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BOOK REVIEW by SEBASTIAN KRATZER[1]

Climate change and colonialism in the Green Economy

A review of Magdalena Heuwieser's "Green Colonialism in Honduras: Land Grabbing in the Name of Climate Protection and the Defense of the Commons", Promedia, Vienna, 2015.

(translated from the original title in German: *Grüner Kolonialismus in Honduras: Landgrabbing im Namen des Klimaschutzes und die Verteidigung der Commons*)

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Magdalena Heuwieser's Green Colonialism in Honduras: Land Grabbing in the name of climate protection and the defence of the commons looks closely into one of the countries most affected by climate change. Through the lens of a decolonial theory developed in Latin America, this German-language book provides a profound and often shocking analysis of how supposedly 'green' projects are hijacked by more powerful political and economic interests. But it goes beyond an account of a few failed or mismanaged climate change initiatives to show how the 'Green Economy' fails to solve the multiple environmental, financial and food crises Honduras, and the world, face today. It is this political ecology analysis of climate change action and development that may be the most valuable contribution of this book. Heuwieser (re)defines them as part of a struggle over territory, resources and power and provides an alternative mini manifesto for the defence of the commons. This book should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the region, let alone those planning climate change or development projects there.

[1] This book review was originally published online, October 16th 2015: http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/10/15/climate-change-and-colonialism-in-the-green-economy.

Climate change, Honduras and a complicated history

In light of the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, countries are determining their national contributions towards achieving the Convention's objective of limiting global warming and its effects. One of the perversities of climate change is that countries of the Global South, which historically contributed least to human-induced climate change, are and will be hit hardest by it over the next century. One of the possible solutions heralded by many of the main players is the idea of a Green Economy. An economic model that will allow countries to continue to grow economically, and to fight poverty by "taking economic advantage of the scarcity of nature" (p.10) without exacerbating climate change. This market-based approach favours the 'financialisation' of nature as the best way of protecting it. In other words, giving nature a price tag to make its protection economically desirable.

Heuwieser's analysis closely looks into one of these countries, and provides a profound and often shocking analysis of how supposedly 'green' projects are hijacked by more powerful political and economic interests. But it goes beyond an account of a few failed or mismanaged climate change initiatives and shows how the Green Economy structurally fails to solve the multiple crises Honduras, and the world, face today.

Honduras is one of the countries most affected by climate change, though this Central American country of 8 million inhabitants remains comparatively understudied. This may well be the only contemporary German-language book that provides an accessible historical and political overview of Honduras. From the early onset of colonisation to formal independence and the subsequent implementation of neoliberal policies, the author shows how political legacies and power constellations have survived and evolved over time. Though these have taken different forms and names, one constant has been their favouring of the few at the expense of the marginalised many. As one indigenous group representative puts it, "the most complex, the hardest fight of all is the one of women. It's comparatively easy to position yourself and fight against transnational companies. It's much harder standing up for and building an anti-patriarchal society" (p.54).

Heuwieser's book deconstructs 'development' and climate change action as part of a neoliberal system that commodifies and exploits natural resources. She offers the reader an analysis of development and mainstream ideas to tackle climate change such as the Green Economy or REDD+ based on a decolonial theory used by critical voices in Latin America, and scarcely known in Europe. Quoting

representatives from indigenous, environmental and civil rights groups in Honduras, Heuwieser gives an active voice to those most affected by climate change, and its proposed solutions.

> "The rejection is based on the fact that it [a hydroelectric power station] attacks the habitat, privatises the Gualcarque River and its tributaries for more than 20 years, destroys cultural and economic heritage and denies the basic human right to water. The privatisation of water also signifies a violation of the individual and collective rights of the Lenca people" (p.132). – Civic Council of Indigenous People and Organisations of Honduras (COPINH).

Latin American activists and academics argue that despite the formal end of colonialism, some of its exploitative structures and practices have persisted into modern times. This also plays out on a cultural level, where Western dominance legitimises the subordination of 'developing' to 'developed' nations, people and culture. This vision further extends to our relationship to nature. Through our rationality we become separate from nature, become its masters, its vendors and consumers. Central to Heuwieser's book is the concept of 'green grabbing'; a new dimension of land grabbing, in the name of environmental protection and climate change action. The need to tackle climate change serves as justification and legitimisation for the privatisation of the commons, turning formerly communally used land and resources into tradable goods and commodities in a globalised market.

It's the politics, stupid

But her book is not only a story of oppression and exploitation of nature and marginalised groups in the name of capitalism or the battle against climate change. Challenging the traditional boundaries of objectivist research, Heuwieser acts as an active supporter of indigenous people's organisations and their struggle. This may have costed her some 'objective credibility', but doing so gives the reader rarely captured insights into the national and local politics surrounding climate change action.

