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Rethinking Political Ontology. Notes on a Practice-Related Approach and a Brazilian Conservation Area

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ABSTRACT: *For a critical discussion of power asymmetries within the co-managed protection of natural resources, political ontology offers a valuable theoretical framework. Relevant studies demonstrate that sustainability cannot be determined ›objectively‹ but is deeply entangled with, and dependent on, the specific ontological constitutions of worlds. However, my case study within the Brazilian conservation area Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns also reveals the limitations of a political ontological approach, as the framework cannot completely contend with the fragmentation of social collectives and the ontological plurality of everyday enactments. Demonstrating that this blind spot is the effect of a specific analytical perspective, I argue for a practice-related reformulation. Illustrated with the empirical data of my case study, I propose the adoption of three concepts for a practice-related political ontology, namely plural ecologies, ontological consequences, and contextual assumptions.*

KEYWORDS: *Political Ontology, Plural Ecologies, Brazil, Co-Management of Natural Resources, Extractive Reserves (Resex)*

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The pioneering studies on ontology in anthropology focus on the metaphysical constitutions of multiple worlds. They analyze indigenous ontologies and thus illustrate the specificity of the Western world (e.g., Stolze Lima 1996; Viveiros de Castro 1996) or categorize different ontological orderings (e.g., Descola 2005). With the approach of political ontology (PO), questions of power have entered the debate. Less concerned with the investigation of specific ontological constellations of worlds, PO examines the power relations that arise *between* worlds, and traces emerging dynamics of conflict and appropriation (Blaser 2009a). By adopting this perspective, PO enables a critique of social and ontological power relations and enriches the ontological turn in anthropology (cf. Eitel/Meurer this issue).

Scholars commonly use the PO approach for case studies in the context of participatory environmental governance, namely government conservation projects with shared governance involving local populations in decision-making and management. They study, for instance, the joint elaboration of norms for sustainable hunting (Blaser 2009b), or the co-management of guanaco population (Petitpas/Bonacic 2019) and salmon fishing (Schiefer this issue). These case studies critically point to the fact that—among many other difficulties evident in participatory environmental protection—ontological hierarchies persistently

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lead to a weakening of local populations and to an enforcement of external, government positions.

Due to this specific perspective, which integrates sensitivity to ontological diversity *and* to power imbalances within projects of shared governance, the PO enriches my scientific examination of the regulations for resource use within the Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns (Resex TA). The Resex TA is a conservation area for sustainable resource use, situated in the Brazilian Amazon Region. It is co-managed by delegates from the local population, governmental agencies, civil society organizations and scientists, gathered together in an administrative board. Although Brazilian legislation implemented guidelines for the effective integration of local voices into decision-making, the negotiations within this administrative board are influenced by particular hierarchies and asymmetries of power. In 2013, the administrative board approved a utilization agreement with binding regulations for resource use—a moment where ontological multiplicity became visible, as I will demonstrate. I understand the term ontological as referring to the metaphysical principles of being, that are constantly reenacted and thereby possibly stabilized or de-stabilized in practice (cf. Blaser 2013a, 21–24).

Still, the application of PO to my case study confronts me with a challenge. Until now, PO's interest has lain in the power structures between the worlds of different collectives, mostly between ontologies of local (often indigenous) groups on the one hand and national agencies, scientists or NGOs on the other (e.g., Bonifacio 2013; Gombay 2014; Glauser 2018; Petitpas/Bonacic 2019). Thus, ontological difference coincides with socio-cultural and/or ethnic difference. The Resex TA, however, presents a setting where social groups and stakeholder groups are fragmented, identities and social belonging are fluid, and furthermore, single individuals commonly participate in distinct ontological constellations. Concordantly, ontological multiplicity and relations of power in this empirical case cannot be reduced to the opposition between local populations and nation-states, or local versus external actors. More complexity and heterogeneity seem to be at stake. The following argumentation is the result of my engagement with this challenging limitation of PO, and the question of how to make use of the approach within ethnographical settings, where empery is fluid, manifold, and complex.

The aim of this paper is to formulate proposals for a practice-related version of PO, to analytically take empirical complexity into account. I draw on my empirical case study for examples of theoretical and conceptual considerations. In the first section, I will sketch the theoretical framework of PO, trace its main assumptions and explore points of critique. The second section introduces my empirical case study and illustrates potential benefits and limitations in the application of PO. In the third section, I will argue for a practice-related reformulation of the approach. In order to carry out a practice-related PO, I introduce three analytical concepts—namely *plural ecologies* (Sprenger/Großmann 2018), *ontological consequences* and *contextual assumptions*—and illustrate these concepts by referring to empirical examples in the Resex TA case study.

