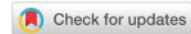


THE LITHIUM CONUNDRUM IN SERBIA'S SUSTAINABILITY GOVERNANCE: A DIPLOMATIC LITMUS TEST FOR BECOMING OR NOT BECOMING RECONCILED WITH THE PLANETARY LIMITS

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Abstract: Technological integration of the silicon chip, personal computer, mobile computing devices, the Internet, and the first smartphone drastically reshaped economic, social, environmental, governance, and global relationships in the 20th century. At its and the second millennium turn, a new type of international relations was agreed upon in the most inclusive United Nations multilateral diplomatic setting, heralding the digital age emergence from the core contradictions of the computer era. Although the principle of respect for nature was put forward, avaricious “carboniferous capitalism” added to its gluttonous menu of critical minerals (silicon, cobalt, lithium, and manganese) the rare earth minerals for feeding its insatiable craving to envelop the global physical space within its coordinates of the free digital flows. ‘Carboniferous capitalism’ counts on the exponential yield of expandingly circulating matter, money, meaning, surplus value, and emotions to overcome its limit. This is the patent disregard for the ginormous pillage of the planet’s wealth, adversely affecting the already most disadvantaged of peoples and worst damaged spaces. Unsustainability is running high despite commitments to sustainable development. When lithium was announced as the key critical material in the 21st century to cure economic, social, and environmental disorders of no-limit capitalism, a new era of geopolitical struggle commenced. The recent lithium insertion into sustainability pursuit parallels its use in 20th-century medical practice as a cure for mental disorders. Helpful at first, often bringing more harm than good. Later, the Nobel Prize award promoted it as an allegedly scientifically proven remedy for disorders in “carboniferous capitalism”. Peddled as material for sustainability, enabling a significant leap forward by contributing to the decarbonization of those human activities negatively impacting climate and harming the people and planet caused both the ‘lithium rush’ and the inflamed grassroots resistance where its mining and production are ongoing or are planned to be undertaken. Lithium extractivist’s ills abound worldwide. The well-recorded and detailed experiences show how, from start to finish, grabbing for it led by major foreign corporations left behind the irreparable destruction of the environment. Lithium believers purport that it advances the transition to a green economy through formal pledges to sustainable mining as a way of human reconciliation with the planetary limits. Instead of consenting to these unduly substantiated claims, societies’ defiance has spiked in the rapidly fragmenting international system. Diplomacy enters the fray to foster negotiated regulations between those who produce lithium and those who hold raw materials for its exploitation. Therefore, lithium is also a diplomatic litmus test, not just for making a genuinely modern world with a sustainable future. A clear bill of its green soundness requires screening its overall processing, from exploration to the final use in the circular economy’s terms. It must guarantee a clean, healthy, safe and secure environment, which is an internationally recognized inalienable human right. Many solely regard the foregrounded issues through the “resource curse” lens. Lithium rapidly becomes a novel global diplomatic actant spanning borders. Being part and parcel of overcoming some limits while pressuring others even more, it is also a new global instigator of human actions from conforming to resisting the redrawing of lines of inclusion and exclusion in the planetary web of networked relationships among humanity and humanity’s relationships with nature. We attempted to disentangle Serbia’s lithium mining conundrum in its sustainability governance framework by employing the briefly outlined intersectional conceptual approach and the diplomatic dissection method of relevant textual materials and data.

