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**Socio-Economics of Forest Use
in the Tropics and Subtropics**

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**State Resource Politics in the Realm of Crisis:
The Forest Reserve Imataca under Dispute**

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Abstract

This paper explores conflicts that have arisen around the opening of the Forest Reserve Imataca in Venezuela's south to large-scale mining activities, which is justified by the State to boost the ailing national economy. Venezuela's move towards intensifying natural resource exploitation in this region as well as resource use activities already under way might put one of the largest remaining tropical frontier forests in the world under severe threat. It is shown that these dynamics and the struggles of key groups (loggers, miners, indigenous people etc.) over resources are deeply tied to the history and political economy of the Venezuelan rentier-state. The meaning of natural resources for modernization and democratization processes in Venezuela has assigned specific roles to state and non state actors and the regulation of access to resources. In these discursive encounters of competing interests we can find old patterns of state-society relationship. These patterns are in particular reflected in the ways actors or groups perceive problematic issues and what arguments they bring forward to enforce their claims.

State Resource Politics in the Realm of Crisis The Forest Reserve Imataca in Venezuela under Dispute

1. Introduction

Given Venezuela's rather deep plunge from a country widely heralded for its exceptional democratic stability and economic success to one that is plagued by economic decline, political instability, institutional collapse and growing social discontent with the existing socioeconomic and political situation, there is a tendency to frame understandings of current processes in Venezuela within a binary logic of "before" and "after" the crisis¹. Within this pattern of thinking, the crisis has come to mark a time of fundamental change in recent Venezuelan history that seems to account for much of the conflicts and problems that have arisen in the political, socioeconomic and ecological realms since the 1980s. There is a profound notion that Venezuela is undergoing a process of "*latinoamericanización*" (LEVINE 1994: 146) with new political rules emerging that put an end to the old economic and political structures characteristic of the former stable democratic oil nation.

In this paper we want to illustrate that although there have been substantive attempts to implement reforms that would transform Venezuela "from a rentier to a more productive economy" and "from a petro-state to a more normal state" (KARL 1995:34), policies, arguments, and practices that fuel the intensive conflicts in the Forest Reserve Imataca are still much indebted to specific patterns of rentier behavior and thinking. The persuasiveness of rentier thought and practice reveals itself in particular in the way how actor groups have referred to, perceived and criticized state action concerning the issue of forest use in the Imataca Forest Reserve.

This is not to suggest that the general terms of public discourse on economic and political matters have remained unaffected. As KORNBLITH (1997: 5) points out there has been a notable shift on how the majority of social sectors has been reacting to economic measures in line with neo-liberal reforms. The notion that major changes had to take place has steadily gained acceptance in larger parts of society. These included drastic measures such as eliminating tariff barriers, cutting back state subsidies, and the so-called *Apertura Petrolera* which radically redefines the rules of the game in the highly symbolic and sensitive, formerly nationalized, oil industry. Today, debates around these issues have turned to be more pragmatic than ideological.

However, it is interesting that KORNBLITH explicitly singles out as an important exception to this general trend the highly ideological public debate that erupted in 1997 when the new land use and regulation schemes on timber and mining exploitation in the Imataca Forest Reserve in the South of Venezuela were published. What has made this issue such a controversial one?

¹ Three events have come to symbolize both the increasing depth of the crisis and the conjuncture of its economic, social and political dimensions: First, the collapse of the currency on the so-called Black Friday, 18th of February 1983, initiating the present period of devaluation, economic stagnation, and inflation; second, the bloody "hunger riots" that erupted in February 1989 after the government had raised gasoline prizes and during which numerous people died; and third the two attempted military coups in 1992 revealing the fragility of the democratic system in Venezuela after almost 35 years of democratic stability.

And what accounts for the fact that the *Apertura Minera*, the opening up of the mining sector for foreign capital, has evoked such strong resistance among the Venezuelan public in comparison to other neo-liberal economic measures?

The most controversial point here revolves around the legalization of large-scale mining activities in an area originally designated for the use of forest resources. Around one million hectares of the forest reserve have been declared a so-called zone of mixed management (*Zona de manejo mixto*) in which mining shall be legally permitted along with the commercial forest exploitation already underway. Apart from the high ecological risks, this ambitious large-scale development imperative has also been severely challenged for ignoring the realities of local populations such as those of the more than 40 indigenous communities inhabiting the region, but also, albeit differently, of small-scale miners (AICHER & GRIMMIG & MÜLLER 1998).

In the following, we will first briefly sketch central socioeconomic and political features that have characterized the Venezuelan petro-state and which, as we argue, need to be taken into account in the analysis of debates and processes of forest destruction in the State of Bolívar symbolized in Imataca. It is not the intention here to focus on state deficiencies but to show how historically grown features of the Venezuelan society shape the discussion around the issue of the use of tropical forests. The central part of the paper discusses practices, arguments, and legitimization strategies of the central actors in the conflict. It will be shown that in a fragmented field of material and discursive struggles different "realities" are produced. The highly ideological discussions are often an impediment to an understanding of the situation based on more empirical evidence.

2. The Venezuelan Petro-state and the Forest Reserve Imataca

"God must be Venezuelan, since the country is so rich in resources.
However, in order to be just, He gave the Venezuelans their politicians."

This often quoted joke throws light on the triangle of natural resources, state and society. The development of the Venezuelan Nation during the 20th century is inseparably linked to oil. Oil has dominated exports and revenues since the late 1920s and soon created political dynamics which formed Venezuelan society in its projects of democratization and modernization. One of the most powerful political leaders, Romulo Betancourt, accused foreign capital in 1936 with an anti-imperialistic undertone for appropriating "our subsoil". In all debates around control over and appropriate use of its plentiful natural resources and its international economic relations "Venezuela for Venezuelans" has been an important frame (CORONIL 1997: 94 ff.).

