

# The discursive dimension of green grabbing: palm oil plantations as climate protection strategy in Brazil

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# The Discursive Dimension of Green Grabbing: Palm Oil Plantations as Climate Protection Strategy in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Drawing on the Marxist concept of continuous primitive accumulation, green grabbing is defined as a flexible analytical tool in order to understand the establishment or restructuring of capitalist relationships of ownership and production in the context of strategies dealing with climate change. However, green grabbing as a new expression of primitive accumulation not only involves the material process of appropriation, but also a specific discursive framing as a “green” or sustainable solution. Thus, this paper argues for the re-interpretation of the concept of primitive accumulation with a special focus on its discursive dimension. The main argument is that the discursive dimension is already envisaged in the implicit ideological criticism of primitive accumulation. Consequently the concept should be extended, drawing on Stuart Hall’s deliberations on ideology and discourse. The analytical concept of green grabbing is applied to a case study on the state-supported expansion of palm oil plantations for biodiesel in so-called degraded areas in the Brazilian Amazon basin. This process of green grabbing remains mostly unquestioned because of the powerful narrative of the “degraded areas in the tropics”. The narrative enables the re-framing of the palm oil plantations as climate protection strategy and so delegitimizes local resistance.

## Keywords

Green Grabbing, Primitive Accumulation, Bioeconomy, Biofuels, Palm Oil, Brazilian Amazon Basin.

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## La dimensión discursiva del *green grabbing*: plantaciones de palma africana como estrategia de protección del clima en Brasil

### Resumen

Tomando como base el concepto marxista de la acumulación originaria continua, el *green grabbing* se presenta como un instrumento analítico flexible que permite entender el establecimiento o la reestructuración de las relaciones capitalistas de propiedad y de producción, dentro del contexto de estrategias de prevención del cambio climático. *Green grabbing*, como nueva forma de acumulación originaria, no solo abarca el proceso material de apropiación, sino que va acompañado de un discurso específico que lo presenta como una solución “verde” o sustentable. Este artículo destaca la necesidad de una reinterpretación del concepto de acumulación originaria, enfocando especialmente su dimensión discursiva. El argumento central es que la dimensión discursiva ya está presente en la crítica a la ideología que se encuentra implícita en la acumulación originaria. En consecuencia, se propone extender el concepto sobre la base de las reflexiones acerca de la ideología y el discurso de Stuart Hall, para luego aplicarlo al estudio de la cuenca amazónica brasileña, donde la expansión de plantaciones de palma africana en áreas degradadas es promovida por el Estado. El proceso de *green grabbing* permanece mayoritariamente incuestionado, ya que va acompañado de la ponderosa narrativa de “áreas degradadas en los trópicos”. Esta narrativa permite enmarcar las plantaciones de palma aceitera como estrategia de protección frente al cambio climático, con lo que deslegitima la resistencia local.

### Palabras clave

*Green grabbing*, acumulación originaria, bioeconomía, biocombustibles, aceite de palma, Cuenca del Amazonas.

## Introduction

The term “green grabbing” was first used by John Vidal<sup>3</sup> and later discussed in a special issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* as a new capitalist form of the appropriation of nature<sup>4</sup>. According to the authors, the term “appropriation” means “the transfer of ownership, use rights and control over resources that were once publicly or privately owned – or not even the subject of ownership – from the poor (or everyone including the poor) into the hands of the powerful”<sup>5</sup>. The expression “green grabbing” is used for the worldwide processes of appropriation and valuation of natural resources (such as the trade in CO<sub>2</sub> certificates) for environmental ends<sup>6</sup>. Green grabbing differs from simple land grabbing in that it is initiated by national or transnational environmental or climate protection measures by states, international organizations or private companies. Environmental and climate policy objectives thus not only serve as “green” legitimization strategies for land grabbing, but can themselves lead to processes of displacement or the loss of control over land access and land use as a result of specific political stimuli, for example support for the production of biofuels. Green grabbing is also characterized by the fact that it is linked to new alliances of actors among the private sector, the state and NGOs, as well as by specific legitimization strategies and practices<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, green grabbing involves not only the material process of appropriation, but also a specific “discursive framing”<sup>8</sup>. The creation and commodification of natural resources, such as CO<sub>2</sub> and biofuels, and the production of agreement to this market-based form of environmental protection across all the political camps can only be understood with this additional focus on the scientific, political and everyday production of knowledge and new truths.

According to Fairhead et al., green grabbing *can* be an expression of primitive accumulation but is not necessarily so<sup>9</sup>. In their interpretation of primitive accumulation they draw on David Harvey’s concept of “accumulation by dispossession”<sup>10</sup> as a distribution process of wealth from the poor to the rich. Consequently they focus on the privatization and financialization of nature, the

<sup>3</sup> John Vidal, “Great Green Land Grab”, *The Guardian*, February 13, 2008, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/feb/13/conservation>.

<sup>4</sup> James Fairhead, Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones, “Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012): 237-261.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>10</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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intertwined environmental and economic crisis, and the new role of the state as facilitator of green grabbing<sup>11</sup>.

Based on this understanding, the ecological crisis such as climate change or peak everything is not only a danger for capitalist accumulation processes but offers new fields of accumulation. Green grabbing is in this interpretation a central mode of this crisis management since it opens up new opportunities to place superfluous capital from other areas (e.g. the finance sector) in these fields. Thus, the concept enables us to analyze whether recent strategies towards a bio-economy as remedies for the ecological crisis are causing new forms of capitalist appropriation of nature. The main idea of the bio-economy in the EU policy agenda is the transformation of the economy from a reliance on fossil fuels to the use of renewable resources and knowledge-based bio-technological innovations<sup>12</sup>. As I will underline in this paper, the concept of green grabbing is pivotal in understanding the connection between new forms of appropriation of nature in the context of the emerging bio-economy and restructuring processes of social relations. However, I will argue in this paper somewhat differently than Fairhead et al. do, and I will define green grabbing as an expression of primitive accumulation in order to strengthen its analytical perspective. My main argument is that the Marxist concept of primitive accumulation enables us to understand whether solution strategies of the socio-ecological crisis cause radical restructuring processes of social relations or not. Furthermore, it entails already the discursive dimension to some extent.

