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## Forest policy and the global portrayal of forest-dwellers: Understanding the role of environmentalist discourses in Brazil and Malaysia

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**FOREST POLICY AND THE GLOBAL  
PORTRAYAL OF FOREST-DWELLERS:  
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF  
ENVIRONMENTALIST DISCOURSES  
IN BRAZIL AND MALAYSIA**

by

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## Abstract

Critical development theory has understood development and global environmental management practice to be the expression of euro-centric discourse that constructs objects such as “development” and “sustainability”. Such discourse is presented as a Western or Northern creation and as something imposed on “the South”. In keeping with the imagery of North/South, centre/margins, top-down/bottom-up, post-development work has seen marginalised people in the South as passive objects of this process but also as the subjects of resistance. It has looked to grassroots movements in the South as sources of alternatives to development that derive their legitimacy and authenticity from their externality to the discourse and apparatus of development. Drawing on case-studies of the movements of rubber tappers in Brazil and the Penan of Sarawak, Malaysia, we argue that such discourses and the regimes and interventions they conjure into being cannot be conceptualised simply as top-down imposition. Rather, such discourses are co-produced, the actions of grassroots movements in the South providing *de facto* validation of these regimes and interventions. This validation must be problematised, however, and we suggest a revised understanding of such regimes as what Ferguson calls “anti-politics machines”. It is not that local political concerns are excluded by purely top-down, euro-centric intervention. Instead, social movements can be shown to employ strategies of self-presentation that adapt themselves to, and thus reproduce, the discursive values dominant in institutions of development and environmental management. In this way the fundamental concerns of grassroots movements may be compromised for the sake of gaining a degree of influence over these institutions. This leaves us critical of the centralisation of power represented by such institutions and that induces such self-censorship, and brings into question the populism of seeing such movements as a source of uncompromised critique.

### **Keywords:**

Environmentalism, environmental discourse, social movements, Sarawak (Malaysia), Brazilian Amazonia

## 1. Introduction

The rubber tappers’ movement in Brazil and the movement of indigenous peoples against commercial logging in Malaysia exhibit some striking parallels. Both began as movements concerned primarily with justice and land-rights and both then became involved with environmentalist institutions at an international scale in an attempt to gain influence over their respective national governments. In this process the discursive expressions of both movements developed a much stronger focus on the environment, reflecting the concerns of their environmentalist allies, and in both cases the outcomes of this process have been what may be categorised as environmental management “solutions” that do not, to some extent, address the original justice and land-rights concerns of their participants.

To understand something of the trajectory exhibited by the histories of these movements we need to focus on the production of the discourses that define the problems confronted and the solutions sought. In the 1990s, a series of authors developed a critique of the premises and rationality that underpinned the concept of development (Apffel-Marglin and Marglin 1990, Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1990, Rahnema and Bawtree 1997, Sachs 1992). Drawing on post-structuralist approaches to discourse, this “post-development” critique showed how discourses on development have produced the so-called Third World as “underdeveloped”. The discourse on development is said to have created, as Escobar (1995: 9) writes, “an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World... In sum, it has successfully deployed a regime of government over the Third World, a ‘space for “subject peoples”’ that ensures certain control over it.” This development process is thus very much portrayed as a “top-down” process of which “the West” is subject. Social movements in the South have been seen as counter movements to this development regime (Escobar, 1992), a source of potential “alternatives to development” or “liberation ecologies”.

This critique can be extended to the sphere of environmental governance. Escobar suggests that the notion of “sustainable development” has promulgated a regime of “environmental managerialism” in which “The Western scientist continues to speak for the Earth” (1995: 194). Drawing on Escobar, Peter Brosius argues that environmental managerialism and the institutionalisation of sustainable development “insinuate and naturalise a discourse that excludes moral or political imperatives in favour of indifferent bureaucratic and/or technoscientific forms of institutionally created and validated intervention” (1999: 38). This he characterises as a process of depoliticisation.

In this paper we take the Brosius/Escobar argument as a starting point. It is, in a way, a critique of the centralisation of power and of the use of that centralised power in the response to environmental crisis. This paper seeks to further this critique of centralised power but with a different understanding of the production of “Westernised” discourse and of the role of grassroots movements. The cases of both the rubber tappers and the Penan of Sarawak, Malaysia, show grassroots actors making use of, and thereby reproducing, the “Western” environmentalist idiom as part of strategies to secure alliances and influence. We therefore argue that discourses on issues such as deforestation, extractive reserves and indigenous peoples must be seen as co-produced by both “Western” environmentalist actors and the participants in grassroots movements. This brings into question the “top-down” versus “bottom-up” picture of development and environmental management. The question is rather one of explaining the production of these discourses as the outcome of the interventions of actors at all levels, and of explaining why the content of these discourses becomes so apparently depoliticised.

