
Analysing the Discourse of 'Green' Capitalism: The Meaning of Nature in 'Nature-Based'

The term 'nature-based solutions,' in the context of the exclusionary and predatory projects that gather behind it, reveals something fundamental. Western civilization has based much of its domination on its troubled and hostile relationship with nature: an exploitable resource and something to venerate as untouched and 'pure.'

Discourse and development

The power of discourse lies in its ability to establish 'regimes of truth'. When philosophers, sociologists or linguists use the term *discourse*, they generally refer to a set of social and linguistic practices that legitimize certain kinds of knowledge, consolidate certain notions, problem definitions, worldviews etc. in a way that they end up being accepted by society as if they were self-evident. A central element for the establishment of such truth regimes are dichotomies – pairs of opposite, mutually exclusive terms – like, for example, 'sane' versus 'insane', 'normal' versus 'abnormal', 'developed' versus 'underdeveloped'. The truth regime serves to determine what can legitimately be said and by whom. By establishing such a regime, a discourse institutes and solidifies certain power relations. Discourse analysis, as introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the late 1960s, (1) seeks to reveal the truth-power nexus of a particular discourse in order to dismantle it, to deconstruct the concepts that have been constructed and naturalised through it.

Applying this approach, Colombian thinker Arturo Escobar (2) exposed the power relations within the discourse of 'development' implemented after the second world war, between industrialized countries and the so-defined 'third world'. By producing a notion of 'wealth' as something that could be quantified and measured in terms of per capita income or gross national product, peoples whose economies were not primarily based on money – like traditional livelihoods and subsistence communities – were now perceived as 'poor', and bringing development to them as a moral obligation of the 'first world'. The wave of development projects over the next decades gave western industries access to natural resources and created new outlets for them by introducing consumer culture in the global South.

In the 1980s, the disastrous consequences of globalised capitalist economic growth could no longer be ignored, and the adjective 'sustainable' was prefixed to the word development. New narratives needed to be created by development agencies and big NGOs about peasants, indigenous peoples, women and the environment. In reality though, the 'sustainable development' projects were implemented in a top-down manner, resulting in rural communities being invaded by environmental specialists, forest engineers, anthropologists, etc., who came to 'teach' them how to use their lands in a 'sustainable' way. In essence, these projects and programs reiterate the paradigm of economic growth and reproduce neo-colonial power relations until today.

The discourse of 'green' capitalism

More recently new and somehow different discursive constructions have emerged. Twenty or thirty

years ago terms such as sustainability, biodiversity or emission reduction were used to suggest a scientific foundation of projects. During the last ten years, however, more technically vague and audience-pleasing, business-friendly expressions have increasingly come to the fore.

‘Green economy’ was propagated ten years ago as a new economic model, including a huge range of technologies – from solar energy to carbon trade – conveying the general idea, that capitalist economy is not a problem, but the solution. (3) Likewise, the idea of ‘circular bioeconomy’ (4) evokes associations with the harmonic circle of life and promises to save the planet through valuation of ‘natural capital’ and a transition to the ‘butterfly economy.’ (5) Also recently, the idea of ‘nature-based solutions’ is intensively being promoted as a supposedly new model for combating climate change and providing “human well-being and biodiversity benefits.” (6) The massive introduction of such ecological-economical all-purpose terms indicates, that the ‘sustainable development’ discourse, as described by authors like Arturo Escobar in the 1990s, is now in a different new phase and that it would more aptly be described as the discourse of ‘green’ capitalism.

So what is the reason for this change? What are the new economic and power interests that demand the adaptation of the truth regime?

The typical sustainable development projects of the 1990s, following the motto “use it or lose it”, sought to make economic use of nature by physically extracting products from protected areas, like non-timber forest products (e.g. latex, brazil nuts) or ‘sustainably harvested’ timber. Projects in the last decade, by contrast, are increasingly driven by interests in environmental and climate compensation. By this logic, in protected areas, in order for them to serve as a pawn for destruction or pollution in other areas, any human interference with so-called ‘ecosystem services’ (e.g. carbon stockage, biodiversity preservation) that are to ‘compensate’ for destruction of the same ‘service’ elsewhere, must be minimised or interdicted. What distinguishes current projects from previous ones are new mechanisms of appropriation. Environmental and climate compensation extract commercial value from nature by ‘virtualizing’ it. The so-called ‘ecosystem services,’ once quantified, are considered interchangeable. By this means, without anything being physically extracted or produced, ‘financial assets’ are created from the land in the form of certificates.

The foundational logic of such projects is not only flawed (since pay-to-pollute is not a solution), (7) but also deeply inhumane, once it ultimately aims at the criminalization and eviction of traditional peoples from their land.

