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## Devolution in the woods: community forestry as hybrid neoliberalism

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the remarkable congruence between the proliferation of community forestry initiatives in North America in recent years and the ascendance of particular forms of neoliberalism. In it I argue that, in the United States in particular, such initiatives are best understood as hybrids between ‘rollout’ neoliberalism and contemporaneous trends in the management of protected areas and state-owned forests. This interpretation contributes to recent arguments that the environment has been understudied as an arena through which neoliberalism has been actively constituted, rather than simply a passive recipient of ‘impacts’. Moreover, surprisingly little academic work has explored the imbrications of specific changes in environmental governance and evolving neoliberalism in the latter’s ‘First World’ geographic hearths, such as the USA and the United Kingdom. In this paper I undertake such an investigation with respect to community forestry in the United States. The paper traces the major antecedents, introduction, and institutionalizations of community forestry in the United States, and shows how their conceptualizations and enactments of ‘community’ are structured by hegemonic neoliberal ideas, making community forestry in this context supplementary, rather than oppositional, to neoliberal restructurings. Exploration of the current Bush administration’s enthusiastic adoption of central elements of community forestry bolsters this interpretation. Finally, the conclusion draws implications from this case for debates in political ecology.

“This is why the Wildlife Conservation Society is now working to apply an exciting new program here at home that goes beyond the boundaries of protected areas to save wildlife and animals ... The approach acknowledges that effective conservation often requires properly managing lands both inside and outside parks and reserves. ... The Living Landscapes approach has already proven itself effective overseas ... ”

Advertisement by the Wildlife Conservation Society  
(*New York Times* 20 May 2001, page 4.17)

“A reckoning with nonprofit organizations is inevitable in this project on the relationship of community with capitalism.”

Joseph Miranda (2002, page 69)

Community forestry efforts have proliferated throughout North America since the early 1990s. Like many trends in forest policy before it, the arrival of community forestry here reflects changes in dominant models of forest management around the globe and the rapid diffusion of ‘best practices’ through networks linking forestry professionals, governments, conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and activists. Yet, in another reprise of previous experiences, the widespread application of a relatively coherent policy model has produced a host of different outcomes: the hundreds, if not thousands, of efforts marching under the banner of community forestry in North America display great heterogeneity. Such heterogeneity reflects national and local differences in forest tenure, recognition of indigenous claims, structures, and repertoires of environmental governance and protest, organizational scales ranging from the national to the resolutely local, and more. Yet all seek to give ‘local’ communities a much greater, more direct role in the management of adjacent or surrounding forests,

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in the belief that this will be superior to centralized state control and will lead to higher levels of economic growth, environmental protection, and community stability.

Community forestry and other community-based resource-management efforts have been the subjects of a rich, multifaceted literature. Although debates continue over what defines community forestry (see Brendler and Carey, 1998), advocates generally emphasize community access to and benefits from protected 'natural' areas; local participation in all stages of conservation and management; flexibility, innovation, and voluntary compliance rather than rigid command-and-control conservation strategies; and attention to place-specific conditions and local knowledge. Prominent critical themes include skepticism about the oft-presumed homogeneity, coherence, and benevolence of 'local communities', and careful investigation of their relationships to protean and strategic indigenous identities (for example, Agarwal and Gibson, 1999; Brosius et al, 1998; Klooster, 2000; Li, 1996); efforts to clarify the complex and often elided relationships between community *control* and *benefits* (Krogman and Beckley, 2002); and unpacking of the conflation and partiality of definitions of 'communities of place', 'communities of interest', and 'communities of identity' (Brown, 2001; Dalby and Mackenzie, 1997; Duane, 1997; Pigg, 1992). Other critical accounts, intensely pragmatic and broadly positivist, focus less on such theoretical nuances and more on the almost complete absence of indicators, monitoring, and outcome assessment in community forestry efforts, raising serious questions about any claims regarding the actual results of such programs (see Dukes and Firehock, 2001; Kellert et al, 2000). All of these are vital debates that inform the current paper. My focus here, though, is on the remarkable congruence between the rise of community forestry in North America and the ascendance of particular forms of neoliberalism.

I argue here that community forestry in the United States, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in North America, must be understood as a hybrid between ascendant neoliberalism and contemporaneous trends in the management of protected areas and state-owned forests. This is a surprising claim because, as we will see, community forestry was born of highly progressive impulses: to democratize, to redress colonial injustices, and to do a better job of environmental protection. Any connection between it and neoliberal assaults on social and environmental protections thus appears paradoxical. Indeed, as many commentators have pointed out, 'community' is almost invariably used in a positive sense (Joseph, 2002, page viii; Williams, 1976, page 15). Yet, as I will show, community forestry and neoliberalism in the United States have much in common—in their timing; in their assumptions about communities, states, and markets; and in their institutional forms and legitimating discourses.

These resonances are far from coincidental, I contend. Yet the relationship they reveal is not one of direct causation or functionality: neoliberalism did not simply produce community forestry as a Trojan horse to carry deregulation and devolution into progressive camps. Proponents of community forestry had good reason to criticize centralized state ownership and management of forests, and came to community forestry by many different routes. Yet neither is this a case of simple convergence, in which proponents of neoliberalism and community forestry happened to arrive at many of the same solutions because they were responding to the same problems, such as failures of high-modernist state projects of the sort identified by Scott (1998). The two have far too much in common for such an explanation to suffice, given the possible range of critical responses. Moreover, such an explanation would rest on far too naïve a view of how policies are formed and transferred: neoliberalism has become nearly hegemonic in the most powerful national and international arenas over the past two decades, and it seems likely that community forestry approaches were influenced by the larger policy environment in which they developed.

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I suggest, then, that we focus on how neoliberalism shaped community forestry as the latter evolved in and between multiple national and regional contexts, and on how community forestry programs in turn became one of the many policy domains in which neoliberal ideas were realized, contested, and reconfigured relative to specific circumstances. I see community forestry as a complex amalgam of trends in environmental governance, neoliberal policy agendas, and responsiveness to contingent historical and geographical factors. Rather than striving for fixed, programmatic definitions of it, we might do better at times to examine closely what other agendas and legacies it has hybridized with, and to what effects, in various locations (compare Joseph, 2002, page viii).

