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# **The Production of Poverty and the Poverty of Production in the Amazon: Reflections from those at the Sharp End of Development**

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## **The Poverty of Development**

Few regions in the world have given rise to so much politico-ecological controversy and been associated with such high levels of uncertainty as the Amazon. Since the time of Francisco de Orellana (ca. 1511-1546), and his epic search for El Dorado, the Amazon has been known for an ‘extravagant’ geography, immense challenges and, potentially, even greater rewards. The region was considered the archetypical representation of the Garden of Eden by renaissance chroniclers and generations of explorers (Holanda 2000). Yet, after the economic boom because of a highly profitable rubber production at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there was an inescapable reversal to subsistence agriculture and barter economy (Bunker 1985). In the post-World War II period, the Amazon became one of the most disputed frontiers of Western modernity, a process that engulfed, but also recreated, territories, relationships and peoples. Particularly in its Brazilian section – which comprises around 67% of the Amazon River Basin – new development-related initiatives were put into effect by the military dictatorship and resulted in an increasing conversion of catchments and localities into hotspots of intense commodity production. The promise of rapid enrichment, often combined with cultural estrangement and sheer fascination, provided once again the rationale for violent conquest, eviction of existing communities and the expropriation of land, resources and livelihoods. Hegemonic relations of production and reproduction have deliberately disregarded ecological limits and aggressively incorporate nature into the logic of commodity production exactly because of the money to be made from the privatization of collective ecosystems and territorial resources (Ioris 2007). Far from being politically neutral, the product of such changes has been primarily accumulated in the hands of a coalition between traditional elites and emerging business sectors that is endorsed by local and national public authorities.

The aim of this article is to expand our understanding of the meaning and consequences of a poverty-making economy at the borders of expanding national development. Such critical

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discussion is important because, as pointed out by Santos (2014, viii), there is no global justice without global cognitive justice (as much as “there is no way of knowing the world better than by anticipating a better world.”). Instead of the mere absence of material means, empirical results will show that poverty is a relational phenomenon that arises from the selectiveness of productive activities and socioeconomic opportunities. Persistent levels of poverty and new structural inequalities are nothing else but the mirror image of development based on short-term gains, lasting negative impacts and commodification of nature. More importantly, poverty constitutes an integral feature of socioecological (or socionatural) interactions (after Castree 2002) which are deeply politicized and encapsulate class-based differences and the balance of power. The interactions between society and (the rest of) socionature bring the imprint of old and new forms of injustice, which are central driving-forces in the constant reshaping, and contestation, of space. For instance, governmental instruments (such as credit, subsidies and the granting of private property) and infrastructure investments (in the form of roads, ports, and warehouses) attracted different contingents of people to the Amazon, who have only marginally benefited from the process of development. At the same time, Amazonian biodiversity has been filled with inequalities and asymmetries spreading from local to regional and international scales of socioecological exchange. The reality is that capital, as a dominant social relation (Marx 1976), encroaches upon the Amazon to retransform the landscape, generates serious social and environmental impacts, and creates new signifiers according to its own priorities. Doesn’t matter if the forested land is crucial for the survival of people and ecosystems, because land [i.e. nature], as capital can be exploited and increased “just as much as all the other instruments of production.” (...) The tragedy derives from the fact that “[l]and as capital is no more eternal than any other capital” (Marx 1956, 185; emphasis added).

The text will specifically revisit the basis and the genesis of poverty in the lower Tapajós River Basin (a tributary of the Amazon River), which is one of the Brazilian areas under particularly intense development pressures (e.g. plantation farms, hydropower, mining, roads and navigation). Our examination is based on research carried out between 2010 and 2011, with additional follow-up visits in subsequent years, undertook to investigate the mechanisms of power distribution and the environmental (i.e. socioecological) contradictions of mainstream policy-making. The starting point was the recognition that poverty is a location specific phenomenon that directly reflects foreign influences and the intervention of the national government (Pogge 2008). In addition, the research required the systematic study of the interconnections between

environmental change and the everyday experiences of hardship in the areas under study. The main unit of analysis was precisely the relationships between people, things and processes, that is, the reality should be conceived relationally (these relations cover and include what is related) and the condition for the existence of things and society are taken to be part of what they are (Ollman 1976). The research had also to consider different materialities and symbolic constructions of deforestation in areas which have specific issues related to poverty and development. Such methodological approach facilitated the investigation of the meaning of poverty and human vulnerabilities in a context of environmental changes and ecosystem degradation. Research findings will demonstrate that the politics of development and poverty in the Amazon don't happen about or around the forest, but with and through the forest. It will make evident that development is not a monolithic phenomenon, but it is full of cracks and intricacies where political reactions can flourish.