In order to conceal this hardly defensible underlying rationale and its flaws, the discursive production has to be split: On the one hand, there is the highly technical jargon in technical papers, largely incomprehensible to lay people, about assessing ‘anthropic impact’ (i.e. human-induced disturbances) in ecosystems, along with calculations of emissions or biodiversity losses supposedly reduced or avoided by a project. This discursive strand is understandable only for a small group of consultants and technicians tasked with making this new form of extraction happen.

On the other hand, for the broad public the superficial euphemistic discourse of ‘nature-based solutions’ is produced. Here, the romanticisation of untouched nature goes along with a happy talk about new solutions and ‘win-win’ situations. The win-win fantasy can easily be sustained for the general public, as long as the factual loss, the destruction of livelihoods that takes place, where the impacted subaltern communities are not in a position to make themselves heard, remains hidden.

An extensive study from Brazilian researchers (8) evidenced this kind of split in the context of a prominent REDD+ project in an Amazonian indigenous territory. (9) The technical descriptions of the

project, in order to 'prove' that the project measures will avoid deforestation that otherwise would have taken place, depict the indigenous community as notorious forest-destroyers. This information is held on the back stage, or, as the authors put it, concealed in the 'black box' of expert language.

On the front stage – in popular YouTube videos, glossy brochures etc. – the narrative of the indigenous people as nature-loving forest guardians is exploited. While the forest-destroyer narrative is the technical requisite for selling 'avoided emissions' as carbon credits, the forest-guardian narrative is necessary in order to effectively greenwash the image of the buyer, in this case a large cosmetics industry.

The mechanisms of appropriation of nature for the purpose of environmental and climate compensation are so obscene and violent, and so far from contributing to the resolution of the crises, that the general public, if they were transparent, would not accept them.

Another effective strategy to hide something is to put it in a haystack. Terms like 'green economy' or 'nature-based solutions' cover a very wide range of initiatives, programmes and projects, blurring the distinctions between them. They function as an all-encompassing label that lumps predatory offset programmes together with initiatives such as urban building greening and small-scale agroecological projects. The use of a common label suggests that all these initiatives – despite some of them seem more 'technically complex' than others – strive in the same direction and must ultimately have the same goal, namely preservation of the environment and climate. The purely commercial interests that are driving the compensation projects and their exclusionary nature thus remain unrecognized by much of society.

The broadness of the new terms and the 'positivity' of the discourse serve to further neutralise critical voices. Those who reject these terms automatically fall into the disrepute of being against any constructive contribution and can therefore easily be excluded from the discussion as notorious 'naysayers'.

The expression 'nature-based' conveys the idea that the supposedly new 'solutions' arise from a new relationship with nature, that humans are now coming to peace with nature and learning from it. Of course, the exclusionary and predatory character of the projects behind this term makes a mockery of this notion. But the expression 'nature-based' in the context of such projects reveals something more fundamental.

The meaning of 'nature'

At this point we need to ask: What is actually the meaning of 'nature'? And for whom does it have this meaning?



[caption id="attachment_23051" align="alignright" width="200"]

In Western patriarchal culture, the dichotomous view of nature goes hand in hand with an equally polarized conception of women. The fifteenth-century painting "The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve" by Carlo da Camerino illustrates the so-called Madonna-whore dichotomy: While the virgin Mother Mary is adored on a throne, depraved Eve, is depicted as sexually available. [/caption]

The anthropologist Felipe Descola (10) shows that the culture-nature dichotomy – i.e. the radical split of these two terms as mutually exclusive – is a specificity of Western society. This naturalism – the assumption that 'nature' exists as its own domain of being, determined by causal laws and separated from 'cultural' reality, which in turn would be governed by human's self-determined action – guides both our common sense and our scientific principle.

Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, who coexist with the land, the forest, the river, the plants, the animals and their spirits, and who suffer the consequences of both the destruction and the attempts to 'save nature' undertaken by Western Man, do not have this generalized and anthropocentric concept of 'nature'. As, for example, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains, the cosmology of Amazonian indigenous peoples can be understood as a 'multinaturalism.' (11) In their view, each one of the various worlds – the world of the jaguars, the world of the snakes, of the tapirs etc. – constitutes a nature of its own, within which these non-human beings exercise social or cultural practices equal or analogous to those of men, that is, for Amazonian indigenous peoples there is only one culture and countless natures.

This leads us to the insight that the destructive relation of modern humans with his environment and fellow living beings is rooted precisely in his notion of nature. It is in this line of thought that some

thinkers propose that we relinquish this notion completely and develop what they call an 'ecology without nature' (12). In such a perspective, there would be no separation between humans and non-humans and no more basis for domination and extermination of the latter.

