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Researching Illegal Logging and Deforestation

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Abstract

Tropical deforestation such as in the Amazon can be studied well from a green criminological perspective. Ethnographic research methods form a useful way to get insight into the dynamics and complexity of tropical deforestation, which often is illegal. This article gives an account of various ethnographic visits to the rainforests of the Amazon in the period 2003-2014. Ethnographic methods provide insight into the overlap between the legal and illegal, the functioning (or not) of state institutions, the power of (corporate) lobbies, and why tropical deforestation correlates with crimes such as corruption and violence. The use of ethnographic methods in forest areas where trustworthy state actors and institutions are not very present can also present danger and raise ethical issues (such as when the researcher, for reasons of safety, does not present as a criminological researcher). However, a large advantage of ethnographic visits to tropical rainforests is that they allow the gathering of local views and voices, which rarely reach the international level. These local views lead to interesting contradictions at the international level where corporate views and lobbies dominate.

Keywords

Deforestation; deforestation crimes; ethnographic fieldwork; ethnographic methodology; Amazon rainforest.

Introduction

Deadly Environment is a report by Global Witness (2014) on lethal violence against environmental and land defenders. Worldwide, 900 humans were reported killed during the last decade with almost half of them, 448, occurring in Brazil which leads the list by far. Global Witness (2014: 19) attributes land conflicts and illegal logging as the driving forces behind this violence in Brazil. With 'the Amazon being the frontier of ... struggle over indigenous and environmental rights', loggers and farmers are pushing ever deeper into the forest, spawning many conflicts.

Large-scale deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest is relatively recent. In 1970, only 2 per cent of the Amazon Rainforest had been deforested. This grew to 14 per cent by 2000 and to 20 per cent by 2009 (Loureiro 2011: 102; Verweij et al. 2009: 7). Of this deforestation, 80 per cent took place in Brazil where two-thirds of the Amazon Rainforest is found.

Some 70 per cent of the deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has been caused primarily by the creation of cattle ranches (Malhi et al. 2008: 169). Land conversion for agriculture, mainly soy, is the second and more recent driver of deforestation. Both types of land conversion go hand in hand with (illegal) logging. Loggers first take out the valuable wood, after which the forest is burnt (at the end of the dry season) and turned into 'productive' land. The three deforestation forces combined form an encroaching frontier that slowly but consistently devours chunks of Amazon Rainforest.

Rates of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon had been decreasing for several years but in 2013 this downward trend was suddenly reversed. Brazil's deforestation rate jumped by 28 per cent in 2013 (as compared to 2012). Global Witness (2014) reports that 61 per cent of this deforestation occurred in two of the states worst affected by violence against activists: Pará (41 per cent) and Mato Grosso (20 per cent). Pará state is a large state – almost twice the size of France – located in the lower (downstream) Amazon. Mato Grosso is located south of Pará and, although slightly smaller, is still almost four times the size of Great Britain. Mato Grosso's northern half lies in the Amazon region; the southern half has a drier savannah landscape. Mato Grosso is Brazil's main soy producing state – the nation's soy heartland – and has been largely deforested.

Over the last decade, the agricultural deforestation frontier has been moving northwards from Mato Grosso into Pará state near the Amazon River and thus into the heart of the Amazon. In Pará the encroaching frontier of agricultural development manifests itself clearly, and sometimes violently. Because many people live in and around the Amazon rainforest, the deforestation frontier has led to resistance from locals and environmental activists. This explains why Pará state has for years had the highest number of land conflicts of all Brazil's states. In the west of Pará state, soy cultivation has been both the main driver of deforestation and a major cause of conflict.

The Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research (NWO) has a programme on conflicts and natural resources (CoCooN) aimed at understanding and, in most cases, also mitigating conflicts over natural resources. An innovative element of this programme is that universities form a team with non-government organisations (NGOs). Within this arrangement, I coordinate a team – the Lands and Rights in Troubled Water (LAR) consortium – formed by academics from the Netherlands, Brazil and Colombia, and NGOs.¹ For this project, I spent considerable time in Brazil's Amazon region, where I used ethnographic research methods: observations, interviews and visitations. I also spent longer periods there in addition to this particular research.

The main aim of this contribution is to share some of my ethnographic experiences. Within criminology, these types of methods are mainly used by cultural criminologists. How can I, with reference to my longer (ethnographic) stays on the deforestation frontier in the lower Amazon (Pará state), explain why deforestation and land conflicts in the Brazilian Amazon are, according to the statistics for Brazil, so particularly violent? While this question is directed at the added value of ethnographic methods, problems, risks and ethical issues are downsides to reliance on this type of methodology. I will also address some of these.