The aim of this paper is therefore twofold: first, I would like to show that primitive accumulation as a theoretical basis of green grabbing is an important flexible tool to understand social change in the context of the current socio-ecological crisis of capitalism; second, I will work out the discursive dimension of green grabbing on the basis of an extension of the theoretical concept of primitive accumulation. My main argument is that the discursive dimension is already envisaged in the ideological criticism of the Marxist concept of primitive accumulation and this shall be further developed.

I will proceed in the following way: in the first section, I will sketch out my interpretation of primitive accumulation, drawing more on Massimo de Angelis than on David Harvey. Then, I will extend the concept of primitive accumulation, drawing on Stuart Hall's contributions on ideology and discourses in order to conceptualize the discursive dimension of green grabbing. Afterwards, I shall summarize the flexible analytical tool of green grabbing. In the third section, I will apply the flexible analytical tool of green grabbing to a case study on palm oil

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 243-246.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, "Innovation for Sustainable Growth: A Bioeconomy for Europe: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions", Brussels, 2012, accessed November 25, 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/research/bioeconomy/pdf/official-strategy\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/bioeconomy/pdf/official-strategy_en.pdf).

expansion in the Brazilian Amazon region. As I will summarize, the case of the palm oil expansion in Brazil on so-called degraded land exemplifies the pitfalls of technocratic strategies towards the bio-economy that ignore the power relations that underlie land relations, development policies, and definitions of so-called degraded lands. Further, I will summarize why the expansion of palm oil could be understood as green grabbing. In the fourth section, a special focus shall be set on the discursive dimension of green grabbing that is in this case the powerful discourse of the so-called degraded lands in the Amazon region. In the final section, the results will be summarized.

## Green Grabbing as an Expression of Continuing Primitive Accumulation

Drawing on Massimo de Angelis I understand primitive accumulation<sup>13</sup> not as a unique historical phase during the emergence of capitalism but as an “inherent and continuous element of modern societies”<sup>14</sup>. In this manner, primitive accumulation can be understood as a mechanism of creating new accumulation opportunities by including the non-capitalist outside. The non-capitalist outside was first introduced by Rosa Luxemburg in her imperialism theory<sup>15</sup> and was adopted by many authors (e.g. David Harvey, Claudia von Werlhof, Silvia Federici, Klaus Dörre) who, like De Angelis, underline the continuity of primitive accumulation. It is of utmost importance to bear in mind that capitalism is understood as specific social relations which can coexist with or combined with non-capitalist relations. Thus, the non-capitalist outside is not a physio-geographic space, but social relations outside of the capitalist logic which are not yet penetrated by capitalist relations *or* which are created by capitalism for its reproduction purposes (e.g. bonded work within transnational supply chains or care work for the reproduction of wage labor). In the context of primitive accumulation these non-capitalist relations are either included into the capitalist logic, *or* newly created *or* newly *combined* with capitalist relations in order to benefit capital<sup>16</sup>. Especially in the context of the capitalist crisis, it is an important strategy to stabilize capitalism. This explains why the concept of primitive accumulation is used by many theorists in order to analyze the new capitalist penetration processes of non-capitalist relations within industrial

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1962 [1867]), 741-791.

<sup>14</sup> Massimo de Angelis, “The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures’”, *The Commoner 2* (2001): 1-22.

<sup>15</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus* (Berlin: Vereinigung internationaler Verlags-Anstalten, 1923).

<sup>16</sup> Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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centers<sup>17</sup>. Vice versa this understanding also implies that the peasants in the Global South are not remnants of pre-capitalist era but rather, as subsistence producers, play an important role for the extended reproduction of capital or production of surplus-value in capitalist crises. For instance, migrant workers can be paid below their reproduction costs if the reproduction costs (care work, food production, etc.) can be transferred to the subsistence sector<sup>18</sup>.

### The Political Dimension of Primitive Accumulation

De Angelis' interpretation of primitive accumulation as a continuous element of capitalism provides two important impulses for the more precise development of the analytical concept of green grabbing: a) he places the analytical focus on the process of the separation of the producers and means of production; and b) he underlines the political dimension of the separation process.

In relation to a), in focusing on the process of separation, he makes an important differentiation: in contrast to the processes of separation within simple capital accumulation, in the case of primitive accumulation we are talking about the original creation of capitalist relationships of production and ownership *or* their extensive restructuring within capitalism<sup>19</sup>. This original or repeated separation is set in motion by extra-economic means such as state intervention, legislative frameworks or direct violence.

It is crucial to mention that it is neither the methods of separation, such as robbery, financialization or privatization, nor the concentration of wealth from the poor to the rich that is characteristic of continuous primitive accumulation, but rather the creation or restructuring of capitalist social relations. At this point I argue differently from David Harvey's interpretation of the primitive accumulation as accumulation by dispossession. In his imperialism theory, Harvey argues that capitalism tends increasingly to overaccumulation crises because of capital and labor surplus. If it is not possible to solve the crisis via spatio-temporal fixes (like investments in infrastructure or technologies) and if the (national) elites reject reforms or redistribution policies, the accumulation of dispossession in the form of privatization, imperialism or financialization would take place<sup>20</sup>. In accordance with Ellen Meiksins Wood, the main critique is that Harvey puts his emphasis "on the concentration of wealth rather

<sup>17</sup> Recent contributions are, for example, Klaus Dörre, "The New *Landnahme*: Dynamics and Limits of Financial Market Capitalism", in *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique*, ed. Klaus Dörre et al (London/New York: Verso, 2015), 247-277; or Emma Dowling and David Harvie, "Harnessing the Social: State, Crisis and (Big)Society", *Sociology* 48, no. 5 (2014): 869-886.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> De Angelis, "The Continuous Character of Capital's 'Enclosures' ", 8f.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.

than on the transformation of social-property relations” and consequently “closer to Smith’s than to Marx’s”<sup>21</sup>. She then observes that Marx breaks away from Adam Smith’s conception of a primitive or original accumulation as a natural result of the concentration of wealth by hardworking elites by referring to the classical political economy as the “*so-called* primitive accumulation”<sup>22</sup>. This does not imply that the concentration of wealth is irrelevant but, as Wood points out, capital is not “just any kind of wealth but a specific social relation”<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, in the concept of green grabbing, the focus is to be set more on separation processes and less on specific extra-economic means and the concentration of wealth.

