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BOOK REVIEW

Transforming the frontier: peace parks and the politics of neoliberal conservation in southern Africa, by Bram Büscher, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, xx + 290 pp., US$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5420-8

The international conservation community has increasingly come to talk about, think about and pursue biodiversity conservation in terms of market language and market solutions. *Transforming the frontier* joins a growing body of scholarship analyzing the causes, critiquing the implications and interpreting the meaning of these discursive shifts in environmental governance as aspects of an ongoing, broadly 'neoliberal' re-purposing of biodiversity conservation. Bram Büscher examines one important instantiation of these trends – the establishment of 'peace parks', or transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs), in southern Africa – to illustrate what he argues are tensions and dynamics inherent to contemporary neoliberal conservation politics.

Büscher focuses his attention on the creation of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project (MDTP): a US$15 million conservation and development intervention straddling the border between Lesotho and South Africa, initiated in 2003 and funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), where he conducted field research from 2005–2007. The book contextualizes the broader circumstances through which that intervention emerged and explains the political processes that conditioned how it progressed. The task quickly spirals outward. Büscher unravels a tangled, power-laden conjuncture of politics, actors, interests, institutions, discourses, policy networks and sedimented historical legacies intersecting in the intervention.

Conservation and development actors in southern Africa, Büscher argues, work diligently to 'keep conservation legitimate in and functional to a postcolonial, neoliberal political economy', which compels actors to align their projects within the constraints (and opportunities) circumscribed by this political-economic order (3). Büscher uses his case to argue that the politics of neoliberal conservation 'coalesce around the dynamics of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing' (xiii). In other words, proponents of transfrontier conservation strive to recast highly contradictory social realities in 'win–win' *consensus* terms, to establish certain modes of problem-solving as politically unassailable or beyond debate (*antipolitics*), and to cultivate desired behaviours through various *marketing* techniques. These three political strategies have the effect of neutralizing or otherwise obscuring tensions between the different actors, divergent interests and incongruent logics that such interventions bring together.

The architects and implementers of the MDTP, for example, had to negotiate a complex field populated by overlapping networks of diverse and sometimes mutually apprehensive actors drawn from state bureaucracies, consultancies, the World Bank, tourism and other private sector interests, conservation organizations and a host of communities with a stake in the intervention, each with unique roles, priorities, concerns, relationships to each other and ways of operating. Ultimately, Büscher contends, the three political strategies deployed by myriad MDTP actors converged to reproduce a broadly neoliberal framework and resulted in the promotion of specific devolved neoliberal governance practices such as the development of tourism and payments for environmental services (PES). Büscher suggests that these strategies for managing, containing, channeling and concealing

these contentious realities through discourse and abstraction – thereby securing the ongoing legitimacy and perceived success of such initiatives – have become a defining feature of neoliberal conservation politics.

Büscher asks how neoliberalism manages to persist as a viable, even hegemonic governance paradigm in spite of manifold contradictions, failures and criticisms. He describes his own struggle to make sense of the intense promotion and 'incredible enthusiasm' over peace parks given the actual, halting, conflictual, on-the-ground realities apparent in his fieldwork. Referencing Tania Li's 'witches' brew' and Bruno Latour's 'overflow' as characterizations of the challenges of reconciling these contradictions in writing, he notes a stark contrast between 'the ethnographic richness, intricacies, and contradictions of local life in the Maloti-Drakensberg' and 'the grand narratives and global solution of the peace parks discourse' (9). Thematically, these opening reflections on this 'overflowing witches brew' – that is, the lived, situated messiness glimpsed through his ethnographic engagements and threatening to 'spill over' efforts to frame them, explain them and theorize them – introduce a tension that runs throughout the book.

The tension speaks to the book's overall research approach: a sustained, multi-sited ethnography with 'an eye for structural power', which entices Büscher to traverse 'academic disciplines, methodological traditions, theoretical dispositions, and empirical realities', as he pursues explanations ever-outward into the multi-scalar complex of sites, times and agencies in which his peace parks are enmeshed (xi). The book both celebrates the integrative aspirations of political ecology and strives to shore up those aspects less emphasized by geographers and anthropologists. While acknowledging the 'partial, limited, and refractory nature […] of ethnographic observations', he stresses the structured manner in which these realities take shape (10). Indeed, Büscher's thoughtful attention to questions of structure and agency in his account of TFCA politics is a particular highlight of the book, as it draws attention to both the individual roles, idiosyncrasies and efforts of key actors in directing and shaping TFCAs in southern Africa and the various institutional inertias which these actors had to maneuver and try to marshal. The care and impressive detail with which Büscher presents his ethnographic material at times feel akin to reconstructing not just one 'ship in a bottle' but multiple ships in multiple bottles. The book shines in those moments where it manages to bring out the ethnographic richness from these disparate sites and institutional milieus, showing their connections to the multi-scalar political processes in which they are embedded.

This tension between empirical reality and abstracted representation characterizes not just Büscher's own efforts to contain his overflowing witches' brew of ethnographic material into his chosen theorization. It also portrays key characteristics of the political process Büscher observes in southern Africa's peace parks: the struggle to align through discourse the unruly, contentious and fragmented realities of divergent actors, interests and logics brought together (or into collision) around these interventions. In highlighting this tension, Büscher sets the stage for his book's broader characterization of the cacophonous challenges to neoliberal governance under such conditions and its countervailing strategies to contain, direct and orchestrate that cacophony.