## 2. The Penan as Co-Producers of Environmentalist Discourse

The cases of the rubber tappers and the Penan each present instances in which grassroots movement have come to be represented by a particular discourse legible in cosmopolitan national and international contexts, which in turn has contributed to the instigation of policies affecting the original movement participants. In understanding this process we must enquire about the production of these discourses, how they come to have the content they do and who gets to produce them. In this we need to guard against the tendency to identify the content of a discourse as belonging to a particular cultural group (e.g. “the West”), and thereby to construct the members of that group (e.g. “Westerners”) as necessarily the producers or subjects of that discourse. Identifying the genealogical roots of a particular form of discourse is not the same as identifying who is responsible for the instantiation of those forms in a given moment.

We can examine these issues with reference, first of all, to the case of the Penan. The Penan are an indigenous group inhabiting certain interior areas of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. This is an area of moist tropical forests and traditionally the Penan communities were nomadic, subsisting chiefly on wild sago and game whilst trading a variety of forest products and craft items for goods such as salt, cloth and ironware. Since the 1980s as few as 300 have maintained a nomadic lifestyle, of a population exceeding 9000.<sup>1</sup> The remainder, since the 1960s and 70s, have gradually adopted a settled or semi-settled lifestyle. It has been state policy, from the start, to encourage this process, encouragement that, on the ground, has taken a form that can best be described as patron-client relations with the state portraying itself as a benefactor providing for and looking after its peoples through the provision of good such as schools, mobile health services, and assistance in constructing permanent villages (Bending 2001b).

In this same period commercial logging has made a steady advance across traditional Penan territories. Logging in Sarawak is conducted by Malaysian firms that are either owned by, or have close connections to, senior figures in the Sarawak state government (Majid-Cooke 1997). Logging methods are nominally selective rather than clear-fell, and felling has always, officially, been

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<sup>1</sup> There are two Penan subgroups, the “Eastern” and the “Western”, with notable linguistic, cultural and historical differences Needham (1972), Brosius (1997a, 1997b), Langub (1991). The protesting communities were all from the Eastern subgroup and it is these that are routinely referred to as simply “Penan” in the various representations of the case. We have followed this practice for the sake of simplicity. The figure of 9237 for the Penan population (Eastern and Western) was compiled by Jayl Langub (1989) from 1985, 87 and 88 census figures.

managed for the goal of sustained yield, the main basis of latter claims of sustainability. In practice, logging rates have been unsustainable and regulation ineffective (ITTO 1990, Heyzer 1995), and the use of bulldozers has been particularly destructive with estimations of the loss of vegetative cover ranging from six to 40+ percent (Pearce 1994, SAM 1990). Either estimate is plausible depending on the location and the terrain. The logging companies are almost the only source of employment in the interior. In some Penan communities many individuals worked for periods in the companies, even since the 1960s when their communities were still largely nomadic. By the 1980s logging work had become an important part of the livelihood of the more accessible Penan communities.

There is, however, an obvious contradiction between logging and the more tradition aspects of Penan lifestyle. Sarawak law effectively designates all land that was primary forest before 1958 as state land, thus leaving the Penan more or less without land rights. The land which they claim as theirs is almost entirely allocated for logging. Concerns about this issue, expressed in appeals to the government, seem to have built gradually as logging advanced, coming to a head in the late 1980s with the involvement of both Malaysian and foreign environmentalists. One individual in particular, a Swiss activist called Bruno Manser, played an important role in suggesting that the Penan and a small number of Kenyah, Kelabit and Kayan communities to take more drastic measures along the lines of the non-violent direct action (NVDA) in use by environmentalist activists in the North.

Thus from 1987 these communities enacted a series of logging blockades in which communities undertook to barricade logging roads running across their territories. Although these actions may have rhetorical significance as direct attempts to stop logging, in terms of the intentions of Penan participants they should rather be understood as protests designed to force the state government to listen to their appeals and to take Penan wishes into consideration. In response to these protests many promises were made by the state government but few kept. Meanwhile they involved considerable disruption to Penan livelihoods and by 1991 the strategy of blockading had been abandoned by most communities. Thereafter, political conflict over Sarawak's forests shifted from local to international contexts in which the protests of the Penan were represented in competing ways.

### **2.1 Political constructions of responsibility**

Bending (2001a, 2001b) describes how an important element of the contestation of the Penan case was the construction of narratives explaining the protests in different ways. The mainstream Malaysian media, which is consistently pro-government, has focussed on the presence of foreign environmentalists,

regarding them as responsible for the protests by duping the supposedly naïve Penan into acting against the government. The Penan are not constructed as the subjects of the protests, rather the protests are explained by the subject-agency of the foreigners. One author has accused foreign NGOs of, "Brainwashing some Penans and others to support the campaign to stop logging in the state" (Chai 1991: 13). Another has written that, "The Penan are beginning to feel the effects of Manser's subtle subversion of their attitudes. Their minds have been infiltrated with a value system, which cannot be the antidote for their current predicament" (Ritchie 1994: 213). Views such as these portray the Penan as puppets without authentic motives of their own. They are constructed as not worth listening to and we are directed only to be interested in the motives of foreign activists. Correspondingly, Penan views and testimony are absent from these representations. Penan actions are constructed as effects while the intervention of foreigners as subjects become the cause.