In relation to b), the strength of De Angelis’ interpretation is his emphasis on the political dimension of the separation process. His focus on class and class relations allows him to understand the processes of separation as contested and as contingent<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, the outcome of separation processes is neither defined nor does it follow a specific pathway. Applied to green grabbing, this means that whether in a particular region the expansion of commodities causes new separation processes of primitive accumulation also depends on the classes<sup>25</sup>, their alliances and resistance. This opens up a research field of social conflicts: with this analytical focus on the actors (e.g. peasants, civil society or unionists) and their resistance, the process of separation also entails a subversive, emancipatory potential. Conversely, once successfully defended spaces and social relations can be put under pressure by new capitalist separation processes.

## The Discursive Dimension of Primitive Accumulation

The means of separation are not necessarily based on violence. As I already mentioned above, primitive accumulation is not defined by the methods or means of separation. Rather, it is defined by the creation or radical restructuring of capitalist or non-capitalist social relations in a (new) capitalist manner. Consequently, the extra-economic means cannot be defined in advance but have to be worked out on a case-by-case basis.

If the restructuring processes are legitimized convincingly across the social classes, i.e. have become hegemonic in a Gramscian sense, green grabbing can also

<sup>21</sup> Ellen Meikins Wood, “Logics of Power: A Conversation with David Harvey”, *Historical Materialism* 14, no. 4 (2007): 9-34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 (emphasis by the author).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>24</sup> De Angelis, “The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures’”, 16.

<sup>25</sup> In the context of the agricultural sector we shall adopt the concept of classes. According to Bernstein (2010), peasants are not a homogenous class but are themselves differentiating into classes with the increasing penetration of capital.

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take place in a seemingly peacefully manner<sup>26</sup>. In order to be able to grasp the discursive dimension of green grabbing, I supplement the implied ideology-critical dimension of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation with Hall's ideology-theoretical deliberations.

The ideology-critical dimension of Marx is indicated, firstly, in his ideological criticism of bourgeois economics<sup>27</sup>, in which he confronts the foundations of the bourgeois self-conception (liberty, equality, fraternity) with his descriptions of the violent development of capitalism. At the same time, as I have already mentioned above, he breaks away from the classical political concept of capitalism as the result of wealth concentration by a hardworking elite. Secondly, Marx describes primitive accumulation as a disciplining process through which the industrial proletariat is created<sup>28</sup>.

Following Hall's ideology-critical deliberations we can combine these two elements and ask with which narratives and practices dominant ideologies are produced and green grabbing in so-called degraded areas is legitimized as "right" and "without alternative", even among the subaltern classes<sup>29</sup>. Hall criticized the orthodox Marxist concept of ideology as false consciousness and developed a neutral concept of ideology. Broadly speaking, neutral means that no thinking is free of ideology. Consequently, ideology is to be interpreted not as false consciousness or intended manipulation on the part of the ruling classes but in the Gramscian sense as hegemonic viewpoints. Stuart Hall defines hegemony in accordance with Antonio Gramsci as ruling power that is based less on violence than on acceptance or agreement by the ruled classes. This does not mean that hegemonic power relations are free from violence but that power is less often exercised through direct violence. The advantage of the Gramscian concept of hegemony is that it reveals the political, cultural, linguistic and ideological dimensions of power relations without ignoring the structural or economic power relations. From Hall's Gramscian point of view, there are dominant and lasting ideologies that are produced and reproduced by influential institutions and day-to-

<sup>26</sup> Alice B. Kelly, "Conservation Practice as Primitive Accumulation", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (2011): 683-701.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Hymer, "Robinson Crusoe and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation", *Monthly Review* 23 (1971): 11-36; Michael Perelman, "Classical Political Economy and Primitive Accumulation: The Case of Smith and Steuart", *History of Political Economy* 15, no. 3 (1983): 451-494; Stefan Kalmring, "Die Krise als Labor gesellschaftlicher Entwicklung: Fortgesetzte ursprüngliche Akkumulation und die große Krise der Kapitalakkumulation", in *Die globale Einhegung - Krise, ursprüngliche Akkumulation und Landnahmen im Kapitalismus*, ed. Maria Backhouse et al. (Münster, Westf: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013), 70-109.

<sup>28</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn: Geschichtliche Organisation der Arbeitsvermögen. Deutschland als Produktions-Öffentlichkeit. Gewalt des Zusammenhangs* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 35-57.

day practices. However, dominant ideologies are contested battlefields and therefore realized neither totally nor permanently; on the contrary, they can be criticized and actively changed. The main field of ideology is the common sense, which is composed by heterogeneous and inconsistent ideas, viewpoints and fragmented philosophies<sup>30</sup>.

Hall extended his neutral ideology deliberations by including Michel Foucault's discourse analysis in order to understand the productivity of power relations in discourses and day-to-day practices. Following Foucault, the analytical focus can thus be set on the production of truths and new subject positions. Hall's concept of power differs from Foucault's in the way that power relations are conceptualized in a Gramscian sense as rooted in class relations<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, the pivotal argument is that ideologies are entwined with asymmetric class and power relationships but they can never be totally manipulated and hegemonic power can be questioned or undermined. According to Hall, it is crucial that although ideologies cannot be derived from the economic basis or specific class positions, they cannot be understood independently of the material relations and powerful institutions which (re-)produce them.

In addition, with his concept of articulation, he developed a useful analytical tool to examine ideologies as the articulation or entwining of different elements into a specific chain of meaning<sup>32</sup>. Thus, ideas that are generally taken for granted can be examined and the same is true for the way in which concepts such as "sustainability", "climate protection" and "degraded areas" fit into different views.

## **Green grabbing – a flexible analytical tool**

Proceeding from the above, green grabbing is when, in connection with strategies for dealing with the socio-ecological crisis, control over natural resources (e.g. land access and land use) and the existing social relations of ownership and labor are restructured for expanded reproduction or the appropriation of surplus value. The separation processes in the sense of continuous primitive accumulation can manifest themselves in many forms; for instance, in the agricultural sector the separation process can be provoked by violence as well as by legal or legalized extra-economic means such as privatization or inclusion in global supply chains via contract farming schemes.

The empirical analysis of appropriation processes of nature requires thorough historical contextualization on a case-by-case basis. Only in this way we can determine whether a restructuring of the social relations – the criterion for green grabbing – has taken place. In addition, against the background of the above considerations there

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Whites of their Eyes. Racist Ideologies and the Media", in *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties: 12th Annual Meeting: Papers*, ed. George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), 7-23.