This article is based on the presentation I gave for the ESRC Green Criminology Research Seminars on 22 February 2013 at Glamorgan University in Cardiff. This presentation included many photographs that I took in the Amazon in Brazil. It made the presentation quite visual; contrary to this written presentation. Instead I describe impressions and discuss ethnographic experiences.²

The changed perception of forestry crimes and harms

In 2001, I gave my first BA criminology course on timber and illegal logging. It is interesting to look at the perception of that new research theme, especially when compared to my former main research theme, international drug control. Some students and colleagues perceived me as having moved from an accepted 'hard' crime theme to a 'soft' theme. I noticed that some colleagues thought that I now worked on a somewhat vague and even deviant theme, as if I had become an environmentalist or hippie-like tree hugger. The criminological relevance was regularly questioned: What does that have to do with criminology?

The reason why I considered that deforestation could well be part of criminology was the simple fact that much deforestation, especially in the tropics, was – and still is – illegal. It may be the general Western bias of criminology that not many criminologists are aware of this, or do not find it interesting enough. After having studied deforestation for over a decade, I observe that the theme still is not high on the agenda of criminologists. Why is this theme largely ignored?

One explanation can be the already mentioned Western bias of criminology. Criminological handbooks and criminology conferences are dominated by Western crimes, while it can be argued that globally most victims of crimes (including corporate, governmental and state crimes) do not live in the West. How many criminologists study crimes outside the Western world? Perhaps to this can be added an urban bias. Many criminologists live in urban areas which is also where most universities are found. This may explain why their attention automatically turns to urban crimes and harms. Moreover, law enforcement agendas are also dominated by urban crimes, not by rural or forestry crimes. A third possible explanation is that criminologists can believe that this subject is dangerous and difficult. This may be part of a more general perception that travelling or living in, for example, the Amazon rainforest is complicated and requires an adventurous attitude and spirit. This image may be influenced by popular documentaries that regularly feature impenetrable jungles and dangerous animals. It is true that there are dangers and difficulties but these usually come from humans, not from animals.

There are several reasons why deforestation can be studied from a conventional criminological perspective as well as from a green criminological angle, with harm as a point of departure. First, much deforestation and especially tropical deforestation is illegal. This means in most cases that timber was logged illegally, without the right permits. According to UNEP and Interpol, illegal logging accounts for 15-30 per cent of the global forestry volume. The economic value of illegal logging is estimated at US\$30-100 billion, or around 10-30 per cent of the global timber trade. In key producer tropical countries, including Brazil, 50-90 per cent of all logging is illegal (Boekhout van Solinge 2010b; Goncalvez et al. 2012: 2; Nelleman and Interpol 2012).

Secondly, deforestation, especially in the tropics, strongly correlates with violence. The Brazilian Amazon seems particularly violent (Global Witness 2014): loggers and farmers (usually large landholders) commonly use gunmen – *pistoleros* – to threaten or kill protesting community leaders in cases of land conflicts. Since the late 1980s, more than 1,150 people have been killed in the Brazilian Amazon in these types of disputes.

Thirdly, various criminological concepts apply to this theme. The UNEP/Interpol report describes corruption, collusion, sophisticated tax fraud and other crimes as ways in which illegal logging is conducted. Involvement of 'criminal groups' is mentioned but not explicitly stated (Nelleman and Interpol 2012). It is obvious, however, that private actors such as timber companies are involved. Some criminologists call this corporate crime or white-collar crime, although some forms of tropical deforestation can better be identified as governmental crime or organized crime (Boekhout van Solinge 2013).

Deforestation fits well within the realm of green criminology, not least due to the word itself. If the word 'green' applies to anything in our natural environment, it must especially be evergreen tropical rainforests with their closed canopies that screen sunlight. The word green also symbolises the awareness that humanity is interacting with its living environment in unsustainable, harmful ways. When the harm perspective is taken as a criterion, deforestation and especially tropical deforestation is a green criminological theme *par excellence*, as several direct and indirect harms can be identified. I will briefly mention some here (see also Boekhout van Solinge 2010a, 2010b).

The harms of deforestation impact upon both human and nonhuman animals, including future generations, and particularly those living in tropical rainforests who are directly dependent on the forests. Tropical rainforests are the planet's headquarters of biodiversity, containing more than half the world's known species and organisms (Wilson 2002: 59). This biodiversity has geographical dimensions, as Wallace (1852) long ago hypothesized after his stay in the Amazon. Deforesting a large area can result in the disappearance of (sub)species.

