Marketing the Hegemony of Development: of Pulp Fictions and Green Deserts

Autoria: Steffen Böhm, Vinicius Andrade Brei

Abstract
In this article we analyze how large corporations worked on the construction of the hegemony of one development discourse and how this discourse was challenged by civil society movements. Through the description of the pulp and paper industries’ marketing actions in the south of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina and using Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985; 2001) “empty signifier” theoretical framework, we criticize how these companies have produced the hegemonic discourse of “development” based on the idea of economic and social progress. This discourse was mostly aimed at the public opinion conquer and at convincing farmers to switch from their traditional pasture/cattle agriculture to eucalyptus planting. Reviewing the concept of development and based on the case description, we build on the critical marketing literature to argue that an assessment of marketing cannot only be about exposing and analyzing its discourses and practices that drive consumption. Rather, we must see marketing as a hegemonic discourse and practice that goes beyond the simplistic distinction between consumption and production. Besides being a practice, a branch of knowledge and an ideology, marketing is also an ontological practice that is politically embattled.

Introduction

The Pampas, a natural grassland area comprising vast areas in the South of Brasil, Uruguay and the Northern half of Argentina, are currently being turned into what some might call a “green desert”. Eucalyptus plantations, which are currently being planted all over the Pampas region as raw material for huge pulp and paper factories, are called “green deserts” because of the immense water needs of eucalyptus trees, which are genetically trained to suck up water from the deep ground in their native Australia, turning what used to be rich Pampas pasture land into deserts that can only support one monoculture: eucalyptus trees.

The pulp and paper industry is seen by the World Bank as well as other international and regional finance institutions as one of the most promising development opportunities for the Pampas region because it has very favorable climatic conditions for eucalyptus trees to grow on an industrial scale. Big corporations, such as Aracruz and Votorantim of Brazil as well as Stora Enso, Botnia and ENCE from Europe, are investing heavily in the wider region, in order to take advantage of these development opportunities in the pulp and paper industry. In contrast, many civil society actors, such as the World Rainforest Movement (WRM), based in Uruguay, and Via Campesina, the international peasant movement, have voiced strong opposition against this type of development, pointing out that the pulp and paper industry “is considered to be one of the three most polluting industries of the planet, together with the leather and metallurgical industries” (CERRI, 2006, p. 13). While pollution stemming from the pulp and paper factories affects everyone, it is especially peasants and small-hold farmers who are threatened by the eucalyptus plantations.

This development of the pulp and paper industry involves a range of corporate, governmental and civil society actors. Although many sectors of society clearly contest this development, this contestation is rarely visible in the public sphere, as marketing, advertising, public relations and media discourses favorable to this development dominate the debates. What interests us in this paper is how this domination, or hegemony, of the development discourse of the pulp and paper industry is produced through marketing practices.

For us, the development discourse is an “empty signifier”, which can be filled in a variety of different ways. We argue that, following the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 2001), “empty signifiers”, such as “development”, are filled by discourses that intend to hegemonize a particular discursive field. In this paper we aim to show that marketing plays a crucial role in this process of...
the production of a hegemonic discourse such as “development”. Particularly, we engage with Aracruz’s advertising and its development messages. For us, these images are textual and visual fillings of the “empty signifier” of development, promising jobs, progress and a bright future, while ignoring the manifold environmental, economic and social problems attached with this particular type of development. The role of marketing is here to establish and maintain a hegemonic field that structures power relations in particular ways. Marketing is one of the glues that holds the various actors of the economy and civil society together in such a way that “progress” and “development” can take place. Clearly, this development will always benefit some actors more than others, and we argue that critical marketing has to be able to make visible the unequal power relations embedded in any marketing practice.

While this is an empirical and political engagement with a particular case that is currently unfolding in South America, the analysis of this empirical data will be based on a critical theoretical framework of Gramsci (1971) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 2001) who have championed the development of the concept of “hegemony”, which we introduce to the field of critical marketing. Our wider aim with this paper is thus to further our understanding of what “critique” might entail in connection to marketing. While this is clearly a theoretical task, we feel that the analysis of the “pulp fictions” coming out of South America enables us to show how critical marketing can intervene in a particular and concrete political situation.

**Pulp Fictions and Green Deserts: The Case**

Across the river from Porto Alegre, the capital of the most southern Brazilian state, Rio Grande do Sul, there is a vast pulp mill run by the company Aracruz. When the factory was first built in the 1970s it had to be shut down by the authorities because of the immense smell and river pollution it created. Although the technology has been updated and the owners of the plant have changed frequently since then, the factory still creates unpleasant smells today, and it continues to cause air and water pollution. Recently, the company has applied to double the capacity of the plant. “Aracruz Celulose is a Brazilian company, the world’s leading producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp. It is responsible [for] 27% of the global supply of the product used to manufacture printing and writing, tissue, and high value added specialty papers” (ARACRUZ, n.d.), which mostly is exported to a range of blue-chip Northern multinationals, such as Proctor & Gamble. Pulp is the material needed to produce a range of paper products of which a typical Northern citizen consumes between 300 and 400 kg per capita, compared to about 40-50 kg in Brazil, Uruguay or Argentina (WRM, 2005). Aracruz has grown rapidly in recent decades, as it has positioned itself to provide the raw material for the continuous growth of paper consumption (despite the fiction of the paper-less office) in the North. The company has bought vast areas of land in various parts of Brazil to plant its eucalyptus plantations, and it has also convinced many farmers to switch from cow production (pasture) to eucalyptus planting, as the latter increases the yield per hectare significantly. Aracruz’s advertising billboards seen all over Rio Grande do Sul (not shown in this paper because of space constraints) hope to convince farmers to switch to eucalyptus planting. They also have a message for the general public: eucalyptus plantations – and therefore the pulp and paper industry – are inherently linked to economic growth, wealth creation and development.