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are three analytical dimensions: the material (e.g. in the agricultural context the relations of land ownership and land access), the political (power, resistance, class and other societal relations) and the discursive (ideologies, opinions, legitimation strategies and legitimation practices). These three dimensions are inseparably entwined and can only be differentiated analytically. The following questions relate to them.

On the material analysis level we have to substantiate whether a separation process in the sense of primitive accumulation is taking place or not. We shall ask whether the producers are separated from their means of production. How is the non-capitalist outside included in, restructured for, or combined with the capitalist mode of production? What kind of extra-economic means can be identified? In the context of the agricultural sector we shall adopt the following separation aspects<sup>33</sup>: the question of how land deals or political incentives for biofuels change control over land access and land use, and the question of who profits from this.

On the political level we shall consider the following questions: How are power relations distributed? Who positions themselves and how? Is there resistance against the separation processes? If so, from whom? And how is it articulated?

On the discursive level we analyze several questions. How is the separation process politically framed and justified? How is it connected with measures to deal with the socio-ecological crisis? Who has the power to define the separation processes as sustainable measurements? In the context of the definition of lands as degraded, who has the right to define what as degraded?

## **Green Grabbing in the Context of Palm Oil Expansions in the Eastern Brazilian Amazon**

### **The Palm Oil Program in Brazil**

Brazil is regarded as a pioneer of the emerging bio-economy although it hasn't yet launched a national strategy. The country started its biofuels production on the basis of sugar cane in the 1970s during the oil crisis and in 2004 it launched its Program of Biodiesel. To date, it is one of the biggest producers, consumers and exporters of biofuels in the world. National mandatory blending quotas of 20-25 percent ethanol and 7 percent biodiesel as well as the dissemination of flex motors have strengthened the biofuels sector. Flex motors enable car drivers to adapt the mix of gasoline and ethanol to the current oil and ethanol prices. However, biodiesel is not based on different crops as planned by the government but mainly (about 80%) on soy oil, a waste product of the animal feed export industry. Consequently, the

<sup>33</sup> M. Borras and Jennifer C. Franco, "Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis", *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12, no. 1 (2012): 34-59.

Brazilian government launched the “Program of Sustainable Palm Oil Production” (*Programa de Produção Sustentável da Palma de Óleo*) in 2010 in order to diversify the crop basis of biodiesel<sup>34</sup>. In this program the Brazilian government combined national energy and development policy goals for the first time with international climate policy targets and strategies for dealing with the socio-ecological crisis. The economic goal is to meet in the short term national requirements for foodstuffs and cosmetics, of which at present more than 50 percent are provided by imports<sup>35</sup>. The development goal is to eradicate rural poverty, especially in the Amazon region. In the official statistics the region was classified as poor: according to the census poverty statistics, between 40 and 50 percent of the rural population in the case study region live below the Brazilian poverty line of 70 reais monthly income per capita (at that time about 25 euros)<sup>36</sup>. The labor-intensive oil palm plantations are to create work for agricultural workers and market access for smallholders and in this way contribute to the development of impoverished rural regions. In a similar manner to the national biodiesel program, a social seal is to guarantee the inclusion of peasant agriculture via contract farming. If enterprises commit themselves to buying 15 percent of their palm oil from the peasants, this seal will entitle them to preferential sales conditions on the national biodiesel market and free them from taxes. Finally, through its production of biodiesel from palm oil, Brazil wants to contribute to the mitigation of climate change by sequestration and avoidance of the climate-damaging gas CO<sub>2</sub>. Through the establishment of agro-ecological zones it is to be ensured that only areas which were deforested before 2008 will be transformed into oil palm plantations and that no environmentally protected areas or territories of traditional communities will be endangered. CO<sub>2</sub> is to be sequestered

<sup>34</sup> EMBRAPA and MAPA, “Zoneamento agroecológico do dendezeiro para as áreas desmatadas da Amazônia Legal”, Rio de Janeiro, 2010; Brazilian Government, “Palma de Óleo: Programa de produção sustentável”. Fact Sheet, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> The African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) is an exotic crop in Brazil and was brought to Brazil by African slaves 400 years ago. See Case Watkins, “Dendezeiro: African Oil Palm Agroecologies in Bahia, Brazil, and Implications for Development”, *Journal of Latin American Geography* 10, no. 1 (2011): 9-33. It was introduced into the Amazon basin for the first time by researchers in 1942 and from the 1970s onward was promoted by the military dictatorship as part of its Amazon development policy. See Felix L. da Silva, Alfredo K. O. Homma and Heriberto W. A. P. Pena, “O cultivo de dendezeiro na Amazônia: Promessa de um novo ciclo econômico na região”, *Observatorio de la Economía Latinoamericana. Economía do Brasil* 158 (2011), accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.eumed.net/cursecon/ecolat/br/11/shp.html>. However, the palm oil sector remained irrelevant compared with other agricultural sectors. In 2009, the palm oil plantation areas in Brazil covered about 100,000 hectares, while at the same time the soya fields contained more than 21 million hectares, “Lavoura temporário 2011”, IBGE Rio de Janeiro, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.ibge.gov.br/estadosat/temas.php?sigla=pa&tema=lavouratemporaria2011>.

<sup>36</sup> IBGE, “Indicadores Sociais Municipais 2010: incidência de pobreza é maior nos municípios de porte médio”, accessed November 25, 2016, [http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/presidencia/noticias/noticia\\_visualiza.php?id\\_noticia=2019&id\\_pagina=1](http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/presidencia/noticias/noticia_visualiza.php?id_noticia=2019&id_pagina=1).

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by the growing palm oil plantations. At the same time, this strategy shall avoid CO<sub>2</sub> through the prevention of deforestation. Approximately 31.8 million hectares which have already been transformed in the Amazon basin and the rainy coastal areas of north-east Brazil have, accordingly, been zoned as suitable for oil palm planting<sup>37</sup>.

The main cultivation area is the north-east of the federal state of Pará. According to the national agricultural research institute EMBRAPA (Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária) there are about 5,5 million hectares suitable for oil palm plantations in a contiguous region of 44 municipalities. So-called degraded grazing land has been given priority. In favor of the north-east region of Pará as the “Brazilian palm oil centre” is also its excellent location near the state capital and port of Belém as well as its greater distance to the biodiversity hot spots of the Amazon basin<sup>38</sup>.

