



Rethinking transitions from the South: a dialogue with Raúl Prebisch on periphery, inequality and capitalism

Repensando las transiciones desde el Sur: un diálogo con Raúl Prebisch sobre periferia, desigualdad y capitalismo

Repensando as transições do Sul: um diálogo com Raúl Prebisch sobre periferia, desigualdade e capitalismo

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ABSTRACT: The dominant approaches to transitions, especially those focused on climate change and energy, are reviewed, underscoring limitations, incomplete diagnoses, and dependence on interpretations from the Global North. A distinction is made between short transitions, which represent instrumental, managerial, or technological adjustments among varieties of development, and long transitions, that follows alternatives beyond development. We propose rethinking transitions from a situated and plural perspective. Furthermore, transitions cannot be addressed in isolation, as they involve explicit diagnoses of current situations to overcome and the proposed goals for change. They also depend on the social, political, ecological, and historical contexts of each territory and continent in which they are located. Following this posture, the ideas of Raúl Prebisch are revisited, updating and discussing concepts such as center-periphery, unequal trade and accumulation, and the ethics of development, so as to explore their relevance in the formulation of transitions. This analysis contributes to a critical and contextualized view of transitions, incorporating lessons from Latin American structuralist thought.

Keywords: climate change, energy, center-periphery, unequal exchange, rights of nature.

RESUMEN: Se examinan críticamente los enfoques dominantes sobre las transiciones, especialmente aquellas centradas en el cambio climático y la energía, señalando sus limitaciones, sus diagnósticos incompletos y su dependencia de interpretaciones del Norte global. Se distingue entre transiciones cortas, que representan ajustes instrumentales, gerenciales o tecnológicos entre variedades de desarrollo, y largas, que apuntan a cambios más allá del desarrollo. Las transiciones no pueden ser abordadas aisladamente, ya que refieren a explicitar diagnósticos de la situación a superar y las metas de cambio propuestas. Asimismo, dependen de los contextos sociales, políticos, ecológicos e históricos de cada territorio y continente donde se insertan. Siguiendo esa postura, se revisita la obra de Raúl Prebisch, actualizando y discutiendo conceptos como centro-periferia, comercio desigual, acumulación o ética del desarrollo, para explorar su vigencia y utilidad en la formulación de transiciones. Se contribuye a una mirada crítica, y contextualizada de las transiciones, incorporando aprendizajes del pensamiento estructuralista latinoamericano.

Palabras clave: cambio climático; energía; centro periferia; intercambio desigual; derechos de la Naturaleza.

RESUMO: As abordagens dominantes para transições, especialmente aquelas focadas em mudanças climáticas e energia, são examinadas criticamente, destacando suas limitações, diagnósticos incompletos e dependência de interpretações do Norte global. É feita uma distinção entre transições curtas, que representam ajustes instrumentais, gerenciais ou tecnológicos entre variedades de desenvolvimento, e transições longas, que visam mudanças além do desenvolvimento. Propomos repensar as transições a partir de uma perspectiva situada e plural. As transições não podem ser abordadas de forma isolada, pois envolvem diagnósticos esclarecedores da situação a ser superada e das metas propostas para a mudança. Elas também dependem dos contextos sociais, políticos, ecológicos e históricos de cada território e continente em que estão localizadas. Seguindo essa postura, a obra de Raúl Prebisch é revisitada, atualizando e discutindo conceitos como centro-periferia, comércio e acumulação desiguais e ética do desenvolvimento, para explorar sua relevância e utilidade na formulação de transições. Contribui para uma visão crítica e contextualizada das transições, incorporando lições do pensamento estruturalista latino-americano.

Palavras-chave: mudança climática; energia; centro-periferia; troca desigual; direitos da natureza.

1. Introduction

Currently, the idea of “transitions” is applied to multiple proposals and actions that, in turn, come from very diverse actors. In some cases, they are governmental or business plans, in others they refer to academic debates, and contributions from civil society are added to all of this. Well-known examples include the European Union’s “just transitions” plan, or those focused on energy and climate change, such as Morris and Pehnt (2014) for Germany, or ETEJ (2023) for Colombia.

In recent years, arguments about transitions seem to focus on the concepts and versions put

forward by industrialized Western countries, and on energy and climate change issues (as in WEF, 2023). These perspectives influence and condition Latin American discussions (and those of other regions of the Global South) in different ways, relegating their own ideas and experiences.