One of the main goals of the project was to give voice to 'forest dependent people' (i.e. low-income communities living in close contact with Amazon ecosystems and who marginally benefit from the process of development) in order to articulate their concerns over degradation and deforestation. The intention was to go beyond the usual stereotypes that typically portray the poor as passive, disengaged from government plans or guilty of forest degradation and social unrest. The research methods included participant observation and engagement with rural communities, one regional workshop in November 2010 (attended by local government officials, community development officers, community representatives, research institutions and NGOs), analysis of documents and policies, and 64 semi-structured interviews (respondents agreed to the disclosure of their names). It basically followed a participatory action research approach oriented towards social change through a collaborative interaction especially with residents in the extractive reserve (RESEX) Tapajós-Arapiuns near Santarém. The reserve, on the left margin of the lower Tapajós River, was established in 1998 and contains 72 communities (with around 18,000 people, the majority are descendants of migrants from the drought-ridden Northeast of Brazil who came to the Amazon to work in the rubber trade and eventually settled in the region); their reliance on extractive activities, the production of artisanal goods and subsistence farming provide an evocative contrast to the growing number of soybean farms, miners and timber companies in the region. Through a persistent dialogue with people living in and near the forest in the case study areas it became clear that local concepts of poverty are, for many, associated with urbanization, restricted access to cultural opportunities, lack of political space, and destruction of ecosystems

and, ultimately, the Amazon at large. Before examining the opinions and experiences of those at the sharp end of development, it will be necessary to briefly describe the complex Tapajós's geography.

### **Developing and Impoverishing the Tapajós River Basin**

This section will examine the main drivers of regional development and the most relevant socioecological pressures in the Tapajós River Basin, an area with around 490,000 km<sup>2</sup>, relatively well preserved forests and home to only one million people. The Tapajós is located in the Eastern section of the Amazon (in the States of Pará and Mato Grosso)<sup>2</sup> and formed by the confluence of two other rivers, Juruena and Teles Pires. The influence of global market demands is certainly now new, as the region played an important role in the history of colonization and natural resource exports. The Portuguese occupation of the Tapajós basin started in the 1630s and the main settlement, Santarém, was founded in 1755. Later, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was a main producer of natural (vegetal) rubber needed primarily by the car industry. Rubber was the first agroindustrial business in the Amazon and responded for the circulation of significant sums of capital, which were nonetheless accumulated in the hands of the powerful tradesmen in Manaus and Belém and international banks and corporations. That led Henry Ford to embark upon an ambitious project of high-tech rubber tree cultivation, which in a few decades became a monumental failure and was eventually closed down in 1945 with great economic losses (Dean 1987). Despite Ford's unrivaled capitalist brilliance, the enterprise carried out in the Tapajós was notoriously inadequate due to the stubborn disdain for local agroecological features. With the virtual collapse of commercial rubber production, those involved in the extraction and commercialization either left the region or turned back to subsistence activity and had to rely on forested ecosystems for their survival. What is relevant for the present discussion is to note that their condition didn't necessarily get worse, but the locals were able to subsist exactly because of their socioecological knowledge and multiple interconnections. Living in close contact with the forest didn't constitute a position of hopeless vulnerability and poverty, but represented a concrete alternative in a context of structural inequalities and sustained socioecological exploitation (i.e. of nature and the workforce).

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<sup>2</sup> A small tract of land is in the State of Amazonas in the municipality of Maués.

During the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), the Amazon was involved in large-scale development plans and geopolitical initiatives according to the conservative ideology and the conspiracy fears (almost paranoid) of the ruling generals. Instead of agrarian reform and land distribution in the rest of the country, the federal government advanced a series of relocation projects to bring landless peasants to the Eastern and Southern sections of the Amazon (who essentially increased the number of poor social groups in the region, especially by those who subsequently lost their land to larger farmers). More importantly, there were also tax-exemption and incentive programs to stimulate the establishment of large farms and logging companies. Slash and burn was the most common method to open primary forests with the high-valued timber sold to timber companies and pastures introduced to support cattle ranching. A main problem was that cattle production competed with local food and subsistence agriculture and invariably undermined biodiversity and ultimately the social reproduction of the poorest social strata (Castro 2007). Rural expansion policies were complemented with the construction of long highways crossing the forest and integrating different states. One of the main roads was the BR-163, opened in 1974 to connect Santarém, in the mouth of the Tapajós River, with the capital of the Mato Grosso State, Cuiabá. Since its construction, the road was perceived as a serious risk factor for environmental conservation and indigenous reserves due to its location at the forefront of the expansion of cattle, grain and timber extraction. As an area of strategic importance to the national economy increasingly dependent on agribusiness, Mato Grosso is today one of the most dynamic crop production centers in the world and, in that context, an improved BR-163 could significantly reduce transport costs.