Venezuelans see themselves as an oil-nation. Oil still dominates economic, social, political, and even spatial patterns. The huge revenues created from exporting this primary good were appropriated by the state which adopted democratic structures in 1958. The state not only accumulates these revenues but also distributes them, and labor as well as capital have tried to get a hold on these riches. Rent-seeking became the central issue within public and private domains. The oil sector itself hasn't created much labor. Separated from the "rest" of Venezuela it became more of an enclave, a state within the state. Political debate has focused on distribution of the oil-rent and not so much on production. Some authors even argue that

production capacities and land accumulation were only used to legitimize access to rent (BOECKH 1988; 1997).

The oil-rent has shaped the functioning of the state and its administration alike. It has been controlled by a bureaucratic elite and has made Venezuela dependent on oil prices in the world market. At the same time, inside Venezuela nearly all different groups and interests were firmly tied to the state and its distributive power, leaving state bureaucracy more or less untouched by larger social struggles. In particular left-wing social theorists saw this as a chance to create and implement a modernization project which was not threatened by economic interest of domestic or international bourgeoisie. As indeed the rent contributed also to improve the living standards of lower classes of society populist rhetoric were widely used. However, while there was trickle-down distribution, systematic re-distribution was never an issue in Venezuela, as opposed to other Latin American rentier states (BOECKH 1997). Conflicts could be appeased through co-optation of opponents or by a 'throw-money-at-it' strategy (KARL 1997: 37). This led to a dilemma that on the one hand the state had a high potential to intervene ("all present state" BOECKH 1988). However, relying on distribution exclusively, the state failed to create any deeper legitimacy in society and thus achieved but a fragile authority fully dependent on its continued ability to distribute. Thus, in large parts of Venezuelan society, a "modern consciousness of 'the state' as an entity that was owed duties and obligations in exchange for services" hardly developed (KARL 1995: 36).

The distributive oil frame and the resulting role of the state also deeply affect the way the Southern parts of Venezuela are perceived and treated. The basic underlying assumption has always been that this space and its resources are to be exploited and distributed according to the extractive oil logic. Although short-term interest was then limited, the state began to integrate the forests in the South into its development plans in the early 60s (UNDP/FAO 1970/1971) changing the legal status of the forests from open access *Tierras Baldías* into forest reserves which were to supply the domestic forest industry in the future in a sustainable manner (MOORE 1967). In doing so, the state thus legally formalized its claim to later exploitation. This was facilitated by the prevailing view that these forests were an empty space, a "virgin" forest, void of inhabitants.

Clearly, developments in this particular region were also motivated by its geopolitical significance. The Forest Reserve Imataca is located close to the frontier of the so-called "zona en reclamación", an area which is both claimed by Guyana and Venezuela. But the strategic importance of Guayana gained real political force only in reaction to the recent crisis when it was linked to the processes of liberalization and economic diversification in the *Proyecto de Desarrollo Sostenible del Sur* (PRODESSUR 1994) that combines intensified extraction of natural resource with state control over remote frontier areas. It is precisely in the context of the crisis and changes on the political agenda mentioned above that massive conflicts over the new zoning plan for the reserve in 1997 (Decreto 1850) have erupted (AICHER & GRIMMIG & MÜLLER 1998).

The constellation of growing national and international capital interests in the exploitation of natural resources and pressures to pay off international debts seem to conform to conventional explanation of deforestation. Various studies that have analyzed the situation in Imataca largely follow such lines of thought (FRANCO 1997; BRYANT 1998). Invariably the problem of "balancing conservation and development in Venezuela's frontier forests"

(BRYANT 1998) is framed in narrow functionalist and highly abstract terms of either imperfect markets and/or insufficient state regulation coupled with deficiencies in the technological and scientific realm. Correspondingly suggested solutions and efforts at the policy level have centered around such issues like the institutional development of a coherent regulatory agency, finding mechanism to increase state revenues from mining and timber exploitation, eliminating state subsidies for logging, development of better technologies, stricter monitoring and controlling of environmental impacts of mining and timber exploitation and theoretically at least develop better markets that reflect the broader value of forest products based, for instance, on indigenous knowledge systems. However, these approaches tend to ignore not only power dimensions but, more importantly, the economic and political history and the resulting social and cultural variables influencing upon the dynamics of access to and use of natural resources in a Venezuelan context.

3. Actors and Claims

Articles, press releases, statements and larger studies published in Venezuela on the conflict in Imataca typically begin their account in the year 1963 when the Forest Reserve Imataca was created. This date seems to be the natural reference point against which the legitimacy of competing use and access claims to natural resources needs to be evaluated. Although there are occasional allusions to periods prior to 1963, the "natural destiny" of this region is invariably linked to its status as a forest reserve. Thus, the forests situated within the demarcated reserve are first of all seen as timber resources for commercial logging. Logging activities started in the late 80s and have been the first type of natural resource use promoted by the state within this area. For the majority of Venezuelans and even for strict opponents of intensified natural resource use in Imataca, the legal existence of the forest reserve seems to be an irrefutable fact. We argue that such a view is problematic for different reasons. Conceiving these forests primarily in terms of their legal status isn't wrong. However, it authorizes certain voices in the conflict while de-legitimizing or even silencing others. For instance, logging as such is generally deemed acceptable, as this activity somehow conforms with the legalized and "naturalized" status of these forests.

In the following sections, we will take a closer look at three major actors involved in the conflict, and their legitimization strategies in a field where social, environmental and economic claims interweave.

3.1. Forestry and Logging

When the public debate around the new land use plan erupted the forest sector itself wasn't under much criticism. The forest department of the environment ministry "*Servicio Autónomo Forestal Venezolano*" (SEFORVEN) in charge of formulating the decree was opposed for allowing a third part of the reserve to be opened to mining and other perceived procedural failures. Forest management per se was not under dispute. Within international debate, however, forestry is more and more criticized of being a key factor of forest destruction (BRYANT 1998). How is it possible then that this resource use has gone relatively unchallenged in Imataca? Are the records of forest management in Venezuela so promising?

The industrialization bias

The Forest Reserve Imataca is exploited under large-scale concessions typically granted for a period of thirty years by the state to private logging companies. Such long term concessions are common in Venezuela since the 1970s as they are considered crucial to secure continuous wood supply which in turn would stimulate private investments into domestic industrial production capacities.