The denial of Penan responsibility for the protests and the discourses they expressed is therefore politically consequential. Environmentalist representations of the Penan, on the other hand, do by and large present the Penan as responsible subjects of their protests, thus directing us to listen to their voices (Davis *et al.*, 1995, Davis and Stenzel 1999, Licht 1989). The Penan, however, are not portrayed as active participants in the modern world but as bearers of an unchanging ancient ecological wisdom that is threatened by the advance of modernity (Bending 2001b, Brosius 1997a, Tsing, 1993). Thus Suzuki (1990: 8) writes, "There are few people left on earth who are capable of living independently from the rest of the world, neither wanting, nor needing, the "civilised" way of life... As the planet continues to fall before the insatiable demands of global economics, will we wipe out every last vestige of different worldviews?" The reason Penan discourse is seen as worth listening to is because it is constructed as unsullied by the evils of modernity; the Penan and only the Penan are constructed as its subjects-agents. In this way environmentalist discourse seems to manufacture for itself a source of moral authority, the danger is that if the discourse represented by Penan testimony is not found to be as pure as the virgin rainforest that authority disappears.

These contesting representations of the Penan case show the question of who is the subject or producer of discourse to be one of political significance. One side sought to deny Penan responsibility whilst the other sought to deny any non-Penan responsibility. We argue here, however, that the protests and the discourse that went with them must be seen as co-produced by the Penan and foreign activists.

### 2.3 Strategic self-portraits

The protests by Penan communities can also be understood as performances directed at foreigners and their governments, again understood as patrons. In the 1980s a historical narrative developed, retrospectively, among Penan communities, in which the pre-logging colonial regime is portrayed as a good patron, fulfilling its duties, and the Malaysian/Sarawakian government is portrayed as a bad patron, failing to look after its clients. Whilst Malaysian activists working with *Sahabat Alam Malaysia* (SAM) provided much more concrete, mostly legal, support for the protesting communities, the white foreign activists that visited the area at the time were attributed great symbolic importance by the Penan. They were regarded as representatives of white foreign governments and their concern for the Penan was taken as evidence that the foreign governments continued to play their role as good patrons and might yet be persuaded to intervene on the Penan's behalf.

As Brosius (1997b) argues, the existence of this narrative has much to do with the historical experiences of Penan groups, as evidenced by the differing reactions of Eastern and Western Penan to foreign activists, differences that can be related to differing historical conditions. However, Bending (2001b) has argued that we should not underestimate the extent to which this narrative is a retrospective construction. It embodies a range of strategic emphases and exclusions, such as that of logging in the late colonial period. It seems to have developed as way of solemnising a political alliance, constructing a recent relationship as a return to a semi-fictional "golden age". In one instance an elderly Penan man even retailed a syncretic animist-Christian creation myth in which the idealised colonial relationship is seen to be established by God (Bending 2001a: 15-16).

This narrative forms a central part of a certain genre of Penan speech typically employed in talking to sympathetic foreigners. The experience of researching in Penan communities as a white foreigner is that one is expected always to want to hear this type of speech. One is expected to want to hear *a* speech, the content and rhetoric of which become rather familiar. It is usually only the older or more politically active men who feel themselves competent in such performance, and when a tape recorder is introduced Penan individuals are wary of speaking in any other way.

In this genre against descriptions of the failings of the current regime are critically juxtaposed against nostalgic statements about the past. A very heavy emphasis, with a certain amount of exaggeration, is placed on comparison between a past abundant in natural resources and present conditions of destruction and scarcity. These concerns are not fabrications - the loss of natural resources is something the Penan seem to care about deeply - rather the point is

that this issue is chosen for emphasis and is then rhetorically embellished. Here Moyong, a man with much experience of foreign environmentalists, speaks for the tape recorder:

*Fish too, its not just Penan who suffer. Fish in the river also suffer; the fishes' young suffer, because the river is muddy. Sometimes, tuva [a poisonous plant used to kill fish] that is in the forest; when [the loggers] come, that tuva is destroyed, those plants are destroyed, it washes down to the river, and thus, fish die!*

Some concerns are overemphasised, as Brosius (1997a) has noted, medicinal plants are emphasised to a degree out of keeping with actual Penan practice, whilst there are many gaps that seem to speak of strategic exclusions. The whole episode of Penan experiments with permanent settlement and forest clearance for agriculture are rarely mentioned. Above all the surprisingly long history of Penan involvement in logging is never mentioned and is usually actively denied.

Thus it would make sense to see this type of speech, this strand of Penan discourse, as a kind of strategic image-management. This is not to say that it is an expression of an explicitly formulated strategy, rather that it has developed through the kind of ongoing management of image in which the presentation of (individual or group) identity depends on the audience, something that may be common community behaviour (Cohen 1993).

