



## **A comment on ‘Expressions of dependency: Green crimes and the phantasmagoria of “development” in the extreme west of Bahia, Brazil’**

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### **Abstract:**

Brief review and comment on “Expressions of dependency: green crimes and the phantasmagoria of “development” in the extreme west of Bahia, Brazil”.

The article 'Expressions of dependency: green crimes and the phantasmagoria of «development» in the extreme west of Bahia, Brazil' addresses a critical vector of change in the so-called MATOPIBA, Brazil's agricultural frontier at the intersection of the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia. This rapidly changing region in North-eastern Brazil has seen an explosion in the past 20 years in terms of both production and demographics related to the extraction of natural resources. The manuscript offers a timely and relevant study focussed on the extreme west of Bahia, the most densely populated sector of this region.

The author argues that the violent dynamics at work in the extreme west of Bahia configure a blatant case of green crime. These dynamics include land and water-grabbing processes as well as the dramatic reduction in food crop agriculture and the destruction of pre-existing social and community ties. As causes, the author points to the dependent position of the MATOPIBA region—and Brazil more generally—in the world economy. He mobilises centre-periphery and dependency theories to prove his point.

While I generally agree with the author's argument, I think 'Expressions of dependency' could more explicitly develop the notion of green crimes. The text allows us to identify three distinct levels, and the author could more closely study their interactions in an empirical context. First, there are norms and procedures that while unimpeachably legal from a technical perspective nevertheless offend local notions of justice and hinder access to common goods, most notably land and water. These goods are increasingly diverted towards exclusively private, extractive endeavours.

A second dimension is the abusive interpretation of the existing legal framework in ways that promote agrobusiness by freeing it from some—or most—of its obligations in open noncompliance of the environmental and social rights of local communities. Under Bolsonaro, lack of active enforcement of environmental regulation has become widespread in Brazil, not only in the MATOPIBA region but also throughout the country (Rocha, 2020).

Finally, we observe how actual crimes, ranging from illegal land and water grabbing to physical violence against activists and their communities, play an important role in the accumulation by dispossession processes described in 'Expressions of dependency'. State tolerance of—and connivance in—these crimes is a startling element of the process which significantly contributes to its scope and complexity. These three levels of analysis allow us to think in insightful ways about the complex interaction between positive law and social legitimacy in relation to green crimes.

'Expressions of dependency' has significant but untapped theoretical potential. Classic versions of both centre-periphery and dependency theories are used to propose hypotheses about the construction of the world system in which certain regions are condemned to produce and export raw materials (Wallerstein, 1974) as well as how power relations are structured within dependent countries to allow for the extensive extraction of these resources while guaranteeing the reproduction of the pattern of domination (Cardoso and Faletto, 1969). Systematic reference to and testing of the validity of these hypotheses in the context of the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the extreme west of Bahia would allow us to gain a better understanding of the actual power dynamics at work in this region. Insights could also be gained as to whether or not the so called neo-extractivism trend in Latin America and elsewhere is all that new (cf. Svampa, 2019).

'Expressions of dependency' also offers a rare opportunity to effectively combine theoretical traditions that most often talk past each other. In exploring the nature of social resistance to water and land-grabbing, the author cites Elinor Ostrom's (1990) classic rationalist study *Governing the Commons*. Again, a more detailed discussion of Ostrom's hypothesis about the weakness of com-

munal structures in the face of privatisation of communal goods would give us a better grasp of the nature of green crimes, resistance and conflict as they play out in the extreme west of Bahia. In so doing, the author could integrate the individual-level dynamics that Ostrom has put forward with the structural analysis that Wallerstein as well as Cardoso and Faletto have proposed.

In a Latin American context, Le Gouill and Poupeau (2020) proposed an analysis of how Bolivian communities resist encroachment on their water rights and organise to defend these rights. The extreme west of Bahia might be an ideal place to test the notion of self-organisation presented by Le Gouill and Poupeau and the conditions in which such initiatives can actually supplant an absent or indifferent state and confront abusive, even criminal attempts at privatising common goods. In so doing, the author might expand and develop the notion of plantationocene, which he only evokes in passing but may in fact prove critical in understanding the evolution of land, water and agricultural production in the MATOPIBA region.

To conclude, the series of maps presented in 'Expressions of dependency: green crimes and the phantasmagoria of «development»' is possibly the article's greatest contribution, as the maps spatially illustrate the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the green crimes committed in this process and the dynamics of social resistance at work in the extreme west of Bahia. I believe the maps are the hinge that allows disparate academic traditions and their insights to be integrated into a fruitful analysis. I encourage the author to further develop this approach and take systematic advantage of both its theoretical and its empirical potential.

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