

Summary of the International Workshop
“The Political Ecology of Agrofuels“ 11th to 12th of October, 2012
Project Fair Fuels?, Institute for Latin American Studies
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Organizers:

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The workshop “The Political Ecology of Agrofuels“ presented and discussed current research on agrofuels from a Political Ecology perspective. The workshop offered insights into excellent research and extremely interesting results and approaches that were vibrantly discussed by participants and speakers alike. By opening up a space for exchange and reflection, the workshop helped to develop a more profound understanding of the perspective of Political Ecology, gave an overview of the current state of the art in critical research on agrofuels, and connected people interested in and academics working in the field.

Agro- or biofuels are advocated by many as an opportunity to transform energy-use patterns, by helping reduce carbon dioxide CO₂ emissions, alleviating dependency on fossil resources and at the same time “developing” rural regions. Mandatory agrofuels or biofuels blending quotas have been adopted by many European countries, the USA and several non-OECD countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Malawi, leading to vast increases in agrofuel crop production and land use change. Significantly, such mandates affect and create conflicts over access to, and use of, natural resources like land, food or water. Moreover, critics are concerned with the competition of agrofuels with food and fodder, the endangerment of primary forests and other high conservation value areas, and increase in intensive agricultural monoculture which can have severe socio-ecological impacts. Recently these issues have given rise to intense international and national debate over the role of agrofuels as a component of a “green economy” and of “sustainable development”. Besides conflicts over land and problematic agricultural practices, more fundamental issues are at stake in regard to

underlying political-economic, -social, and -ecological dynamics and interdependencies. Critical perspectives within Political Ecology address these issues by examining the complex relationship between society and nature, including social power relations at different scales, and analyzing the dynamics of agrofuel production and policies.

With the aim of bringing different perspectives together to create a more profound and nuanced understanding of the transnational Political Ecology of agrofuels, the one and half day workshop saw young researchers from various academic disciplines and countries offer insights from their work on both case study analysis and theoretical conceptualization. Around 50 participants discussed the research findings on agrofuels dynamics in and across different countries and regions as well as the theoretical, analytical and political implications deriving from current research activities.



The keynote speech on Thursday evening was held by **Prof. Dr. Markus Wissen** (Berlin School of Economics and Law/ HWR, Berlin), who introduced the field of Political Ecology by sketching out its origins, basic assumptions and central concepts. Political Ecology was explained as a critical perspective on the ecological crisis that insists on the inherently political character of environmental problems. Wissen further dwelled on key analytical concepts within Political Ecology such as power as understood by Marxist, Gramscian, Foucauldian and feminist approaches, the physical and social materiality of nature, and the notion of space with scale, place, territory, and networks as its different dimensions. He explained how these concepts can be used to examine power relations, the politicization of materialities and how these affect social relations of agrofuel production, as well as to analyze new frontiers and territorialities produced by processes such as land grabbing. Wissen emphasized the need for and merits of a Political Ecology perspective. He ended his lecture by discussing the current wave of valorisation and financialization of nature as a component of the globalization of nature and a Green Economy, which he assessed as a possible new hegemonic project and as a crisis regulation strategy for the multiple crises of capitalism.

On Friday morning, fieldwork focusing on social-ecological conflicts surrounding (the expansion of) biofuels was presented. **Anke Schaffartzik** (Alpen-Adria-Universität, Vienna) and **Christina Plank** (University of Vienna) presented their work on possible responses to the expansion of feedstock production for biofuels and trade at different levels and scales, focusing on socio-ecological conflicts. In their presentation they focused on their case study analysis currently undertaken in Ukraine, where they are analyzing the political-institutional and the biophysical dimensions of land use related conflicts. Schaffartzik and Plank responded to an essential conceptual challenge within Political Ecology by presenting a concept of conflict that looks at potentials for conflict, latent and manifest conflicts in the decision-making processes over the acquisition of land, and the use of land and agricultural products. For instance, in Ukraine there are conflicting interests at the national and the supranational level in regard to legal frameworks related to the blending of biofuels and the energy mix, in general.

