Between 'Conservation' and 'Development': The Construction of 'Protected Nature' and the Environmental Disenfranchisement of Indigenous Communities

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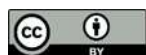University of Essex, United Kingdom

Abstract

Conservation and development discourses are the two main frameworks in which global debates on how to relate to nature occur. These discourses are considered as opposed; while conservation discourses argue for the maintenance of nature in its pristine state, development discourses seek to justify re-engineering spaces to give place to cities, monocultures and roads. However, both discourses have one practical consequence in common: the environmental disfranchisement of Indigenous communities. This article uses the case of the Ecuadorian Yasuní Park to show how the implementation of both conservation and development discourses ultimately disempower Indigenous communities. We use media reports and governmental statements to document the Yasuní case. A critical analysis of the dynamics behind this and other cases allows us to expose the misleading messages, the ironic consequences and the false motives involved in some conservation projects.

Keywords

Conservation; Amazon; Indigenous; Yasuní Park

Introduction

The Yasuní Park is located in the Ecuadorian part of the western Amazon. Scientists acknowledge Yasuní as one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet (e.g., Swing 2017). Despite the existence of many anthropogenic threats to its integrity, there are still many tracts of intact forests in Yasuní. Therefore, the current state of many areas of the Park is a direct result of millions of years of non-industrial biological processes (Bass et al. 2010). The 'pristine state' of these sectors is not due to the absence of humans (Panko 2017), but to the absence of impact of industrial practices. Indeed, three main Indigenous groups inhabited the Yasuní region before colonial intrusion: the *Waorani*, *Tagaeri* and *Taromenane.* While there are dates for the first times these communities were in direct contact with colonists, there are no precise dates for how long the Yasuní has hosted these Indigenous groups. The Tagaeri, Taromenane and Waorani used to live apart from each other before the conquest of the vast western Amazon. However, diverse colonial extractive practices subsequently forced them into the smaller area of rainforest denominated as Yasuní. Of the three groups, the Taromenane and Tagaeri decided to live in isolation from external, global society. While public discourse may refer to them as 'uncontacted', commentators (e.g., Gilbert 2018) indicate that a more accurate term is 'voluntary isolation'. These Indigenous communities have had contact with colonisers but have preferred to maintain a separate existence and reject the enticements of material goods.

In stark contrast with the slow formation of the biological and cultural richness of the Yasuní, are the changing politico-legal dynamics that have affected and shaped the region today. The Yasuní Park was officially created in 1979 and by 1989 had been recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as a World Biosphere Reserve. In 2006, the area of the park where the Tagaeri and Taromenane Indigenous communities live was classified as a 'no-go-zone' or 'intangible zone' (*Zona Intangible Tagaeri Taromenane*) (Pappalardo et al. 2013) by the Ecuadorian government, meaning that no extractive practices could take place within the demarcated area. The declaration of 'intangible zones' is exceptional in Latin America; at the time of writing, only Ecuador and Peru have implemented them. Their uncommonness is illustrated by the statement of Ecuadorian legal scholar Torres Espinosa (2000: 160) who upon the declaration of the Intangible Zone Tagaeri Taromenane expressed:

> until very recently it was a dream to think that large scale resource extraction could be stopped, and particularly crude oil extraction … Today we have a presidential decree prohibiting those activities.

Theoretically, the scheme of intangible zones seeks to strengthen the category of Biosphere Reserves and give authorities a binding legal backing to protect them.

In 2007, the Ecuadorian government launched the Yasuní-ITT project (named after an area of the park called Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini). This was a statement of intent to leave untouched the oil known to be beneath the soil to protect this sensitive territory in perpetuity. This proposal was, however, conditional on pledges from the wider international community to provide compensating funds of US$3.6 billion over 13 years (an amount calculated as representing 50 per cent of the value of the oil if it was extracted). In 2008, Ecuador adopted a new 'environmentalist' constitution that contains principles like the *Sumak Kawsay*, and an explicit prohibition on exploiting sensitive zones. In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme initiated a scheme to collect international contributions to the compensation fund, but in 2013 the Ecuadorian government unilaterally decided to terminate the Yasuní initiative (Alarcón and Mantilla 2017). In just 40 years, diverse and highly contrasting international policies have been applied to a zone that over millennia was subject only to local Indigenous politics and the laws of nature. The disconnection and discontinuity between the slow pace of creation of the biological and cultural richness of Yasuní and the swift changes in the political decisions applied to it, may not however, be as abrupt or real as it might seem. The two processes have an unbreakable

connection in that the latter could have not happened without the former. As predicted by the *resource curse* thesis (Auty 1993; Brisman and South 2013), places rich in biodiversity are most prone to violent action, whether direct or discursive. The biological richness generated during millennia in the Yasuní Park was the trigger for highly violent political action aimed at converting this natural 'wealth' into economic profit.

