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The choreography of sacrifice: Market environmentalism, biopolitics and environmental damage

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ABSTRACT

Market environmentalism, and, arguably its exemplar carbon forestry, has been engaged within human and economic geography by drawing from the Marxist tradition, and to a lesser extent, utilising post-structuralist lines of enquiry. A direct focus on how practices and transformations related to carbon forestry could be construed as 'sacrifical', however, is lacking. This article seeks to remedy this by attending to the biopolitics of climate security discourse and interventions as they localise in an 'assemblage of market environmentalism' in Uganda. It charts a *choreography of sacrifice* that emerges under a neoliberal environmentality within this entity, namely, where the activities and 'moves' of both state and non-state actors constitute the grounds for forms of both direct and circuitous bio-cultural sacrifice. Here both surplus populations of people, the non-commercial component of Ugandan forestry, and those forest areas which are not amenable to having 'nature pay for itself' through carbon sequestration, are written off through direct violence and degradation, on the one hand, and through the naturalisation of broader processes of deforestation, on the other.

1. Introduction

Scholars of market environmentalism – which relates to the extension of market logics and institutions to the governance of 'nature' and the environment (Bakker, 2005; Castree, 2008) – critique its associated transformations in conservation and land governance for the way in which they sit on a continuum with colonial practices (Barrett et al., 2014), and contend that capital is the driving force behind contemporary changes to varied socionatures. Certainly it is essential to approach new transformations in conservation, with regard to the environment (variously defined) and degradation, through the lens of dialectical materialism, and here political ecologists, including Harvey (2014), focus not on an external nature with which capitalism clashes and undercuts, but on the ecosystem and ecology of capitalism itself, as it localises itself in particular places; most epically portrayed through Burtynsky's stunning film 'Manufactured Landscapes' (Baichwal and Burtynsky, 2007). This is, of course, best understood though Smith (1996), who highlights the *production of nature*, and through analyses of the ways in which capital (re)inscribes new neoliberal natures (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004).

Nevertheless, accounts which under-emphasise poststructuralist insights are limited. While over-accumulated capital has in large part driven investments in terrestrial capital, especially in Africa since the so called economic crisis of 2008, it is clear that it is not exclusively a crisis of over-accumulation that underpins the spatial fix of carbon forestry, if it can be considered as such.[1] Neither does capital 'have all the moves' (Castree, 2008). Within the context of ecological crisis and climate change, we have also seen a crisis of legitimation for capital, which must engender its own form of 'environmental fix'; a double movement, embodied in market environmentalism, which attempts to securitise the 'environment' (Dalby, 2002; Trombetta, 2008) and render climate change governable (Oels, 2005).

Within Marxist geography the discussion of limits to be internalised and boundaries to be overcome presents us with a key opening to appreciate how capitalism attempts to deal with environmental externalities and climate change; through, for instance, the establishment of carbon markets and the 'making' and fetishisation of carbon itself as a commodity (Bridge, 2011). Here purported growing 'scarcity' of 'environmental services' increases the demand for the value provided by natural resources, which is captured and quantified through pricing mechanisms. Some of the 'green commodities' that have emerged in such ways include carbon and biodiversity offsets, biofuels, ecotourism

[1] Following Harvey, the reliance on carbon forestry offsetting as the primary formal international mitigation measure could be considered a faltering attempt to externalise, or spatially 'fix' the crisis by moving it around geographically.

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retreats and water catchment services, and these have their value realised in tandem with our recognition of the deleterious consequences of global environmental change (Sullivan, 2013). As arguably the exemplar of market environmentalism, carbon forestry has been described as a fetishised, unfinishable calculative practice (Lohman, 2009), a contemporary form of accumulation by dispossession (as Bumpus and Man (2011) put it 'accumulation by decarbonisation'); or as 'carbon colonialism' (Lyons and Westoby, 2014). Authors have shown how carbon forestry is complicit in processes of marginalisation and exclusion (Grainger and Geary, 2011), how it re-enforces hard edged 'fortress conservation' (Brockington, 2002), and articulates with forms of Grabbing Green (Fairhead et al., 2012).

However, purely Marxist critiques of these 'commodities' are negligent of the connections between new practices and discourses in shaping the actions of both state and non-state, human and non-human actors, and the way in which these involve reterritorialisations and deterritorialisations which produce distinctly new 'smooth' spaces for the application of calculative practice. The application of post-structuralist lenses are vital to understand the practices and discourses which come together in securitising climate change, and in constructing a 'world ripe for intervention' (Li, 2005). Here the focus is on practices which render climate change governable (Oels, 2005) in a form where market approaches to environmental regulation become a more dominant part of governance strategy (Anderson and Leal, 2001). Yet the deployment of the concept of sacrifice has been relatively limited in this literature, and thus in this paper I argue for the relevance of biopolitics in discerning the specificity of a *choreography of sacrifice*, pertaining to market environmentalism and how it can be socially and environmentally sacrificial.

