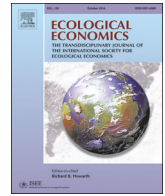




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## Neoliberalism in Denial in Actor-oriented PES Research? A Rejoinder to Van Hecken et al. (2018) and a Call for Justice

### 1. Introduction

There was a time when, it seemed, we had finally transcended the venerable structure-agency debate. Previously, the pendulum had swung back and forth between the two poles. On the one hand, a structuralist perspective argued that actors merely respond to larger systems of power that operate according to *sui generis* principles (Althusser, 1972). Opposing this was an “actor-oriented perspective” celebrating “local creativity” and “everyday forms of resistance” to challenge what they saw as “determinist, linear and externalist views of social change” (Long, 2001: 11; Scott, 1990). But this latter focus soon produced its own backlash faulting it for “romanticizing” (Abu-Lughod, 1990) and “fetishizing” (Kellner, 1995) local agency and resistance in often “translating the apparently trivial into the fatefully political” (Sahlins, 1993: 17).

In response, some sought to resolve the standoff by advancing a perspective that would not only integrate the two poles but actually conceptualize each as a function of the other. While less than perfect, Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory and Giddens' (1984) structuration, for instance, both depicted a world in which structures were erected through the work of intentional actors whose own agency was itself in part produced by the structures so established. In International Relations, Wendt similarly argued that “just as social structures are ontologically dependent upon and therefore constituted by the practices and self-understandings of agents, the causal powers and interests of those agents, in their own turn, are constituted and therefore explained by structures” (Wendt, 1987: 359).

Now, however, we seem to have returned to a moment in which structure and agency are newly opposed and the latter increasingly championed as the appropriate focus of analysis. In one iteration of this position, Van Hecken et al. (2018) (hereafter VHEA) explicitly advocate an “actor-oriented approach” to investigate the implementation of payment for ecosystem services (PES) programmes. Their approach is presented as a direct response to a previous analysis published by the present authors (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017, hereafter F&B 2017), whom VHEA claim adopted a stance tantamount to “silencing agency” in advancing an “overly structural analysis” grounded in “economic determinism.” Our perspective, VHEA assert, thus promotes “grand generalizations” depicting “a particular hegemonic and neoliberal PES” as an “ontological truth” that is steered by an “unquestionable hegemonic, central command.” In doing so, we are accused of promoting an “essentialist view of PES as an unquestionably neoliberal project writ large” that contributes to “essentializing a ‘neoliberal’ monster into being.”

We are surprised and indeed dismayed by this characterization of our work. Not only does it completely misconstrue the perspective we advanced in our paper, but in so doing VHEA's critique risks focusing the discussion away from the key issues of social justice in environmental politics that our analysis sought to highlight. In this rejoinder to

VHEA, we seek to clarify our analysis and redirect the discussion back to the main point we sought to make: that it is crucial to point out that PES is a neoliberal conservation paradigm, and that this acknowledgement should be made even if PES implementation is far from any neoliberal “ideal” in practice. Only by following this nuanced perspective on PES that integrates agency and structure can we acknowledge what is inherently flawed about the paradigm: namely that it constrains broader opportunities for social and environmental justice beyond how local actors subject to PES interventions creatively appropriate the mechanism. This is why we titled our article “The PES Conceit,” as the mechanism's promotion constrains these broader opportunities, *even as implementation does not work out as planned*.

### 2. Clarifying the Debate

The intent of our original article was to move the PES debate forward. Responses to such endeavours normally help to further this objective. VHEA's commentary, however, involves many misinterpretations and inferences that are clearly inconsistent with what we wrote in our original article. Hence, rather than moving the debate forward, we fear that VHEA's commentary risks setting it back. In the following, we therefore respond to the most important concerns in order to clarify our position and aims.

First, far from “silencing agency,” we explicitly pursued “a balance between structure and agency” (F&B, p. 230) in our analysis. We cautioned that pursuing an *exclusively* agency-based approach “risks obscuring the overarching structural dynamics that influence actors' decisions and shape the outcomes of their actions in often profound and problematic ways” (F&B, p. 230) – something VHEA themselves acknowledge. Second, instead of making “little attempt... 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,” we literally stated that a holistic perspective “demands connecting micro- and macro political economic analyses to confront broader neoliberal power structures” (p. 224). Third and most importantly, rather than inadvertently “essentializing a ‘neoliberal’ monster into being,” we explicitly explained that “[w]e use the term ‘conceit’ here intentionally, then, and not because we want to somehow ‘keep the monster alive’ as the subject of our critique (a legitimate trap of critical research)” (p. 230).

