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Commentary

## Silencing Agency in Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) by Essentializing a Neoliberal ‘Monster’ Into Being: A Response to Fletcher & Büscher's ‘PES Conceit’

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### ABSTRACT

In this commentary we respond to Fletcher and Büscher's (2017) recent article in this journal on Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) as neoliberal ‘conceit’. The authors claim that focusing attention on the micro-politics of PES design and implementation fails to expose an underlying neoliberal governmentality, and therefore only reinforces neoliberal capitalism as both the problem and solution of ecological crises. In response, we argue that a focus on the actions of local actors is key to understanding how and why such governmentality fails or succeeds in performing as theorized. Grand generalizations fixated on a particular hegemonic and neoliberal PES ontology overlook how actors intertwine theory and practice in ways which cannot be explained by a dominant structural theory. Such generalizations risk obscuring the complexity and situational history, practice and scale of the processes involved. Rather than relegating variegated and hybrid forms of what actually emerges from PES interventions as neoliberal conceit, we argue that an actor-oriented, ‘weak theory’ approach permits PES praxis to inform knowledge generation. This would open up a more inclusive and politically engaging space for thinking about and realizing political change.

### 1. Introduction

In a recent contribution to this journal, Robert Fletcher and Bram Büscher (henceforth: F & B) (2017) call for a more detailed discussion of neoliberalism in ongoing debates on Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES). An overly-simplistic understanding of neoliberalism, they say, has led to redirected and unhelpful attention to the variegated and seemingly non-neoliberal processes and outcomes of PES implementation in specific places (e.g. McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; McElwee, 2012; Shapiro-Garza, 2013a; Van Hecken et al., 2015a,b), while minimizing or neglecting the consequences of an “overarching effort to advance a more general programme of neoliberal environmental governance” (p.228). According to F & B, conceptualizing PES in more explicitly defined neoliberal terms would look beyond modes of implementation and outcomes, and refocus the discussion on how PES should “be considered an important element of a global program to spread neoliberalism as a particular rationality and mode of capital accumulation”

(p.224). They claim that this would more clearly highlight ‘the PES conceit’, namely “that the approach implicitly accepts neoliberal capitalism as both the problem and the solution to the ecological crisis” (p.224, emphasis in the original).

As critical scholars examining PES, we welcome this call for a more explicit critical debate on the ideologies and power structures underlying PES (see also Kolinjivadi et al., 2017a,b; Van Hecken et al., 2015a). We also recognize that the framing of mainstream PES as “paradigmatic of a more general neoliberal environmental governance approach writ large” (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:227) can serve as a heuristic to situate PES, connect it to more structural dynamics, and draw attention to the inequities these initiatives might trigger (Büscher, 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012; McAfee, 2012). F & B's approach also looks beyond the material outcomes of PES by stressing that, irrespective of actual commodification or marketization processes taking place, PES could still promote more nuanced forms of neoliberalization, for example by sensitising communities and conservation practitioners to

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neoliberal ideals, and by side-lining social concerns. Finally, from a strategic (and scholarly activist) perspective, F & B's neoliberal framing also engenders an attractive and relatively straightforward call to arms to oppose these mechanisms, enabling new forms of translocal political solidarity and strategically targeted resistance<sup>1</sup> (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

However, in this commentary, we emphasize the limitations of the PES “approach as a whole” as an ideological neoliberal project (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:224) and we challenge the implied rejection of an actor-oriented approach in studies of PES and neoliberal conservation. We argue that grand generalizations of PES - often pivoting around a ‘Wunderian’ PES ontology (Wunder, 2005, 2015) underpinned by neoliberal philosophy - all too often overlook alternative relationalities that actors mobilize to make sense of PES. A ‘PES conceit’ approach risks imbuing and dismissing this complexity through a wholesale re-legation of PES as hegemonic neoliberalism, thereby obscuring the situational history, practice and scale of the processes involved (Barnett, 2005; Lerner, 2003; Peluso, 2012), and silencing the agency of the related actors. Paradoxically, this position risks keeping the ‘neoliberal monster’ alive - the very one we try to escape from.

