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Timber Capitalism: The Journey of Industrial Logging Across Tropical Forests in the Post–World War II Era

Abstract: This article investigates the rise of the global tropical timber trade in the post–World War II era by focusing on two key actors, Japan and Malaysia. It probes into the rise of corporate capitalism in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s and state developmentalism in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the creation of the International Tropical Timber Organization. It then turns to Malaysia's defense of tropical logging both during and after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, leading up to the internationalization of the Malaysian timber industry. The article argues that the development of international norms governing the tropical forests of the South in the 1990s was made possible by the assimilation of both the developing states' aspirations for economic growth and the industrialized world's environmental demands into neoliberal environmentalism as underpinned by technological fix and a retreat from the earlier narratives of "limits to growth."

Keywords: tropical forests, Malaysia, Japan, International Tropical Timber Organization, New International Economic Order, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

I. Tropical Forests from Commodification to Socialization: An Introduction

Writing on the eve of the so-called "End of History," American environmentalist David Morris shared an anecdote about picking up a toothpick in a restaurant in Minnesota, US, and finding out that it was manufactured in Japan, yet out of wood from the forests of Minnesota, and shipped back to the US. He wrote:

> [t]his toothpick may embody 50,000 miles of travel . . . . In my mind's eye, I see two ships passing one another in the northern Pacific. One carries little pieces of Minnesota wood bound for Japan; the other carries little pieces of wood from Japan bound for Minnesota. Such is the logic of free trade. (Morris 1990, 191)

That small toothpick, in fact, captures the broader history of the world's forests and the enormous juridical-material transformations they have undergone in the post–World War II era. The mass logging of tropical forests particularly stands out from that of temperate forests in this era in terms

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of both the scale and the ideology underpinning it. It is reflective of late development as "invariably linked to squandering ever more resources" (Sachs 1991, 253). More than half of the tropical forests disappeared in the twentieth century (Chase 1993, 749), and the volume of international tropical timber trade increased from 5 to 61 million cubic meters by the end of the century (Gale 1998, 62). Most of this destruction materialized in the second half of the century and in the context of the postcolonial states' scramble for industrialization—itself a reaction to the peripheralizing effects of laissez-faire capitalism from outside and as embedded in the work of the Bretton Woods institutions (Slobodian 2018). The rise of tropical logging has, indeed, involved the worldwide journey of material capability—capital, machinery, and know-how—from temperate to tropical forests, but also ideologies of growth and production for the market. Peluso and Vandergeest speak of the "political forests of Southeast Asia" as produced by conditions of coloniality, postcoloniality, and governmentality (2001, 370). Elden, in turn, proposes "legal terrain" to capture the intertwined functioning of "geopolitical and geophysical" in the changing landscape (Elden 2013, 210, 217).

This article builds upon archival materials and existing literature on tropical timber trade in international relations and political science and forestry to offer a historical materialist account of tropical logging in the post–World War II era. The article zooms in on two key players, Japan and Malaysia, to investigate the co-constituent relations between local and global relations of production around tropical forests.[1] It argues that national and international law have been a constituent element of capitalist extractivism in tropical forests, as marked by exclusive property relations around nature, production for the market, and accumulation of the surplus value by the capitalist and the state (Milios et al. 2002). International law principles of "permanent sovereignty over natural resources" and "the right to development" pursued by the developing states in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly, became crucial to the enclosure of tropical forests and subjugating their use value to their exchange value (Gilman 2015; Murphy 1984; Hermann 2021). Beyond commodification, liberal environmental law has helped mitigate the dislocating effects of mass logging without undermining the exclusive property regimes underpinning it (Bernstein 2000). The second argument is that although new and developing countries gathering around the New International Economic Order (NIEO) movement opposed any retreat from economic growth without the reform of the international economic order in the 1970s and 1980s, the ascent of neoliberalism rendered the Third World states' militant approach against such norms obsolete, paving the way for the emergence of "sustainable forest management" norms in the 1990s.

More specifically, the article traces normative and material changes brought by the rise of corporate capitalism in Japan and state developmentalism in Malaysia (Parts II and III), to the creation of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) under the aegis of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (Part IV). Part V turns to the rise of global anxieties around tropical deforestation in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the ways in which the ITTO sought to contain antagonism through developing standards for sustainable forest management. This is followed by Malaysia's defense of industrial logging in global policy spheres such as the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (Part VI), as the country's transnational timber firms were expanding abroad relying on material and juridical transformation brought by the neoliberal turn and the rise of South-South economic cooperation (Part VII). Part VIII concludes the piece.

[1] The documents of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) were accessed in the UN Library and Archives in Geneva, Switzerland, and the documents relating to the International Tropical Timber Organization were provided remotely by the organization's secretariat in Yokohama, Japan.

II. Remaking Japan: Occupation, Corporate Capitalism, and Tropical Timber Trade

The United States' occupation of Japan from September 1945 to April 1952 not only brought an end to a bloody global war—while inflicting death and destruction on thousands—but it also laid the foundation for remaking Japan, the Pacific, and the world. In the span of a decade, Japan grew into an economic power, with raw materials such as tropical timber from Southeast Asia occupying a central place in the country's reconstruction and international trade. The Truman administration was intent on leading the country through a constitutional and economic transition from state capitalism and close links between firms and the state toward market competition and corporate capitalism (Okumura 2000). The idea was that such a transition in former fascist strongholds like Japan (but also Germany) would not only diminish the risk of nationalism by dismantling the forces that tend to subjugate market equilibrium to ethno-national whims (van der Pijl 2003; Kostal 2019; Haley 2001), but it would also make Japan an "anti-Communist workshop in Asia" by bringing the country's material capability and Southeast Asian resources together—and integrating both into global circuits of production and exchange (Schonberger 1989, 202).