Chapters 1 and 2 situate the rise of transfrontier conservation in the broader historical context of southern Africa's evolving postcolonial political economy and begin to illustrate the politics of consensus, antipolitics and marketing in action. Büscher describes the 1997 establishment of the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF), the role of its charismatic champion Anton Rupert and the leveraging of elite networks by TFCA proponents as they enrolled allies, built legitimacy and gathered resources to the cause of transfrontier conservation

in the region and beyond. Here, the trope of win–win undergoes combinatorial explosion. Büscher argues that

> neoliberal conservation discourses move beyond a world of win–win solutions to a world of win–win–win–win–win–win–win (or win^7 if you like) solutions that benefit: corporate investors, national economies, biodiversity, local people, Western consumers, development agencies and the conservation organizations that receive funding from those agencies. (5)

Büscher characterizes the formation of peace parks as a chimera of logics shaped to fit a historical and political-economic conjuncture – a legacy defined by struggles over race (apartheid/postapartheid politics), the postcolonial state and sovereignty (including relations between South Africa and Lesotho), different visions of conservation and development, integration into a globalizing political economy, and shifting regimes of access to land, water, minerals, tourism and other resources. In such a context, the peace parks discourse required 'constant proactive grooming and strategic interventions' to smooth over these tensions (65).

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 extend this discussion by refocusing analysis on the MDTP itself. These chapters analyze the process of designing the MDTP as a fundable intervention and follow its implementation. Büscher recounts the divergent perspectives of its two Project Coordination Units (PCUs) from Lesotho and South Africa – the groups tasked with actually shepherding the project – as they grappled with an array of stakeholders and dealt with the vagaries of the MDTP as it unfolded. Büscher's discussion of the influential role played by private consultants (whose costs comprised over half the total budget of the project) in the formation of the MDTP is particularly interesting. Büscher notes the crucial roles played by project implementers as brokers and translators between local conditions and higher bureaucratic processes. Throughout these chapters, Büscher describes MDTP proponents struggling to reconcile (with mixed success) the messy realities in which the project intervened. He documents developing frictions between the South African and Lesotho PCUs, which adopted distinct antipolitical strategies: the former adopting a more technocratic 'rational consensus' approach (an 'instrumental antipolitics') inspired by bioregional planning and the latter adopting a community-based-conservation-inflected 'accommodating commonage' approach (a 'moral antipolitics') which acknowledged plural interests and actively sought legitimacy through inclusion and participation of local people. In these struggles, the PCUs converged on the use of neoliberal devolved governance mechanisms, namely tourism and PES, as preferred strategies for pursuing conservation and development, as they sought to maintain project legitimacy.

This mismatch between on-the-ground realities and the discourses representing them is further explored in chapters 6 and 7. Here, Büscher examines in closer detail the specific discursive practices used by various actors in the MDTP. Büscher highlights the role of marketing techniques and the manipulation of abstraction (images, reports, planning documents, performance evaluation frameworks and so on) by consultants, donors and the private sector in these struggles to influence the direction of the project and shore up the fragile consensus surrounding it. Ultimately, the devolved neoliberal governance practices promoted in the MDTP – tourism and PES – did not materialize according to expectations: a key personnel change in the World Bank and apprehensions among some PCU staff resulted in a shift away from PES, while tourism opportunities also fell short. Büscher describes the work of 'interpretive coalitions' in managing and submerging these contradictions – a process of 'interpretive translation' effected across a chain of institutions – which molded perceptions of the MDTP as legitimate and successful.

This 'retreat' from practice into discourse by project implementers – in other words, their preoccupation with image over reality – leads to Büscher's concluding discussion of what he refers to as 'the bubble of neoliberal conservation'. Development and conservation actors, Büscher argues, continue to feed this 'epistemological contradiction', but its façade is continually cracking and takes work to maintain. 'The result', Büscher suggests, 'is an awkward situation in which neoliberal conservation, especially in its transfrontier incarnation, produces ever-grander discourses seemingly free of contradictions, while these saturate its practice' (220). While currently wrapped up in a neoliberal framework, Büscher emphasizes that the strategies of consensus, antipolitics and marketing are themselves 'not inherently neoliberal' and can be subverted and potentially appropriated toward other, perhaps counter-hegemonic, political aspirations. However, while concluding with this optimistic note, the book also admonishes caution. As stakeholders are drawn to the allure of consensus, antipolitics and marketing – as they consent to interpolating their respective interests into and through that process – they do so on an often highly uneven and circumscribed playing field. As they crowd into (or are crowded into) this political space, its terrain has been pre-defined, narrowed and delimited in ways reflective of and conducive to power asymmetries.

Among the structural forces described in his book, Büscher tries to highlight the contingencies and opportunities recoverable for non-neoliberal political possibilities. But to return to Büscher's opening reflections on his witches' brew of ethnographic material, this point arguably could have been taken further. Throughout the book, Büscher regularly ascribes a 'neoliberal disposition' (64) to the sprawling array of observations and processes he presents. A question arises: to what extent did the tangled conjuncture of different actors, divergent interests and incongruent logics brought together in the MDTP not only hybridize with but actually *overflow* or otherwise dilute neoliberal strictures in terms of what came out of it in the end? Certainly, Büscher shows that the constitution of peace parks in the region cannot be understood outside of neoliberal politics. But at what point might it stop being essentially defined by them? In the end, the tourism did not materialize according to expectations, the PES was largely abandoned and, while observing a variety of responses by local people at the community level to the project, Büscher concludes that the 'actual effects of the MDTP (in South Africa and Lesotho) on existing power balances were negligible' (166). What did neoliberalism *do* here and what were its effects beyond the voluminous talk, rhetoric and discourse that Büscher elegantly unpacks? Certainly, neoliberal visions were advanced and neoliberal solutions were tried – but as they joined the swirl of this witches' brew, perhaps something else emerged and neoliberal logic was overflowed?

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