My argumentation is based on ethnographic research between 2013 and 2018. In sum, I conducted 20 months of fieldwork in various communities of the Resex TA and within its administrative board. I collected empirical data by means of participant observations and informal conversations, supplemented by open and semi-structured interviews, and the evaluation of legal and archival documents. For data analysis, I made use of content-related coding and interpretative procedures inspired by Georg Breidenstein et al. (2013).

Approaching Political Ontology

Political ontology refers to

> »the power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology. On the other hand, it refers to a field of study that focuses on these negotiations but also on the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other.« (Blaser 2009b, 11)

This often-quoted definition sums up the research program of PO. The theoretical framework was first introduced by Mario Blaser (2009a; 2009b; 2013b), and further refined in collaboration with Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar (e.g., Blaser/Escobar 2016; Blaser/de la Cadena 2018). In my view, Blaser's analysis of a participatory sustainable hunting program among the Yshiro, an indigenous group of the Paraguayan Chaco, makes PO particularly tangible. In this case, Blaser identifies two opposing ontologies. First, a dualistic ontology based on opposites such as nature versus culture; following Bruno Latour (1993), this ontology is referred to as *modern*[1]. Second, a *relational* ontology, in which relations constitute being (for further elaboration cf. Blaser 2013a). These opposing ontologies become explicit in hunting practices and regulations; the Yshiro reproduce relational ontological principles, while the state, NGOs and scientists reproduce modern ontological principles. At one point, conflicts arise over hunting. This is not, according to Blaser, because Yshiro and external actors pursue different goals or express different opinions about sustainability, but primarily because their practices are part of different ontologies—because the metaphyical orders of relational and modern worlds require different sustainability strategies. Seen from that angle, there is no conflict over resources, but a conflict over the world and its ontological constitution. This leads to a process of ontological enforcement, in which Yshiro knowledge is explicitly identified as local cultural knowledge (and not as an alternative ontology) and is thus sucked into the modern dualism of one objective nature versus a plurality of diverse cultures. By having modern science (understood as objective knowledge as opposed to cultural perspective) on their side, the external actors manage to ensure dominance of their own ontology in decision-making processes (ibid. 2009b). I understand this dynamic as a process of *de-recognition through recognition*—the *recognition* of Yshiro knowledge as culture gives it a voice in environmental governance, but leads simultaneously to its *de-recognition* as an alternative ontology. With regard to co-management of natural resources, this means that as long as local knowledge is recognized as culture and not as an expression of alternative ontology, such processes of appropriation will continue.

Further studies of PO share this interest in power relations between a modern and a relational ontology. In the case studies, the modern ontology is represented by governmental and civil society actors or scientists, whereas indigenous or non-indigenous local populations represent a relational ontology (e.g., de la Cadena 2010; Bonifacio 2013; Gombay 2014; Glauser 2018; Petitpas/Bonacic 2019). Thus, »the power-laden negotiations« the PO is interested in always unfold between these collectives; ontological difference becomes the distinguishing feature between ontologically homogenous groups involved. This homogenization of social groups is part of an analytical strategy, Blaser explains. It enables a »shrinking of modernity« and raises awareness for the existence of alternative ontologies. By doing so, PO is able to engage situations of inequality in favor of modern actors and at the expense of indigenous groups, and to examine still existing postcolonial power asym-

metries (Blaser 2013b, 553). However, it is precisely this act of reduction which makes PO vulnerable to criticism, since the analysis ultimately results in a very modern juxtaposition of indigenous people versus the West (Bessire/Bond 2014; Erazo/Jarrett 2018; Bormpoudakis 2019). As a result, indigeneity becomes the West's Other, exploited to ultimately criticize Western thinking, as David Chandler and Julian Reid (2020) argue with regard to the ontological turn. Since Blaser and de la Cadena (2018, 5) define ethnography itself as a practice of world-making, the critique gains even more relevance.

While I agree with parts of the critique, I am still convinced that the perspective of PO enriches ontological anthropology because it addresses the structural dimensions of ontological enforcements and includes sensitivity to power inequalities within ontological multiplicity. Nevertheless, with regard to the analysis of my own ethnographic data, the approach encounters a limitation. The situation in the Resex TA does not adequately fit into the PO paradigm, since strategic homogenization and the juxtaposition of relational and modern actors would swallow too much ethnographic detail. I will illustrate my case study and these challenges in the following section.