Keywords: lithium, sustainability, planetary limits, planoferal capitalism, green transformation, Serbia’s sustainability governance

Field: Social Sciences, and Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Lithium (Li), the third chemical element in the Periodic Table of Elements, rapidly becomes a novel global diplomatic actionist. Taken “in its pure elemental form, lithium is soft, silvery-white metal but its highly reactive and therefore never is found as a metal in nature” (Spellman, 2024, p. 18). It spans borders and crosses boundaries, tying up formerly largely disconnected places into unusually configuring new concerts. On the business, political, scientific, technological, and societal sides, in suspected and unexpected spaces, the staunch backers of its alleged manifold usefulness liaise with its highly motivated

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diggers or harvesters. Seemingly, this alkali metal's silvery luminescence lures into a frenzy for it as a freshly found 'treasure island' promising captivating sums of profit inflow from return on investments in its exploration, extraction, and exploitation. Corporate, public, and global governance Scheherazade-resembling tale-tellers sculpture lithium as the cornerstone of clean energy transition and by that virtue being sustainable and enabler of transformation to sustainability.

Intensely distrustful ones in its purported might to be a sort of 'magic potion' for healing the human-inflicted wounds upon the planet condensing into desarraying flows cascading further shocks to its systems and crossing one by one planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2021). Simultaneously drawing novel lines of connectedness across the globe, lithium propagates the unprecedented divisions between its new haves (Romero Valenzuela, 2020) and have-nots. Being part and parcel of overcoming some limits while pressuring others even more, it is also a new global instigator of human actions from conforming to resisting of the redraw of lines of inclusion and exclusion in the planetary web of networked relationships among humanity and humanity's relationships with nature. Therefore, we attempted to disentangle the lithium mining conundrum in Serbia's sustainability governance framework.

It is commonplace that humans' diversity in opinions, beliefs, imaginings, knowledge, habits, and experiences is the source of their vitality and vibrancy in life. Also, from this diversity, splitting and divisions ensue. Whatever one prefers to be true nowadays, no one can hide from the consequences of human-impacted havoc in Earth's systems. Human beings primordially needed power over nature by deciphering its innate greatest secrets, harnessing them into their controlling processes and built-up structures for mastering the planet and fellow humans' actions. This drive to become masters instead of good stewards of the Earth leads to mankind's very unsustainability. Growing choirs of people in Serbia orchestrated by ignited students' unrest are voicing their painted discontents through the chorus, "Pump up! Pump up!" It surpassingly echoes the battle cry "Drill baby drill!" on the American right of the political spectrum propagating unstoppable extraction of oil and gas, an unavoidable question is where these harsh action verbs are stemming from. Do social sciences have a theoretical apparatus with conceptual lenses for understanding and explaining such phenomena and myriad aberrations from the habituated collective and individual associations and assembling? Why is it that most humans on the Earth are so bewildered with their everyday living and belonging? The haggard prospects of tomorrow drive the multitude across the planet to diverse places to choose to block their lives from unfolding as a sacrifice to the altar of political, economic and societal rearrangements. Humanity is in a pickle, without a shred of doubt. seemingly freeing, leaping forward to new desired social arrangements. Lithium enters into emerging planoferal capitalism for years as a product to improve medicine (bipolar disorder) (Bensaude-Vinsent, 2022, p. 227; Okanović et al., 2020) and the scientific foundation of technology's progress (Norton, 2023). However, critical works on lithium legacy are still missing letting the gap from science to practice widening by the day. Our leading assumption from such state of play is that the lithium crisis is a symptom of the systemic change. The central layer serves the interest of capital 'survival' through overcoming its own limit by riding the lithium frenzy further rearranging by its mobility deeper cuts into the fabric of societies. The apparent human restlessness is the name of the game for emergent social relations, while the planoferal is the adjective for the capital in search for overcoming the diluted "carboniferous capitalism" pushed to its limit. Emergent is the new social formation of phygitality where human digital technologies drive and remake the world ordering.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sustainability definitions vary. It as a relational paradigm underlines the enjoying of the equity of inanimate and animate agencies bringing into life diplomatics (in well-known Martin Wight's understanding) webs of relationships. They are desired instead of politics, international hierarchies, markets, and systems, made out on the lack of diplomatic power to let local dynamism of decency and dynamics of the all-out and throughout respect, in that sense, for to flourish universally. Violent criticism can be heard in the backroad while typing these words appearing on the screen by bits and bytes of input on the keyboard. How the allegedly agrarian concept of sustainability, for some all too heavily loaded with agricultural overtones of yielding to nature instead of subjugating nature further to humans' power of reason, could be the seeding concept and veritable manifestation of the new world order? Could it be that sustainability is just "a veil of ignorance"? Is it the pretense of the greater good and equity but lacking awareness of the consequences of what human interventions into "fixing" harm already done to nature might turn into? Many solely regard the foregrounded issues through the "resource curse" lens.