As half a million American soldiers were being deployed, a drastic process of constitution-making was launched to turn Japan into "a liberal and prosperous member of the international community" by way of the market (Saunders 2023, 268). One of the first measures was splitting business monopolies, or *zaibatsus*—many of whom were involved in Japanese aggression—into small firms (Cohen 1987). The November 1945 memo entitled *Control of Corporate Organization: Japan* required reorganizing Japanese business "in accordance with the military and economic objectives of the United States," and as such dispersing "ownership, management, and control" of the country's economic system and "abrogating all legislative or administrative measures which limit free entry of firms into industries" (Haley 2001, 24).

By the late 1950s, many of the split-up firms went on to create new business networks called *keiretsu*, marked by mutual shareholding and vertically integrated operations (Cutts 1992). As I will detail later, Japanese mega trading companies (*sogo shosha*) prominent in tropical timber trade became successful examples of such networks (Young 1979).

To promote the export economy, the US administration appointed the American banker Joseph Dodge, who developed a successful financial and monetary scheme for linking Japan to the world capitalist economy (Schonberger 1989, 206). After a brief period of trade protectionism, the 1949 Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Administration Law required the state to take measures to ensure "the freedom of foreign exchange, foreign trade, and other foreign transactions, to enable proper expansion of foreign transactions and *the maintenance of peace and security in Japan and in the international community*." Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act, No. 228 of Dec. 1, 1949, art. 1 (emphasis added). The same year, the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) was established to promote investment and trade abroad, most notably in Southeast Asia (Johnson 1982)—a process firmly supported by Eisenhower's "regional integration plan" (Webber 2006, 303). As infrastructure and logistics were being mounted between the North Atlantic and the Pacific, national laws and institutions were developed to help create new geographies of production and exchange across the equator (Cowen 2014). Soon enough, the Korean War (1950–1953) launched Japan's "special procurement boom," turning the country into what some described as "one huge supply depot" for the military operations in Korea (Schaller 1997, 49). By the 1960s, Japan had become "chockful of companies," relying on multitudes of investment treaties, development aid agreements, and private contracts to integrate their southern neighbors in new networks of production and exchange, with timber as the leading commodity (Dingman 1993, 42).

Japan had depleted many of its forests during the two world wars. By the end of the Second World War, imported timber was needed not only to rebuild the war-torn cities and create new infrastructures but also to enable the country's rise to being the largest plywood and paper producer (Marchak 1995, chap. 5). From 1961 to 1973, Japan's share of the global tropical timber market grew from 30 percent to 51 percent, far higher than that of any other nation and two times more than that of the entire European Community (Ross 2001, 44). In parallel, the country's emergence as the world's leading shipbuilding and shipping power—made possible by American investment and low Japanese wages in the early postwar years—helped effectively address the high transportation costs that had plagued the global tropical timber trade for many years (Tenold 2019, 21).

Commodification of tropical forests below the equator followed afforestation of mountains at home. The 1951 Forest Law required the state to take the necessary steps for recovery of forest resources cut before and during the war and develop ten-year management plans to ensure the conservation of biodiversity and the supply of forestry products "in line with the needs of the people." Law on the Management of National Forests Act, No. 246, of June 3, 1951. The same year, tariff barriers were lifted to allow the entry of high-volume timber into Japan (Takagi 1997, 21). As Fraser argued, "Northern 'post-materialism' ultimately rested upon 'southern materialism'" (Fraser 2021, 117). Japanese mega trading firms, such as Oji, Fuji, and Mitsubishi—all rising from the ashes of the old *zaibatsu* firms—became leading actors in the trade of tropical timber. Large-volume, low-cost raw materials from Southeast Asia, but also vertical integration of financing, extraction, processing, and marketing, gave these firms a competitive edge globally. Some of them obtained logging concessions abroad, and others set up joint ventures with local firms (Iwai 2002). By the mid-1960s, *sogo shosha* firms had established natural resource development offices across resource-rich regions of the world, hiring thousands of geological, mining, and finance specialists for such operations (Young 1979, 136, 163). They acted as nodes in a network that brought together logging equipment giants such as Komatsu and Hitachi, twenty-five thousand sawmills, and dozens of plywood plants in Japan, and subcontracted ethnic Chinese firms across Southeast Asia to realize large-scale extraction and export (Dauvergne 1997, 4; Fujikake 2002, 182). In parallel, development assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)—part of which was offered as reparation for wartime destruction—helped lay down infrastructure such as forest roads and sawmills, and conduct inventories crucial to locating high-value forest areas, all while the Ministry of International Trade and Industry created the legal environment for trade and investment abroad (Dauvergne 1997).

Yet, as capitalism expands spatially, it must face its ecological contradictions—what Foster calls "the metabolic rift," or the *impossibility* of maintaining nature's balance under capitalism and its laws of motion (Foster 1999). The history of Japanese logging in Southeast Asia has also been a history of continual "spatial fixes" and moves to new frontiers to overcome the declining rate of profit and resource depletion (Harvey 2001). As forests of the Philippines were depleted by the end of the 1950s, a move was made to the forests of Indonesia, and from there to Peninsular Malaysia in the 1960s and subsequently to the East Malaysian states on the Borneo, and ultimately to Congo Basin, South America, and the Pacific from the late 1980s onward (Ross 2001). In parallel, the Japanese state and firms sought to mitigate social and ecological dislocations generated by mass deforestation. Starting in the 1980s, the Japan-based ITTO helped develop norms and practices for "sustainable forest management"—a set of forestry principles aimed at protecting forests on the margins of the market—while Japanese firms such as Mitsubishi launched reforestation and forest management programs in Southeast Asia, including East Malaysia. With this, let us turn to the case of Malaysian forests.