In this article we address some of the apparently divergent aspects of the Yasuní case to show that, in practice, they are connected. The main thesis is that both conservation and development discourses, apparently opposed, are in practice connected by their common practical effect of environmentally disfranchising Indigenous communities. To substantiate that argument, we divide the rest of the article into five sections. In the first part, we review some of the academic literature concerned with the dialectics of conservation and development (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). In the second part, we offer a theoretical framework for the study at the intersection between green cultural criminology (Brisman and South 2014) and discursive public policy analysis (Fischer 2003). In the third, we present the background to the case-study, exploring the way a combination of local poverty in highly biodiverse areas and the implementation of market mechanisms within international climate change frameworks has presented climate change as an economic opportunity. The fourth section describes four ways conservation discourses can environmentally disenfranchise Indigenous populations. Here, we expose the misleading messages, ironic consequences and false motives involved in some conservation projects. In the fifth section, we discuss the apparent discursive 'dead end' that this study and its findings produce. In the conclusion, we return to connections with similar examples of contradictory conservation and the generalisability of the study.

Contradictory conservation and environmental discontinuities

Writing about the construction and demarcation of areas of protected, conserved or preserved 'nature', Halsey (1999: 248) argued that 'If the challenge of political ecology is something other than to create ... a series of "wilderness prisons" ' it is necessary to 'question the ways "humans" and "nature" interact in areas devoted to experiencing 'nature" '. This is partly because 'The way "nature" is *perceived* has everything to do with the way "nature" is regulated (or constructed as an *object* of discourse)' (italics in original). The forms of regulation and discourse that tend to dominate are not without bias and the significance of the ways they present the 'nature' that people 'see' in a particular way should not be underestimated. As West et al. (2006: 255) asserted:

> Protected areas have increasingly become the means by which many people see, understand, experience, and use the parts of the world that are often called nature and the environment.

This positioning of nature is described as creating a 'virtualizing vision' which, despite being contested, has 'imposed the European nature/culture dichotomy on places and people where the distinction between nature and culture did not previously exist' (see also Larsen 2012). Therefore, protected areas reproduce a particular way of viewing and understanding the world, with effects and implications for those who live on, near, or are displaced from, these sites. Importantly, they also 'change the face of the Earth by renaming places, drawing boundaries around areas, and erasing boundaries between states' (West et al. 2006: 252). This is the exercise of power to create 'insides and outsides—significances and insignificances', all breaking with continuity to produce *discontinuity* (Halsey 1999: 229). This may mean several things including renaming or recategorising a space, so it ceases to be what it was for the previous hundreds or thousands of years. It is discontinued and re-established as a different place.

Halsey (1999: 230) (drawing on Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 474–500) suggested that the resulting spaces can be viewed as 'striated', by which he means the 'inside' is delineated or divided from the 'outside' in ways that enable more effective control of what occurs within the

'inside': 'A troubling effect of this striated inside/outside relation is that it creates divisions rather than extensions'. Examples of such divisions and discontinuities are now being noted in relation to various examples of what can be called 'green grabbing' and neoliberal conservation. The practice of 'green grabbing' involves, as defined by Huff and Brock (2017), 'the elite expropriation and enclosure of land or resources for ostensibly environmental purposes (Corson et al. 2013; Fairhead et al. 2012)', a trend increasingly 'associated with changing governance and technical management of local landscapes to produce conservation areas comprising 'nature[s] that capital can see' (Robertson 2006).' Huff and Brock (2017) termed this process 'accumulation by restoration' and argued that it amplifies and exacerbates 'socio-economic inequalities and power hierarchies via both material and discursive pathways' such as laws, use of military and civil policing forces (Goyes and South 2017), and privatisation, affecting rural and Indigenous peoples by restricting their access and use rights, and ultimately leading to displacement (West et al. 2006: 257).