Given the extent to which such speech is directed at foreigners it should come as no surprise that it seems to be represented in international environmentalist representations of the Penan. A good example is *Penan: Voice for the Borneo Rainforest* (Davis and Henley 1990) which embodies a statement by a Penan man called Dawat Lupung recorded by the authors on a short visit to Sarawak. It seems to be an excellent example of the speech-making described above:

*The water muddy, the fish dead. Can't drink the water anymore, muddy, terrible, no good. We don't like this...* (Davis and Henley 1990: 54).

*Long ago during the British times, hitting - there was none of that. Penan were happy living in the headwaters... Now, the government gets angry with us... Dead, dead, alive, alive. It is decided by the government. They don't know how to think like humans, don't know how to help people, people who are suffering, people who are poor...' (1990: 74-81).*

Without in-depth research the impression any visitor is going to receive will reflect this strand of Penan discourse. And indeed, environmentalist representations of the Penan do seem to have been considerably influenced by how the Penan have presented themselves. If the Penan had consistently said “We want the government to respect our lifestyle and leave us a substantial area of forest, but we don’t mind logging elsewhere and we still want jobs with the logging companies,” the reaction of foreign environmentalists might have been very different.

In this way it may *almost* be said that the Penan have manipulated environmentalists to gain influence. Yet it may equally *almost* be said that the environmentalists have manipulated the Penan. The price of international support has been having to conform to the stereotypes of “Western” discourse. Penan speech seems over time to have been tailored to what foreign activists have been pleased to hear. In acting this part the Penan have helped reproduce Western discourses about “the Other”, the “noble savage” and so on. More specifically they have helped reproduce a particular environmentalist agenda. The original motives of the protests might be described as more concerned with just treatment for themselves, including better provision of government patronage as well as respect for traditional land rights, than with the preservation of forest per se. In reproducing some of the values of Western environmentalist discourse they have reinforced the primacy of ecological concerns.

It is not possible to refute any Penan responsibility for their self-presentation - we cannot, like the Malaysian government, treat the Penan as mere puppets - rather we have to say that the discourse by which the Penan have sought to portray themselves, and thus the discourse of environmentalist representations of the Penan, is to an extent co-produced. In reinforcing “Western” ideas about indigenous peoples the Penan have become co-producers of that discourse. The question we are left with is why does it happen this way? Why is it that environmentalists have only responded to Penan actions when those actions are already a response to an environmentalist agenda? Why not the other way around? These are questions to be taken up below, but first we will turn to the case of the Brazilian rubber tappers, a case that shows us the above cannot be taken to be an isolated, quirky instance.

### 3. Shifting Alliances in Brazil

The rubber tappers’ or *seringueiros* descend from migrants from Northeast Brazil brought to Amazonia in large numbers to extract rubber from the wild (Ruiz and Pinzón 1995). These migrants settled in the forest during two peak periods of the rubber economy in Amazonia, the first in the late nineteenth century and the second during World War II. Ultimately, competition from plantations established in Southeast Asia caused the production of rubber for export in Amazonia to collapse (Dean 1989). However, duties on imported rubber and government subsidies sustained the economic viability of rubber extraction from the wild for decades and enabled an important population of rubber tappers to remain in the forest (Menezes 1993). Nowadays, the livelihoods of the rubber tappers consist of a combination of subsistence activities such as fishing and hunting and market oriented ones, including the extraction of rubber and brazil nuts. In some areas, seasonal employment has also become important.

In the early 1970s, the forests inhabited by the *seringueiros* came under threat from the encroachment activities promoted by government policies to develop Amazonia (Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Road building paved the way for mining, cattle ranching and logging, which were encouraged by the government through financial incentives (Mahar 1989). Large numbers of migrant farmers were also settled along the recently built roads as a means to address the problem of landlessness and the social tensions it created in other parts of Brazil (Martine 1990). Pressure on the areas inhabited by the rubber tappers grew and conflicts with cattle ranchers, loggers and land speculators became increasingly common.

In the Acre State, in Western Amazonia, conflicts over land rights became particularly prevalent and often violent. Cattle ranchers began evicting families of rubber tappers from their landholdings resorting to threats and armed gunmen. In response, rubber tapper families rallied into groups to confront the teams hired by cattle ranchers to clear the forest. This tactic, known as *empate* or standoff, became emblematic of the struggle of the rubber tappers to protect their livelihoods and rights to land (Hecht and Cockburn 1989). The Catholic Church as well as rural workers’ unions assisted the rubber tappers to organise and resist pressure from cattle ranchers. Some rubber tappers’ leaders became activists in these unions and in the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT), a fervent campaigner for agrarian reform and other social justice issues. Engagement with these institutions resulted in the rubber tappers framing their struggle for land rights within broader social justice issues, in particular agrarian reform (Keck 1995).