Inspired by feminist and poststructuralist scholars' work on decolonized epistemologies (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2004), we believe that the tendency towards building a neoliberal ‘monster’ can never be forcibly stopped, but can only fail to manifest or materialize by placing greater attention on entangled social-ecological contexts and the adaptations they engender. We hold that socio-economic and scientific theories, and the epistemic communities that translate such theories into practice, tend to construct or ‘perform’ the realities we are examining (Kolinjivadi et al., 2017b). Therein lies our main concern with F & B's ‘PES conceit’; by insisting on viewing PES through a singular theoretical lens we risk strengthening the overgeneralized monolith of neoliberalism itself. We claim that, instead, we should be attentive to diverse theory-practice entanglements, rendered invisible or dismissed as utopian by an overreliance on hegemonic Western- and capital-centric epistemologies. The key question for understanding PES in its many configurations is not whether PES is neoliberal or not, but rather *how* and *why* different actors interpret and shape PES in response to the failure to make human-nature relationships perform as ex ante theorized. In other words, an actor-oriented approach does not obscure underlying governmentalities, but helps to understand how such governmentalities succeed or fail.

In this commentary we aim for middle-ground in the PES debate by responding to F & B in relation to the so-called structure-agency divide, and contribute to the analytical development of PES initiatives. We mainly draw from critical geography and social science literature in crafting our arguments. We first present our concerns with F & B's overgeneralized ‘PES conceit’ and the dangers of over-essentializing PES as a neoliberal project (Section 2); we outline alternative ontological frameworks to think through motivations and configurations of PES and other ‘neoliberal’ conservation approaches (Section 3); and we assess a rich literature on reimagining, adapting, and even hijacking PES for more humane and nature-respecting local alternatives (Section 4).

## 2. Creating the Monster: Over-essentializing Neoliberalism in (Already) Neoliberal Times

First, we challenge F & B's essentialist view of PES as an unquestionably neoliberal project writ large, arguing that the ‘PES conceit’ is underpinned by an overly structural analysis focusing on a hegemonic discourse of neoliberal natures disentangled from practice. As such, F & B inadvertently defend an economic determinism that largely

ignores and, we claim, is at the expense of the continuous contestation, multiple subjectivities and agency of actors actually making (sense of) PES in practice. We rather see neoliberalism as a relational, dialectical process where social norms, dynamic socio-nature worldviews, intersectionality, inter-personal relationships and individual agency play as much a role as structural power. This epistemological difference ultimately explains our position on the potential for actor-oriented research to inform PES analysis. These differences become even more apparent as we examine the literature that F & B use as their evidence for a dangerous ‘PES conceit’.

While F & B recognize the multitude of evolving PES definitions and framings, the core of their argument revolves around principles of PES as laid out by environmental economists (Engel et al., 2008; Pagiola et al., 2002; Wunder, 2005, 2015), which, unsurprisingly, espouse clear neoliberal foundations. Yet, there is an enormous body of work on the variegated plethora of PES permutations, such that it makes little sense to lump together all schemes so labelled as neoliberal conceit or otherwise (e.g. Muradian et al., 2010; Schomers and Matzdorf, 2013; Sommerville et al., 2009; Tacconi, 2012; Chan et al., 2017). Alternative theoretical frameworks for PES shaped by ecological economists, geographers, and anthropologists provide more nuanced perspectives (Dempsey and Robertson, 2012; Muradian et al., 2010; Pirard, 2012; Singh, 2015), emphasizing that not everything labelled PES has been driven by a neoliberal agenda. Clearly, some initial international funders promoted a vision of PES in line with neoliberal ideologies (Pagiola et al., 2002; see also Pasgaard et al., 2017; Kolinjivadi et al., 2017b). But as with other policy instruments originally borrowed “from the neoliberal bag of tricks” (Ferguson, 2009:174), even these PES initiatives have been used to promote outcomes that often defy neoliberal intents (Corbera, 2015; McElwee, 2012; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010). Instead of categorizing PES itself as neoliberal, we argue that it is the perceptions and actions of actors which are key to understanding how and why (and the extent to which) such initiatives are influenced (or not) by neoliberalism. Accordingly, a focus on actor-oriented research would shape future PES research in ways that transcend the neoliberal natures' debate, rather than remaining forever enmeshed in its web.