Ontological Multiplicity in the Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns

> Sipping a small cup of sweet, hot coffee, I listen to my conversation partner Seu Júlio[2]. The elderly man bends his upper body over the wooden kitchen table, enthusiastically remembering a very successful hunt from a few years ago. Every now and then, his hands gesture through the air as he indicates the impressive size of the trapped tapir. Through the open window behind him, I spot the huge metal plate at the entrance of the village. It designates the communal area as part of the territory of Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns. (Fieldnotes 24.07.2016)

The Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns is a conservation area for sustainable resource use, founded in 1998 in the Amazon region of Brazil. It covers an area of 6,500 km^2, situated at the conflux of the two rivers Tapajós and Arapiuns. About 20,000 inhabitants live in over 70 communities, nestled along the riverbanks. Like Seu Júlio, most residents secure their livelihood by hunting, gathering and fishing, as well as cultivating small-scale agriculture and raising livestock. No less important though are sources of monetary income such as pensions, child benefits or financial support provided by relatives living in the cities. Furthermore, village schools offer rare possibilities of wage labor. And so, despite the remote location, people regularly visit the nearest town Santarém to purchase food (Pena 2015).

Although my local interlocutors mostly identify themselves as *ribeirinhos* (dwellers of the riverbanks), in governmental terms they are defined as *traditional population*. Traditional population refers to the non-indigenous inhabitants of rural Amazonia, descendants of indigenous groups and Portuguese colonizers (Carneiro da Cunha/Almeida 2000). In the 1990s, a process of re-ethnicization started in many parts of Latin America, and in the region of this case study, an increasing number of residents started emphasizing its indigenous ancestry and to self-identify as indigenous (Bolaños 2008; Vaz Filho 2010).

By legislation, the 95 Brazilian Resex are co-managed by members of an administrative board composed of delegates of governmental agencies, civil society organizations and scientists, as well as representatives of the local communities. To ensure that local economic practices remain sustainable and to prevent over-utilization of natural resources, this administrative board must develop and approve a utilization agreement—a set of

binding rules and requirements for resource appropriation (Cardoso 2002, 150–170). In the case of the Resex TA, this utilization agreement was approved in 2013; since its ratification, it is the only formally binding normative order, which regulates all areas of local resource use.

> Having studied the 52 paragraphs of the utilization agreement in detail, I feel optimally informed about relevant regulations in the Resex Tapajós-Arapiuns. And so I know, for instance, that every household possesses a private parcel of land, on which others may neither cultivate nor gather nor hunt. Accordingly, I am very puzzled when Seu Júlio breaks into laughter and explains: »And what do we do if game is escaping in the neighbor's land parcel? Do you think hunters stop at a property line, waiting for the next animal to come? No, no, this does not make sense. We—the community of Nova Canaã—decided that the whole land is collective land. We do not have private parcels here.« (Fieldnotes 24.07.2016)

My ethnographic data reveals various examples where practices of (and informal standards for) resource use in the communities differ significantly from the official utilization agreement. And so, unwittingly and largely unconsciously, a legal pluralism has emerged; regardless of the utilization agreement, daily subsistence practices within the communities often continue to be standardized by local norms (cf. Meurer forthcoming).

The legal pluralism further implies ontological multiplicity. This is also corroborated in the course of my conversation with Seu Júlio, who describes a powerful entity relevant to hunting permissions:

> »As far as I know, and I've hunted a lot, you won't bag any game when Curupira is present. When she's there, she doesn't leave. You can't see her; you only perceive this particular feeling, hear her whistling. You know that when she is there, no game passes by.« (Fieldnotes 24.07.2016)

Curupira is one of many *encantados* (enchanted creatures) that are known in the Amazonian region and beyond. *Encantados* live in streams, rivers, lakes, caves and forests, and are very often entrusted with the protection of these habitats. Curupira is probably the most famous among them (Hoefle 2009; Almeida 2013). Her name varies—in some places, she is called Caipora, Kaapore or Caá-porá; as does her appearance and performance—while often depicted as a small, red-haired creature with feet pointing backwards to confuse hunters with false footprints, in the Resex TA, she stays invisible. While she is mostly given a masculine pronoun in literature, most of my interlocutors referred to Curupira as she/her. They did not recount stories of Curupira as the protagonist of abstract tales, but instead always referred to personal experiences that they or their acquaintances underwent somewhere in the nearby forest.

Accordingly, for many residents in Nova Canaã, Curupira is a very influential entity on the subject of hunting, and when searching for sustainability strategies, her influence should be taken into account; all the same, in the paragraphs of the utilization agreement, Curupira is absent.

The empirical case thus seems to be paradigmatic for situations of conflicting ontologies (in the PO sense). It shares some central characteristics with Blaser's case, including the context of co-management, the visibility of diverse ontologies that further lead to different sustainability strategies, and a certain hierarchy between the different ontologies,

demonstrated by the fact that Curupira was not included in the official utilization agreement.