III. Malaysia Remade: Independence, Race, and Timber

The forests of Malaysia, located in the Peninsula and Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, have been key sites of extractivism, from tin mining and rubber plantations to logging, beginning with European colonization, continuing through the Japanese occupation, and taking force in the postindependence era. British and Japanese control of Malaya and Borneo Island introduced exclusive property relations, machinery, and know-how of commercial logging into previously open forests. It also created a division of labor among different ethnic groups, laying the foundation for intertwined functioning of race, nation-building, and extractivism in the country's forests after the 1957 independence (Jesudason 1989). As Japan was establishing new laws for timber import in this era, the Malaysian state relied on colonial and newly enacted laws to enclose virgin forests for timber extraction—a large portion of which went to meet the Japanese demand. The shifting control and ownership of forest resources at home also shifted Malaysia's approach to international law from modernist West-centrism in the 1950s and 1960s to Third Worldist state developmentalism from the 1970s onward, followed by stern opposition to international governance of forest resources in the 1980s and 1990s (Majstrovic 1997). But how did these extractivist dynamics begin?

Colonization of Malaya began in 1511, when the Portuguese sought to take over buzzing spice trading ports, including the Strait of Melaka. In 1641, the Dutch East India Company took over Malaya, and following the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty, the British East India Company established colonies in the territory before it was put under the control of the British Colonial Office as crown colonies in 1867. The British government ruled indirectly through local rulers and coastal sultans until after World War II. Across the South China Sea, on Borneo Island, Sabah (called North Borneo at the time) was ruled by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company, while Sarawak was governed by the British adventurer James Brooke and his descendants until the Japanese occupation (Irwin [1955] 2014).

The Forest Act of 1878 afforded the British administration full sovereignty over all wastelands in the colonies, including Malaya, enabling the colonial administration to demarcate and enclose forests (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005, 62). Earlier, Sarawak's Land Order of 1863 declared the land "not occupied" by Native people as belonging to the state (Kaur 1998, 127). The creation of forest institutions across Malaya and Borneo followed the degree of industrialization in these territories—fast in the Peninsula and slow in Borneo (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001). Tin mining reached new heights in the late 1880s, and as the automobile industry took over the United States and Western Europe in the early twentieth century, rubber was introduced into Malaya from Brazil, followed by land clearing for rubber plantations (Ross 2017). The British also brought in a large number of Indian Tamils and Chinese to work in mines and plantations, while Malays and other Indigenous groups in Borneo were restricted to subsistence rice farming (Jesudason 1989, 29). As I will discuss later, this racial division of labor came to play an important role in postindependence timber extractivism, as ethnic Malays sought to reverse the colonial legacy—and the "myth of the lazy native" versus the "industrious Chinese"—by gaining control over logging concessions (Alatas 1977).

In 1941, Malaya, North Borneo, and Sarawak were occupied by Japan. In Borneo, Japanese forces imported logging technology and developed infrastructure to supply wood to Japan's war fronts (Kaur 1998; Ooi 2010). In the Peninsula, the four-year Japanese occupation reinforced new racial hierarchies: The squatting of vacant lands by the Chinese minority was tolerated, while occupation became a "gestation period" for Malays to dip their toes in the timber business as "administrators, agents, and brokers" (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005, 253). The US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 ended Japanese occupation, and Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak

were put separately under the direct administration of the British government. On the eve of the Cold War, the colonial administration sought to tackle the risk of communism by promoting timber extraction by the local population. An Interim Forest Policy Statement was issued in 1952, recommending the reservation of 25 percent of the Peninsula for regular timber production, and in 1956, the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) was set up to integrate rural Malays into the national economy through capitalist development (Aiken and Leigh 1992, 56–57). The British left Peninsular Malaysia in 1957 after annihilating the communist forces while continuing their rule over Sarawak and Sabah. The Federation of Malaya was established as a constitutional monarchy, and by 1963 had merged with the former British territories of Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak. Singapore separated two years later (Saravanamuttu 1983).

Among the vast former colonies of Britain, the British extractivist policy had the most profound impact on Malaya. Peninsular Malaya emerged from colonization as an agricultural country with tin and rubber accounting for 85 percent of all exports and 70 percent of the population engaged in low-wage agriculture (Jomo et al. 2004, 68). Despite this, the postindependence Malaysian economic policy continued along laissez-faire lines, with the market leading the socio-political organization. Malaysia's positioning in the international legal order came close to what Anghie described as "Eastphalia:" the rise of a new form of Third World sovereignty in East Asia, whereby a distinction is made between "political" and "economic" sovereignty. Although interference in the former is not tolerated, there is a willingness to synchronize local relations of production with the needs of the global economy (Anghie 2017, 548). While neighboring Indonesia nationalized Dutch and other foreign assets, transforming into an anticolonial force within UN institutions, the Malaysian postindependence state accommodated foreign economic interests, "burnishing sovereignty in spite of the International Cold War" (Chong 2020, 179; White 2017). British and ethnic Chinese commercial networks continued to lead extraction and export, and new foreign capital was elicited from the US and Japan for the expansion of manufacturing (Jesudason 1989).