Aracruz is not the only company pitching its hopes on the development of the pulp and paper industry. In the wider Pampas region, comprising vast areas of Rio Grande do Sul, Uruguay and Northern Argentina, a range of multinationals, namely Votorantim, Stora Enso, Botnia and ENCE, are currently investing – with the help of regional governments, the World Bank and other national and international development actors – billions of dollars in the construction of pulp mills and the acquisition of vast areas of relatively cheap land for the plantation of eucalyptus trees, which provide the necessary raw material for the production of
pulp and paper. What once used to be natural grassland, the Pampas, is slowly turning into a vast industrial eucalyptus plantation.

This development has recently been put into the public spotlight in the wider Pampas region by the construction of one of the world’s biggest pulp mills by Botnia – a Finnish multinational – on the Rio Uruguay, which borders both Uruguay and Argentina. This pulp mill has been vigorously opposed by the people of Gualeguaychú on the Argentinean side of the river who have engaged in an intense social struggle against this development, as they argue that this mill has immense environmental, economic, social and cultural implications for the town and the local region. There is not only the smell that all pulp mills produce – even those with the newest technologies. There is also the aesthetic aspect of having giant chimneys rising next to where people want to enjoy tranquil river life – not to mention the immense amount of other smoke being produced by these plants, which would potentially deter tourists from coming to this popular carnival and water sports destination. There are also the documented effects pulp mills have on the quality of the water; they use millions of liters of water every day, which they extract from a public space – the river – free of charge. Today, companies are obliged to clean the water; but they can never filter everything out because producing pulp and paper is an intense chemical process using a lot of toxic materials. Additionally, because of the lack of regular controls, the existing environmental laws are often not enforced. Besides inevitable ongoing contaminations, there are frequent large scale contaminations like those experienced in Valdivia (Chile), where a pulp mill has recently devastated an important swan sanctuary.

While the environmental degradation caused by the pulp mills is relatively obvious, the problems created by the vast eucalyptus tree plantations are perhaps less visible – especially considering that trees are often seen as something inherently “good” for combating climate change. The discourse of “reforestation” is therefore used by a range of advocates of this type of development. For example, Aracruz uses a range of environmental and green images in its advertising to position itself not only as economic developer, but also as one that “cares” for the environment and the future of the planet. As general environmental concerns grow in civil society and governments, the company increasingly markets itself through promises of “sustainability” and “a clean environment”. The tree plantations fit well into this image, promising a green future, while still contributing to economic growth. What is left out of this picture is the fact that pulp mills require hundreds of tons of wood every day. This wood needs to be planted and grown cheaply near the mill in order to reduce transportation costs. In this part of the world the eucalyptus tree, which is native to Australia, has been introduced over the past three to four decades specifically for its industrial use in cellulose production. Eucalyptus trees mature in the Pampas region about 10 times faster than in other regions. This is because of favorable climatic conditions and the relatively rich resources of water available in the Pampas. The problem is that

the eucalyptus sucks up all the nutrients of the earth. The eucalyptus is a destructor on a grand scale. A tree consumes one hundred liters of water per day, each eucalyptus. It dries up the water tables, which are the water reserves we have underneath the earth, to be accessed for human consumption. All this is sucked up by eucalyptus trees. That is, the massive eucalyptus plantations are a desertification instrument, and in addition it kills all the biodiversity that there is. Underneath a woodland of eucalyptuses there is no beast, there is not left anything, everything disappears. (RUBIO apud CERRI, 2006, p. 44)

Here it is claimed that a eucalyptus tree consumes 100 liters a day; others claim it consumes 30 liters a day. Whatever the number, it is widely accepted that eucalyptus trees consume a massive amount of water, as they are genetically trained to look – with their long roots – for deep water sources in the Australian desert. This is why civil society organizations and movements, such as the WRM, call eucalyptus plantations “green deserts”. One of the things the WRM has documented is that farmers near eucalyptus plantations are being robbed
of natural water resources (CARRERE, 2006). Their wells go dry, which makes it impossible for them to continue raising their cattle and small hold peasants cannot grow vegetables. Thus, although the Pampas region is naturally a water rich area, it is slowly being turned into one where water scarcity is becoming an issue.

We should also mention the implications of these eucalyptus plantations for the consolidation of unequal land rights. As Galeano (1998) has described, ever since the ‘‘discovery’’ of Latin America the continent and its vast lands were a colonial tool to produce monocultures that were in high demand in Europe. First it was sugar. Then it was coffee, cacao, cotton. Today it is soy, maize, and of course eucalyptus. These vast areas of land, owned by national oligarchies as well as foreign proprietors, are intensively used to produce monocultures that are shipped to Europe and other parts of the ‘‘developed’’ world. That is, they are not used to develop a local industry; monocultures are not there to bring about a sustainable local development. Instead, monocultures are almost exclusively exported to the ‘‘developed world’’ in the North. Massive amounts of pesticides and industrial fertilizers are needed to keep the production of monocultures efficient, which is another source of water contamination – not to mention the implications of these monocultures for the consolidation of unequal land distribution.