Victoria Marín-Burgos (University of Twente, Enschede) discussed the case of oil palm expansion in Colombia, where the government strongly supports and fosters palm-oil based biodiesel use and production since 2004. She highlighted the rapid expansion of oil palm cultivation and critically assessed the social-ecological conflicts that result from it, which are rooted in the



competition for access to land between actors whose power and wealth are asymmetrically distributed. Marín-Burgos proved the political ecology character of the conflicts by pointing out the materiality of both the crops and the geographical area, and by presenting a concept of power linked to the notion of territorialization. Based on the “theory of access”, power is to be understood not only as control of societal interactions with the environment, but also as the ability to influence structural and relational mechanisms of access to resources such as technology, capital, markets and knowledge. Marín-Burgos pointed out that institutionalized credits and fiscal incentives were important drivers of the accelerated expansion of oil palm cultivation that is at the centre of these conflicts. She concluded that at least within the Colombian case that biofuels are not the only, and maybe not always the most relevant, factor when analyzing the complex relations between social-economic, cultural and environmental aspects that lead to conflict over land and territories.

While also analyzing social-ecological conflicts, **Carol Hunsberger** (Institute of Social Studies, The Hague) focused on competing discourses surrounding the promotion of *Jatropha* in Kenya. In her field work Hunsberger compared the experiences of small-scale farmers with the motivations and claims of NGO, government, private sector, donor, and research representatives. She identified strikingly different discourses of development ranging from a market-led to a livelihood-oriented discourse. According to Hunsberger's analysis, this duality of discourse produced competition, but also granted actors the flexibility to invoke *Jatropha* as a means of achieving a variety of objectives. At the same time the lack of reliable information about *Jatropha* created a climate of uncertainty, where conflicting views could spread unchecked. The control over discourse as a main form of power was further discussed by various speakers during the afternoon.



The afternoon lectures broadened the local political ecology perspective on agrofuels by presenting analyses of processes at the regional and transnational scale. **Dr. Oliver Pye** (University of Bonn) started off with his presentation on new social spaces created by, among other factors, the biofuel-driven expansion of palm oil across Southeast Asia. These spaces are characterized by a new ensemble of territory, place, scale and network, in which equalization at the global scale creates new geographical patterns of investment in fixed capital and precarious labor relations, as a consequence. Pye emphasized the importance of a scale perspective on globalized labor. In regard to territory and place, he explained how the Malaysian state criminalizes migrant workers by territorializing the plantations as national space, refusing citizen rights to migrant workers and attempting to outsource their reproduction across the border. Pye gave examples of how these processes and relations are being challenged by networks of migrant workers that produce transnational social spaces in which workers become empowered and develop means of everyday and collective resistance. In particular, these networks might even provide the potential to scale up labor organizing strategies in the palm oil industry so existing labor relations and the outsourcing of social reproduction on a global scale can be challenged.

Aaron Leopold (International Institute for Sustainable Development, IISD; University of Kassel) gave a lecture on competing discourses on biofuels in Brazil, the European Union and the United States over the course of the food vs. fuel debate in 2007/08. While the dominant, hegemonic discourse has changed, the production of biofuels has not been scaled back and biofuel policies have remained basically the same. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, Leopold aimed to explain the lack of change by examining different political economic justifications for biofuels production and support policies in the analyzed countries. He further pointed to hegemonic co-optation of resistance to biofuels through certification schemes, iLUC quantification, and 2nd generation biofuels, as another reason for the lack of change. Throughout his presentation Leopold stressed the importance of holding power over knowledge use and the need to examine underlying power relations behind political rhetoric and the industrial complex that constitutes a historic bloc within the biofuels arena.



The final speaker, **Kim Bizzarri** (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow) further explored these power relations by examining patterns and strategies of intra-elite communication and lobbying in Brussels. In particular, he looked at the influence of Brazilian interests in manufacturing a consensus around European biofuels policy. Bizzarri portrayed the tightly knit net of social relations through which policy actors come together to form hybrid (discourse) coalitions. He explained detailed linkages between UNICA, the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry Association and European decision-makers operating in Brussels through formal and informal channels of policy influence. Concerning the former, he pointed out that European Commission's advisory bodies (such as expert groups and technology platforms) have provided biofuels proponents with a privileged access to EU decision-makers. With

reference to the latter, UNICA's funding of universities and research institutes, such as the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) – one of Brussels's most influential think tanks – enabled biofuel proponents to shape the debate in their favor through the production of pseudo-scientific knowledge disseminated at the highest political level.

In the concluding session, **Dr. Kristina Dietz** and **Maria Backhouse** (Fair Fuels?, FU Berlin) summarized the main conceptual and theoretical challenges facing Political Ecology brought up in the presentations. They pointed out that the notion of conflict needs to be analyzed in relation to existing social contradictions like the division of capital and labor, among other points. Furthermore, they noted that the crucial role of agency needs to be more closely examined on various scales, as many presentations illustrated that the global scale is linked back to the local via the labor process. They concluded that the concepts of power, space and territory presented during the workshop and utilized by Political Ecology approaches seem particularly useful.

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