Concessions fit well into the structures and procedures of a state based on the exploitation of mineral resources. First, fundamental concepts are similar. A leading forestry concept sees forests as capital that has to be made productive by capturing the "interest" of the stock (i.e. growth of trees)². Such an idea suits well with the concept of resources as "natural capital" to be liquidated for industrialization purposes. A similar concept has long been used to explain the wealth created by the "value" of oil. Secondly, the huge amount of incoming oil revenues created the problem of how to invest them productively. Since the "absorption capacities" of the domestic economy were reached soon, modernization strategies have tended towards large scale projects. The concept to "sembrar el petroleo" ("saw the petrol") could similarly be transferred to forest-based industries.

The bias towards large-style industrialization can be seen looking at the way localization and size of forest concessions are determined. The decisive question rather seems to be how much wood a certain plant or mill needs in order to run efficiently than basing forest management on the growth potential of an ecosystem considering its structure, composition, soils etc. as well as regional and local socio-economic aspects. The orientation is set rather towards absorption of "interest" than investing into production.³ The alleged forestry-industry-link is still part of the official policy and discourse although no modern or big industry has developed so far in the context of exploitation of natural forests. Some of the enterprises now argue the commercialization structure on international markets demand concessions of 500.000-1.000.000 hectares to be able to compete under the new rules of a globalized economy, legitimizing thus their demand for access to the so-called "patrimonio nacional" still with presumably "objective" market structures or rules.

Technical dimension and vision of forests: legitimating resource use in uncertainty

For decades the lack of scientific knowledge considering tropical ecosystems has been addressed by foresters as a problem of tropical forest management. A learning-by-doing strategy has been adopted as legitimization to intervene in these forests in the context of

² The exploitation is based on a scheme of minimum diameter of tree species that are clustered in few groups. The definition of these diameters are arbitrary and sometimes even open to negotiation between state and individual company. In fact there is very little reliable knowledge about the regeneration or growth rates of species. Generally however, forests are seen as over mature with little growth. So the concept is to stimulate growth rates by interventions and optimistic guesses about their impact. E.g., SEFORVEN has granted concessions within a similar ecosystem running between 25 and 40 years, without specifying why trees of the same species might in one case need 25 and in another 40 years to guarantee an assumed sustained yield.

³ This is most visible in the so-called "quotas fijas" which guaranteed the concessionaire the exploitation of an annually fixed amount of certain species for the whole turn. The last concession with such a privilege was granted in 1987.

uncertainty. Concession firms have been integrated into the "trial and error" process in Venezuela. With the development of a national forest investigation plan (COPLANIFOR) in 1991 and the creation of its financial instruments, the state administration tried to co-opt concessionaires and scientific institutions intending to build the still missing knowledge base for a management system of the complex ecosystems "for the benefit of the greatest number of Venezuelans"⁴ (MARNR 1991). The "plan de ordenación y manejo" (POM), the heart of management practice, required to get access to forest resources, is also considered as a way of generating the necessary knowledge. However, apart from the inventory data, most "new" data created by the enterprises seems not to go further than the information already provided by the state *Corporación Venezolana de Guayana* (CVG). Such knowledge production that underscored the sustainable character of forest management and "returning" benefits to society in exchange for private access rights to resources has been a way to legitimate intervention in a situation where little has been known about tropical forest systems. The problematic status of knowledge hasn't turned into a critical impulse to challenge the status quo or to improve inadequate practices. Scientific research on forest management largely has frozen to mere routine and planning fetishism.

Thus, the terms of forest exploitation haven't changed much over the last 30 years. The models of the 1990s were simply taken over from the older forest reserves in the Western parts of Venezuela where they haven't shown the promised outcomes. They still express the same technical perspective on a wild and "unorganized" nature that has to be made useful for society through rational and planned interventions. In their socioeconomic part, they even blur the distinction between society and nature describing "populations" (tree or rural) in technical terms of their distribution, growth rate and so forth, completely ignoring the demands and necessities of rural communities. By not taking social realities of rural communities into account, these plans represent a technical top-down perspective. Equally, they disregard the importance to integrate forest dwellers into forest management in order to strengthen their interest in conserving these forests. Thus, the poor performance of such technical models is of little surprise.

Economic concepts and distortions

One of the paradigms of forest management is that one has to assign economic value to the forest in order to rise an interest in conserving them. Higher economic use value means higher conservation interest. Without paying too much attention to what this would imply in respect to local forest populations, it has been the policy of the forest administration to introduce as much species as possible to the market to increase exploitation and thus the value of stands. However, while over 150 species are exploited in Venezuela, only a few of them are economically important. This is explained by technical limits or habits of industries or by distorted incentives of the state (CENTENO 1995). Profits are much higher with a few valuable species, and the logic of concessionaires is not to add value to forests to conserve them or look for possibilities to introduce a resource in the most efficient manner into an economy but to search for a most comfortable way to secure own revenues. The distribution of the rent

⁴ This reflects a position of Pinchot, "founder" of the US forest service around the turn of the century, legitimating the intervention of state bureaucracy to stop the free-access situation based on early frontier ideology in the US.

extracted from logging between state and private firms has been changing for the benefit of the companies over the years since taxes haven't been adjusted to inflation while wood prices have jumped up. Logging has also been exempted from income tax, thus enjoying the same advantages as the sensitive agricultural sector. Until the structural adjustment program has started in 1989 the forest sector has been protected through tariff barriers of 120% from imports which has then been lowered to 30%. However, compared with the opening of the markets and lowering tariffs to generally 5-20%, it is still among the most protected sectors (FAO 1993).

There are no serious studies on the cost-benefit relation of timber exploitation in Venezuela. The forest rent has not been nearly as critical to the political economy of the state and hence there has been little motivation for the national elite to obtain such information. So statistics are often non-existent and the data vague since mostly provided by the enterprises and not cross-checked by independent institutions. Estimations on revenues are difficult to validate. Nevertheless, according to a high official in the MARNR forestry exploitation is one of the most lucrative businesses in Venezuela. Calculations of the enterprises and SEFORVEN show a different picture. But certainly, there are lots of possibilities to distort the information by overestimation of cost (e.g. infrastructure, silvicultural activities,.. etc.), sub-estimation of market prices, hidden links between production and commercialization with adding prices without valor aggregation, faults in declaration of species and amounts extracted etc.

