



Why do smallholders plant biofuel crops? The ‘politics of consent’ in Mexico

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Biofuels
Hegemony
Jatropha curcas
Oil palm
Political ecology
Rural organisations

ABSTRACT

Recent studies have addressed the social and environmental impacts of biofuel crops but seldom the question as to why rural producers engage in their production. It is particularly unclear how governments worldwide, especially in middle-income countries such as Brazil, Thailand, and Mexico, could enroll so many smallholders in biofuel cropping projects. Conventional views see yields and economic returns as main drivers for smallholder participation in biofuel production but ignore the role played by power and politics. This paper analyses the rapid biofuel expansions (oil palm, *jatropha*) in the southern Lacandon rainforest in Chiapas (Mexico) and their partial failure (*jatropha*) from a political ecology perspective. Our findings indicate that biofuel expansions in this region not only occurred for productive reasons, but also because biofuel programmes provided prospects for political gains through strengthened rural organisations. In contrast with emphasis on state coercion and local resistance—common in political ecology—the biofuel expansion relied, in this case, upon a ‘politics of consent’ in which both the state and rural organisations, albeit in a power-laden relationship, sought to achieve their own goals by supporting the planting of biofuel crops. These findings suggest the need to rethink how particular approaches within political ecology apply Gramsci’s notions of power and hegemony and, more broadly, to consider the importance of politics in explaining why certain forms of agricultural production become dominant.

1. Introduction

State intervention has been crucial for the expansion of biofuels crops (Sorda et al., 2010). In India, for instance, the state of Chhattisgarh distributed 380 million seedlings of *Jatropha curcas* L. (hereafter referred to as *jatropha*) to farmers (Fairless, 2007). In the United States, favourable policies for maize-based ethanol and rising prices led to the largest maize area planted since 1944 (Gillon, 2010). In Chiapas (Mexico), the government promoted the cultivation by smallholders of both oil palm and *jatropha* as potential biofuels through subsidies, free plant material, and credit. Government support for these crops during the 2007–2012 period contributed to an increase of about 30,000 ha for oil palm (SIAP-SAGARPA, 2014) and 10,000 ha for *jatropha* (Gobierno del estado, 2012). Governments worldwide have promoted biofuel cultivation as a strategy to reduce fossil fuel imports and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as to foster rural development through new markets and new jobs (Franco et al., 2010). State support in different countries has included material donations (e.g., seedlings, mills), credit, infrastructure, tax incentives, and blending mandates. In particular, some middle-income countries implemented pro-poor schemes that

enrolled smallholders in biofuel production (Flexor and Kato, 2017; Skutsch et al., 2011; Somnuek et al., 2016).

Despite recognition of significant state involvement in the expansion of biofuel crops worldwide, explanations of biofuel planting often emphasise farm-level economic and technical factors. Recent research tends to explain smallholder participation in biofuel production in terms of individual or household decision making, with economic and production optimisation conceived as key goals (e.g., Feintrenie et al., 2010; Kuntashula et al., 2014). While biofuels have often been promoted by the state, participating smallholders appear devoid of politics and ideology. Hunsberger (2010) showed, instead, the importance of the political dimension for explaining biofuel expansions in Kenya by contrasting international-, national-, and local-level objectives in relation to *jatropha* projects, and how different meanings and discourses linked to *jatropha* were disputed, negotiated, and rearranged as different actors sought to achieve their own goals. This article explains biofuel planting by focusing on the politics involved, whereby politics includes processes at the local level, which, in concrete situations of practice, are very much intertwined with technical/environmental and economic factors, as well as state-level decision making. Political

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ecology serves this purpose.

We build on the political ecology approach by analysing how land use decisions and farming practices are embedded in social and political processes. Political ecology aims to understand nature–society interactions in relation to political dynamics at different levels, including within particular rural communities, at the interface between local strategies and state policies (Hecht and Cockburn, 2010; Nygren, 2004)—taking into account peasant politics and local ideology (Kull, 2002)—and at the level of relationships between technical or environmental and political domains (Jansen, 2003; Toleubayev et al., 2007). We identify in political ecology a common frame to conceptualise local politics and state–peasant relationships. We will call it the ‘governing and resistance’ frame. On the one hand, many studies focus on the modes of governing through which the state attempt to impose, shape, or regulate particular agricultural production systems or ways to manage nature by rural populations. These studies point to how the state redefines forms of resource use and access, either by advancing certain conceptualisations and discourses over what nature, agriculture, and rural people are and should be or, more forcefully, by modifying rules of use and access to resources, sometimes with great harm to local actors (Asher and Ojeda, 2009; Martinez-Reyes, 2014). On the other hand, as these interventions often lead to exclusions, scholars also analyse how local actors or communities respond, with several studies emphasising ensuing resistance and conflicts (Birkenholtz, 2016; Rocheleau, 2015). Analysis of state–peasant relations might be also found in recent studies on ‘governmentality’ that analyse how the state renders rural subjects governable (Córdoba et al., 2014; Li, 2007). Studies on governmentality can also be linked to a second view that identifies subjects as deploying complex forms of political agency in relation to state interventions. This second view explores how states might impose modernisation ideas or agendas on rural populations and how local people might resist them, but also argues to go beyond the coercion/domination and resistance dualism, as this does not cover the full complexity of state–peasant relations in specific material and economic contexts (Knight, 1994).