Focusing on the problem of energy and climate change, in this review we analyze some substantial limitations of addressing transitions, and offer a contribution based on the recovery of ideas originating in Latin America. Among them, we take as reference those of the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, such as center-periphery, the structural heterogeneity of the continent’s econ-

omies, or asymmetries in global trade (Prebisch, 1949). We understand that these contributions offer relevant lessons for any transition program that aims to confront the socio-ecological crisis. Without intending to transplant them to the present, we examine, confront, and compare Prebisch's theses as a way of demonstrating the relevance of dialoguing with the antecedents of Latin American thought. We understand that, in this way, a reflection on transitions can be nourished that is more detailed, more adjusted to the circumstances of Latin America (and the Global South), and that recovers part of its own history.

The article begins by analyzing conceptual issues on contemporary uses of the notion of transitions, especially those focused on energy and climate change. It distinguishes between transitions that remain within the varieties of development and others that aim to go beyond them. Next, some aspects of Raúl Prebisch's thought are summarized, in order to dialogue with current approaches to transitions, pointing out contributions that remain valid or deserve to be taken up again.

2. The Current Debate on Transitions

The postulate of transitions holds enormous potential for confronting current social and environmental crises. In their recent uses, they are presented as just or equitable transitions, characterized in sectors (such as energy) or in specific problems (e.g., fossil fuels), or focused on broader transformations (such as socio-ecological ones) (see Wang & Lo, 2021). The term became popular, which inevitably led to limitations. Those focused on a sector or a problem prevail, with a

clear dominance of those addressing energy and climate change issues, so that other dimensions, such as biodiversity loss, remain lagging, despite their urgency.

The proposals and discussions from the industrialized North, especially from Western Europe and in academic circles, have achieved enormous influence in the Global South. As a consequence, reflections, proposals, and actions that have taken place in Latin America are minimized or relegated. This leads to proposals that marginalize, for example, experiences such as an oil moratorium in the Yasuni National Park region in the Ecuadorian Amazon, citizen initiatives for post-extractivist transitions in Peru and other Andean countries, or with earlier ideas, such as those that nourished development debates in the last century.

Likewise, there are transitions that have become ends in themselves, without the desired goals being explicit. Precisely in the debates on energy and climate change transitions, this limitation is recorded when, for example, the expansion in the use of electrical energy is presented as its essential content, discarding other aspects, and without weighing the uses or impacts of the energy produced. In the same way, a transition is demanded without addressing in a detailed and exhaustive way the current conditions to be overcome.

Therefore, it is necessary to make clear that invoking a transition always requires two other considerations. On the one hand, a precise description of the issues that are considered negative, unjust, and intolerable in the current situation; on the other, the purposes that are desired to be achieved, expressed in ideas, sensibilities, and

aspirations typical of an alternative that solves present ills. The transition includes the ideas and actions organized to move towards these desired ends.

Based on these considerations, proposals on transitions in general, and those focused on energy and climate change in particular, can be ordered considering the distinctions proposed in Gudynas (2024).

In a first set are transitions based on adjustments, for example, technological, and therefore remain within the same variety of development. A second set refers to measures, and even goals, with greater ambition, questioning one type of development to demand a transition towards another variety. These refer, for example, to transitions that start from rejecting neoliberal development styles, to postulate changes towards varieties with greater state intervention that could be qualified as social democratic (for example Tornel Curzio *et al.*, 2022; ETEJ, 2023).

In any case, under these two purposes, these transitions occur within Western notions of development, and therefore are identified here as *short transitions*. It is assumed that the desired ends can be achieved with adjustments or reforms framed in the notions of Modernity's own development, operating in markets, or accepting the role of property. The European Union's plans, classified as just transitions, are of this type, in turn framed in the European Green Deal, with the aim of achieving greenhouse gas emission neutrality¹.

On the contrary, other transitions question

these ideas and sensibilities of development in any of their expressions. They understand that to overcome the climate crisis, more radical measures are necessary that involve discussing and transcending notions such as economic growth or the market. This stance is here qualified as *long transitions*. Among them, a proposal in the Ecuadorian Amazon can be indicated, among other reasons, as a result of recognizing intrinsic values in Nature, which is a condition beyond Modernity (Gudynas, 2023).