Since markets have been controlled by oligopolistic structures and well protected from competing imports wood prices have stayed high in Venezuela and profits, too. So it hasn't been necessary to invest into quality or efficiency standards. 70% of the wood from natural forests goes into construction - a sector heavily dependent upon the state - where it often serves as planks and is said to be a real re-seller. So it seems forests do not serve as much as primary resource which has to be introduced into a productive process or a process of value aggregation to stimulate development in particular in rural areas (as the legitimizing argument goes), but rather work as a storage hall which guarantees more or less predictable profits. This, however, only works as long as the state protects the market and the oil rent allows to pay high prices for low quality wood products.

Securing appropriation

The important role of petrol in the democratization and modernization process which led to the nationalization of the oil sector in the 1970s made Venezuelans very sensitive towards granting access rights to resources to transnational companies (TNCs) or foreigners. No TNC has officially been able to get access to a forest concession. Most concessionaires, however, are nationalized immigrants (Spain, Italy, Cuba, Lebanon...). Thus public critique teasing nationalistic feelings could largely be avoided. In contrast to other countries, forest concessions in Venezuela are not in the hands of an old landlord oligarchy or family members of ruling cliques.

Forestry is promoted as an important economic sector with a big labor market if compared to the oil sector. This argument helps loggers to secure privileges and to search for additional ones distributed through state bureaucracy which itself utilizes this argument to legitimate its existence and distribution power. The primary forest sector, however, participates in the GNP with less than 1% and hasn't created a huge amount of jobs either (ESTADISTICAS FORESTALES 1993, according to a 1997 MONITOR study still around 30.000). The few jobs

that exist basically consist of low paid, dangerous and seasonal labor mostly related to subcontracting, leaving to the concessionaire the problem of securing access rights through lobbying in Caracas and taking care of the marketing of wood extracted.

Logging entrepreneurs share the notion that the state never has financially supported the sector which seems to contradict the thesis of the all-present-state mentioned above. Nevertheless, the forest primary sector has benefited from low taxes and state protection. Furthermore, there have been indirect ways to subsidize the logging companies. For example, the resolution 506-A (issued in 1983) allowed the concession companies to install so-called research parcels for usually 2 years before they had to present their management plan (POM) and a formal contract was to be signed between state and company. The effect was that state bureaucracies gave the companies the right to log timber without any management plan or constraints. Unofficially this was also seen as a financial contribution to logging companies in times of high bank interests. Since most do not have big investments in industrial plants (officially it is considered as a prerequisite for applying for a concession) nor in machinery (working usually with subcontractors) these were distributed gifts by state officials.

New coalitions and perspectives

Interestingly, so far the public dispute around Imataca hasn't affected logging interest as such to a great extent. Certainly, there is a new situation of competition with the mining sector. Some forest experts argue "realistically" that mining activity within the reserve can not be avoided and thus timber should now be harvested before parts of the reserve will be eventually destroyed. With the pressure to open up the reserve Imataca for mining interests the concessionaire association (ASOINBOSQUE) has started to cooperate with the interest of industrial mining (CAMIVEN). Both groups followed in their arguments the old path of industrialization based on primary resource exploitation. ASOINBOSQUE sees no major problem to combine the two activities. However, it prefers to exclude the "illegal" or small-scale mining business. The affinity of large-scale mining and big logging also has practical dimensions. Industrial mining needs infrastructure. These access roads could also be used by the logging business, lowering cost of exploitation for both parties. Forest administration opposition to this trend is weak, hidden behind their new catchword of "flexibility" which frames in terms of economic modernization what in fact can be considered as a collapse of older concepts and structures based on visions of state-controlled long term planning for economic sustainability and development.

At the same time, there is also an internal dynamic inside the forest sector itself. While some of the concessionaires want to go on like before, others see the wind of change of an *apertura* of this sector. They look for new institutional allies in the "*Ministerio de Industria y Comercio*" (MIC) further weakening the linkage between natural resource management and supposedly profitable activities as embodied by MARNR. These actors want to secure huge chunks of the still not distributed forest pie for themselves and look for international investors to built up the long promised modern wood based industry. They speculate that they would most likely profit from granting of concessions since popular resistance against TNCs would keep foreign capital out of the distribution of the "patrimonio nacional". Regardless whether this is a realistic vision or whether wood will be rather exported as logs in the future and

without creating but a few more jobs for highly trained personnel, forests are again seen as a potential for industrialization.

3.2. Digging behind the glitter of gold

Gold and diamond minerals in Bolívar State have drawn attention of the state only since the 1980s. Under the program to move to a more diversified and productive economy, the Venezuelan State now tries to integrate the mining of minerals⁵ into the national economy. To achieve control of the mineral resources - which are up to day extracted in the first place by an estimated number of 50.000 small-scale miners⁶ - and related environmental impacts, the state has opened the mining sector to TNCs and integrated the gold- and diamond sector in a huge administrative complex⁷. By granting concession areas to large companies massive conflicts have arisen not only with environmentalists but also with small-scale miners who are loosing access to the mineral deposits. However, the majority of these concessions are not yet exploited by companies but in the stage of speculation or exploration. By giving or refusing access rights and by regulating mining through numerous laws and tax policies, the state exerts great influence on everyday life, middle and long-term decisions of the actors involved (miners, mining cooperatives, mining companies,...). Still, the state's influence is very restricted when it comes to finding and realizing goal-oriented solutions in the existing and emerging conflicts.

Industrial mining - a rational choice?

In the process of liberalization of the mining sector (*apertura minera*), the state's role is seen in providing a general framework for private investments, whereas the (multinational) private sector invests the capital for developing the mining sector to a greater extent, creating job opportunities and national benefits through payment of taxes. In a global triumph of free market ideology, technological advancement and scientific development which is reflected in the Venezuelan economic model this is the official version of the role of both parts. The arguments in favor of industrial mining are accompanied by an ecological one, according to which capital intensive and technologically advanced mining has a less destructive impact on the environment than small-scale mining.⁸ To what extent are these arguments based on realistic grounds?

