https://ese-journals.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/index

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2026: 953-970

https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v19n3p953-970

Published 15 November, 2026

OPEN SECTION / ARTICLE

Powered by Distance: Collective Mobilisation Born in the Peripheries and the Case of Anti-Mining Activism in Barroso (Portugal)

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ABSTRACT: This article defines the peripherals as a vast and heterogeneous group of people excluded from the real or perceived centres of decision-making, prosperity and recognition and argues that multidimensional processes of peripheralisation in the context of accelerated socio-structural transition may contribute to the transformation of collective identities and political oppositions and rekindle mobilisation. Such notions are applied to the green transition pushed by the European Union and specifically to the case of the lithium exploration projects in Barroso, Portugal. If the socio-structural shock represented by the energy transition depends on objective conditions of peripherality that facilitate extractivism and dispossession of vulnerable populations, the accentuated peripheralisation can also bring about collective mobilisation when articulated through strategies of collective identity construction and framing. Through the lens of social movements and resorting to a qualitative frame analysis based on the triangulation of academic, institutional, media and movement-produced sources, the analysis demonstrates that the anti-mining activist groups in Barroso strategically framed experiences of subjective peripherality – economic, political, geographic and cultural – in order to gather popular support, build international and intersectional alliances and go beyond traditional politics.

KEYWORDS: Energy transition, Green extractivism, Lithium, Peripherals, Social movements

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1. Introduction

If we look at the map showing the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections and focus on the two most decisive countries in terms of number of seats and geopolitical weight, what we see is clear: a fracture. In Germany, the eastern regions of the former GDR, except for Berlin, are painted with a colour representing the far-right *AfD* (*Alternative für Deutschland*), whereas almost all the rest of the country bears the colours of the centre-right traditional party, the Christian democrats of the *CDU*. In France the image is even more striking, because excluding the colourful dots of larger cities like Paris and parts of the South, the overwhelming

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tone is that of the right-wing populist party *Rassemblement National*. While in the case of Germany we see an old east-west cleavage resurfacing, in France there is undeniable evidence of a reality that has been pointed out for years by people such as Christophe Guilluy when he talks of two different worlds: the *gens ordinaires* (ordinary people) living in the peripheral France and the *monde d'en haut* (upper world) concentrated in the cosmopolitan centres.

However, it is our belief that before this fracture could change the colours of an electoral map, it first had to be felt in the hearts and minds of people living in those peripheral territories and expressed by collectives capable of mobilising shifting identities. And merely looking at political parties is not enough to understand a vast movement occurring within several corners of western societies with a plurality of seemingly unrelated manifestations, from the *yellow vests* in France (mainly between 2018-2020), to the 2023-2024 European farmers' protests or the 2024 United Kingdom anti-immigration riots.

Therefore, the first part of this paper introduces the concept of the *peripherals* and of socio-structural processes of peripheralisation, taken here as defining elements, capable of triggering a reconfiguration of social identities. We begin with a more comprehensive explanation of the *peripherals* and its analytical advantages, developed through a conceptual path along neighbouring, inspiring and sometimes overlapping ideas. Afterwards, we will examine three socio-structural processes of peripheralisation and their resulting potential for the formation of new political oppositions and social mobilisation.

In the second, empirical part, a detailed case of such mobilising potential of peripherals will be provided through the analysis of the social backlash that was generated in the north of Portugal, in the region of Barroso, due to the prospection and possibility of lithium extraction, justified by economic interests and pushed by national and European political authorities with the urgency of climate decarbonisation. There, we argue, narratives of peripheralisation were strategically framed by anti-mining social movements with the purpose of shaping collective identities, rekindling conflict and encouraging popular resistance.

Moreover, it is pertinent to mention that instead of focusing on traditional political parties, often faced with suspicion and distrust by peripheral populations, there is great advantage in adopting a social movement perspective, since it allows us to grasp how contentious politics (Tarrow and Tilly 2015) in the context of the peripheries can be a source of collective identity formation and mobilisation beyond institutional politics. Also, the choice of a process of peripheralisation brought about precisely by the energy transition, so decisive and ubiquitous in the next decades, presents us with an example of the challenge this transformation poses to societies worldwide and illustrates how significant the role of the peripherals can be in the times ahead.

In this sense, the article also contributes to what Donatella della Porta (2015) describes as the "strange disappearance" of debates on capitalism within social movement studies, by reconnecting cleavage theory, contemporary capitalism and contentious collective action in the context of accelerated socioeconomic transformation.

Finally, the case of anti-mining activism in Barroso, peripheral in the Portuguese scenario and ultraperipheral in the European scale, presents us with an example of environmental justice movement in the Global North that resonates with the experiences of the "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier 2002). Indeed, although this concept has traditionally been associated with extractive conflicts in the Global South, the Barroso case suggests the emergence of analogous forms of territorially rooted ecological resistance within peripheral regions of the Global North, where environmental conflicts are often struggles over livelihood, territory, autonomy and survival rather than merely post-material environmental concerns.

2. Theoretical Framework: Peripheralisation, Cleavages and Collective Action

Let us start by taking *peripherality* as the fundamental concept of this essay and defining all those who experience it, the *peripherals*, as *a vast and heterogeneous group of people excluded from the real or perceived*

centres of decision-making, prosperity and recognition. Rather than a fixed geographical condition, peripherality is understood as a relational and multidimensional process full of overlapping layers shaped by structural transformations within contemporary capitalism.

We draw inspiration from Christophe Guilluy's portrait of French society divided in two, with the "integrated categories", the "France of the *métropoles*", the "ruling classes" of the "world above" (*le monde d'en haut)* on one side and *la France périphérique*, also referred to as the "ordinary people", the "dispossessed" or the "new popular classes" on the other. Born from "the precarisation (…) of the old middle class and the disintegration of the working class" (Guilluy, 2020, p. 51) – these people are forging an identity away from the traditional political boundaries. Driven by a "common diagnosis", according to which the effects of a globalised, metropolitan and multicultural society were "disastrous" and excluded them from the "bloc of the integrated categories", these *gens ordinaires* would be going through a process of recomposition that is bringing together a set of people traditionally opposed politically and divided socially, what Guilluy calls an "atypic sociology gathering popular classes of all conditions, origins and status" (Guilluy, 2022, p. 57).