In the first three years of the palm oil program the area covered by oil palm plantations tripled from 50,000 hectares to about 150,000 hectares<sup>39</sup>. Transnational enterprises such as the state energy company Petrobras, the Brazilian mining company Vale and the US concern ADM (Archer Daniels Midland Company) invest in plantations and processing facilities and compete with local palm oil companies (e.g. Agropalma, Dendê-Tauá and Marborges) for land, plantation workers and potential contract farmers. The total planned planted area among the large players in the near future is estimated at over 300,000 hectares<sup>40</sup>.

The expansion of agro-industrial palm oil production has slowed down<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless it is having an effect on the landscape and social relations. Plantations are being established with up to 10,000 hectares per unit – known as *pólos* in Portuguese – with processing mills being constructed at their centres. Since the fruits must be processed within 24 hours of being harvested, a high logistical effort is required. This includes the tight organization of work on the plantations, a suitable transport infrastructure (roads, waterways and ports) and processing in the neighbourhood of the plantations. Furthermore, the potential contract farmers’ plots are to be found around the plantations within a radius of no more than 30 kilometres.

Till this day the major driver of the current oil palm expansion in the region is Vale, the second-largest mining company in the world. This Brazilian enterprise explains its entry into the palm oil sector with its strategy of establishing itself on a

<sup>37</sup> EMBRAPA and MAPA, “Zoneamento agroecológico do dendzeiro para as áreas desmatadas da Amazônia Legal”.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio A. Muller, José Furlan Junior and Pedro Celestino Filho, “A Embrapa Amazônia Oriental e o Agronegócio do Dendê no Pará”, EMBRAPA Documentos 257 (Belém, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Verena Glass, “Expansão do dendê na Amazônia brasileira: elementos para uma análise dos impactos sobre a agricultura familiar no nordeste do Pará”, *Reporter Brasil*, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://reporterbrasil.org.br/documentos/Dende2013.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> USDA, “Brazil. Oilseeds and Products Annual: 2013-14 Record Soybean Production Forecast at 85 mmt”, GAIN Report Number: BR0908, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.thefarmsite.com/reports/contents/boap13.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

global scale as a sustainable actor and of producing renewable energy for its own needs. By 2020 the fuel blend for its vehicle fleet is to contain 20 percent biodiesel. By 2013 Vale had established 40,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in Pará<sup>42</sup>. According to Vale, this expansion was in line with sustainability since it took place in parts of the Amazon biome, “which were previously used for pasture before being abandoned”<sup>43</sup>.

## The Material Dimension of Green Grabbing: New Separation Processes

The palm oil plantations, however, are not only expanding into abandoned or empty spaces. The results of my case study<sup>44</sup> indicate that on the material level two different forms of green grabbing are beginning to take place since a) land speculation and b) contract farming inclusions have stimulated a comprehensive *separation process* of peasants from their land or control over their land.

In relation to a), the expansion of the oil palm plantations has caused the price of land to rise and turned land speculation into a lucrative business for intermediaries. By 2008, ex-mayors of the municipalities and large landowners had already started to buy the land of cattle ranchers as well as of family farms. In the first years, they achieved low prices below market value since they had information advantages concerning the palm oil program and investments. These large-scale land deals contain a serious conflict potential because in Pará most of the land titles are invalid due to widespread land theft by means of document forgery (in Portuguese *grilagem*) and because of the lack of a superior land registry office<sup>45</sup>. According to the land rights expert Girolamo Treccani, more than 90 percent of existing land titles are

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>43</sup> Vale, “Sustainability Report 2011”, accessed August 23, 2015, [http://assets.vale.com/docs/Documents/en/aboutvale/sustainability/links/sustainability-reports/SR2011\\_en.pdf](http://assets.vale.com/docs/Documents/en/aboutvale/sustainability/links/sustainability-reports/SR2011_en.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> This contribution is based on the results of my doctoral thesis, prepared from 2010 to 2013 within the framework of the research project “Fair Fuels?” ([www.fair-fuels.de/en](http://www.fair-fuels.de/en)), which was supported by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBWF). In qualitative field studies of all in all eight months length in 2010 and 2011 more than 80 interviews were conducted with actors from the private sector, the state and civil society in Brasília, Belém and five of the 44 municipalities designated for oil palm production (Maju, Acará, Tomé-Açu, Concórdia and Bujaru) in the state of Pará, and supplemented with group discussions, observations, grey literature (reports, fact sheets, manuals, homepages), image films and secondary data of the Brazilian census. The complete study was published in Maria Backhouse, “Green Grabbing – The Case of Palm Oil Expansion in So-Called Degraded Areas in the Eastern Brazilian Amazon”, in *The Political Ecology of Agrofuels*, ed. Kristina Dietz et al. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 167-185; *Grüne Landnahme – Palmölexpansion und Landkonflikte in Amazonien* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Girolamo D. Treccani, *Violência e grilagem: instrumentos de aquisição da propriedade da terra no Pará* (Belém: UFPA, 2001).

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irregular. Furthermore, the claims to land in the whole state of Pará amount to more than four times the existing territory of that state. There is a considerable risk that future conflicts will be caused by differing claims to land.

The separation process in the sense of green grabbing is provoked by the increasing number of purchases of land from the peasants, many of whom have to start working in bad working conditions on the palm oil plantations in order to make a living<sup>46</sup>. Land purchase as such is a normal market process and consequently not an extra-economic process. However, in the case study region, the purchase practices of the intermediaries have to be contextualized to the social land and power relations in the region. Against this background, the extra-economic means of green grabbing or primitive accumulation arises in connection with the large asymmetries of power between land buyers (mostly former large landowners) and peasants as well as sometimes decades of land conflicts in the region. Pressure arises, for instance, when land buyers threaten peasants without land titles that they will lose their land in any case because of the missing documents.