The notion of hybridity implies some new combination of previously separate and pure categories. Community forestry and neoliberalism are such categories in an analytical sense: attempts to discern and define coherent patterns amidst myriad, heterogeneous phenomena occurring at multiple scales across the globe over the past three decades or so. They are of course abstractions, but useful and defensible ones I think. Before discussing their hybridization in detail, then, we need some sense of these abstract categories on their own terms. I undertake this task with respect to community forestry in some detail in the next section. In the remainder of this section, I briefly review the literature on neoliberalism as a category, and then sketch out a preliminary version of what I mean by hybridization between it and community forestry. This interpretation is situated relative to current conversations about hybridity, civil society, and community.

Neoliberalism is suddenly everywhere in geography, in many ways supplanting 'globalization' (Larner, 2003, page 509; Tickell and Peck, 2003). Most critics proceed from a relative consensus that the term refers to a near-global project over the past few decades to reconfigure economic and political governance in line with many of the founding precepts of liberal theory, most notably faith in what Polanyi (1944) termed the "self-regulating market", as the institution and guiding metaphor most likely to produce optimal social outcomes. Corollaries to this faith in the market are hostility towards the state—particularly the Keynesian and developmentalist states deposed by the neoliberal consensus—as owner, provider, or regulator of goods or services, and faith in civil society, or its component communities, as the locus of actors best able to redress any market failures that do occur (see Jessop, 1994; Peck, 2001; Peet and Hartwick, 1999; Tickell and Peck, 2003). In practice, some of the major manifestations of neoliberalism's growing hegemony have been severe structural adjustment policies and forced openings of economies in many developing countries (see, for example, Chang, 2002; Hearn, 2001), rollbacks in the Keynesian social safety net in industrialized countries, and dramatic increases in the governance power of multilateral lending and trade organizations such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization. Work on neoliberalism in geography has focused particularly on questions of scale and governance (for example, debates about the 'hollowing out' of the nation-state, or 'glocalization'); the reconfiguring of central pillars of the Keynesian welfare state, such as the transition from welfare to workfare; and the implications of neoliberalism for urban geographies in particular (see, for example, Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jessop, 1994; 2002; Peck, 2001; 2002; Swygnedouw, 1997).

Despite the foregoing consensus and growing body of work, major debates remain. One centers on how to negotiate the tension between the desire to identify a core logic of 'neoliberalism' on the one hand and the need to recognize the multiplicity and variability of specific 'neoliberalizations' on the other (Larner, 2003; Tickell and Peck, 2003). The invocation of neoliberalism as an explanatory term rests on the belief that it captures widely generalized and tightly interdependent logics and practices. Yet equally important is the imperative to resist the seduction of the apparent obviousness of the term, to heed Larner's (2003, page 509) call to remain attentive, 'to the *different variants*

of neoliberalism, to the *hybrid nature* of contemporary policies and programmes, or to the *multiple and contradictory aspects* of neoliberal spaces, techniques, and subjects” (emphasis in original). Research on neoliberalizing projects has shown such attentiveness to difference and variation in important respects, examining how neoliberal reforms vary geographically, sectorally, and temporally. Of particular relevance to this paper is a distinction drawn by Tickell and Peck (2003) between ‘rollback’ neoliberalism in the 1980s and ‘rollout’ neoliberalism in the 1990s and since. Rollback neoliberalism was characterized by undisguised hostility towards the state and efforts to roll it back in various ways during neoliberalism’s first control over state apparatuses during the 1980s: structural adjustment, deregulation, the sale and privatization of state assets, and so on. Following the dramatic failure of many of these tactics and tacit recognition of the need for the state, neoliberal efforts in the 1990s and since have turned much more towards rolling the state back out, but in more neoliberal forms: public–private partnerships organized according to market models, a discursive focus on empowering local governments rather than on slashing the central government, and reforms framed as technocratic searches for best practices rather than as the enactment of rigid ideological principles.

Theoretically and politically, then, attention is shifting to how neoliberalism is hybridizing with other institutional forms and political agendas, leading to what we might term ‘hybrid neoliberalisms’. I use hybridity here primarily in the relatively everyday sense seemingly intended by Larner in the quotation above, that is, the inextricable interweaving in practice of analytically separable policy trends. The current project is thus also a response to recent calls to explore the hitherto neglected importance of environmental governance as an arena in which such neoliberal hybridizations are constituted and contested (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). The notion of hybrid neoliberalisms is thus distinct from, although informed by, metaphorical uses of hybridity in nature–society theory and postcolonial theory.<sup>(1)</sup> Postcolonial theory’s explorations of the ways in which resistance often draws from dominant repertoires and frameworks and of the role of constructions of ‘pure’ indigenous identities and knowledges in postcolonial and developmentalist imaginaries also provide resources for theorizing the relationship between community forestry and neoliberalism (Young, 2001).

The hybridization of community forestry and neoliberalism has been enabled primarily by their complementary understandings of two key terms in contemporary governance debates: civil society and community. Neoliberal discourses tend to use the term civil society, whereas community forestry discourses turn, obviously, on invocations of community. They use these terms in functionally analogous ways, though, assigning the same characteristics and capacities to civil society and to communities, its building blocks. The two terms thus do similar kinds of work within each discourse, rendering them commensurable. First, they construct these categories as unified, cohesive entities, obscuring differentiation within groups while hardening the boundaries between them. Such constructions hide tremendous inequalities and struggles within and between societies and communities, compressing myriad groups with very different levels and kinds of power, organized according to very different logics, into

<sup>(1)</sup> In nature–society theory, following the work of Latour (1993) and Haraway (1991), metaphors of hybridity have been widely used to challenge and destabilize presumed ontological separations of nature and culture by tracing the existence of material-semiotic objects, networks, and relations that cross and transcend such categories (see, for example, Whatmore, 2002). Ontologically similar but empirically distinct uses are widespread in postcolonial theory, wherein evolving notions of hybridity are frequently used to describe the contested and unstable nature of postcolonial identities in terms of nationalism, culture, geography, and relationship to colonial histories—and their transformative and revolutionary potentialities (Young, 2001).