Moreover, our use of the “PES conceit” term referred not to how “focusing attention on the micro-politics of PES design and implementation... only reinforces neoliberal capitalism as both the problem and solution of ecological crises,” but to how *promotion* of PES “implicitly accepts neoliberal capitalism as both the problem and the solution” (F&B 2017: 224) to these crises. This is crucial difference; one we thought we had explained clearly in our paper. Our aim, again, was therefore not to diminish the utility of micro-level studies, but to argue that this “contradictory and problematic conceit cannot be

acknowledged or surpassed *only* through actor- or micro-oriented studies” (p. 225, emphasis added). Hence, we argued that micro-level studies should be *complemented* by macro-level analysis of cross-cutting patterns and attributes of PES cases. There was, in sum, no “implied rejection of an actor-oriented approach” (VHEA p. 315) in our analysis.

### 3. On Evading Neoliberalism

The consequence of these misinterpretations is that VHEA end up erecting a caricatured straw man of our analysis that is, unsurprisingly, easy to burn down. Beyond this, however, we believe that there are significant flaws in VHEA's own analysis. One of the main complaints in our paper was that while many authors previously “called for clarification of the terms ‘markets,’ ‘market-based’ and ‘MBIs’ in PES research, curiously ‘neoliberalism’ had not been subject to the same scrutiny, despite the fact that its meaning has been the source of substantial debate in related fields” (p. 224). Our point, then, was not that previous analyses had been based on “[a]n overly-simplistic understanding of neoliberalism” (VHEA, p. 314) but that this term was rarely defined at all!

This seemed to be a problem, given that the debate we responded to was about whether PES was neoliberal or not, with Van Hecken et al. (2015: 117) earlier arguing that “the debate has, to an extent, moved beyond “neoliberal” vs. “non-neoliberal,” focusing instead on the variegated ways PES plays out in the field.” It is this point our intervention sought to “push back against to a degree” (p. 224, emphasis added). Hence, far from perpetuating analysis of neoliberalism as an “over-generalized monolith” (VHEA), we advocated a “refined understanding of the multidimensional nature of neoliberalism” (p. 224) and spent much time explaining exactly what we meant by this. This entailed outlining the different ways in which neoliberalism had been understood in a substantial literature: conceptually, from either a Marxist standpoint as a particular mode of accumulation, or in Foucaultian terms as a particular governmentality; and via Castree's (2010) distinction among neoliberalism as simultaneously a *philosophy*, a *programme* expressing this, and concrete *policies* through which this programme materializes. Our own approach was to combine these elements to understand neoliberalization “as simultaneously an overarching mode of accumulation, a particular governmentality and set of specific policy measures” (p. 230). We suggested that future debate concerning PES's neoliberal emphasis could benefit from more explicit definition of the debate's central term.

It is therefore perplexing to find VHEA claim that “detailed and nuanced empirical examples of engagement... would be invisible through the lens of F&B's ‘PES conceit’” (p. 316). Far from advancing “a wholesale relegation of PES as hegemonic neoliberalism” (p. 315), we had instead offered a multidimensional framework that would allow us to ask precisely which elements of PES in specific cases were or were not neoliberal and with what consequences. Our aim was not to encourage researchers to “look beyond modes of implementation and outcomes” (VHEA p. 314) but to *complement* this focus with attention to cross-cutting patterns and exploration of policymakers' and other actors' design intentions.

More curious is that in their response VHEA still do not define their use of the term “neoliberalism.” Instead, they describe it alternately as a “governmentality,” a “structural hegemony,” an illusory “monster” conjured by critical researchers, a “site of social contestation seeking to instil similar material practices” and “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 equivocation makes neoliberalism anything and everything, and hence analytically vacuous. Such fuzziness thus leads to analytical confusion of the type we sought to preempt. First, VHEA consistently interpret us as emphasizing neoliberalism as a governmentality, thereby minimizing our equally important focus on dimensions of capital accumulation. Second, when they do get

beyond generalizations to discuss specific principles through which neoliberalization is expressed, VHEA ignore the other core features we outlined (privatization, re/deregulation, commodification, etc.) and instead focus only on incentives, chastising us for “characterizing PES as broadly neoliberal, marked by key concepts such as ‘incentives’, and hence ‘all one needs to know about it’” (p. 315).