Monoculture-producing agro-businesses have forced millions of peasants and indigenous people off their land, displacing many of them into the already overcrowded, crime-ridden mega-cities of South America. Many end up imprisoned or even killed. The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) has struggled against this type of monoculture development for many decades. Now the development of the pulp and paper industry is seen as yet another round of colonization that preserves or even extends unequal land ownership in the country. However, for Aracruz, the struggle of the MST and the indigenous movement is seen as illegitimate, as it is “against development”. In one of the Brazilian states - Espirito Santo - Aracruz has been engaged in a long battle with indigenous movements over land rights and access. The indigenous people are represented by FUNAI, the National Indian Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio), which uses a range of strategies and tactics to claim back indigenous land occupied by Aracruz and other agro-businesses. One of Aracruz’s advertisings (not shown because of space constraints) says “Aracruz brought progress. Funai the Indians”. The “Indians” here stand for “backwardness”, the “past” and “non-development”, while Aracruz positions itself as the guarantor of “progress”, the “future”, and “development”.

This type of colonial discourse is, of course, not new; it has been going on ever since the “discovery” of Latin America by European conquerors, which enslaved millions of indigenous people, established unequal relationships of dependency, and created unprecedented practices of exploitation, pollution, and contamination. It is precisely these colonial practices which are now being extended through the discourse of “development”. Companies like Botnia, ENCE, Stora Enso, Aracruz, etc, receive a lot of public money (from the World Bank, but also local governments) to invest in this region (LANG, 2007). The Botnia investment in Uruguay, for example, is the biggest single foreign investment in that country ever. It is supposed to develop the economy, provide jobs, stop the emigration of young Uruguayans to other countries because of the lack of opportunities at home. But many critics ask: what kind of development is it really?

In the middle of the 1980s, at the end of the 20th century, a plan was conceived in Europe to clean the old continent of dirty industries. The idea was to begin to relocate the most polluting industries, taking them to other countries of the world where they could take advantage of the free plundering of natural resources, cheap manual labour, and where they could get rid of the polluting leftovers without the necessary controls. Thus, the Europeans reached the conclusion that the project to install cellulose plants in the river basin of the Uruguay River would help to implement a significant part of that plan, which is beneficial
for them and detrimental for us. … The World Bank granted the first credits to bring the project on its way, money that began falling into the hands of the political class, some of whose members would use it to invest in eucalyptus plantations. (CERRI, 2006, p. 13)

Cerri talks of a deliberate plan to shift the contaminating industries from Europe to the developing countries. What he forgets is that this “decision” did not come suddenly. It is the result of decades of social struggles that involved a very strong green movement in Europe – particularly in places like Germany, France and Scandinavia starting in the 1960s. The victories that were won in that struggle resulted in higher environmental costs for companies in the North. There were now stricter laws and controls in place that prevented pollution from happening (which is not to say that it never happens). Hence, many of these companies have been forced by the environmental movements to clean up their act. However, intensified globalization processes from the 1970s and 1980s onwards have enabled polluting companies to increasingly relocate their production to developing countries where the environmental standards and controls are often less stringent, in order to attract foreign investments.

Many developing countries welcome these companies because they promise jobs, economic and social development. The Botnia pulp mill in Uruguay promises to “have a significant, positive impact on the economy of Uruguay. It is expected to generate revenues equivalent to 2 percent of the country’s GDP (based on 2005 figures) and more than 8 percent of the country’s exports annually for an estimated 30 years of full production. The employment impacts will also be significant. The project is expected to create 2,500 jobs, of which 300 in the mill and 2,200 in related forestry and local transport” (IFC, n.d.). When faced by these figures and exposed to the marketing of the pulp and paper industry it is difficult to see anything wrong with this type of “development”. “Job creation” is almost always used today as the main signifier to justify any development project. Despite the hegemony of the development discourse, it is nonetheless being contested everywhere in South America.

Now that we have introduced this case in quite some detail, we need to develop a critical analysis of the specific role of marketing in this kind of development in the Pampas. Within marketing it is not easy to locate useful starting points for such an analysis, given that the hegemonic discourse of the marketing field is very managerial and uncritical in its reflections about marketing’s role in global society. Nevertheless, there are a few interesting literatures and concepts that we have found amongst existing marketing analyses, which we briefly review in the following section.

(Critical) Marketing Theory and the Discourse of Development

Although the relationship between marketing and development has been studied since the 1950s and 1960s (WOOD; VITELL, 1986), marketing’s concern with development has been normally limited to a micromarketing bias, mostly focusing on a managerial view of marketing’s actions and its influences on development (LAYTON; GROSSBART, 2006). This bias began to be challenged by the advance of what today is called “macromarketing”, a relatively marginal research field in its beginning that, nevertheless, has been increasingly included in the marketing mainstream since the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Hunt et al. (1981) have suggested, macromarketing a) allows for varying levels of aggregation, b) includes work on social responsibility and economic development, and c) analyses the impact of different legal, political and social value systems on marketing and vice versa. While in the mid-1980s the narrow, managerial focus of traditional micromarketing was challenged by analyzing the role of marketing systems in wider economic development processes (FISK, 1981; NASON; WHITE, 1981), the 1990s saw the focus moved from the formulation of an integrated theory of marketing systems per se to a problem-oriented analysis of marketing
processes’ wider impact on developed and developing societies (see LAYTON; GROSSBART, 2006).