⁵ If not detailed, mining entails gold and diamond mining.

⁶ Estimations about small-scale miners reach up to 200.000 people (estimation of a high official of the *Guardia Nacional*, personal communication, August 1997). Because the number of small scale miners are very often manipulated - to demonstrate either the threat for the forests or their political relevance - or copied from unsound sources, it is difficult to catch a more or less realistic number. Based on field studies, self-estimations of mining cooperatives, estimations of officials in State departments, analyses of official statistics and so on we assume a number around 50.000 miners.

⁷ There are more than 12 state institutions - divided in several subdivisions - involved in one or an other way in structuring, ordering and controlling the mining sector. A central problem of the mining sector is that the state institutions have partly overlapping mandates and partly contradictory aims.

⁸ Ecological impacts of small-scale mining activities are especially mercury pollution, sedimentation of rivers and forest destruction. The intensity of these impacts vary greatly depending on the type of exploitation (e.g.

- Firstly, a well managed mining sector in economic and ecological terms should be based on sound information. While the Minister of Energy and Mines promises to "keep his house in order" (see MINAS HOY 1995), there is an apparent lack of basic information about which mining company (or small scale mining association) has concessions in the forested areas of Bolívar State. The last mining register (1997) has not been published because it contained to many errors concerning owners of concessions, location and extent of legalized mining areas. To collect basic information of the 289 contracts and 137 concessions⁹ in the Imataca Forest Reserve the Permanent Commission for Energy and Mining of the Senate (*Comisión Permanente de Energía y Minas*) sent at the end of 1997 117 questionnaires to mining companies, of which 30 letters could not be delivered because companies did not exist, addresses were phantom addresses, and so on. Only 39 questionnaires could be analyzed.
- Secondly, the claim that industrial mining complexes will create additional working opportunities seems rather doubtful. While one company announces in public statements that it will create 2.000 jobs, company documents reveal that this amount of jobs is only valid in the stage of construction, while only 600 jobs can be expected at a later stage. This number seems more realistic, considering that one already exploiting mining company whose exploitation technique demands an even larger work force currently employs only 420 people. In the glorification of the mining sector as a "golden calf", which has to grow up to be milked, it is overlooked that large-scale resource extraction economies generally create employment mainly in the construction stage.
- Thirdly, state revenues seem to be low and difficult to track. Taxes are paid to three different governmental institutions (SENIAT, MEM, CVG) where the tax payers are merged in different categories which makes it impossible to look for the total amount paid by one company. Over the last three years, the most important international gold mining company paid a total amount of 136.545.657 Bolívares (app. 437.646 US\$) exploitation tax which represents 1% of the value extracted (SENIAT 1997, unpublished paper). Other companies officially declare that they do not exploit minerals, because they do not have the necessary permit of the Ministry of Environment (*Permiso Ambiental*) required since the passing of the Environmental Criminal Law (*Ley Penal del Ambiente*) in 1992. Yet, statistics of SENIAT show that they are paying exploitation taxes. This leaves unclear whether exploitation really takes place or whether payments serve to enforce access claims. But it is another indicator of the weaknesses and contradictions of state agency in this sector making its claim to be able to efficiently regulate mining activities rather doubtful.
- Finally, the argument that industrial mining companies are less detrimental to the environment than small-scale miners can hardly be sustained in such a general way since there are very different forms of exploitation with a very different ecological impact. At the moment, the majority of the industrial mining companies is in the stage of speculation and

open-cast mining, underground galleries), techniques used and level of socio-economic organization at the mining site (MÜLLER 1997).

⁹ A contract grants access rights for one year and is given out by the regional planning authority CVG. A contract is given for an area between 20 and 500 hectares; most recipients belong to associations and cooperatives in the small-scale mining sector. A concession, generally the size of 5000 hectares, is granted by the ministry of energy and mining (MEM) and has a duration of 20 or more years. Prior environmental studies are required.

exploration. Thus it is still unknown whether the companies will exploit the mineral from the surface or by thrilling underground galleries. Whereas the first method means a total clearing of the forest cover, the second causes forest destruction to a much lesser extent. It is also interesting to note that the currently most important transnational company active in the region does not have the above mentioned permit of the Ministry of Environment. In an interview conducted with the General Manager of this company the explanation was given that the company started gold exploiting before this law was passed. Nevertheless, in glossy paper publications a picture of a "sustainable mining sector" is drawn - or ecological doubts are simply dismissed by economic necessities. Referring to the environmental opposition, the Minister of the national planning institute CORDIPLAN e.g. compared the Venezuelans with Hindus, which let the cows rather die than eat them (EL NACIONAL 13/10/1997).

Thus, the standard arguments for large-scale mining are not very convincing. The rather low number of generated employment and taxes, the weak state control based on doubtful information and the present state handling of environmental problems indicate that the shift towards large-scale mining may have deeper roots.

Embedding the bias towards large-scale mining in the political economy

Firstly one has to consider that Venezuela is constrained by global market forces. The current liberalization move is largely induced by foreign debt and IMF adjustment programs. But this does not explain why it is in particular the mining sector that Venezuela is opening up to transnational capital. Here the above mentioned historically grown „Venezuelan“ perception of natural resources and the economic and political effects of the oil concentration come to bear. Influenced by the long time experience of the oil sector and the poor records of the diversification process of the national economy, the mineral resources of Bolívar State are seen as natural capital, i.e. given riches that just have to be pulled from the ground. Furthermore, with its experience and revenues from the oil sector, the Ministry of Energy and Mines is one of the best established and equipped Ministries in the country, well used to handle foreign investments. So, it is hardly surprising that the mining sector has come to play a central role in the liberalization process. Due to the long time practice in industrial mining (oil, iron, bauxite) and periodic corporations with transnational mining companies, the MEM collected its "working tools" in large-scale sectors and does not have any experience in small scale mining. Moreover, the ideal of a strong state responsible for the functioning of the economy is much better compatible with a few big mining companies than with thousands of small-scale miners roaming in the forests.

