ASSESSING NATURE:
BETWEEN ZONES OF EXPLOITATION AND PROTECTION

Guest Editors' Foreword

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Nature is a domain where the scientific, the capital, and the political meet, in constant negotiation and making of Nature. By Nature with a capital 'N' we mean an abstract concept of Nature as one external and in contrast to Society with a capital 'S'. While these concepts are abstracts, they are at the same time very real in that they have to be made, maintained, and are acted upon, thus shaping reality (see Latour, 2004; Moore, 2015). The result of this making of Nature is by no way fixed and is often contested as claims on the protection and exploitation of Nature are made. We understand the exploitation of Nature as embedded in a neoliberal agenda of both resource extraction and touristic attraction, while nature's protection oscillates between ascribing degrees of intervention and the exclusion of humans from other than human environments, such as what is proclaimed as wilderness. Yet on the ground, human and other than human interaction is a practice of assessment, judgement, and selection, where questions of right, of emotional attachments, and the survival and reproduction of species - human and non-human - are put to the test. While Nature often appears as a bound more than human entity, specific entities like trees, flowers, animals, mushrooms, and microbes are often invisible and uninteresting groups. They leave categories of indifference only when they become potential resources (or threats) to human lives. When not material resources, they are moralising comparisons to human socialities as mere metaphors rather than entities in their own right (Tsing, 2005: 172; see also Lorimer, 2007). We direct our interest towards those modes of assessment that happen in space and time, 'on the ground', where entities are sorted in a bid to make Nature.

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Starting from a concern about the ways Nature is negotiated, translated, and transformed across the scientific, economic, and political domains, and about the specific ways it is sorted on the ground, the current issue of *Studia Sociologia* presents three articles that look at these processes from three distinct points of view. Sergiu Novac focuses on the negotiation of Nature-concepts as they enter political agendas while shaping nature on the ground. As such, he evokes the Dutch Pavilion built in Hannover for the 2000 World Exhibition, that became a mere ruin in danger of demolition. He accounts for the parallel processes by which an economic vision of society based on Keynesian and socialist-communist values was dismantled, while another one based on the neoliberalization of the market and the individuality of man was created. In this process, sustainability was attached to this discursive rationality as a mode of recreating Nature in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. The gaze of Iulia Hurducaș, meanwhile, is that of an urbanist investigating a politically, economically, and scientifically imagined as well as a grounded territory brought within urban control, on the Vasser Valley in Maramureș, northern Romania. Through her geographical outlook, she analysis the legal and scientific control over the forest body and the tensions that this control brings about as it is placed upon the fluid and shifting forest landscape. Subjected to the practice of forestry engineering, a practice that manipulates nature, the forest landscape emerges in between the political, economic, and scientific negotiations of control, and the practical dealings with nature as a form of life on the ground. Thus, what is seen as artificial or natural, virtual and actual all shape the forest. The focus of Agota Abran is two minute strands in the extraction of plant raw materials for the medicinal plant industry. From these strands, she analysis the tension between plants coming from Nature as opposed to Society and plants coming from the spontaneous flora, as often used in the industry. While Nature is sold on shelves, the concept of spontaneous flora allows for the 'appropriation' (Moore, 2017) or the 'salvage' (Tsing, 2015) of plants from spaces which are not only outside of capitalist control but where plants grow *in spite of* it.

Several themes transcend the selected articles, through which we propose a joint reading of them. The diverse forms of negotiations that create different forms of natural capital allow for things to travel through the various modes of Nature's existence. A travelling of this sort brings into question the concepts used to recreate Nature while subtracting natural resources (political capital, timber, medicinal plants) for diverse agendas. These concepts are most often shown to be inherently problematic, as Hayden's (2003) analysis of bioprospecting in Mexico demonstrates. Based on an idea of biodiversity as a distinctive kind of natural capital, her account brings forth a distinctive mode

of Nature's existence in the concept of biodiversity more open to practices of industrial and economic management. The 'haunting' images of exploitation that such an enlargement raises, that stand aside the goals of ecological wealth and need for sustainability, promoted by the same industries that would exploit this wealth (2003: 52) are daunting, but they are equally a fruitful ground for debate on ethics and politics.

Questioning the ethics of the capitalist accumulation process, the three articles highlight the spaces of negotiation and erasure, where things are appropriated as they are made movable. Thus, in Iulia Hurducaş' account, the difference between the abstraction of the plan and the manipulations on the ground emerges as the space where the forest travels from Nature to capital. Within this space, an ever more specific organization of the forest according to environmental conditions is juxtaposed on an economic organization of the forest as a space of extraction. In Novac's story, sustainability emerges as the discursive space where the shift in economic visions happens, resulting in the collapse of the East German economy. Here, what appears as an economic vision grounded on a new mode of organization of Nature in the form of sustainability, does not even touch nature on the ground, but it merely 'stages' it in the discursive layer. Moreover, what becomes apparent, is that when used to justify a new economic vision, sustainability almost erases the existence of Nature on the ground, as it constructs it anew. In Abran's account, the concept of spontaneous flora emerges as the space where the by-products' of the unplanned and unregulated spaces where plants grow at will, are commodified. From a spatial point of view, the emergence of these plants in the leftover spaces of urbanization can lead to a conception of them as 'subnatural' (Gissen, 2009). However, the focus on the plants themselves, for whom the social categorization of space is indifferent, as they emerge where the proper conditions for life are met, both in 'natural' spaces and in urbanized space, calls for a different categorization, transcending the spatial division into natural and urban. As plants travel from 'the environment' into 'the economy', the moral organization of nature into weeds and useful plants is overwritten by the concept of spontaneous flora.

Through the reading together of these three articles, we can begin to recompose the intricate processes by which Nature is made a subject of debate in its multiple existences within the scientific, the economic, and the political domains, and how they relate to nature on the ground. In the top-down political push towards a new capitalisation of Nature 'staged' as a sustainable use of natural resources, as in Novac's article, nature on the ground is invisible. Its negotiation on the ground, however, as Hurducaş shows, is a matter of manipulation and sorting of a natural territory. Here, the tension between its

sustainable use, upon which its capitalisation rests, even though it denies it, and its protection as a natural environment, manifests itself not only in the discursive but also in the affective layer, as forestry engineers become the negotiators of this tension. Starting from the ground, Abran illustrates how the by-products of this tension are appropriated by capitalist production processes through scavenging spontaneous life. Throughout these processes, the inherent ambiguity in Nature (Cronon, 1992: xvii) with a capital 'N' becomes apparent. As Nature emerges already distinct from Society in Marxist and Hegelian thought, as an entity outside the human, to be appropriated by processes of capitalist exploitation (Cronon, 1992: xvii), nature on the ground, where humans become the collectors, the negotiators, and the protectors, becomes a hybrid mix of the natural and the artificial, of the controlled and the uncontrolled.

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