Since the end of the 1980s macromarketing researchers examining the relationship between marketing and development have developed three broad paradigms: modernization, institutional and radical (JOY; ROSS, 1989; TAYLOR; OMURA, 1994). The first paradigm, essentially based on Rostow’s (1971) development model, takes an evolutionary perspective dealing with development patterns that see marketing knowledge transfer from developed to less “fortunate” countries, promoting their transition from the first development stage (traditional society) to a country’s last and desired evolutionary stage (high mass consumption), passing through the “transitional society”, “take-off” and “technological maturity” stages in between. The institutional paradigm (also called political economy approach) is based on Arndt’s (1981) original proposition that the traditional manufacturer-wholesaler-retailer micromarketing process is inadequate to analyze a country’s development process. Instead, polity (power and control systems in a society) and economy (productive exchange systems through which inputs are transformed into outputs) should be considered simultaneously. Thus, the institutional paradigm suggests that economic, political and social relations all need to be considered when studying the relationship between marketing and development. The radical paradigm focuses on a politico-economic view when studying the role of marketing in a country’s position in the wider world system. The starting point for this research stream is the view that today’s situation of less developed countries is embedded in the heritage of colonial exploitation by more developed countries. As less developed countries are so dependent on foreign capital, technology and other resources, they are considered incapable of internal growth generation, and their dependency is hence the primary cause of their underdevelopment.

Cutting through this literature in a slightly different way, we can also identify the following two streams of research in terms of their visions about the relationship between marketing and development: pro-marketing and anti-marketing. The pro-marketing stream states that there is a positive relationship between marketing and international stability as a result of conflict reduction caused by trading nations’ prosperity (ALDERSON, 1965; LAYTON; GROSSBART, 2006); marketing can be used to stimulate the development of the “Third World”, as developing countries are often referred to, through actions such as organizing information networks, making distribution channels more efficient, and promoting social development as well as social values like consumerism, innovativeness and an entrepreneurial outlook (HOSLEY; WEE, 1988); marketing can aid poor countries’ planners in negotiations at the international level (DHOLAKIA; SHERRY, 1987); marketing is a catalyst to development in less developed countries because it provides utility to consumers through saving time and money in the buying process (WOOD; VITTEL, 1986); consumer culture stimulated by marketing strengthens trade and make war less probable (DROGE et al., 1993); marketing systems build bases for peace through community cohesion, global inclusion, sustainable development and quality of life improvement (SHULTZ et al., 2005).

In contrast to this perhaps “evangelical” view of marketing and its positive effects on countries’ development, the anti-marketing literature suggests, among other statements, that: marketing is shown to have an inherent drive toward environmental unsustainability (van DAM; APELDOORN, 1996); there is a lack of morality studies about “green” marketing’s actions on the natural environment (CRANE, 2000); marketing, as part of the wider global economic system, has a significant impact on a country’s ideology (DARIAN, 1985); marketing adds to, caters to or highlights disparities between communities and the concentration of wealth in societies (LAYTON; GROSSBART, 2006); marketing scholars have defined the “quality of life” construct mostly related to developed nations, but it has not yet been adequately studied when applied to less developed countries (HILL; DHANDA,
the development process is unstable and can be problematic if a single neoliberal development model (in which corporate marketing features strongly) is applied to all less developed countries; and finally that radical and critical approaches are more adequate to studying the marketing/development relationship because they do not assume that social, economic, political and individual advantages derived from globalization processes will be shared equally by all (KILBOURNE, 2004).

These “negative” views of marketing’s impact not only on development but also more generally on what is called “critical marketing”. Although Burton (2001) argues that the beginning of the critical marketing discourse is inherently linked to the rise of “macromarketing”, we would want to be more cautious and suggest that there are a lot of uncritical, even “evangelical” voices in the macromarketing field, which in our view put forward very problematic views of development and the role of marketing. In short, for us, macromarketing is not necessarily the same as the critical marketing field. For Burton (2001), critical theory is based on three elements: demystifying the ideological basis of social relations; questioning of positivist methodologies; and the importance of self-reflexivity of the investigator and the linguistic basis of representation. Thus, for us, critical marketing theory should go beyond simply referring to marketing’s impact on development as “negative” or “problematic”. It needs to question the marketing way of “seeing things”; it needs to see marketing as part of a wider social formation characterized by specific power relations leading to specific development discourses. Critical marketing should also make visible movements of resistance against dominant power regimes, exposing gaps in the hegemony of the marketing discourse, giving voice to marginal groups and territories. Critical marketing encourages a more reflexive approach within the discipline, exploring potential liberatory aspects of the tensions between current marketing thinking and action. It does not accept the idea that marketing technology provides a neutral way of looking at the world. Critical marketing aims to uncover the fallacy of the alleged neutrality of marketing theory and practice (BROWNLIE, 2006).

It is apparent that critical marketing theory is still in its infancy, as “critical perspectives have not been widely embraced in marketing; it is largely a minority interest comprising different factions” (BURTON, 2005, p. 11). Yet, the field is clearly growing, as the following list of useful texts shows: Alvesson (1994), Brownlie et al. (1999), Burton (2002), Catterall et al. (2002), Hetrick and Lozada (1994), Murray and Ozanne (1991), Murray et al. (1994), Saren et al. (2007). Without having the space here to engage in detail with these contributions to the critical marketing field, we want to concentrate on the specific concept of “hegemony”, which, in our view, is a very useful one for the analysis of our case material. To our knowledge the concept of hegemony has not been utilized yet in the marketing field. What we would like to do in the remainder of this paper is to explore the possibilities of the concept of hegemony for the critical analysis of marketing and development discourses in our specific case.

