



Contesting forest neoliberalization: Recombinant geographies of ‘illegal’ logging in the Balkans



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ABSTRACT

Although the political and economic strategies through which forests have become targets for the expansion and deepening of neoliberal agendas are relatively well researched, comparatively less is known about the reflections of such dynamics at the level of everyday life within communities and households. This is particularly true in the post-communist states of Southeastern Europe (SEE), which have seen the transformation of formerly centralized and hierarchical integrated monopolies in the management of forest resources into a myriad of diverse commercial enterprises outside the control of the state. With the aid of on-site research undertaken in Macedonia, therefore, this paper investigates the neoliberalization of the Balkan forestry sector within the context of illegal logging practices. The experiences and aspirations of individuals implicated in such activities are used as a basis for interrogating the privatization and marketization of forest resources, and the rise of corruption. The broader purpose of the paper is to explore the ‘recombinant’ (Stark, 1996) nature of capitalism in this part of the world, thanks to which neoliberalism is ‘challenged and changed by its encounter with nature’ (Duffy and Moore, 2010).

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Introduction

Forest resources are gaining growing importance across the world, primarily in the context of climate change mitigation and adaptation, and as a tool for poverty alleviation. At the same time, forests have become targets for the expansion and deepening of neoliberal economic and political agendas. The relationship between neoliberalism and forest governance at the community level, however, remains relatively marginalized within the academic literature. This is despite the fact that social scientists have repeatedly insisted that scholarship on neoliberalism needs to make the connections between top-down projects and everyday life (Barnett, 2005). There is a pronounced need to understand the role of forest management in the rise of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ – commonly termed ‘neoliberalization’ – in the micro-level implementation of forest policies (also see Munck, 2005; Bakker, 2010; Peck et al., 2010; Castree, 2011; Pokorny et al., 2012).

The inadequate understanding of everyday articulations of forest neoliberalization is particularly felt in regions undergoing rapid dynamics of socio-economic and technological change. Such is the case with the post-communist states of Southeastern Europe (SEE, also known as ‘the Balkans’), which have seen the extensive entry

of neoliberal economic practices in the management of the forestry sector. In most cases, the formerly centralized, hierarchical, vertically and horizontally integrated monopolies responsible for the management of forest resources in this part of the world have been transformed into a myriad of diverse commercial enterprises outside the control of the state (Stahl, 2010a). However, the restructuring process has exerted a major impact on the livelihoods of local populations whose day-to-day existence is highly linked with forest governance. In part, this is due to the fact that forests account for more than 40% of the total landmass of some SEE states, while representing a valuable economic resource in economically marginal regions.

One of the consequences of the neoliberalization of the forestry sector – and the subsequent curtailment of everyday informal economic practices in this domain – has been the widespread rise of ‘illegal’ logging. For the purpose of this paper, I understand ‘illegal logging’ to mean the removal of wood in contravention of the relevant regulatory acts applying to the territory where such a practice is undertaken, while noting that the academic literature has frequently challenged the notion that a single legality around natural resource exploitation exists in the articulation of everyday life (Casson and Obidzinski, 2002; Brown, 2006). Understood in the narrow legalistic sense at least, illegal logging is particularly common in SEE, to the extent that in some instances it has even been accompanied by local armed conflicts that have been reported in

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the local media (Kanal5, 2005; Inpres, 2009; Nova Makedonija, 2011). The expansion of clandestine forest exploitation – in its multiple guises and forms – has been intensified by the increase of energy prices in the region, as a result of which growing numbers of households have been forced to rely on illegally supplied fuelwood in order to maintain thermal comfort in the home (Buzar, 2007). Understanding the political economy of illegal logging, as well as the discourses and institutions that frame it, can therefore provide important insights into the micro-scale performance of neoliberal policies in the management of natural resources (Stahl, 2010a).

Using interviews¹ and secondary data undertaken in the Republic of Macedonia – a country that occupies the centre of the Balkan region and is thus emblematic of wider conditions in the area (see Buzar, 2007) – this paper explores the neoliberalization of the forestry sector in the context of illegal logging practices during post-communism. The opinions and aspirations of individuals – forestry officials, experts, local people, NGO activists – affected by, and implicated in such activities are used as a basis for interrogating the different ways in which the privatization and marketization of forest resources have been enmeshed in the 'articulation of multiple resource extractive processes, which the state has been incapable of entirely capturing within its regulatory vision' (Staddon, 2009, p. 173). In a broader sense, I am interested to know how and to what extent neoliberalism is 'challenged and changed by its encounter with nature' (Duffy and Moore, 2010), in the context of local forestry management. Inspired by Stark (1996) and Watts (1998), I rely on the notion of 'recombinant capitalism' to explore the institutional context of forestry governance, while investigating how neoliberalism has been implicated in dynamics of privatization, corruption and contract outsourcing.