With the increase of land prices in Mato Grosso and in other Brazilian states, the lower Tapajós offered a new window of opportunity for the same phenomenon to take place once again. More than 60 years after the end of Ford's rubber plantation, soybean began to be cultivated around Santarém, as the result of a convergence of cheap land, government support, technological improvements and flexibilization of environmental regulation (Pereira and Leite 2011). Soybean, as one of the main commodities exported by Brazil today, is highly emblematic of the type of development that is being promoted and, crucially, the politico-economic priorities and the hierarchy of benefits and beneficiaries. The cultivation of soybean in the lower Tapajós has increased substantially after the soy giant Cargill constructed a controversial export harbor terminal in Santarém in 2003, which was associated with conflicts and court disputes since its announcement and turbulent approval (Costa 2012). In 2014 alone, more than two million tons of

grains were exported through Cargill's port in Santarém. Upstream along the Tapajós River, in a location known as Miritituba, the TNC Bunge started to operate other navigation facilities to ship soybean to the international ports located at the mouth of the Amazon River.<sup>3</sup> It is expected that the so-called the 'North Exit' for soybean produced in the Amazon – combining better roads and fluvial navigation (from Miritituba, it is anticipated that 20 million tons will be exported every year) – could reduce transport costs by 30% (when compared to ports in the Southeastern coast of Brazil). Yet, there are crucial parallels between rubber and soybean farming, in the sense that are both activities that rely on the disorganization of existing lifestyles, on the predatory appropriation of nature and even on racist, discriminatory attitudes of newcomers against the locals, non-white populations (Costa 2012).

Farming expansion followed a pattern of (legal and illegal) occupation of cheap land, production intensification, and then migration to new areas. The purpose of land grabbers (commonly identified as *grileiros*) is to secure massive gains from speculation and sudden increases in the price of land. Farmland around Santarém had the highest percentage of price increase in 2010: between 88 and 111% in one single year (FNP 2011, in Costa 2012). Land grabbing in Brazil is unique as it involves both foreign and national capitals mobilized through the state ideology of development and national security (Oliveira 2013). Roads, government incentives and weak rule of law have provided fertile ground for the perpetuation of land grabbing, which has been a widespread practice in the Tapajós by faking titles, corrupting officials and unrestricted use of violence. Only between 1996 and 2001, 475 social activists were murdered in the State of Pará (London and Kelly 2007). In 2005, the American Catholic sister Dorothy Mae Stang, a protector of the local poor and the forest, was murdered after repeated threats from loggers and landowners. The escalation of land price only aggravates the displacement and violence against peasants and indigenous groups. Violent conflicts are common between gold miners and indigenous groups, as in the case of the Mundurukus who still wait for the regularization of their land. On 28 Nov 2014 a delegation occupied the office of the Brazilian indigenous service FUNAI in Itaituba to complain about the situation and, with no solution in sight, decided to initiate the demarcation themselves, obviously leading to more controversy.

There is a widespread sense of lawlessness and persistent tensions associated with land tenure disputes, illegal deforestation and the exploitation of forest and mineral resources (Zaitch

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<sup>3</sup> In 2014, more than ten other companies were avidly waiting to be licensed to start naval operation in Miritituba.

et al. 2014). For instance, the Tapajós is also the most important gold panning area in Brazil. Before 1978, the activity was carried out as rudimentary mining, but production then increased with introduction of machines and motors. The increasing price of gold in recent years only attracts more artisanal gold miners [*garimpeiros*] to the region. In addition, there is growing pressure for the construction of new hydroelectricity schemes in the Amazon, and the Tapajós in particular, which are considered the main untapped reserve of renewable energy in Brazil. The contentious, inefficient and hugely expensive Belo Monte dam is currently under construction in the Xingu River (a project constantly stopped due to lawsuits, legal disputes and contract renegotiations), but initial assessments indicate that the Tapajós could receive 42 schemes and reach a total capacity of more than 30,000 MW. The main schemes planned to start generating electricity by 2020 will be São Luiz do Tapajós (6,133 MW) and Jatobá (2,336 MW). One crucial difference when compared with other areas in the Amazon is that the Tapajós contains large plots of relatively undisturbed forests, several conservation reserves and indigenous reserves, all under threat by hydropower. But several initiatives of the federal government demonstrate the perverse direction of its policies for the basin, as in the case of the law that reduced the territory of the Amazon National Park and other eleven neighboring parks (Law 12,678 of 2012) in order to facilitate the approval and licensing of the proposed hydropower projects. In 2014, a series of debates took place in the Tapajós to discuss the plans, but (as in the case of the Belo Monte dam) public consultation is highly controlled and doesn't leave much space for any critical assessment and consideration of alternatives. On the contrary, local communities and their allied have denounced the violation of ILO Convention 169 that deals with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples (Gazeta de Santarém 2013).