As the 1960s drew to a close, laissez-faire capitalism proved to have peripheralized ethnic Malays further, culminating in a series of race riots in May 1969. A nationalistic turn in the dominant political party, the United National Malay Organization (UNMO), subsequently laid the ground for restructuring the national economy along ethno-national lines, "engineering a new middle class . . . urban, educated bumiputera" (Sloane-White 2008, 455; Searle 1998). With timber becoming a prominent commodity in the 1960s, forest management also transformed into "a technology of state power"—to empower rural and urban Malays and reposition ethnic Chinese firms historically dominant in logging and timber export (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001, 762). In parallel, the new state elites came to view state-led capitalist expansion in Japan and Northeast Asia—what Cumings described as a "Bureaucratic Authoritarian Industrializing Regimes" (BAIR)—as examples to follow (Cumings 1984, 28).

Article 153 of the 1956 Constitution, adopted in the lead-up to independence, had already envisaged special advantages for ethnic Malays. In 1971, the Tun Abdul Razak administration relied on this constitutional provision to develop a twenty-year plan called the New Economic Policy (NEP) which required 30 percent equity ownership for ethnic Malays in all firms (Milne 1976). To enable state intervention in the timber business, the state incorporated the Forest Department into the Ministry of Agriculture, and as timber export took force in the early 1970s, the department was transferred to the Ministry of Mining and Land Affairs (Gomez and Jomo 1999, 272). Subsequently, the Timber Industry Act was passed, and the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB) came into being to empower the state "to enter into such negotiations and agreements as the Board considers necessary for the promotion of the general interests of the timber industry and trade." Malaysian Timber Industry Board (Incorporation) Act 1973, para. 12(2)(a). The state also used the FELDA (the state agency set up by British administration for land

development) to enclose thousands of acres of land and create rural development schemes as part of the broader nation-building process. This was done through two legal processes inherited from the British colonial administration: alienation (voluntary sale by the owner) and gazetting (acquiring land by the state through publishing a notice in the state gazette). These lands, integrated into the state domain in the 1960s, underwent commercial logging in the 1970s (Gomez and Jomo 1999, 274), taking over the declining export from the Philippines and Indonesia to Japan. A new age of primitive accumulation was launched in the Third World (Moore 2004).

Forest surveys by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in the late 1960s, followed by a National Forest Inventory, in turn, helped create a "cartographic consciousness" of lowland and hill forests home to Indigenous tribes and agricultural communities for thousands of years (Harvey 2001, ix–x; Colchester 1989). Based on such statistics and with the help of a loan from the World Bank, the state launched a mega development project, the Jengka Triangle Project, at the heart of the Peninsula, where ethnic Malays were the majority (Wikkramatileke 1972). Blending the "political" and "economic" in a gray muddle, the project sought to enable the transfer of Chinese expertise in timber business to Malays as new ethnically driven employment quotas were being imposed on sawmills (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005, 274). While some Malays turned into a bureaucratic rentier class taking charge of allocating logging concessions, others took over the management of timber firms (ibid. at 255). By the 1970s, more than 1.1 million hectares of forests, or around 50 percent of the forest cover in the Peninsula, were logged (313), making Malaysia the source of around 58 percent of the global log export and 81 percent of the Asian log export (Marchak 1995, 172).

As the Peninsula was undergoing the uneven and combined development generated by capitalist industrialization, the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak across the sea were expected to learn entrepreneurship from Kuala Lumpur. Land scarcity in the Peninsula, as well, was moving a portion of land-based commercial activities to East Malaysia (Gomez and Jomo 1999, 80). Like the Peninsula, Sabah's postindependence state enclosed previously open forests and categorized many plots as production forests. The state's transitional alliance government—consisting of Christian-dominated and Muslim-dominated parties—began issuing annual logging licenses as a means of gaining political support (Ross 2001, chap. 5; Dauvergne 1997, chap. 4). With Japanese development aid helping lay a network of roads in the 1970s, the state's timber export shifted from Britain to Japan (Jomo et al. 2004, 104). By the end of the decade, the annual deforestation rate grew to 5.7 million cubic meters, four times the standard set by the Forest Department (Ross 2001, chap. 5). As Sabah's forests began to deplete, heads turned to Sarawak.

Sarawak had double forest cover scattered across its peat swamps and hills. After being incorporated into the Federation of Malaya in 1963, the state was governed by a series of transitional alliance governments made up of five Muslim-majority and non-Muslim political parties, with party leaders using timber concessions for building political alliances (Ross 2001, chap. 6). By 1975, the hill dipterocarp forests finally became accessible with the help of imported machinery and know-how, unleashing a new timber boom. Capitalizing on this new potential, Japanese aid was channeled into building forest roads, as Mitsubishi became the leading logger and exporter of the state's timber, all against the wishes of Sarawak's most prominent nomad tribe, the Penans (Dauvergne 1997, 100).

Back in the Peninsula, as the grip of the Malay ruling elites grew over the economy in the early 1970s, Malaysia's approach to international law also shifted toward full-fledged solidarity with other primary-producing Third World countries and advocating for "permanent sovereignty over natural resources" and "right to development" (Jesudason 1989, 59). Alongside other developing countries, Malaysia supported an international economic order that coordinated nationally

organized economies and opposed the competitive international economic order promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions (Murphy 1984). With trade relations shifting eastward in the 1970s, Japan became the primary source of investment in Malaysia and the largest trading partner, importing 18 percent of the country's exports and supplying 26 percent of Malaysian imports (Jesudason 1989, 58; Jomo 1994). Mahathir Mohamad's rise to leadership in the 1980s further strengthened Malaysia's alliance with the Third World. Mahathir and his entourage belonged to a group of counter-elites called the "ultras" within the UNMO Party, who aligned with Afro-Asian Third Worldism, the NIEO, and resource nationalism. Yet, the startling rate of deforestation in Sarawak in the 1970s and 1980s and roadblocking by the Penans brought the case of the Sarawak forests not only to Japan's National Diet, but also to the Japan-based ITTO, repositioning Malaysia as the leader of the developing states bloc at the upcoming 1992 Rio Summit (Nectoux and Kuroda 1989, 94). But where did the ITTO come from?