Other actors and institutions also began working with the rubber tappers in educational and community development projects. These included researchers such as anthropologist Mary Allegretti, who formed an NGO called Institute of Amazonian Studies (IEA) to assist the rubber tappers, and OXFAM representative in Brazil, Tony Gross. The IEA, funded by OXFAM, became actively involved in advising the *seringueiros* and helping them to develop strategies to legalise the traditional occupancy rights of the rubber tappers to the areas they inhabited (Keck 1995, Melone 1993).

The efforts of rubber tappers to secure rights to land coincided with mounting international concerns over tropical deforestation. Multilateral bank loans were severely criticized by environmentalists for being one of the main drivers of deforestation. Environmentalists in the United States launched an international campaign that focused on various initiatives (Rich, 1994), one of which was POLONOROESTE, a development programme funded by the World Bank in Rondônia, Western Amazonia.

In 1985, seeking international support for the rubber tappers, anthropologist Mary Allegretti and Tony Gross of Oxfam made contact with environmentalists involved in the multilateral banks campaign. This sets the context for an alliance between the two groups (Keck 1995, Melone 1993, Hecht and Cockburn 1989). From this point onwards, the rubber tappers' struggle leaped into the international context and shifted from an emphasis on land rights to one on environmental conservation.

### **3.1 The rubber tappers' re-alignment**

As deforestation and other global environmental issues received increasing worldwide attention, the support of international environmentalists became important. The alliance with environmentalists was accompanied by a re-alignment of the rubber tappers' discourse to fit the environmental agenda. The environment was incorporated into the rhetoric and goals of the rubber tappers' movement. The IEA, led by Mary Allegretti, assisted the rubber tappers to develop a proposal for the establishment of special protected areas called extractive reserves that allowed the rubber tappers to live and harvest resources. These areas are essentially a means to legalise the traditional occupancy rights of the rubber tappers to the areas they inhabited (Begossi 1998). However, land rights were reinterpreted in a new frame that emphasized environmental conservation goals.

For environmentalists, the rubber tappers gave a moral significance to their claims, much as Conklin and Graham (1995: 698) argue that their alliance with Amazonian indians in the 1990s allowed them to "claim the humanitarian stance of defending human rights and oppressed, politically disempowered people, not

just protecting flora and fauna." The alliance with the rubber tappers might almost be said to have politicised the environmentalist cause. Previously, as Keck (2001: 38) notes, environmentalism in Brazil was conventionally dismissed as "a hobby for the well heeled and well fed," its claims fading in comparison to the need to alleviate poverty.

Whether or not environmentalist discourse was politicised, the effect on the presentation of the rubber tappers' movement has the appearance of depoliticisation, rather as Brosius (1999) argues for the case of the Penan. International coverage of the rubber tappers tended to ignore their association with the broader movement for social justice and the Brazilian Left represented by the Workers' Party (Keck 1995). Environmentalists only emphasised the less radical aspects of the rubber tappers' struggle, portraying them as defenders of the forest and protagonists of a struggle against the destructive expansion of modern development in Amazonia.

The concept of extractive reserves had the effect of neutralising the controversy attached to land reform, the movement with which the rubber tappers had previously aligned themselves. Extractive reserves are land reform presented as a value-neutral technical measure, as an "alternative forms of resource management that will promote social well-being while preserving the environment" (Allegretti 1990: 251). The moral imperatives that animated the original resistance of the rubber tappers to loggers and cattle ranchers have been displaced by the emphasis on environmental conservation and environmental management.

The rubber tappers have strategically adjusted the discursive presentation of their movement according to the institutional setting with which they may be most profitably allied. In a medium where the most promising allies were institutions such as the Catholic Church, trade unions and leftist parties, the rubber tappers framed their struggle as a struggle for social justice and land reform.

Environmentalists represented a new set of political opportunities, namely access to international organisations with power over policies for Amazonia (Silva 1994). Chico Mendes, the leader of the rubber tappers, travelled several times to Washington to lobby the US Congress, which in turn had power over the US Treasury, the institution that provided most of the funding administered by the World Bank. He also met with senior World Bank staff. These institutions had leverage over Brazilian national policies through control of development finance.

Researchers and representatives of development NGOs assisted the rubber tappers to make their claims legible to policy makers and acceptable to a wider audience. Extractive reserves were proposed with that objective in mind. As a policy, these include aims of environmental conservation and social and economic development. However, the rubber tappers have represented the relative weight of these goals differently according to the actors from whom they seek to gain support.

The role of extractive reserves in protecting the environment was emphasised when dealing with environmentalists. When it came to engage the support of the World Bank, extractive reserves were described as alternatives for the development of Amazonia. After 1990 when extractive reserves were finally adopted into environmental policy, the rubber tappers have sought the support of a range of actors to improve their viability. Their project proposals for NGOs and other funding agencies highlight the aspects of extractive reserves that these institutions are most likely to support. (Rosendo 2002).