If in previous decades the Brazilian military deliberately tried to develop the region through large-scale, state-led economic production, the conversion of Brazil into one of the key emerging markets (epitomized as one of the BRICS countries) has fueled a new 'rush for the North' involving both corporations and individuals. After stabilizing the economy according to neoliberal monetary policies in the 1990s, the federal government introduced the 'Forward Brazil' [*Avançar Brasil*] development program with several incentives to private entrepreneurs backed by the state. The more recent administrations, under the populist Presidents Lula and Dilma, replaced those strategies with similar initiatives specifically focused on the recovery of economic growth (under the suggestive title Growth Acceleration Program – PAC). The program included several infrastructure projects for the Amazon and the Tapajós, including paving the BR-163 highway



(initiated in 2009 and is planned to be concluded in 2015, despite the fact that socioenvironmental mitigation measures are lagging far behind engineering works). Lula also expanded existing conditional cash transfer schemes (conditional because they require beneficiaries to fulfill specified conditions in order to continue receiving grants), especially the ‘Family Allowance’ [*Bolsa Família*] that benefited millions of Brazilian families and helped his party (PT) to remain in power and win four general elections so far. In the communities of the lower Tapajós River, government alleviation schemes have increased the purchase capacity of people who previously had no regular source of income.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it is possible to detect a clear criticism of the financial dependency and subtle discrimination promoted by the same programs. Although the motto of Dilma Rousseff’s administration is ‘Rich Country is Country without Poverty’ [*País Rico é País sem Pobreza*], action against poverty led by the federal government represents a series of short-lived mitigation schemes that fall short of questioning development trends and the legitimacy of huge social inequalities. As much as in the past, economic growth is taken for granted, reified as the inescapable imperative of a country that ‘deserves’ to be a new global power and where the Amazon cannot represent an ‘obstacle’ to national ambitions.

Minimum income schemes (i.e. means tested transfers) introduced by the federal government have not been immune to repeated criticism by other groups of the supposed indolence and inactivity of the local poor. Such (evidently unfair) blame of the poor hides the fact that such groups are those historically marginalized by the process of development and systematically exploited during colonization, rubber production, agriculture expansion and urban expansion. In reality, the same social groups there were subjugated and benefited little from economic activities put forward for the Amazon by the main political and economic centers of Brazil are then exogenously labeled as poor in need of more of the same development, combined with end-of-the pipe poverty alleviation schemes, as in the case of the ‘family allowance’. On the other hand, schemes like these may help to momentarily address poverty but in practice serve to legitimize and consolidate the overall pattern of unequal development. In effect, state interventions to develop the Amazon have systematically undervalued the lives and the needs of traditional communities, peasants and indigenous groups, even when the alleged goals are to improve environmental conservation and legalize land ownership. The Sustainable Amazon Plan (PAS in Portuguese) launched by the Brazilian government in 2008 replicates old problems of centralization, populism

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<sup>4</sup> In 2011, another program was introduced for those working in extractive activities in the Brazilian Amazon (called Green Stipend) and promises around US\$ 150/month per family.

and market fundamentalism. In 2009 the national government introduced the program Legal Land [*Terra Legal*] to regularize public areas illegally occupied in order to formally offset land grabbing and deforestation at the transition zone between the savanna [*cerrado*] and the forest. In practice, the program served to undermine agrarian reforms elsewhere in Brazil and led to increasing land concentration and environmental degradation because it created similar market-centered mechanisms than those available for large-scale agribusiness (Oliveira 2013).