IV. The International Tropical Timber Organization: From Geneva to Yokohama

The decades-long process of improving the position of the Third World in global commodity trade within the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) followed a longer trajectory of nationalization and other struggles by developing states for import substitution industrialization. Developing countries entered the post-WWII era with 85 percent of their revenue coming from raw materials and with three out of four countries earning more than 60 percent of their foreign exchange from the export of such commodities (Gosovic 1972, 93; Raffaelli 1995). The full operationalization of the Bretton Woods institutions in the early 1950s established the dominance of market competition, exerting political and impersonal pressure against territorially confined accumulation regimes at the core of state developmentalism (Slobodian 2018). Despite the promises of these institutions, the volume of international trade in the Third World continued to decline in the 1950s and 1960s, and as the negative balance of payments became a structural force in the developing economies, the gap in the standard of living between North and South grew drastically (Murphy 1984, 8). Influenced by the dependency and world system theories, the emerging bureaucratic vanguards in the Third World viewed intergovernmental intervention in global commodity trade, coupled with an episode of extractivism at home, as crucial to import substitution industrialization (Prebisch 1946; Amin 1974; Wallerstein 1989).

Malaya was not new to such international initiatives. During the interwar period, the British administration had involved the country in the 1931 International Tin Agreement and the 1934 International Rubber Regulation, and as the groundwork for independence was being established, the issue of global commodity chains held a significant position in Malaysian foreign policy (Martin 2022, chap. 5). During "the high tide of anticolonial legalism" in the 1960s, indeed, the challenge posed by global commodity trade marked a deviation from the state's West-centric foreign policy following independence (Moyn 2020). Upon the creation of UNCTAD in the mid-1960s, Malaysia became a member of the Group of 77 and endorsed the organization's state developmentalist approach. The Malaysian delegate in UNCTAD criticized the heavy burden placed on developing nations to ensure supply and buffer stocks, arguing that poor nations remained "saddled with the ailments of the wealthy nations" despite decolonization (Saravanamuttu 2010, 130). Alongside Bolivia, Malaysia opposed the 1975 Tin Agreement for its failure to offer a higher price to producing countries, and as the state assumed control over production relations to reverse the colonial division of labor from the early 1970s onward, Malaysia's support for the NIEO grew further.

While creating a space for anticolonial and anticapitalist imaginaries, the NIEO programs revolved around the developing world's elites "renegotiating their roles in the world capitalist system;

reforming rather than repudiating the existing international order" (Özsu 2024, 32, emphasis added). Recognized by the UN General Assembly in 1952, the struggle for "permanent sovereignty over natural resources" (PSNR) was underpinned by "historicism"—an acknowledgment that centuries of colonial accumulation had to be reversed through "globalization of private property as the proper way to relate to the earth and its fruits" (Pahuja 2011, 128).[2] In that direction, UNCTAD was intended to enable intergovernmental intervention in private business through information gathering and developing international regulatory frameworks (Gosovic 1972). The organization's approach to the South's commodity challenge was famously shaped by the Singer–Prebisch theory of commodity prices, which argued that the price of commodities since the nineteenth century, and in general, tends to decline faster than that of manufactured products. As such, state-assisted extractivism and intergovernmental intervention was essential to transition to a manufacturing economy (Prebisch 1946; Singer 1949; Toye and Toye 2003).

UNCTAD's work on tropical forests and timber trade followed the work of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank on agriculture in the early post-WWII decades and was influenced by the modernization theory and the US's vision of efficient, transnational, and capitalist agriculture (Ribi Forclaz 2019). The plan was not only to turn tropical forests into large agricultural fields with single species and fast-growing crops for export, but also to clear the forests for monoculture softwood that could then pay for import of food and machinery into tropical countries (Tucker 2000). FAO's inventory in Malaysia's Sarawak in the 1960s, for example, became a successful example of linking forests to the global market (FAO/IBRD Co-operative Programme 1966). FAO, of course, was not alone in funding such projects. Starting in the 1950s, the World Bank as well funded projects focused on logging, pulp, and paper mills, from Chile to Bangladesh to Zambia, and geared toward increasing the GDP. By the late 1970s, the Bank's lending to timber-related industries had already reached $240 million US (Innes and Hajjar 2009, 28). As discussed previously, in Malaysia in the 1970s, the Bank supported a master plan, the Jengka Triangle Project, clearing thirty-two thousand acres of forests for oil palm, rubber, and farmer settlement (World Bank Group 1970).

In 1966, UNCTAD and FAO established a Working Party on Forest and Food Products to investigate barriers to tropical timber trade and make recommendations for improving industrial production and the terms of trade. The reports covered a wide range of issues, from high tariff barriers in the developed world and the significant shipping costs representing 30 to 50 percent of log prices at the destination, to the inefficiency and poor performance of sawmills, to the near absence of the pulp and paper industry in the developing world.[3] They also highlighted Malaysia as a success story for the expansion of tropical timber export beyond its traditional markets and credited efficient Japanese shipping for the increase in tropical logging and export from Southeast Asia. They attributed the low productivity of African timber industries to insufficient capital and technology, while the "backwardness" of the South American timber industries was blamed on an excessive emphasis on agribusiness (FAO Secretariat 1966, 8).