Perhaps the classic early example of this can be found in the history of the creation of national parks in the western United States (US) in the late nineteenth century, which occurred alongside the displacing of Native Americans from their own lands onto reservation territories marked out by the government. In the case of Yellowstone, the marketing of nature was employed early to encourage tourism, while the US army was employed to remove any potentially hostile inhabitants and reassure tourists and investors about safety. The construction of natural spectacle and packaging of wilderness as a national treasure occurred alongside the removal of the original settlers and owners, and hence, required a rewriting of history. This provided a model emulated elsewhere in the US and globally. Further, and as West et al. (2006: 258) put it:

> More insidiously, Yellowstone became a model for the creation of virtual landscapes, in the form of theme parks, malls, international hotels, and other spaces designed to present consumers with generic experiences of sanitized histories and landscapes (Wilson 1992).

The narrative was rewritten, one culture was super-imposed upon another, traditional land uses were discontinued, and the ways protected lands could now be used legitimately were redefined. The discourse of conservation and protection of nature was constructed in a particular way, opening the door to development.

A cultural criminology of green public policies

Constructivist approaches to science have underscored the importance of discourses in social life (e.g., Gallego-Badillo 1996; Guba and Lincoln 1994, 2005; Wallner 1994). Several disciplines including sociology (e.g., Goffman 1963), political science (e.g., Fischer 2003) and psychology (e.g., García Borés 2000) have studied the role of discourses in shaping our perceptions of reality and, consequently, our actions. Discourses are 'the broad frameworks that provide a set of assumptions and judgements to help us analyse the events of our daily lives and locate them in coherent accounts' (Goyes 2018: 14; see also Svarstad 2002). They allow or forbid ways of thinking, talking and acting (Takeshita 2001). For instance, telling a life story or presenting a group narrative will rely on terms of reference provided by discourses (e.g., Presser and Sandberg 2015; Sandberg 2006).

When it comes to relations between humans and the natural environment, *development* and *conservation* are the two main discourses that provide the framework of reference for a multiplicity of individual stories and group narratives. These two discourses are fundamentally opposed—mainly because they are derivations of the two major philosophical approaches to nature, *atomist* and *gestalt* philosophies, which are themselves in contention (see Goyes and Sollund 2018). An atomist philosophy 'regards nature as a series of independent but

interconnected pieces' (Goyes and Sollund 2018: 374) and assumes that humans can understand the laws that govern nature, and consequently predict, control and organise it. Development discourses are a derivation of such a mindset and assume that humans are at the apex of the hierarchy of all earthly beings and that their cognitive capacities entitle them to manipulate the natural environment to satisfy human needs and desires. Consequently, they justify and sponsor the modification of natural spaces to include infrastructure that will (allegedly) facilitate human development. As noted above, development discourses have been 'greened' in recent decades, giving rise to narratives such as those represented by terms like *ecological services*, *sustainable development* or *green technologies* (for a criticism of these narratives see Vetlesen 2016). The opposed philosophical stance reflects *gestalt philosophy*, which views nature as composed of 'dynamically integrated wholes' whose totality is different from the sum of the components (Wertheimer 2010: 50). A gestalt philosophy acknowledges the limited power and restricted understanding of humans over the functioning of the natural environment. Therefore, it calls for respect of the *intrinsic value of all beings* within nature (Næss 2008). A conservationist discourse is based on a gestalt philosophy and encourages the protection of natural areas in a pristine state (White 2013).

Brisman and South (2014) set out—under the label of 'green cultural criminology'—the bases for studying the ways cultural representations of nature shape human behaviour towards nature and support or prevent its destruction. Discourse analysis, as a method and mode of critique and inquiry, is clearly implicated in green cultural criminology. The discursive analytical tool implied in green cultural criminology can be applied to governmental discourses to understand how discursive representations of the environment prompt certain behaviours towards it. Following Fisher (2003), every public policy—understood as the set of tools employed by a government to improve social integration, or as the body of official mechanisms by which a problematic social issue is settled (Goyes 2015; Muller 2002)—will draw upon the discursive representations available within any given society. Consequently, development and conservation discourses, being the main two discourses about human interaction with nature, are the likely frameworks in which governments will construct their environmental public policies. Here, we use a theoretical framework joining together green cultural criminology and discursive public policy analysis, to explore the signs and realities of Indigenous disenfranchisement resulting from certain conservation projects.