Two definitions proved to be important for the later shared understanding. The first is provided in the two down-cited paragraphs of the World Conservation Strategy adopted at the International Union for

Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 1980):

"2. Humanity's relationship with the biosphere (the thin covering of the planet that contains and sustains life) will continue to deteriorate until a new international economic order is achieved, a new environmental ethic adopted, human populations stabilize, and sustainable modes of development become the rule rather than the exception. Among the prerequisites for sustainable development is the conservation of living resources.

3. Development is defined here as: the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of human life. For development to be sustainable it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base; and of the long term as well as the short term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions."

The second definition is one arrived through negotiations within the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) at the United Nations set on sustainable development as "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Critics have found that the concept of development contradicts the requirements of the concept of sustainability since development is pressed with the needs of growth, disturbing the harmony between humans and nature. The complexity of the concept of sustainability usually underlines creation and maintenance:

"...the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony that permits fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations" (NEPA, 1969);

...the integration of environmental health, social equity and economic vitality in order to create thriving, healthy, diverse and resilient communities for this generation and generations to come. The practice of sustainability recognizes how these issues are interconnected and requires a systems approach and an acknowledgment of complexity" (UCLA, 2021).

Employing the intersectional conceptual approach of sustainability and, accordingly, the appropriate diplomatic dissection method of relevant textual materials and data, we delve into major controversies in Serbia and new connections and cuts surrounding the stumbling matter of lithium mining. Being part and parcel of overcoming some limits while pressuring others even more, it is also a new global instigator of human actions from conforming to resisting the redrawing of lines of inclusion and exclusion in the planetary web of networked relationships among humanity and humanity's relationships with nature.

The concept of sustainability does not belong to a particular scientific discipline. Although there are attempts at constituting a distinct sustainability science, the sustainability concept works for every discipline and every field of human activity. The sustainability concept appears to be actionable since it has might to be a waking-up call and being new lenses for having new eyes on the journey of discovering the new landscape of the emergent world where there is no human violence, enmity, and pettiness. Space for business engagement in that vein is vast and its action in such a direction is needed.

Considering the case of Serbia, and future projects:

"the underground deposit is in the Jadar Valley, Serbia. Drilling by 1.81% Li₂O and 13.4% B₂O₃, contained in a mixed lithium boron (...) the ramp-up to full production in 2029, the mine is expected to of boric acid over the expected 40-year life of the mine, producing 2.3 million tonnes of lithium carbonate. This would make Rio Tinto one of the top 10 lithium producers in the world. The future of the project is, however, unclear as there is strong resistance. 110,000 petitions have been submitted against the project by the local authorities, leading to a decision by the President of Serbia to hold a referendum on the project" (Kunasz, 2024, p. 302).

Lithium as critical material is in the group of critical materials since "their behavior and performances are heavily influenced by what they afford to human actors" (Bensaude-Vinsent, 2022, xxix).

3. RESULTS

The carbon we do not know the whole quantities of, nor how it relates to the planet's intra-related elements, has been blamed for climate change. However, carbon is not the culprit. Our human system, the civilization of fossilization with its machine of, according to Lewis Mumford, "carboniferous capitalism," is the culprit for a dramatic chain reaction already triggered by quantities of carbon dioxide and methane emitted by our activities and the disturbance related to them. For instance, today's treatment of plastic waste comes from the belief that recycling more and more plastic waste being burnt to generate heat or electricity is a useful mode of management of this waste stream. This way of treatment drives 'skyfill' and 'waterfill' up.