And yet, the complexity within the Resex TA limits a productive application of PO. In the Resex TA, it is not possible to identify clear opposing groups of actors, nor to define one social group—or even one individual—that consistently enacts one particular ontology. Instead, social affiliations are everchanging and numerous, and individual's actions are ontologically diverse. Let me reinforce these observations with ethnographic detail.

First, although similar to the studies of PO cited above—wherein multiple stakeholders engage in processes of co-management—in this instance social boundaries are not static nor clearly defined. Due to the dynamics of re-ethnicization, the boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous actors are blurred and constantly shifting. And because NGOs, academia and (to a lesser extent) even governmental agencies employ local staff, it is hard to draw a distinction between local and external actors. Accordingly, since social affiliations are neither static nor mutually exclusive, they do not adequately explain ontologically different world-makings.

Second, the situation becomes even more ambiguous when considering the heterogeneity of daily practices. Different ways of world-making cannot be surmised by knowing the identity or social belonging of the acting subject. To the contrary, my data indicates a variety of situations where the same person enacts quite different ontologies, as the following examples illustrate. An interlocutor in the village of Nova Vista (a non-indigenous *ribeirinho* in his forties, without any scientific background and a delegate of his community in the administrative board) reported some of the most impressive and frightening encounters with Curupira, somewhere up in the woody hills. This same man is more than fascinated by the task of tracking the manioc fields of the community residents with a GPS device in order to regularize their location and scale. In his function as a member of the administrative board, he is responsible for this duty; a practice of regularization that (re)produces a very naturalistic idea of measurement and scientific management. Similarly ›incongruous‹ seems to be the statement of a forest scientist at the University of Santarém who, talking about my research results, ponders aloud: »Curupira is so important for forest conservation; if only we could somehow verify her existence in our data...« (Fieldnotes 24.09.2018). These two brief examples should suffice to illustrate that ways of world-making and enacted worlds can ontologically differ within the practices of a single individual.

How to make sense of this ontologically complex and vague ethnographic situation, taking into account that other empirical studies (e.g., DeVore 2017; Theriault 2017; Haug 2018) indicate that this situation is not an anomaly?

Concepts for a Practice-Related Political Ontology

Due to the strategic homogenization in studies of PO, these fluid daily dimensions remain in the blind spot of the approach. I argue, though, that they could be analytically integrated within a practice-related reformulation. This idea is suggested implicitly in the work of Blaser (2013a, 21–24). He conceptualizes ontology by defining three intertwined dimensions. Following Amazonian anthropology (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1996; Descola 2005), ontology refers to a metaphysical principal of order, that defines and structures being and its relations (a). Following science and technology studies (e.g., Mol 1999), ontology is constantly (re) enacted in practice (cf. Jensen this issue) (b). Both dimensions are highly interconnected;

while practice is structured and organized by metaphysical ontological principles, practice itself must be understood as a moment of metaphysics production (c).

For empirical analysis, this three-dimensional conception of ontology offers two possible approaches. First, the focus of analysis can be on the metaphysical orders (dimension a), while studying its reproduction in practice. Or second—conversely—the focus of investigation can be on practice (dimension b), analyzing the production and the enactment of realities with particular ontological orders (Blaser 2013a, 24). In my opinion, these two ways of approaching ontological diversity result in slightly different analytical focal points, whose further consequences are underexposed in the framework of PO. I contend that, even if studies of PO do not disclose their analytical steps in detail, they usually progress in the first direction. For instance, through his conversations with local experts (Blaser 2010, xi), Blaser gains in-depth knowledge of Yshiro metaphysics and its relational ontological principles (dimension a). Knowing about these principles, practices are interpreted, and it becomes evident that the Yshiro reproduce and reaffirm their ontology in decisions for a particular sustainable hunting strategy. This direction of analytical progress reveals the importance of metaphysics in practice and its (sometimes conflicting) consequences. However, the analytical lens can only make sense out of practices that reproduce an already-known metaphysical ordering; those practices that do not inevitably fall out of theorization. This makes it enormously difficult, I argue, to make dissonant voices meaningfully audible and to theoretically integrate the empirical complexity found in my case study (cf. Meurer forthcoming).