Deforestation-related crimes and harms mentioned so far, however, were not the main reason for Interpol putting deforestation on the agenda (see Nelleman and Interpol 2012). What really made the difference is the impact of deforestation on carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and climate change. Tropical rainforests represent enormous storages of carbon (Verweij et al. 2009: 7). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007) estimates that some 18 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions are caused by deforestation. A UN programme – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) and, later, REDD+ – has been set up to limit (increasing) CO₂ emissions by controlling deforestation. This allows the buying of carbon credits, enabling (rich) countries to not (substantially) reduce emissions themselves but to basically pay their way out of the problem by aiming to reduce emissions elsewhere. The best-known example is (oil exporter) Norway which is paying 1 billion US dollars to Indonesia to reduce its deforestation and consequently carbon emissions. Norway is also the main funder of Interpol's Law Enforcement Assistance for Forests (LEAF) programme aimed at reducing deforestation.

For green or critical criminologists it may be ironic that it has not been the crimes that have been committed that have been crucial for putting deforestation on the international law enforcement agenda but the legal harms it causes. Whether REDD+ can be effective in forest preservation and reducing global emissions is another question (not addressed here). That illegal logging and deforestation are increasingly accepted as a new crime and law enforcement theme has also meant that the perception of my work has changed. Instead of studying a 'soft' and deviant theme, I am now increasingly viewed as working on an interesting and innovative theme.

Methods and methodological reflection

The Global Witness report shows that there is nothing soft about deforestation. That research on deforestation can also be risky is something that I only really understood after spending time in and around rainforests. I had not thought that studying tropical deforestation could, from my experience, at times be more dangerous than studying illicit drug markets.³

I have used several ethnographic research methods: observation; which I believe is a underestimated research method in criminology; walking and talking; walking and having small conversations; asking seemingly innocent questions to people like taxi drivers and street vendors (who see and hear a lot); talks and interviews with key informants and people in communities for more in-depth information; and living somewhere (part-time), which also means having a social network and following the news. Compared with quantitative research,

ethnographic methods require additional (social) skills and demand other qualities such as contextual assessments of people and situations.

One of the first tasks is finding good and trustworthy gatekeepers: people who can open doors to people or places, who are aware of certain risks, and who can make decisions that limit my risks. Secondly, there is the normal scientific requirement of authenticity and representation: how trustworthy are (the stories of) key informants and respondents and to what extent are they representative of the phenomenon under investigation. A third condition for good qualitative research is to win trust, first from key informants and gatekeepers, later from respondents. This holds true in particular for deviant or illegal phenomena, where the researcher has to be careful to not be seen as a spy, rat or snitch. My standard reaction in these kinds of situations is always that I am an independent academic researcher who is paid by the university alone; that I am interested in phenomena, not in names; and that I would like to hear their perspective on things. During research on illegal phenomena in 'real life' (hence not in prisons or from dossiers), especially in research areas within weak states where the rule of law is weak and the monopoly of violence is not in the hands of (trustworthy) government personnel, this forms an essential safety dimension for doing research. In those situations, a crucial question is: how safe it is to walk and work with this person?

Studying deforestation can be dangerous. Those making a living from it (sometimes including law enforcers) could interpret me as a threat. Tropical rainforests are vast areas where it is not uncommon for people to carry weapons for hunting or for protection against dangerous animals. State institutions are generally not very present or cannot be trusted, which leads to regular situations where people take the law into their own hands.

Having visited potentially dangerous places and meeting potentially dangerous people over many years, I gradually learned to recognise, use and trust my feelings or intuition which increasingly became an indicator of my (lack of) safety. When I have a good feeling about someone or something, I go on, and when the feeling about someone or something is bad, I change course. I will give several examples where feelings influenced research decisions.

Downstream the Amazon River (2003)

The first time I visited the Amazon was in 2003. From Rio de Janeiro I flew almost 3,000 km to Manaus, capital of Brazil's largest state Amazonas. Manaus is located in the heart of the Amazon, at the confluence of two large rivers – the black Rio Negro and the sandy-coloured Rio Solimões – that run side by side for kilometres before gradually mixing.

In the nineteenth century, when the Amazon had the monopoly on high quality rubber, Manaus was the world's rubber capital, which brought money and migrants. Some of Manaus' rubber barons were extremely wealthy. Manaus became famous for its beautiful opera house, with a rubber access road so that the sound of horse-drawn carriages with late guests would not disturb the artists and audience. Manaus was the first city in Brazil that had electricity and a Federal University.