Also, echoing Robert Castel's notion of *désaffiliation* as a gradational path of exclusion from the "networks of wealth production and of social recognition" (Castel 1994, 13) that includes, in between, a zone of vulnerability and a zone of assistance (Castel 1991, 148–149), peripherality is not an absolute state because it implies centrality in some dimensions and peripherality in others. In this sense, left-behindedness is the concept that shows greater affinity with peripherality, overlapping in many ways. Attributed to both people and places (Pike et al. 2023, 1171), Jamie Furlong even talks of "varieties of left-behindedness", with three possible definitions using objective indicators: a conventional one, referring to older, less educated, low-skilled, white, working-class people; an economic deprivation one, pointing to "higher proportions of social housing, rates of deprivation, unemployment, and poor health"; and a precarious employment one, with a focus on "higher proportions of insecure employment" (Furlong 2019, 2). Conversely, Noam Gidron and Peter Hall look at left-behindedness as a subjective perception, a problem of social integration that "stems from a set of economic and cultural developments that have severed the connections that usually bind people to their society, creating rifts between individuals in the mainstream of society and others who feel 'left behind'" (Gidron and Hall 2020, 1030).

Notwithstanding this conceptual proximity, peripherality rejects a linear and simplistic dichotomy between those who supposedly adapt to the progress of societies and all the others, those who are "left-behind" and become external to the system, strangers to its mode of functioning and incapable of "catching up". Plus, while we also imagine the integration/peripherality binomial as a distance between certain points, we visualise it in a non-uniform concentrical way, rather than two dots in a line. Finally, the peripheral is not merely residual or a useless "waste" of the system, what Wolfgang Streeck described as "people who were no longer needed", a "surplus population of a revived capitalism on the move" looking "helplessly and uncomprehendingly at the transformation" (Streeck, 2017, p. 7). On the contrary, their multidimensional and variable distance from the integrated categories is a condition both produced by and productive of the centre.

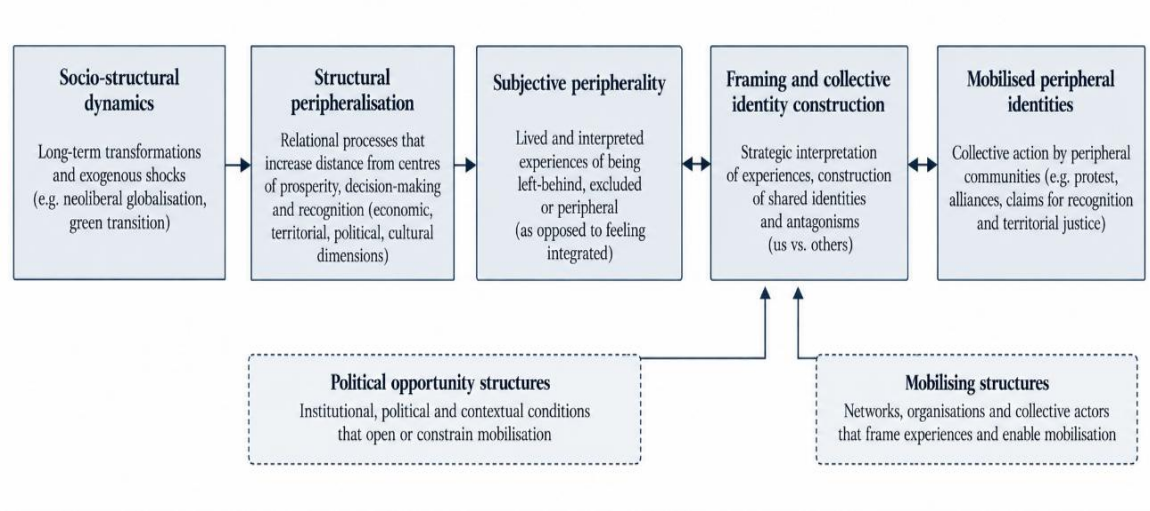
Bearing this in mind, it is our belief that experiences of peripherality can be powerful triggers for identity formation and collective mobilisation, which brings us to an essential connection with cleavage theory. Following the seminal work of Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, who conceived national party systems as "the expression of underlying social conflicts" originated by socioeconomic trends with the power of shaping societies in the long-run (Hooghe & Marks, 2018, p. 111), Bartolini and Mair (1990) enumerate three key elements for the formation of fully developed cleavages: "a distinct socio-structural basis such as class or religion, a collective identity, and a particular form of political organisation of this group" (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2019, p. 1190). This way, categories with diverging preferences and interests are not enough for a cleavage to be produced. The formation of a clear group consciousness or collective identity is also required. Indeed, the experience of overlapping modes of being peripheral can perform such aggregative function, thereby connecting social structure to politics.

It is at this point that we distinguish between objective processes of peripheralisation and subjective peripherality. The former refers to structural peripheralisation as a relational process through which individuals, groups or territories are increasingly distanced from centres of prosperity, decision-making and recognition. Such processes may operate simultaneously through socioeconomic, territorial, political or cultural relations and therefore overlap and reinforce one another. Subjective peripherality, in turn, refers to the lived and interpreted experience of that distance. It is through processes of collective identity construction and framing that such experiences are heightened and may become politically mobilising.

Such distinction also prevents peripherality from becoming a synonym for marginalisation, dispossession or exclusion. These processes may contribute to objective peripheralisation, but they do not constitute peripherality in themselves if they are not articulated as a perceived distance from economic, cultural or political centres.

This said, "cleavage theory is a theory of discontinuity" given that changes to a "sticky" scenario come from exogenous shocks, impactful enough to alter collective identities and reshuffle the dynamics of conflict inherent to any society (Hooghe & Marks, 2018, p. 119). For us, that is precisely the potential of peripheralisation processes. Linking cleavage theory with social movement literature, we argue that exogenous socioeconomic shocks may alter political opportunity structures and create conditions favourable to mobilisation. Under such circumstances, mobilising structures can strategically frame experiences of subjective peripherality and transform them into mobilised peripheral identities (McAdam 2017).

