

Contested Environments: The Political Ecology of Agrarian Change and Forest Conservation

Rachel
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Theorists labeling the world's present condition as post-colonial, post-socialist, or neoliberally globalized find it increasingly essential to engage with the issues of environmental justice, conservation, and agrarian change. Generously sponsored by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, this panel at the Annual Meeting of the German Anthropological Association GAA (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde DGV) aimed to highlight research and intersections on two central themes in political ecology: the politics and violence associated with forest conservation and the neoliberalization of agriculture under the present global food regime.

Opening the panel, **BRAM BÜSCHER** spoke about the idea and practice of 'saving' nature by subjugating and reevaluating it in capitalist terms as the dominant mode of biodiversity conservation worldwide. Based on extensive ethnographic field research in Southern Africa, his paper argued that three modes of politics are especially important for understanding contemporary neoliberal conservation: those of consensus, anti-politics, and marketing. Bram empirically illustrated these modes; he also demonstrated how planners and managers employ and thereby reinforce them. He concluded that these political modes led to an uneasy contradiction between development defined as social change and conservation defined as protection from social change.

Through her research on subsistence-producing farmers and external intervention forces on such practices, **BIRGIT MÜLLER** was able to show direct links between indigenous farmers and decisions of the world's parliaments. Whether to burn, cut, or prune trees in their fields has become an object of intense controversies in the hilly agrarian Nicaraguan frontier. The different views are supported by diverse programs and governmental practices promoted by NGOs, international organizations, the municipal government, and by the complex relationships to large cattle holding landowners. Müller's paper argued for context-specificity and highlighted structural problems that the farmers alone cannot solve.

Modern agrarian transformation began for Wayanad (Kerala) in the 1940s when the hilly forested area was colonized by waves of agricultural settlers. These migrants largely displaced the local Adivasi population and created one of the most prosperous cash-crop regions of India. Beginning in the 1990s, however, the agriculture in the region has experienced a severe ecological and economic crisis. Based on their shared fieldwork experience among farmers and forest officials, **DANIEL MÜNSTER** and **URSULA MÜNSTER** proposed to ground the analysis of Wayanad's ecological modernity in two historical trajectories: the history of agrarian change and the increase of conservation measures. These histories were presented as an intersection of a series of conflicts over the interface of agriculture and forest.

The notion of 'scale' has long been a crucial ingredient to political ecologist's analyses of human-environment interaction. **CHRISTOPH BERGMANN'S** and **MARTIN GERWIN'S** case study explores questions of scale by focusing on the Bhotiyas, *former trans-Himalayan traders between India, Nepal, and Tibet (China) who practice a sort of combined mountain agriculture in the high valleys of the Kumaon Himalayas. Bergmann and Gerwin proposed an interdisciplinary perspective that combines anthropological and geographical theory as well as methods to analyze the historical transformation of the Bhotiya's migratory pattern along highly contested modes of scaling: from border demarcations to ethnic designations; from state rules of forest and pasture use to ritualized techniques of timber extraction.*

The Mizo people use Jhum cultivation (slash and burn or swidden)—a contested practice during the British colonial time. **SHAHNAZ KIMI LEBLHUBER** and **H. VANLALHRUAIA** describe this in terms of both “commodity” versus “sacred space” and “civilized space” versus “primitive bounded space.” In the post-colonial and global India, the practice of Jhum cultivation is often stigmatized as an “extravagant and unscientific form of land use,”—a pessimistic attitude driven largely by the growth of liberal economy and concern over the ecological crisis. Hence, many Jhum fields are transforming under the policy of “fences and fortresses” and “alternative paradigms.” By taking the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) introduced by the government of Mizoram in 1985 as a site of

investigation, the paper connected the debates concerning Jhum cultivation, forest conservation, and agrarian change in Mizoram.

GUNNEL CEDERLÖF presented a historical perspective on the large transformation of power and political relations in Northeastern Bengal and the area near the Burmese border which occurred in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Almost insuperable social-structural and climatic barriers marked the first four to five decades of British supremacy along the “Southwest Silk Road,” which came to have a decisive effect on polity and subject formation. As a monsoon landscape, there was a tense relationship in this area between a fluid, continuously changing landscape and fixed notions of boundaries, revenue classes, government control, and policies. The state, as Gunnel argued, begins with administrative practice.

Postsocialist land reform unfolded simultaneously with the decentralization of the state and the delegation of administrative decisions and powers to local level. Land and forest restitution has put local state officials into an excellent position to take advantage, economically and politically, when implementing land reforms. Based on sixteen months of fieldwork in two villages in Romania, **STEFAN DORONDEL** explored the relationship between radical economic change and the transformation of agrarian landscape in the form of deforestation.

Disagreements with the seed industry as well as modern germination techniques have led groups of farmers to reshape their discourses and practices regarding seed conservation and reproduction. This dynamic can be seen in the revival of heirloom varieties and the progressive construction of the new category of “peasant seed resistance” in France as well as its internationalization. **ELISE DEMEULENAERE** drew on the anthropology of globalization and examined the ethnoscapes emerging from this globalization with focus on the developing ‘peasant’ category. Her hypothesis was that peasant resistances are built more on their unity, whereas contestation of forest conservation advances the unique goals of local communities.

The United Nations Collaborative Program on *Reducing of Emissions of Deforestation and Degradation Mechanism (REDD)* was launched in 2008 as a means to mitigate climate change, while also protecting the forests of so-called “developing countries.” **GAWAN MARINGER** gave insight into the inherent problems concerning REDD, both in how it disregards issues of biodiversity conservation, focusing exclusively on the function of forests as carbon stores, and how it marginalizes Indigenous Peoples and neglects their rights. Indigenous Peoples often receive a great deal of attention in the international arena. The recent COPs and UN mechanisms concerning Indigenous Rights and development exemplified their rather active, vital role in the climate change debate. Gawan emphasized the inherent dynamic of Indigenous Peoples' cultures in cre-

ating a certain pan-indigenusness concerning environmental issues.

NIELS BARMAYER, “a little bit of an activist anthropologist himself,” presented evidence in two case studies on how global conservation schemes have been rejected by the indigenous population on Mexican ground. Amidst increasing demands for cultural and territorial autonomy, indigenous Zapotec communities in the southern state of Oaxaca are resisting the top-down conservation efforts in one of Earth's ²mega-diverse² areas. The mountainous and biologically diverse regions in question are characterized by a history of relative autonomy with regard to land management. But government programs implemented in the context of global conservation efforts often undercut this autonomy. Niels' paper addressed indigenous detail resistance as well as state-independent and community-controlled bottom-up approaches at conservation.

As one of the last indigenous groups maintaining its identity in the immediacy of the main Amazon river, prolonged cultural contact nevertheless took its toll from the Sateré-Mawés. The critical situation is widely discussed among themselves; possible solutions could be summed up as revitalization of the Sateré-Mawé's sense of place. **WOLFGANG KAPFHAMMER** presented two discourses and/or strategies, one from evangelicals which recontextualizes the communities as a ²moral place,² and one by activists of a fair trade project which seeks to globalize the local economic structures. While both trends can be called place-making strategies, the former seems to re-politicize and re-ecologize the evangelical movement, while the latter tries to re-sacralize human-nature relations. They converge in their creative reshuffling of cosmological space and as a whole connect with the spiritual subtext of Western ecologism.

The workshop was a very lively experience with vital discussions and in-depth questioning. Daniel Münster and Ursula Münster plan to bring a publication forward to further foster that successful line of inquiry in the field of political ecology.

-- Marcus Andreas