In the early twentieth century, the economy of Manaus and the Amazon as a whole collapsed when the British and other European colonial powers started to export Asian plantation rubber on a large scale. These Asian rubber trees grew from 70,000 rubber seeds that, in 1876, had been smuggled out of the Amazon by Henry Wickham (Jackson 2008). This 'rubber robbery' would later become one of the classic examples of biopiracy. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, Manaus has grown rapidly into a large industrial city and the largest city in the north of Brazil, with over 2 million inhabitants. Even though it is located 1,500 kilometres from the sea, the

Amazon River is easy to navigate for container ships. Manaus is also a main destination for tourists visiting the Amazon.

My aim was also to see the forest, river, and wildlife as well as getting a first-hand grasp and view of deforestation. I had no contacts yet but, during breakfast in the hostel where I stayed, I picked up an interesting conversation between two French tourists and their French-speaking Brazilian guide who said he had been guiding and translating on a Greenpeace ship visiting the Amazon. He said much illegally logged timber was exported from two harbours downstream on the Amazon River: Santarém and Belém in Pará state. I decided to visit them.

From Manaus, I went 600 kilometres downstream and eastwards – more or less along the equator – on a ferryboat, the most common public transport. Two days later I arrived in Santarém, a city of some 300,000 people. More than one century ago, ‘rubber robber’ Wickham secretly loaded the 70,000 rubber seeds on a ship, after collecting them around Santarém (Jackson 2008).

On the docks of Santarém I saw many large timber stacks ready to be loaded on ships. Taking an ‘innocent’ walk along the docks after disembarking, I noticed that all ships had their (mostly European) destinations painted on their sides, the Dutch port Flushing being the most common. Piles that had a timber certification were rare. Considering the high levels of illegal timber from this part of the (lower) Amazon, some of the timber probably had been logged illegally.

Santarém, some 800 kilometres from the Amazon River mouth, is at the point where the clear water, blue-coloured Tapajós River flows into the brown Amazon River, the second ‘meeting of waters’. Human habitation in this area is very old, as the archaeological excavations of Anna Roosevelt (1996) have shown.

When I visited Santarém, a soy-exporting terminal for Cargill, Incorporated, the food multinational company, had become operational. Cargill built the port to reduce transport costs so that soy from ‘soy state’ Mato Grosso no longer had to be transported 3,000 kilometres southwards to be exported. It now only had to be transported 1,000 kilometres northwards to Santarém, from where it could be exported directly, mainly to Europe and Asia. An English-speaking biologist who guided me thorough the Tapajós National Park told me that the soy harbour was attracting farmers from central and southern Brazil because they could source cheap land near Santarém.

From Santarém I flew to Belém, Pará’s capital near the mouth of the Amazon River. With amazement, I watched how over 15 per cent of the planet’s fresh water (Goulding et al. 2003: 27) meandered towards the ocean. At the same time, I was shocked to see how much rainforest had disappeared. In Belém, I tried to visit the harbour but it was not accessible to the public. Through the gate I could see much timber.

Back to Brazil (2009-2011)

In 2009 I went back to Belém. After that I planned to fly to Manaus and look for deforestation that was related to timber, cattle or soy, the three drivers behind deforestation. Beforehand, I had made an appointment with a timber trader in Belém. He was surprised that I was going to Manaus. ‘Why do you go to Manaus? There is still forest there. If you want to see deforestation for timber and soy, you better go to Santarém’ (refer to Figure 1).

The following day, I missed my plane to Manaus. This was surprising and confusing, because I had never missed a plane before. Another flight to Manaus was not available in the short term. I

remembered the words of the timber trader and on an impulse I decided to go to Santarém, where I could travel the next day.



Figure 1: Soy fields near Santarém in the Brazilian Amazon (photographed by author)

I suddenly had one more day in Belém. I heard a taxi driver talking French at a hotel. ‘Where did you learn that?’ I asked. ‘By practising’, he replied. He explained that he regularly had French customers, some from nearby French Guiana, to buy timber. ‘So you know the timber businesses here?’ I asked. ‘I know them all!’, he replied. I asked his price and booked him for the next day.

The next morning we left the city and he gave an overview of timber companies operating locally. I chose one nearby to visit first. Arriving at a big gate, the driver said that timber companies were not easily accessible ‘but they know me!’. I thought that it was better to use a cover.⁴ I pretended to be interested in timber, which he translated at the gate. Inside, the director appeared to be Dutch, which completely took me by surprise.