What one finds there is a tale of struggle, of political and armed fights between those who see the Honduran territory as a source of profit and those who rely on the same territory for their livelihoods, ethnic identity, and culture. On the one side the Honduran elite, ruthlessly adopting the discourse of a Green Economy. "*This means land, land, land…for me, this opposition, in my opinion, is rather fanatical,*

terroristic. Like those religious ones, the Taliban…but we have prepared for this fight" (p.119, 140), as one dam owner explains.

Opposed to them, a multitude of indigenous groups fighting for their traditional communal land use and who suffer the (sometimes deadly) consequences. As the sister of a murdered activist puts it, "t*he River Gualcarque and the land are the source of our livelihoods. We have to defend them, whatever the cost… should I die defending our lands and water, it will be an honour for me*" (p.130).

Only these insights allow the reader to contextualise development and climate change initiatives, and to develop a better understanding of why the people supposedly benefitting from such projects are the ones resisting those most.

It is this political ecology analysis of climate change action and green initiatives that may be the most valuable contribution of this book. Many of the initiatives under the guise of the Green Economy remain technical fixes. Trading emissions, clean development mechanisms, promoting 'green' energy, REDD+ and paying people to protect forests are all presented as crucial to limit global warming. But this vision tends to forget, or rather chooses to ignore, that ecological problems and anthropogenic climate change do not occur in a vacuum. They are interlinked with our system of ever-increasing production and consumption as well as the multiple economic, financial, food and refugee crises arising from it. What is more, within the affected countries, they are part of a political struggle for the control over territory, resources and power.

The three case studies on hydropower and the national REDD+ Strategy exemplify what can go wrong when 'green' initiatives ignore the political dynamics of the space they enter. This also means that the proposed solutions to the challenges of a changing climate need to look beyond the best approach to capturing carbon emissions; to the capital, companies, and communities that are fighting to define our relationship with nature.

Heuwieser takes up some of the alternative solutions promoted by environmental and indigenous activists, and provides a mini manifesto for the defence of the commons, based on solidarity, climate justice and the right of survival for all instead of the enrichment of a few. Unfortunately, she doesn't go into too much detail here, it would have been interesting to see *how* we could better pursue these alternatives while mainstream climate change initiatives are scaled up around the world.

Development, in defence of the commons

While Heuwieser's analysis is robust and the solutions she proposes are compelling, some of her views and conclusions about the development and climate change domain may seem too fatalistic. Reading through the case studies, one cannot but think that the culprits are a rogue national elite rather than an imperfect global system.

Heuwieser quotes Adalberto Padillo of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. According to Padillo, REDD+ cannot solve the problem of carbon emissions by itself, but it can play a role in avoiding deforestation *if* implemented correctly. She questions whether it would rather be about finding more just and effective approaches to protecting forests and addressing the causes of climate change. But what would the counter-hypothesis look like if we were to get rid of initiatives like REDD+ in Honduras now? Would we achieve the protection of nature and the territorial integrity of indigenous groups through bottom-up action as she lays out in her book? We should certainly hope so, and fight for it. But in light of the sheer criminal energy of the Honduran elite (and anywhere else really) in accumulating profits and power, and the naivety or ignorance of international actors, it seems doubtful that getting rid of REDD+ would lead to better environmental protection.

If COP21 produces anything close to "concerted climate action, then reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation is widely acknowledged to be the fastest way to do so," explains Will McFarland from the Overseas Development Institute. So instead of discounting it as a distraction from better solutions, it may just be worth regarding it as one of the instruments in our struggle to defend nature, support people to empower themselves, and push for more meaningful solutions to the (climate) challenges we face. If you can't beat them, join them. A lesson the Honduran elite seems to have learned faster.

Colonialism and development

Decolonial theory suggests that development continues to promote the Western way of life and consumption previously imposed through colonialism. Heuwieser convincingly extends this analysis to the Green Economy. Although the common roots between colonialism and development cannot be denied, the latter has come a long way since. True, some of the main actors remain the same players that wreaked havoc in the economy of many countries of the Global South. But decolonial theory does not account for the multitude of actors, voices and arguments that have emerged within development, continuously scrutinising the work done and the results obtained. Though still not often or loud enough, actors of the Global South have started raising their voices in defining and shaping the sector. Also in the Global North, some *do* have different attitudes and are doing development differently. Discussions of rights, power, (gender) equality and empowerment have become part of development done right, and can strengthen people in their struggle against an unjust status quo.

The theory not only discounts the actual positive advances achieved, but also what a more diverse, emancipated and correctly implemented development can contribute to the struggle of the marginalised. Under the far-from-perfect Millennium Development Goals for example, the number of people living in extreme poverty and hunger declined drastically, maternal and child mortality rates are at historic lows, and school enrolment and public health coverage have reached new heights. These achievements are of course far from sufficient and might be discarded as technical whitewashing that do not change the root causes of an unjust system. But a healthier, better nourished, educated and environmentally aware population will be a stronger player in the struggle for emancipation.

This book makes an important contribution to the discussion on climate change action and development. It grounds them in political context, as part of a struggle over territory, resources and power. It should be mandatory reading for everyone interested in the country and the region, let alone those planning climate change or development projects there or elsewhere.