one matrix of voluntary, associational life (Abrahamsen, 2000, page 54; Joseph, 2002, page 28). They also treat civil society and communities as bounded, coherent social actors, rather than as terrains of struggle in a Gramscian sense (Hearn, 2001, page 43). Second, the discourses examined here tend to construct civil society and communities as inherently democratic and flexible, and states as inherently less democratic, leaning towards centralization if not totalitarianism. They thus associate all power and coercion with states and all hopes for democracy with strong, healthy civil societies and communities: transferring governance powers from states to communities can therefore only mean increases in freedom and democracy (see, for example, Abrahamsen, 2000, page 52–59; Joseph, 2002, pages 93, 114). Third, these discourses assert a close, cooperative relationship between markets and civil society or communities: both are cast as the aggregate results of free individuals voluntarily entering into contracts and associational life, free of coercion from the sovereign. Because the state is seen as only reducing freedom, both markets and communities benefit when its role is reduced. Moreover, such voluntary spheres reinforce each other as they grow—so stronger markets mean a stronger civil society, and vice versa. The discourses examined here thus manage to link economic liberalism to the strengthening of communities, trends that would seem opposed from many perspectives.

Such linkages are not purely theoretical. Looking at governance debates in particular regions—sub-Saharan Africa, for example—it is possible to trace a very concrete lineage from neoliberal assaults on the state and the concomitant growth in the role of NGOs in governance in the 1980s (as examined by, among many others, Abrahamsen, 2000; Davis, 2004; Hearn, 2001) to the genesis of community forestry programs based on nearly identical assertions regarding the deficiencies of states, the virtues of communities, and the desirability of subsidiarity (see, for example, Schroeder, 1999, page 2). Although both community forestry and neoliberalism have deep historical roots—community forestry in long-standing debates about the relationships between communities and modern forests, neoliberalism in classical liberalism and, more recently, intellectual groundwork laid during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—both began to be taken seriously as policy options in the late 1970s. They then moved to center stage in the 1980s during the first wave of rollback neoliberalism, and were implemented most rapidly and pervasively in developing countries—where, not surprisingly, their limitations became most apparent and the most trenchant critiques of them were developed (see, for instance, Barrow et al, 2000; Schroeder, 1999).<sup>(2)</sup> They have been implemented more deeply in advanced capitalist countries during the 1990s and since, usually in modified, ‘rollout’ forms. My genealogical project here thus calls into question the claims of some community forestry advocates in the contemporary United States that agents of neoliberalism, such as the current Bush administration, have merely ‘hijacked’ a previously innocent community forestry (personal communications with researchers in the field; see also Leahy, 2003; but compare Little, 2003, page 6). We need to ask instead whether community forestry, shaped by its evolution in a broader neoliberal environment, already contained many neoliberal principles that made it easily susceptible to such appropriations.

In this paper, I undertake such an investigation with respect to community forestry in a particular temporal and geographical context. In the first section I document the empirical phenomena of the antecedents, introduction, and various

<sup>(2)</sup> The depth and vigor of these critiques were made clear to me when I presented this work to the 2003 participants in the International Scholars of the Environment Program at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, many of whom had had extensive, direct experience with community forestry efforts in their home countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. My understanding of these issues was considerably sharpened during our subsequent discussions.

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institutionalizations of community forestry in the United States. Following closely from this, in the second section I look at the ease with which many ideas in community forestry have been adopted by the Bush administration, bolstering the argument that versions of community forestry, at least, are quite compatible with aggressive neoliberalization. In the third section I elaborate the argument for interpreting these community forestry initiatives as neoliberal hybrids. Finally, in the conclusion I draw implications from this case for debates in political ecology.

### **Community-based forestry in the United States**

Community forestry has developed rapidly in the United States and Canada since roughly 1990. Programs have been organized at a variety of scales, through governmental and private efforts, and in a wide variety of tenurial systems. Community forestry initiatives have proliferated most rapidly and generated the most controversy in the western United States, where many local groups have sought greater control over nearby federal lands, particularly national forests. I therefore focus mainly on such initiatives here, but most of the points apply to community forestry efforts throughout the United States (for reviews of broadly parallel developments in Canada, see, for example, Bradshaw, 2003, Duinker et al, 1994). In this section I trace the antecedents, introduction and diffusion, and institutionalization of these community forestry efforts. In practice, these categories overlap and interact with one another, but as heuristic devices they allow us to chart a course through a heterogeneous and rapidly evolving domain.

#### **Antecedents**

The community forestry initiatives at issue here have deep roots in the century-old turn away from economic liberalism, and more immediate antecedents in international changes in the management of protected areas in 'Third World' countries, the successes of Fordist-era environmental regulation, and the growing hegemony of neoliberalism. The first three are examined below, and the fourth in a subsequent section.

Community forestry is often portrayed as a radically new approach to conservation in the United States (for example, Weber, 2000; 2003), but in fact it has many domestic ancestors. Recognizably similar debates over the relationships between communities and forests in the United States have been going on for at least two centuries, as environmental historians continue to document from new perspectives (for example, Jacoby, 2001; Judd, 1997). Calls for community involvement in, and benefits from, forest management thus have a long domestic lineage. The decision in the late 19th century to retain federal ownership of much of the American West, in the form of national forests, parks, and other categories of public land, marked a key transition in the governance of American nature. It came as a tremendous shock to natural resource industry firms, potential homesteaders, and other would-be privatizers because it reversed over a century of US land policy, which had up until that time facilitated the rapid, low-cost transfer of the public domain into private ownership. It also represented one of the first major responses to the environmental failures of the self-regulating market, and so one of the first challenges to the hegemony of 19th-century economic liberalism (see Frank et al, 2000; Polanyi, 1944).