In his office I said I was interested in timber prices. I was now talking directly to a timber trader and in our native language. I felt increasingly bad about basically lying to him. This became so uncomfortable that I felt I had to change something. ‘I have to tell you something. I have not been honest with you. I am actually from the university, doing research on timber’. He kept silent. What would he do? He seemed like a good person and I did not feel in danger, which could have been the case with other timber traders. Then I said: ‘I understand it if you are angry and want to kick me out’. No, he was willing to talk.

Eventually we spoke for hours. I was allowed to sit at a meeting with another (European) timber trader. They discussed whether or not to bribe a mayor who was deliberately delaying paperwork in order to be paid. The trader explained that he tried to buy legal timber, but that some 30 per cent of his supplies were suspicious in origin. At the end, he said he understood my motives for being deceptive: if I had initially presented myself as a criminologist, he would not have talked to me.

That I had entered his business under false pretences made me re-evaluate my position. This approach had resulted in interesting information and was sometimes the only way to get access to timber traders but it could have been dangerous. More importantly, it did not feel good and I decided to not do it again.

The next morning I arrived in Santarém, halfway between Belém and Manaus, where I had arrived by boat six years earlier. I went looking for the English-speaking biologist who had previously guided me but no one I approached spoke either English or French. I felt bad and decided that I had to change course. I then realised that I had actually not really arrived yet. I said to myself: just walk and look, go with the flow! Some minutes later, walking along the river boulevard, I entered an internet café and I had an unusual feeling: 'There might be something for me in there'. The owner happened to be fluent in English. I asked him if he knew an English-speaking Amazon guide. 'Sure', he said, 'my good friend Gil, who lives a little further down the boulevard'.

Five minutes later I knocked at Gil's door. After another five minutes I knew I wanted him as my guide. 'But you have to know that I am very expensive', he said, 'but I like what you're doing; we'll make a deal'. Eventually, after hours of talking, he said: 'Why don't you move in here, then we can talk more'. Eventually, I spent a week at Gil's house. He became my guide, key informant and gatekeeper. I gradually discovered that he was very knowledgeable and had a large network, including NGO representatives, defence lawyers, academics and people from forest communities.⁵

In 2010, I was back in Santarém to investigate possibilities for a research project. The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) had launched a programme on conflicts and natural resources (CoCooN), for which the Santarém area seemed suitable. Next to longer existing conflicts over timber and cattle, the main cause of conflict had become deforestation for soy. Gil and I organized meetings at his house with academics and NGOs. With a view over Santarém's 'Meeting of Waters', we designed a first project plan, which later was accepted for funding.

For me it was all an example of serendipity. My first two visits to Santarém were unplanned and happened more or less by accident. Now I had a research project there. I learned Portuguese, became friends with Gil and familiar with the region and its deforestation issues. The Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), a well-respected Brazilian NGO, became part of our team and also acted as a gatekeeper. Through CPT I made contact with communities or their representatives. I went back to Santarém several times between 2010 and 2014. In 2011 and 2012 these visits amounted to six months per year.

Conflicts over natural resources in West Pará

Several times I travelled between Manaus and Santarém, by boat and by plane. Santarém lies in the west of Pará state, Manaus lies in the adjacent Amazonas state. Amazonas and Pará are Brazil's two largest states, both located in the Amazon region. Moving between the states also means moving between two different forest situations, and governance or rule of law systems. This can be observed from the air or from the river. In Amazonas state, the forest is mostly intact; Pará has been substantially deforested. This difference can partly be explained by their economies. Amazonas has much industrial development, concentrated in Manaus. Pará's economy is based on agriculture and natural resource extraction, which means that there is a strong agricultural lobby at the state level, just as there is at Brazil's federal level. Both put pressure on forestland.

The large-scale exploitation of natural resources in the Brazilian Amazon started in the 1970s. Logging and cattle ranches were driving the first deforestation trend. In Pará, this was facilitated by two roads cutting through the Amazon rainforest, both of which were finished (paved) in the early 1970s. Roads give access to forests and enable timber and cattle transports. Roads also brought settlers, especially when Brazil started a programme of internal colonisation by transferring Brazilians from the poor north-eastern regions to the Amazon. Fearnside (1984: 50) explains that unplanned colonisation through squatting, the traditional means of settlement, 'engendered many bloody fights throughout Amazonia between squatters and either landowners holding documents for legal ownership or the more feared *grileiros*, speculators making their living by contracting thugs (*jaquãos* or *pistoleros*) to drive small farmers off the land they occupy'.