There is a remarkable degree of fluidity in the process of appropriation and reproduction of different discourses and associated changes in practices. Through their network of support, the rubber tappers can respond quickly to changing institutional and political opportunities. In 1987, for example, when there seemed to be favourable conditions for the implementation of an effective programme for agrarian reform in Brazil the rubber tappers proposed the establishment of Extractivist Settlement Projects by the national agrarian reform agency, INCRA (Menezes 1994). When these conditions proved illusive, attention shifted again to the environment and environmental policy. Each of the ways in which the rubber tappers have framed their struggle makes sense for a different audience. In reproducing the discourses some actors wished to hear, the rubber tappers reinforced certain ideas originating in different contexts, helping to reproduce various discursive constructions of themselves, their movement and its aims.

Originally isolated and marginalised, the rubber tappers are now capable of participating in the politics of regional development (Brown and Rosendo 2000a). This is due partially to the institutionalisation of the rubber tappers' movement and the consequent "official" recognition of the rubber tappers organisations as legitimate representatives of grassroots interests. Their association with global environmental politics and institutions gave them a degree of leverage over various arms of the Brazilian state. However, this influence may have been achieved at a price.

#### 4. Negotiating with Centralised Power

The cases of the rubber tappers and the Penan both show a local conflict becoming an issue contested by national governments and international institutions concerned with the environment. In this transition the values being contested underwent a transition of their own, first of all in the forging of an alliance between grassroots actors and environmentalists. In both cases this was a transformation from particular local concerns to ones more legible in the context of cosmopolitan environmentalism. Brosius (1999: 38) has characterised this as an exclusion of "moral and political imperatives in favour of indifferent bureaucratic and/or technoscientific forms of institutionally created and validated intervention." He argues that the increasing institutionalisation of responses to environmental issues amounts to what Rappaport (1993) calls "the subordination of the fundamental to the contingent and instrumental" and risks the kind of depoliticisation Ferguson (1990) identifies when he labels the apparatus of development as an "anti-politics machine."

This is a thesis we support but in a qualified way. We suggest that rather than seeing this depoliticisation as something imposed from above we must note the role played by those below. What occurs is rather that the values inspiring grassroots activity are compromised for the sake of gaining influence, and thus do not come to contradict the values established in the discourses of central institutions. These discourses and the apparent consensus prevailing in these institutions are thus reinforced, not challenged. To support this argument, however, we need to the case studies of the Penan and the rubber tappers to examine the consequences of the processes already described, consequences that should inform our attitude towards centralised environmental management.

##### 4.1 From land rights to "sustainability"

By the end of the 1980s the case of the Penan became something of a *cause célèbre* in international environmentalist circles, something to which the Malaysian state and logging interests had to respond. The story of this international campaign and counter-campaign is described in detail by Peter Brosius (1999) and so here we will recount it only in summary.

The campaign outside Sarawak initially focussed on the Penan and their protests, arrests and trials, and so on. It was in this period that the environmentalist representations described above were produced. The case was presented as a black and white moral issue with the Penan cast as the defenders of the forest pitched against the Malaysian government and loggers as its destroyers. The solution sought was a halt to logging and the creation of something such as a "Penan Biosphere Reserve" that would preserve both the

rainforest and allow the Penan to continue a traditional way of life (Davis and Henley 1990).

The Malaysian state, media and timber industry lobby responded vigorously. They argued that the campaign constituted a kind of eco-imperialism and that environmental problems had more to do with the industrialisation and high consumption levels of the North. The Malaysian Prime Minister summarised their position well:

*The North should begin to clean up its own backyard and stop scapegoating the South for the ecological sins it committed on the way to prosperity. The North should resist the temptation to lock up the tropical forests and other natural resources, which are critical for our development, in the name of a "common heritage".* (Mahatir bin Mohamed and Lutzenberger 1992: 56).

These arguments were actually quite persuasive with both Northern and Malaysian environmentalists. A prominent Malaysian activist wrote,

*The North must recognise that it has already depleted most of its own forests and that it is now also responsible for consuming a very large share of tropical forest products. To facilitate forest conservation, it must drastically reduce its wasteful use of products derived from natural forests* (Khor Kok Peng 1991: 24).

The anti-environmentalist counter-argument fitted well with Northern environmentalists' own critique of Northern industrialism and consumption and with general internationalist sentiment. This contributed to a general shift in rainforest related campaigning in the early 1990s away from attacking the direct agents of deforestation and towards the less hypocrisy-prone area of boycotting tropical timber products. It was with this shift that the Penan case began to slip from the limelight.

This new phase of the campaign resulted in significant reductions in the consumption of tropical timber in some European countries. Environmentalist groups had to accept, however, that if timber could be produced according to a set of sustainability criteria then its consumption was permissible. Fearing the effects of reduced consumption, the Malaysian government and timber industry also accepted and began to promote the sustainability agenda, arguing that forestry in Malaysia had always been sustainably managed. Efforts to establish a timber certification scheme brought into play an extensive multilateral institutional net-work involving organisations such as the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) and World Bank, industry and producer country

representatives, donor organisations, environmental NGOs and so forth. It also necessitated and brought into being an international apparatus of forest governance and surveillance.