F & B further argue that neoliberalization is a broader process than what most PES scholars acknowledge, in that, for example, neoliberalism does not require actual markets, but rather “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action”, for example through the use of external financial incentives (Brown, 2003:3, as cited in Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:228). However, we argue that identifying ‘incentives’ as a key neoliberal conceit risks obscuring the many PES initiatives in which ‘incentives’ are ill-defined, variegated, and disassociated from market values, often as a result of actor interventions. As we discuss in Section 4, the ‘incentives’ in some PES schemes have integrated social exchanges that build relationships and reputation between actors (De Koning et al., 2011), cultural norms and values that proscribe relationships to socio-natural systems (Mahanty et al., 2012), and reflect historical trajectories of state actors that define contextual limits of how PES is implemented and understood (McElwee, 2012). We also find that characterizing all incentives as neoliberal leads to impasses in classifying and recognizing myriad human responses to a range of structured interventions, from taxes to markets, for which there is very little agreement about the degree to which such interventions can be called neoliberal (Andrew et al., 2010; Harnes, 2012). For example, is any action by a state to redirect human behaviour by transferring resources “to align individual and/or collective land use decisions with the social interest” (Muradian et al., 2010:1205) neoliberal? Claiming incentives (however defined) as markers of neoliberal policies ultimately seems self-defeating, as this would lump a variety of environmental policies together under one rubric in ways that are unhelpful and fail to forward an agenda for research and action. Ultimately, by characterizing PES as broadly neoliberal, marked by key concepts such as ‘incentives’, and hence ‘all one needs to know about it’, portrays an overly optimistic view of the

<sup>1</sup> See for example the *Via Campesina's* (2014) position paper, in which this global peasant movement opposes PES schemes and green capitalist mechanisms.

success of neoliberal performance, ignoring how and why such performance fails to either take place at all, or to materialize into neoliberal effects.

### 3. Giving Life to the Monster: Essentializing Expert-driven Theory and Dismissing Theory-Practice Entanglements

We caution that F & B's claim that PES is a neoliberal conceit can take on a performative role, through which the work of critical scholars may, paradoxically, serve to reify the essence of neoliberal governmentality, obstructing greater attention to the *how* and *why* of the hybridization, variegation, and outright failure or 'success' of a neoliberal PES (Kolinjivadi et al., 2017b; Butler, 2010). Through the language of 'diffusion' and 'internalization' of the dominant logic (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017:229), neoliberalism is portrayed as an abstract, static macro entity that can either be accepted by otherwise powerless micro agents or passive victims of overpowering (neoliberal) oppression or completely resisted by heroic revolutionaries. This position simplifies and limits our ability to perceive the inevitable ambiguous sociocultural change and socio-economic (re)structuring of seemingly neoliberal policies (Burawoy, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 2002; Gudeman, 2001; Hart, 2006).

In this regard, both F & B and more positivist PES scholars alike pivot around a fixed neoliberal definition of PES (e.g. Wunder, 2005, 2015) by either over-essentializing hegemonic power, or simply turning a blind eye to entrenched power relations. For example, Wunder (2015) argues that we must analyze PES to prove how practice corresponds to theory,<sup>2</sup> and disciplines scholars and practitioners who fail to adopt his particular definition.<sup>3</sup> We argue that F & B's 'PES conceit', based upon theories of neoliberal natures (e.g. Heynen et al., 2007), actually mimics Wunder's claims through the false assumption that an a priori expert-driven theory is the only lens to examine practice. Consequently, little attempt is made to understand how seemingly neoliberal policy tools are mutually constituted and co-produced through the (micro) agency of diverse actors and the macro of neoliberal structure (Cleverly, 2012; Hart, 2006). The result is a battle between 'armchair' experts, with no voice from anyone actually *experiencing* PES. The risk of such an approach is that even the most critical positions exposing the ramifications of structural hegemonies such as neoliberalism, globalization or capitalism will produce only an inherently limited repertoire of potential responses, and, in the process, merely reinforce what is already perceived as dominant (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Law, 2004).