The politics of such a broad transformation are complex. The nascent impulse to preserve nature from the crucible of the market was thoroughly imbricated with colonial and centralizing dynamics. As in cases around the world, such tenurial transformations were predicated on assumptions that either the lands in question were *terra nullis* (see Whatmore, 2002) or existing claims were superseded by state interests (foundational assumptions the United States, at least, has yet to seriously revisit). Either way, local users were often seen as likely exploiters from whom state forests

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and resources had to be protected (Dana, 1956). Calls to put communities of various sorts back *into* forest management around the world would not have the force they do, had modern processes of state making and territorialization not forced them *out* long ago (Doornbos et al, 2000; Scott, 1998). From this perspective, the perennial romantic appeal of 'community' as the locus of premodern sensibilities and potential for resistance is entirely understandable (Joseph, 2002, page xxi). Nor is such a binary formulation adequate, of course: a complex array of priorities and property relations have competed and co-existed on the subsequent public land system for well over a century (see Fairfax et al, 1999a; 1999b). Focusing on the historical moment above, however, emphasizes the ways in which forest policies in North America partook of common colonial dynamics and can usefully be examined as terrains of postcolonial struggles in the present (see, for example, Braun, 2002). Given such historical and geographical continuities, it is unsurprising that the proliferation of community-based resource-management approaches in 'Third World,' mainly postcolonial, locations around the world eventually led to calls for similar efforts in North America.

Community-based resource management, including community forestry, emerged and proliferated as a new approach to the management of protected areas worldwide (including state-owned forests, national parks, game reserves, and so on) over the past two to three decades for instrumental, analytical, and ethical reasons. State monopolies over forest management in much of the developing world, generally using the methods of scientific forestry, were manifestly failing. They often lacked legitimacy and were frequently unable to provide the commodities and public goods promised by the advocates of scientific forestry (Gauld, 2000; Sundar, 2000). In the theoretical realm, the 'tragedy of the commons' and 'prisoner's dilemma' models of resource use that had dominated much postwar resource-management thinking were effectively challenged by a growing body of evidence and theory showing that common-property systems and other alternatives to centralized state control or privatization could be as or more effective in managing resources (Gauld, 2000; Ostrom, 1990; Poffenberger, 1996). Crises in the management of parks and other protected natural areas were precipitated by the inability of governments and conservation NGOs to keep local people out of those areas in many cases, and by a growing recognition that many 'natural' areas had been created by the forcible expulsion of existing human communities and the disruption of long-standing patterns of resource use and property relations. Many international conservation organizations, experts, and programs have professed to recognize the pitfalls and injustices inherent in protecting nature by keeping people out and have accepted that conservation can succeed only if local resource users support and benefit from it. The most effective strategy, then, is to draw people into conservation, win their consent, and convince them to internalize conservation norms and ideologies (Neumann, 2001). Accordingly, many conservation experts now advocate making the boundaries of protected areas more porous and permitting more local economic use, including extraction and commodity production in some cases. These efforts have been accompanied by greater respect, at least nominally, for customary patterns of resource use, livelihood concerns, and local ecological knowledge.

The successes and failures of Fordist-era environmental regulation were also important precursors to the rise of community forestry. On the one hand, increasing environmental protection was clearly one of the major achievements of the Keynesian state in the postwar period. The successful institutionalization of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and since, drastically changed existing structures of environmental governance in the United States. The raft of modern federal environmental legislation introduced new, more ecologically oriented demands on the federal lands and dramatically increased the potential for citizen oversight, participation, and legal intervention.



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Regulatory agencies that had long been effectively captured by representatives of the industries they were supposed to regulate were opened up to public input and oversight. Professionals with priorities other than commodity production began to rise through the ranks of resource-management bureaucracies. Overall, environmental laws, regulations, constituencies, and norms proliferated together in advanced capitalist countries, collectively coming to represent substantial and growing constraints on capitalist accumulation strategies. It is hardly surprising, then, that environmental regulations were among the first targets of revanchist neoliberal assaults (Dryzek, 1996; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Vig and Kraft, 1984).

The rollback neoliberalism of the 1980s (Tickell and Peck, 2003) began to erode support for environmental regulation, in part through discursive strategies. Terms such as ‘analysis paralysis’ and ‘juridical gridlock’ became common during the 1980s, signifying a central neoliberal desire for flexible regulation. Invoking another common neoliberal trope, critics insisted that environmental regulations added to industry’s costs and were thus a hindrance to competition the United States could not afford in an era of heightened (and naturalized) economic ‘globalization’ (see Deere and Esty, 2002; World Resources Institute, 1995). Yet the assault on environmentalism also turned out to be an important stumbling block for neoliberalism: at a number of pivotal junctures, the strongest advocates of rollback neoliberalism severely underestimated public support for environmental protections, to their detriment (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). It appears that an American public seemingly untroubled by the dismantling of union protections, welfare programs, or the separation of church and state remains attached to many environmental protections.

Simultaneously, though, the shortcomings of modern environmentalism prepared fertile seedbeds for neoliberalism. New federal environmental laws and agency regulations created opportunities for public review, comment, and appeal, but this much-vaunted procedural opening of federal environmental governance was sometimes more formal than substantive, raising serious questions about how much public participation actually affected the eventual actions of agencies (Beaver et al, 2000; Committee of Scientists, 1999; Duane 1997; O’Connor Center, 2000; Society of American Foresters 1999). Command-and-control regulations were counterproductively rigid at times. New requirements in areas such as endangered species protections, environmental impact statements, and ecosystem management had impacts across nearly all land-tenure categories, genuinely increasing the direct, visible role of the state in many rural areas and amounting to what Geisler and Bedford term, “a radically new and expanded geography of conservation” (1998, page 133; see also Yaffee et al, 1996). Mainstream environmentalists often consciously pursued strategies of seeking to have strong federal environmental legislation passed without worrying terribly much about its social impacts or subnational variations (Baca, 1995; Dowie, 1996). They frequently seemed to assume that the only way to truly protect the environment was to set it entirely apart from human use, habitation, or transformation, by setting more and more of it aside as wilderness (Cronon, 1995). Together, these shortcomings limited the benefits and appeal of ‘environmentalism’ by race, class, and geography, reducing its base of support when the neoliberal counterrevolution came. Genuine populist resentment was harnessed by neoliberalizing projects and rolled into a faux-populist rhetoric regarding the dangers of centralized governance and careless elites (McCarthy, 1998). Thus, by the 1990s observers from many different points on the political spectrum agreed that federal environmental management had largely been a failure and that local and regional efforts would be more successful (see, for example, multiple chapters in Baden and Snow, 1997; Fairfax and Souder, 1996). Such a position was both compatible with, and at some level a part of, the turn towards rollout neoliberalism in the 1990s (Tickell and

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Peck, 2003). At the same time, growing needs to manage across tenurial categories spurred the development of collaborative approaches (Selin and Chavez, 1995).