Dominating images of small scale miners and their counter positions

Small-scale miners conjure images of anarchy and chaos - associations which do not fit in development strategies oriented towards large scale projects and threaten the ideal of a strong state. While small-scale miners generally are seen as a mass of lawless men, exploiting and destroying national resources, they find themselves in a similar situation as described by DOVE (1996: 48) for small scale miners in the development process of Indonesia:

"...(mineral) fields were initially developed by small holders. Their modest successes attracted the attention of the national government, which responded by licensing the mining right out to corporate

concessionaires and declaring the small holders who originally developed the gold-fields to be 'illegal'."

Small-scale miners counter the public image drawn of them as criminals and mercury using destroyers of the environment by accusing the transnational companies of imperialism - simultaneously accusing the state to be an accomplice of imperialistic companies. They further argue that small scale mining offers at least low income jobs in a state where more than the half of the population can not find jobs in the formal sector. Independent of the validity of this argumentation, in the Latin-American history of colonialism and neo-colonialism and in view of the Venezuelan social crisis, these are emotionalizing arguments. But the attempt to legitimate their exploitation by nationalistic arguments (the minerals belong to Venezuelans) are dodged by discussions on environmental impacts of mining, as are arguments that link their situation with larger social questions.

Although pushed into illegality¹⁰ on the one side, leaders of the small scale mining sector are co-opted by politicians and companies to calm the large amount of small miners. Through a web of informal linkages between high and middle level officials¹¹ in state agencies, leaders of small-scale mining cooperatives try to integrate their activities into the national economy and seek to by-pass the confusing jungle of laws and regulations¹², whereas administrators and politicians attempt to calm erupting conflicts and to strengthen their political power. (The social group of the diggers is considered as an important factor in elections)

Marginalized views in the discourses of small-scale mining

In the discussion around the Imataca Forest Reserve the externalization of the problems on foreigners is one unifying element where arguments of NGOs, indigenous people and small-scale miners partly coincide. Due to the fact that all actors focus on state activities, errors and responsibilities, and due to the deeply negative image of small-scale miners, argumentative conjunctions - and in particular other local groups apart from the small-scale miners¹³ - are largely overseen.

¹⁰ Pushed into illegality, development opportunities of livelihood in small-scale mining are partly restricted. For example, due to their illegal status, a small-scale mining cooperative can not sell the slag heaps. Their 5 year struggle for legal recognition hasn't been successful so far since a industrial company mining seeks access to the same area. In order to prevent the loss of enormous amounts of gold remaining these slag heaps, some mining cooperatives even consider to extract the gold with cyanide themselves. This certainly would entail extreme risks for the environment as well as people.

¹¹ For example there are direct contacts between leaders of the small scale mining sector and the Minister of Energy, high officials in the Ministry of Energy and regional politicians.

¹² AMORER (1991) found out that the process to get all required permits for a mining concession takes nearly two years, requesting 76 single decisions. My own inquiries reveal that the process to get a contract or concession often require more than two years due to legal uncertainty (e.g. see business history of the mining company GREENWICH and the mining cooperative AGROMINERIA SIFONTES).

¹³ In historical descriptions of the mining sector, it is - e.g. in the CVG published newsletter „EL Minero“ - hardly ever mentioned that miners and companies did invade not into an empty space but in territory inhabited by indigenous people. Until today, diggers and managers of mining companies repeatedly express in interviews that there are no Indians around the mining places, or when their existence is recognized, that this is not a problem. On the other hand, it should be noticed that direct contacts between NGOs and small scale miners hardly exist.

To create linkages with other actors small-scale mining cooperatives try "to green" their forms of mineral exploitation, too. By introducing new technologies and by implementing state regulations to reduce environmental impacts as well as by reforestation efforts of impacted areas in their mining sites, they hope to change their public image. But, like a leader of the small-scale miners said: "First and foremost mining is an economic activity, not an environmental one." (personal communication). While their "greening activities" might lack a high grade of professionalism, there is nonetheless a potential to reduce the enormous environmental impacts of small-scale mining, but it is not taken seriously in public opinion. In contrast to e.g. Brazil or Colombia, in Bolívar State projects of regional Universities, international institutions or NGOs to reduce environmental destruction by small-scale miners do not exist.

Due to the economic prosperity of the (oil based) national economy up to the 80s, small-scale mining has assumed an important role as a "security valve" for urban unemployed people at a later time than in other Latin-American countries. Thus, also realizing that it is impossible to prevent small-scale mining in the forests of Southern Venezuela as these are an endpoint of poverty migration comes late in Venezuela. Up to now, small-scale miners (and small-scale projects!) do not fit into the image of a centralized, top-down regulated use of national resources. Only in the 90s middle level officials in governmental organization and Universities have started not only to condemn small scale miners but to see them in a more balanced way.

"Los pequeños mineros abocados a la explotación aurodiamantífera han sido estudiados solo superficialmente y catalogados como expresión de desorden y anarquía. Por el contrario, en este primer trabajo concluimos en el reconocimiento de un patrón tecnológico cuya manipulación, a través de las decisiones laborales de los actores develan un orden y una racionalidad autoconstruida y susceptible al cambio. Tal reconocimiento, en el contexto del desarrollo regional, nos induce a considerar al pequeño minero trabajador, e incluso microempresario, como un actor profesional e innovador, capaz de asumir los retos que implican las políticas de reconversión para el sector y hace de él un potencial recurso para las futuras inversiones en minería de mayor escala. (PEROZO 1993: 34)

Still, given the world-wide dominance of neo-liberal development strategies and the specific features of the Venezuelan economic and political system (strong state, experience in primary industries, preference of large-scale projects,...) the supporters/holders of industrial mining certainly continue to have much better possibilities to portray themselves successfully as "sustainable" and revenue-generating actors to the benefit of larger social groups.

3.3. Indigenous Voices: Potentials and Limits

Indigenous people have been among the most visible protagonists in the Imataca conflict. On an international scale indigenous people generally have become to be regarded as competent stewards of the natural resources that form the basis of their livelihood. This international shift in perception, along with growing support from environmental NGOs has allowed them to raise their concerns also at the national level in Venezuela. Yet, these new images, discourses and agendas that have emerged around ecology and indigenous people not only provide opportunities but also restraints for indigenous people. The ecological framing of their concerns opens but a narrow corridor of arguing, further restricted by the historical

experience indigenous people have lived in the long process of interaction with their respective rulers or nation-states.

