An Introduction to Markus Kröger's *Clearcut: Political Economies of Deforestation*

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EXALT Helsinki
11 December 2025
https://youtu.be/jjj17DzxYKY?si=F1OChtHp1cDy_j4h

In my experience, the most useful academic books are those that come alive in your hands not just because of the new discoveries they recount, the innovations they make, the quality of their research, and all that, but more because of the changes they generate in you while you read them and the inspiration they give you to go on with your struggles, but in a different and maybe better way.

This is what Markus's new book, *Clearcut*, does for me. It helps me remember tools that I sometimes forget I have for thinking about what causes deforestation. It gives me fresh confidence to push forward on many neglected issues and look for serious new pathways where people can join together to confront the forest crisis.

We live in an age that is awash in extremely simple-minded official theories about deforestation. In reality these theories tend to be little more than rudimentary, abstract fictions thrown up by powerful institutions in their own interests. These fictions don't usually waste any time describing the realities of forests themselves. In fact, they're usually formulated by people who haven't spent much time with people who live in them, or with people who are present on the ground when the trees are cut down, or with people who cut the trees themselves or hang around afterwards. But careful analysis is not the function of these theories anyway. Their function is more to help big interests navigate the political turbulence of a global forest crisis in a style that points to themselves as a solution to it rather than one of its causes.

Because any proposed solution, of course, needs a problem. Things being what they are, that problem usually turns out to be some racial or class group "other" than my own. This is not a conspiracy. It's merely a barely-conscious reflex to move along the path of least intellectual resistance in a world of racism and colonialism. Bit by bit, a whole political economy of ignorance about deforestation is created, as it were by default. A crazy kind of received wisdom about forests becomes entrenched that, to adapt the words of the late James Ferguson, is not just false but *outlandish*.

Back in the 1980s we all listened to Margaret Thatcher going on about so-called "slash and burn" agriculture, with all the racism that implied. Almost since time immemorial, it sometimes seems, we have had to listen to people who call themselves scientists rant about "overpopulation" – always the overpopulation of "others" – as the primary cause of deforestation as well as every other environmental crisis.

Since the 1960s, too, we have listened to countless orthodox economists tell us that the cause of deforestation is incorrect prices. They tell us that as soon as hypothetical, all-powerful, benevolent authorities bestow the correct monetary value on standing forests, cash will flow into the forests and magically solve the problem. Market failures will turn into market successes. Once all mispricings are wiped out, the perpetual motion machine of market exchange will create a circular economy and preserve forests forever.

Of course, this theory ignores the history of commodification, enclosure, entropy and state power, as well as the function of prices in appropriating economic surplus in the first place. But it helpfully points away from economists' own co-responsibility for sustaining and deepening the forest crisis. Naturally, that makes it very popular at the World Bank and in many university departments.

The flavor of the month in this particular political economy of ignorance is the fanciful proposal called the TFFF, or Tropical Forests Forever Facility, which was officially unveiled at the climate summit in Belem, Brazil last month. The TFFF is a new scheme for leveraging taxpayers' money to make profits for Wall Street from the international emerging-economy debt market and then siphon off some of these profits to pay relatively small money prizes to national governments in the global South who pass a paternalistic test for halting deforestation administered by the World Bank.

In order to function, this institutional setup requires a particularly simple-minded theory of deforestation. According to this theory, deforestation is, again, a result of inadequate economic valuation of conservation combined with a lack of money in central government treasuries – what certain fabulists like to call "the funding gap." A necessary condition for this assertion is that individual Southern governments be theorized as being not only independent parties who bear the key responsibility for the destruction of forests that happen to lie within their geographic borders, but also all-powerful actors when it comes to stopping it – once they are promised a little cash.