This difference in perspective impacts how actor-oriented research is perceived, either as key evidence as to the interplay of multiple governmentalities (e.g. Fletcher, 2017) or simply as patterning within a single hegemonic governmentality (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017). F & B view actor-oriented research as a way to provide "a fine-grained understanding of how neoliberalization plays out through on-the-ground practice" of PES (p.230), based on the premise that there is an a priori structural power (i.e. neoliberalism), and an a posteriori interpretation (e.g. actor-oriented agency) that merely patterns assumed hegemonic power in new ways. Conversely, our vision of actor-oriented research considers neoliberalism, not as an ontological truth, but as a site of social contestation seeking to instill similar material practices. This approach asks researchers to explore the proactive role of a large range of actors, including the discourses of social scientists, in (re)constructing particular theories (e.g. neoliberal natures) through epistemic communities.

As such, we are not proposing to 'test' the efficacy of expert-driven theory of neoliberal PES to document the patterns of neoliberal natures

in practice, as F & B suggest. Instead, we propose to adopt a *weaker* theoretical and methodological approach, one that explores how a multitude of practices and actors relate to conceptual or discursive formations such as PES. While we certainly recognize the potential for neoliberal performatives to produce material effects, we argue that PES scholarship should permit the multitude of entangled practices and discursive formations to inform a more realistic depiction of PES (i.e. one in which neoliberal performances do not always succeed). We believe such a focus permits a clearer understanding of the dialectical process in which both individual and collective decision-making constitutes and is constituted by the 'neoliberal' definition of PES. Through this approach it becomes possible to explore the plurality of PES praxis without privileging any one form of theory over another in explaining observed outcomes. In the following section we further explain and illustrate the potential of this approach with detailed and nuanced empirical examples of engagement that would be invisible through the lens of F & B's 'PES conceit'.

### 4. Evidence of the Monster? Empirical Examples of the Contestation and Reworking of PES

F & B (2017:230) call for an examination of PES cases insofar as the focus remains on "the ways in which it may continue to promote aspects of neoliberalization regardless of how it is actually implemented". By dismissing studies on the "particularities and outcomes" of PES (p.229) F & B ask us to simplify the messy social reality of people in relation to cultural, ecological, political and economic dynamics. Such an approach to understanding co-constructed and ever-emergent human-nature entanglements can only take us further into the neoliberal monster's belly. We argue, instead, for the adoption of 'weak theory'<sup>4</sup> to understand the co-production of PES. Such a perspective views PES as multi-scalar, plural and necessarily mutually constituted amongst macro and micro scales, discourses and practices (Larner, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Ferguson, 2009). It explores the inter-sectoral and intersubjective dialectic between human-nature entanglements "as being multiple and determined simultaneously and interactively" (Stasiulis, 1999:345). Studies on the intricate and grounded dynamics of PES initiatives have illustrated how ontological foundations of PES can be discursively (re)imagined, in turn impacting grounded practice and socio-environmental outcomes of PES.

The social movement, *Movimiento El Campo no Aguanta Más!* (MECNAM) (The Countryside Can't Stand Anymore! Movement), nationally active in Mexico during the early 2000s, illustrates how the agency of actors with distinct ontologies can produce diverse conceptualizations and practices of PES. Although the primary platform of MECNAM was the contestation of neoliberal policies such as NAFTA, and of the 'neoliberal project' more broadly, they surprisingly advocated for and won the expansion of the newly created national PES programs in Mexico (Shapiro-Garza, 2013b). Movement leaders found PES discourse to be a 'useful surface of engagement' (Escobar, 1999:13) for 'a new form of relationship' for garnering recognition from the state and urban Mexico of the value of rural environmental stewardship and, concurrently, of maintaining indigenous and *campesino* communities on their lands (Shapiro-Garza, 2013b). This alternative conceptualization of PES, holding the potential to 'revalue the rural', was not simply rhetorical: MECNAM leaders sat on the design committee that developed a second, national PES program and their contributions had significant impacts on its conformation (Shapiro-Garza, 2013b). Similar processes, in which neoliberal PES conceptualizations are altered through encounters with diverse ontologies and values for socio-natural