Since my goal is the integration of these alleged empirical inconsistencies, I suggest rotating the analytical perspective by 180 degrees and traveling the second analytical route: to focus on practices and enquire after their multiple ontological enactments (dimension b), and thus to perform a practice-related version of PO. To do this, I propose applying three conceptual tools (cf. figure 01). First, I will turn to the concept plural ecologies as defined by

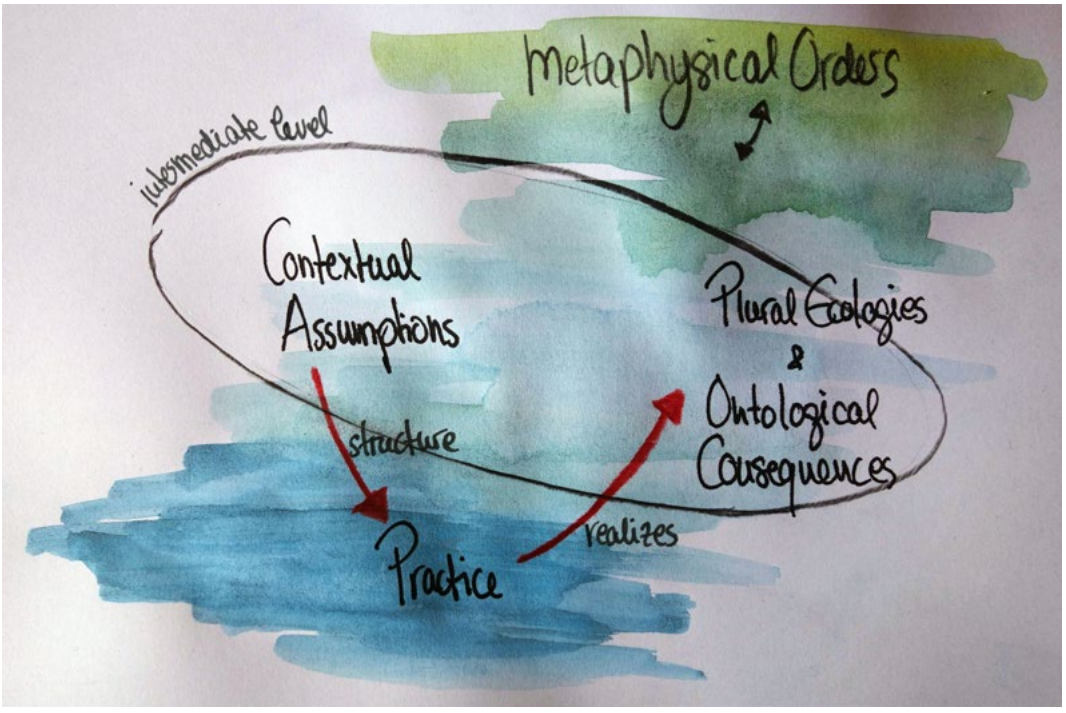

Figure 01: Concepts for a practice-related political ontology (drawing by the author)

Guido Sprenger and Kristina Großmann (2018) and to the term ontological consequences in order to grasp the ontological dimensions enacted in practice. I illustrate the two concepts with reference to examples drawn from my case study (Curupira and carbon). Second, I will introduce the idea of contextual assumptions to analyze ontological relations of power within specific settings of practice. I will demonstrate the use of this concept by asking why Curupira is absent from the utilization agreement of the Resex TA.

Plural Ecologies and Ontological Consequences

Example I: Curupira

As elaborated above, some of the norms for resource appropriation in the community of Nova Canaã (as in other places of the Resex TA) indicate the relevance of Curupira. For example, there is the recommendation to avoid hunting in excess, since Curupira penalizes such practices, or to stop hunting if she comes nearby, since there is the threat of physical danger when she is enraged. I interpret these norms as components of world-making processes, as they enact specific realities with particular ontological patterns. In this way, norms for subsistence offer a starting point for the exploration of reality in terms of a practice-related PO.

To grasp the enacted realities, I use the concept of plural ecologies. Sprenger and Großmann (2018, ix) define ecologies as »a more or less coherent set of relationships between humans and non-humans«, implying »specific conceptions of beings and relationships«. Since these specific conceptions vary, ecologies must be thought of as plural. They are (re)produced in practice and are therefore not stable, but processual and contextual. By focusing on the relationships between humans and non-humans, this concept enables the exploration of enacted realities in ontological multiplicity. It offers a necessary openness for my empirical case study because it assumes that »individuals and groups are not bound to one ecology but can be engaged in different ecologies at the same time« (Haug 2018, 342).

In this sense, the listed norms for resource use concerning Curupira realize a specific ecology, a particular relationship between residents (humans) and Curupira (non-human). The ethnographic data reveals a variety of characteristics. The relationship consists, for instance, of equally conscious, and equally acting subjects. Curupiras' above-described interventions in hunting demonstrate that agency is not limited to the human role; to the contrary, human and non-human actively and mutually shape their relationship. This relationship can feature different qualities—varying from violent to friendly to cooperative—depending on the particular human individuals involved and the specific situation of engagement. Regardless of these different qualities, all resident-Curupira relationships in Nova Canaã exhibit a distinct sociality between humans and non-humans; they establish social bonds that clearly transcend the boundaries of the human realm (Meurer 2020, 88–92).