### **Introduction and diffusion**

The major institutional proponents of community forestry in the United States have been foundations and conservation NGOs active both within the United States and in many other locations around the world. Foremost among these has been the Ford Foundation, which has funded pilot projects, working groups, workshops, academic research, and more aimed at promoting community forestry in the United States. Conservation NGOs, including The Nature Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Society, have also played major roles. The Wildlife Conservation Society, for instance, has created a “Living Landscapes” program in the United States that aims to extend conservation beyond the boundaries of protected areas. Explicitly modeled on the society’s analogous programs in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, the program attempts to use their tactics, ‘here at home’, using language that makes explicit the positionalities and geographical imaginaries of these central actors (*New York Times* 20 May 2001, page 4.17). Meanwhile, state-level chapters of The Nature Conservancy have begun to incorporate core ideas of community forestry, such as the need for commodity production and respect for local populations, into their conservation projects (Weinstein, 2001). Within the United States, community forestry has been taken up and diffused by dozens of foundations and NGOs with more national—or regional-scale—visions, acting through grants, workshops, publications, and targeted programs (Belden Russonello and Stewart, 2001). Prominent national actors include the Aspen Institute, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, and American Forests; prominent regional actors include the Sonoran Institute, Sustainable Northwest, and the Northern Forest Alliance.

Academic and popular writing on the subject has also played important roles. The dominant model of Western researchers studying conservation struggles across the developing world has provided a vector by which current wisdom in international conservation has become better known within the United States, with some academics explicitly advocating a reversal of the usual direction of flows in conservation policy (see Jacobs, 1998). Academic centers with strong domestic policy interests in this realm have also done much to promote community forestry: examples include the University of Virginia’s Institute for Environmental Negotiation and the work of Wondolleck and Yaffe at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources. More popular writing has also played an important role, with prominent ‘public intellectuals’ and regional newspapers in the West increasingly making the case for the devolution of federal environmental governance to states and local communities (for example, Baden and Snow, 1997; Kemmis, 1992; 2001). Finally, community forestry has been diffused by and within various levels of the state as well, as reviewed in the following section.

### **Institutionalization**

Over the course of the 1990s community-based approaches to environmental governance went from being experiments to being institutionalized elements of environmental governance in the United States. Within the federal government the greatest steps towards institutionalizing community forestry occurred within the Forest Service. This trend began with the 1990 National Forest Dependent Rural Communities Economic Diversification Act and continued with its Rural Community Assistance program (Voth et al, 1999). The agency also set up local Resource Advisory Committees, in which residents advise the agency on the management of national forest resources in their area. During the 1990s the Forest Service itself initiated a number of the private or public–private community forestry groups now active around the West. In 1998 the agency created a

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Collaborative Stewardship Team, which explicitly endorsed the need for, and utility of, community forestry. At about the same time the Secretary of Agriculture appointed a Committee of Scientists to recommend changes to Forest Service planning procedures. The committee's report recommended that National Forest planning processes be more collaborative in nature and involve more of the stakeholders outside of the agency (Committee of Scientists, 1999). The Forest Service began to incorporate collaborative approaches into many of its ongoing standard operations and provided resources to help agency personnel towards this goal. Thus, community forestry arguably moved within the space of a decade from being an experiment for the Forest Service to being institutionalized as part of the agency's normal culture and operations.

The Bureau of Land Management and a number of other federal agencies charged with environmental governance also began to implement community-based approaches during the 1990s, through a variety of new programs in areas as diverse as marine resources management, urban environmental justice initiatives, and conservation of habitat on private lands (Dukes and Firehock, 2001; Richard and Burns, 1998). Although community involvement in environmental governance has been advocated since at least the 1970s, these recent efforts are distinguished by the extent to which they seek to devolve management authority to communities, rather than simply increasing input. Ironically, such trends towards community-based approaches will require these federal agencies to *increase* at least some programs and expenditures.

Community-based approaches to environmental governance have also been adopted at the state and county levels. Many states have endorsed collaborative approaches to environmental management and developed community forestry programs in recent years, and the National Association of State Foresters has attempted to develop community forestry programs at state and local levels (Beaver et al, 2000; Dukes and Firehock, 2001; Koontz, 2002). County governments around the West enthusiastically embraced many of the core ideas of community forestry, clearly seeing the benefits of devolution for their agendas. The so-called 'county supremacy' movement, for instance, used arguments taken directly from international community forestry discourses to argue that counties should have much greater control over federal lands within their borders (McCarthy, 2002a).

Community forestry has also been institutionalized by and within a variety of non-state organizations in the United States over the past decade or so. This institutionalization within civil society has included the creation of NGO programs, or entire NGOs, devoted to community forestry; the creation of a network of practitioners and advocates who self-identify and identify each other in relationship to something called 'community forestry'; the growth of academic research that takes community forestry in its various guises as an object of study; and the formation of hundreds of local groups, with varying degrees of formal organizational structure, for whom the ideas of community forestry are central to their operation. The numbers and variety of these local groups are too great to be reviewed in detail here—depending upon how expansive a definition of community forestry one uses, hundreds of relatively new groups fit the description.<sup>(3)</sup> Some are defined around specific forests, others by watersheds, others on the basis of county boundaries. They are present throughout the United States, in a wide range of tenurial settings, and vary widely in their structures, strategies, values, agendas, definitions and degrees of success, and more (National Community Forestry Center, 2001). Such institutional and programmatic heterogeneity is inherent in community forestry, given that much of the motivation for community-based

<sup>(3)</sup> For lists and examples, see Brick et al, 2001; Cestero, 1999; Dagget, 1995; Dukes and Firehock, 2001; Gray et al, 2001; Kenney, 2000; Selin and Chavez, 1995; Weber, 2000.

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approaches lies in the conviction that standardization necessarily does violence to local specificity (Scott, 1998).

