

Ending Colonialism Means Ending REDD+

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Before it can make money for anybody, REDD+ first has to divide the world's people into three different classes.

One class is the class that supposedly saves forests. This is the class that pays the money that, it claims, makes the difference between saving forests and letting them die.

In return for paying the money that supposedly makes this difference, this first class is allowed to go on extracting and using fossil fuels – activities crucial to its identity, its wealth, its power. For this class, REDD+ needs to be an investment that pays off. For every dollar spent on REDD+, more than a dollar must be saved on not having to give up fossil fuels.

Then there is a second class. This is the class that supposedly lets forests die when no REDD+ money is being paid to keep them alive.

It might be that this class lets forests die because, without REDD+ money, it just isn't powerful enough to stop the advance of logging, mining, dams and commercial plantation agriculture into its territories. Or maybe it lets forests die because, without REDD+ money, it can't learn how to make them absorb enough of the carbon dioxide that is being given off by fossil fuel burning. Or maybe because, without REDD+ money, this class are just natural-born forest killers, ignorantly “slashing and burning,” collecting firewood and forest goods, hiring themselves out to logging or mining companies, or building villages where they're not supposed to.

Whatever: the important thing is that, for REDD+ to work, a second class of predictably passive beings has to be invented in order to make a first class of active people with initiative stand out in contrast. Otherwise it would be impossible to argue that the saving of some stand of trees was the “result” of REDD+ money rather than rural people's own organizing abilities, say, or increased rainfall.

Finally, there is a third class. This class is the audience for the claim of the first class that they are saving the world's forests from the doom that would otherwise follow from the inaction of the second class. The applause of this third class is crucial to the first class' survival.

An Old Dualism

Does the contrast between first and second classes sound familiar? It should, because it's a descendant of the divisions among human beings that colonialists and racists have been inventing and reinventing for centuries.

The divide between the first and second classes is like the old imperialist divide between white conquerors who “make history” and nonwhite “people without history”

(1) who dully scratch around on the land in the same ways year after year. It's like the old contrast that thinkers like John Locke made between "productive," private-property-owning Europeans and Indigenous Peoples, who never made any "improvements" to their land and thus were not entitled to it. (2) It's like the dichotomy that capitalists promote when they say that it is their distinctive "initiative" and "ingenuity" that entitles them to harvest the sweat of their lazy, less intelligent workers.

In fact, REDD+ works best when it is most colonialist. The more that the second class is portrayed as helpless, and the more predictable the future of their forests, the easier it is to invent precise numbers for how many trees have been "saved" by REDD+ money. Not only is REDD+ founded on racism; it also has built-in incentives to become more and more racist the more refined and "improved" it becomes.

Why has all this provoked so little scandal? How has REDD+ managed to cover up its colonialist nature for so many years?

Hiding behind Jargon

The secret is carbon accounting.

REDD+'s carbon accounting is like the law and literature of classical colonialism. It's there to maintain inequality. The difference is that REDD+ carbon accounting doesn't proclaim its double standard openly. It hides it under literally millions of pages of technical jargon. It never uses words like "second-class people" and "first-class people". It never uses words like "waste" to refer to the lands of second-class people, nor "productive hectares" to refer to the lands of first-class people. Instead it uses the terms "baseline" and "project or programme funded by REDD+".

"Baseline" is a code word for "fate". A baseline is whatever colonial powers have decided cannot change until they arrive to make a difference. It might be the static nature of the savages (noble or otherwise) who inhabit forested territories. It might be something like Locke's vision of the Americas as a territory destined to eternal backwardness until the arrival of Europeans. Or it might refer to the unstoppable march of capitalist progress into ever more "sacrifice zones" of extraction on earth or in outer space: the universal destiny imagined by many capitalist ideologues today.

In any case, the "baseline" rate of forest destruction in a REDD+ project zone is always statistically predictable – whether through economic modelling, satellite imagery, tree measurements, linear extrapolation from selected examples, or whatever other method. REDD+'s carbon accountants are professionally committed to the assumption that, in principle, they can predict the futures of forest peoples' forests the same way that chemists predict the outcomes of chemical reactions.

A REDD+ project is different. Under the rules of REDD+ carbon accounting, what a REDD+ project will do is never allowed to be statistically predicted from the previous behaviour of REDD+ consultants or REDD+ money. Unlike a baseline, a REDD+ project is never defined by the past. While forest peoples are imagined to be confined by statistical destiny, REDD+ funders are not.

Without this dualistic fiction, REDD+ projects could never be defined as “additional” (making a difference). The “results” that REDD+ money delivers could never be calculated, and carbon pollution permits could never be generated.

REDD+ consultants – and the companies and governments they work for – would no doubt be extremely offended if carbon accountants tried to predict their future carbon-related behaviour on the basis of their dismal past records, and then boiled it down to a single number. Forest peoples, however, are expected to sit still while carbon accountants dictate to them what the inevitable fate of their territories will be if they don’t accept REDD+ projects.

In many ways, then, REDD+ carbon accounting is just one more exercise in colonialist history-writing. Falsely treating forest dwellers as peoples trapped by the past, carbon accountants simultaneously erase inconvenient parts of their own record. REDD+ without colonialism is as inconceivable as extractivism without colonialism.

Going Forward with REDD+ Criticism

The racism of REDD+ carbon accounting, in short, goes a lot deeper than just the fact that carbon accountants usually have white skins (although they do). The real issue is that REDD+ carbon accounting is colonialist even when it is used by people with black, brown, yellow or red skins. And the better that REDD+ does its technical job of showing that REDD+ money makes a difference, the more colonialist it becomes.

Ironically, this is true even when REDD+ tries to treat Indigenous Peoples and peasants as active parties in saving forests instead of as irresponsible forest encroachers. REDD+ has no choice but to assume that forest people’s practices, however good they are, can be made measurably more effective with REDD+ money. But REDD+ money needs carbon molecule accounting in order to quantify the pollution rights that REDD+ provides to fossil-fuelled industry.

Which means that forest peoples’ beneficial practices can only be recognized and “activated” when they are chronicled, measured, reconceptualized, reorganized, certified and paid for by what are typically Northern-dominated institutions. Institutions that are contractually obligated to defend the continued extraction of oil, coal and gas that is a danger to so many other forest peoples worldwide.

So once again it’s a “white supplement” that makes the REDD+ money flow. Not political organizing among forest peoples themselves, which, it is assumed without evidence, can never be effective. Under REDD+, Indigenous Peoples and peasants can earn recognition for their forest practices – and their own agency – only when they are taught to treat them as means of manufacturing cheap pollution rights for dominant powers.

This is why REDD+ needs to be eliminated, not reformed. Reforms that urge “more accurate baselines” and “Indigenous REDD+” can lead only to intensified colonialism and weaker forest movements. At a time when even some of carbon offsets’ longest-standing proponents are finding that they can no longer defend the practice, (3) it’s time for critics of REDD+ to become even tougher so that the institution can be ended once and for all.

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