The paper commences with a brief exploration of some of the main academic debates on the neoliberalization of nature and forestry more generally. I then move on to the ramification of these processes for post-communist forest policies in the Balkans. Having overviewed the recent restructuring of the forestry sector in the Republic of Macedonia, the paper provides an account of the institutional processes of forest neoliberalization by examining the multiple ways in which 'market' relations have entered the domain. The discussion then moves onto perceptions of the constitutive dynamics of corruption – whose intensification, it can be argued, is a specific by-product of recent reforms in the sector – as well as the components and implications of illegal logging, whose emergence in post-communism is seen as a practice of contestation and resistance towards the path chosen by the state in restructuring the forestry sector. The conclusion of the paper highlights, *inter alia*, the diverse and multi-sited economies (Stenning et al., 2010) associated with neoliberal forest management policies in the Balkans.

Nature, neoliberalism and forestry: Micro-level processes matter

To date, the neoliberalization of nature – sometimes termed 'green neoliberalization', 'market environmentalism' or 'environmental marketization' – has mainly been explored from the disciplinary viewpoints of political ecology, geography and environmental economics (Bakker, 2004; Liverman, 2004; McCarthy, 2004; Peck, 2004; McCarthy, 2005, 2006; Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Castree, 2008a, 2008b; Pinkerton et al., 2008; Fletcher,

2010; Maxwell, 2011). Many of these approaches tend to conceptualize the relationship between neoliberalization processes, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, as governed by a distinct set of interactions between economic and political processes and the biophysical world. The emergence of multiple 'socio-natures' stemming from this association has been examined in a wide range of thematic contexts, including tourism (Duffy, 2008; Duffy and Moore, 2010), forestry (McCarthy, 2005, 2006), agriculture (Mutersbaugh, 2003, 2005), water management (Bakker, 2003; Perreault, 2005; Furlong, 2010), biodiversity (Staddon and Cellarius, 2002) and ecosystem management and conservation (Robertson, 2004; Igoe and Brockington, 2007). However, it is sometimes emphasized that a more nuanced understanding of the role of neoliberalization in producing socio-natures is necessary (Bakker, 2010). This would allow the debate to move away from the view that nature is a non-human resource that can be considered a 'primary commodity' while giving a more prominent voice to, *inter alia*, 'cyborg' and 'hybrid' socio-natures (Bakker, 2010).

Castree (2008a) suggests that attempts for the neoliberalization of nature in capitalist societies can be seen as 'environmental fixes', which entail the institution of a standardized set of measurements and practices – privatization, marketization and capital accumulation – through the conservation, exposure or degradation of natural resources and ecosystems. He also points out that some 'fixes' involve the relegation of state responsibilities to the private sector and/or civil society, by 'hollowing out' the role of the state, or taking a 'minimal state' attitude (Castree, 2008a, p. 149). This chimes in with Bakker's (2003) argument that the state's attempt to off-load its responsibilities as the owner or manager of natural resources and ecosystem services can be understood as 'state failure'. According to her, the existence of such developments means that governments are financially and administratively incapable of delivering goods and services at a price and standard acceptable to their citizens. However, the same author also points out that the 'minimal state' stance is a myth, since governments are rarely 'neutral' in relation to the marketization of nature (Bakker, 2003, 2007). It should also be pointed out that although the neoliberalization of nature is often perceived as an environmental hindrance and disadvantage for marginalized populations (Gibson and Koontz, 1998; Mutersbaugh, 2003, 2005; McCarthy, 2004, 2005; Heynen and Robbins, 2005), recent studies reveal that this is not always the case (Bakker, 2004, 2010; McCarthy, 2006; Castree, 2011).

Such findings have been accompanied by attempts to distinguish between 'roll-out' and 'roll-back' neoliberalism in environmental governance. While the former is mainly used in the context of more aggressive and interventionist attempts to marketize the regulation of environmental policies and practices, the latter offers a framework to capture policy attempts associated with the withdrawal of state intervention so as to promote 'market rule', privatization and free trade (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Lockie and Higgins, 2007). Thus, Pinkerton et al. (2008) argue that roll-back neoliberalism 'affords political space for the assertion of rights and the use of strategies and tools to build co-management' (p. 353). They emphasize, however, that the expansion of such possibilities is deeply embedded in local cultural and regulatory contexts. This chimes in with Roth and Dressler's (2012) insistence on the importance of place in the articulation of neoliberal nature conservation policies. Having introduced a set of papers focused on the 'history, practice and contradictory outcomes of market-oriented conservation' (p. 365), they outline some of the ways in which 'the particularities of place disrupt the implementation of new governance models' (Roth and Dressler, 2012). This includes local people's contestation of neoliberal conservation approaches, as well as the excessive levels of state intervention and policy effort needed for the functioning of such measures (Roth and

¹ A total of 25 interviews with experts, decision-makers, employees of forestry companies and state agencies, as well as households involved in illegal logging in the Eastern part of Macedonia, were undertaken during April 2011. Not all interviews have been cited here, and many institutional affiliations and all names have been left out in order to ensure confidentiality.

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