Long transitions, moreover, better fit the historical uses of the term, which, for various reasons, have been largely forgotten in much of the literature on the subject. Indeed, for much of the 20th century, a different meaning prevailed that proposed ideas and actions of ambitious social and economic changes. In Latin America and Africa in the 1960s to 1980s, they referred mainly to transitions towards socialism (Sweezy & Bettelheim, 1971). From the 1990s, in Eastern Europe, the word began to be used to describe an almost inverse purpose, such as the transition from state socialism to democratic openings and market economies (Lavigne, 1995). In parallel, the same term was used for changes in political regimes, such as redemocratization after dictatorships. As can be seen, in the use of these interpretations, transformations crossed the entire society, which means that, at least from that perspective, it would make no sense to refer to a sectoral change (for example, energy sources) as if it were both a social and environmental transformation.

¹ A description of the components, operating mechanism and financing, in The Just Transition Mechanism: Making Sure No One Is Left Behind, European Commission, available at https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en

Bearing these distinctions in mind, it is evident that many transitions are short, being limited to sectoral reforms, and some even block discussions about more radical and longer transitions, which other long ones could allow.

3. Crises, Transitions, and Purposes

Among the most well-known transitions today, those focused on confronting climate change predominate. While recognizing the seriousness of this problem, the emphasis cannot make us forget that the accumulation of greenhouse gases is inseparable from other ecological problems (biodiversity loss, changes in biogeochemical cycles, etc.) that are expressed locally, in Latin America, and on a planetary scale (see WWF, 2024). This, furthermore, is inseparable from crises occurring in other dimensions (social, political, and economic). In the Latin American case, we highlight the persistence of poverty and inequality (CEPAL, 2024). The political conjuncture not only shows differences between countries, but also continues to be tinged by previous waves of progressivism and conservatism, which differentiates it from other continents, although democratic quality is falling in almost all cases (Latinobarómetro, 2024). All of this, in turn, is immersed in earlier dynamics that, despite manifesting at different rhythms, remain decisive, such as colonial antecedents.

If transitions focus solely on the issue of climate change, these other crises are marginalized. Similarly, when some of these other issues are addressed, the notion of transition is rarely used.

Not only do proposals for transitions focused

on climate change prevail, but in many of them, they are formulated as a plan to reduce CO₂ emissions, especially those from the energy sector, as these constitute the most important sources. This explains the insistence on alternatives such as electrification. All of this is very common in plans developed and proposed in Northern countries, and which are taken as an example in the South.

However, the origins and composition of greenhouse gas emissions in Latin America are different: carbon plays a leading role, but so does methane, and the most important sources are due to deforestation, changes in land use, and various agricultural practices (as can be seen in the examples presented in Table 1). Emissions from rural areas account for more than half of total greenhouse gases in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru; and also exceed the energy sector in Brazil. Situations are even observed where the primary source of emissions lies in deforestation and changes in land use, above the agricultural sector (as occurs in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru). Therefore, the transitional proposals from the North are neither adequate nor sufficient for the Latin American situation and divert attention from some of its fundamental problems.

All this explains that transitions addressing climate change must give special attention to agricultural, livestock, and forestry policies, which in turn refers, again, to problems such as land tenure and ownership, or the subordinate insertion of the region as a supplier of agro-food products. This makes them very different from the proposals developed in industrialized nations. Similarly, a program of energy transitions that focuses on electrification, reforming transport or industries, as

TABLE 1 – Greenhouse gas emissions in selected countries in Latin America in the energy sectors and grouping agriculture, forests and land use changes within them.

Country	Energy	% of total emissions	Agriculture, forests and land use changes	% of total energy
Argentina	201.91	48%	163.92	39%
Bolivia	23.98	17%	107.81	79%
Brazil	533.46	35%	889.26	38%
Colombia	98.6	35%	152.28	54%
Ecuador	43.8	44%	38.84	39%
Mexico	430.65	67%	115.32	19%
Paraguay	8.98	9%	77.97	80%
Peru	50.4	27%	116.61	63%

SOURCE: Own elaboration based on Climate Watch Data (www.climatewatchdata.org). In MTon of CO2 equivalents, for the year 2021, and percentages of the total (rounded).

there are many at present, can be positive but does not solve emissions from rural areas.

Other relevant sectors in terms of energy use, such as mining, like agriculture, are among the main sources of natural resource exports. These extractivisms are responsible for the appropriation of enormous volumes of natural resources, under conditions of subordination to global markets. Latin American countries accept international prices, depend on foreign investment and also on transnational corporations in many cases, and are commercially integrated following the rules and disciplines of the WTO (World Trade Organization).

These varieties of development are the main factor in the destruction of Nature, explaining the most severe processes of biodiversity loss, deforestation, deterioration of soils and water, on a continental scale, as well as their contributions to the accumulation of greenhouse gases. This is a condition that has been repeated, in different ways, since colonial times.