The reports recommended the creation of tropical timber bureaus in key timber trading centers in the industrialized world to produce market intelligence and stimulate supply and demand. However, the negotiations for UNCTAD's Common Fund to support the expansion of commodity trade were slowed down by the 1973 oil crisis, the increasing debt of the South, and the North's economic stagnation (Franczak 2022, 92). After a prolonged break, Japan stepped in and advanced a draft of an international tropical timber agreement in 1983 (Poore 2003, 35). Japanese diplomat Tatsuro Kunugi oversaw the preliminary meetings and later chaired the negotiation conference in Geneva. Southeast Asian countries (most notably, Malaysia, Indonesia,

[2] G.A. Res. 626(VII), Right to Exploit Freely Natural Wealth and Resources, U.N. Doc. A/RES/262, Dec. 21, 1952.
[3] Published under UN document series symbol TD/B/C.2/AC.2.

and the Philippines) also actively contributed to shaping the 1983 International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA). A two-part conference took place in March and November 1983 in Geneva, Switzerland, with thirty-six producing and thirty-four consuming countries, and the International Tropical Timber Agreement was opened for ratification on January 2, 1984. The agreement also established the ITTO as an international commodity organization, which became fully operational in 1986.

Reflecting the new material capability of the postindependence states, Article 1 of the ITTA spelled out the purpose of the ITTO as "benefitting both producing and consuming members and *bearing in mind the sovereignty of producing members over their natural resources*" (emphasis added). Article 2 confined the work of the organization to "tropical timber" or "non-coniferous tropical wood for industrial uses, which grows or is produced in the countries situated between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn." International Tropical Timber Agreement, Nov. 18, 1983, UN Doc. TD/TIMBER/11/Rev.1 (hereinafter 1983 ITTA). The provision created a material and ideological framework whereby "forests" could be discussed in the ITTO only in the form of "extracted timber" destined for global markets. As such, questions of forest conservation or Indigenous communities had to be translated into the organization's mandate.

The asymmetrical productive potentials among different tropical regions were also institutionalized by the ITTO's weighted voting system. Article 6 structured the plenary body of the organization, the International Tropical Timber Council (ITTC), into two blocs of producing and consumer countries, which were then allocated votes based on their share of import and export in the global tropical timber trade (1983 ITTA, Article 10). In Colchester's words, "the more a country destroyed tropical forests, the more votes it got" (1990, 167). Despite their lower forest cover, Southeast Asian countries scored a high percentage of votes. Malaysia, for instance, received 12.6 percent of the votes in the producing bloc, while Japan received 30 percent in the consumer bloc (1983 ITTA, Annex B).

The higher production and trade capacity of Northeast and Southeast Asia also influenced the choice of the headquarters and chief administrator of the ITTO. As the selection of the headquarters became a source of disagreement, delaying the operationalization of the organization, Japan contributed several million dollars to the budget and offered free office premises.[4] This, and some "preferential trading deals to the Third World," finally won the votes for Yokohama (Chase 1993, 758). The office was set up in the city's business district, Minatomirai, adjacent to the headquarters of some of the biggest multinationals. Now that the headquarters were set up in a consumer country, the director general had to be elected from the producing bloc. The former deputy director of Malaysia's Forest Department and the country's envoy to the UN negotiations on ITTA, Freezailah Che Yeom, was appointed as the first director general of the ITTO.

Akin to a consulting firm, the secretariat was expected to balance the interests of the consumer and producing blocs in the tropical timber market by collecting and circulating data on the production capacity of some of the most politically unstable countries in the tropics, while obtaining necessary funds for the creation of timber industries in such countries and connecting timber firms in the industrialized world and developing states. More broadly, the ITTO was seen as a hub for the diffusion of the East Asian experience of timber business to tropical Africa, South America, and Oceania.

[4] Revised Reply by Japan to the Questionnaire Relating to the Location of the Headquarters of the ITTO, June 25, 1984, Communication SI/UTS/259, file TDO 440, International Tropical Timber Organization, UN Archives and Library in Geneva.

In the early years, the organization's work and budget were mostly focused on tapping into new forests and marketing lesser-known species (LNS) through preproject and project proposals submitted by producing countries. For example, Ghana received funding from UNCTAD to build a "Wood Village" for training woodworkers and identifying future customers, while the United States funded the development of a timber industry by the ITTO in Guatemala. Similarly, the South Pacific region obtained some funds from Japan and Australia to make its wood-processing industry more efficient.[5] Soon enough, however, things took a turn in the organization.

V. Managing Anxieties: ITTO, Sarawak Mission, and the Year 2000 Objectives

As the 1990s drew closer, the startling rate of deforestation in Southeast Asia and South America, but also the risks that the ongoing debt crisis in the Third World posed to their forests, created massive global anxieties. In the 1980s alone, the global annual loss of tropical forests increased from 11 to 17 million hectares, and Malaysia stood out for having logged 4 million hectares (or 21 percent) of its forests in a single decade, but also for the mass dispossession of forest-dwelling communities in Sarawak (FAO 1991; Colchester 1989; Leigh [1998] 2001). The pressure was building up to take the ITTO beyond its pure commodity logic and incorporate forest conservation into the organization's mandate without undermining the weighted voting in favor of largest producing and consumer blocs. As calls were being made in the North for boycotts, levies, and certifications in and beyond the ITTO (Humphreys 2006, 116), the organization's secretariat took the initiative in 1988 to commission two expert studies on the costs and benefits of sustainable forest management—depoliticizing the politics by "promising technical solutions" (Louise and Maertens 2021, 9).