Overall, the Tapajós is now a decisive battlefield between, on the one side, the preservation of the Amazon as claimed by national and global NGOs and, on the other, powerful pressures for the expansion of large-scale hydropower generation, gold mining (especially gold-panning) and agribusiness production. In that challenging context, the governor of the State of Pará, Simão Jatene, publicly declared that the mistakes of past development seem to be once again replicated and, while the pressures constantly increase and the sociospatial inequalities are magnified, there is no clear strategy for the Amazon and a growing gap between national and local authorities (interview at the TV Cultura's program *Roda Viva*, 22 Dec 2014). In any case, while the state administration has recorded recent increases in life expectancy and GDP per capita in the Tapajós region, improvements in those aggregate indicators have been also associated with increases in the Gini index of social inequality from 0.488 to 0.499 between 2008 and 2011 (IDESP 2013). More significantly, what has been happening in the Tapajós is an integral element of the advance of capitalism in the country, as a long, gradual reorganization of economy, society and the State, as described by the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes. The author argued that a 'bourgeois revolution' in the periphery of capitalism is "essentially a political phenomenon" given the diversity of interests among capitalist groups (Fernandes 2005, 343). One of its concrete results is the widespread feeling of uneasiness about public policies and the devastating impact of private initiatives constantly encroaching upon new territories.

From the above, it is not difficult to see that in recent decades the Tapajós region was further incorporated into national development strategies as the source of exotic and valuable goods (including plant and mineral commodities), navigation and hydropower energy, as well as the deliberate deposit of poor people who could not find a better life in other parts of the country. The poor were both attracted to the area and then systematically contained through a combination of low-paid jobs, political repression, the use of forest resources for survivability and, increasingly, targeted poverty alleviation measures. Approaching it from a critical political ecology perspective, the region has been transformed, in highly contested ways, by both productive, profitable

interventions and by the propagation of an economic model based on the twin processes of exploitation and inequality. In that sense, the insightful reflection of rural residents (characterized here as ‘forest-dependent poor’) helps to elucidate the obstacles to escape poverty and discuss the possibilities of change.

### **Poverty as a Mirror of Wider Socioecological Tensions: Learning from those at the (Physical and Social) Margins of the Tapajós River**

The trajectory of development in the Amazon, and in the Tapajós River Basin in particular, raises several questions about the consequences of large-scale changes and the reinforcement of mechanisms of socionatural exploitation that, in the end, produce new waves of poverty and marginalization. Extensive areas in the Amazon have been converted into true landscapes of impoverishment where the prospects of a better life for the majority of the population are undermined by the very ‘success’ of economic growth (which is largely based on new extractivist activities controlled by powerful business groups). Poverty and affluence have evolved in interconnected ways through the transformations carried out in the Amazon in a manner that, as long denounced by Engels (1848), “poverty and pauperism have been openly declared (...) to be necessary elements of the present industrial system and the national wealth”. Whereas the mainstream discourse considers wealth as the logical result of entrepreneurialism and efficient exploitation of territorial resources (specially mining, logging and farming), poverty effectively springs from corrupt relations of production and the systematic denial of justice (see George 1979). In official documents and mass media articles, the poor are typically located in a passive position, occupying spaces with clearly defined problems and in need of further integration with apparently thriving enterprises (e.g. The Economist 2013). Any interpretation of poverty which does not conform to the pre-established explanations and ongoing policies tends to be overlooked and subsequently removed from the public debate (Ioris 2012).

Poverty is a vast topic and certainly it cannot be exhausted here. Yet, based on qualitative research methods and engagement with locals (mainly in the RESEX area across the river from Santarém), two decisive lessons were learned and deserve special attention, respectively, about the disputed meaning of poverty in the Amazon and its persistence exactly due to the socioecological contradictions of development. Although only schematically considered in the present article, these two main findings help to inform a critical rethinking of poverty in the rich ecosystems of the Amazon. The *first lesson* starts with the recognition that, despite the fact that a multifaceted

ontology of poverty has been well established in the critical academic literature, the intricate relationships between poverty-making and the transformation of ecosystems under fast development pressures need yet to be better understood. It is even less common to come across analyses that interpret poverty metabolized through the appropriation and dealing with the forest in a way that incorporates socionatural change into the resistance against social and political inequalities. The causes and consequences of poverty are rarely interrogated from the perspective of those living in close contact with forested ecosystems and witnessing their fast conversion into hotspots of economic development.