The enactment of this specific ecology implies further ontological consequences, a term I define as the implicit aspects and dimensions within a particular ecology (e.g., a certain form of epistemology, rationality or temporality). For instance, within the ecology of residents and Curupira, a specific epistemology holds true: the ethnographic data indicates that knowledge about the existence of Curupira is based primarily on lived experiences. Thus, what I was told about Curupira related exclusively to the personal experiences of my interlocutors or their close acquaintances. Meanwhile, more abstract forms of knowledge production—whether objective measurement procedures or abstract cosmological assumptions—did not appear to be necessary, nor to be valid epistemologies. Furthermore,

this particular ecology implies a specific rationality; in this context, certain actions become logical and needful, while others are not possible. In order to hunt successfully, for instance, it makes absolute sense to remain reserved and humble, possibly carrying a little bit of the sugar cane liquor *cachaça* as a gift for Curupira; whereas, obtaining permission from the environmental agency of the Brazilian government ICMBio, is out of question. As previously noted, I integrate these observations under the concept of ontological consequences—a term inspired by a line of thought originating with Annemarie Mol (1999, 81). She demonstrates that different medical diagnostic procedures enact slightly different ontological versions of a disease. This implies further »reality effects« such as specific gender conceptions, for instance. I similarly argue that, within a certain ecology, further ontological consequences are equally realized—a specific epistemology or rationality, but also certain causalities, temporalities and finally sustainabilities.

By integrating the concepts of plural ecologies and their ontological consequences, I introduce an *intermediate level* to Blaser's conception of ontology. This intermediate level can analytically mediate between the concrete practices (dimension b) and the abstract ontological structures (dimension a). Having analyzed dimension b by applicating the notions of plural ecologies and their ontological consequences, it makes sense to consider dimension a. It is, for example, obvious that the ecology of Curupira does not fit into the dualistic ontological oppositions of modern thinking, but instead blasts a nature-culture and associated subject-object dualism. It can thus be revealing to investigate similarities to relational ontologies (Blaser 2009a), as well as to other anthropological models like perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1996) or animism (Descola 2005). The integration of such possible references will further enrich the investigation of plural ecologies.

Example II: Carbon

Considered from that analytical angle, the plural norms for resource use in the Resex TA reveal further ecologies. One example, that differs significantly from the residents-Curupira relationship, could be established within the framework of a planned project of REDD+. REDD+, the mechanism for *Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation* aims to reduce forest destruction and degradation by establishing financial incentives to forest conservation. In short, REDD+ valuates intact forests stands in the Global South as carbon sinks. If local populations, initiatives or governments can demonstrate a reduction in deforestation, emission certificates are issued and generate revenues for the respective forest protectors. Carbon emitters, often companies in the Global North, can in turn purchase the certificates to offset their emissions. From the perspective of those who believe in market-based solutions for climate change, REDD+ represents a win-win situation for all the involved stakeholders (Hufty/Haakenstad 2011).

Starting in 2014, the administrative board of the Resex TA discussed the implementation of a REDD+ project in an effort to finance the conservation area's management through the sale of emission certificates. The implementation would have given rise to a fundamental transformation in local resource use and would have modified its regulations, as a resident of the Resex TA fears:

> »Then we would no longer be able to work in the forest. We would no longer be able to cut wood, that we need—that we really need—for our everyday life! We wouldn't be able to create manioc fields anymore... the only thing we could still do would be to watch the forest!« (Informal conversation with Seu Tibério, 11.12.2015)

Unfortunately, Seu Tibério's evaluation could indeed be correct; under a REDD+ project, particular areas of the Resex TA would have to be designated as protection zones and their use would necessarily be restricted completely (or at least to a very large extent).

Hence, implementing a REDD+ project would inevitably lead to new norms for local resource appropriation. As with the example of Curupira, these norms must be considered as particular moments of world-making, enacting specific ecologies with ontological consequences. Within this ecology, too, a non-human entity (carbon) plays a crucial role for resource use—even though its relationship to humans is shaped very differently. To begin with, we can observe a clear subject-object relationship. The human entity appears as the acting subject that intends to protect forests, regulate emissions and manage carbon stocks. The non-human entity, by contrast, is treated as a passive object—a chemical element that is managed, counted and controlled. In addition, this seems to be a hierarchical relationship, even though this hierarchy is more ambiguous than it appears at first glance. On the one hand, agency is clearly vested in the human partner, while carbon is merely dealt with. However, in the context of the global climate crisis, human dependence on carbon is becoming increasingly obvious. Human and carbon mutually depend on each other, being reciprocally in hierarchy to each other. Regarding further ontological consequences, certain epistemologies and rationalities can be identified. It is not the empirical experience that foremost constitutes a valid epistemology; rather, abstract carbon accounting measurements and calculations produce knowledge about what is real and what is not—and about what is valid and true and what is not (cf. Knox 2020). A rational practice is not a reserved and humble behavior (as seen in the ecology of Curupira); the conversion of carbon into a monetary value is intended to propel people into action. A specific rationality ultimately results in particular strategies for sustainability (cf. Blaser 2009b). This means that just as ecologies are plural, so are the supposedly rational strategies for sustainability. This last aspect is of crucial political relevance today.