Many of these efforts involve both civil society and the state. As noted above, the Forest Service organized some collaborative groups. Conversely, privately organized groups frequently urge the state to undertake some dramatic change. The best-known example is that of the Quincy Library Group, a self-organized collaborative group in northern California that sought and nearly obtained authority from Congress to manage large sections of National Forests on an experimental basis (see Duane, 1997). In a similar example, Montana's Lubrecht Group—one of the many private groups encouraging collaborative conservation in the West—has recently advocated the establishment of a new 'Region 7' in the US Forest Service. Rather than being defined by geographic area, like the current six regions, Region 7 would span the country and be defined by local-scale and regional-scale experiments in community forestry. Participating forests and projects would not have to comply with current Forest Service regulations and would have great leeway with their budgets, operations, and goals (Beaver et al, 2000).

One final sign of institutionalization of the community forestry is critical here: its gradual acceptance by national environmental organizations. Although most of these organizations have strongly opposed trends away from strong federal command-and-control approaches, some are becoming more accepting of community forestry. For example, the Wilderness Society, the National Audubon Society, and several other major environmental organizations recently produced together a handbook designed to assist environmental activists participating in collaborative conservation projects (Dukes and Firehock, 2001). The National Wildlife Federation has collaborated with the Ford Foundation on demonstration community forestry projects throughout the country.

Such openness to community forestry is only nascent within the mainstream environmental community, however. The major national environmental groups in the United States have for the most part been highly skeptical, seeing community forestry as primarily a way to evade environmental regulations (for example, McClosky, 1999; for a review, see Kenney, 2000). Many contest frequent assertions that the current adversarial, lawsuit-driven federal land-management system is broken, suggesting that only interests committed to commodity production perceive it as unworkable. Environmentalists' resistance to community forestry has been criticized as stemming from an attachment to power and a lack of regard for the concerns of many rural communities. There is certainly some truth to such charges. It is also true, though, that environmentalism has been one of the strongest bastions of resistance to neoliberalism (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004) and that environmentalists have often displayed an admirable clarity regarding the neoliberal project, seeing that environmental regulations have come under attack not because they were *not* working, but precisely because they were working so *well*. For environmentalists who have fought a decades-long struggle to democratize the state with respect to environmental governance, community forestry often appears a move towards less, rather than more, democracy and public representation (see, for example, Coggins, 2001).

### **Rollout neoliberalism and the Bush administration's forest policy**

Environmentalists' fears that community forestry could offer a benign face for a concerted assault on environmental regulation seem to have been confirmed under the current Bush administration. The introduction, diffusion, and institutionalization of community forestry in the United States occurred largely during the two Clinton administrations, which strongly promoted them. Given the many policy differences between Clinton and Bush, one might have expected reversals on community forestry

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as well. Just the opposite has occurred, though: the Bush administration has embraced and accelerated many of community forestry's central tenets, such as devolution, voluntary participation, and public-private partnerships. Such continuities highlight the two administrations' shared commitment to neoliberalism, I believe.

The administration's proposals for the National Forests make clear the links to a broader logic of neoliberalism. Taking a page from its education agenda, the Bush administration has proposed the creation of 'charter forests', akin to charter schools. The proposal is strikingly consistent with many of the core ideas of community forestry: one or two national forests would be removed from the jurisdiction of the Forest Service, exempted from many federal environmental laws and regulations, and managed by local trust groups. As with charter schools, antipathy towards government and faith in the ability of local, nonstate actors to create innovative solutions undergirds the initiative. Many suspect that 'local' management of charter forests would strongly favor extractive industries, however (Sierra Club, 2005). Describing the Bush administration's new environmental programs, such as the "Cooperative Conservation Initiative", Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton wove together elements of neoliberal and community forestry discourses, arguing that, "we must move beyond command-and-control and punitive approaches", and suggesting that the initiatives represented, "a new environmentalism rooted in the concept of citizen conservationists who take upon themselves the care of the land—while still living on that land and working it" (Norton, 2002a). That such soft-edged rhetoric conceals an attack on the successes of modern environmentalism came through clearly in a 5 March 2002 column in the *Washington Times* by Norton, in which she claimed that, "Unfortunately, environmentalism in the past three decades has featured conflict more than consensus ... Somewhere along the way, we got the idea that regulation and litigation were the best tools for conservation. It's time to get back to partnership" (Norton, 2002b).

In late August 2002 President Bush introduced the "Healthy Forests" Initiative. Bush and his appointees claimed that "excessive red tape and endless litigation" and a "hands-off approach to forest management" were responsible for that summer's severe forest fires. Bush directed the Forest Service to "reduce bureaucracy and speed up ... thinning on public lands" (radio address, 24 August 2002). He also called for environmental review and appeals procedures called for by environmental laws to be set aside for forest 'thinning' projects. The fact that the initiative would waive portions of the National Environmental Policy Act, arguably the centerpiece of Fordist-era environmental legislation, is perhaps its most controversial aspect. In a related initiative that same year, Senators Craig (Republican—Idaho) and Wyden (Democrat—Oregon) introduced the Forest Restoration and Protection Act, which would have forced a "Universal Settlement" to outstanding lawsuits regarding National Forests within ninety days. The settlement would then take precedence over the Endangered Species Act and prohibit environmental plaintiffs from suing over timber harvests. The Forest Service would also be required to establish a "Collaborative Review Board" to review and decide on projects. The board's fifteen members would include representatives of the major 'stakeholders' in these debates, including community forestry advocates. The board would approve projects not by consensus, but by a two-thirds majority vote. Senator Craig has also cosponsored the Community Based Forest and Public Lands Restoration Bill, allegedly to make community forestry central to federal land use and management. The proposed legislation would "provide incentives for collaborative, community-based restoration projects on National Forest System and other public domain lands", using, "principles of community forestry, local and traditional knowledge, and conservation biology". In short, it draws strongly and directly from the international discourse of community forestry. Yet, although the bill claims that its primary goal is ecosystem

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restoration and maintenance, close reading reveals that support for commodity production also figures centrally in it.

The fate of many of these proposals is undecided at the time of this writing. Regardless of whether they succeed or fail, however, they collectively demonstrate the extent to which major elements in community forestry discourses have become central to contemporary forestry policy debates in the United States. The eagerness with which the Bush administration has adopted those elements is, I suggest, a reasonable indicator of their compatibility with ongoing neoliberalization: some of the strongest contemporary political support for community forestry in the United States is coming from elected officials who have histories of stark disregard for the environment, for the poor, and for sustainability by most definitions, and many of the political appointees shaping current community forestry efforts have direct ties to antienvironmental organizations (Hattam, 2001; Risen, 2001; *Seattle Times* 31 August 2002).