Figure 1 - From peripheralisation to mobilised peripheral identities: an analytical framework



However, it should be noted that, although these processes are presented as a sequence, they are not necessarily linear. If framing can reshape how experiences of peripherality are interpreted, collective mobilisation may itself reinforce notions of identity and opposition, as we shall see in the empirical case of Barroso. Before turning to that case, we will now examine different processes through which peripheralisation may unfold.

2.1. Economic processes of peripheralisation

The first dimension through which processes of peripheralisation can operate is economic. Over the past forty years, neoliberal globalisation, or hyperglobalisation (Rodrik, 2011), has been the key force transforming societies worldwide. It entails the integration of global markets for goods, labour, and capital, combined with a politically driven retreat of the state from production and the commodification of almost every sphere of social life through privatisations and deregulation (Kentikelenis & Babb, 2019, p. 1721). In western economies,

we can add concomitant trends of technological change, automation, deindustrialisation and a service-based labour market with historically high levels of income inequality.

In fact, the "massive decline in the ranks of blue-collar workers" (Oesch 2006, 264), alongside the reduction of "good jobs" (Rodrik 2023, 1) for the middle class, replaced by more precarious, low-skilled and often poorly paid forms of employment with no "middle-class status" attached, have created a significant group of people who feel that "their opportunities in life diminished as a result of globalisation" (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2019, p. 1188).

Furthermore, authors like Guy Standing detect the emergence of a "class-in-the making", the *precariat*, "characterised by chronic uncertainty and insecurity" with a distinct mindset and political preferences (Standing 2015). Similarly, Roberto Segatori identifies new social divisions associated with hyperglobalisation, such as the dichotomy "socially secure vs socially insecure", contrasting "public workers with life-long contracts and unionised workers in medium-large corporations" to "unemployed, independent/self-employed workers and precarious workers" (Segatori, 2017, pp. 41–43).

In times qualified by Peter Hall as an "era of knowledge-based growth", due to the ongoing revolutions in "information and communication technology now joined to advances in artificial intelligence" (Hall 2020, 192), we can only predict that the number of those left-behind is bound to grow further, deepening their distance from centres of prosperity and prompting a political backlash that Streeck calls the "return of the repressed" (Streeck, 2017).

2.2. Geographic processes of peripheralisation

It comes as no surprise that the described economic trends have spatially uneven consequences. "Production in developed economies has shifted from an 'old' industrial system with geographically dispersed activities to a 'new' tech economy, increasingly concentrated in big urban agglomerations" (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023, 954).

Nevertheless, for many communities the direct short-term effects of these economic shocks were the shutdown of industries, resulting in unemployment and wage cuts, part of a long path of decline and peripheralisation whereby "local businesses of all kinds suffer, young people leave or turn to drugs, real estate values plummet, and social services" deteriorate (Broz, Frieden & Weymouth, 2021, p. 488). Plus, the concentration of wealth and innovation in superstar cities has left peripheral territories in a "development trap" (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023, 954) that was only accentuated by the effects of the Great Recession.

Consequently, the profound increase in the levels of interterritorial inequality has brought attention to this reality of the "left-behind places" and the geographic reproduction of peripheries through "mechanisms of selective out-migration, disconnection from infrastructure and knowledge networks, increasing dependence upon larger cities for decision making, funding and services, and discursive marginalisation" (Pike et al. 2023, 1175) that effectively weakened social mobility and democratic chances of political participation.

From theory to the map, we are concretely talking about territories such as the Midwestern Rust Belt in the US, the post-industrial regions of the British North-West, the *diagonale du vide* in France, the *Aree Interne* (inner areas) in Italy, or the *España vaciada* (the emptied Spain). And from map to the ballot box, authors like Rodríguez-Pose claim that we have been witnessing the "revenge of the places that don't matter" against distant centres of power dooming them to a future that offers "no opportunities, no jobs and no hope" (Rodríguez-Pose 2018, 199).

2.3. Cultural processes of peripheralisation

The rise of neoliberalism also brought a shift in cultural hegemony. As Guilluy argues, "until the end of the *Trente Glorieuses* the popular society was the reference" of politicians, the media, the world of culture and

even of the newly-arrived immigrants. Yet, "from the 1980's onwards, the cultural hegemony of the winners of globalisation is total", meaning that "the liberal and libertarian ideology of the cool bourgeoisie is everywhere" and "popular culture becomes an unhealthy subculture from which one should get protected" (Guilluy, 2020, pp. 11–12), a supposedly vile world inhabited by character-like figures such as the "redneck", the "deplorables", the "little people", the "great unwashed".

Streeck agrees with this mechanical link between globalisation and the victory of a cosmopolitan consciousness, whereby the moralisation of capitalism goes hand in hand with the delegitimisation of those harmed by it (Streeck, 2017, p. 10). This idea connects directly to David Goodhart's distinction between the "Anywheres", who possess enough economic and cultural capital to feel at ease in new places and around new people, and the "Somewheres", who "do not command such cultural capital and lack transnational experiences" and are "more rooted and usually have 'ascribed' identities based on group belonging and particular places" (Goodhart 2017, 3).

Guilluy further sees an intentional "abandonment of the elites" from the reality of the popular classes. This process would have involved a series of strategies that deepened a sense of peripheralisation and fears of cultural inexistence. Firstly, a trend of social and symbolic distancing that generates two self-reproducing exclusive realities (Guilluy, 2022, p. 28). Secondly, the delegitimisation of the popular classes through their fascisation and reproduction of the "figure of the homophobic, racist and violent proletarian" to claim moral superiority and authority (Guilluy, 2020, p. 32).

Therefore, the perception of no longer being recognised as a majoritarian reference, almost as if they were "strangers in their own land" (Hochschild 2016), fuels an instinct of survival and a "willingness to preserve a social and cultural status" and a vaster "sense of society" (Guilluy, 2022, pp. 56–57).