Marketing the Hegemony of Development

The starting point for our analysis is the view that marketing plays a crucial role in the way hegemonic discourses of development are established and maintained. But what do we mean by “hegemony”? We base our analysis on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985; 2001) who have extended Gramsci’s (1971) foundational work on the concept of hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony is a concept and practice that points to historical formations that traverse the spheres of the economy and civil society, and that endure over time and space. Writing in the early parts of the 20th century, it was important for him to go beyond classical Marxist categories of class struggle that are predominantly located in the sphere of the economy, where capital and labor faces each other eye to eye. While the economy is clearly an
important aspect of the way capital establishes its hegemony, Gramsci pointed out that civil society is another important battlefield where the cultural legitimation of a hegemonic formation is fought over. Gramsci (1971, p. 181-182) also talks about an “historical bloc” that produces “not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity” creating a “universal plane” and thus a hegemonic social relation. In short, hegemony points to the “unity existing in a concrete social formation” (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 7), which must not only be maintained in the spheres of the economy but also in civil society.

For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is established when “a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it” (LACLAU; MOUFFE 2001, p. x, emphasis in original). That is, in our case, a particular set of social actors (Aracruz, the World Bank, and the Brazilian government, etc.) assumes the representation of “development” as a totality, while there are many other actors (MST, Via Campesina and other social movements) that expose the “radical incommensurability” at the heart of that representation by putting forward alternative images of development. This means that the concept of hegemony involves a particular, what Laclau and Mouffe call, “articulation”. Articulation here points to the practice of one particular discourse standing in for the whole. For example, Aracruz’s vision of development, involving pulp mills and eucalyptus plantations, stands in for all available representations of development.

When Laclau and Mouffe talk about the “radical incommensurability” at the heart of hegemony, they imply that hegemony is not the same as totality; that is, hegemony is a democratic practice of establishing an economic, political, social and cultural rule, which is fundamentally different to totalitarianism. While a hegemonic regime can be every bit as “effective” as a totalitarian one, in terms of its capacity to develop and maintain a social order, it can never be total or final. Instead, hegemony describes the dominance of an inherently unstable discursive regime. Applying Foucault’s (1969; 1971) terminology of “discourse”, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that every discourse is characterized by, what they call, a “field of discursivity,” which is a “surplus of meaning” that subverts the very discourse it is emplaced in (1985, p. 111). In other words, while, following Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) maintain that the concept of hegemony refers to a certain unity in particular discursive formations, they also highlight that this unity can only be a contingency.

A hegemonic formation is therefore inherently unstable and contingent, which describes what Laclau and Mouffe call the “logic of antagonism”, pointing to the fundamental impossibility and openness of social organization. Laclau (1995) also refers to this openness as the “empty signifier” that describes every social concept and practice. Here “empty signifier” defines a discursive space, such as “development”, which is constantly embattled by a range of different social actors. In our case, pulp and paper companies and governments have quite a different idea of what “development” should look like, compared to, say, civil society actors, such as the MST, FUNAI or Via Campesina. In other words, “development” is an embattled, discursive field which can never be totally filled by one actor. However, hegemony also implies that, although contingent and temporary, this “filling” of the “empty signifier” has to, indeed, take place, as otherwise there would be no such thing as society. This is why Žižek (2001) points to the fantasy, or fiction, at the heart of every social reality (see also, BÖHM; De COCK, 2005; De COCK; BÖHM, 2007). Hence, when we talk about “pulp fiction” we expose the radical contingency of Aracruz’s assumed position as the sole representatives of “development”. While this “fiction” is indeed very real, in terms of its material implications in the real world, there is nevertheless a fundamental instability and contingency that is important to point out.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the inherent instability of this “empty signifier” or discursive field requires a “logic of equivalence” (1985, p. 130), in order to hegemonize this very field; that is, to make it more stable and to establish a certain sense of social organization
across the spheres of the economy and civil society. This is precisely the point when “marketing” enters our theoretical argument. Marketing – in our paper analyzed through one of its major tasks, to implement a corporate practice of communication – aims to establish “chains of equivalences” between economic and civil society discourses in order to create a relatively stable hegemonic field. So, when Aracruz in one of its adverts promises profits for eucalyptus planting farmers, and then promises in another advert sustainable, green development, these might be partially contradictory and even antagonistic messages – not to forget the other battle against indigenous movements the company is engaged in. The function of Aracruz’s marketing is precisely to hegemonize this diverse “field of discursivity”. It does this by investing millions of dollars into advertising, public relations, cultural sponsorships and other marketing tools. It uses all the communications channels available (TV, newspapers, magazines, radio, billboards, internet, etc.) to put its messages forward. To construct an image of a sustainable company, Aracruz highlights to its clients that it only works with planted trees and not selvage ones. Furthermore, it sells its products (pulp and paper) wrapped in recyclable paper, sponsors environmentally friendly programs and events, and has its plantations certified by the Forest Stewardship Council - FSC. Hence, an image of sustainable development is created by the company that stands in stark contrast to its actions against the indigenous communities, as well as its condemnation of the invasion of one of its plantations by Via Campesina women.