The continent's dependence as a provider of

natural resources implies commercial, economic, and political subordination, in reference to centers of political and economic power such as Washington and Brussels, and more recently Beijing. This particular condition makes Latin America similar to some cases in Africa and Asia, making it clear that the contexts for elaborating transitions are very different from those observed in industrialized countries.

4. *Dialoguing with Prebisch*

The situation that has just been very schematically described evidences the persistence of dependence, commercial subordination based on exporting natural resources, and financial subordination based on the International Division of Finance (Oliveira & De Conti, 2025). This immediately refers to the contributions of the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch. Many of his ideas refer to problems that are still present and that can illuminate possible transitions, and at the same time, serve to show the importance of an

independent Latin American thought.

Prebisch (1901-1986) was an economist who began his career as a manager at the Central Bank of Argentina, and then joined the nascent Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL). He served as its Secretary General until 1963, achieving great notoriety. He then directed UNCTAD (the United Nations organization for Trade and Development), from 1964 to 1969. After that stage, among other tasks, he dedicated himself to teaching, and then returned to Chile, to reconnect with CEPAL. He is considered the main promoter of structuralist economics, the first school of criticism of development in Latin America. This review does not analyze in detail all his contributions (to learn about the stages of his thought, see Prebisch, 1983a; his biography in Dosman, 2010; and a summary of structuralism in Guillén, 2024), but rather selects those that we consider most relevant to the current debate on transitions. Beyond the fact that references to his work are sometimes superficial and fall into misunderstandings, his influence continues to inspire, mainly in Latin America, evolutionary traditions, post-Keynesian ideas, and current debates on international asymmetries, internal inequalities, equity, and sustainability (see García-Quero, 2024), or even on regional integration of the continent.

His approaches paid attention to historical antecedents, analyzing economic structures, but also social ones, innovating with ideas focused, directly or indirectly, on proposing alternatives (Prebisch, 1949; 1970; 1981).

5. *Centers, Periphery, and Inequality*

Prebisch understood that Latin American national economies suffered from a heterogeneous structure, with lagging sectors and modernized ones, linked to international trade. This condition is a legacy of the region's historical evolution and leads to what he called a "center-periphery system". He understood that, on one side, a center organizes relations with its periphery in a way that "served its own interests"; on the other side, the periphery is diverse and connects to that center through the export of raw materials, that is, natural resources.

Although Prebisch presented this characterization in the 1950s, its essential features persist today, and have even worsened in Latin America in at least two ways. The proportion of primary goods in total exports increased, reducing the participation of manufactured goods in several countries, such as Brazil and Argentina. The volume of resources extracted for sale abroad substantially increased, which entails more severe and widespread environmental impacts, with deeper social consequences.

The export of Latin American natural resources, such as minerals, hydrocarbons, or agro-food products, has continued to grow, approaching one billion tons per year at the beginning of the 21st century; the physical trade balance has been negative for more than a century (Infante-Amate *et al.*, 2020). The region is the largest net exporter of biomass and minerals (which directly affects greenhouse gas emissions). This condition corre-

sponds to the notion of a periphery that supplies resources to the center countries. This role, expressed in a clear negative net balance in the physical balance, is repeated in the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. The situation is more heterogeneous in Asia due to China's role as an industrial processor. For their part, industrialized Western countries have been net importers since measurements have been available (see Schaffartzika *et al.*, 2014).

More than half a century ago, Prebisch warned that this linkage ends up conditioning the dynamism and even the economic structure of each country. This situation is associated with a heterogeneous social structure, where the benefits are enjoyed by minorities while majorities are left behind, which in turn affects multiple social problems such as unemployment or poverty.

Subordination persists in the periphery, as fluctuations in prices and demands for natural resources not only condition exports, but also the flow between savings and investments, adherence to trade agreements, or the determination of labor, health, and ecological policies, among others. Therefore, their effects go far beyond foreign trade. Other elements addressed by Prebisch, such as technological backwardness, also remain present.

Prebisch recognized a clear external vulnerability to these centers, which involved a tendency towards deterioration in the terms of trade (an argument known as the 1949 “manifesto”). This unequal exchange produces low prices for exported raw materials in relation to the value of the products that peripheral countries must import. In other words, and schematically, proportionately more natural resources must be exported to import

industrial goods or technology.

The notion that the terms of trade in international commerce are unequal, popularized as the Prebisch-Singer thesis, has been the subject of much controversy in economic sciences (see Bacha, 1978). In the case of Latin America, there is a clear consensus regarding the chronically unfavorable role of the terms of trade (Alonso-Fernández & Regueiro-Ferreira, 2022). This fact has led governments to consider themselves trapped in maintaining extractivism to ensure exports.

