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The Invisible Mine and Internal Extractivism: The Tangible Transition of Critical Raw Materials in Europe

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Abstract

How to interpret the contemporary return of mineral extraction in Europe and the Western world more broadly? Through the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), the European Commission frames this return as a necessity for the “green” development of European production, aimed at providing robust responses to the challenges posed by climate change. A political-ecological reading of this resurgence deconstructs such narratives by situating them within a broader perspective, revealing how this return aligns with European industrial policies focused on growth and competitiveness, while highlighting its inherent contradictions. This paper provides a political-ecological analysis of the overarching narrative justifying the return of the mining ecosystem and introduce two new conceptual notions necessary for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon: “internal extractivism” and “double accumulation.” Adopting the framework of political ecology and the aforementioned terminology, this study conducts a preliminary analysis of the debate surrounding the return of mining and domestic extractivism in Italy. An examination of the parliamentary hearings regarding the implementation of the CRMA reveals a perspective aligned with that of the European Commission. However, both the debate and this analysis remain in a nascent stage, as they do not yet incorporate the diverse claims and actors capable of offering alternative perspectives on Italian internal extractivism.

Keywords: critical raw materials, double accumulation, Europe, internal extractivism, mining, political ecology.

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The present paper is a collaborative effort by the two authors. If, however, for academic reasons individual responsibility is to be assigned, Moro wrote § 2, § 3, § 4, Mattozzi § 5, whereas § 1 and § 2 have been written together.

Riassunto

Come interpretare il ritorno contemporaneo dell'estrazione mineraria in Europa e più in generale nel mondo occidentale? Attraverso il Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), la Commissione Europea inquadra questo ritorno come una necessità per lo sviluppo “verde” della produzione europea, volto a fornire risposte concrete alle sfide poste dal cambiamento climatico. Una lettura politico-ecologica di questa rinascita decostruisce tali narrazioni collocandole in una prospettiva più ampia, rivelando come questo ritorno sia in linea con le politiche industriali europee incentrate sulla crescita e la competitività, evidenziandone al contempo le contraddizioni intrinseche. Questo documento fornisce un'analisi politico-ecologica della narrativa generale che giustifica il ritorno dell'ecosistema minerario e introduce due nuove nozioni concettuali necessarie per una comprensione più approfondita del fenomeno: “estrattivismo interno” e “doppia accumulazione”. Adottando il quadro dell'ecologia politica e la terminologia sopra menzionata, questo studio conduce un'analisi preliminare del dibattito sul ritorno dell'estrazione mineraria e dell'estrattivismo interno in Italia. Un esame delle audizioni parlamentari relative all'attuazione del CRMA rivela una prospettiva in linea con quella della Commissione europea. Tuttavia, sia il dibattito che questa analisi rimangono in una fase embrionale, in quanto non incorporano ancora le diverse rivendicazioni e gli attori in grado di offrire prospettive alternative sull'estrattivismo interno italiano.

Parole chiave: materie prime critiche, doppia accumulazione, Europa, estrattivismo interno, attività mineraria, ecologia politica.

■ 1. Introduction

Mining activities are the first step of production and value chains. They constitute, one of the sectors, which is most harmful for living systems: among other factors, these activities account for approximately 6 % of global emissions (Oxfam Australia 2025). Moreover, through the negative environmental impact, they alter relations among individuals and among classes. These consequences have been extensively studied for the global souths, particularly by anthropologists and geographers (e.g., Paredes Peñafiel and Li, 2019; Schoderer and Ott, 2022; McDonnell, 2015). Conversely, sociological studies focused on Europe are less frequent (though see Canelas and Carvalho, 2023; Dunlap and Riquito 2023; Eerola and Komnitsas, 2025; Laurent and Merlin 2021), especially regarding the Italian context.

The present paper intends to begin filling this gap. This effort is rendered necessary by the return of extractive activities in Europe, bolstered by policies implemented under the framework of the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) (Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2023). The paper retraces the “invisibilization” of mines from