This is certainly not all one needs to know about it, nor did we characterize “all incentives as neoliberal” (p. 315). Had VHEA followed our multidimensional framework, they would have understood that rather than invoking ‘incentives’ generally, our analysis implies that it is *financial* incentives aimed at resource *commodification* and *marketization* that make incentives more paradigmatically neoliberal. From our multidimensional perspective, therefore, it is not all “action by a state to redirect human behaviour by transferring resources ‘to align individual and/or collective land use decisions with the social interest’” (VHEA p. 315, citing Muradian et al., 2010 p. 1205) that is neoliberal. Such a claim would be nonsensical, as it equally encompasses the “command-and-control” forms of state regulation to which neoliberals usually stand opposed. For such action to be neoliberal, it would have to be framed in other of the principles and policies we also specified.

In our multidimensional analysis, macro and micro scales do not necessarily equate directly with structure and agency, respectively, as VHEA's discussion depicts. Rather than “removing the agency of theory-practice entanglements by implicated actors themselves through painting all PES as driven by strictly neoliberal logics” (VHEA p. 317), a nuanced perspective must acknowledge that this neoliberal logic is itself driven by the agency of actors embroiled in “theory-practice entanglements” in other domains. Far from viewing actor-oriented research as merely providing “a fine-grained understanding of how neoliberalization plays out through on-the-ground practice,” (F&B, p. 230) our perspective demonstrates how design and creation of neoliberal mechanisms can be investigated through this approach as well. An actor-oriented perspective, in other words, must accommodate the agency not only of local stakeholders creatively *appropriating* PES but of all other actors who exercise agency to help design and diffuse the mechanism in a particular (neoliberal) form.

This includes Wunder and colleagues at the Center for International Forestry (CIFOR) and Pagiola at the World Bank, who have not only been prolific “expert” commentators framing PES in neoliberal terms but also very active in promoting this version of PES for actual implementation (e.g. Pagiola, 2008 for Costa Rica). We never implied any “unquestionable hegemonic, central command that is pushing PES” (VHEA p. 317) but stand firm behind our (empirically-based) conclusion that the mechanism has been promoted worldwide by “a relatively small and coherent body of actors and organizations... as a component of an overarching effort to advance a more general programme of neoliberal environmental governance” (p. 228). Yet – importantly – this does not mean that such promotion is merely “structural.” Rather than promoting “the premise that there is an a priori structural power (i.e. neoliberalism), and an a posteriori interpretation (e.g. actor-oriented agency)” (VHEA p. 316), a nuanced, holistic and *dialectical* perspective moves beyond opposing both structure/agency and macro/micro and then conflating the two halves of these dichotomies. Instead, it promotes an understanding of *how structures and agency are co-constituted at macro, micro and intermediate levels simultaneously and how these change over time*.

Not doing this type of nuance justice leads to contradictory and ambiguous analysis, as several examples illustrate. First, VHEA reproach us for portraying neoliberalism “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,” then go on to suggest that we turn “a blind eye to entrenched power relations” (p. 316)! Second, VHEA claim that “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” (p. 317). So are structures real or are they

conjured by critical researchers? VHEA equivocate on this essential point throughout their commentary. As a final example, in another recent paper from several of the same authors, [Kolinjivadi et al. \(2017\)](#) state, “While scholars have argued rather convincingly that PES rarely if ever operates according to sheer market-based arrangements... this fact alone is insufficient to dismiss a broader discursive shift from ecological values to more market-driven values geared towards furthering economic production.” This, ironically, is exactly the point that our own analysis made.

#### 4. On Limits of “PES”

All this leads to overarching confusion concerning the definition of “PES” itself. Just as research concerning neoliberalization generally has questioned how far analysis in these terms can be taken before the concept loses all meaning ([Birch, 2015](#)), the same could be asked of PES. As support for their actor-oriented approach, VHEA discuss instances in which local stakeholders have transformed PES programmes in ways that deviate substantially from their initial market-based conceptualization. In one of their most compelling examples, a local “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” (p. 317). But when such a programme no longer involves *payment for services* in any form can it still be considered PES in anything but name? If not, using examples such as this to argue that PES is not necessarily neoliberal becomes a semantic game the import of which is questionable. If on-the-ground analysis reveals that “not everything labelled PES has been driven by a neoliberal agenda” (VHEA p. 315), does this mean that PES is not neoliberal or that such projects can no longer be labelled PES? If local agents can indeed “alter the ontology and practice of PES beyond recognition” (VHEA p. 317), are we still talking about PES at all?

As an extreme example of this dilemma, in one of the studies we highlighted in our own paper, [Muniz and Cruz \(2015\)](#) conclude that most current PES is problematic but that the mechanism could be redeemed by reformulating it to ‘make nature valuable, not profitable.’ To accomplish this, they assert: ‘PES should avoid monetary payment or the logic of such payments’ (2015: 10911). Essentially, then, the authors argue that PES can function effectively and equitably if it abandons all those features that would make it recognizable as PES. While such convoluted reasoning may celebrate how local actors appropriate ostensive PES programmes for their own ends, it does little to help our analytical understanding or define types of environmental governance that would move us towards a better world.