The situation is aggravated by the addition of ecological implications, as shown by Pérez-Rincón's (2006) analysis for the Colombian case. This country, like others in the Global South, provides raw materials to the nations where they are processed and industrialized, leaving the ecological and social impacts in their territories (Dorninger *et al.*, 2021). Among them, agro-food exports cause local effects and also fuel greenhouse gas emissions.

Currently, it can be noted that market prices for natural resources are always “cheap”, as Pérez-Rincón (2006) also warns, insofar as they do not incorporate the costs of social and environmental impacts, which are externalized to local communities, regional and national governments. Nor do they consider non-monetized effects, such as the loss of natural heritage or the contamination of soils and water. These conditions are relevant because they persist even during periods with high raw material prices, as occurred in the last decade. The most recent evaluations confirm this situation (Alonso-Fernández & Regueiro-Ferreira, 2022).

Various evaluations, employing new indica-

tors, agree on showing peripheries subordinate to one or more centers. Previously, data on the Latin American physical trade balance was offered, while globally, Hickel *et al.* (2022) show that the industrialized North, in 2015, achieved a net appropriation from the South of 12 billion tons of raw materials. This appropriation required intervening 822 million hectares, the equivalent of 3.4 billion barrels of oil, and the equivalent of the work of 188 million people for one year. This is a net transfer because it is not compensated in equivalent terms from the North to the South. At the same time, this flow entails enormous financial losses for the nations of the South (recognizing the difficulties in establishing these economic values, they estimated the drainage for the South at US\$ 10.8 trillion in 2015; Hickel *et al.*, 2022). The resources appropriated by the industrialized North sustain approximately a quarter of its total consumption. This is how unequal exchange is expressed, both in its social and environmental aspects.

Faced with these asymmetries, Prebisch, in his early stages, envisioned alternatives focused on industrialization within Latin America. He argued that it would allow avoiding certain imports, generating its own manufacturing base, reducing technological backwardness, and promoting employment. These and other measures aimed to reduce economic and social heterogeneity, and at the same time achieve capital accumulation (for example, Prebisch, 1981, p. 198, p. 223, p. 253). He even used the term transition, but to refer to an indefinite period in which to introduce major readjustments in the system to avoid such problems.

The Argentine economist always understood

that capital accumulation was required (using that and terms like surplus), and this, in turn, needed growth, which inevitably is economic growth. In his conception, development, whether in the center or the periphery, expresses and requires capital accumulation. Hence, he continuously emphasized the need to increase the rates of capital accumulation in the periphery as “the only lasting and long-term solution to the problem of development” (Prebisch, 1980, p. 17). Although he rejected “non-reproductive” accumulation, which favored the centers and the upper strata in peripheral nations, he vehemently defended a virtuous (“dynamic” or “reproductive”) accumulation that creates high-productivity jobs and rising wages, and that allows for equitable redistribution.

6. The Developmentalist Framework

These dynamics lead to a centripetal capitalism, which Prebisch describes as absorbent, dominant, and expanding to exploit the periphery, not to develop it (Prebisch, 1981, p. 14). This centripetal condition of the capitalism of the centers contributes to maintaining peripheral fragmentation, which conditions their policies and exit options.

In the Prebischian scheme, the central countries are the main beneficiaries of unequal exchange, maintaining their production of manufactured goods with advanced technologies, which allows them greater capacity to absorb labor and obtain surpluses from the productive process. Peripheral nations, by focusing on the export of primary goods and raw materials, not only depend on the technology of the centers but also have a

very limited capacity to absorb the workforce (for example, in Prebisch, 1949).

An “external strangulation of development” is identified because the contraction of the centers causes or accentuates the fiscal deficit, inflationary pressure, external imbalance, and monetary depreciation (Prebisch, 1970, p. 139-140). This strangulation involves other issues such as dependence on the dollar, which in turn has varied consequences on monetary reserves, the financing of debt and imports, and inflationary drifts.

Prebisch’s alternatives throughout his career were always functional to a development based on growth. He states that the “transformation of the process of appropriation of the fruit of technical progress, its distribution and the accumulation of capital that intensely drives economic development” is unavoidably necessary (Prebisch, 1985, p. 41).

As the years passed, he recognized the difficulties in concretizing such alternatives, which led him to partly revise his diagnosis. In 1985, for example, he understood that the dynamics that make the pursuit of surplus a key condition in capitalist development, one way or another, lead to crises (Prebisch, 1985, p. 36).