This apparent consensus on timber certification shifted the political debate to the question of what should count as criteria and indicators of sustainability. In this process NGOs have argued for the inclusion of criteria such as impact on local communities whilst actors such as the Malaysian government and the ITTO have sought a focus on such considerations as sustainable yield management, ideas of scientific forestry and the economic costs of adherence to sustainability criteria.

This is obviously an arena of highly political contestation. Whether sustained yield management triumphs over respect for the customary rights of local communities, it could be of great consequence for those communities. Yet these debates have occurred in a particular institutional and principally technocratic context. The substance of the debate is discursive contestation, the outcomes of which can be expected to reflect the values dominant in this discursive context. In this process, furthermore, sustainability criteria, which at base may represent fundamentals of justice and ecology, become bargaining chips that can be traded one against the other.

Back in the 1980s the governance of forestry in Sarawak was something into which the Penan had no input. To be heard they had to resort to dramatic protests that disrupted logging and brought international attention. With the certification process governance has shifted to an even more centralised arena in which it is again difficult for people like the Penan to have any voice. This is a discursive contest in which emotive (i.e. explicitly moral and political) appeals are effectively excluded. As Brosius points out, there has been no place in these negotiations for figures like Bruno Manser or for images of the Penan making passionate appeals through the medium of protest.

This is an ongoing process and as yet it has had little effect on forestry in Sarawak. There are potential benefits for people such as the Penan, but in a rather hit and miss way, the new governance regime reflecting the discursive values of the centre rather the particular realities of different communities "on the ground". As a bargaining process that needs to maintain consensus with some very powerful actors, however, everything has not gone the way many NGOs (let alone the Penan) would wish. Many Environmental NGOs have withdrawn support from the process in frustration over the exclusion of more radical concerns and not wishing to legitimise the regime being set up.

#### 4.2 From land rights to conservation

The conservation agenda in Brazil over the last decade has been strongly driven by international forces, in particular through the implementation of major environmental management projects (Fearnside 2003, Keck 2001). One of the most important is the Pilot Programme for the Conservation of the Brazilian Rain Forest (PP-G7) funded mainly by the Group of Seven industrialised countries (G7), the European Union and the German government and administered by the World Bank. The Rondônia Natural Resources Management Project (PLANAFLORO) funded by the World Bank is another example of large-scale environmental management initiatives implemented in Amazonia from the early 1990 onwards (Brown and Rosendo 2000b).

Both the Pilot Programme and PLANAFLORO include measures aimed at extractive reserves. The extractive reserves approach became the object of externally driven environmental management interventions. They became enveloped within institutions for global environmental governance, which caused their creation and implementation to be in some respects a top-down process. As a result, these areas have often been established against the will of key stakeholders such as State and local governments as well as the business sector. This happened not only in the case of the reserves established under PLANAFLORO (Brown and Rosendo 2000b) but also in other regions such as Pará, where plans for the creation of the largest extractive reserve in Brazil were fiercely resisted by the state and local governments and business associations linked to logging (Estadão, 2002a and 2002b, O Liberal 2002).

The inscription of extractive reserves in global environmental management regimes appears to benefit the rubber tappers, but this is true only to a certain extent. The international promotion of extractive reserves has helped overcome the opposition of economic elites and their allies in the national, state and local governments, but the rubber tappers' influence over the process of reserve creation has also been undermined. This is visible, for example, in the way some reserves have been created in Rondônia under PLANAFLORO.

In its original conception, PLANAFLORO included the creation of three extractive reserves. The project, however, also included the implementation of a socio-economic and ecological zoning plan for Rondônia, which divided the state into six macro-zones according to their suitability for different types of agriculture, forestry, extractivism or total environmental conservation (Mahar 2000). The zoning plan, which became a law that regulates land use in Rondônia, was supportive of the establishment of additional extractive reserves in various areas designated for extractivism (extraction of non-timber forest products).

WWF and some Brazilian NGOs working in the region viewed the zoning plan as a strategic opportunity to put large areas of forest under protection through extractive reserves. However, creating these areas required involving and organising local populations (Pinzón 1995, IBAMA 1994). The support of these actors was vital to establish the Organisation of Rubber Tappers of Rondônia (OSR), a grassroots organisation formed in 1991 to advance the creation of extractive reserves.

The OSR took the lead in proposing the creation of extractive reserves in a number of areas inhabited by rubber tappers supported by the expertise and funding of its NGO partners. One of the main jobs of the OSR became to fulfil the legal requirements and gather the documentation to support claims to establish extractive reserves. This included the establishment of associations to manage the reserves. This process, however, became goal rather than process oriented. The associations were easily established, not least because there was funding from WWF to support them. This included recompensing those leaders who gave up their time and means of earning a livelihood to take up community organisation and other responsibilities within the associations. The leaders selected to run the associations were usually the better educated, which often were also individuals that no longer lived in the forest. Furthermore, the associations were based in urban areas, not in the reserves. WWF provision of funds to sustain them meant that they could subsist independently from the contributions of their members. Little sense of collective responsibility and ownership in relation to the associations developed, leading the rubber tappers to take advantage of whatever benefits they generated, but without contributing to their maintenance.

