

5.2. *Regional water alliances*

In the mid-2010s, social movements and DT-aligned NGOs responded to community concerns about water and began to strengthen local organizations and build regional alliances "structured by different rules and normative frameworks, sources of legitimacy, [and] forms of authority" (Hoogesteger et al., 2016: 93). Local and regional water rights organizations representing grassroots communities emerged in relation to the DT, forming the seedbed for water alliances. These "local water-use territories form the basic building blocks around which broader grass-roots water territorialization takes place" (Hoogesteger et al., 2016: 97). These alliances brought together water user groups, place-based defenses, agrarian struggles, and NGOs to create new scalar forms to challenge the hydrosocial territories of extractivism from below.

One regional alliance is the Consejo Comunitario de Retalhuleu, (CCR), which arose in 2015 in response to the expansion of sugar cane monocultures. In the Declaration of Champerico (2016), they denounce the capture of rivers, chemical pollution, deforestation, aerial fumigations, and the burning of cane fields pre-harvest. It also demands that the sugar industry leave the territory and return land stolen from Indigenous communities. The CCR fights against water contamination and river diversion with government officials at municipal and departmental levels, and partners with national NGOs Asociación Ceiba and the Network to Defend Food Sovereignty in Guatemala (REDSAG). It is also a contact point for international human rights organizations, and participates in regional and national alliances. By 2022, the CCR had expanded to 24 communities, most of them from the municipality of Champerico. Struggles to liberate water from plantations go hand in hand with struggles for land, as monoculture plantations control over 84 percent of land on the south coast (Cabañas, 2017). Peasant organizations in plantation zones frame their struggles for land, water, and subsistence as part of the defense of territory through the lenses of buen vivir *and* food sovereignty (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015), blending influential paradigms for rural grassroots mobilization (Copeland, 2019c).

In February 2016, representatives from almost 100 villages from the south coast municipalities of Tiquisate and Nueva Concepción–elected officials, members of development committees, and dozens of farmers, accompanied by representatives of the Catholic Church and the NGO Comanglar (The Guatemalan Coordinator for the Defense of Mangroves and Life)–assembled to liberate the Madre Vieja River that had been diverted by the Hame Mill (Escalón, 2016a, 2016b). The next day, the CCR liberated a river diverted by a sugar plantation. More rivers followed in a spontaneous "grassroots reterritorialization" (Hoogesteger et al., 2016: 98). Soon after, organizations from across south coast departments of Suchitepequez, Retalhuleu, and Escuintla formed REDSUR, the Southern Network, to coordinate actions regionally.

Mining operations also spark regional oppositional alliances as they transform vast hydrosocial territories. For example, the Escobal Mine has united residents of dozens of affected communities from three municipalities, the Xinka Parliament, and the Catholic Diocese in an alliance driven in large measure by shared concerns about water. Hydroelectric dams also produce regional opposition movements (Batz, 2022). In 2015, 38 Q'eqchi' communities from the municipality of Cahabón organized a popular consultation against Oxec I hydroelectric dam that affected the flow and quality of water in the Cahabón river and its tributaries (Yagenova, 2018). By 2018, as additional dams were built, organizations from over 195 communities had joined the peaceful resistance and carried out a consultation vote overwhelmingly condemning the projects, despite the Supreme Court's (CSJ) 2017 ruling to limit consultation to eleven communities.

Dismantling the hydraulic infrastructure of sugar plantations, holding community-led consultas, or establishing road blockades to shut down mining operations and hydroelectric dams became new modes of contention that aggregated local concerns around water into "supra-community cooperation" united in opposition to extractive development (Hoogesteger 2013). Bebbington et al. (2010) argue that the "most effective [communal] responses [to extractive industries] involve some form of alliance and collaboration between [community based] federations and a range of other non-indigenous organizations (6). The strategic objective of the DT is to articulate grassroots movements against diverse industries, to make them operate in unison as a movement against "extractivism" writ large. This vision finds material support in the tendency of local movements to coalesce around water.