This leads to a situation where Prebisch warns about many of the problems inherent in capitalism, but maintains his adherence to seeking economic growth. It is a paradoxical situation because, on the one hand, he approaches the conventional proposals of his time, such as those of W. W. Rostow (1960), emphasizing the need for growth and the role of accumulating capital to achieve it, but on the other hand, structuralism rejects the Rostowian view of successive stages in development, insisting that underdevelopment and

development are part of the same process.

Under these conditions, he always defended the need to generate surpluses, and that they be sufficient to ensure the reproduction of capital and allow for equitable redistribution, which would make it possible to limit backwardness. In his words, “the pace of capital accumulation in physical goods and human formation must be raised, in order to intensely increase employment with growing productivity and thus achieve a dynamic redistribution of income” (Prebisch, 1981, p. 293). This would be, for Prebisch, both the end of development and the means to achieve it.

Therefore, any transition that strictly followed Prebischian ideas would need to generate surpluses and would be forced into some kind of intensive appropriation of natural resources, although these should be managed “virtuously”, including redistribution to seek equity. These would be transitions between varieties of development, corresponding to what are described as short transitions.

Reformulating these ideas to the present, the alternatives would be based on a State that would regulate, for example, the surpluses from extractivism, to accelerate growth and at the same time correct inequalities. Instead of basing alternatives on state-owned companies, such as mining or oil companies, public regulations would be used to allow for a redistribution of surpluses. In general terms, these options are similar to attempts, and above all to the rhetoric, of the progressivism of the last decade. This is well illustrated by the positions of the Rafael Correa administration in Ecuador: promoting extractivism to sustain economic growth; attempting for the State to capture

a larger proportion of its surpluses; and using the funds obtained in programs to reduce poverty and possible productive reconversions. This strategy failed, as environmental impacts worsened, welfare was not overcome, and a productive reconversion was not achieved (see Acosta & Cajas Guijarro, 2018). Similar situations occurred in other countries, and in general, the condition of extractivist subordination to globalization was maintained or worsened.

7. Transitions Within and Beyond Development

What is interesting in Prebisch's later writings is that he seems to be aware of all the problems involved with development, but he does not break with these notions, and therefore does not envision an alternative beyond development. His alternatives point to some kind of synthesis between liberalism and socialism. He repeatedly states that they must adjust to the conditions of peripheral capitalism, but that they must also address Latin American contexts and be based on their own thinking that does not copy ideas from the North.

He considers that the premises of "market laws" would be arbitrary, but so would "redistribution when political and union power oppose those laws". This leads him to maintain that it is "essential for the State to regulate the social use of the surplus, in order to increase the rate of accumulation and progressively correct structural distributive disparities" (Prebisch, 1981, p. 47). He understands that these changes could be through state ownership and management of productive means, or through state action that rationally

managed surpluses without having ownership in its hands. Prebisch opts for the second option.

Despite these attempts, when considering the tensions and contradictions surrounding accumulation, Prebisch concludes: "There is no scientific solution. The solution is fundamentally ethical: the surplus belongs to society as a whole and must be used according to ethical principles" (Prebisch, 1985, p. 34).

This confession is key, and taking this perspective, today it can be argued that the incorporation of another theory of value would lead to broadening the notions of justice and morality, all of which allows us to think and imagine alternatives beyond development. Precisely for these reasons, the rights of Nature can be defended, as proposed in the Constitution of Ecuador in 2008, which corresponds to long transitions. An alternative theory of value is at stake, very different from that based on conventional utilitarianism which, after all, legitimizes the exploitation of Nature. In this way, a transition that seeks to recompose linkages with Nature and effectively protect biodiversity must necessarily embrace indigenous values.

8. Discussion

This brief dialogue with Raúl Prebisch's work offers several lessons for the construction of transitions towards alternatives in the 21st century. Firstly, it should be noted that Prebisch's alternatives always result from diagnosing the situation he observed. His perspective is not limited; rather, he considers various sectors or broad themes in the field of development, and he does so rigorously.

Secondly, the goals of the alternatives also reflect a broad perspective and consider a diversity of sectors and issues. Therefore, the transition from the present situation to an alternative future proceeds along several paths.

These two aspects are analogous to the point made in this article about the inconvenience of considering transitions in isolation, without understanding them as part of a whole that includes a diagnostic assessment of the starting situation and alternative purposes as destinations.