This process can be seen as the implementation of extractive reserves as a conservation and sustainable development measure by actors such as the WWF. The reserves represent the de facto instantiation of the conservation-oriented values of environmentalist discourses, which rubber tappers in Rondônia have been asked to “rubber-stamp”. It is not surprising that some of the tensions in these reserves concern residents wanting to pursue land use options forbidden by the conservation-oriented management plans. Yet the interesting thing is that this conservation agenda takes its legitimacy in part from rubber tappers' own strategic alliance with environmentalists, a discursive move that has led the “green” credentials of the rubber tappers to be assumed. Through this strategy, rubber tappers have succeeded in influencing policy, but not entirely on their own terms.

## 5. Conclusion: The “Anti-Politics Machine”

These two cases exhibit noticeably similar trajectories in which grassroots conflict is substituted, or apparently substituted, by a growing regime of environmental managerialism. The cases suggest that the institutionalisation represented by this regime could well be dubbed an “anti-politics machine”.

We can understand what happens in cases as these as a process of trade-offs between competing values. The initial movements of the Penan and the rubber tappers were an expression of certain sets of values that arose out of the experience of the participants in these movements, expressed through the particular cultural idioms of their communities. In both cases, as it happened, we might characterise these initial values as concerned rather more with notions of what would constitute just treatment of themselves than with more explicitly environmental concerns. In both cases, however, they began, strategically, to present their concerns through discourses of environmentalism that were legible in an international context. While they gained influence through this process, the price was one of having their movements endorse values that, while overlapping with their initial concerns, also owed much to the discursive world of their non-local allies. This process can be seen as one of political compromise in exchange for influence.

This process can be seen operating also at higher levels. In order, for example, for environmental NGOs to secure Malaysian state acceptance of the sustainability agenda they themselves have had to accept the compromise of their aims in negotiations over what should count as sustainability. The outcome of this process, as the case of the rubber tappers shows so clearly, is that the actual policies that get implemented are at least somewhat removed from what might initially have been wanted at the grassroots.

Noticeably, it is the grassroots movements that seem to have to compromise. The reason would seem to be the centralisation of power. Thus, although the Malaysian state had little choice but to engage in the certification process, it was still in a very strong bargaining position to influence that process. In essence, we can see this situation as a case of the “Emperor’s new clothes”. Because power is concentrated in the hands of the emperor, everyone tells him what he wants to hear and his belief that he is clothed is reinforced. All those around him act to reproduce the discourse of the invisible clothes for the sake of receiving his benevolence. The state, multilateral institutions and other institutions of centralised governance are prone to the same blindness as the emperor. Other less powerful actors and movements are unlikely to challenge the established discourses (and hence moral/political values) of the centre. We would suggest that the apparent value-neutrality of centralised technocratic

management may result in part from the way in which movements, which might otherwise present a discursive challenge to the centre, tone down or self-censor their discourse for the sake of the influence alliances with more central actors can bring.

This is thus a slightly different critique of the centralisation of power and the institutionalisation of development and environmental governance than that presented by authors such as Escobar. That critique tends to construct discourses (of development, sustainability, etc.) as things imposed by the North on marginalised peoples in the South, with the North (or the “West”) constructed as the subjects or producers of those discourses. The case studies of the rubber tappers and the Penan suggest a different construction in which marginalised actors become co-producers of these dominant discourses, legitimising and reinforcing them in return for the support of more powerful actors. This is as true for environmental NGOs being co-producers of the discourse on sustainability (and hence timber certification) as it is for rubber tappers legitimising the importance given to forest conservation. These dominant discourses thus cannot be criticised simply on the basis that they are an ethnocentric imposition, however much they may have Western roots. Instead we have to ask why they are endorsed and reproduced by the people they are supposedly imposed upon. This also naturally has a bearing on the idea that these marginalised groups may be the source of thoroughly non-Western “alternatives to development”.

Is this centralisation of power a problem? It certainly raises some questions. If it were argued, from a rather technocratic perspective, that policy can be correctly and objectively determined from the centre, presumably through detached scientific investigation, then it might even be seen as desirable. Alternatively, in the same vein as Rappaport’s critique of “the subordination of the fundamental to the contingent and the instrumental” (1993: 299), cited above, it might be argued that the greater the centralisation of power in institutions of national and international governance, the greater the risk that the solutions implemented will not address the concerns which originally inspired movements at the grassroots. Such a critique would suggest that ethical questions of justice and society’s relationship with the natural world cannot be determined in centres of governance many removes from the people and nature in question. Rather, it would suggest that these are questions that can best responded to when confronted by the reality of the issue in question. The centralisation of power might then be said to encourage the subordination of these ethical judgements (the fundamental) to the values of established discourses (the contingent) and calculations of influence maximisation.

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