

Abstract:

Green grabbing in the Brazilian Amazon

Maria Backhouse

The term *green grabbing* was first used by John Vidal (Vidal 2008) and discussed in a special issue of *The Journal for Peasant Studies* as a new capitalist form of the appropriation of nature (Fairhead et al. 2012). According to the authors, the term 'appropriation' means 'the transfer of ownership, use rights and control over resources that were once publicly or privately owned – or not even the subject of ownership – from the poor (or everyone including the poor) into the hands of the powerful' (ibid., 238). The expression 'green grabbing' is used for the worldwide processes of appropriation and valuation of natural resources (such as the trade in CO₂ certificates) for environmental ends. Green grabbing differs from land grabbing in that it is initiated by (national or transnational) environmental or climate protection measures – for example via the agroindustrial development of allegedly degraded areas. Environmental and climate policy objectives thus not only serve as 'green' legitimization strategies for land grabbing, but can themselves lead to processes of displacement or the loss of control over land access and land use as a result of specific political stimuli, for example support for the production of agrofuels. Green grabbing is also characterized by the fact that it is linked to new alliances of actors among the private sector, the state and NGOs, as well as by specific legitimization strategies and practices. It involves not only the material process of appropriation, however, but also a specific 'discursive framing'. The creation and commodification of natural resources such as CO₂ or 'biofuels' and the production of agreement to this market-based form of environmental protection across all the political camps can only be understood with this additional focus on the scientific, political and everyday production of knowledge.

In the presentation I will argue that the expansion of palm oil production for agrofuels production (biodiesel) in so-called degraded areas is a form of *green grabbing*; my empirical references are based on a case study in the Brazilian state of Pará. The thesis will be substantiated in the following way: First, I will define green grabbing as the expression of *continuous* primitive accumulation. I shall then define the term more precisely in order to identify the analytical substance of green grabbing. I argue somewhat differently to Fairhead et al., according to whom green grabbing can be an expression of primitive accumulation but is not necessarily such. Continuous primitive accumulation describes the establishment or restructuring of capitalist

relationships of ownership and production for the appropriation of surplus value or extended reproduction from a Marxist perspective. I will base the material and political dimensions of the flexible analysis concept of green grabbing on a re-interpretation of the concept of primitive accumulation drawing on Massimo de Angelis' interpretation. In order to be able to grasp the discursive dimension of green grabbing, I will supplement the ideology-critical dimension of Marx' chapter on primitive accumulation by Stuart Halls ideology-theoretical deliberations. As a third step, the presentation will consist of an analysis of the expanding oil palm plantations in northern Pará as a process of green grabbing. I proceed here from the history of the oil palm in Pará in Brazil and then analyse the material, political and discursive dimensions of the current agroindustrial expansion. Taking the example of the powerful narrative of the degraded Amazon areas together with the state supported expansion of palm oil in Brazil I will show how a natural resource is produced and legitimized for its agroindustrial appropriation, and how societal agreement to this is produced and resistance made difficult.

CV:

Maria Backhouse is a PhD Candidate and research associate in sociology at the Institute for Latin American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.

Her dissertation is titled: "Grüne Landnahme. Die neue Expansion der Palmölproduktion in Amazonien (Pará/Brasilien)" – ["Green Grabbing. The New Expansion of Oil Palm Plantations in the Amazon (Pará/Brazil)"]. She holds a Master's degree in sociology from the Freie Universität Berlin. Her disciplinary interests are political ecology, critical development and postcolonial studies. Recent publication: "Die globale Einhegung – Krise, ursprüngliche Akkumulation und Landnahmen im Kapitalismus." Backhouse, Maria; Gerlach, Olaf; Kalmring, Stefan and Nowak, Andreas (eds., 2013). Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.

References:

Fairhead, James, Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones (2012): "Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (2), 237–261.
Vidal, John (2008): "The great green land grab", *The Guardian*.
[www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/feb/13/conservation, last access: 13.10.2013].