The two plans become evenly visible through these "sustainable lenses," polished from diverse

approaches to theorizing sustainability. The first one to surface consists of the measurable inequalities, losses, damages, and venom at the core of the existing global order of unsustainability. The second, a more descriptive one, encompasses the crucial plans and practices around the globe for eradication of unsustainability to order the world anew on the rights of nature, the equity of species, the rights of future generations, and global justice, together with the countervailing forces of states, elites and even some international fora that discursively overstate urgency and extraordinary measures for dealing with the transboundary crises while serving partial interests that deride sustainability.

Lithium is made into a divine savior in this regard. In reality, it is solely a new natural matter that capitalist actors, agents, actants, and actionists are inweaving into overcoming the limit of "carboniferous capitalism" by gulping every inch of the Earth and each cell of a human person in its maddening dive to clear the sound ground. It will be one where it can rein over the remaking of man into the creature engulfed with technology to the point of becoming undistinguished from any and all apps. Purportedly the planet will be remedied to be safe by respect paid to its limits. World is going through the lithium crisis reveling in so many localities that the ongoing transition from and out of "carboniferous capitalism's limit to an allegedly unbounded "carboniferous capitalism" state allegedly respecting the natural boundaries is a planoferal beast. It has the ability to become sustainable by presenting itself as such through a new welding of the wealth of Earth and human unsatiable inclination towards addiction to technologies. Even if they provide to be just smoke and mirrors of belonging and a sense of becoming different from how it is, and the natural planetary limits set upon them are humans get mesmerized by their entwining with gadgetry powered by lithium stored energy. The perfect governance cycle of lithium as the energy transition cornerstone and sustainability pillar was obviously broken in the Western Balkans as a whole and not just in Serbia (Stefanović-Štambuk, 2024). The European Union and its participating Member States in the Berlin Process charted the region's course on superficial sustainability at the 2023 Tirana Summit. For the faster economic and social convergence of the region to the European Union, "sustainable mining," including mining of lithium, is superficially prioritized as the wide road to green growth of the Western Balkans Six (WB6). Decarbonization and climate action are put forth to cover the ferality of lithium with the most noble of human goals to avert its own extinction. Behind the used words of sustainability is the truth that 'sustainable mining' has risen the dam, allowing smoother, easier and less costly flows of freely moving planoferal capitalism. Advancing its interests higher up to become no-limit capitalism in the phygital reality it makes now, all commitments of the 2020 Green Agenda for the Western Balkans were downgraded to 'dead letters.' In the 2023 Ergo Strategy Group's assessment of the economic impact of lithium mining in Serbia's Jadar valley, the economic bait is thrown by firm statements validating the Jadar project as having:

"the potential to be a worldclass lithium asset, supporting the development of other future industries, catalysing tens of thousands of jobs, and helping Serbia become an important player in the global energy transition" (Ergo Strategy Group, 2023, p. 3).

Some authors agree with the upper judgment (e.g. Obradović, 2023). Many others from diverse standing points of expertise argue the project's feral disruption of nature equaling ecocide (Marković & Đereg, 2022). Citizens in Jadar local community and many across Serbia are unpersuaded by pros and cons around this largely over generalizing lithium conundrum. If the production and exploitation of lithium is only concrete for symbolic and superfluous sustainability it personifies "the future of mobility, is about a technology that has been essential in enabling our mobile world: lithium-ion batteries" (Norton, 2023, p. 239). Part of that process in human history is also speeding up as the digitalization of human work. This brings "the changes brought about by digitalization in the modern world, the extension of the definition of the right to privacy has been changed, without the consent of the individual, or more often with unexplained consequences about possible abuses" (Vuković, 2022, p. 137).