### **Community forestry as neoliberal hybrid**

Community forestry and neoliberalism are both abstractions, analytical categories encompassing a wide variety of empirical phenomena. The overviews above demonstrate the importance of specificities and contingencies: the particular history of environmentalism in the United States, electoral politics, the severe forest fires of 2002, and so on all meant that community forestry and neoliberalism developed here (as elsewhere) into unique, differentiated forms. It would be a gross oversimplification to reduce one to a mere result or manifestation of the other, or to construct too simple a correspondence between their respective developments. Yet, I argue that the correspondences and relations between them are so strong that it would be myopic not to consider them in relationship to each other. Examining community forestry as a neoliberal phenomenon raises appropriately skeptical questions about what may be hiding behind its often populist assumptions, while looking at the ways in which community forestry programs have furthered broader neoliberal agendas directs our gaze towards the understudied question of the ways in which neoliberalism has been constituted in and through reconfigurations of environmental governance.

Returning to the question of singular versus multiple neoliberalisms, or neoliberalizations, I believe that, although neoliberalism necessarily always exists in hybrid forms, a relatively consistent, core set of beliefs and commitments about markets, the state, and civil society organize and motivate myriad, disparate neoliberalizing projects (see Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jessop, 1990; Tickell and Peck, 1995; 2003). Like classical liberalism before it (see Polanyi, 1944), neoliberalism emphasizes faith in markets as instruments to allocate goods and services and achieve optimal social outcomes, skepticism if not hostility towards centralized state regulatory functions, and confidence that market failures or lacunae are best addressed by voluntary organizations in civil society, as opposed to the state. Discourses centered on community forestry share these basic orientations, I argue. Their core precept would seem to be that communities (that is, the building blocks of civil society) can manage the environment more effectively and with greater legitimacy than centralized states. Skepticism towards the state permeates the developments reviewed in the previous sections. From dismissals of the state as too paralyzed to act at all ('red tape' and 'analysis paralysis') to charges that it is far too active (criticism of command-and-control regulation), from characterizations of it as fundamentally colonial and intrusive to complaints that it does not do enough to help rural communities develop, the discourse of community forestry effectively discounts the state as a viable environmental administrator, at least on its own [Duane (1997) gives examples of such discourse]. It positions 'community' as the alternative to states and markets, and imbues it with qualities that allow it to remedy their

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failures: it presumes communities are responsive, flexible, and internally homogenous whereas state bureaucracies are slow, rigid, and paralyzed by diverse constituencies, yet also stable, cautious, and egalitarian in their social and environmental relations whereas markets are headlong, destructive, and stratified. Within the United States, such thinking clearly informs convictions that communities are certain to manage forests more innovatively and creatively than government agencies, yet also more sustainably than corporations (see, for example, Brick et al, 2001). Assaults on federal environmental regulation, attempts to devolve environmental governance to the most local level of government possible, and attempts to shift governance functions outside the state entirely all flow logically from this position, connecting it with neoliberalism.

The discourses of neoliberalism and community forestry invoke civil society and community, respectively, in nearly identical ways. Indeed, community forestry efforts have often been interpreted as part of a resurgence or strengthening of civil society in places where it was either crushed by, or never allowed to develop under, colonial administrations, new states consolidating control over territories and populations, and coercive postwar development programs (Bhogal et al, 2003; Sundar, 2000). But as noted above, neoliberal invocations of civil society gloss over enormous inequalities within and between groups, exaggerate the cohesiveness of voluntary associations, treat civil society as an actor rather than as a terrain of struggle, treat very different groups as equivalent, and attribute to civil society democratic tendencies and capacities it may not possess (Abrahamsen, 2000; Hearn, 2001; see also Joseph, 2002, page 114). All of these criticisms are equally applicable to mobilizations of community in community forestry discourses. For instance, a policy paper by the Southern Rural Development Center advocating community forestry in the United States suggests that, “community development efforts, to be effective, cannot afford to be tainted by ‘politics’. ‘Politics’ are divisive and focus upon competition, conflict, advocacy, and upon creating disagreement where it may not even exist. To be effective, community development must unite and work toward the development of consensus” (Voth et al, 1999, page 23). Such views, common in North American discourses around community forestry, attempt to define out of existence the realities that decisions about who will have what kind of access and control over resources, for what ends, are unavoidably political; that there is rarely if ever any unitary community interest; and that win–win scenarios are neither always possible, nor desired by some of the most powerful actors. In fact, community is always and everywhere political, as Joseph (2002) demonstrates conclusively.

The ways in which discourses of community and civil society complement neoliberal visions of self-regulating markets are less direct. Indeed, at first glance, one might think that the qualities of community celebrated in these discourses—democratic, egalitarian, local—would be directly antithetical to the global extension and deepening of markets free from any social or environmental constraints. On closer examination, though, it turns out that civil societies and communities are being put forward as providing everything that markets lack. They are therefore ideal complements to free markets: there is no need to worry about alienation, exploitation, or stark inequalities in market relations, because those concerns will all be addressed by communities. At the same time, civil societies and markets are represented as having common interests, inasmuch as both are portrayed as realms of voluntary action threatened by the state, the locus of all power and coercion (Abrahamsen, 2000, pages 54–57; Joseph, 2002). Communities in this civil society know their place, however: as the quotation from Voth et al above makes clear, ‘politics’, conflict, advocacy, and even disagreement are all off the agenda (see Abrahamsen, 2000, page 59). Moreover, in the United States, ‘community’ usually seems to mean carefully bounded nonprofit organizations that “are defined through their relation to capital. Nonprofits are supposed to be *not* for profit ... but they

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are also not noncapitalist and definitely not anticapitalist” (Joseph, 2002, page 70, emphasis in original). This certainly describes the landscape of community forestry, which is defined largely by foundations and hundreds of small, local nonprofit groups. With the state thoroughly discredited and politics carefully circumscribed and bounded to the local level, only the market remains to structure national and international relations and institutions (Paehlke, 2001). In short, this is a vision of community as a supplement to capitalism, as Joseph terms it (2002, pages xxxii, 11), rather than as genuinely alternative, oppositional, or even complementary.