Take the case of the alliance of Q'eqchi' communities in the lowlands of AltaVerapaz and Petén. Formerly known as the Asociaciòn de Comunidades Afectadas por la Palma, they changed their name in 2020 to the Movimiento de Comunidades en Defensa del Agua Qana Ch'och'.

Qana Ch'och's Facebook page states their desire to "revindicate water as a grandmother, as a living being, and as a human right." Herbert Sandoval (2021), coordinator of the Movimiento Social Intercultural de Ixcán, explained that:

> What has generated greater awareness about the multiple impacts of palm monoculture is water scarcity and pollution. This has made the communities aware of the other impacts and has built the resistance that currently exists […]. This was a region that flooded a lot but since 2018, the region has been one of the most affected by droughts, leaving people without crops. It is already understood that the greater the destruction of [ecological] diversity, the more impact the drought will have on the territories (my translation).

Focusing on water enables communities to grasp and communicate a variegated range of harms of extractive industries and prompted a deeper investigation of multiple problems surrounding agrarian monocultures, such as understanding the connections between flooding and reduced soil permeability due to deforestation. In an interview on the Voice of Water, Qana' Ch'och's internet radio program in 2021, Q'eqchi' territory defender Ángel Quib described how their network adopted the name "defense of water" to "*denounce all the human rights violations we are seeing in our territories, to make visible all the damage that comes from a crop that supposedly brings development. But we have lived in our own flesh that that is a lie; it brings poverty, extreme poverty, malnutrition has increased, indicators that tell us that we are not developing*" (my translation) Focusing on water makes visible "how the violence of agro-industrial projects is imprinted in the everyday, affecting daily activities and logics" (Ojeda et al. (2015:110, my translation)—experiences which interrupt dominant discourses that idealize extractivism as "development." The elaboration of water and water rights as a local idiom for discussing the violence of extraction is a hallmark of the DT.

5.3. the March for Water

To maintain the momentum of historic anti-corruption uprisings that rocked the country in 2015, and to channel the public outcry over the ecocide in Sayaxché and river diversion for monocultures, the Social and Popular Assembly (ASP), a multi movement convergence, convened the March for Water, Mother Earth, Life, and Territory in 2016 (ASP, 2016a; Nómada 2016; Granovsky-Larsen 2017; Del Águila 2018). The Water March marked a qualitative scalar evolution in the DT, building on the 2012 Indigenous and Peasant March. It mobilized hundreds of local and regional water rights organizations, uniting place-based defenses against mining and hydropower, peasant struggles against monoculture expansion, women's organizations, rural Municipal Development Councils (COMUDES) and urban Neighborhood User Committees (CUBs) demanding better water and waste treatment infrastructure and water access. Indigenous governments and social movements, community resistance organizations, human rights and feminist groups, and allied NGOs Marched alongside student organizations and participants in urban anticorruption and pro-democracy alliances. The March framed the extractive economy as a de facto privatization incompatible with the human right to water, uniting communities across ethnic, class, and geographic lines, indicating significant potential for building a counter-hegemonic (anti-extractivism, anti-oligarchy) alliance capable of transforming the state and neoliberal economy, as has happened in other Latin American countries.

The March highlighted water's role as "an agent of change and social organization" (Linton 2014:16) echoing movements against water privatization throughout the continent, as well as post-capitalist resignifications of water rights according to Indigenous cosmologies (Perera 2015). The Declaration of Iximulew (ASP, 2016b), issued after the March, demanded the collective right to water and policies that prioritize the common uses of water for life over commercial uses and privatization. It further called for the recuperation of traditional and local water management practices and defined water as sacred and living being and a critical component of territory.