Interestingly, the very meaning of poverty for the locals differs from official interpretation of national and international organizations. For instance, people in the RESEX demonstrate to be aware of major social differences, but normally don't see themselves as poor, at least not according to the conventional account of poverty. They may not have had all the tools and goods of present day society (as they can easily see on the television, which has a widespread audience), however their condition is one of basic needs satisfaction and, what is closely related, great collaboration across families and communities. As said in the interviews:

“We are poor because we are, but we have what we need.” (Manoel Moreira)

“There are people with difficulties, but I don't think there is any poverty here. Everyone has a reasonable life.” (Rubens dos Santos)

Poverty in the forest is therefore regarded as relative, lived and reacted upon through survival measures and the construction or retention of particular identities. It was also possible to uncover sophisticated and surprising elaborations on their condition and the opportunities provided by the interaction with the forest:

“Well poor, for me, poverty, for me, well there is poor and there is hard up. Today we are hard up, but we are not poor. A poor person has no home, no roof over his head, that's a poor person. I might not have anything today, but I will have tomorrow. Here at home it might have nothing in the morning, but by mid-day I'll have it. If I don't have what I need in the afternoon, I'll find a way get it by the evening. So we are not poor, the poor are those who don't have warm clothes, who don't have a source of income, who go around begging. That's what being poor is, we say, look at him poor thing, you don't say, look at that poor rich man. You feel sorry for him because he is poor. The word “poor” for me is very strong.” (José Silva)

The poor are not simply people ‘stuck’ in the forest and needing help, but have dynamic lives, with a strong sense of place and able to construct vibrant socioecological relations (Campbell

2012). In many of our interviews, people stated that the forest offers opportunities and provide for, but that the help offered by the forest requires working, and working with, ecosystems. Working the forest and with the forest are the main forms of getting by or escaping more acute conditions of deprivation. The material conditions of living are thus connected to specific forms of cultural knowledge, skills and social contacts valued by marginalized groups (Appadurai 2002; Robinson and Oppenheim 1998). Instead of the relatively easy discourse of environmentalists about protecting the forest, the environmental ethics of the poor is based on physical effort and appropriate knowledge:

“I used to work in the fields, then we came here and I worked on the fields here too, on the clearings. But then I decided to get into carpentry, I made a lot of canoes. (...) I think that [the forest] helps them escape from poverty. How? Working on the thing, you know, working, planting, reaping – then you have something.” (Valdomiro Batista)

This form of grassroots environmental ethics is put in practice through the constant and almost daily reworking of the forest, in a perennial practice that incorporate the condition of poverty into socionatural relations. The forest ecosystems can provide some reassurance against the widespread sense of uneasiness about the rapid appropriation and conversion of the forest by large farmers, miners and engineering companies. That is articulated against the static and prejudiced conceptualization of poverty by public agencies, which in many cases is instrumental in reducing the political role of the poor and their ability to modify their present situation. That is why alternative interpretations of the meaning and consequences of a poverty-making geography, as those articulated by residents in the RESEX, offer a broader understanding of poverty as a complex set of practices and experiences which unfold through interrelationships between local cultures, opportunities and lifestyles (Alcock 2004; Danziger 2010; Room 1999).

However, even if the locals don't identify themselves with the ordinary characterization of poverty, it doesn't mean that they don't perceive their inferior condition when compared with other rural and urban groups. But their protest is less about poverty in itself and more directly related to their role in the wider process of transformation and development (see also Barbier 2012). They react against the hegemonic tendency to convert highly valuable land resources to benefit mainly wealthy elites, thus exacerbating problems of inequality and discrimination while at the same time impeding economy-wide development:

“(...) we don't have everything we need to survive here. We have difficulties in reaching what we really want. But almost everyone here works and is able to support themselves with their work.

(...) I think that for us who live a long way from the large capitals or towns, we depend on a lot of things that end up demotivating us to move forward because we have difficulties in these processes...” (Pedro Soares)

Local residents are fully aware of the value of their knowledge and the potential of their activities to overcome poverty, but have also very clear the many obstacles they inevitably face:

“Well, it didn’t work because, like I said, the project comes, they work on it, but then we don’t have the money to keep it going. Just so you have an idea, a bee-keeping project. We learned the technique, but when we had to start working we didn’t even have the money to buy the boxes. Then there was the project for rustic furniture. Was it a good Project? Yes, it was. But afterwards, we tried to drag it on but you just can’t do it like that. So that’s what happens with the projects...” (José Silva)

Most of the criticism is directed against the government and its close association, and convenient alliance, with the stronger players (timber, miners and agribusiness companies in particular):

“Because the government doesn't want to see where the poverty is. It only looks towards where there is more money. And we suffer the consequences here.” (Antônio Tavares)

“For some of us the changes have brought good things, for others no. For example, for us who don’t have the means to work with a lot of timber. A while ago there was a timber association here, there was plenty of wood around here, now there isn’t. It can’t be our main source of income because we don’t have the machinery to cut much down. But for the big companies it brings a lot of money because they have the materials, the government helps them a lot and they have what they need. The weaker ones are the poor, the business man is not weak.” (José Santos)