I maintain, then, that we can identify a common logic at work in the hybridizations between community forestry and neoliberalism. Equally important, though, are variations and indeed contradictions. The permutations of community forestry in North America demonstrate the variability of hybrid neoliberalisms over space, over time, and from normative perspectives. Scholarship on globalization and neoliberalism (Dicken, 1998; Tickell and Peck, 2003) and on forest policy (Sivaramakrishnan, 2000) has demonstrated time and again that the transfer of a given policy model rarely produces identical or convergent outcomes. Rather, hybridization occurs between transferred policies and preexisting cultural formations, bureaucracies, labor markets, biophysical natures, and more. Despite common ideas, community forestry is different in developing and industrialized countries, different in Canada or Mexico than in the United States, different in Oregon than in Vermont (see, for example, Bradshaw, 2003; Duinker et al, 1994; Klooster, 2000). For instance, community-based conservation programs developed in a variety of Third World contexts frequently proceed from assumptions that ‘local’ residents are members of indigenous groups displaced by conservation efforts and that the central state has severely limited capacities for monitoring and enforcement. These assumptions still suffuse the rhetoric of community forestry programs in the contemporary United States: few of their proponents grapple with the fact that the ‘locals’ here are mainly descendants of the people who forcefully displaced the indigenous inhabitants, or that the state has, if anything, a dangerous surplus of monitoring and enforcement capacities (McCarthy, 2002a). So, community forestry in North America adds to the evidence that neoliberalism is not monolithic over space.

It provides similar proof of how neoliberalism has varied over time: although community forestry in the United States exhibits many of neoliberalism’s core ideas, its institutionalization during the 1990s exemplifies many of the defining attributes of rollout neoliberalism laid out by Tickell and Peck (2003), as opposed to the rollback version of the 1980s. It has been defined as much by the creation of new state programs and priorities as by the rollback of the state; it has involved the active fostering of a range of public–private partnerships; it has relied more on win–win rhetoric than on strong, oppositional denunciations of the state; and it has become accepted by an increasingly wide array of former opponents. The last point is particularly telling with respect to how deeply neoliberal ideas have been absorbed into the common sense of our time.

Finally, hybrid neoliberalisms introduce normative complexity. The supplementary relationship between community and capitalism in general (Joseph, 2002), and between community forestry and neoliberalism in particular, is complex. Ideas of community often serve to express and refine dissatisfaction with capitalist relations and genuine desires for noncapitalist relations. Yet they can also serve to articulate the two, mediating and maintaining their difficult coexistence and so contributing to the maintenance of hegemony (Joseph, 2002, pages 73, 87). Community forestry programs can be seen as responding to some of the damages created by neoliberal policies. For instance, many focus on attempts to create viable local industries in the wake of widespread restructuring and loss of employment in a forest products sector dominated by the multinational corporations, while others try to take up the administrative slack produced by the



reduction of state capacities. In these respects, community forestry programs can plausibly be interpreted as belonging to the defensive half of Polanyi's double movement. Thus, they contain elements of critique that should be celebrated and elaborated. Moreover, as noted earlier, they are also outgrowths of progressive critiques of the institutional legacies of colonial forestry and versions of environmentalism centered on ideas of pristine nature.

Yet their role remains a supplementary rather than oppositional one because they rarely if ever interrogate how the processes of capitalist modernity they criticize have constituted the very 'communities' they invoke as alternative managers, and because they take as given many core neoliberal presumptions, even as they struggle against their consequences. In short, they neglect to ask how civil society and communities are shaped for and by power, rather than merely against it. For this reason, analyses of community forestry programs informed by Gramscian notions of civil society would be fruitful (see Burawoy, 2003). Postcolonial studies also offer promising directions for theorizing this tension, inasmuch as they have grappled extensively with how resistance is shaped and limited by drawing from dominant structures (Young, 2001, page 341). Such perspectives also remind us that the neoliberal content of many community forestry programs should not cause us to discount their progressive possibilities.

### **Community forestry and political ecology**

I have argued here that community forestry in the United States is best understood as a hybrid of rollout neoliberalism, currently dominant models in forest policy, and a variety of specific historical geographies. Examining how this hybrid has been formed and understood prompts a few final reflections on its relevance to debates in political ecology. Community forestry advocates often assert that the stabilities of 'local' ecosystems, communities, and economies are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. An overarching 'sustainability' purportedly encompassing all three is thus often asserted as both *rationale* and *goal* for community forestry programs. Such framings are highly reminiscent of the emphasis in an earlier cultural ecology on homeostasis as *both* an explanatory resource that could be assumed, and a desired state to be created and maintained (Peet and Watts, 1996). Many of political ecology's key interventions into this framework—an insistence on larger scale political economic contexts, dynamism, and the micropolitics of local resource use, for example—would be highly salutary for contemporary community forestry efforts in North America.

Yet political ecology needs to be pushed as well. Recent work has explicated both critical differences and important continuities and commonalities between many First and Third World situations, and their relevance to political ecology (McCarthy, 2002a; Walker, 2003). More important, though, is the instability of such categories themselves. Examining the hybridizations of economic liberalism, colonial and scientific forestry, development theory and practice, neoliberalism, conceptualizations of civil society, and community forestry around the globe reveals a mosaic of constant, interdependent change and transference that undermines the First and Third World categorizations that remain central to the geographical imaginaries of political ecology, urban studies, and many other fields (see McCarthy, 2002a; Robinson, 2002). Born of colonial and postcolonial resource-management problematics, community forestry was created most directly by NGOs based in First World countries in response to developments in Third World settings; experimented with, refined, and critiqued in the latter by myriad actors; and then 'imported' into a variety of industrialized countries as a 'third way' out of the adversarial politics of Fordist environmental governance, all under the auspices of a globalizing and evolving transnational neoliberalism. To seek to categorize it, or specific iterations of it, as First or Third World is thus fruitless; it is a phenomenon

resulting precisely from the creation of and ongoing relations between these ostensibly separable categories.

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