In relation to b), contract farming has been controversially discussed for decades<sup>47</sup>; it is not necessarily the result of land grabbing<sup>48</sup>. In the context of the palm oil expansion in the Brazilian Amazon basin, however, the agro-industrial inclusion of peasants via contract farming sets off a separation process. The separation process takes place because the peasants largely lose control over their land use, even if they formally remain the owners. The peasant forms of land use are converted into monoculture mini-plantations and in this process they are reorganized spatially and temporally. In order to ensure efficient production, the whole production process is prescribed by a strict timeframe which is monitored by the company's agro-technicians. If the peasants do not stick to the management regulations, the loan-issuing state bank suspends their account in consultation with the company concerned. The process of restructuring peasant land use is therefore accompanied by a disciplinary process. In a similar manner to the peasants who have sold their plots and have started working on the palm oil plantations, the contract farmers are more dependent on monetary income to be able to get by. This dependence is further strengthened by the fact that none of the traditional regional crops can be produced in between oil palms; mixed cultivation is not provided for. The palm

<sup>46</sup> Verena Glass, "Expansão do dendê na Amazônia brasileira: elementos para uma análise dos impactos sobre a agricultura familiar no nordeste do Pará", *Reporter Brasil*, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://reporterbrasil.org.br/documentos/Dende2013.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Peter D. Little, "Contract Farming and the Development Question", in *Living under Contract: Contract Farming and Agrarian Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Peter D. Little and Michael Watts (Madison: Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 216-47.

<sup>48</sup> Saturnino M. Borrás and Jennifer C. Franco, "Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis", *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12, no. 1 (2012): 34-59.

oil companies do not allow their contract farmers to deviate from monoculture planting on their palm oil plots for reasons of productivity and profit.

The result of a current new wave of separation processes does not imply that the peasants had previously been entirely outside of the current peripheral capitalist agriculture. The subsistence production was already combined with the production of cassava for the local food market and migration work. My argument is that these specific *combinations* of capitalist with non-capitalist sectors within the small farms are restructured deeply toward the needs of the palm oil industry. Consequently, with contract farming, the peasants surrender the control over their land and their labor and at the same time are directly subjected to the price trend of their products on the world market. In this case, the palm oil companies do not have to grab or buy land in order to control the peasants' plots. The specific materiality of the palm reinforces this aspect; palm oil producers are tied to the sector for at least 25 years by the life-cycle of the oil palm, as the transformation of a palm oil plantation for another use is complex and expensive, and is therefore not an option for small producers. The reorganization of the relations of production takes place almost exclusively in favor of the palm oil sector, which passes on the production risks (disease, bad harvests), the compliance with national environmental and labor laws, and fluctuating world market prices to the peasants without having to buy land or pay legal minimum wages.

### **The Political Dimension of Green Grabbing: Silenced Resistance**

It is uncertain how contract farming inclusion will continue to develop. The number of contract farmers in Pará has not yet fulfilled the companies' targets of having several thousand families under contract. According to one Vale employee it is difficult to find "suitable" families who own enough land, can supply enough labor and are creditworthy<sup>49</sup>. The reasons are twofold: first, the program was obviously designed for production on a large scale. The existing land use forms and needs of the peasants were not taken into account. Second, many peasants are also suspicious and have no desire to sign a contract. In their reluctance appears something that is described by James Scott as resistance practice<sup>50</sup>. However, we should neither over- nor under-estimate these subversive practices. First of all, even if the peasants refuse to cooperate as contract farmers they can hardly stop the expansion since the governmental program does not set its main focus on the inclusion of the family

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Vale manager 17 and 26 May 2011 in Moju. See also Frederico Brandão and George Schoneveld, "The State of Oil Palm Development in the Brazilian Amazon. Trends, Value Chain Dynamics, and Business Models", in *Working Paper 198*. Bogor, Indonesia: CIFOR, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985).

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farms in the palm oil complex; only 15 percent of the palm oil is to be produced by smallholders and the rest is to be produced by large-scale producers and palm oil companies themselves. Secondly, sceptic smallholders as well as critics on behalf of NGOs, social movements or scholars in Pará are broadly isolated and silenced. Critical actors have difficulties in organizing resistance against the palm oil project, forming alliances and being heard in the political forums of decision-making. The analysis on the political dimension of green grabbing revealed that besides the controversies and the criticism by various actors in the interviews and group discussions, by the end of 2013 still no protests to the state palm oil program had been formed. The lack of protest or politically audible resistance can be explained on the one hand by the power asymmetries in the region and in the agricultural sector in general. On the other hand, the silencing of the critics is connected to the convincing legitimization of the palm oil project as a climate protection and development project.

### The Discursive Dimension: What Degraded?

The analysis of the interviews and group discussions revealed one dominant legitimation narrative: accordingly the palm oil expansion is without alternatives since it represents a “green” development in a “degraded region”. From the critical perspective of the Political Ecology there can be no generally valid definition of so-called degraded or marginal land<sup>51</sup>. Areas that seem to be degraded from a macro-perspective of decision-makers can in fact be the basis for the livelihoods of peasants or traditional local communities. The agro-industrial change in the use of so-called degraded areas can therefore strengthen the processes of appropriation and displacement of peasants in favor of agribusinesses which have operated for decades. Therefore, several questions arise. For example, what is degraded land? What is a degrading practice? Who has the power to define degraded land? Who profits from this reframing?

In this section I will develop on the discursive dimension of the analytical tool of green grabbing, how the powerful narrative of degraded lands is articulated with the old narrative of degraded lands in the Tropics, and the global project of climate protection.

<sup>51</sup> Piers M. Blaikie and Harold C. Brookfield, “Defining and Debating the Problem”, in *Land Degradation and Society*, ed. Piers M. Blaikie and Harold C. Brookfield (London: Methuen, 1987), 1-26; A. R. Nalepa and Dana M. Bauer, “Marginal Lands: The Role of Remote Sensing in Constructing Landscapes for Agrofuel Development”, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 2 (2012): 403-422; Jennifer Baka, “The Political Construction of Wasteland: Governmentality, Land Acquisition and Social Inequality in South India”, *Development and Change* 3 (2013): 409-428; Jennifer Baka, “What Wastelands? A Critique of Biofuels Policy Discourse in South India”, *Geoforum* 54 (2014): 315-323.

*So-called Degraded Land in the Tropics*

In the Brazilian Amazon's context, the narrative of the degraded areas is by no means new but is nevertheless powerful. According to this narrative, tropical forests are being linearly degraded by deforestation and by the growing population because of their sensitive ecosystem. The classical theories of tropical ecology in particular still have an effect on ideas concerning the Amazon and its peoples today. In the classical theories of tropical ecology – but also in agrarian economics – shifting cultivation is described as the traditional, Amazonian form of land use: small areas of up to five hectares of tropical forest are burned down, and annual crops, such as manioc, are planted directly amid the tree stumps in the soil, which is fertilized by the ash and deacidified. Following one or two years' use these areas are given over to the secondary forest. After a fallow period of between 10 and 15 years the areas are cultivated again according to the same pattern (burning down and planting)<sup>52</sup>. The degradation process takes place according to the classical theories because the growing population in the Amazon region intensifies the agricultural use and shortens the fallow period.