The indigenous Kariña in the Imataca conflict are a good example for both, the enabling and the disabling effects such framing can have. With growing attention and support from the international level, Venezuela's current transformation process could hold promises for their greater participation in decisions related to the use of resources situated in their territory. At the same time, the opening up of the region for economic development and, in particular, for large-scale investment poses further threats to their extremely marginal existence. In their attempts to intervene in the present conflict, two problems seem of particular importance: their difficulty in claiming any territorial rights based on their history in the region, and the difficulty to claim economic and social rights that do not easily fit into the pre-configured "ecological space" accorded to them.

Struggles for land rights

As it is the case for most indigenous groups (but also peasants and other forest people) around the world, the fight for land rights also lies at the heart of the indigenous movement in Venezuela. Land rights are generally considered critical for the continued cultural and physical survival of indigenous people and in the light of current developments in the South of Venezuela ever more urgent. Statements like the following one by an indigenous leader in Venezuela are widely to be heard. They underline the crucial importance that is attributed to land by indigenous peoples inhabiting the forests of Imataca:

"Lo que a él interesa, al indígena, es tener territorio, tener conuco, producir, eso, porque con eso se sustenta, eso es lo más importante, por eso es que el indígena quiere territorio. Para tener acceso a otras cosas, claro ya ahorita con la educación todavía se está preparando, y nosotros pensamos también en nuestro futuro, porque si esto lo entregamos ahorita, entonces qué va a ser de nuestro futuro, de nuestros hijos? Dónde ellos van a habitar? Dónde van a tener acceso al trabajo? Entonces ahorita hay que pensar en el futuro, por eso es que nosotros queremos territorio (Personal communication).

Yet, indigenous claims for land rights have been largely dismissed in Venezuela by referring to the fact that in most cases the territory claimed lies within a national park, a forest reserve or other zones under special state regulation which legally impede the granting of private land titles.¹⁴

"El problema es que en las zonas ha habido interés recientemente el ejecutivo de asignarle tierra en propiedad, pero resulta que en las áreas casualmente no sé por qué, tiene que tener su lógica, las áreas donde están ahorita las comunidades indígenas son las áreas que fueron numeradas parques nacionales y reservas forestales" (legal consultant of the Ministry of Environment (MARNR)).

Seemingly by some unknown logic, as this legal consultant notices, the majority of indigenous communities in Venezuela are located in so-called *Areas Bajo Régimen Especiales*. Hidden behind this presumably natural coincidence of indigenous territories with national parks and

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this issue and more information on the history of indigenous legislation in Venezuela, see KUPPE (1987; 1994).

other restricted use areas, however, lies a long regional history of marginalizing indigenous people, a past which is silenced through this language.¹⁵

Indigenous People's silenced past

Already at colonial times the region of Sierra de Imataca which to a great extent coincides with today's forest reserve of the same name had come to be a highly contested area among the competing colonial powers from Spain, Holland, and later England. It was also the heartland of the Carib Indians whose descendants, the Kariña, still live in scattered communities throughout this region today. The Kariña homeland was considered by the Spanish as preeminently within their domain, a claim that was forcibly resisted by the Kariña who allied themselves with the Dutch in the adjacent region of the Essequibo instead¹⁶. In the course of these battles which were waged on all sides - by the Capuchin Missionaries for Kariña Souls, to be contained in the growing number of missions, by the Spanish rulers in their attempts to dislodge the Dutch and later English colonial powers - Kariña communities not only retreated into the more inaccessible parts of their territory, but their numbers also were drastically reduced through the exposure to Old World Diseases (CIVRIEUX 1977; WHITEHEAD 1988; BUTT-COLSON 1994/1996). Subsequent waves of intruders attracted by the rumors of gold that started to circulate by the middle of the 19th century reinforced this process of severe dislocation among the Kariña. In a 1948 report they could then be described by a British welfare officer as "the most impoverished and traumatic aboriginal group that I have encountered throughout the length and breadth of British Guiana"(PEBERDY 1948:19).

Given the intense social fragmentation and marginalization of the remaining indigenous communities, it was not surprising that the Venezuelan state could later claim relatively unchallenged legitimate authority over these vast and seemingly inhabited frontier forests through the creation of national parks, forest reserve and other protective zones under state-controlled administration. It is of certain irony, that on one hand, indigenous people's exclusion from national and regional developments has generally contributed to the maintenance of these peripheral forest regions. As long as the oil revenues were coming in, the marginal status of this space and its people within the national political economy has also allowed the Venezuelan State to pursue a relatively progressive forest and environmental

¹⁵ The tendency to ignore the historical context has also been perpetuated by anthropologists whose dominant frameworks for understanding recent encroachments and clashes between indigenous people and the "outside world" frequently posits a simple dichotomy of before and after, of pristine isolation and tradition, on the one hand, and rapid cultural destruction or modernization on the other. In these frameworks, marginalized indigenous people become romanticized as archaic survivors who have only recently experienced a downfall into history and market relations. This perspective, however, is increasingly being challenged by a rising number of social scientist (See for example HECHT 1998; ZERNER 1996; TSING 1993).

¹⁶ As major historians of the period point out, the Kariña played a crucial role in the consolidation of the colonial political economy of the Dutch. The Dutch depended heavily on these key allies, in holding the line against Spanish incursions from the Cuyuni, in providing important trade goods, including Amerindian slaves, and in a later period, in policing the territory against runaway African slaves from the Dutch colonies. However due to changing economic and political conditions in the Dutch colonial regime during the 18th Century, i.e. a shift to plantation agriculture on the coastal area and a more accommodating policy towards their Spanish rivals, the Kariña steadily lost their importance. This also contributed to their dramatic collapse in the latter half of the 18th Century (WHITEHEAD 1988:107ff.).

policy in this region.¹⁷ On the other hand, this same marginality has now come to mark an ecological profile that thrusts indigenous people into the glare of international environmental discourses and which is simultaneously used by indigenous people as a strategic argument in the present struggle waged over resources and meanings in Imataca.