But are these two images – sustainable Aracruz vs. mean, anti-social movement Aracruz – really so different? We would argue not. What clashes here are two very different models of “development”, which cannot be reconciled with one another. On one hand, there is the hegemonic discourse of development which argues that, in order to increase economic and social wealth, one has to create property relationships, privatize public spheres, and increase the productivity and efficiency of the economy. The surplus value created through this economic development will then “trickle down” to create social wealth in all spheres of society. This admittedly oversimplified version of development propagated by Aracruz and international financial institutions - such as the World Bank and IMF - are at the heart of mainstream economic and marketing discourses (see STALLINGS; STUDART, 2006; MILLER, 1967; KAYNAK, 1986). On the other hand, there is a completely different image of development that highlights solidarity, common land ownership, social welfare, self-determination, autonomy and grassroots power.

As Cleaver explains, the entire hegemonic discourse of development is tied up with the rise of capitalist colonization and exploitation of the “third world”:

To accept the desirability of development...is to remain bound within the project of accumulation and to be limited to disputing its form and the class origins of its managers....We can do better than this. All around the world are people in communities who have been elaborating social projects of self-valorization, ways of being and interacting which go beyond the workcentered, sexist, racist, alienated existence offered by capitalist development. These projects provide points of departure for alternative paths of social evolution. (1989, p. 41)

Cleaver here fundamentally rejects the capitalist mode of development as being single-mindedly focused on capital accumulation, which, as many so called “dependency theorists” have shown, leads to unequal global relationships between “developed” countries in the North and “underdeveloped” countries in the South. What authors such as Bielschowsky (1989), Cardoso and Faletto (1981), Dos Santos (1970, 1997), Frank (1967), Furtado (1967), and Marini (1973) show is that the term “developing countries” is fundamentally flawed, as the countries in the South are not developing and progressing towards an eventual inclusion into the elite club of the North. Instead, the rich league of nations have become rich, and remain rich, precisely because it has colonized and exploited the countries of the South for the past half a millennium. Hence, we need to talk about a dialectical relationship between
“development” and “underdevelopment”. It is precisely this underdevelopment that social movements, such as the MST and Via Campesina expose, when they challenge Aracruz’s “development” actions. What they argue is that Aracruz does not nearly create as many jobs as it destroys, when it privatizes land and throws peasants and small-hold farmers off what used to be common land.

It is worth mentioning here that marketing and advertising alone cannot clearly establish a hegemonic discourse on their own. Marketing practices are embedded in and connected to a range of legal, economic, cultural and social practices. The role of the Brazilian government and international finance institutions is crucial in the way they have legitimized and helped to finance Aracruz’s expansion. What is crucial to understand, however, is that this dominance of the economic and legal field is never enough. What the concept of hegemony points to is that the cultural field, which legitimizes this type of development in a wider cultural way, is equally important. The role of marketing is to precisely “soften up” this cultural field and maintain the cultural and social legitimacy for the construction of more pulp mills and eucalyptus plantations, despite the manifold, documented problems with them.

To be sure, this hegemony of development is never complete and geared towards one actor alone, such as the pulp and paper industry. Yet, marketing practices and communications strategies of multinational companies, such as Aracruz, continuously aim to maintain their historical hegemony in this discursive field of “development”. Our argument is not that the marketing messages of Aracruz are simply “hollow” or “empty”, that is, that they are just “talk”. On the contrary, when Aracruz claims to stand for progress, then it “really” does. That is, its progress is a particular version of economic, social and cultural progress that has real effects in terms of the “real world” practices it implies: the construction of mega-factories, the plantation of vast eucalyptus areas, the further concentration of land rights, the displacement of many peasants, etc. Equally, when Aracruz claims that it is “really” aiming to be sustainable and environmentally friendly, then we have no reason to doubt the real intentions of the company. The problem is that we are dealing with different versions of sustainability and environmental futures. That is, while Aracruz might be serious about its environmental credentials, many civil society actors resist the “green futures” – namely, large eucalyptus plantations and pulp and paper factories – the company is propagating. We are thus dealing with a struggle for the hegemony of a discursive field, which involves dominant actors as well as a range of resisting actors that continuously embattle the discourse of development.

This equivalence fills the “empty signifier” of development that exists in society and enables identification with a particular organization of reality. That is, while there are different practices of development possible, the Aracruz adverts aim to establish and maintain a social consensus that sees development mainly connected with large, multinational companies and large scale developments of pulp and paper factories and eucalyptus plantations.

Marketing Resistance against the Hegemony of Development

That the “logic of equivalence” can never be total is clearly shown by the ongoing struggles in South America involving a wide range of civil society actors that resist Aracruz and other multinational companies, which aim to turn the Pampas region into a “green desert”. The people of Gualeguaychú, for example, have been engaged in a long-term struggle against the construction of a pulp mill by Botnia, the Finnish multinational, on the shores of the Rio Uruguay, which provides the livelihood for their communities. They have organized themselves in a Citizens Assembly, using a range of strategies and tactics, including the blockade of roads, legal challenges in the International Court in The Hague, poster campaigns, “internet marches” and others. The Citizens Assembly’s slogan “No a las
papeleras; Si al la vida” (“No to pulp and paper factories; Yes to life”) has become an anti-corporate slogan spread throughout the city and the wider region, if not across Argentina. Most shop windows, restaurants and cars bear this slogan, which has become a defining tool to establish “chains of equivalences” across the different communities of the city.

