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Commentary

Silencing Agency in Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) by Essentializing a Neoliberal 'Monster' Into Being: A Response to Fletcher & Büscher's 'PES Conceit'

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary we respond to Fletcher and Büscher's (2017) recent article in this journal on Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) as neoliberal 'conceit'. The authors claim that focusing attention on the micro-politics of PES design and implementation fails to expose an underlying neoliberal governmentality, and therefore only reinforces neoliberal capitalism as both the problem and solution of ecological crises. In response, we argue that a focus on the actions of local actors is *key* to understanding how and why such governmentality fails or succeeds in performing as theorized. Grand generalizations fixated on a particular hegemonic and neoliberal PES ontology overlook how actors intertwine theory and practice in ways which cannot be explained by a dominant structural theory. Such generalizations risk obscuring the complexity and situational history, practice and scale of the processes involved. Rather than relegating variegated and hybrid forms of what actually emerges from PES interventions as neoliberal conceit, we argue that an actor-oriented, 'weak theory' approach permits PES praxis to inform knowledge generation. This would open up a more inclusive and politically engaging space for thinking about and realizing political change.

1. Introduction

In a recent contribution to this journal, Robert Fletcher and Bram Büscher (henceforth: F & B) (2017) call for a more detailed discussion of neoliberalism in ongoing debates on Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES). An overly-simplistic understanding of neoliberalism, they say, has led to redirected and unhelpful attention to the variegated and seemingly non-neoliberal processes and outcomes of PES implementation in specific places (e.g. McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; McElwee, 2012; Shapiro-Garza, 2013a; Van Hecken et al., 2015a,b), while minimizing or neglecting the consequences of an "overarching effort to advance a more general programme of neoliberal environmental governance" (p.228). According to F & B, conceptualizing PES in more explicitly defined neoliberal terms would look beyond modes of implementation and outcomes, and refocus the discussion on how PES should "be considered an important element of a global program to spread neoliberalism as a particular rationality and mode of capital accumulation" (p.224). They claim that this would more clearly highlight 'the PES conceit', namely "that the approach implicitly accepts neoliberal capitalism as both the problem *and* the solution to the ecological crisis" (p.224, emphasis in the original).

As critical scholars examining PES, we welcome this call for a more explicit critical debate on the ideologies and power structures underlying PES (see also Kolinjivadi et al., 2017a,b; Van Hecken et al., 2015a). We also recognize that the framing of mainstream PES as "paradigmatic of a more general neoliberal environmental governance approach writ large" (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:227) can serve as a heuristic to situate PES, connect it to more structural dynamics, and draw attention to the inequities these initiatives might trigger (Büscher, 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012; McAfee, 2012). F & B's approach also looks beyond the material outcomes of PES by stressing that, irrespective of actual commodification or marketization processes taking place, PES could still promote more nuanced forms of neoliberalization, for example by sensitising communities and conservation practitioners to

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neoliberal ideals, and by side-lining social concerns. Finally, from a strategic (and scholarly activist) perspective, F & B's neoliberal framing also engenders an attractive and relatively straightforward call to arms to oppose these mechanisms, enabling new forms of translocal political solidarity and strategically targeted resistance[1] (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

However, in this commentary, we emphasize the limitations of the PES "approach as a whole" as an ideological neoliberal project (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:224) and we challenge the implied rejection of an actor-oriented approach in studies of PES and neoliberal conservation. We argue that grand generalizations of PES - often pivoting around a 'Wunderian' PES ontology (Wunder, 2005, 2015) underpinned by neoliberal philosophy - all too often overlook alternative relationalities that actors mobilize to make sense of PES. A 'PES conceit' approach risks imbuing and dismissing this complexity through a wholesale relegation of PES as hegemonic neoliberalism, thereby obscuring the situational history, practice and scale of the processes involved (Barnett, 2005; Larner, 2003; Peluso, 2012), and silencing the agency of the related actors. Paradoxically, this position risks keeping the 'neoliberal monster' alive - the very one we try to escape from.

Inspired by feminist and poststructuralist scholars' work on decolonized epistemologies (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2004), we believe that the tendency towards building a neoliberal 'monster' can never be forcibly stopped, but can only fail to manifest or materialize by placing greater attention on entangled social-ecological contexts and the adaptations they engender. We hold that socio-economic and scientific theories, and the epistemic communities that translate such theories into practice, tend to construct or 'perform' the realities we are examining (Kolinjivadi et al., 2017b). Therein lies our main concern with F & B's 'PES conceit'; by insisting on viewing PES through a singular theoretical lens we risk strengthening the overgeneralized monolith of neoliberalism itself. We claim that, instead, we should be attentive to diverse theory-practice entanglements, rendered invisible or dismissed as utopian by an overreliance on hegemonic Western- and capital-centric epistemologies. The key question for understanding PES in its many configurations is not whether PES is neoliberal or not, but rather *how* and *why* different actors interpret and shape PES in response to the failure to make human-nature relationships perform as ex ante theorized. In other words, an actor-oriented approach does not obscure underlying governmentalities, but helps to understand how such governmentalities succeed or fail.