Finally, an inquiry regarding metaphysical structures reveals clear references to a dualistic, modern ontology. I contend that a subject-object divide (reflecting a culture-nature divide) characterizes the ecology of carbon crucially. Furthermore, certain beliefs—in an independent market, in individually acting subjects and in a measurable and manageable nature—are fundamental facets within this ecology, three basic assumptions of modern world-making, as Arturo Escobar (2017, 83–91) states.

However, as of today, the REDD+ project has not been implemented in the Resex TA. The proposal was suspended in August 2015, when indigenous activists occupied the building of the government environmental agency in Santarém. Even so, many interlocutors are sure that, in the future, similar projects will again appear on the agenda of the administrative board. »The project was not extinguished, but only temporarily suspended«, Seu Tibério clarifies (Informal conversation, 11.12.2015). If this proves to be the case, carbon and its ecology, in one way or another, will become an influential agent in local resource usage and in the production of reality.

Returning now to an examination of concepts. A practice-related PO enables us to investigate additional ecologies that fit less easily into anthropological models of modern or relational ontologies, but still become relevant in practice. One striking example are the numerous community associations in the Resex TA. These associations are responsible, among other things, for local conflicts over resource use. But it is also through these associations that residents are represented in the administrative body. Accordingly, they are influential more-than-human entities with regard to the negotiation of resource use and regulation within the Resex TA. I will not elaborate further on this example but will con-

clude with a short reflection. A practice-related approach—investigating practices and tracing the ontological characteristics of enacted ecologies—demonstrates that we are dealing with plural ecologies within the same empirical context. These ecologies differ ontologically, namely in terms of existing human and non-human entities and their relations. As in other ethnographic contexts (e.g., DeVore 2017; Haug 2018; Sprenger 2018), it is the same social group (or even the same individual) whose practices realize not one but plural ecologies.[3] A practice-related PO is capable of addressing this ethnographic density of plural ecologies because it stays open to the possible multiplicity of diverse enactments in practice. Additionally, its open perspective allows for a plurality of enacted ecologies—even if they cannot (or can only indirectly) be related to the metaphysical orders as described in anthropological theory.

Contextual Assumptions

I have hitherto presented two concepts that trace the ontological effects of specific practices. By adding the term contextual assumptions, I propose to consider the particular conditions under which certain ecologies come into being while others are damned to non-existence.

Practice is not realized within a vacuum, but is always pre-structured by context, by preceding events and practices (Giddens 1984; Ortner 2006). Moreover, agents act based on certain »pragmatic presuppositions« (DeVore 2017, 15) that also touch ontological dimensions. To come to terms with this fact analytically, I propose to appraise the unquestioned contextual assumptions, that axiomatically permeate specific settings and thereby structure respective practices. They operate *axiomatically* in the literal sense of seeming »obviously true and therefore not needing to be proved« (Cambridge University Press 2014), and thus are widely *unquestioned*. They are *ontological* because settings are not solely permeated by assumptions about appropriate (or inappropriate) conduct, habitus or language, but also by presuppositions regarding existence—on what is and what is not even possible. As a result, contextual assumptions *structure* (not determine!) practice; the actors involved, taking assumptions for granted, align their practices accordingly and thus, reproduce them.

Seen from that angle, the plurality of ecologies within the empirical case of the Resex TA is indeed manifold and complex, but the specific enactments should not be interpreted as completely arbitrary. Here is a final example: The above description of the Resex TA and its legal pluralism ended with the observation that Curupira, although having a strong impact on subsistence practices in Nova Canaã, is non-existent in the utilization agreement. Nor was she mentioned in the numerous meetings of the administrative board that I attended between 2013 and 2018. How to explain Curupira's absence from the utilization agreement and in discussions of the administrative board?

Empirical data indicates that the actors' social and cultural belongings do not serve as adequate explanation. In other settings outside of the administrative board, many of the delegates make use of practices that recognize Curupira (or other non-human *encantados*). Interlocutors formulate hunting norms where she is a relevant actor; some of them ask for permission when entering specific habitats. They even requested the aid of a local healer when a forest management student disappeared during an excursion in 2016 and did not return until the following day because Curupira had confused her. These interlocutors include indigenous and non-indigenous participants of the administrative board; among them are delegates of local communities, as well as participating scientists and NGO staff.