4. DISCUSSIONS

The current state of the world is a heavy burden on everyone. The planetary scope and permeation of crises sets this era apart from the past. The simultaneous decline of capitalism, liberalism, and democracy, particularly in their Western birthplace, is a global issue. The "triple planetary crisis" (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2022) impact is felt globally, with transboundary crises and internationalized conflicts on the rise. The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, following a fragile recovery from the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Russian Federation and Ukraine conflict started on 24 February 2022, all underscore the gravity of the situation. The Middle East destabilization since 7 October 2023, still threatens to explode into a region-wide conflict.

The impact of these global crises on business and international relations is urgent and cannot

be ignored. Crises are protean. Assessments of crisis are various, contentious, and contested. Hence, a crisis might be defined in manifold ways. Science can definitionally make the crisis whatever it finds suitable to make of it. The definition depends on the choice of theoretical lenses and their diopters applied to gain understanding or explain a crisis. The likewise is the ongoing lithium crisis.

The conceptual history of crisis provides insight that: “[T]he crisis caused by morality’s proceeding against history will be a permanent crisis as long as history is alienated in terms of its philosophy” (Koselleck, 1988, p.12). Transboundary crises have ebbed and flowed over the last five decades. They have started to swarm with the dollar crisis “beginning in May, precipitated in August and apparently resolved in December 1971” (Strange, 1972, 191). This crisis not only crossed national borders but planted a slow start to the energy sector crisis, culminating in 1973. Again this ‘oil shock’ moved swiftly and easily across national borders. Thus, the two crises jointly ended the ‘boom era’ of the 50s and the 60s. They were initially settled in morphing into the structural crisis of the international being loaded with various strains of recurring crises.

On the other hand, there was a sign that the international allowed still the unfolding of international relations differently from sowing crises transgressing established demarcations. The laborious diplomatic process started in 1968 to square the circle of unfolding international relations damaging to the Earth’s system framed at that time as ‘the human environment.’ At face value, this process led to success in 1972. A shared understanding has been reached in Stockholm to commonize management of the fomented crisis to prevent its deepening. Both the two unprevented crises in the 70s and the process of the third one, tried to be resolved through the spearheading of joined-in management before it turned nasty and overwhelming, had not left the international intact.

The makeshift to the globalization of international as the relational structure of interhuman relationships and humanity’s relations with nature is the changed reality that those crises enacted. Even today, the “dollar standard” being “inherently flawed and increasingly unstable” (Duncan, 2005, p. 312) is a looming transboundary crisis on the murky horizon of the future. It could likely be more economically devastating than the global financial crisis of 2008. The recent energy and food crises stemmed from the ravaging Russia – Ukraine war. The transition to clean energy sources, already too slow, is further hampered by globalization’s breakdown stirred by this conflict. Additionally, the environmental crisis of the 1970s has grown into the nowadays ‘triple planetary crisis’ (climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss).

All these crises, apart from stemming from clashes between the two hubs of modernity, “freedom and social order (the latter in the sense of control)” (Donati, 2021, p. 18), are bringing as well into their enacting of change the clashes of and within modernity’s third hub. That third modernity hub is the international. It is modernity’s relational structure of unfolding relations within humanity and the imposed order of humanity’s reign over nature. International is in clashes of its own. The hardest clash is with an oppositional emergent relational structure of intraglobality within the process of “transcending modernity” (ibid., p. 18). We assume that this process of transcending modernity, since shared understandings are out of reach, unfolds through transboundary crises. In this convoluted process of clashes, they are enacting the changing of the reality of relations within humanity and between humanity and the Earth’s systems. Entangled plenifolds of related materiality, ideationality, normativity, discursivity, and practicality through settlements of transboundary crises are morphing in the exiting of modernity the international toward transformed relational structures of mutuality between humans, humanity, and nature.