The March positioned "vernacular" water knowledge and "efforts to 'redesign' and reshape the hydraulic grids, units and artefacts that underlie the structure and logic of dominant hydrosocial territories" as the central theme and organizing principle of the DT (Boelens et al., 2016: 10). It made the politicization of water rights violations inherent to extractivism a cornerstone of DT strategy. The March brought together a constellation of left and liberal-progressive organizations and political horizons: highlighting the right for water as integral to buen vivir, food sovereignty and food securitiy, environmental protection, human and women's rights, health, and anti-corruption. In 2017 Pedro Camajá, director of the NGO FUNDEBASE and part of the leadership in the ASP, explained to me that March organizers saw water as a "common thread" between numerous movements. The March's success stood as a symbol of popular demands that far exceeded the violent exclusions of neoliberal democracy and reaffirmed the "value of and need for more systematic horizontal and vertical alliance building" around water "and across land and water sectors" (Franco et al., 2013: 1670).

With opposition to extractivism and defense of water rights its binding themes, after 2016 the DT morphed into a movement for alternative development *and* a movement for a new hydrosocial territory that reflected grassroots priorities for water use and governance and local meanings of water. The hybridization between the DT and water rights in the wake of the March was evident in subsequent movements for a national water law. Rather than consolidate and build on the transversal alliances of the March, however, it has proven difficult to sustain them amid state repression and the divisions on the Guatemalan left.

5.4. A Popular Water Law

The ASP issued the *Declaración de los Pueblos de Iximulew* (ASP, 2016b) as an "initial definition of our rights in relation to life, Mother Earth, Territory, and Water for use as instruments of struggle and the accumulation of forces" (281, my translation). They also elaborated a set of guiding principles for a water law, many of which were direct responses to extractive enclosures and territorial defenses. Their plan was to build unity first, and then draft a collective proposal that reached beyond depoliticized, market oriented, and technocratic framings of the human right to water (Perera 2015). Instead, the *Asamblea de Pueblos, Agua, Vida, y Territorio,* (AAVT), comprised of a subset of organizations from the ASP, including the NGOs SERJUS and Utz Ché, drafted Initiative 5070 (AAVT, 2015; SERJUS, 2016; Padilla, 2019).

Based on a study of Andean laws, Initiative 5070 aims to guarantee the human right to water and the collective rights of Indigenous and peasant communities, recognize water as a sacred and living being with rights, empower Indigenous and communal water systems, limit industrial water use, ban privatization, and create enforcement powers. It would also form a Junta Directiva with representatives from municipal and Indigenous authorities, establish a National Water Authority to manage, regulate, and monitor water systems and charge usage fees, and create an Indigenous water council. Like grassroots water law proposals in other Latin American contexts, 5070 promised to "protect the ecosystems crucial to the water cycle and the cultural value of water" and conceptions of territory and the commons (Perera 2015: 198). Initiative 5070 aimed to legally enshrine a mix of counter hegemonic principles that were sometimes in tension: recognition of water as an inalienable common good and relational cosmovisions (post-neoliberal) alongside measures to expand access and participation (counter-neoliberal) (Roa-García et al., 2015). Without question, passing such a law would turn DT values into concrete mechanisms to limit industrial activity, create a mechanism to compel state action, strengthen local water control across vast territories, and constitute a powerful break from the neoliberal extractive economy. But passing the law presupposes a form of political agency with the power to pressure the state and economic elite that does not exist. The Water for Life Campaign launched over digital media by

the AAVT to raise support for a law, followed by many reunions and press conferences, did not gain national momentum.