Researchers from various disciplines have criticized this homogeneous perspective on the Amazon and its peoples. Since the 1990s they have shown that the tropical ecosystems are much more complex and in part more resilient than classical tropic ecology has assumed<sup>53</sup>. Neo-Malthusian explanations<sup>54</sup> and homogenizing assumptions concerning Amazonian shifting cultivation are also unsustainable against the background of diverse peasant strategies of adaptation and survival<sup>55</sup> and of new knowledge concerning complex, relatively intensive-use systems in past civilizations<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> Heribert Schmitz, "Bauern, Landnutzung und Entwicklung in Amazonien: Der Beitrag von Thomas Hurtienne seit 1994", in *Die globale Einhegung – Krise, ursprüngliche Akkumulation und Landnahmen im Kapitalismus*, ed. Maria Backhouse et al. (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013), 324-37.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. C. Uhl, D.C. Nepstad, C.A. Pereira and J.M.C. da Silva, "A Comparative Study of Tree Establishment in Abandoned Pasture and Mature Forest of Eastern Amazonia", *Oikos* 76, no. 1 (1996): 25-39.

<sup>54</sup> Current approaches are described as neo-Malthusian which, like Thomas Robert Malthus, regard environmental crisis to demographic growth. See the summary of Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology – A Critical Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Hurtienne, "Agricultura familiar e desenvolvimento rural sustentável na Amazônia", *Novos Cadernos NAEA* 8, no. 1 (2005): 19-71; Susanna Hecht, "Soybeans, Development and Conservation on the Amazon Frontier", *Development and Change* 2 (2005): 375-404; Alfredo W. B. D., *Antropologia dos Arquivos da Amazônia* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa 8/Fundação Universidade do Amazonas, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Michael Heckenberger and Eduardo G. Neves, "Amazonian Archaeology", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 251-266.

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Nevertheless, this naturalizing narrative about the Amazonian smallholders continues to be influential and has been given a new meaning with the green reframing of the palm oil program as a climate protection strategy: the palm oil plantations, according to the national agricultural research institute EMBRAPA, are to restore the areas that have been degraded by extensive pastures and shifting cultivation<sup>57</sup>. The oil palm plantations, according to EMBRAPA, were ideal for the “reforestation” of degraded tropical soils because palms could grow in nutrient-poor soils and protect them from dehydration and erosion caused by wind and rain<sup>58</sup>. In addition, the palms sequestered CO<sub>2</sub>, especially during their growth phase<sup>59</sup>. Through the integration of peasant farmers into oil palm production, the peasants could also be offered an economically reliable alternative to the practice of degrading shifting cultivation<sup>60</sup>.

Thus, the upgrading of the palm oil plantations as a contribution to Brazil’s voluntary commitments to climate protection through the avoidance of deforestation and lower carbon emissions<sup>61</sup> is directly connected to the downgrading of the peasant land use systems as degrading practice. The homogenization of peasant forms of land use and their classification as a cause of degradation is not only maintained here but worsened as they are also damaging to the climate. From this increasingly dominant perspective, rural poverty is not the result of unequal distribution of income and access opportunities in society, but the consequence of an allegedly natural process of degradation due to population growth and “stone age”, “traditional” forms of land use.

### *The Production of Degraded Lands*

The decisive scientific instrument for the apparently objective identification of the areas to be restored is the spatial planning instrument of agro-ecological zoning<sup>62</sup>. In the official zoning document, in contrast to political statements and interviews, the term “degraded” is scarcely used<sup>63</sup>. Instead, on the basis of the deforestation data from the monitoring system PRODES (Programa de Cálculo do Desflorestamento da Amazônia), the document only designates areas which were deforested before 2008, which have the required soil characteristics and climate

<sup>57</sup> José Furlan Junior et al., *Biodiesel: Porque tem que ser Dendê* (Belém: Brasilien, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>61</sup> Brazilian government, “Palma de Óleo: Programa de produção sustentável”. Fact Sheet, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> EMBRAPA and MAPA, “Zoneamento agroecológico do dendezeiro para as áreas desmatadas da Amazônia Legal”.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

conditions (rainfall and solar radiation), and which have a minimum amount of infrastructure and labor. It is implied in the document, however, that about 80 percent of the deforested areas are “exhausted, degraded or abandoned grazing land”<sup>64</sup>. The characteristics of degraded grazing land are not specified, but it is implied that big part of the region is uninhabited and not used any more agriculturally.

During the zoning process the main production locations were demarcated by a committee of experts, consisting of representatives of palm oil enterprises and technical state authorities. The rural population did not participate in decision-making and zoning; it was included in the zoning plan only via economic and demographic data as potential workers or contract farmers.

Agro-ecological zoning is not only an instrument of legitimation for the palm oil sector. In Pará it produced for the first time the natural resource “degraded land” for renewed development by the agro-industrial palm oil complex – in a similar way to the description of Rachel A. Nalepa and Dana M. Bauer<sup>65</sup>. The region can only be appropriated by the agro-industry through its definition, location and classification in combination with the corresponding credit lines of the support program. At this point the materiality of the green framing of the agro-industrial expansion becomes clear.

### *Palm Oil Plantations as a Climate Protection Strategy*

The articulation of the palm oil program with the Brazilian climate protection strategy has wide-ranging implications. The green reframing of an agro-industrial mode of production enables, for instance, the argument of Vale’s managers that palm oil plantations sequestered more CO<sub>2</sub> than a natural forest<sup>66</sup>. This strengthens the dominant ideology that the palm oil expansion was a sustainable development project without alternatives.

Here the pitfalls of the current climate policy become clear, since it is increasingly limited to the quantifiable (and therefore tradable) reduction of a single greenhouse gas (CO<sub>2</sub>)<sup>67</sup>. The upgrading of the palm oil plantations into a climate protection strategy is therefore just possible because of the reduction of climate change as well as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>65</sup> A. R. Nalepa and Dana M. Bauer, “Marginal Lands: The Role of Remote Sensing in Constructing Landscapes for Agrofuel Development”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2 (2012): 403-422.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Vale managers in 26 May 2011 in Moju.