In order to rethink the ‘governing and resistance’ frame, we propose to analyse the political dimension of the biofuel expansion through the concept of hegemony. Hegemony in this study is not another word for top-down control, but instead refers to the process by which different classes hold on to a particular project advanced by a ruling class, located within the state, without necessarily being coerced. We use the concept of hegemony as an entry point to the analysis of local political dynamics involved in a case in Chiapas, in which producers showed great interest in engaging in oil palm and jatropha production. We argue that the concept of hegemony helps us to understand why a ‘state project’, such as planting oil palm in Chiapas, has apparently become ‘common sense’ among part of the rural classes—in this case, in the southern Lacandon rainforest. Rather than focusing on the construction of hegemony by analysing state attempts to foster the use of a particular crop or agricultural technology (e.g., Newell, 2009; Pichler, 2015), this article describes the political actions of local actors, including both local producers and their organisations, towards the state. It attempts to understand how consent to biofuels was locally advanced and reproduced.

Data were collected through 133 semi-structured interviews with government officials (8), private sector actors (4), leaders of organisations (31), oil palm (33) and jatropha smallholder producers (47, out of whom 13 were awaiting seedlings at the time of interview), and other local producers and key informants in *ejidos* (10) (Table 1 and Fig. 1). In Mexico, *ejidos* broadly refers to peasant villages having access to non-fully liberalised land in which collective forms of decision making still occur to some extent (Assies, 2007). The category ‘leaders of organisations’ included ‘regional leaders’—the leadership of rural organisations of *ejido* biofuel crop producers and of other regional organisations of past importance in the region—and ‘local leaders’—biofuel producers elected or appointed as representatives of biofuel organisations at the

community level. Interviews with regional and local leaders delved into the dynamics of local and regional production, the history and functioning of rural organisations in the region, and the role that organisations play in the responses to state development interventions. Questions for biofuel producers focused on economic and productive aspects of land use, production practices in biofuel cultivation, and their perspectives on organisational matters. We also conducted a one-day workshop with jatropha producers on 20 January 2012 in Zamora Pico de Oro (Supplementary Material A). Fieldwork was spread over 14 months between 2011 and 2016, and during this period, 115 entries were recorded on the field observation log. We also undertook archival research, collecting 84 relevant press releases by the Chiapas government, as well as 87 relevant contemporary and historical documents collected online, at Chiapas’ state archives, and from leaders’ personal archives.

The next section introduces the concept of hegemony and its potential contribution to the field of political ecology. The second section describes the context of the study region and why producers considered biofuel crops as an option. The third section analyses how, why, and by whom biofuels were promoted in the southern Lacandon rainforest. Subsequently, we address the intertwining of interventions that support jatropha and oil palm with the construction of hegemony, elucidating the fact that project failures do not necessarily threaten the political order. This article concludes by discussing how development projects, such as biofuel expansions, are better understood as processes not only imposed from above, but also reconstructed from below and in connection with evolving state–peasant relations. Our study points to the need for political ecology to move away from theories of power and hegemony overdetermined by domination to more balanced approaches for which particular forms of Gramsci analysis offer a way forward.

2. Political ecology, the state, and local politics

In their quest to understand the ‘chains of explanations’ or ‘webs of relation’ linking the local use of resources to extra-local processes and actors, many political ecologists turned their gaze towards the state and related local politics. Scholars within this tradition found how local environmental problems or conflicts were linked to policies, narratives, or even scientific accounts emerging from particular state agencies and actors. Soil degradation and forest conflicts were explainable if dis- possession and resource control related to state interventions—sometimes going back to colonial times—were taken into consideration. Local environmental problems were political and implied power disputes over who owned natural resources, who accessed them, and who shaped the conceptions of how resources were being transformed with the state often playing a crucial role (Holmes, 2014; Zimmerer, 1993). The state and its politics were, implicitly, a reference point in political ecology from the start. Scholars, particularly early ones, focused on ‘marginal’ subjects and ‘marginal’ sites, but this begs the question: marginal in relation to what? The answer is, marginal in relation to global markets and global capital as in Miskito’s coast in Nicaragua (Nietschmann, 1973), but also, as Robertson argues (2015, p. 458), marginal to state power. As the analysis of the state and power has evolved, political ecology has also changed.

In-line with wider shifts in social science, conceptions of the state in political ecology as a confined autonomous entity have increasingly given way to ideas of the state and state politics as relational. This perspective calls into question conceptualisations of the state as necessarily at odds with local actors putting forward alternative readings of the state as an arena of struggle in which different actors meet, negotiate, and collide. Rather than being external, the state is considered to be ‘highly porous to both the influences of capital and local producer communities, but also natural objects like trees, fields, and cattle’ (Robbins, 2008, p. 209). While depiction of the state as ‘highly porous’ is probably an overstatement, analyses of local politics in political ecology have gained depth and nuance. Relational thinking has opened

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