According to Girard's 'Violence and the Sacred' (1977) sacrifice has two aspects: firstly it establishes the space and boundaries of a community and the symbolic distinctions regulating relations, and it frees the community from violence or threat (perceived or actual). Secondly it does this by expelling something internal to the community, in order to create or maintain the borders of the community and its symbolic distinctions (1977, p. 235). In this instance the 'community' to be securitised pertains to global state-capitalist system, with its locus on the Global North, and the symbolic distinctions regulating relations with the environment derive from market mechanisms, qua market environmentalism, which create their own forms of social and environmental damage, read here as sacrificial, in the Global South. I explore this by first discussing the concepts of sacrifice and sacrifice zones, in order to apply them to the theorisation of market environmentalism. I then proceed to describe a specific example of the localisation of market environmentalism in Uganda, depicting its manifestation as a transnational *assemblage* (see Nel, 2014) which emerges with the inception of carbon forestry and the neoliberalisation of the country's forestry sector. To do so I draw from fieldwork conducted in 2012, comprising extensive interviews with both state and non-state actors, and site visits to multiple projects and forest reserves, which I took as proxies to understand the dynamics affecting the 'forest estate' more broadly in Uganda, and the emergence of market environmentalism as a new, heterogeneous governmental form (the assemblage described) which sets the stage for sacrifice.

While assemblage approaches have come to be recognised as key to understanding contemporary valuations of nature and their diverse outcomes (Larner, 2011), with more specificity than the terms apparatus or entanglement (Bracking et al., 2014), I do not describe the assemblage itself as sacrificial. This is because assemblages, as unsettled, extended social forms, always contain the potential to be 'other'. The key intervention of the paper then is to deploy the concept of *choreography* to describe how a series of neoliberalising "moves" deployed *within* the assemblage can point to social and environmental sacrifice in both direct and circuitous ways. To be more specific, while certain intentional moves within the constructed reality of market environmentalism may be choreographed and indeed come to pass, the final *performance* of actually existing carbon forestry and market environmentalism, may also include missteps, pernicious surprises and circuitous consequences. Conceptualised in this way the theorisation of choreography and performance, tied to the deployment of assemblage – as a heuristic tool to understand complex interactions – adds nuance to place based understandings of the way that market environmentalism localises. In doing so it enables us to highlight those social and environmental sacrifices, obtaining through the discourses, practices and activities of different actors in pursuit of a particular forms of climate security and the maximisation of timber production, and does so without essentialising the resulting formation, or precluding space for resistances and alternatives.

1.1. Sacrifice, biopolitics and nature

In the first instance, there is an apparent connection between Market environmentalism, engendered here in Ugandan forestry, biopower (drawing from Foucault's conception of capacity of governmental interventions to 'make live' and 'let die'), and the concept of sacrifice and 'sacrifice zones'. Cavanagh (2014) argues for the application of Foucault and a more than human revision of his thinking to examine the shifting terrain of biopower in the context of global environmental change. This requires moving beyond Foucault's reflections on Stalinism and Nazism, to construe a biopolitics of environment and development that looks at asymmetric exposures, as well as the vulnerabilities of various populations to the socio-ecological consequences of global environmental change (idem). Such a biopolitical perspective takes seriously what forms of life states and development institutions can and should support through intervention, and what others may be left to die. With regards to the latter, conceptions of sacrifice (Biermann and Pattberg, 2012) are beginning to gain traction within the discipline of Geography (Brownlow, forthcoming). These accounts critically analyse modes of sacrifice that go beyond those perpetrated by sovereign nation-states. They consider sacrifices made by new bodies and new socio-natural assemblages, and interrogate the way interventions by capital and the state produce new political subjects, and engage with the biopolitical manipulation of populations of both human and non-humans. Mark Halsey's (2006) article Deleuze and Environmental Damage, for instance, explores a complex case study of state-sanctioned, industrial tree-harvesting in Australia's Goolengook forest block. Instead of 'progressive forest management', the research outlines a devastating series of discursive events that name, zone, and plot the forest into reductive grids of recoverable wood, writing off the nameless remainder as dispensable waste, thereby unveiling the damage such systematic blockage inflicts on the forest (Halsey, 2006).

More specifically, the idea of sacrifice zones points to the spatial and geographical manifestations of social and environmental damages, as well as to alternative natures that are rendered inaccessible by capital, that are therefore obfuscated within security discourses. Such places are "written off for environmental destruction in the name of a higher purpose, such as the national interest" (Scott, 2010, p. 31). The term was initially applied during the Cold War, by the United States government and military officials, to describe such territories as Bikini atoll, which were forever alienated in the wake of nuclear testing and production. A sacrifice zone then, in a definition derived from Lerner (2010) and Hooks and Smith (2004), corresponds to a political and economic – and I would add ecological – device, which is 'part and parcel' of an