2.4. The green transition as a peripheralisation shock

Using Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction", we can better understand the shift from a fossil-fuel economy to "green capitalism", a supposed fusion between free-market economies and the principles of sustainability espoused by ecologism. Promoted as a priority by the European Commission through the European Green Deal, this green transition aims to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050 while fostering inclusive growth (European Commission, n.d.).

However, within this new economic paradigm, it is our belief that all the economic, geographic and cultural processes of peripheralisation described earlier may be both a condition for and an accelerated consequence of capitalism's latest metamorphosis.

That is very evident when it comes to the mineral and energetic resources that are essential for a carbon-neutral economy, resulting in the expansion of "commodity frontiers" and in the creation of "green sacrifice zones", areas where "processes of extraction and exchange are linked to dispossession, displacement, the depletion of environmental resources" (Silva and Sareen 2023, 2), an imposed cost on a minority justified by the need to promote the greater good.

Of course, the creation of such sacrifice zones is easier in already peripheral territories, "places of relatively weak economic, social and political power, vulnerable to dependence on external core investment" (Golubchikov & O'Sullivan, 2020, p. 3), which renders them an easy prey for practices of "green extractivism", described by Dunlap as a neo-colonial method of "branding extractivist projects 'green' or ecologically sustainable" when in reality, we are simply talking about "extracting more from the earth and its inhabitants to advance industry, technology, and elite control" (Dunlap, Verweijen & Tornel, 2024, p. 450). This is precisely the way already left-behind places enter processes of further peripheralisation, hence becoming also "resource peripheries" (Golubchikov & O'Sullivan, 2020, p. 3), whose service to the metropolitan way of life and the transition economy is deemed essential by the central state and their investing partners, often foreign

companies who promise to bring jobs and economic life to deserted territories and their ageing population. And although traditionally associated with extractive conflicts in the Global South, forms of "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier 2002) may also emerge within old or newly-peripheralised regions of the Global North, where ecological resistance is deeply tied to the defence of livelihoods, territorial autonomy and cultural patrimony.

As a matter of fact, beyond the economic face of the extracting process, there is a looming cultural and political opposition between a narrative of local revitalisation and global salvation on the one side, and the preservation of ancestral ways of life and of communities' right to self-determination, on the other. Such dichotomy generates the struggle between the cosmopolitan forces of progress, depicting local populations as inferior - selfish, backward and reactionary -and the peripheral movements of resistance against foreign oppression and cultural extinction. Indeed, it must be highlighted how peripheralisation processes accelerated by the green transition may reinvigorate pre-existent identities and contribute to the formation of new ones, particularly in places sometimes shaped by decades of political disaffiliation.

3. Research Design and Methodological Approach

The main research interest of this paper is looking at how sociostructural shocks trigger or accelerate processes of peripheralisation and how, through processes of framing and collective identity construction, experiences of subjective peripherality may contribute to political mobilisation. For this, the previous theoretical contextualisation was essential to conceptualise our notion of peripherality, point to three processes of peripheralisation and introduce the socio-structural shock that may accelerate them, providing the background for the empirical part.

It is now time to move from theory to the field. Therefore, the following sections will focus on a concrete case: the attempts of lithium exploration in northern Portugal, in the region of Barroso. There, already peripheral communities were confronted by the socioeconomic shock of the green transition and reacted against perceived risks of further peripheralisation which reinforced social identities and awakened collective mobilisation in the shape of anti-mining activism. In fact, by resorting to a social movement perspective we shall demonstrate that Barroso presents us with an example where the political opportunities and the mobilising structures for activism are easily identifiable. Similarly, experiences of subjective peripherality were strategically framed by anti-mining social movements to gather popular support, build international and intersectional alliances and go beyond traditional party politics.

The present case-study was conducted through a triangulation of sources and data. Firstly, through valuable pieces of academic literature covering not only technical/scientific dimensions of lithium exploration but also forms of political resistance to *green extractivism* in Portugal. Secondly, the consultation of public (national and European) legislation and environmental reports issued by public authorities and mining companies, alongside secondary sources, such as newspaper articles and media (TV/radio) coverage, proved essential for our research. Thirdly, and most importantly, a thorough analysis of social media content published by Portugal's key anti-mining associations since their foundation, as well as information present on the websites of parties and environmentalist organisations, represented the bulk of the data gathered.

In more concrete terms, we carried out a qualitative frame analysis, focused mostly (but not exclusively) on official public consultation processes and, more importantly, on *Facebook* posts, website publications, manifestos and other public communications of the selected social movements. We are talking about the four most relevant and active anti-mining groups in the region of Barroso, namely the *Association United in Defence of Covas do Barroso* (*AUDCB*), *the Association People and Nature of Barroso* (*PNB*), the *Association Montalegre with Life* and the *Movement No to Mines – Montalegre*, whose publications between 2018 and 2025 were reviewed in full, with those relevant to the research question being selected for analysis. As illustrated in the

following pages, we looked for specific analytic categories suggesting narratives of exclusion, perceptions of peripherality and processes of identity construction and boundary-making, in which opponents were clearly framed and antagonistic dichotomies were constructed.