The coherence and correspondence between these elements are clear when considering transitions to address greenhouse gas emissions. As indicated above, in Latin America, a good part of its emissions are due to CO₂ but also methane originating from land and forest management, and agricultural practices, and these sectors in turn depend on foreign trade. Therefore, transitions focused exclusively on emissions from sectors such as industry or transport, and on the CO₂ they produce, in the image of discussions in the Global North, are inadequate. This does not imply that programs that, for example, expand electrification to reduce the burning of fossil fuels are wrong or should be rejected. These components can be added to broader transitions, but by themselves, they are insufficient. Therefore, an energy and climate change transition adapted to Latin America will have to address issues that some might consider distant, such as agricultural policies, foreign trade, or land ownership. Similarly, these transitions must also include, in detail, adaptations to climate change primarily fueled by gases emitted from other continents, and which the region neither controls nor avoids.

Thirdly, the aspects just discussed lead to the necessity for transitions to deal with extractivism. This forces us to consider, for example, Latin America's international insertion as a supplier of raw materials, which implies recovering several Prebischian notions, such as center-periphery.

Most of the energy transitions proposed and applied by the Global North reinforce extractivism and Latin American subordination. Illustrative are the European Union's plans that demand lithium from Chile and other countries for its reconversion, particularly towards electromobility. This stance is accepted by the Chilean government, assuming it as proof of its collaboration in combating climate change. However, such measures hinder an energy transition within Chile, accentuating the impacts of mining extractivism, reproducing the subordinate position as a supplier of natural resources (see Paz Jerez *et al.*, 2023).

As shown in this article, new and more accurate indicators of the appropriation and commercialization of matter, water, energy, and space confirm that Latin America continues to be a net supplier of natural resources to globalization. The fact that China and other Southern countries replaced Western Europe and the United States as prominent destinations actually means a change from some centers to others, but without modifying the dependent and asymmetrical relationships.

Insofar as extractivism is now the continent's greatest ecological, spatial, and social problem, any transition that aims to be effective must propose drastically reducing it and dismantling global subordination.

Fourthly, multiple experiences and proposals from Latin America that addressed some of these

issues must also be kept in mind. For example, in the post-extractivist transition program discussed in Peru in the last decade, a regional articulation among Latin American countries different from the conventional one was sought, as it aimed for a selective disengagement from globalization to regain autonomy (see Gudynas, 2012). This proposal for autonomous regionalism approached Prebisch's call to articulate regional markets within Latin America. But it is also different, as it is organized based on complementarities between bioregions, and not to organize industrialization to substitute imports.

Fifthly, Prebisch's attention to unequal exchange remains relevant, and it has also been updated and adjusted (as in Pérez-Rincón, 2006; Alonso-Fernández & Regueiro-Ferreiro, 2022). Therefore, a transition must propose, among other things, a correction of raw material prices, incorporating systematically excluded economic, social, and ecological externalities (Gudynas, 2023). This will multiply the price of these commodities, and this value adjustment will serve as one of the mechanisms to dismantle extractivism.

Sixthly, the importance of specifying the contents is highlighted, accurately identifying the appropriate measures and actions to advance in the transition, and discarding those that hinder it. For example, in Prebisch's work, importance is given to industrialization as an alternative to, among other things, overcome the peripheral condition. But at that time, its purposes or social and environmental performance were not adequately considered. Many academics would defend the importance of indigenous industrialization, but if a substantive transition is sought, a radical reform

must be undertaken. It is necessary to determine which industrial processes are necessary, which goods are justifiable, which are unsustainable, either because they are high environmental impact operations, or because they provide unnecessary manufactures, replaceable or with negative effects on health, society, or the environment. Such considerations must be included in transitions.

Seventhly, Prebisch's journey shows the importance of conceptual frameworks. He warned of the limits and blockages generated by capitalist development conceptions, but he did not break with the notion of development. He proposed an overcoming based on a synthesis between liberalism and socialism, while persisting in actions that would ensure growth and accumulation, and at the same time, equitable redistribution. But at times he understood that this was not enough. He even warned of the ecological tensions involved; he stated, for example, that "Liberalism regarding individual decisions to produce and consume, unless for considerations such as ecological preservation, would also have to be taken by collective decision" (Prebisch, 1981, p. 287).