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Wunder's statement: 'We would not want our PES definition to slip through our fingers like wet soap when we try to get an empirical grip' (2015:235).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Wunder's statement: 'These considerations still leave us with the practical dilemma of whom we should invite to our next PES workshop and whom not: how do we measure distance from the ideal type?' (2015:241).

<sup>4</sup> As explained by Gibson-Graham (2008:619): "The practice of weak theorizing involves refusing to extend explanation too widely or deeply, refusing to know too much [...] Weak theory could be undertaken with a reparative motive that welcomes surprise, tolerates coexistence, and cares for the new, providing a welcoming environment for the objects of our thought."

systems, have been documented elsewhere. [Bétrisey and Mager \(2015\)](#) examined how the Reciprocal Water Agreements promoted by the NGO *Fundación Natura* in Bolivia reconceive of ‘payments’ from downstream municipalities as recognition of the invaluable environmental stewardship of previously marginalized upstream communities. Similarly, the national *Socio Bosque* program of Ecuador incorporated discourses and constructs of the rights of nature and indigenous sociocultural concepts of relational and other values for nature (*sumac kawsay*) into its conceptualization and design ([De Koning et al., 2011](#); [Radcliffe, 2012](#)).

Further studies have elucidated the myriad ways in which the means and meaning of PES are directly and actively co-constituted by the micro-agency of ‘participants’. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the NGO CAREC (The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia) received EU funding to pilot a market-based PES initiative for improving water quality in the Chon-Aksuu watershed near Lake Issyk-Kul. Local norms, ideas and practices influenced by both emergent and pre-existing socio-nature relations shaped the way PES was perceived within the contingent ontologies of implicated actors ([Kolinjivadi et al., 2016](#)). In this region, semi-nomadic herders alternate their livestock between settlements at the base of the watershed and upstream pastures. Accordingly, the theorized PES dichotomy of downstream users paying upstream providers to avoid grazing livestock in areas vulnerable to soil erosion proved to be irrelevant, inappropriate and conflictual. Consequently, the PES project diverged to become instead a collective action arrangement in which the traditional unpaid voluntary ‘work days’, coordinated by local leaders of water user associations, replaced ‘payments’ for water-resource management. Similar cases that examine the grounded and intimate ways in which local actors imbue the intent and motives of these initiatives with their own meanings, sociocultural institutions and value systems have been documented with indigenous-led forest-based carbon offsetting in Mexico ([Osborne and Shapiro-Garza, 2017](#)), REDD+ in Cambodia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines ([Mahanty et al., 2012](#)), small-scale PES programs in peasant communities in Nicaragua ([Van Hecken and Bastiaensen, 2010](#); [Van Hecken et al., 2017](#)), and in fishery communities in Japan ([Ishihara et al., 2017](#)), the national forest PES program of Vietnam ([McElwee, 2012](#); [McElwee et al., 2014](#)), and the national PES program of Mexico ([Shapiro-Garza, 2013a](#)).

While we take F & B’s point that states and state-aligned actors are often the primary points of enactment, and indeed the backbone of neoliberalism, other forms and historical trajectories of governance can alter the ontology and practice of PES beyond recognition. As [Van Hecken et al. \(2015b:55\)](#) claim, “it is precisely through the socio-political processes surrounding environmental governance debates that the application of PES is shaped”. A national law on PES was adopted by Vietnam in 2009, which, on the surface appears to follow the neoliberal conceit, in that households are paid to protect ‘environmental services’ accruing downstream to hydropower companies. However, in reality the program is built upon Vietnam’s long history of state involvement; from the state-owned electricity monopoly to the state forest service, which co-administer the PES payments ([McElwee, 2012](#); [McElwee et al., 2014](#)). The importance is not that the state is involved per se, but that households perceive PES payments as supplemental income, claiming that such payments are a government responsibility and a welcome return to a pre-neoliberal era of state subsidies. Insisting on neoliberal frameworks as principal drivers of PES in Vietnam obscures that PES has become a non-conditional, Keynesian-type social welfare program of cash transfers that households understand as reconfirming their historic relationship to the state and the importance of rural upland spaces to national development. Other cases of alterations to the rationales and practices of PES governance leading to the failure of neoliberal logics include a series of large-scale PES programs in China, which shares much of Vietnam’s state socialist history ([Yin et al., 2013](#); [Kolinjivadi and Sunderland, 2012](#)), the Working for Water program of the Republic of South Africa, labelled as PES for reasons of political