However, the occidental construction of nature cannot be understood as just any discursive construction, which we could, as soon as we have identified it as such, simply abandon or easily deconstruct. This is a deeper problematic. Nature is the fundamental alterity – the 'other' that constitutes the 'I' – of Western Man. His cultural identity is defined by this antagonistic relationship. The history of occidental civilization, from the ancient Greeks to late capitalism is marked by this phantasmagorical and hostile relationship, by the white man's violent attempts to dominate what he projects as nature, promoted in the name of enlightenment and development. (13),

The romanticisation of nature, as we see it coming up in the new 'nature-based' discourse, can be understood as an essential component of this troubled relationship. Instrumentalization of nature as exploitable resource on the one hand and veneration of untouched 'pure' nature goes hand in hand. This phenomenon is analogous to a condition described in feminist literature (14), known as the madonna-whore dichotomy: Frequently men in our patriarchal society are unable to have respectful sexual relationships with women, because they can only conceive them as either despicable beings that can be degraded to exploitable sex objects or as pure 'virgin-mothers'.

In a similar fashion, nature – objectified as 'resource' – can be aggressively exploited without moral scruples, living beings can be crammed into monocultures or industrial livestock farms and genetically manipulated in order to maximise production. This predatory attitude is contrasted with the romantic veneration of an ideal distant 'motherly' nature, bringing forth images of untouched natural landscapes and 'virgin forests'.

This dichotomy ultimately does not leave space for a dignified relation between humans and other life forms. It strives towards a world where uninhabited islands of forests are surrounded by high-tech agricultural production sites. "Expropriation of the rural population from land and soil" is, as Karl Marx (15) and Rosa Luxemburg (16) explained, the primary and permanent condition for capitalist growth. Compulsive capitalist growth, rooted in the occidental nature-relationship, goes along with ever new mechanisms of expropriation and a constant creation and adaption of truth regimes.

The new 'nature-based' discourse must be understood and rejected for what it is: a functional component of late capitalist mechanisms of exclusion and dispossession. The exclusion and extinction of human and non-human living beings through the financialisation of their living spaces, is embellished and concealed by a discourse that worships the Western phantasmagoria of nature.

Michael F. Schmidlehner, michaelsschmidlehner@gmail.com
Research Nucleus on Work, Territory and Politics in Amazonia, Brazil
(Núcleo de Pesquisa Trabalho, Território e Política na Amazônia – TRATEPAM-IFAC)

(1) Foucault, Michel. *A arqueologia do saber (L'Archéologie du Savoir, 1969)*. Forense Universitária, 2008.

(2) Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 2011.

(3) UNEP, UNEP. "Towards a green economy: Pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication". *Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP*, 2011.

(4) WEF. "What's a 'circular bioeconomy' and how can it save the planet? | World Economic Forum", 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/circular-bioeconomy-nature-reset/>.

-
- (5) Hohne-Sparborth, Thomas, Christopher Kaminker, Laura Garcia Velez, Kristina Church, e Michael Urban. "Investing in Nature: the true engine of our economy—a synthesis", 2021.
- (6) Cohen-Shacham, Emmanuelle, Gretchen Walters, Christine Janzen, e Stewart Maginnis. "Nature-based solutions to address global societal challenges". *IUCN: Gland, Switzerland* 97 (2016).
- (7) About the flawed logic of environmental and climate compensation and "pay-to-pollute", the following texts provide examples and explanations:
- Kill, Jutta. "Economic valuation of nature". *Bruxelas: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung*, 2014.
- Lohmann, Larry. "Carbon trading, climate justice and the production of ignorance: ten examples". (8) *Development* 51, n° 3 (2008): 359–65.
- (7) Rajão, Raoni, e Camilla Marcolino. "Between Indians and 'cowboys': the role of ICT in the management of contradictory self-images and the production of carbon credits in the Brazilian Amazon". *Journal of Information Technology* 31, n° 4 (2016): 347–57.
- (9) The authors of the study have anonymised the data, but there is little doubt that it is the Suruí Forest Carbon Project (SFCP) in the Brazilian state of Rondonia, as I pointed out in: Schmidlehner, Michael Franz. "[Guest Post: Between Suruí and 'Acapú': REDD and scientists' ethical dilemmas](#) | REDD-Monitor", 2016.
- (10) Descola, Philippe. *Beyond nature and culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- (11) Castro, Eduardo Viveiros de. "Os pronomes cosmológicos e o perspectivismo ameríndio". *Mana* 2, n° 2 (1996): 115–44.
- (12) Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- (13) Adorno, Theodor W., e Max Horkheimer. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988.
- (14) Bareket, Orly, Rotem Kahalon, Nurit Shnabel, e Peter Glick. "The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy: Men who perceive women's nurturance and sexuality as mutually exclusive endorse patriarchy and show lower relationship satisfaction". *Sex Roles* 79, n° 9 (2018): 519–32.
- (15) Marx, Karl. "Das Kapital, Buch 3, Vierundzwanzigstes Kapitel. Die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation". In *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Werke*, 23:741–91. Diez, 1962.
- (16) Luxemburg, Rosa. *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus*. Vol. 1. Buchhandlung Vorwärts Paul Singer, 1913.