Resource Politics in Imataca and indigenous articulations

As already mentioned above, support for indigenous people has been widespread in the environmental activist community in Venezuela where their plight is taken to indicate one among many ways in which the promises of development and progress remain unfulfilled (AICHER & GRIMMIG & MÜLLER 1998). For many, indigenous people have come to hold a special place as the representatives of diverse but pure forms of a cultural heritage unsullied by encounters with colonialism, westernization and modernity.¹⁸ A sign of the significance of discourse and activism around the subject of indigenous people is the extent to which officials from various state institutions in Venezuela have found themselves obliged to respond to it. While they don't speak with a single voice, one can note that they all at least rhetorically acknowledge the somewhat different status of indigenous communities and their right to preserve their culture. But many officials, in particular of those state institutions most directly involved in resource policies in Imataca, i.e. SEFORVEN and MEM, are strongly opposing the discourse that presents them as indigenous people with traditional and enduring rights to the land currently under state control as the following statement of a state official from the ministry of environment indicates:

Nosotros tenemos que permitirle a ellos, que es lo que está como primer punto en nuestra agenda, la fórmula como el estado les de garantías y les reconozca ese uso *sin que necesariamente implique un derecho de propiedad*" (official of MARNR; emphasis mine)

In contrast to the status of small miners, indigenous peoples' right to reside in these areas is not questioned. However, if they are to remain in the forests, it must be upon terms defined by the state agency responsible for the forest domain. Other factors have also worked in favor of the state monopoly to present and control this space. First, as shown in the sections above, commercial logging activities in the Forest Reserve Imataca are largely perceived as a legitimate and sustainable activity, with relatively little impact upon the indigenous population. Secondly, the forestry sector still succeeds to present itself in terms of an enterprise conforming to the interests of the Nation even while it is acknowledged that it only provides very little direct benefits to local and regional economies. Thirdly, there is a strong mistrust towards what many officials of the forest department conceive as an imported and highly romantic view of indigenous people and environmentalism. The conjuncture of these images and arguments makes discussion about indigenous rights a very delicate issue in

¹⁷ In comparison with other Latin American States, Venezuela's environmental legislation is very advanced with for instance more than 80% of the territory of the State Bolívar under some sort of restrictive use regulation.

¹⁸ Much has been written about the distortion of indigenous struggles caused by such simplified representations created and imposed by outsiders (among others HECHT & COCKBURN 1989; RAMOS 1994). Thus, for instance, they argue that such "green orientalism" compels local indigenous people to act out assigned roles leaving them little room for maneuver to their own advantage.

Venezuela as such right claims can be easily conceived as anti-developmental and anti-nationalist.

In the emerging international campaign to advocate the rights of indigenous people in the Forest Reserve Imataca, gold mining is portrayed as the central threat to the survival of these people. As contention in Venezuela has also focused on the issue of mining, this is of little surprise. Considering furthermore, that mining has evoked much stronger ecological concerns among environmentalists on the national and international level than commercial logging in Venezuela, the story mobilizes well established signifiers and traits concerning the subject of indigenous rights and ecology and hence increases its audibility. While these stories draw a picture that pits marginalized indigenous communities against powerful mining interests, one also has to take into account that a rising number of indigenous communities has taken up small-scale mining as a supplementary economic activity. It is difficult to draw a general conclusion as to how this affects indigenous people's stance in the conflict. Given the strong tendency to frame the problem of indigenous people in narrow ecological terms, however, it doesn't look too promising in Venezuela since their involvement in mining supports the widely-shared notion that indigenous people are unable to buffer modern economic and ecological stresses and hence will eventually dissolve into the dominant culture.

4. Conclusion

We have tried to show in a general way that changes in the natural environment and socioeconomic environment affect each other and, more specifically drawing on some empirical data collected during our stay in Venezuela, how the processes concerning tropical forests south of the Orinoco and the Imataca Forest Reserve can be understood in relation to the history of Venezuelan society.

We thereby focused on three major groups involved in the current conflict and analyzed their specific way to introduce, to change or to secure their position in political arenas where different modernization strategies clash. Some see the exploitation of natural resources (gold, wood...) as a possibility to get rid of international debts and keep the dream alive of making up development by following the path of the so-called developed countries. Others argue that both nature and social justice will be destroyed through international capital interest and neo-liberal measures, favoring an alternative project of modernization. Again other groups seem largely outside the discourses of development and modernization and act rather on an ad hoc basis related to their everyday livelihood.

The distinct positions are not merely ideological in nature but based on profound differences in economic and cultural interests. For the forest dwellers (indigenous people and to a lesser extent small miners) these differences might include the dimension of cultural identity and survival. On the other hand there is vested interest largely detached from the specific locality, acting in a rather speculative manner. The different agendas and backgrounds lead to a number of sometimes surprising coalitions. The government cooperates with TNCs promoting their access and trying to regain control and maintain order through such collaboration. Small miners agree with the opening of the forest to mining as long as they are included. Indigenous people want their land rights and also access to mining, and cooperate

with NGOs but also object "too much" conservationism. The logging business pays comparably little attention to other actors as their rights seem still largely accepted, legally and socially.

Ecological discourse has allowed indigenous people to introduce their position and gain somewhat broader recognition. Small-scale mining is under strong pressure and tries to "green" itself in order to secure its interest while at the same time helping to mobilize resistance among environmentalist and opponents of neo-liberal development strategies. Furthermore their self-confident, often aggressive and "disordered" articulation of their interests somehow helps to perpetuate the image of them as being anarchic and unruly. This, on the other hand, strengthens state arguments to introduce law and order, for example through multi-national industrial mining companies seemingly to be easier to control by the state.

Most strategies and arguments in the current debate still revolve around the "magical state". Since the right of the central state to allocate natural resources or the access to them isn't challenged per se, actors involved largely hang on to older models of state-society relations. In making the central state their addressee, conflicts seem to be narrowed down to distributive issues, in a time where the state neither has the economic strength nor the political power to control related processes as it may have had earlier when similar processes occurred with regard to the oil sector.

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