The Assembly’s campaign website (www.noalapapelera.com.ar), besides giving up-to-date information on the campaign, has been used as a tool to mobilize internet users across the world to lobby the World Bank not to grant Botnia a substantial loan in order to construct their pulp mill. The resistance movement organized by the Citizens Assembly in Gualeguaychú has become a major political issue in the Pampas region, which has catapulted issues of environmental destruction as well as of green and sustainable development right to the forefront of people’s attention. What we are thus dealing with is an anti-corporate marketing campaign fought by a civil society movement that aims to establish “chains of equivalence” amongst diverse civil actors against the hegemonic discourse of development in the wider Pampas region. “Marketing” can thus itself be seen as an “empty signifier”, or discursive field, that is embattled and filled with different communication messages, contents and practices.

This struggle between two different discourses of development – as well as marketing – also became visible when women associated with the international peasant movement, Via Campesina, invaded a eucalyptus tree nursery of Aracruz in Rio Grande do Sul, destroying thousands of young trees. The activist women used direct action tactics in order to invade not only the property of Aracruz but the wider marketing/media sphere that has been dominated by a one-dimensional view of development. The corporate media and the marketing machinery of Aracruz were quick to condemn this action. Yet, alternative media collectives, such as Indymedia Brasil, Brasil de Fato, and the website of Via Campesina were quick in their response too; they cheered the women’s action and celebrated it as a success against the hegemony of Aracruz. To follow up on this direct action intervention, a few weeks later Via Campesina released a pamphlet that explained its critique of the “green desert” development. What is interesting here is that in this alternative marketing brochure it attacked the main economic argument of Aracruz, which lies behind the company’s anti-FUNAI, anti-Indian advert shown above. The hegemonic argument is that this type of development does, despite its negative environmental impacts, produce jobs that are desperately needed in South America and elsewhere. The reason why most people in Uruguay support the installation of the cellulose plants is because of the promised economic development providing jobs. Equally, in Rio Grande do Sul most ordinary citizens seem to support the eucalyptus plantations and pulp and paper plants mainly on the grounds of the economic progress promised by the multinational companies and the government.

However, there is another side to the hegemonic discourse of economic progress and development. Via Campesina shows in its adverts that the eucalyptus plantations of Aracruz actually destroy jobs, rather than creating them. That is, “green deserts” are not only monocultures and environmentally destructive, they also make little economic sense in terms of the few jobs that are actually created by them. Via Campesina claims that small scale peasant agriculture sustains many more jobs and far more sustainable economic and environmental development than monoculture-producing agro-businesses.

What we face therefore is a politically contested field of development, in which marketing plays a crucial role for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements. In our view, the critical study of marketing needs to make visible this contested terrain of hegemonic and alternative marketing messages. Marketing is not a neutral or value free practice; instead, it is embedded in a discursive field of power and resistance. The concept of hegemony helps us, in our view, to decenter marketing of one of its major roles – to act as a corporate communication tool – of selling products, services and influencing public opinion. As this
Case has shown, marketing is, on the one hand, a tool for the establishment and maintenance of hegemonic development discourses in society. However, this discourse is continuously contested by a range of different actors in civil society who also use various marketing tools to put forward alternative visions of development. That is, resistance also involves marketing practices, which are aimed at undermining and challenging hegemonic discourses of marketing and development, putting forward alternative visions of the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

Marketing plays a key role in contemporary society. As the struggle over the development of the pulp and paper industry in the Pampas region shows, marketing practices are used to construct and maintain hegemonic discourses of development. At the centre of this hegemony of development are large, industrial, multinational corporations, which in our case have used marketing and advertising strategies with two main goals: first, to convince local farmers to move from traditional pasture/cattle agriculture to eucalyptus plantations. Second, to conquer the region’s public opinion in support of the hegemonic development discourse, linking it to images of economic and social progress. The first goal is essential to providing cheap raw material for pulp mills. The second, in our view, is the more significant goal and involves molding public opinion in favor of the pulp and paper industry, hiding the negative environmental, economic and social impacts of this type of development. Given that Aracruz has spent significant sums on various marketing and advertising campaigns, clearly marketing plays a crucial role in the establishment of what we have called “chains of equivalence” between different actors in society. That is, it is not enough for Aracruz to champion the economic aspects of their business. It must also ensure that civil society is on its side, not to mention that public opinion management is also important to accelerate the government’s approval of eucalyptus plantations and factory construction projects. This approval is essential to Aracruz in its efforts to secure funding (also from public sources) for these development projects. In short, marketing strategies have been applied by the pulp and paper industry in the struggle to build and sustain a hegemonic development discourse that is necessary to legitimate their interests and actions in the Pampas region.

However, marketing practices have also been applied by activist counter-hegemonic movements like MST, Via Campesina and the people of Gualeguaychú in their struggles against the hegemony of the corporate development discourse in the wider Pampas region. These movements have used anti-corporate marketing campaigns that also aim to establish “chains of equivalence”, but, in their case, amongst diverse civil society actors who are opposed to the kind of development represented by large multinational companies. They argue that the corporate hegemony of development involves three main problems: first, multinational companies hide the significant environmental, social, cultural as well as economic consequences of their development practices (e.g., desertification, pollution, sedimentation of unequal land rights, destruction of farming jobs, and significant cultural shifts for local farmers so far dependent on cattle farming). Second, they directly try to weaken the discourse of economically less powerful actors, i.e. the indigenous population; and one can even detect a racist background in Aracruz’s attacks on indigenous communities. Third, Aracruz and other pulp and paper companies monopolize mass media discourses on development, as they are able to spend millions on ads, billboards, and so forth. This makes a response by popular movements almost impossible, because they lack the economic resources necessary to carry out mass media campaigns, highlighting alternative development possibilities.