In the Tapajós Valley in west Pará, this colonisation was combined with a gold rush between 1970 and 1990. It attracted tens of thousands: prospectors, business people, sex workers (in the slipstream of gold prospectors) and *pistoleros*. The gold rush meant wealth but also disorder, invasion of indigenous lands and otherwise protected areas, mercury pollution, disease and death. Many people in the Santarém area know (knew) someone who died during the gold rush from disease, accidents or violence.⁶

In the 1990s, after the Tapajós gold rush, entrepreneurs started to invest heavily in cattle ranching and logging (Goulding et al. 2003: 141-142). The gunmen found a new clientele among loggers and ranchers. Pará became the major timber harvesting and exporting state. Pará gained the reputation of a conflict state: forging documents and using violence became the key for land grabbing (Greenpeace International 2003).

In the early twentieth century, deforestation for soy became the main conflict in the Santarém area, stimulated by the construction of a soy-exporting terminal in Santarém by the company Cargill, Incorporated. The port itself also was a source of conflict: not only was it built without the obligatory Environmental Impact Assessment (leading to ten years of court cases), it was also built next to an archaeological site on the Tapajós River bank and destroyed a popular city beach. The presence of the port attracted farmers from central and south Brazil who bought or grabbed rainforest land, feeding further conflicts.

A culture of lawlessness and impunity had emerged. Of 1,150 murders committed over land conflicts in the Amazon since the late 1980s, only 100 cases went to court. While 80 hired gunmen have been convicted, only 15 people who ordered killings have faced charges (Brooks 2011). Many others are threatened by coalitions of loggers, farmers and cattle ranchers (Phillips 2008). Among the nine Brazilian states in the Amazon, Pará state stands out as having the largest number of these murders, with rural leaders being the most common victims (Loureiro 2011: 81). Pará also became the most violent of Brazil's 26 states in terms of murders over land conflicts (CPT 2009).

What struck me, after spending much time in the Amazon and especially Santarém, is the generally negative image of ranchers, (soy) farmers, loggers and timber traders. They have quite a tough and bad reputation as people who may easily resort to violence. In Santarém, I was at a training event by CPT for leaders from forest and riparian communities (as part of our CoCooN activities). A lawyer gave them security advice: never leave your house alone; make sure you are surrounded by other people – in some villages, fellow villagers form a safety protection ring around a threatened community leader – and instruct your children to never tell a stranger – a potential *pistolero* – where you are.

This violence by loggers and farmers seems quite structural. It reminded me of what John Braithwaite (1989: 129) wrote about (US) business subcultures: 'business resisting law

enforcement by forming oppositional and criminogenic business subcultures'. Paraphrasing Braithwaite, I suggest the term 'violent business subcultures' for some of the businesses in the Amazon that specialise in natural resource exploitation, although organized crime might also be appropriate (Boekhout van Solinge 2013).

Precautions, problems, corruption and criminalisation (2011-2014)

Being in the Amazon, I took my precautions. For some time I lived on a beautiful river beach on the outskirts of Santarém. At night, I was sometimes woken up by the sound of bulldozers taking logs from a barge to a timber company on the riverbank. During a beach stroll one afternoon, I took a closer look at the piles of huge logs but it did not feel good and safe to be there. To begin with, the neighbourhood (Maracana) did not have a good reputation. Quite a few people had been robbed, raped and killed on that beach. I was a foreigner living nearby on the beach and I did not want anyone at the timber company to know about my curiosity about their timber. Another time, I walked by a local nearby beach bar and a guy yelled and wanted to talk. Perhaps he was curious about me, the *gringo*. He worked for Alcoa, a controversial multinational involved in large-scale deforestation for bauxite mining in nearby Jurutí (see Boekhout van Solinge 2010a, 2010b). Maybe it was because he was drunk but I strongly felt at that moment that I did not want this person to know that I studied deforestation. In general, I became hesitant telling people of my interest and would generally vaguely say that I worked with the UFOPA (Universidade Federal do Oeste do Pará) university in Santarém. Once, after a presentation at a conference at UFOPA, I was invited to the regional television station. In the television interview, I made some critical comments. After the interview, I decided that I was not going to do that very often. I figured it better to stay low profile, so that my *gringo* face would not become too well known in the area.

Researching deforestation in Brazil is also a sensitive issue in other ways. It can easily be interpreted as interfering with Brazil's internal affairs. In several cities (Santarém, Belém, Manaus, Rio and Brasilia) I met people, and particularly educated middle-class people, who criticised or questioned my work. I often heard: you in Europe cut down all your forests and developed economically; are you now saying we cannot do the same? A federal civil servant in Brasilia said: 'We are aware of our social and environmental land issues, but we feel international pressure. In Europe you do not have Brazilian NGOs and researchers doing critical investigations, do you?'