Notice how smoothly this theory – if you want to call it that – diverts attention away from what Markus calls a "system of ***inter***state competition," extractivism and speculation replete with colonialist armed violence applied to commodity frontiers, including mineral, cattle ranching, plantation, hydropower, oil and carbon-sink frontiers. The result is not only to dismiss existing knowledge of the real causes of deforestation, but also to inhibit *further* inquiry into the subject.

In fact, now that I mention it, one of the worst things about all the simple-minded theories of deforestation that I've mentioned (or perhaps I should say self-interested racist fantasies) is the deadening effect that they can have on serious scientific research. As Markus puts it, "trying to find the silver bullet of how best to avoid deforestation, paradoxically, might yield fewer results about the *actual* problematic processes causing deforestation." You can improve your remote sensing and satellite monitoring of forest changes as much as you like, but if you have no viable theory of what is causing them, your interventions are likely to make things worse.

Worse still, convenient yet simple-minded theories of deforestation can harden into the landscape itself certain features that deepen the crisis. Famously, this can happen when "tragedy of the commons" theorists who advocate more private property as the silver-bullet solution to deforestation get their way. One result is often to undermine commons norms among small farmers themselves and to undo practices that had kept forests standing for centuries.

By the way, let no one accuse me of an unthinking leftist bias here. We all know that simple-mindedness about the causes of deforestation is not a vice limited to reactionary institutions like the FAO or the UNFCCC or Jaakko Pöyry or The Nature Conservancy or WWF. For example, we're probably all acquainted with counterculture figures who recurrently fall back on the idea that the real root of deforestation is "overconsumption" and that the solution will be to hold ethics classes for a lot of individuals in the global North. Let's not forget, either, well-intentioned NGOs who are forced by the exigencies of having to lobby at the UN to pretend to embrace, for the nonce, the theory that the way to deal with the forest crisis is just to provide Southern states with more cash, or to reverse current unjust financial flows from Southern to Northern states.

Not much less simplistic is the abstract claim, put forward by many on the left, that deforestation is caused by an underspecified "global capitalism." Such a claim is fine as far as it goes but is like me holding up a card reading "accumulation crisis" or "death throes of the latest global empire" whenever anybody asks me about how to confront *trumpismo*. It sort of functions to get me off the hook of responding to the question, but isn't much help to movements needing to discuss and identify strategic points for the struggle for liberation. By the same token, as Markus points out, it's not going to help much in understanding, say, the wildly-oscillating trends in Brazilian deforestation over the past 20 years just to invoke "global financial capitalism," without dedicated analysis of the what Markus calls the "sublogics" of specific sectors like the soybean-corn complex, relevant "territorially vested interests," or the sunk costs that apply in this particular case.

In fact, it's probably fair to say that it's the very premise of Markus's book that the job of responsible academics should be to decline the temptations of all such oversimplifications about the underlying causes of global deforestation. The book itself is grounded in painstakingly-assembled insights about specific, far-flung forests in Brazil, Finland, Peru, and other countries, pointing out the differing dynamics of deforestation in each case. It insists, for example, on taking seriously the question of why, when you cross the Brazil-Peru border, you see such big differences in the nature and extent of deforestation in what you might reasonably expect to be the same landscape. As well as, to take another example, the question of why industrial plantation politics and – just as important – industrial plantation resistance is so different between Brazil and Indonesia.

Yet this attention to the detail of specific cases encourages not an abandonment of theory but the reverse. Taking his cue from, among other ideas, the pioneering sociologist Phil McMichael's model of "incorporated comparison," Markus refuses to abstract his cases from their location in historical time and space, understanding them as related but differing nodes in a singular phenomenon that is constantly emerging historically and that can be the subject of useful generalizations.