The political economy of this dominance of the media is well explained and analyzed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) who put forward a “propaganda model” of the media. They argue that there are five types of what they call “filters” which determine what becomes, or is
regarded as, “news”. These filters, technical in nature, ensure that Aracruz is able to, first, “manufacture consent” – to use Herman and Chomsky’s term – for the type of development it propagates, and, second, it shuts out any dissent voiced by social movements and other civil society actors against pulp mills and eucalyptus plantations. This is by no means a mechanical process, only involving a handful of actors in Aracruz’s headquarters. Instead, we must imagine a whole array of actors in corporations, business lobby organizations, local, regional and national governments, and international finance institutions who all have a “stake” in this development discourse. Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) argument is that the way the corporate media is structured and controlled will have a profound effect on the type of media being communicated. As one of the most important Brazilian companies, Aracruz has privileged access to the corporate media, and in this way, it has direct and indirect control over what is being said about it. While the concrete analysis of the political economy of the Brazilian media is beyond the scope of this paper, what Aracruz’s marketing and advertising strategy tries to achieve is to construct a favorable image of the company and the discourse of development it propagates.

What we have tried to show in this paper is that, despite this overwhelming hegemony of Aracruz and those actors propagating pulp mills and eucalyptus plantations as “development”, there are plenty of social movement and civil society actors that use alternative marketing and media strategies to communicate their resistances to a wider public. It is this alternative marketing practice that highlights the deeply political nature of any hegemony, as it points to the “minor” languages that disrupt hegemonic marketing discourses and expose their historical contingency. We see our academic task in supporting the exposition of this contingency, because without it there would not be something called “development”. Development, in our view, needs to start from the premise of critically analyzing what has been “good” about the past, and what has not been so beneficial. Our aim has been to give voice to those “minor” development actors who often do not have access to the public sphere in the same way as dominant corporate actors do, and who have voiced significant critiques of the type of development propagated.

The critical analysis of the hegemony of development is not an end in itself. Besides our intervention in a particular political “development” field in South America, we hope this paper supports critical marketing discourse and its aim to give voice to those people who directly or indirectly suffer as a result of marketing’s practices. We feel that this concern for “minorities” and those who are negatively impacted by the hegemony of development discourses is not adequately represented by the hegemonic marketing discourse, as the “development” paradigms it mainly supports – modernization, institutional, and radical (JOY; ROSS, 1989; TAYLOR; OMURA, 1994) – do not open enough space for the kind of debate we hope to have engaged in. As some marketing authors (e.g. BROWNIE, 2006; BURTON, 2001, 2002; HETRICK; LOZADA, 1994; KOZINETS; HANDELMAN, 2004; MURRAY; OZANNE, 1991; MURRAY et al., 1994; RUMBO, 2002; THOMPSON; ARSEL, 2004) have highlighted, it is high time for a wider view of the political implications of marketing on the hegemonic struggles waged in society.

Part of this political view of marketing is the argument that a critique of marketing cannot only be about exposing and analyzing the discourses and practices that drive consumption. While there have been long-standing critiques of consumption and the consumer society in marketing and in other disciplines, like sociology, anthropology and political science, it has been our aim to see marketing as part of the production of development. That is, seeing marketing as a hegemonic discourse and practice goes beyond simplistic distinction between consumption and production, with marketing being seen as that managerial practice that sells the stuff that has been produced to the consumer. In contrast, our Gramscian analysis of this case shows that marketing is an integral part of the hegemonic
discourse that enables not only the production of pulp mills and eucalyptus plantations but also its legitimation amongst civil society actors. In this way, the politics of our critique is not only about how Aracruz sells its products in the marketplace and how it might manipulate consumers into buying “stuff”. It goes much beyond such a consumption view. We argue that Aracruz’s marketing is ontologically necessary for its sheer existence, as the company heavily relies on the development images it propagates to legitimize its production amongst a wide array of civil society actors.

Marion (2006) states that marketing is construed in three layers: it is a practice – all actions and deeds conducted by marketing practitioners or professionals; a branch of knowledge – codified principles and tools used by marketers; and it is an ideology – enduring beliefs and collective representations, i.e., perspectives, frames of reference and viewpoints shared by marketers. We would add a fourth layer: marketing is also an ontological practice that is politically embattled. That is, marketing is not value free but embedded in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses involving specific ontological regimes of power and resistance. The concept of hegemony, which we have introduced to the field of critical marketing in this paper, shows that marketing is always already a political practice, involving ideological power struggles that do not simply point to one aspect of the value creation chain of companies. Instead, our analysis of the development discourses embedded in marketing point to the ontological significance of marketing practices. What we have tried to show in this paper is that this ontology is embattled. In our view, critical marketing theory needs to make visible these struggles and challenge the widespread and dominant assumption that marketing is just a philosophy of business, an organizational function, or a set of managerial tools (WEBSTER, 1992) essential to the economic development of corporations and even countries (DHOLAKIA; SHERRY, 1987; HOSLEY; WEE, 1988; SHULTZ et al., 2005; WOOD; VITTEL, 1986). Our case has shown that at the heart of marketing there are ruptures, resistances and ideological battles about what constitutes as “development” itself. Marketing is an ontological and political practice.

References