#### 5. On Epistemology and Politics

VHEA’s commentary raises another important issue concerning the implications of the perspective informing research. They present the divergence between their views and ours as primarily an “ontological” one, a function of the “epistemological difference” used to view the phenomenon under investigation. Invoking Gibson-Graham, they contend that far from describing an empirical reality, one’s “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” (p. 315). Our own critique of PES, then, is seen to “take on a performative role, through which the work of critical scholars may, paradoxically, serve to reify the essence of neoliberal governmentality” (p. 316).

In addition to the irony of seemingly wishing to deprive us of the very agency that VHEA claim we deny local stakeholders in PES projects, this type of argumentation can become seriously problematic. While of course all research is performative to a certain extent, taking this perspective to extremes risks undermining the common ground upon which scholarly debate is usually based. If our object of study is

indeed *only* a function of the perspective through which we view it, then questions concerning the accuracy of interpretation vis-à-vis the world at large are no longer pertinent, and there is no need to ask them anymore. What, in such an “ontology,” remains the role of empirical research? How do we resolve questions concerning differences in the interpretation of empirical results among researchers employing different “ontologies”? In already troubled “post-truth” times, we think this is a very slippery slope VHEA are treading with potentially disturbing consequences for scholarly research and analysis that demand more sustained discussion.

One such consequence is that VHEA advocate a flat ontology wherein “instead of categorizing PES itself as neoliberal... 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” (p. 315)? Does not acknowledging all “ontologies” as equally legitimate – including those of neoliberal policymakers, corporate think-tanks, wealthy conservation philanthropists and others – risk depriving us of the ground from which to wage a progressive politics altogether, which requires assessing the relative validity of different knowledge claims and the value orientations they embody? Moreover, if we must employ “praxis to inform knowledge generation and critically giving voice and power to *all* actors making sense of PES” (VHEA p. 317), does this not also demand conferring voice and power to those seeking to bring PES back into alignment with neoliberalization in the face of on-the-ground deviation (see [McAfee and Shapiro, 2010](#); [Fletcher and Breitling, 2012](#); [Matulis, 2013](#))?

While VHEA find a positive politics in how “a focus on actor-oriented research would shape future PES research in ways that transcend the neoliberal natures’ debate” (VHEA p. 315), we see a danger that this could function precisely as a form of “neoliberalism in denial” ([Springer, 2014](#)) in which the vigilance needed to combat the pernicious diffusion of neoliberal ways of thinking and being might be abandoned. Hence we cautioned before that “recent calls for real-world PES to be ‘retrofitted’ to better incorporate concerns for equity and social justice... risk reinforcing the problematic dimensions and entrenched power structures of the approach as a whole and hence work against effective resolution of these very concerns” (F&B p. 225). Yet VHEA seem intent on continuing in exactly this vein in their claim that “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” (p. 316). What VHEA end up with, then, is a conception of the world in which all actors and theories are equal, thereby rendering research and analysis in support of particular values or politics pointless.

#### 6. Conclusion: On Doing Agency and Structure Justice

Let us, finally, move to the issue at the heart of the PES discussion; one we emphasized in our initial paper. What, in the end, constitutes an emancipatory environmental politics facilitating democratic decision-making and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and resource access? This is the essential question that informed our own analysis. To the extent that ‘actually existing’ PES projects contribute to these ends, they could be supported, whether or not we continue to label them ‘PES’. Our own work makes clear that we are quite sceptical that PES or any other neoliberal conservation mechanism can really move us substantially in this direction, for reasons explained in the original paper. Far from waging “a battle between ‘armchair’ experts, with no voice from anyone actually *experiencing* PES” (VHEA p. 316), our critique was inspired by numerous voices of discontent from actors around the world about the negative impacts of PES projects – some of which VHEA themselves reference.

VHEA seem content to continue searching within actually existing PES for “clues on how to forge ahead with *alternatives* to the tendency towards neoliberal natures” (p. 317, emphasis in original). But might our collective energies in pursuit of a progressive politics be better

spent discussing how to develop wholly different “forms of environmental management that ‘promote cooperation’ (Farley et al., 2015: 244), are guided ‘by the logic of gift, reciprocity, and affect’ and that celebrate ‘the joyful and life-affirming aspects of conservation care labor’ (Singh, 2015: 59, 53),” as we suggested in our paper (p. 230)? Let us therefore not move back across the social theory pendulum once again. Only by doing justice to agency *and* structure simultaneously can we take up this important call and work towards environmental and social justice.

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