In this commentary we aim for middle-ground in the PES debate by responding to F & B in relation to the so-called structure-agency divide, and contribute to the analytical development of PES initiatives. We mainly draw from critical geography and social science literature in crafting our arguments. We first present our concerns with F & B's overgeneralized 'PES conceit' and the dangers of over-essentializing PES as a neoliberal project (Section 2); we outline alternative ontological frameworks to think through motivations and configurations of PES and other 'neoliberal' conservation approaches (Section 3); and we assess a rich literature on reimagining, adapting, and even hijacking PES for more humane and nature-respecting local alternatives (Section 4).

2. Creating the Monster: Over-essentializing Neoliberalism in (Already) Neoliberal Times

First, we challenge F & B's essentialist view of PES as an unquestionably neoliberal project writ large, arguing that the 'PES conceit' is underpinned by an overly structural analysis focusing on a hegemonic discourse of neoliberal natures disentangled from practice. As such, F & B inadvertently defend an economic determinism that largely ignores and, we claim, is at the expense of the continuous contestation, multiple subjectivities and agency of actors actually making (sense of) PES in practice. We rather see neoliberalism as a relational, dialectical process where social norms, dynamic socio-nature worldviews, intersectionality, inter-personal relationships and individual agency play as much a role as structural power. This epistemological difference ultimately explains our position on the potential for actor-oriented research to inform PES analysis. These differences become even more apparent as we examine the literature that F & B use as their evidence for a dangerous 'PES conceit'.

While F & B recognize the multitude of evolving PES definitions and framings, the core of their argument revolves around principles of PES as laid out by environmental economists (Engel et al., 2008; Pagiola et al., 2002; Wunder, 2005, 2015), which, unsurprisingly, espouse clear neoliberal foundations. Yet, there is an enormous body of work on the variegated plethora of PES permutations, such that it makes little sense to lump together all schemes so labelled as neoliberal conceit or otherwise (e.g. Muradian et al., 2010; Schomers and Matzdorf, 2013; Sommerville et al., 2009; Tacconi, 2012; Chan et al., 2017). Alternative theoretical frameworks for PES shaped by ecological economists, geographers, and anthropologists provide more nuanced perspectives (Dempsey and Robertson, 2012; Muradian et al., 2010; Pirard, 2012; Singh, 2015), emphasizing that not everything labelled PES has been driven by a neoliberal agenda. Clearly, some initial international funders promoted a vision of PES in line with neoliberal ideologies (Pagiola et al., 2002; see also Pasgaard et al., 2017; Kolinjivadi et al., 2017b). But as with other policy instruments originally borrowed "from the neoliberal bag of tricks" (Ferguson, 2009:174), even these PES initiatives have been used to promote outcomes that often defy neoliberal intents (Corbera, 2015; McElwee, 2012; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010). Instead of categorizing PES itself as neoliberal, we argue that it is the perceptions and actions of actors which are *key* to understanding how and why (and the extent to which) such initiatives are influenced (or not) by neoliberalism. Accordingly, a focus on actor-oriented research would shape future PES research in ways that transcend the neoliberal natures' debate, rather than remaining forever enmeshed in its web.

F & B further argue that neoliberalization is a broader process than what most PES scholars acknowledge, in that, for example, neoliberalism does not require actual markets, but rather "involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action", for example through the use of external financial incentives (Brown, 2003:3, as cited in Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:228). However, we argue that identifying 'incentives' as a key neoliberal conceit risks obscuring the many PES initiatives in which 'incentives' are ill-defined, variegated, and disassociated from market values, often as a result of actor interventions. As we discuss in Section 4, the 'incentives' in some PES schemes have integrated social exchanges that build relationships and reputation between actors (De Koning et al., 2011), cultural norms and values that proscribe relationships to socionatural systems (Mahanty et al., 2012), and reflect historical trajectories of state actors that define contextual limits of how PES is implemented and understood (McElwee, 2012). We also find that characterizing all incentives as neoliberal leads to impasses in classifying and recognizing myriad human responses to a range of structured interventions, from taxes to markets, for which there is very little agreement about the degree to which such interventions can be called neoliberal (Andrew et al., 2010; Harmes, 2012). For example, is any action by a state to redirect human behaviour by transferring resources "to align individual and/or collective land use decisions with the social interest" (Muradian et al., 2010:1205) neoliberal? Claiming incentives (however defined) as markers of neoliberal policies ultimately seems self-defeating, as this would lump a variety of environmental policies together under one rubric in ways that are unhelpful and fail to forward an agenda for research and action. Ultimately, by characterizing PES as broadly neoliberal, marked by key concepts such as 'incentives', and hence 'all one needs to know about it', portrays an overly optimistic view of the

[1] See for example the *Via Campesina's* (2014) position paper, in which this global peasant movement opposes PES schemes and green capitalist mechanisms.