Background: Ecuador and the Yasuní Park

The reasons and dynamics behind the radical change in Ecuador's official environmental policies during the past decade have been explored by many, usually tracing the changing environmental discourses under the presidency of Rafael Correa, which drifted from an environmentalist stance to a neoliberal one. Alarcón and Mantilla (2017) identified the adoption of the *Buen Vivir* [good living] principle as a key factor in the transformation. *Buen vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* is a pillar of the Ecuadorian Indigenous peoples' eco-philosophy; it calls for a harmonic coexistence between human beings and nature, asserting that economic growth does not directly equate to human wellbeing (see Apaza Huanca). The *buen vivir* principle had an emancipatory potential as an ecocentric alternative to the dominant, global neoliberal-capitalist logic. However, Alarcón and Mantilla (2017: 99) indicated that, paradoxically, it was its inclusion in the *Ecuadorian Political Constitution* that rendered the principle 'banal' and meant that it was divested of its 'critical and transformative potential'. The lack of clarity about the meaning and reach of the principle allowed the government to slowly but steadily appropriate it, and begin to change whatever it entailed. By 2013, the principle was embedded in the framework of neoliberalism and articulated within the logic of 'sustainable development'. While Alarcón and Mantilla's work is valuable in understanding the dynamics around the Yasuní case, we expose as false the apparent tension between environmentalism and neoliberalism, mainly because a large swath of environmentalism is entirely neoliberal. Consequently, the seeming 'drift' can rather be understood as an 'unmasking'.

Gilbert (2018) focused on the practices of rubber and oil exploitation in the Yasuní, conceptualising the Yasuní as a commodity frontier (i.e., a space of capitalist resource production with little state regulation). A commodity frontier fits Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation', which refers to the use of diverse measures to divorce workers from the means of production— for instance, by dispossessing them of their lands ([1867] 2017). As with every commodity frontier and most measures of primitive accumulation, the Yasuní has the kind of permanent element of human violence usually found in places where profit accumulation is sought via the exploitation of natives as the labour force. Consequently, Gilbert viewed the expansion of capitalism as the historic driver of conflicts and violence in the Yasuní, as well as the principal cause of the victimisation of the Waorani, Tagaeri and Taromenane Indigenous communities. Gilbert explained the organising logic of capitalist resource extraction in terms of the control of territory, which is advanced using militaristic strategies and the imposition of infrastructure. Simultaneously, Indigenous communities seek to apply territorialisation strategies to maintain their own social order and cultural identity. These parallel efforts to control the same territory, as developed by capitalists and Indigenous communities, result in a clash of interests: first, between Indigenous communities and the oil complex; second, within and among the diverse Indigenous communities themselves. This clash of varied interests arose from a past of Indigenous and colonial conflicts, contemporary internal politics regarding the oil at the heart of the 'resource curse', and then, the new dimension of the 'glocal' and an opportunity offered by the international game of environmental economics.

Climate change as an economic opportunity

In the era of globalisation, social phenomena must now be understood as *glocal*, reflecting the 'intertwining of the global and the local' (Aas 2013: 6). As West et al. (2006: 265) argued, an adequate anthropological (or any form of) analysis of protected areas must employ this approach to bridge the:

> political economies of globalization and the subtle but profound local social effects of the creation of nature and environment in places where those categorizations of people's surroundings did not exist until recently.

Although part of the biological and ethnic state of the Yasuní is a product of isolated development, a good portion of it has already been shaped by exchanges with global forces. Notably, some of the modern history of the Yasuní has been marked by three waves of colonisation. The first was based on Western demand for rubber during the decade of the 1870s, during which Indigenous communities were either chased deep into the jungle or used as cheap labour. A second wave in the 1930s saw oil companies arrive in the area, though they were expelled by the Waorani. The oil companies returned permanently in the third wave from 1972, fully supported by the state and international capital. These three waves of colonisation left a fragmented social landscape. Indigenous communities decided to live in isolation; 'mestizos' lived in a region marked by 'deforestation, water contamination, alcoholism, prostitution and militarized enclaves of petroleum production spreading deep into the rainforests' (Gilbert 2018: 238); the government was virtually absent from the region.