In Colombia, a failed referendum campaign on a radical water law gave rise to a "counter-network […] [a] slow-paced, bottom-up, and autonomous space" built by water activists to "resist dispossession and absorption by large water companies" (Perera 2015: 206). Radical water law movements in Guatemala were more fragmented. Some in the ASP opposed what they saw as the AAVT's unilateral effort to claim the water issue outside of the alliance and remained cool to the proposal. Meanwhile, the urban, mestizo/ladino (non-Indigenous) Agronomy Faculty from the University of San Carlos (USAC), and then-Dean Mario Godínez, launched the *Diálogos del Agua*–a multi-stakeholder initiative carried out in 24 locations in 22 departments in 2016–2017 to solicit and systematize opinions, concerns, and suggestions about water use, management, access, and policy to generate consensus for a water law (Comisión Ley de Aguas, 2016). Rather than create a permanent forum for strategic dialogue, organization, and coordination (*articulación*) around water, the Agronomy faculty drafted Initiative 5253, hoping to capitalize on the weakness of the unpopular government of Jimmy Morales, a comedian and dark horse candidate who had recently won a flawed and widely boycotted election on an anti-corruption platform, then governed from the far right. Intended as a collective proposal informed by twelve guiding principles identified by the dialogue, 5253 frustrated the Indigenous-led AAVT whose proposal was superseded, reopening divisions in progressive organizations around race, education, and geography. Under pressure after the Water March, Jimmy Morales's party, the Frente de Cambio Nacional (FCN) took up 5253, altered it significantly, and put it up for a first reading in Congress. A subsequent vote failed when both the ASP and the AAVT, cut out of the process and suspicious of the last-minute changes, withdrew support, sparing industrial water users from even moderate regulation.

The movement for a popular national water law and the Dialogues focused critical attention on the environmental and human costs of extractivism and came close to a major victory in the form of a new law, even a flawed one, but also revealed serious obstacles to national alliances. Many were frustrated after years of advocacy, a historic March, a multisector dialogue, and mobilization for a water law yielded little in terms of policy change or tangible organizational gains at the regional or national level. In addition to the divisions between the USAC agronomists, the AAVT, and the ASP, the 48 Cantónes de Totonicapán opposed a national law as a form of privatization and a threat to autochthonous water management, a position that runs counter to popular mobilization and is welcomed by the industrial sector who benefit from the deregulated status quo (Del Águila, 2016; Escalón, 2016a, 2016b; Padilla, 2019).

By contrast to the Andes, where durable scalar alliances yielded progressive water laws and plurinational constitutions (Hoogesteger et al., 2016), events in Guatemala showed the limits of legal proposals as organizing principles in themselves. In the first meeting of the Water Law forum organized by the IPN-USAC in July 2020, Mario Godínez said that *"it is necessary to walk at the national level, the University has a legal proposal […] and it would be good if we were united, all sectors around a proposal or various"* (my translation) A united proposal could surely galvanize a multiscalar alliance but, as the situation in Guatemala shows, is more likely to emerge from such an alliance than to create one. In the absence of a unified organization able to propose a consensus law, competing proposals undermine unity, and no proposal is backed by the organizational strength necessary to ensure its passage. This is a microcosm of the divided left. However, as Godínez explained, if the industrial sector tried to pass a law that prioritized their interests over community needs and demands, organizations would certainly unite to oppose it.

In the years after the 2015 uprisings, Guatemalan elites consolidated control over state institutions and attacked anticorruption movements, further dashing hopes for a progressive water law (Copeland, 2021). Taking stock of the conjuncture, Diana Monroy proposed the expanded strategic use of existing environmental laws, which are routinely broken by industry and unenforced. Although most legal actions would be ignored, she said, *"one in a hundred"* might prosper and *"we can begin to set a precedent and seek restorative justice, a justice that seeks to restore all of this damage"* (my translation). Absent a national law or unified movement, efforts to demonstrate systemic violations using existing laws, and seeking redress at multiple scales, can and do provide critical support to specific defenses and restorative projects, and could have a cumulative effect of shifting normative assumptions, strengthening institutional protections, and changing corporate behavior. Such restorative justice efforts, even when unsuccessful, form an integral part of the organizational matrix conducive to the emergence of durable networks capable of forcing deeper transformations in water, development, and environmental law and policy.

