



Grievances, agency and the absence of conflict: The new Suzano pulp investment in the Eastern Amazon[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In November 2013, Suzano Papel e Celulose, a Brazilian paper company, is projected to inaugurate the world's largest pulp mill in Imperatriz in the remote state of Maranhão, Eastern Amazon. This investment will further consolidate Brazil's position as the leading exporter of wood-pulp coming from vast, corporate-controlled industrial plantations. These inland forestry investments are a feature of the second wave of large pulp projects, extending inland from the best lands in the coastal belt via accessible rivers and railroad networks. This globally significant inland expansion has been poorly studied, if at all. No publications exist on this Suzano pulp project. Empirically, this article provides a baseline study on the political economic dynamics.

The case is highly relevant for conflict theory. Generally, industrial tree plantation expansion has boosted grievances, but the resistance and conflicts have varied depending on the social actors' agency. In comparison to the high-intensity conflicts between the rural social movements such as the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) and the pulp companies in most other new investments, there has been a rare absence of conflict in this case, as no movement has seized on local grievances. Conflicts cannot be studied in-depth by focusing only on conflict cases. Absence-cases open up an opportunity to revisit the question why conflicts arise. An analysis of this case allows an empirically rooted theoretical discussion on conflict causalities, which can answer several vexing questions in the study of conflicts. A new and generally applicable typology of different types of grievances is offered, and the grievances' causal relation to conflicts is examined. The importance of political dynamics and inter-personal relations in investment conflicts is emphasized. The way culture influences conflict dynamics is pondered upon by ethnography of the Brazilian conflict culture, where personal relations are more relevant in explaining conflict escalation than in the political systems with a stronger (impersonal) rule of law. The role of third parties such as other industries in the investment area is discussed. A qualitative comparative analysis of the major pulp project conflicts and their causes in Latin America is offered. Mobilization and thus conflict causality is explainable only when taking into account the types of grievances and the local, inter-personal, and organizational (state-business-movement) relations by which these are remediated and negotiated.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Conflicts over pulpwood plantation lands and conflict causalities

The increased demand for commodities including timber has caused growing socio-environmental pressure across the globe (Borras et al., 2011). An illustrative example of this dynamic is the march of new large-scale pulp projects deeper into Latin America (e.g. Brazilian inland, Uruguayan pampas, and Chilean cordilleras). As a consequence of pulp expansion, traditional rural and ecological mosaics have been converted into sources of transnational, single commodity extraction. In many Latin American pulp projects, community activists have seized on local grievances fuelled by already incurred or expected socio-

environmental damages, creating conflicts (Kröger, 2011, 2012, in press). Yet this has not happened everywhere.

Endowments, the investment area's geographic position or grievances are not sufficient conditions to explain conflict, as there are numerous cases across the world, also in global peripheries, with extreme damage levels and high grievances that do not have conflicts (such as the one studied here).¹ To make causal claims on what

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¹ For example, Özkaynak et al. (2012) study on mining conflicts across the world illustrates that although a rough correlation between e.g. water resource damage and conflict exists, similar grievances exist in both low and high-level conflicts, leaving conflict-cause as a puzzle. Gritten et al. (2013–this issue) argue by a quantitative analysis of conflict representation in the internet in English that conflicts would be located mostly in global resource peripheries. This does not reveal conflict causes and does not correspond to actual conflict spread, which should be verified by actual studies. A qualitative comparative analysis based on in-depth field research on actual conflicts and local politics, provided here, can open up the causalities and test the claims of correlation-studies relying on secondary data.

creates conflicts requires the study of social relations in particular political-cultural contexts, including comparisons to non-conflict cases. The striking absence of conflict in Suzano's new pulp investment in Brazil's Western Maranhão offers a possibility for re-examining the reasons for the variance in conflicts (or their absence). To look deep into conflict, one must look even deeper into non-conflict situations.

The article is of considerable interest in the context of increasing contestations and conflicts in various parts of the world between local communities, corporate actors and the state over the control and management of natural resources (White et al., 2012). The general reasons for state/industry–local community conflicts have been widely discussed, particularly within political economy and ecology (Peluso and Watts, 2001; Martínez-Alier, 2002; Peet et al., 2010). However, conflict absence has not been studied. A Scopus search (5 February 2013) for publications mentioning “absence of conflict” with “land” or “forest” found no results; a search for “absence of conflict” and “resource” resulted in six articles, none of which engaged in studying the dilemma of conflict absence.

Previous studies on tree plantation conflicts have mapped the correlations between grievances and conflict (e.g. Gerber, 2010), but much more study is needed on the causal chain leading to mobilization and conflict escalation.² The causal chain from grievance to protest is not automatic, but embedded in socio-political relations. These must be pruned to be able to show causality. This argument, developed in the article, can add more depth to the explanation of all kinds of conflicts.