While this was the local scenario before the Yasuní initiative, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the international level, a new political stage was being set. Taken together, the flow of authoritative scientific data indicating the accelerating accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the lobbying by a number of scientists warning politicians about this, the increased intensity of social movement and legal action, and the heatwave that affected North America in 1988 (Bodansky, Brunnee and Rajamani 2017), all led to the formal launch by the United Nations of a set of negotiations aimed at the creation of consensus and an international agreement concerning response to climate change (Carlarne, Gray and Tarasofsky 2016). Despite difficulties and contestation, this process produced the 1992/1994 UN Framework Convention on Climate

Change (UNFCCC), designed with the purpose of mitigating climate change, facilitating adaptation to it, regulating global funding to face climate change, and securing compliance by signatory parties (Carlarne, Gray and Tarasofsky 2016). Expectations regarding the distribution of global funding to respond to climate change have assumed that economically poor countries will commit to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions and in exchange economically rich countries will transfer to them monetary and technological resources useful in the process of adaptation and mitigation (see Sollund, Maldonado and Brieva). The 1997 Kyoto protocol was the first UNFCCC development to introduce market instruments to simultaneously facilitate compliance by industrialised countries and the transference of funding to industrialising countries. Among these market arrangements, the *clean development mechanism* enables 'developed countries'[1] to invest in environmental projects implemented in 'developing countries' to obtain credits valid for the fulfilment of their obligations (Bodansky et al. 2017). This mechanism created a system that could market and sell 'compensatory offsets and credits' to be used to ' "mitigate", greenwash, or legitimize environmental harm in other places' (Huff and Brock 2017). It also gave a green light to economically poor countries to view climate change as an economic opportunity to design and implement *unilateral clean development projects* and await funding from industrialised countries.

The Ecuadorian government was quite conscious that within its border, a region rich in biodiversity was nonetheless out of its control. This provided the economic opportunity to sell clean development credits, motivating (former) president Correa to launch the Yasuní-ITT project. At first, the initiative was camouflaged as a conservation project, but later took on the characteristics of a development project. An analysis of 11 years' news coverage of the initiative enabled identification of the main topics that dominated the news every year. These provided signposts to the facts and stages of development in an otherwise often-blurred narrative. Most importantly, this analysis allowed the tracing of the transversal discourses held by the government, the opposition and the media. The next section presents findings from this discursive analysis of news reports about the Yasuní during the period of interest.

Latent uses of conservation discourses

A critical discourse analysis of the 11 years' media coverage of the Yasuní project identified important threads.[2] The most relevant general finding is that the Ecuadorian government adopted a narrative stance that views climate change as both an economic and equity problem, but not an environmental problem. Viewing climate change as an economic problem leads to adoption of a strategy to turn an economic negative into one that is economically beneficial. Conversely, perceiving climate change as an equity problem is based on the assertion that how much a country must do to remedy the problem in part depends upon how much that country has contributed to creating the problem itself (Bodansky et al. 2017). Representatively, a former Ecuadorian ambassador in Spain declared that 'Ecuador is foregoing 50% [of the potential income] and asking that the other 50% is covered by the countries that contaminate the most' (Actualidad 2009). Therefore, the syncretic stance of viewing climate change as an issue of 'economic equity' marked out its position. It was precisely this syncretic stance that opposition groups criticised from the very beginning of the Yasuní-ITT project. They observed that the Ecuadorian government was not really interested in defending the constitution, the rights of nature or the rights of Indigenous communities; rather, it was more concerned with economic loss. They suggested that had it been different, the decision to not exploit the Yasuní oil would not have been made dependent on acts of the international community.

Based on the discursive identification of the syncretic stance of Ecuador vis-à-vis climate change, we identified four further narratives that, beneath the rhetoric of conservation, brought about the environmental disenfranchisement of Indigenous communities. This finding fits the criminological objective of seeking to uncover the mechanisms that facilitate crime commission. This is illustrated by Hirschi's (1969) famous statement indicating that criminologists should explain why people and groups do not commit crimes rather than why they do. Sociological

theorisation about techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza 1957) and processes of denial (Cohen 2001) are two of the most enriching models to explain the ways people or groups liberate themselves from factors that would normally restrain them from committing crimes. In this case, the narrative behind the Yasuní conservation project fulfilled four latent functions that allowed the Ecuadorian government to avoid and evade social forces that would have made it harder to exploit the oil reserves present in the west Amazonian territories. The idea of *latent functions* is, of course, based on Merton's sociology (2002 [1949]) and later, developments in the sociology of law (e.g., Mathiesen 1984) and denotes the non-declared/ non-manifest functions fulfilled by a social artefact, and about which only a segment of the population is aware. The four latent functions of the Yasuní-ITT conservation project and their discursive power are outlined below.