This leads us to the *second main lesson*, which is the genesis and prolongation of poverty located in the socioecological contradictions of development. The imbricate dialectics between wealth and poverty is mediated, and engraved on, mounting socioecological impacts resulting from the private appropriation of the commons. Instead of being simply anti-nature, the most harmful attribute of the process of development is its anti-commons imperative, that is, the dominant model of development (based on the apparent and misleading ‘abundance of nature’) depends on the conversion of collectively owned and jointly managed tracts of the Amazon into the sphere of private property relations what is needed to allow the simultaneous exploitation of people and resources. Development is promoted as a remedy to poverty but in effect it is simultaneously anti-poor and hostile to the commons. This disturbing convergence between anti-poverty and anti-poor tendencies is explained exactly because of a third, resulting pole of negativity, that is, the anti-

commons ontological basis of development. This happens in strike contrast to the largely communal world-view of the locals, for whom nature is the ultimate ‘owner’ of the land (interview with Vianeí Castro). Among the locals, the feeling that their hardship is connected with environmental degradation and labor exploitation due to the destructive intervention of new, powerful players is clear, for example, in the following extracts:

“We feel it for the forests. Not here, it doesn’t happen much here, but where these big companies come into the forest we feel that, it may not be causing problems now, but we already feel that it could do later on.” (Joniclei Nunes)

“In our region where it’s just the little guy, the forest is not affected. But do you know who makes the situation worse? It’s the big companies. They are the ones that are killing subsistence farming. They do everything in large quantities, they clear large areas and we are the ones that get into trouble. Here I can only clear four hectares, but the business man clears 200 [hectares]. Who degraded the forest more, him or me? And that’s the thing. So I have just a little to eat, and he buys big car, he drives around and we are no foot, because I can’t grow any more than this. I can’t even buy a bull. There was this project from the government, they gave me a cart. It’s still there today. And then one day one of them comes up to me and says, “So?”, so I say to him, “It’s over there. You give me a cart but you don’t give me a bull to pull it!” Do you think I’m going to turn into a bull to pull the cart? That won’t do. So that’s it. (...) our agriculture doesn’t affect the forest.” (José Silva)

“(...) well, because the devastation of the forest...a lot of streams are drying up, because they destroy the forest. And the heat, why do we have that? It’s very hot....” (Odila Guimarães)

Poverty is generated through the advance of mainstream development in the region and the reduction of socioecological complexities to the monodimensional sphere of market transactions. Once the commons were no longer protected, the stronger and more opportunistic competitors are able to exclude others from the access to now scarce, previously shared, resources. The implicit acceptance of those tensions makes sense in the long anti-commons practice of development, as conceptualized in the post-World War II period, that typically associated it with the intensification of the production of goods and services according to the patterns of consumption (as well as waste) of Western societies. From being a remote land of exuberant biological formations that fascinated explorers for many centuries, the Amazon was brought to the center of national development policies that aimed to replicate similar technological, institutional and approaches. Contrasting with colonial and post-colonial times, when the riches were captured and removed, conventional development required the consolidation of private property inside the region and the reorganization of social relations in function of the political power of private land, mines and industries (or similarly in function of state-owned property serving capitalist expansion, such as dams, roads and

ports). The anti-commons dynamics of Amazonian development is actually an expression of the wider phenomenon of alienation of humans from their product activity, social context and socionatural condition. As argued by Marx (1988, 83), private property is the “material, summary expression of alienated labor”; furthermore, private property embraces both the relation of the worker to work (and to the product of his/her labor) and the relation of the non-worker (the capitalist) to the worker and also the product of his/her labor.

The devastating impacts of the growth of private property institutions become evident in the growing erosion of subsistence, communal practices originally based on complex forest and ecosystem management. The risks associated with that were point out:

“Before, for example, fishing was easier. It was easy to fish around here, very easy. And today you don't see it because predatory fishing still goes on today. (...) Our water was very clean, crystal clear, today it's polluted. [This is also related to] the timber merchants that showed up (...)” (Milton Barreto)

Beyond the focus on efficiency by economists working on anti-commons theory (e.g. Heller 1998), development as anti-commons has codified inequality and served to disseminate poverty in the region. Socioecological transformations under the influence of development policies have unfolded through eco-class-race struggles that ultimately propagate and reinforce a poverty-making geography (Isla 2009). Because of powerful anti-commons pressures, the forest has been brutally altered (in symbolic and material terms) from its long-established, dynamic condition giving rise to both environmental disruption and social exploitation. Araghi (2009) observes that, according to Marx, it is the category of ‘estranged labor’ – i.e. the exploitation of workers for the accumulation of surplus value – that explains the structural dualism, and distancing, between society and nature.