Alternatively, it could be the dominance of government agencies within the administrative board that is suppressing ecologies which do not conform to their dualist modern conceptions. However, this does not seem very plausible to me; even the delegates mentioned in the preceding paragraph seem to enact Curupira's non-existence actively and enthusiastically within the administrative board. Focusing on the question of contextual assumptions, though, another interpretation reveals itself.

Based on my data, I maintain that particular principles have succeeded in becoming dominant within the administrative board and are now able to frame the space for discussion. These principals represent fundamental political norms for co-management of natural resources, a strategy of scientific management that strongly represents ontologically modern, naturalistic features (cf. Ioris 2008). Some of these principles are explicitly specified—laid down in manuals, statues, or environmental law. Other principles, perhaps the largest part, remain implicit but have solidified into collectively shared contextual assumptions, whose validity is not questioned at all within the administrative board's discussions. One of these contextual assumptions applies the modern axiom that a non-human is not, and cannot be a possible negotiation partner for resource use; Curupira is no more than local cultural belief. Because this contextual assumption dominates the particular setting of practice, the delegates do not include her into the utilization agreement. A process of *de-recognition through recognition* as Blaser (2009b) describes it in his case study seems to take place. But in this case it happens not between different social groups or stakeholders, but instead is jointly realized by an enormously heterogeneous collective. In this sense, it is not so much ontological oppression between different agents taking place; the ontological power relationship between plural ecologies appears rather hegemonic. The delegates actively participate in reenacting the dominant modern assumptions, thereby accepting its underlying ontological principles. This is not to say that other ecologies are not possible within this setting. I am convinced that they are, and that actors are indeed able to blur and de-stabilize the dominant dualistic assumptions—albeit, during my research, this did not happen.

Focusing on contextual assumptions in particular settings reintroduces PO's sensitivity concerning constellations of power to a practice-related analysis. In this way, the suggested approach specifically looks at moments of »power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology« (Blaser 2009b, 11). Nevertheless, taking the complexity of ethnographic fluidity seriously leads us to a slightly different understanding of processes of ontological enforcement. As outlined above, they seem to be hegemonic and not a product of clear oppression or uncontrolled ontological equivocation.

Conclusion

This paper maps the critical engagement between empirical data and the theoretical framework of political ontology, leading to my proposal for a practice-related reformulation (cf. figure 01). To this end, I suggest exploring the ontological dimensions of empirical case studies by focusing closely on practices and the realities they enact. To come to terms with these realities, I propose making use of three analytical concepts. The first is the idea of *plural ecologies* (Sprenger/Großmann 2018), understood as particular relationships between human and non-human entities and their specific ontological characteristics. The second concept is that of *ontological consequences*, valuable for analyzing additional features orig-

inating from particular ecologies—for example epistemologies, rationalities, causalities or, not least, sustainabilities. The third concept, *contextual assumptions*, enables the consideration of particular settings of practice and their potential influence on the enactment of specific ecologies (and the non-enactment of others). It helps to identify dominant assumptions—supposed ontological certainties—within specific settings and thus, integrates the analysis of power relations and ontological hierarchies into a practice-related political ontology.

Above all, a practice-related political ontology stands out by virtue of its analytical openness to empirical complexity. Since it chooses practice (and not ontologies, worlds, or social groups) as its analytical starting point, this approach is able to capture ontologically different ecologies, regardless of whether they differ between social groups, between individuals or within the practices of a single actor. The approach is furthermore able to consider the whole variety of realized ecologies, whether they bear resemblance to modern or relational ontologies, or whether they express entirely different ontological structures. Within a practice-related framework of political ontology, empirical complexity thus need not remain trapped in thick description; it can be thoroughly examined and contribute to a thick analysis of ontological processes of power.

Endnotes

1 Modern in the sense of Bruno Latour refers to the characteristic ontological classification of modernity. Emerging in the age of the Enlightenment, it is primarily organized around two great divides: the fundamental distinction between nature and culture; and the distinction between those who are aware of the nature-culture separation (we) and those who are not (the others) (cf. Latour 1993; Blaser 2009a). I learned that the term quickly misleads, as its general usage implicates strong value connotations. As it is fundamental for Blaser's argumentation, I will still make use of it in this paper. For an alternative understanding of modernity that does not exclude indigenous subjects, but instead highlights the multiple and multifaceted interconnections of indigenous and non-indigenous worlds, see Ernst Halbmayer (2018).

2 Names of interlocutors are pseudonyms.

3 This multiplicity also extends to the normative orders for resource use in the Resex TA; both the utilization agreement and the norms in Nova Canaã are ontologically fragmented, each of them establishing in themselves a plurality of ecologies.

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