Conservation projects as enablers of clean conscience extractive mining

Correa became president of Ecuador with the support of several grassroots social movements gathered under the banner of the *Revolución Ciudadana* [Citizen's revolution] (Lalander and Peralta 2012). An important part of this support came from Indigenous and environmentalist groups, which were satisfied with the statements and sentiments of the 2008 'environmentalist' political constitution. Correa gained additional popularity with the proposal to not exploit the oil in the Yasuní Park. Reporters indicated at the time that 'it is difficult to find a commentator who disagrees with these postulates … they are part of the modern policy of taking care of the environment' (Pachano 2009). Correa's government built an international green image and in the 11 years that have passed since he first proposed the initiative, and the five since he cancelled it, an important body of academic literature has been produced praising the project (e.g., Rival 2011). Most importantly, Correa was able to present an image of honour, conveying a message that he had acted on behalf of the Indigenous communities that sponsored his election as president, while in reality, he was disengaging from the mandate given by electors through a supposedly representative democratic process. It follows that the first latent function that a proposal for a conservation project can fulfil is to allow for the development of *clean conscience extractive mining*; the political version of market greenwashing (on 'greenwashing' and technologies of advertising and persuasion see Brisman and South [2017]; on using environmental arguments as greenwashing and to justify 'green grabbing' of land, see Apostolopoulou and Pantis [2010]).

Conservation projects as transference of responsibility to the 'higher authority' of global economic dynamics

In his influential book *States of Denial* (2001), Stanley Cohen referred to political obedience as a denial strategy. Political obedience occurs when the agent of the crime states that they had no choice about committing a crime because they were coerced or ordered by an authority figure to act in this way ('only obeying orders'). In the era of globalisation, due to 'the transformation of time and space through a process of time-space compression' (Aas 2013), authorities do not need to be physically present to exert close control. However, in the case of the Yasuní project, Correa used the abstract concept of the 'international community' as a higher authority that 'forced him' to cancel the initiative. Throughout the diverse stages of the Yasuní project, Ecuador experienced serious shifts in its international relations. Initially, Ecuador declared its faith in international collaboration, indicating for instance that a commission of German parliamentarians would visit the Yasuní Park to settle a scheme in which Germany would 'contribute 50 million dollars yearly over 12 years' (Actualidad 2009). Later, however, Ecuador blamed the international community for the failure of the project. Former president Correa declared that 'the world has failed us' (Noticias 2013a) when he officially announced the termination of the Yasuní-ITT project. According to Correa's narrative, Ecuador could not do anything but exploit the oil because the world had forced it to do so by omission. Correa also invoked *social development* as another 'higher authority'. On several occasions, Correa and members of his government stated that with the money derived from the exploitation, they intended to 'build new schools, improve the roads, kit up hospitals and take out of poverty as many Ecuadorians as possible' (Noticias 2013b).

Indeed, since the early 1970s, the Amazon has been portrayed as a territory in need of development, thus legitimising forceful interventions (Gilbert 2018).

Indigenous communities now found themselves environmentally disenfranchised, with the government denying responsibility for ignoring them and blaming external forces. Via this narrative, Correa sought to reject any criticism of having betrayed the trust that environmentalist and Indigenous groups had placed in him. The international community was placed at the top of an external decision-making hierarchy, with 'development' in second place. At the bottom were the politically engaged Indigenous communities and—even lower—the isolated Indigenous communities who have experienced the harshest forms of environmental disenfranchisement.

Conservation projects as a method of securitisation

Orthodox definitions of securitisation view it as a process of defence of national interests against potential or actual threats (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016). Such a definition can be criticised for, among other things, assuming a unity of interests within a nation-state, and particularly for vagueness in defining these threats and the concept of 'security' itself in this context. Consequently, a critical vein in security studies has begun to inquire about the political effects of securitisation discourses (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016). Securitisation programs have also met much scepticism among commentators. Duffy (2014: 819) pointed out that since the early 2000s, 'fortress conservation' models that include military means and 'green militarization' have underpinned many efforts to conserve biodiversity. Duffy termed this new model a 'war for diversity' and indicated that such a policy is 'used to justify highly repressive and coercive policies'. Wall and McClanahan (2015: 236), when studying the African 'war on poachers', argued that conservation projects in former colonies often include a securitisation component:

> where both military and police measures fabricate a social order set on securing not only the conservation of wildlife, but also a regime of accumulation based on wildlife tourism and 'legitimate' safari hunting.