One of the studies, conducted by the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), concerned the scale of sustainable forest management in the tropical world. The report noted that the extent of sustainable practices in forests under study had been negligible: 800,000 hectares, or 1 percent of the estimated 828 million hectares (Poore et al. 1990, xiv). Yet, given the commitment of the authors to the cause of the ITTO and its producing members, the IIED acknowledged the necessity of foregrounding the economic function of natural forests, speaking of "a direct relationship between the market and the degree of intensity of management that proves profitable" (ibid. at xii, 59). The other study, commissioned to the Harvard Institute for International Development, explored the potentials of the multiple-use management of tropical forests in lowering the rate of logging. The report noted that the governments of tropical countries undervalued forests, recommending a partial shift to nontimber products and an increase in rents and severance taxes to increase state revenues with the hope of decreasing unfettered logging.[6]

The movement for internationalization of tropical forests and setting global norms for sustainable forest management from the late 1980s on should be understood as what Kees van der Pijl describes as "post-commodification socialization," or measures taken by national and international civil servants to improve the conditions of life on the margins of exclusive property regimes. He explains, "[u]nder the discipline of capital and the commodity form, the real subjects cannot execute the planning/normative function for themselves; alienation and exploitation imply the

[5] See, ITTO project/preproject/concept notes identifiers 1985–1990, https://www.itto.int/project_search/.

[6] The Case for Multiple-Use Management of Tropical Hardwood Forests—A Study Prepared by the Harvard Institute for International Development [HIID], Jan. 1, 1988, Folder 228571, WB IBRD/IDA AGR, Records of the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, DC, pp. 233–43, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/873681680010569793-0560011988/original/WorldBankGroupArchivesFolder228571.pdf.

negation of autonomy to begin with." As such, functionaries subordinate to the ruling class step in to restore social cohesion through developing new standards and a shared image of production relations (van der Pijl 1998, 137–38).

Despite the efforts to "technicalize" deforestation and beyond the walls of the ITTO, however, the global grievances against the deforestation of Sarawak and the dispossession of the Indigenous people continued. Under Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, the annual log production had increased from 11.4 to 19.4 million cubic meters, five times more than what the FAO had proposed as "sustainable" for the state (Ross 2001, 150). In July 1988, the European Parliament passed several resolutions calling on the European Community to ban imports of hardwood from Malaysian Sarawak "until it can be established that the logging does not cause unnecessary environmental damage and does not threaten the way of life of Indigenous peoples."[7] The Brussels-based *Union pour le Commerce des Bois Tropicaux* (UCBT) was also considering a levy on Sarawak timber. Shortly after, Austria began developing a federal act on the marking of tropical timber (Humphreys 1996a, 226). Germany and the Netherlands were planning similar initiatives as well. Finally, the plights of the Penans and Mitsubishi's investment in Sarawak's logging reached Japan's National Diet, where a general recognition was made that "Japan bears rather a heavy responsibility for tropical overexploitation" and that the state had to take action to reverse the situation (Nectoux and Kuroda 1989, 24).

As the GATT negotiations were taking place, there was a high risk that bans and levies would be labeled as "product discrimination." ITTO Director General Freezailah made an appeal to all members to reject any type of boycott on the timber trade and asked the organization's council to take action (Poore 2003, 64, 69). Within the producing bloc, Brazil questioned levies and certifications as contravening tropical countries' "permanent sovereignty over natural resources," while Malaysia sent million-dollar missions around Europe and North America to discourage similar measures (Gale 1998, 248). The Malaysian delegation to the GATT also led the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to submit a complaint against the Austrian legislative measure to the organization's secretariat in 1993, which was followed by the modification of the law and the halting of the European Community resolutions (Chase 1993, 374).

In early 1988, Freezailah traveled to Malaysia to persuade the authorities to accept a mission visit by the ITTO. Mahathir saw the organization as sympathetic to the cause of industrialization in Malaysia and approved the visit. During the May 1989 session of the council in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, the Malaysian government extended an official invitation to the ITTO, with Chief Minister of Sarawak Taib Mahmud traveling to the venue to support the invitation (Gale 1998, chap. 11; Poore 2003, chap. 7). This was the first time a mission of this kind would be carried out by the ITTO, and other producing countries, most notably Brazil, were concerned that the mission would become a springboard for further international governance of tropical forests (Gale 1998, 104). The council established a mixed-member mission with a well-defined mandate (ITTC Resolution 1(VI), 6th session, May 1989). The mission was composed of three country delegates from producing countries (Ghana, Bolivia, and Indonesia), three from the consumer bloc (Japan, Norway, and the US), and three independent experts (a Danish economist, a representative of the timber industry from Australia, and Duncan Poore, the British forester and founder of the International Institute for Environment and Development's Forestry and Land Use Programme). The group was led by the British zoologist Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, 5th Earl of Cranbrook, who alongside Poore had taught forestry at the University of Malaya and worked with the postindependence Malaysian state. Freezailah also accompanied the mission to his native country from the beginning to the end (Poore et al. 1990, 3).

[7] European Parliament, Resolution on the Catastrophic Environmental Impact of Large-Scale Deforestation in Sarawak (East Malaysia), Doc. A2-92/88, 1988 OJ (C 235) 196, para. 1.