The main promoter and guarantor of anti-commons trends has evidently been the national state and its increasingly sophisticated combination of the development agenda and weak environmental policies contained by a vague idea of sustainability (Ioris 2014). The material consequence of a strong anti-commons ideology and associated practices is to leave the state in charge of the most decisive pressures on socioecological systems, at the same time that it has to negotiate the rate and the distribution of negative impacts. In other words, the hegemonic privatizing force not only shapes development and produces poverty, but has also consequences in terms of the distortions of environmental conservation policies. Supposedly innovative



approaches to forest management adopted under the canon of environmental governance have likewise offered narrow, formalized solutions (e.g. carbon certification), which may be relevant to environmentalists and commercial land managers but are less relevant to the forest dependent poor. Schemes that deal with environmental conservation tend to be top-down and highly prescriptive, rarely involving community participation at the local level and in meaningful ways. Such programs are blighted by limited structure and coherence, and fraught with the lack of cross-institutional communication, while gaps in implementation and fragmented delivery aggravate deforestation and perpetuate poverty. The same governments that introduce environmental legislation and establish nature reserves constantly formulate economic incentives and construct roads and infrastructure that lead to further land concentration and aggravate conflicts. In practical terms, the anti-commons commitments of the state, essential for the success and expansion of mainstream development, are inherently antagonistic to the conservation of forest ecosystems and the elimination of poverty-driven socioecological relations.

### **Resisting and Denouncing Development: Socionatural Identity and Politics**

The previous section discussed the context-specific meaning of poverty and the anti-commons basis of development making use of the experiences and the reactions of communities living in the Tapajós basin. An examination of those two fundamental, and synergistically connected, processes help us to understand the politicized ecology of everyday life and the failure to fulfill demands that not easily fit in the mainstream agenda of economic growth and regional integration. According to this official agenda, development has to be promoted through intense resource exploitation and the 'productive' use of land, which have the perverse consequence of creating and maintaining multiple vulnerabilities. At the same time, efforts to alleviate poverty are, by and large, hampered by an overly simplistic representation of economic development and of the multiple scales across which drivers of poverty and environmental degradation operate. While some government interventions have brought positive but localized results, as a whole, investments and assistance programs have failed to produce the desired recognition of wider social rights and the correspondent valorization of the socionatural features of the Amazon. The poor are stereotyped and assumed to be culturally backward and incapable of escaping poverty on their own.

Beyond any mainstream consideration of the causes and remedies for poverty, the deprived condition of rural communities is really the outcome of a powerful hegemony that has been applied

simultaneously to both them and the forest. This prevailing direction of economic development does not diminish the value people attach to community life and their crucial connections with the land. On the contrary, the impasse of development and poverty-making will only be overcome when substantive solutions that can be found through contextual, place-based approaches to resources and socionatural relations. Reworking the forest and with the forest – for example, producing subsistence food, artisanal artifacts and other objects that can be sold in local or national markets – constitutes an element of the concrete alternative to the perverse anti-commons trends of mainstream development. The results of our research directly indicate that communities in the Amazon cleverly associate, in a highly politicized way, the value of the forest with the value of their own labor, in a way that all spheres of value (intrinsic, use and exchange value) are inextricably linked (see also Kovel 2014 for the importance of a critical epistemology of values).

As a concluding point, it is relevant to observe that most scholars have examined the poor according to their own intellectual biases and academic commitments, allowing the poor only an instrumental role as holders of limited political agency. It was denounced by Rancière (2004, 81) that even radical authors, when dealing with class consciousness, reduce such groups simply to their revolutionary duty, what in practice “is nothing else than the negation of the worker.” The philosopher addresses the apparent dilemma of the needed transformation of the world being pursued exactly by a small group of people who prefigure, fight for and, ultimately, deserve a better life. But Rancière only treats this impasse as a purely politico-economic problem, while in reality the main challenge is profoundly socionatural and politico-ecological. The main argument here is that the agency of the poor (or the proletariat) is not based on their destitution or class identity, but derives primarily from their socioecological identity and vital interconnections with the rest of nature. Equally, it will never be possible to overcome poverty without confronting the hegemonic forces that persistently undervalue the socionatural whole and accumulates capital from the deliberate fragmentation and exploration of socionature.

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