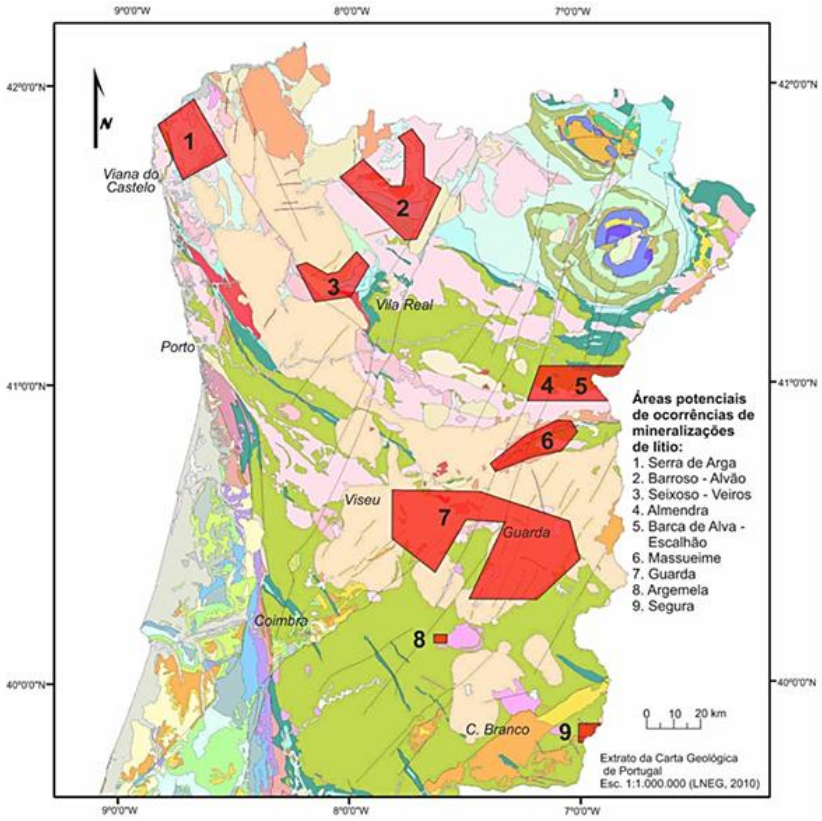
Finally, rather than claiming a deterministic causal relationship between peripheralisation and mobilisation, this article adopts an interpretive approach aimed at understanding how experiences of subjective peripherality become politically meaningful through processes of framing, collective identity construction and contentious action.

4. The Race for Lithium and the Birth of Protest in Barroso

In March 2024, the European Union, via the Council, adopted the European Critical Raw Materials Act, whereby critical raw materials (CRMs) were defined as "raw materials of high economic importance for the EU, with a high risk of supply disruption due to their concentration of sources and lack of good, affordable substitutes" (Council of the European Union, n.d.). In concrete terms, the EU refers to mineral resources used on ubiquitous appliances such as smartphones, electric cars, semiconductors or airplanes, which almost all come from outside of the EU, therefore constituting a relevant vulnerability in the geopolitics of natural resources. Consequently, the CRMs' act established as main targets 10% of CRMs annual consumption extracted within EU's territory, as well as 40% of its processing. In fact, the guarantee of European autonomy in the extraction and transformation of these raw materials, as well as the decarbonisation of the energy system constitute the two pillars of the so-called goal of the "twin transition", not only declared in paper, but also enforced nationally via easier access to European funding and more expedited project licensing.

This being said, among CRMs such as copper, cobalt or nickel, there is also lithium, a key component of the lithium-ion batteries that we can find in electric cars, themselves essential in the effort of decarbonising the European roads by replacing conventional fossil-fuel vehicles. Worldwide, around 70% of the known reserves of this "white gold" are concentrated in the salt-lakes of the so-called "Lithium Triangle" of Bolivia, Argentina and Chile, with relevant extraction also coming from countries like Australia and China. And in Europe, despite some contradictory sources (Chaves et al. 2021, 4), it is claimed that Portugal is the country with the largest lithium reserves (Oliveira et al., 2018, p. 90). This has spurred a sort of "lithium fever", with recent governments signing several contracts of prospection and sometimes exploration of hard-rock mining concessions in around 10 regions of the Centre and North of the country. One of those regions is the "Barroso-Alvão", located in the Vila Real district and encompassing two main municipalities: Montalegre and Boticas (parish of Covas do Barroso). It is precisely the mining projects of Montalegre, secured by the company *Lusorecursos* and the one in Covas do Barroso, owned by *Savannah Resources*, that are in a more advanced stage of execution (extraction is expected to start in 2027 in Barroso [Público, 2024b]) and that have generated greater levels of local and national protest, political and civil mobilisation and media attention, whether in Portugal or internationally.

Figure 2 - Areas of potential lithium mining exploration in 2018



Source: Boletim de Minas, 52, Edição Especial - Lítio - 2017–2018.

The emergence of lithium mining projects across the Portuguese territory can be interpreted as the exogenous socioeconomic shock that altered the political opportunity structure within the arena of contentious politics. Indeed, according to the counting done by Dunlap and Riquito (2023), since 2017 "numerous civic initiatives began to appear, which included the emergence of 15 national groups coordinating with the existing civil society groups and environmental NGO's" in order to raise public awareness of the unscrutinised lithium mining projects springing across the country. Sometimes on their own, others in articulation amongst themselves, these mobilised structures resorted to a vast "repertoire of collective action" (Tilly 1983) that included demonstrations, road blockades, electoral boycotts (Dunlap & Riquito, 2023, p. 2), conferences, summer camps, manifesto signings and several judicial actions against the government, public agencies, municipalities and the companies involved in the mining concessions.

Amongst those collectives campaigning under the "Yes to life, no to mines" slogan, the most active were the ones coming from Montalegre and Boticas, two small municipalities inhabited by around 15 000 people altogether that, despite the small numbers, have managed to organise impactful groups, such as the *Association United in Defence of Covas do Barroso* (*AUDCB*), *the Association People and Nature of Barroso* (*PNB*), the *Association Montalegre with Life* and the *Movement No to Mines – Montalegre*.

5. Framing Peripherality: Identity and Opposition in Barroso

Going some steps backwards, the general theoretic argument of the present paper was that socio-structural shocks, namely socioeconomic ones, are capable of generating or exacerbating processes of peripheralisation,

which can lead to collective mobilisation through strategies of framing and collective identity construction. Consequently, it is now the moment to examine the way the movements that emerged from the resistance to lithium mining in Barroso constructed their narratives of identity and opposition through framing processes. That is, how experiences of peripherality were interpreted and how boundaries between local communities and different "others" were constructed. Such boundary-work was fundamental in the movements' effort to agitate collective identities through an evident mobilisation (cognitive and emotionally) of an interactive and shared "sense of we-ness" (Snow 2001).