Being among the world's top five or six countries – in terms of size, population and GDP – Brazil's educated middle-class population is increasingly self-conscious and confident. There is quite widespread feeling among politicians, policy makers and entrepreneurs that foreigners criticise Brazil's development model too much. A Brazilian viewpoint is that, in order to compete with subsidized agriculture in North America and Europe, Brazil has to use its relatively unused and unexploited land.

This can imply that gates sometimes close for Westerners studying deforestation. In 2012, two of my MA students came to Santarém for research: one on timber, the other on soy. In Santarém, I had befriended a taxi driver with a large and interesting network. I wanted to use him as a gatekeeper. He knew different timber traders and I asked if he could introduce one student and drive her there. He said that this would be no problem. However, he did not succeed, which really surprised him as he knew the traders. They did not want to talk about their business to a foreigner. The other student tried to contact soy farmers and Cargill, Incorporated. From a union leader, she got a list with phone numbers of 95 soy farmers. She called them all, but only two were eventually willing to talk to her. Some had called her an eco-terrorist. Interviewing a staff member from Cargill also proved difficult, even after establishing contacts at a meeting

where Cargill staff were present and where she was promised an interview. After many attempts she finally met with a spokesperson, who did not say much.

Cargill is known for not being very transparent and accessible. Even Olivier De Schutter, in his capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, was unable to speak to what he calls 'The Big Five', the large and mostly unknown food multinationals. According to De Schutter, these five companies – ADM, Bunge, Cargill, Glencore and Louise Dreyfus – are not interested in having a dialogue because the general public does not know them (Somers 2014). In other words, they prefer to remain unknown, which means they do not have to defend their name.

In 2014, I visited Santarém again. Brazil's (non-corrupt) Federal Police had just closed, for one month, Santarém's Federal Environmental Protection Agency IBAMA. The reason was an investigation into illegal timber that had been 'legalised'. It concerned a quantity of some 500,000 cubic metres, which would need 14,000 trucks for transporting (Sousa 2014). Some timber companies had used hackers to break into the online governmental timber registration system set up to control the timber trade. First, over 100 and later over 300 timber companies were under investigation for this. The houses of some IBAMA agents had also been searched. It reminded me of a European timber trader I once met in Germany, who had previously worked in Santarém but had left after threats from a Brazilian timber trader. He explained that he had to pay an IBAMA agent in order to get documents. 'So this one was corrupt?' I asked. 'This one? They all are corrupt!', he said. All timber companies in the area had to pay IBAMA agents: the bigger the companies, the more they had to pay.

Also during my 2014 visit, I visited Santarém's courthouse where a hearing took place over a conflict in 2010 between a logging company and indigenous communities from a reserve near Santarém. Indigenous communities were claiming that the timber company was logging illegally in their reserve. They had made a river blockade at Prainha, near Santarém, stopping barges with timber and demanded the judicial authorities visit and act. However, after a blockade of days, no one from the prosecutor's office came and the protestors set one of the barges on fire. When they tried to stop another barge with timber, someone from the barge shot and hit a protestor in the chest. This gun violence made the protestors stop (CPT 2010: 14). The timber company later brought several indigenous communities to court, as well as representatives of some NGOs who were present (also our partner CPT). In the end it was not the (apparent) illegal loggers, one of whom also used violence, but the environmental and land protectors who had to go to court.

Discussion and conclusions

Ethnographic methods provide insight into the dynamics and complexity of deforestation: the types of players and forces involved; the overlap between the legal and illegal; socio-economic circumstances; conflicts and power relationships; and the functioning (or not) of state institutions. One thing that always strikes me when visiting regions with large areas of rainforest is that there is not much governmental presence. As soon as one leaves the town or city, governmental institutions are not really around. This can create a power vacuum that, combined with economic-political interests, corruption and collusion, can create a culture of disrespect for the law and sometimes impunity. Ethnographic methods are also a way of gathering local views and a way to give a voice to those whose voices are seldom otherwise heard internationally or in English. Knowledge of local views leads to interesting contradictions between the local and international level.

A first contradiction concerns the perception of me as researcher. Whereas in the West (and maybe elsewhere in the world) many people will generally say it is important to study deforestation, in areas with rainforests, I am sometimes seen as an intruder or someone who

exaggerates. I heard several times in the Amazon: 'There is so much forest here, this cannot disappear'.