expediency but structured as a public works and employment generation program ([Buch and Dixon, 2009](#); [Hough and Prozesky, 2013](#)), and the *Bolsa Floresta* program of Amazonas State in Brazil modelled after a federal poverty reduction and social development program, *Bolsa Família*, providing a suite of subsidies and assistance for local public works, strengthening of governance, capacity building, and other social programs ([Bakkegaard and Wunder, 2014](#)).

These examples problematize several points of F & B’s conceptualization. First, they highlight the fallacy of F & B’s implication of an unquestionable hegemonic, central command that is pushing PES “as a global program to spread neoliberalization as a particular rationality and mode of capital accumulation” (p.224). Second, they illustrate our claim that it is by exploring the actions of implicated ‘PES actors’, not as passive recipients or predictably rational *homo economicus*, but as complex and intersectional individuals exerting both individual and collective agency to resist, readapt, but also propose divergent PES ontologies, that we offer a way forward for escaping the material effects of neoliberal logics ([Larner, 2003](#); [Ferguson, 2009](#); [Gibson-Graham, 2008](#); [Van Hecken et al., 2015a](#)). Third, these cases show how broader neoliberal rationalities of transforming liabilities to assets, rational self-interest and incentives, or the notion of undervalued goods and services produced from the land failed to perform as theorized.

## 5. Conclusion

To reiterate, we do not suggest that structural hegemonies associated with neoliberal natures do not have material effects. However, removing the agency of theory-practice entanglements by implicated actors themselves through painting all PES as driven by strictly neoliberal logics results in the systematic dismissal of hybridized (and potentially novel and meaningful) ontological positions. As such, we do not believe that it is mere naivety to empirically explore the so-called structure/agency divide in PES research. We believe that over-essentializing one or the other in this divide is where the naivety lies, and worse still, serves to reinforce the homogenization of ontological space by experts alone. More specifically in this context, by framing the analysis in a way that gives credence to structures of power is to further reify them and subsequently trap us deeper within their grip. Our approach calls for a situated actor-oriented approach to PES research, allowing PES praxis to inform knowledge generation and critically giving voice and power to *all* actors making sense of PES. In this manner, the unique worldviews of actors within PES projects could be *recognized* for their inherent legitimacy rather than being relegated to an expert-driven, singular, and theoretical interpretation.

As we have demonstrated through empirical grounded case studies, dismissing all PES as neoliberal artefacts falsely downgrades the collective efforts of scholars, practitioners, and on-the-ground actors who reveal a more complex reading of human-nature relationalities than merely supporting the neoliberal cause. The unstated objective then remains forever in an offensive position: slaying every neoliberal ‘monster’ that pops up. Instead, as [Haraway \(2016\)](#) alludes to, it may be more fruitful to explore the continuously emerging and diverse relationalities that might (already) offer seeds to alternatives within a seemingly inescapable capitalist system. Following this logic, it is our belief that the work of scholars and practitioners has a clear forward agenda: to deconstruct how supposed ‘truths’ about socio-ecological processes under the PES rationale gain acceptance; to reveal the myriad ways by which PES logics morph and contort into hybrid relationalities; and to examine the ways in which they might be spatially and temporally positioned to achieve objectives of conservation in unexpected ways. Doing so may offer clues on how to forge ahead with *alternatives* to the tendency towards neoliberal natures.

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