5.1. Distant decision-making and political abandonment

Firstly, we must underline the opposition between the distant central government that decides and the locals that actually feel the impacts of becoming a "sacrifice zone". This feeling of political periphery has been expressed by the very president of the parish of Covas do Barroso, Lúcia Mó, who said that "[the central powers] should come and see, instead of deciding while sitting in their cabinets, because it is in the field that we see the reality of things" (SIC Notícias, 2025). A local inhabitant, Benjamim Gonçalves, shares this sentiment: "it is decided far away by the Secretary of State and by the Minister. They decide in an office and pretend that we are just some sort of lackeys around here" (SIC Notícias, 2025). The total lack of transparency and consideration for the affected populations, is also a recurrent theme. In the words of Benjamin Gonçalves, they "feel invaded, unprotected" (SIC Notícias, 2025), asked to participate in a sacrifice against their will.

Indeed, the movements often frame their efforts as a battle for existence in freedom and against distant oppression. In a manifesto that united more than 115 social movements across the country to mark the seventh anniversary of Barroso's resistance, we can read that "there is more humanity in our grandmothers' kitchens than in the corridors of power" (AUDCB, 2025) and a call for action by the *AUDCB* against a judicial order that allowed Savannah to access private land without permission equated the present with the long Portuguese dictatorship that ended in 1974: "50 years after the Revolution, the State continues to impose projects by force, indifferent to the reality and the will of people". To this they react with the slogan "The time of serfdom is over! Barroso lives and resists!" (AUDCB, 2024a).

5.2. Green extractivism, dispossession and territorial sacrifice

Framing Barroso's resistance as a fight against extractivism and a refusal of becoming a green sacrifice zone is essential in the anti-mining movements' rhetoric. They declare that "Barroso [already] is green" and therefore "no one forces us to say that the grey is green, that mines are sustainable and that mining companies are development angels. (…) It is here, where they want to destroy Barroso's green world to save the world of infinite growth that we want to confront and deconstruct the idea of a transition based on extractivism" (AUDCB, 2023).

Complementing this idea, the *Movement No to Mines – Montalegre*, wrote in an open consultation to the environmental impact evaluation of the mine project, that "mining is a form of colonialism unacceptable in our days. We cannot accept the 'green mining' narrative when what is at stake is mere destruction and contamination" (Agência Portuguesa do Ambiente, 2023, p. 486). As a matter of fact, it is exactly the memory and the fear of this destruction and contamination that lie behind the reasons pointed out by the anti-mining activists of Barroso and Montalegre. Firstly, the vivid recollection of the Borralha wolframite mine (operating in that village between 1902 and 1986) that left behind a trace of disease, death and abandonment (it is known by the locals as the "widow village" and the "ghost town") (Dunlap & Riquito, 2023, p. 11). Secondly, the objective potential impacts of an open pit mine in a very delicate ecosystem. As was written in a 2022 manifesto against *Savannah* by the *AUDCB*, "mining occupies the lands, destroys the ecosystems, pollutes the rivers

and contaminates the soil, pollutes the air and makes agriculture impossible. (…) mining wrecks communities, harms physical health and pollutes mental health" (AUDCB, 2022b).

This framing of mining as a form of dispossession is also reflected in the movements' opposition to the economic interests behind the green transition. For them, the European Union and the national governments have sided with the economic interests of foreign enterprises and multinationals against local populations. And the well-marketed "green transition" is nothing but a huge scam and an example of technocratic "climate reductionism" (Dunlap & Riquito, 2023, p. 4), simplifying ecological problems to a mere issue of carbon emissions. The real priority, argues the *AUDCB* in another manifesto advertising their 3rd summer camp (August 2023), is "ensuring a decarbonisation that does not jeopardise the interests of the automobile industry and does not question the idea of infinite economic growth" (AUDCB 2023). Therefore, the movements were born to "confront and deconstruct the idea that energetic transition implies unbridled extractivism (…) dispossession of rural territories and the unrelenting pursuit of profit". And in their own lands, they just want to "stop a greedy company from destroying their mountains and ancestral history" (AUDCB, 2022a), playing their part in a "local fight that is an echo of global resistance" against "modern colonialism, the "forefront where we will halt the destruction of life in the name of the pursuit of profits" (AUDCB 2023), they write.

5.3. "Carbonising the countryside to decarbonise the cities": the unequal geography of the green transition

The anti-mining collectives often resort to a territorial framing of peripheralisation, within the country and in a European context. They claim that the idea of Portugal as the European state with the largest lithium reserves is a mere lie (Expresso 2021), diffused by central and powerful countries like Germany, whose reserves are allegedly even more abundant, with the purpose of avoiding the negative externalities of lithium extraction while reaping all the benefits. Sustaining such position, the *Movement No to Mines – Montalegre* defended in December 2021 that "it makes no sense to impose on the peripheral countries the consequences of open-pit mining so as to feed the automobile and other similar industries of the richer European countries". Similarly, it makes "no sense to carbonise the fields to decarbonise the cities" (Movimento Não às Minas – Montalegre, 2021b). This rural vs. urban dichotomy is also pointed out by the *AUDCB* when they write that the attempt to turn Barroso into a sacrifice zone is just an excuse to "dislocate the pollution from urban centres to the rural areas". This would represent the victory of intensive individual consumerism (urban *ethos*) over communitarian ways of life (rural *ethos*) embodied by the large portions of common land, accessible to all in Barroso (the *baldios*), that "are and have always been managed by local communities in harmony with the diverse ecologies and ecosystems" (AUDCB, 2022a).

5.4. Defending a way of life: territorial identity and cultural recognition

The Barroso-Alvão mining concessions are located in the only Portuguese area recognised by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) as a "Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System". Indeed, the "Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral System" is characterised by a "pattern of land occupation marked by human activity for agriculture, forestry and grazing, while a number of very significant and relatively intact environmental areas are still found" (FAO, n.d.). Because of this, the *Movement No to Mines - Montalegre*, in a call for a demonstration in Barroso, wrote in January 2022 that "in the soil [of Barroso], there is a treasure (…) the biodiversity here present [that] led, from time immemorial, to humankind honouring what sprouts from the Earth in its benefit". However, "with Barroso's mine, this treasure would be extinct, but we are here to say NO!" (Movimento Não às Minas – Montalegre, 2022a).