Research material was collected through fieldwork in Latin America between 2004 and 2011 in most of the new pulp investment areas (see Kröger, 2011, 2012, *in press* for details about data and methods). Ethnography and participant observation in the Eastern Amazon regarding the new Suzano project was conducted in early 2011, with 35 semi-structured interviews of key actors in Portuguese (ranging in length from 1 h to long sessions on several days, average length 2.5 h), including representatives of local communities, movements, intellectuals, state actors, and company directors.³ A case study approach was adopted, using the snowball sampling method and triangulation.⁴ A systematic qualitative comparative analysis (see Ragin, 1987; Kröger, 2011 for methodological discussion) of this case data to that collected on other pulp conflicts in Latin America (in Kröger, 2011, 2012, *in press*; Kröger and Nylund, 2012; Nylund and Kröger, 2012) guided the theory foundation and analysis.

1.2. Objective

Understanding the ever-more urgent phenomenon of industrial forestry conflicts (or their absence) requires analysis of the political processes whereby land use is determined. Earlier research has shown that local investment-level dynamics have to be pruned in order to understand how outcomes are defined: global or national-levels, where the initial decisions are made, do not determine the subsequent trajectory (Hall, 2002; Kröger, 2011, *in press*).

² Conflicts have been found to correlate foremost with corporate land enclosure leading to displacement (e.g. Gerber, 2010) and environmental transformations caused to locals by investments (e.g. Hall, 2002). The case at hand shows that even in the presence of these grievances, agrarian conflict does not necessarily occur or escalate.

³ A social movement consists of a sustained challenge to powerholders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those powerholders by means of repeated public displays of that population's numbers, commitment, unity, and worthiness' (Tilly, 1994: 7).

⁴ Although a thorough study was done, carefully selecting a representative mix of key actors, it is possible the information retrieved is limited in some aspects; also, most interviews were with movement or institutional leaders, not ordinary people. Some of those interviewed may also have been careful with their wordings, as they knew the results would possibly be published and read by Suzano and others, with whom they had real stakes at play.

The surprising absence of conflict related to eucalyptus plantation expansion, exposed while interviewing Suzano stakeholders one by one, suggested that what was theoretically interesting in this case was to study 1) why there were no major conflicts, and 2) how they had thus far been avoided. All possible alternative explanations had to be assessed. This included the analysis of grievances, cultural context, and the dynamics around previous land-use projects in the socio-political context where the investment was located. To explain the role of particular actors and their doings in relation to others required analyzing if there was active agency on the part of some individual to prevent conflicts from arising, agency with substantial capacity to influence these dynamics.

I will first discuss the causal relationships between grievances and mobilization, and then the role of movement–state–industry dynamics in conflicts. Next, a regional development history sheds light on the different kinds of grievances Big Pulp in Imperatriz region has boosted, and which not. The role of inter-personal relations and the cultural context are then analyzed to explain more in-depth the surprisingly non-conflictive character of the project's agrarian relations. The concluding sections summarize the findings.

1.3. Theory

1.3.1. Forestry conflicts, agency, culture and power relations

What is a conflict? It is useful to distinguish conflicts by their intensity, both for methodological and conflict resolution purposes. A recent large study attempting to compare global mining conflicts for example divides these into three levels: low-level conflicts (some local organizing); medium (street protests or other visible mobilization); high (deaths, violence, or arrests) (Özkaynak et al., 2012). This categorization is adapted here.

Earlier forest policy research has illustrated conflicts can be visible or invisible (Hubo and Krott, 2013–this issue). The visibility depends on the recognition and communication of an issue as a conflict, not on the “objective” situation itself (Hubo and Krott, 2012). Practically anything can be defined as a conflict. In this sense, conflicts exist everywhere all the time, power struggles being omnipresent. If an actor group wishes to and manages to transform an issue into a contentious one, conflict becomes visible. Thus, conflict studies are studies about the use (and non-use) of resistance strategies that shape the policy agenda and process (Kröger, *in press*).⁵ A central question arises: why do actor groups decide not to communicate a situation as a conflict? Culture and political economic relations play key roles.

Hellström (2001) has approached forestry conflicts by seeing them as cultural products of a given country. The presupposition taken in this ‘conflict culture’-approach is that every culture has a tendency to produce particular types of conflicts, and an inclination to react into these in a particular manner (Hellström, 2001). The notion is helpful in examining the role of local culture in conflict causalities. DaMatta (1992: 139), a renowned anthropologist of Brazil, has argued that in Brazil ‘there is a long road to travel between the existence of a crisis and its recognition.’ Conflicts are typically not seen as productive feedback, by which to correct policy, but as ‘omens of the end of the world, as signs of unbearable failure,’ this cultural valuation curbing conflict recognition. So cultural variations in conflict dynamics have to be taken into account.

Power relations within the political economy also influence conflicts. Particularly those defending the dominant economic interests do not typically want conflict visibility: investors and the general

⁵ This research agenda, adopted here, approaches conflicts non-normatively, not attempting to resolve them or making value judgments on their impacts. The more common approach in conflict studies is to recognize conflicts so as to resolve them (Glasl, 1999; Druckman, 2005). In forestry, conflict resolution and management are seen as serving the goal of supporting public interests by making policies more balanced, taking into consideration differing interests such as conservation and economic use of forests (e.g. Hubo and Krott, 2012).

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