In the case of Ecuador, the securitisation discourse was used in two contrasting ways, both rendering important political and symbolic outcomes that match Duffy's and Wall and McClanahan's postulates. Visits from the international community enabled the government to justify strict militaristic control over the Yasuní during the initial phase of the project. The visit from German parliamentarians who 'lived in the village, flew over the park, and navigated the river' (Política 2011) allowed the Ecuadorian government to legitimately mobilise the army to protect the international guests. The resulting military occupation of the Yasuní stands in stark contrast with the previous situation in which the Ecuadorian state had been virtually absent from the western Amazon. The control/pacification of the territory made it easier to attract the attention of international investors, many of whom had previously decided to leave the zone due to their perception of the risk of violence and disorder.

The securitisation discourse was applied in a radically different fashion after Correa's cancellation of the project. German diplomats paid a second visit to the Yasuní but with Ecuadorian chancellor Ricardo Patiño making it clear that:

> Ecuador will not allow the German parliamentarians to supervise what the Ecuadorian government is developing … if they do not respect and do not believe in Ecuador, then international cooperation is not welcomed. (Actualidad 2014).

This harsh change of tone from Ecuador continued when Correa declared that:

> the dignity of the country is not for sale misters, take your money … the country will get ahead without the arrogance of those who think they own the world. (*El Comercio* 2013).

Following this, a scheme was put in motion to return the $US7 million that Germany had contributed to the Yasuní initiative. In a highly contrasting, second securitisation moment, Ecuador sought to defend its sovereignty over Yasuní against the 'German threat'. In these two ways, the Ecuadorian government presented and asserted the demarcation and centralised control of the region. Both developments emphasised that only the central government could define 'security', as well as the conjunctural threats of concern. Indigenous communities are environmentally (and politically) disenfranchised, as they are denied participation in the framing of any such threats or in the organisation of security in their territories.

Conservation projects as a confirmation of the lack of agency of Indigenous communities

Since colonial times, discursive tools have been used to justify control over Indigenous communities. Some Christian theologists viewed Indigenous peoples as lacking a soul, while others perceived them as culturally inferior. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1941) argued that war against Indigenous communities was necessary because their barbaric nature would lead them to sin. Nineteenth century anthropology represented Indigenous peoples as living in an atavistic stage of social evolution (i.e., as savage or barbaric) (Béteille 1998). While science and politics have partially advanced in their understanding of Indigenous communities, they still reproduce representations that rob Indigenous communities of their full agency. In the case of the Yasuní project, a first point is that newspapers included frequent mentions of the rich biodiversity in the park but made little or no reference to the Indigenous populations living there. Representations have focused on the diversity of non-human species. Further, the few news entries that acknowledged the presence of Indigenous communities used the term 'uncontacted communities' to describe them. As explained by Gilbert (2018), this is incorrect given that these communities have had contact with external society but have since decided to live in voluntary isolation. The lack of accuracy of this term is not only a technical matter; it has important sociological and political implications. Referring to Indigenous communities as 'uncontacted' can function as a fourth method of inducing the environmental disenfranchisement of Indigenous communities. When these populations are presented as 'uncontacted', one sociological question that arises concerns their 'agency'—encompassing their scope for action, their rights and their voice. Arguably, it could be said that they lack agency or a voice in the public sphere, and therefore, it is legitimate to let other Ecuadorian citizens, market dynamics and the international community decide what to do with the territories where Indigenous peoples live. However, the Tagaeri and Taromenane communities, despite having decided to live in voluntary isolation, have rejected extractive activities by attacking oil infrastructure and hiding in the jungle. Such expressions of protest were neglected or ignored during the Yasuní initiative, representing the extreme of complete denial, expressed particularly clearly by the manager of Petroamazonas—the Ecuadorian corporation exploiting Yasuní's oil—in a statement that said 'the Tagaeri and the Taromenane do not exist' (Aguirre 2010). Making Indigenous communities invisible—a discontinuation to the point of non-existence—is a highly symbolic and materially effective way of relieving them of their legitimate control over their own territories.

The conservation and development impasse?