One of these historically-grounded generalizations is the notion of "regionally-dominant political economies," or RDPEs, about which I hope Markus can say more today. As Markus expresses it, singling out RDPEs as key drivers of deforestation "challenges prior notions on nation-state centrality" (such as those we see in the TFFF). Instead, it focuses on diverse, politically-powerful extractivist sectors that "both *cause* and *rely on* deforestation" against the background of the dynamics of the current *inter*national system, widespread state capture, and capital's perennial need to seek and produce what Jason W. Moore calls "cheap natures." Once an RDPE is established, Markus writes, ecological interests become secondary in the definition of territories to the interests of the wide variety of actors that benefit from further expansion of the sector. Those might include machinery dealers, rentiers, traders in legal or illegal gold, land speculators as well as innumerable others.

In taking this approach, Markus aligns himself with fellow theorists such as Wendy Wolford, who notes that the "boundary of the nation-state was not the national border; rather, the boundary was the commodity frontier that nations laid claim to and protected with an ever-more elaborate set of rules." He also associates himself with recent intellectual currents that question the fashionable notion of the Anthropocene (which in my own view is one part of the political economy of ignorance that I mentioned earlier). Instead he invokes opposed concepts like Moore's "Capitalocene" or the "Plantationocene" loosely associated with writers like Wolford, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Sylvia Wynter, Tania Li, Elizabeth McKittrick and Sophie Chao.

One of the virtues of Markus's RDPE theory is that, unlike the simple-minded theories of orthodox economists that I called attention to earlier, it takes seriously not only the issue of *space* but also the issue of *time* as it is bodied forth in particular territories. Establishing an RDPE takes time, leaving a cascade of opportunities for opposition. Yet by the same token, once an RDPE is in place, sunk costs such as "technologies of extraction, logistical networks, social channels, investment, and debt arrangements, as well as accrued social, symbolic, and physical capital" have already become "entrenched in the habitus, identities, ideologies, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the territory" in ways it takes time to disrupt. This path-dependence cuts sharply against the image of flipping imaginary price switches that is so common in economics departments and mainstream conservation organizations – an image that gives the mistaken impression that we don't need to study history and should just get on with preventing deforestation as quickly as possible.

However, like your typical commentator, I'm now going to be completely unfair and neglect most of the rest of the fascinating treatment of RDPEs in Markus's book. Instead, I'm going to zero in on just one dimension of the RDPE discussion that particularly struck a chord with me. This is precisely those aspects of territorial "habitus, identity, feelings, thoughts and attitudes" that I just referred to.

Of particular interest to me was Markus' description of the ways that, in different regions and different RDPEs, different "moral economies" not only become dominant among elites but also establish themselves among small communities and in the land itself. This concept of "moral economy," of course, comes from the British labor historian E. P. Thompson, and has been developed by writers analyzing other regions, including the late James C. Scott. Regional moral economies include local values, stories, feelings, mentalities, customs, mythologies, psychological identifications, understandings of how responsibility should be distributed, ways that ordinary people structure and make sense of the world in their minds.

For Markus, transformations in these regional moral economies are crucial when it comes to understanding where the thrust of deforesting extractivism is going to be allowed or resisted. Extrapolating from Thompson a bit in the direction of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, I myself would say that regional moral economies also include distinctive regional ***fantasies***, although neither Markus not Thompson use that particular word.

The idea is that, for example, in Brazil, a "cowboy" mentality can over time become popular not only among big ranchers, but even among relatively powerless people. In Finland, a narrative that says that "clearcuts and bog trenching are best for us and our land" becomes popular not only among big paper and biomass industrialists but also among small forest landholders, in spite of what Markus identifies as its various "irrationalities." Meanwhile, a "miner" imaginary might well become more dominant at the grassroots in a country like Peru, or at least seem to become dominant to observers in certain contexts. And popular community stories and attitudes about industrial plantations might differ between Indonesia and Brazil just because so many more people are employed on plantations in Indonesia. Unsurprisingly, such mythologies, fantasies and self-images have a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies to some extent, coming to permeate the socionatural landscape itself, often with destructive results.