The mobilization of crisis “in narrative constructions to mark out a ‘moment of truth’ or as a means to think ‘history’ itself” (Roitman, 2012) is undoubtedly the quadrant hardest to negotiate in the notional and conceptual maze of crises. In such a regard, transboundary crises are more often narratively constructed as the truth’s moments when the “turning point in history” (ibid.) is reached, “decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology” (ibid.). From the relational perspective, the intralinks of disturbances and aggravations, brought to the surface with every transboundary crisis, can be seen to point to the emergence of a novel relational structure. What seems to appear is a globally emerging relational structure of locally unfolding reordering of relationships into an ecologically just human comity and safe human-nature enmeshments.

The theoretical concept of crises, irrespective of the employed approach, should be clear, precise, and devoid of ‘folk notions’. The literature on crises has been growing in strides with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study of crises as an academic field or object of knowledge is constituted by scholarly research from political, organizational, and public administration sciences to biology and epidemiology (Boin, 2004). There are also valuable contributions from anthropology (Barrios, 2017). Disciplinary eclecticism produced both a richness of approaches and efforts to put an end to the “conflation of notions of ‘crisis’ with ‘disasters’” (Barrios, 2017, p. 151). A strong definitional connection exists between crisis

with 'threats' and 'risks' or 'hazards'. An understanding was formed within anthropology on disasters that they are the consequences of historical processes "by which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, technological malfunctions, and communicable diseases and inequitably distribute disaster risk according to the lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity" (ibid., p. 151).

The political ecology of hazards and critical disaster research revealed multifaceted social vulnerability and how multiple crises interact (ibid.). Over time, a substantial transition has happened from considering 'crisis' as an anomaly and unique event to perceiving several crises ongoing simultaneously as a structural or systemic change process. 'Crisis', 'disasters', 'risks', and 'hazards' are not solely relational constructs peddled in the political framing of perceiving changing reality. Neither are they just analytical categories employed to justify or criticize existing human arrangements. All are deeply felt on the bodies and emotionally and intellectually as the harms or potentially harmful. Unequal perception and communication come from different knowledge and cultural contexts. In the last instance, it is determined by the hold on power. Thus, crises are "instances when 'the real' is made bare" (Roitman, 2012), although they did "not imply, in itself, a definite direction of change" (ibid.). It might not be known when and in what ways these crises "will come out" (Donati, 2021, p. 18). Regarding uncertainty of outcomes, all crises seem to be the same. Different 'whats' and 'whys', more than when and how, have influenced even greater indeterminacy of some crises' outcomes. Therefore, in that respect, almost a new saying underlines, "Not all crises are created equal."

Consideration of just necessary plastic waste cleaning before permanent burial is mostly sidestepped as extremely costly and wrought with risks of pollution from underground decomposition and fires and implosions of such combustions releasing more carbon, methane, and microplastic penetrating soil and water, not only air. Such careless and unfathomably costly impacts of the explosions of the accumulated mass of the unknowns and the divination of human reason are rippling through the planet's relational wholeness. We roam the Earth as now-extinguished dinosaurs roamed before the meteor hit. However, we are 'the meteor' of our looming extinction as a species that pretends to know nature. Despite all the ignorance shown, and the violence inflicted upon the planet in our pretension to rule over it, we are mesmerized by our cognitive powers. Many still believe that sheer calculations could upkeep the 'infinite growth' on the 'finite planet'.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Lithium believers purport that it advances the transition to a green economy through formal pledges to sustainable mining as a way of human reconciliation with the planetary limits. Instead of consenting to these unduly substantiated claims, societies' defiance has spiked in the rapidly fragmenting international system. Diplomacy enters the fray to foster negotiated regulations between those who produce lithium and those who hold raw materials for its exploitation. Therefore, lithium is also a diplomatic litmus test, not just for making a genuinely modern world with a sustainable future. A clear bill of its green soundness requires screening its overall processing, from exploration to the final use in the circular economy's terms. It must guarantee a clean, healthy, safe and secure environment, which is an internationally recognized inalienable human right.

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