The shortcomings and the false motives underlying the Yasuní project were not unknown within Ecuadorian society. From the beginning, while there was much hope attached to the project, there was also scepticism. Environmentalist groups indicated that the decision to not exploit the oil should reflect principles and deep convictions rather than being dependent on an economic opportunity and the financial contributions of the international community. Franco Viteri, representative of the Indigenous communities living in the Yasuní, stated 'it is not for the money that we want the oil to stay under the soil, it is for the sake of life' (Negocios 2012). It was also recognised that the project was designed to 'build an ecological image of the government abroad' (León Trujillo 2013), which is a unique example of greenwashing since it comes from a state rather than from corporate interests (which are its usual sponsors). This was accompanied by

concern about the possibility that 'the zone would end up being exploited and the failed project would enable Correa to overcome any guilty conscience for allowing this' (Cáceres 2008). As explained, this was a conservationist initiative designed to fail, which also served as a strategy to cool down environmental movements, present a positive image of the government to the international community, and enable the same government to then exploit nature with a clean conscience.

This study has presented original data and examined layers of narratives to reveal the contradiction at the heart of the story of the Yasuní project and the Ecuadorean offer to forego oil revenue if compensated by international donations. Discourses of the natural, the cultural and the material are intertwined here. As West et al. (2006: 255–256) argued, 'protected areas are the material and discursive means by which conservation and development discourses, practices and institutions remake the world'. However, much like communism and capitalism, the two main economic models, which when implemented both produce marginalisation, poverty and control, the discourses of development and conservation produce environmental and economic disenfranchisement for Indigenous communities. If we know the problems caused by development projects, and cannot trust conservation projects, what policy should we follow to protect both the natural environment and the Indigenous communities inhabiting it?

Conclusion

We are not alone in cautioning about conservationist projects with hidden agendas. Signs of this strategy are visible in many other places, such as Tayrona National Natural Park in Colombia, described by Ojeda (2012: 371) as a neoliberal conservation attempt to market a 'paradise regained' that has instead created 'rampant forms of exclusion that, in the name of nature, have been maintained and reinforced through a double strategy of touristification and militarization'. Neoliberal and 'coercive conservation' (Peluso 1993) have been identified by others as central to investment opportunities based on ecotourism development models that simultaneously promote the cultural value of Indigenous peoples and ways of life while denigrating them for their 'inherent "backwardness" and presumed inability to respect the delicate ecosystems they inhabit. This imaginary authorizes material practices of racialized dispossession' (Loperena 2016: 184). All of this reflects the 'changing dynamics of conservation based on a convergence of interests and intensifying alliances between corporate capital, finance and conservation' resulting in a Faustian bargain (Huff and Brock 2017) in which all are signed up to the same end-goals. Apostolopoulou and Adams (2014: 31) also drew out the significance of such convergence, which constructs a 'self-contained package' containing an ultimately destructive circularity: 'capitalism is used to solve environmental problems it has generated, in turn creating more problems and opportunities for capitalism to "help" '. These are indications of the strength of '*econocentrism*' (Brisman, McClanahan, South and Walters 2018) as a guiding philosophical position. Econocentrism is exclusively concerned with economic health, even at the cost of human health and wellbeing, and environmental health and protection.

Such expanding permeation of capitalist logic to every aspect of social life—including environmental issues—functions like a blurring lens, rendering the heart of a problem 'unseen' and 'unsolved' while attention is instead diverted towards *economic* debates. When climate change is viewed as an economic opportunity and not as an environmental issue, and when ecosystems are portrayed as potential sources of revenue and not as habitats of many human and non-human beings, it becomes easier to neglect the original, Indigenous inhabitants of territories, and indeed forget why *environmental* policies are needed at all.

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1 This is the phrasing used in the original documents. While we reject its implications, we use it here to be faithful to the language used in this political scenario.

2 This analysis is based on primary and secondary data. As part of the primary data collection, we created an archive of 271 news entries that appeared between 2007 and 2018 in the two main Ecuadorian newspapers: *El Comercio* [The Commerce] and *Últimas Noticias* [Latest News]. We followed the 'full collection' sampling technique (Flick 2005) by including all elements that fitted predefined inclusion criteria. We used the keyword 'Yasuní' and explored all entries month by month during the relevant period, generating a list of over 1,500 entries. Next, we applied a second filter by including only the news that dealt–even tangentially—with the Yasuní-ITT project, leaving 271items. News items were collected from 2007, the year the Yasuní-ITT project was officially launched. The analysis focused primarily on the period between September 2009 when the Ecuadorian government initiated a strong international lobbying campaign to collect international funds for the Yasuní Project and August 2018, the time of writing. The material was analysed using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 2012), and the coding process employed Atlas.ti 8 software. For purposes of fact-checking reports of developments and context, we triangulated (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) news stories with information in scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

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