Interestingly, here the activists from Barroso mimic a rhetoric often used in the Global South by "the poor and indigenous" who reason "in terms of sacredness", rather than in terms of the economic costs of

extractivism (Martinez-Alier 2014). That is why, were there to be a mine many locals claim they would be forced to leave, centuries-old knowledge transmission would cease forever, and the jobs created would not compensate for all Barroso's identity and ancestral ways of life that would be sacrificed in the name of a fallacy called "green transition".

Finally, the already mentioned difference in urban and rural lifestyles is often times translated into a cultural caricature that divides enlightened cosmopolitans who defend the planet and backward peripherals, too selfish to make a sacrifice and too ignorant to understand what is at stake, equated with denialists and right-wing extremists. Such reasoning, demoralising peripheral populations and delegitimising their demands, explains the *AUDCB*'s accusations of collusion between academia and the mining industry, under what they perceive as a general tone of cultural superiority:

> "We know that many agreements were signed between [mining] companies and universities. We know that many academics of those universities often appear in the *media* in support of the mining projects. And we also notice their usually insulting comments about the communities opposing those projects" (AUDCB, 2022a).

To sum up, several processes of peripheralisation – political, economic, geographic and cultural – either pre-existing or accentuated by the economic transition and the prospects of lithium exploration have consistently been explored and framed by anti-mining agents in order to shape visions of identity and opposition (central government *vs.* local populations; foreign economic oppressors *vs.* the guardians of natural and immaterial heritage; urban consumerists *vs.* the real "green" and sustainable lifestyles; abstract forces of moralisation *vs.* real people experiencing "green sacrifice") and bolster collective mobilisation. The following section examines how these locally grounded frames were scaled up through alliances and wider networks of solidarity.

6. Strategy of Alliances and Intersectionality

The choice of exterior allies also sheds some light on the political frontiers that the anti-mining collectives of Barroso-Alvão have been attempting to draw, not only to gather more support for their cause, but also as a means to build a wider sense of identity. This strategy goes in line with contemporary social movements that increasingly operate through transnational activist networks capable of linking local grievances to broader contentious arenas (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009).

For instance, in August 2024, during the fourth annual summer "Camp in Defence of Barroso" organised by the *AUDCB* and amidst cries like "We want a world where many worlds fit" or "From Barroso to Palestine, the land belongs to those who work it", several environmentalist groups from different countries (Spain, France, Germany and Argentina), launched the "Global anti-extractivist network" to fight together the economic giants that "threaten to destroy ways of life and territories all over the world" (Público, 2024a). Indeed, Barroso activists are also part of the "Yes to Life, No to Mining" (YLNM) network, showing their resistance goes way beyond a "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) perspective, but understands that even if one mining project might be halted in a given territory, the confrontation with global extractivism does not end. Similarly, in November 2021, Barroso welcomed the "Zapatista Caravan for Life" (Fig. 2) in their first stop during a European journey to share the experiences of Mexican peasants and indigenous populations of "a more democratic management of the territory and respect by habits and traditions" and learn with European cases of resistance against predatory attacks on local communities and their patrimony (Movimento Não às Minas – Montalegre, 2021a). Also, in October 2023 a delegation from Barroso's activists participated in the first Iberian Meeting alongside "hundreds of Iberian communities in the fight against mining" and some months later, in February 2024, joined the "Green European Horizons Academy: Good For All" that took place in Belgrade,

Serbia. Even the 2024's edition of the *Festival de Cannes* was used to gather international support, with the premiere of the "Barrosan Western", Paulo Carneiro's "Savannah and the Mountain", saluted by the ACDB as an example of resistance through art capable of fostering "empathy and solidarity" and "strengthening the fight of Barroso against the arrogance of those who want to impose a project of death" (AUDCB, 2024b).

Figure 3 - Zapatistas in Barroso



In the meantime, when it comes to national solidarities, the support to the cause of Barroso reaches far beyond other territories also threatened by mining projects. An example of this was the 9th Meeting for Climate Justice that took place in Boticas in April 2024 and was organised only for the second time away from Lisbon, uniting environmentalist activists from all over the country. Furthermore, the year before, Barroso had also hosted the National Feminist Meeting of the *Network 8M*. In their first non-urban large initiative, the aim was bridging the anti-mining with the feminist fight in an ecofeminist perspective under the slogan "No to mines, yes to sisterhood" ("*não às minas, sim às manas"*). In the words of one organizing element "the fights criss-cross because the problem behind all of them is the same: the capitalist system" (Jornal Mapa 2023). Closely, in the framework of a more classical opposition to capitalist exploration, in February 2025 *AUDCB* welcomed a visit of the *Association of Ex-Workers in the Uranium Mines*, in which they sang together some of the miners' hymns and discussed the dangers of open-pit mines.

In fact, such leftist spirit is compatible with the support that the two main radical left parties in Portugal – *Left Bloc* (*"Bloco de Esquerda - BE*") and *Portuguese Communist Party* (*"Partido Comunista Português – PCP")* – have recently expressed to the cause of Barroso. In January 2025, the leader of the *Left Bloc*, Mariana Mortágua, went to Covas to participate in the protest organised by *AUDCB* entitled "The time of serfdom is over! Barroso Lives and Resists" and declared that the local population is absolutely right in not wanting a project that only serves "powerful financial interests" and represents a "model of development unfit for our country" (Esquerda.net 2024). Likewise, asked for their positioning *vis-à-vis* the mining projects in Barroso during the campaign for 2022's general election, *PCP* issued a statement arguing that "[mining] concessions [in the region] do not safeguard the national interest and that of local communities", lamenting that "under the pretext of commendable objectives – such as the energetic transition – true attacks against the Portuguese

people and its economy are regularly legitimised" with "the big companies profiting and the working people paying the bill" (Movimento Não às Minas – Montalegre, 2022b).