<sup>67</sup> Achim Brunnengraber and Kristina Dietz, “Transformativ, politisch und normativ: für eine Re-Politisierung der Anpassungsforschung”, *Gaia* 22, no. 4 (2013): 224-227.

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In addition, there is an indication of a new legitimization narrative concerning what could become established as so-called climate-friendly Amazon policy: hot spots rich in biodiversity are to be protected by opening so-called degraded areas to agro-industry. In order to achieve this, exceptions to the regulations must be found at the level of the environmental laws, as seen in the debates on exceptions to the Forest Law (Código Florestal)<sup>68</sup> at state level, for example for reforestation with exotic oil palm and eucalyptus plantations. At the time of the implementation of the palm oil program in 2010, “restoration” or “reforestation” with oil palm plantations was not allowed by law. Nevertheless it was already anticipated by the Brazilian agricultural research institute EMBRAPA as mentioned above<sup>69</sup>.

All of this has an effect on the way in which the palm oil program can be justified, given a legal foundation and implemented as sustainable, desirable or without alternatives in the case study region, and explains why it is difficult for critics to establish a subversive counter-narrative and to organize resistance. The mining company Vale had already created accomplished facts with the planting of its oil palm plantations in 2011 as if oil palm plantations for reforestation were already permitted by law. The signs around Vale’s plantations emphasize this by describing them as a “reforestation project”. A critical unionist expressed her helplessness in the following way: “The palm oil project is boosted by the government, transnational mega-companies as well as the international climate policy. How shall I mess with them?”<sup>70</sup>

By classifying both the peasant systems of land use and extensive grazing lands as degraded areas and degraded practices in connection with a state-promoted support program, the lack of an alternative to this strategy is discursively confirmed far beyond the region itself. Allies in regional or international environment forums are hard to find for the largely isolated critics of the palm oil program. The discursive power of the palm oil project becomes obvious in the interviews and talks in the region about “*the* project”, which underlines that no projects of support for agriculture are being implemented other than the palm oil program. Existing counter-narratives of the peasants and representatives of civil society who attach greater value to peasant manioc production as the production of a basic regional foodstuff, or who question the classification of the region as degraded, are to a great extent silenced.

<sup>68</sup> See also the Brazilian Forest Code of 1965, Law No. 4.771/65, and the transitional regulation (*medida provisória*) No. 1.511 of 1996. The new Forest Law was passed at the end of 2012, following year-long controversies (Law No. 12.727 of 18.10.2012).

<sup>69</sup> José Furlan Junior et al., “Biodiesel: Porque tem que ser Dendê” (Belém, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Interview with unionist 17 June 2011 in Concórdia.

## Conclusion

Strategies towards the bio-economy do not take place in empty, ahistorical spaces and are subsequently less a technical challenge than a question of power relations. Even if the energy sector – as one crucial field of the emerging bio-economy – could be transformed from a fossil to a biomass basis, somebody has to produce the biomass somewhere. Thus, the current envisaged socio-ecological transformation in Brazil or elsewhere does not challenge the growth compulsion of capitalism or discuss new models of consumption or living. Instead, the aim of the dominant policies is to ensure economic growth on the basis of opening new supposedly green fields.

Drawing on Fairhead et al., Marx, and Hall I have developed with green grabbing a flexible analytical tool for analyzing the extent to which separation and restructuring processes in the sense of continuous primitive accumulation are initiated by strategies towards the bio-economy. I have not defined the methods, dynamics and conflict constellations of green grabbing in advance; these must be contextualized and worked out case by case. Furthermore, I have extended the concept of primitive accumulation with Stuart Hall's deliberations on hegemony, ideology, and discourse. In so doing, not only the material and political dimensions of green grabbing are to be examined but also the discursive dimensions as requested by Fairhead et al.<sup>71</sup> As it became clear in the case study of the Brazilian Amazon region, these three analytic dimensions are inseparably linked to one another. None of them is more important or can be examined separately from the other two.

The case study on palm oil production in the Amazon region illustrates that the opening of supposedly degraded land for biodiesel does not resolve but can worsen social and ecological problems of the agro-industrial production model, which is one of the main emitters of greenhouse gases.

The current displacement of Amazonian peasant agriculture is not new but was already established in the colonial era and has been strengthened since the development of the Brazilian agro-industry in the 1970s. The newness of the current displacement process lies in the green re-framing of the agro-industrial expansion as well as the involved radical restructuring of social relations in the Amazonian region. The dynamics are an expression of green grabbing because in this restructuring process the peasants lose control over their land and their labor to the palm oil companies – even if they partly remain the owners of their plots. The methods of separation used here are not direct force but state support measures, specific purchasing context and the practice of the agro-industrial inclusion of peasant agriculture via contract farming schemes.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem.

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As I have shown, the discursive dimension of the analysis is pivotal in order to be able to understand why these restructuring processes, despite the criticism expressed in the interviews, have not led to politically organized protest. Furthermore, it helps to examine the production of new truths about reforestation and sustainability in the Amazon basin. In the case under examination the narrative of the degraded areas of Amazonia has proved to be particularly powerful. It is only because it is widely accepted, from local to transnational political forums, that so-called degraded areas should be developed agro-industrially for the protection of the tropical forest, that the local population's participation rights, and environmental laws, can be circumvented by the large-scale extensions of plantations, without causing transnational protest as is sometimes the case for other large projects in Amazonia. The bias of transnational environmental policy towards the protection of primary forests and the concentration of climate protection on the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> close political articulation forums to peasant actors who live in these allegedly less valuable areas. The narrative of the degraded areas is not only a legitimation strategy with political implications, but it also has material implications: agro-ecological zoning produces the new resource of the to-be-developed degraded areas; at the same time the palm oil complex is re-framed as new subject of sustainable development and climate protection in the Amazon region. Finally, the narrative of the degraded areas can be seen as means of separation itself since the local social movements are silenced and at the same time separated from their former subversive counter narratives and representation forms as "green" grassroots. However, this separation process is not irreversible; the challenge is now – drawing on Stuart Hall and Massimo de Angelis – to start a new "ideological struggle" over meaning.

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