5.5. Water networks

In addition to legal proposals, DT organizations have tried to build water networks to create a common platform around water, like networks in Ecuador (Hoogesteger et al., 2016). The Guatemalan Water Network (REDAGUA) formed in 2019 to support local movements, strengthen alliances, promote access to water science, community water monitoring, and awareness about watershed hydrology. Representatives from over a dozen grassroots organizations resisting different kinds of extractive development, several progressive NGOs, representatives from the ASP, the Catholic Church, the state human rights attorney's office (PDH), academics, and environmental professionals attended three assembly meetings to discuss the structure and mission. Emerging when national water law initiatives had stalled, REDAGUA aimed to build on previous efforts to use water as a lever to support and articulate local resistances. The working group published public statements about environmental protection and just adaptation to climate change signed by dozens of organizations and wrote a document on political strategy that defined key terms and refined an organizational structure. Rather than simply assuming watersheds as a "pre-given, most suitable scale" for water policy (Götz, 2019:92), we debated the value of the watershed concept as a scale for political organization, comparing watersheds to state administrative categories (municipalities, departments) and Indigenous conceptions of territory.

Hoogesteger et al. (2016) argue that "interlinking […] local hydrosocial territories with broader spatial scales is crucial for water-centered social movements. It enables dispersed and often spatially and politically less powerful water user groups to develop regional and national political agency" (97). A big question for REDAGUA from the outset was how to get NGOs whose assistance is vital to grassroots mobilization to support a network without independent funding and whose activities did not align neatly with their existing projects. This was related to another problem: how to create an independent decision-making structure led by frontline communities when funds for mobilization came from NGOs which can also act as gatekeepers to community organizations. REDAGUA's efforts to articulate NGOs sounded like every other NGO; some NGOs viewed REDAGUA as a competitor.

Unable to form within or float on top of the NGO dynamic, REDAGUA's efforts to bring national water rights organizations onto a common platform stalled several months into the pandemic and its work was taken up by NGOs. In 2020, the Observatorio de Industrias Extractivas (OIE) led by Guadalupe García Prado with funding from Oxfam and the Ford Foundation, began to promote water monitoring around the Escobal Mine, building a national database to collate water data about extractive industries (primarily mining and hydrocarbons), and creating detailed maps that demonstrate the area of influence of extractivism on watershed systems. Such citizen science initiatives have significant potential to denaturalize hydrosocial territories of extraction, challenge the commodity consensus, and expand anti-extractive alliances by shifting grassroots perceptions of the scope and impacts of industrial pollution and water use.

Parallel NGO-led networks formed to organize events for National Water Day 2021: the *Articulación para el Agua*, led by REDSAG, and *Liberación para el agua,* led by Maíz de Vida (formerly Socialab). In 2022, Maíz de Vida also convened a national water summit attended by dozens of community organizations and NGOs, but as of January 2023, no single organization represented the national water movement. Nevertheless, coordination remained possible without unity. For example, in 2020, conservative President Giammattei created a new Vice Minister of Water inside the Ministry of Natural Resources by decree and created a commission to monitor watersheds as an effort to project an image of national regulatory coherence and "vertical encompassment" (Gupta and Ferguson, 2002) in response to civil society criticisms, and as a mechanism to intervene in water disputes at the national scale. Over 170 organizations denounced these moves as cynical efforts to regulate water without a law. But civil society organizations have yet to establish a common platform for issuing unified proposals or organizing around the theme of water.

6. Conclusion

Guatemala is undergoing a rising politicization of water in anti-extractive politics and radicalization of water politics around paradigmatic questions of development and territory in a moment of deepening political and ecological crisis. As DT movements focus on water, water movements increasingly foreground critiques of extractivist development. The DT strategically politicizes water to open space for the holistic systems thinking that underpins critiques of neoliberal extractivism and to build alliances for a post extractive future whose specific elements remain a source of discussion a work in progress. Meanwhile, the crystallization of extractive critiques around water keeps a laser focus on these industries' material consequences for poor communities, subsistence economies, and ecosystems, while inviting a wider accounting of inequities related to any project.

In Guatemala the de facto privatization of water through extractivism generates sustained opposition, which gains legitimacy from the absence of a national water law but is not as explosive as the uprising after the sweeping water privatization in Bolivia in 2000. Guatemalan DT movements face unique obstacles, most significantly the legacy of extreme violence reinscribed by the targeted criminalization of territory and water defenders. The convergence around water augments the scalar capacities of the DT in the face of these limits on democracy. Focusing on water overuse and contamination lends credence to the DT's expanded definition of extractivism by showing similarities between diverse industries and places industrial harm at the center of discussions about corruption. At the national level, water is an effective articulatory principle for Indigenous and peasant organizations that emerged from the embers of the armed conflict and who want to refound democracy in a plurinational state. Water also connects national resistances to regional water movements and transnational movements for decolonization (c.f. Estes, 2019; Montoya, 2021).