A second contradiction is that many of the harms and crimes related to tropical deforestation remain unknown internationally. This relates to a third contradiction: the perception about multinational companies such as Cargill, Incorporated. When one 'Googles' Cargill, one finds many positive references about its policy of corporate and environmental responsibility. Cargill states that its policy has resulted in 'zero deforestation in the Santarém area since 2006'.⁷ This contrasts with local views from Santarém where, for over ten years, Cargill's presence has been controversial. Not only was Cargill's soy export port's legal status contested in the courts but the port also catalysed deforestation in the region.

A fourth contradiction concerns international (private) regulation initiatives. Deforestation for soy is on the international agenda and has led to international initiatives such as the soy moratorium and the Round Table on Responsible Soy. Soy multinationals, including Cargill, promised to ban soy growing on land that has been deforested after 2006. Several times I heard or I read that this regulation system is effective in stopping deforestation. This problem has been solved, a Dutch civil servant told me. An international consultant told me something similar. International NGOs mostly support these regulation systems but local or regional Brazilian NGOs do not. They mostly consider that it does not work (Boekhout van Solinge and Kuijper 2012). People from communities and NGOs in and around Santarém say that deforestation, also for soy, has slowly but consistently continued since 2006.

A fifth contradiction concerns the focus of NGOs. International NGOs that work in the Amazon are mostly environmental NGOs, focusing on the preservation of nature. Local and regional NGOs focus much more on human rights. A common criticism of local NGOs is that international NGOs pay more attention to animals than to the human inhabitants of the forest.

For many people, including most Brazilians, rainforests are places that are far away and unknown. I once gave a presentation to academic staff at an anthropology department in Rio de Janeiro. Of the twenty or so people who were present, only one had ever been in the Amazon. They had heard about Santarém and some made cynical comments about the many (activist) NGOs in Santarém, which they seemed to see as exaggerated. I received the impression that they did not understand the reality of crimes and harms in the Amazon.

In 2014, Global Forest Watch, a new state of the art forest monitoring system, was launched. It shows that deforestation in the Santarém area has continued since 2006.⁸ Satellite images basically confirm what many locals say. This contradicts Cargill's statement about zero deforestation in the Santarém area. Does Cargill make this statement because it is meant for an international audience and will not be verified locally? Everyone who knows the Santarém area and its economic dynamics also knows that soy is the main crop. Can it really be the case that none of the soy that is exported from Santarém grows on recently deforested areas?

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- ¹ See the blog *Lands and Right in Troubled Water*: landsandrightrights.blog.com. The CoCooN programme requires studying conflicts over natural resources in two countries. We chose Brazil and Colombia. Academic partners are Utrecht University, National University of Brasilia, and National University of Colombia. UFOPA, the Federal University of West Pará was initially involved. The NGO partners are FIAN international, CENSAT (Friends of the Earth) in Colombia, and the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in Brazil.
- ² Two sections of this article, *Downstream the Amazon* (2003) and *Back to Brazil* (2009-2011), are adapted translations (by me) of parts of an article previously published in Dutch on ethnographic methods in tropical rainforests (Boekhout van Solinge 2009).
- ³ My hypothesis for this is as follows. When I meet people who are in the drug business, there is mutual understanding that their activity is illegal, which means that this is not really an issue. I only have to make sure that I will not reveal their identity. This is in contrast with logging, where legal players are involved, also in illegal acts. They might see a criminological researcher as a threat, not wanting to be associated with crime and criminology.
- ⁴ This guise was also influenced by work of NGOs like EIA that sometimes do undercover investigations with hidden cameras. By presenting themselves as buyers of timber or wildlife products, they identify trafficking networks.
- ⁵ I gradually learnt about his experience and knowledge. Gil Serique has been guiding various scientific expeditions and television documentaries. In several books he is referred to as the best or one of the best guides of the Amazon. See the chapter *Soymageddon* in Blackwell (2012).
- ⁶ This was explained to me by Gil. I met several people, and I heard about more, making a fortune, some as gold prospectors (although I also met some who lost it all), others as owners of a hotel, brothel or plane (flying in gold prospectors). I also heard stories of violent and extorting policemen. Military policemen (the most common and most corrupt police) sometimes had to pay a superior for being stationed in a gold prospecting area, which guaranteed extra pay. Some policemen went further and became violent robbers or contract killers. The gold rush was ended by President Collor de Mello in 1990, in an attempt to improve Brazil's image on environmental issues (Brooke 1990).
- ⁷ See Cargill, Incorporated statement *Responsible Soy Production: Respecting and Engaging with the Local Community in Santarém* at <http://www.cargill.com/corporate-responsibility/pov/soy-production/local-community-santarem/index.jsp> (accessed 28 July 2014).
- ⁸ See <http://www.globalforestwatch.org> for mapping of tree cover loss.

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