This means that Prebisch-like transitions, one way or another, end up being short, in the sense indicated in this article, since they persist within the basic ideas of development, and therefore require economic growth, the appropriation of natural resources, ownership over them, and markets, among other factors. Short transitions could solve some impacts in some sectors, but they do not attack the underlying dynamics. Various cases of this situation can be pointed out, such as the approach promoted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) of transitions towards

net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, which, lacking concrete measures in different areas, would result in a very short transition (Alfonso *et al.*, 2023). In Colombia, the initial aspiration of Gustavo Petro's government was more ambitious, as some proposed leaving fossil fuels behind. But it ultimately got bogged down in changes to the electricity generation matrix and its suppliers (ETEJ, 2023). This is a positive measure, which can be presented as a transition in the energy sector, although by not decisively attacking the hydrocarbon and coal sectors, it is a short transition.

Eighth and finally, we arrive at the relevance of what are here called long transitions. A good example of an attempt that, in the North, hints in that direction is the program proposed for Catalonia by González Reyes *et al.* (2024), together with the Ecosocial Transition group of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor). They express much harsher criticisms of capitalism than Prebisch, recognize the limitations of other transitional proposals, and advocate for degrowth, offering multiple measures in various sectors. Some of these components would seem to be located beyond development, although that analysis is not addressed in detail. Latin American proposals discussed above point in the same direction.

In long transitions, a key component is their theory of value. Reductions to economic value are not accepted; instead, the multiplicity of human valuations is rescued, adding the recognition of intrinsic values in the non-human. This change has diverse effects on the meanings of justice and morality. What is relevant is that this issue is not entirely alien to Prebisch's thought. Indeed, he maintained that a "new rationality" should

be sought that was not inspired by "hegemonic interests" or by economic and social goals, but by what he describes as ethical objectives. He states that this is what must be "reintroduced into economics", adding that one must return to "political economy and not just economics dryly". He concludes: "It is not only about a new international economic order but about a new internal social and ethical economic order. These are the great problems we have to solve in Latin America after hard sacrifices" (Prebisch, 1983b, p. 19).

9. Conclusions

The proposal for transitions cannot be approached in isolation; it must always respond to a diagnosis of the current situation and the alternative goals towards which one wishes to transition. This determines that their contents cannot be generic or replicate those conceived as universal, as they must be adapted to the circumstances and contexts of each region. In this way, even when the purposes are similar, transitions in Latin America will be different from those, for example, in Western Europe or Southeast Asia, because each region followed different historical developments and their social and ecological contexts are different. It is, therefore, wrong and inadequate to transplant the ideas and analytical frameworks of European transitions to other continents. Attending to this condition, for the Latin American case, this article dialogued with Raúl Prebisch's contributions, showing the validity of many of his ideas.

At the same time, the contents of the transitions must be coherent with each other, with adequate articulations to achieve their

goals. Several conventional approaches to energy and climate change transitions show that these conditions are not met, and therefore they do not recognize that in Latin America multiple sectors are involved, such as agricultural and commercial. This also leads to recognizing the determining role of extractivism, against which Prebischian perspectives such as center-periphery, inequalities in international trade, or the role of accumulation remain valid.

Limited transitions or those that respond to incomplete diagnoses are neither adequate nor effective in confronting current crises. It is highlighted that the ecological crisis is so severe that alternatives cannot continue to appeal to economic growth. Moreover, postulating changes that imagine equity for all inhabitants of the planet in terms of energy, material, and water consumption at levels recorded in industrialized countries is not only environmentally impossible but would also not solve social problems, such as poverty or inequality. Such a claim would imply multiplying the level of ecological destruction across the globe and would lead to a generalized collapse. All of this leads to recognizing that it is essential to reduce the extraction of natural resources and the consumption of water and energy.

These situations serve to justify the distinction between short and long transitions. Those qualified as short transitions can only solve limited difficulties, but they do not address the ideas, structures, and processes that reproduce the various crises. Examples of these are change options that aim to improve the performance of extractivism but are not willing to abandon it. In contrast, if the need to reduce extractivism or

abandon fossil fuels is truly accepted, then long transitions are necessary, as they question the very idea of development.

This horizon of change distances itself from Prebisch's adherence to development, but at the same time, it can return to it by coinciding with his insistence on avoiding intellectual imitations of the Northern centers. Defending independent thought, Prebisch's ideas go hand in hand with recent Latin American antecedents that point to these long transitions. Among them, the alternatives beyond Western conceptions of development in *Buen Vivir*, in its original sense, or the recognition of the rights of Nature, stand out. These ideas result from the contributions of academics, activists, and especially indigenous peoples. It is for all these reasons that the difficulties do not lie in the lack of examples or attempts at long transitions, but rather that they are often forgotten or relegated.

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