Highlighting the hydrosocial injustices intrinsic to the extractive economy creates an effective link between diverse struggles and helps bind together heterogeneous horizontal and vertical alliances traversing geographic and social divides. Additionally, alliance building around water and development have the potential to strengthen ties between agrarian movements and place-based environmental defenses, and thus deepen cross-fertilization between peasant-centered demands for food sovereignty which foreground democratized access to land and water, ecological food production, and gender equity and Indigenous conceptions of buen vivir and territory (LVC, 2007; Copeland, 2019c). In synergy with food sovereignty, which emerged as a peasant countermovement to the corporate food regime and then expanded to address the pluri-crisis of the metabolic rift, the strategic consolidation of Indigenous and peasant environmental politics around water and resignification of water rights contribute to planetary efforts "to rethink the ecological conditions and scale at which human communities can live, and survive" (McMichael, 2014: 937). Demands for universal access and collective democratic caretaking of water commons refracted through Indigenous cosmologies disrupt the plantation ideal that has "colonized our understanding of productive landscapes," and are critical to constructing "other ways of being on the land" alongside "agrarian reform, agroecology, and noncompulsive markets embedded in local communities and fields" (Wolford, 2021: 1622–1623), all of which have been violently suppressed.

Mindful of the difficulty of keeping this civilizational horizon clearly in view amid the ubiquity of market oriented and technocratic frames for water politics (Boelens et al., 2014), opportunities to optimize water's scalar potential for territorial politics abound, for example, tapping into water user networks in municipalities and mancomunidades (multi-municipal governing structures) where water struggles are latent, and additional, sustained efforts to strengthen alliances between urban and rural struggles for water access, treatment, and waste management. Another possibility is to make visible the scale of "virtual" water transfers through agriculture and other industry, their socioecological effects, and who profits (Vos and Boelens, 2018). Broadening the OIE's focus on mining and oil to map water rights violations from a broader range of extractive industries, and effective publicity, could expand the scope of community organizing.[3] NGOs and funding agencies must also reexamine their practices to better support grassroots scalar alliances.

As water networks bridge communities, scales, and paradigms, the DT harnesses convergences to create new political subjects, ecopolitical imaginaries, organizational forms, and possibilities for collective action. The turn to water increases the DT's capacity to connect rural movements against extractivist development to poor urban communities' struggles for water access and infrastructure, and to gain solidarity for rural struggles from urban middle class movements against the capture of Guatemalan democracy by corrupt elites. The strategic politicization of water helps clarify to a broader segment of society the virtues an economy based on Indigenous principles of reciprocity and the expanded rights commitments of food sovereignty, an economy that prioritizes meeting human needs equitably and sustainably and remediating damaged landscapes over profit. Focusing on water also helps illuminate the hidden costs and inequities of a mining-intensive capitalist "green" transition while orienting our thinking and solidarities toward deeper social and economic transformations that are both just and necessary.

Difficulties in crafting unified proposals and building robust water networks and durable multi-sectoral alliances speak to the effects of state violence and industry strategy on grassroots politics, the dependence of mobilization on NGOs that simultaneously facilitate and impede multi-scalar organizing, hierarchies internal to social movements, and depoliticized framings of the water crisis and needed solutions. These and other obstacles must be overcome for Indigenous and peasant environmental defense movements to realize their full potential to challenge unequal productive relations that systematically exploit racialized labor, degrade ecosystems, guarantee poverty, hunger, and malnutrition, drive displacement and mass extinction, and stand in the way of viable alternatives (McMichael, 2014; Kallis, 2018; Hickel, 2020; Ajl, 2021).

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

[3] https://www.oiegt.org/.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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