7. Beyond Traditional Politics?

Conversely, it is pertinent to observe that, despite the support of these political parties to the anti-mining cause and its anti-capitalist dimension, the electoral results in the municipality of Boticas as well as in the parish (*"Junta de Freguesia"*) of Covas do Barroso invariably attribute the victory to the centre-right party, *Partido Social Democrata* (*PSD*). As a matter of fact, it was precisely in Boticas that the centre-right coalition *Aliança Democrática* (uniting *PSD* and the Christian-democrats of *Centro Democrático Social*) obtained its strongest results in the legislative elections of March 2024 (58,05%), whereas *BE* and *PCP* only got around 1% each. From this scenario, one could hypothesise that popular mobilisation against the mining projects and national politics belong to two parallel realities, such that the collective awakening that the resistance movements have generated in such ageing and peripheral communities operates beyond the traditional left-right spectre of political conflict.

Finally, it would be a mistake to suppose there is an unanimity amongst locals against the lithium mines. Notwithstanding an overwhelming 91,4% of Barroso residents opposing the exploration projects in a survey conducted amongst 453 people (a very sizeable sample considering the small number of inhabitants of the region, around 15000 if we count the municipalities of Boticas and Montalegre altogether) in January 2021 (Público 2021), another civil association was recently created, the *Association Future of Barroso* (Público, 2025), that regards *Savannah's* investment and job-creation promises as a development opportunity and proposes to be a bridge in the communication between company and local communities. Aware of the considerable challenges posed by any open-pit mine, the president of the association, José Moura, urges his fellow countrymen to consider the greatest threat to Barroso's survival, depopulation: "In order for this municipality to vanish we just have to sit still and do nothing. When I was born it had 14 000 inhabitants and now it does not even reach the 5000" (SIC Notícias, 2025).

Nevertheless, even the salience of this topic in the lives of Barroso's inhabitants was insufficient to counter a long-lasting tendency of low electoral turnout in the district of Vila Real. Plus, against expectations of a burst of political participation that would accompany the surge in associativism, we have observed that the variation of turnout in Boticas and Montalegre follows very closely the dynamics of the country as a whole (see Annex 1), meaning that it is not possible to conclude that anti-mining activism has brought about a rekindling of interest in traditional politics. The only exception that might confirm the rule, understandable given the personal and a-ideological relationship parishes have with the inhabitants, is 2021's turnout in the parish of Covas do Barroso, rising 8 p.p. (from 49% to 57%) against a 1 p.p. decline in the local election's turnout countrywide. Once again, this reinforces our hypothesis that the awakening of popular mobilisation and collective action works in a sphere beyond traditional politics and the left-right spectrum. However, given its capacity to reshape identities and awaken civic participation it is a force that cannot be ignored if we are to understand the political potential of peripheral populations in modern democracies.

8. Conclusion

Throughout these pages, we tried to show the explanatory advantages of notions like the *peripherals* and processes of peripheralisation when it comes to making sense of phenomena such as shifting social identities and oppositions and rekindled collective mobilisation in times of accelerated socioeconomic metamorphosis.

The concept of the *peripherals* was compared with neighbouring ones before delving into three socio-structural processes of peripheralisation. The economic one, capable of generating its own peripheries, the *losers*

of globalisation, the *precariat* or the *socially insecure*. The geographic one, with the divergent realities of the *superstar cities* and of the left-behind places. And the cultural one, marked by the demoralisation of popular or more traditional ways of life and by a general feeling of cultural inferiority amongst the *Somewheres*.

After this, we argued that the current energy transition towards a green economy builds upon existing conditions of peripherality, exacerbates them and may generate new ones. A particularly illustrative example of this is the case of proposed lithium mining in northern Portugal. In the region of Barroso, socio-structural transformations became politically consequential because identities and conflicts were (re)shaped by experiences of subjective peripherality, framed and mobilised by new social movements that were born to defend their lands against the danger of extinction in a scenario that escapes and transcends traditional parties and mainstream politics.

In times of inescapable climate challenges at a global scale, one of the greatest obstacles to social movements' mobilisation over environmental causes has been the extended time horizon of climate change effects, more gradual and subtle than the "here and now" of other pressing issues (McAdam 2017). However, the case of Barroso suggests that when strategically framed and coupled with the danger of peripheralisation, socioeconomic shocks with environmental impact can trigger powerful reactions. In the form of a countermovement of the peripherals against invisibility, where the prevailing force is their survival instinct, this conflict may continue to grow within the context of today's transition economy. Of this future, Barroso offers but a small glimpse. Born in the peripheries.

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Annex 1. Electoral turnout (%) in the Barroso region and correlation with national turnout

Legislative elections	2009	2011	2015	2019	2022	2024	Coef Correl
National Turnout	60,54	58,92	57	54,5	57,96	66,23	
Turnout Municipality of Boticas	52,35	51,02	44,17	45,09	43,02	48,3	0,462
Turnout Parish of Covas do Barroso	53,61	51	44,19	43,98	47,9	51,53	0,735
Turnout Municipality of Montalegre	49,86	44,59	40,7	37,47	41,12	44,65	0,628

Presidential Elections	2006	2011	2016	2021	Coef Correl
National Turnout	62,6	47,51	50,07	45,45	
Turnout Municipality of Boticas	53,74	45,09	40,58	32,4	0,868
Turnout Parish of Covas do Barroso	55,31	45,07	42,57	34,39	0,9120
Turnout Municipality of Montalegre	49,56	36,53	33	28,47	0,948

Local Elections	2009	2013	2017	2021	Coef Correl
National Turnout	59,01	52,6	54,97	53,65	
Turnout Municipality of Boticas	58,65	54,78	52,14	52,05	0,742
Turnout Parish of Covas do Barroso	53,89	49,57	48,97	56,54	0,241
Turnout Municipality of Montalegre	61,46	54,9	51,84	54,37	0,780