But we also shouldn't forget E. P. Thompson's original point that a *different* sort of moral economy can exert power *before and during* the onslaught of enclosing and extractivist forces. Let me bring a couple of my own examples to the party. A couple of years ago, in an Indigenous territory I will not name, some shady digital businessmen arrived with a contract that promised riches for the local people if they would sign up to a scheme by which electronic tokens representing the conservation

of their forest biodiversity assets could be marketed to Northern investors. The only condition for this project was that the community had to consent to real-time digital and satellite surveillance of every aspect of their local biome, with all data centralized and processed by the businessmen's company itself. The businessmen assured the community that this was nothing more than just observation. Nobody would ever try to steal the land or the forest itself, nor interfere in any way in community stewardship. Nevertheless, after many months of to-ing and fro-ing and lots of intra-community conflict, the Indigenous nationality finally rejected the scheme. One reason was that the community felt that it *was* indeed a form of land grab, because, in their view, to take information or knowledge about the forest could not be distinguished from ripping off the forest and the community itself. The community's thoroughly non-Cartesian moral economy thus provided a foundation for its defense against the encroaching swindlers and may well have helped them preserve their forests.

The other example is a sort of "*cazador*" or "hunter" moral economy, which several forest activists, including Indigenous activists, tell me can be quite strong among certain Indigenous communities. This mentality might be expressed as something like: "Hey, let's go hunting for the cash brought by these foolish whites who are coming in with all these silly paper contracts for REDD+ or for TFFF or for digital carbon or biodiversity investments or whatever, and then we can capture that cash and bring it back to our forest communities with no further consequences."

You might feel a lot of sympathy for this particular mentality and say, more power to these guys, maybe this might turn out to be one more way of fighting deforestation. But of course it's more complicated than that, as often emerges in international discussions among Indigenous forest peoples themselves. Many participants in this debate point out that the confidence in community power expressed by this particular local narrative may be misplaced and the ultimate results unfortunate when the narrative interacts with the fantasies of opponents of Indigenous rights who are acting within emergent RDPEs centered on capital's exploitation of ecosystem services. (And also when the relevant "cash hunting" in one territory turns out to be a betrayal of fellow Indigenous peoples in another.) Here I'm reminded of the work of Jeremy Campbell, a fellow researcher that Markus's book has pointed me to. Campbell describes how, in Paraguay, rural colonists without much power, through their improvisatory use of narratives and fantasies about property – some of them borrowed from development officials or economists and adapted to varying temporary purposes – have actively participated in the construction of a regularized state tenure regime that, in Campbell's words, is in the end "rigged for theft and destruction."

In this connection, I think we might well want to try to sharpen or deepen Markus's treatment of this "moral economy" aspect of RDPEs. Markus relies a fair amount on Gramsci and a somewhat crude dichotomy between coercion and ideological or cultural hegemony. This picture has been greatly enriched recently by Søren Mau's brilliant rejuvenation of Marx's concept of "mute compulsion," and also challenged by James C. Scott's previous work on domination, protected sites and hidden transcripts, and when we talk about RDPEs' role in deforestation I reckon we need to include such perspectives.

You might think that this last remark is a criticism of Markus's book. But I don't look at it that way; for me it's simply among the many things that I needed the book to spur me to think more carefully about. The point is that when analyzing how deforestation is caused and curbed, forest activists need to consider as rigorously as possible these questions of how friends and enemies from different regions and social formations in flux can talk to and influence one another. We have to grapple every day with the fact that nobody's language is really or forever their own, or even temporarily separable from others in the vast, fast-evolving, diverse sea of forest cultures. Methodologies for

working out a theory of global deforestation cannot avoid deploying what the great anti-imperialist scholar Sakai Naoki calls a “heterolingual” mode of address – one that seeks to engage with *mixed* as well as differing audiences, as opposed to a “homolingual” address assumed to mediate separate cultural communities modeled as “national” in identity and treated as homogeneous.

Well, that’s quite enough introduction from me. I think it’s well past time to start listening to the star of today’s show, Markus Kröger.