Confining itself to the terms of the 1983 ITTA, the Council requested that the mission examine the current state of and potentials for sustainable management of Sarawak forests with a view to "promoting both continuous timber extraction and maintaining ecological balance" (ITTC Resolution 1(VI), 6th session, May 1989). In its report, the mission interpreted "sustainable management" as meaning "the attainment and maintenance of a forest estate yielding a continuing and non-declining flow of benefits and products at levels each considered best by the people of Sarawak, and at levels that can be supported or even increased in the future" (Poore et al., 1990, para. 34). By using the term "people of Sarawak," the mission put groups with opposing interests—in other words, state authorities, settlers, concessionaires, and Indigenous communities—in one box. The visit involved the examination of national laws and policies, conducting field inquiries, and meeting with federal and state authorities (Prime Minister Mahathir and Chief Minister of Sarawak Taib Mahmud) and local state-owned firms such as the Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation (STIDC), and large-scale timber firms such as Rimbunan Hijau, among others (ibid., Appendix I).

The report noted that the forests of Malaysia as a whole including Sarawak were not sustainably managed; that the catchment protection in the Sarawak forests was negligible; and that the fellers being paid in piece rates (number of trees cut in each round) had been a strong force of destruction. The authors recommended an increase in the number of forest staff, securing some of the hill dipterocarp forests of more than 60 percent slope for soil conservation, and a review of the organizational structure for allocating the concession (Poore et al. 1990, para. 18). The document confirmed that the deforestation of Sarawak was linked to international trade, with 80 percent of the logs intended for Japan. Nevertheless, the ban on imports was characterized as "naive and misguided [, with] consequences that went far beyond the tropical timber trade" (ibid., paras. 18, 166, 167). The mission report was initially presented at the eighth session of the Council in May 1990 and was put to debate and approved by a second meeting in November that year (ITTC Decision 3(IX), 9th Meeting, November 1990). The report drew extensive criticism from environmental NGOs, while creating a division between those who saw value in maintaining communication with Malaysian authorities and others who saw no prospects for saving the Borneo forests through the ITTO (Poore 2003, chap. 7). In the aftermath of the report, Mahathir's administration set up the Malaysian Timber Council (MTC) to issue sustainability certificates, while Mitsubishi's Environmental Affairs Department launched a fifty-hectare forest rehabilitation project in Bintulu, Sarawak (Wakker 1993). Back in the ITTO, the Japanese delegate expressed his government's readiness to assist in aid and technology if Sarawak reduced production (ITTC, Report of the 11th session, November-December 1991, 25).

The Sarawak Report was, indeed, part of the broader turn to managerialism in global environmental circles and in the buildup to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The 1970s narratives of "scarcity" and "limits to growth" were being overshadowed by technological fixes. In Stevens's words, young environmental activists of the 1970s were being replaced by "grey-suited lawyers, schooled in complex regulatory interventions" (Stevens 2016, 131). As the reign of the market in sociopolitical ordering was being restored, managing the environmental externalities of mass production on the margins of private property regimes took center stage. It was in this new environment that the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) introduced "sustainable development" as a new compromise between the interests of the capital and nature (WCED 1987). The notion was permeated by "the contradiction between the vital need to 'sustain' the environment and an underlying ethos of growth, based on unchecked accumulation and consumption, to avert the prior problem of redistribution" (Graf 1992, 559).

To align with the WCED's report, in 1989, the ITTO Council had mandated the secretariat to develop a series of voluntary guidelines on "sustainable forest management" or SFM before being taken up by the Permanent Committee on Reforestation and Forest Management (PCF 1990). A "shopping list of possible actions," the guidelines emphasized the increasing participation of different interest groups—from women and youth to Indigenous people and industry representatives—in forest policies and management, with the state mediating conflicting interests (Poore 2003, 71). They were followed by a council resolution two years later that committed the ITTO's producing and consumer members to ensuring that "the total exports of tropical timber products should come from sustainably managed resources by the year 2000" (ITTC Decision 3(X), 10th session, May 1991). Japan, as one of largest contributors to the ITTO's budget, also declared its intention to fund the organization's work toward the Year 2000 Objectives (Dauvergne 1997, 34).

Combining market pragmatism and conservationism, standards developed within SFM embedded a "valuation lens" that prioritized certain flora (slow-growing trees more specifically) over others and rare animals (mammals mostly) over insects or enzymes. SFM treated primary forests and plantations as the same, repackaging "mining" as "forestry" (Lee 1990). In the course of time, indeed, the intense management of tropical forests proved to simplify tropical ecosystems and impoverish species and genotypes (Rice et al. 1997). The soil in tropical regions is poor in minerals that are often found in weathered rocks of temperate climates. Even one round of cutting and selective logging alters the path of tropical forests in unpredictable ways. Not only does the full life of each tree depend on the adjacent ones, but the natural bridges between canopies (often destroyed in the process of building roads into the forests) are key to the survival of arboreal mammals such as sloths or primates and their access to resources (Gregory et al. 2017). It was in this context that Radkau wrote, "sustainability was always more a theme of forest literature than a guiding principle in the practice of forestry, where no one ever managed to spell out what it meant simply and straightforwardly" (2012, 173).

Simultaneously, "sustainable forest management," as a strategic tool configured by international institutions and the epistemic communities surrounding them, embedded a vision of forests as "internationalized" objects of governance, threatening the Third World states' claim to "permanent sovereignty over natural resources." As I will discuss in the next section, the neoliberal turn came to render the aspirations of these states for national economies—and indeed, the North's demands for environmental protection—obsolete, as they were both integrated into narratives of permanent entrepreneurism and crisis management.

VI. Between Conflict and Compromise: Malaysia at UNCED

In the buildup to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Malaysia's defense of industrial logging at home transformed into a defense of the global tropical timber trade. The Mahathir administration was determined to unite other developing states around old claims to "permanent sovereignty over natural resources" and "the right to development," but also new discourses of "common but differentiated responsibilities" and "aid for nature." The series of binding and nonbinding international instruments adopted by the summit, however, came to nominally recognize both the South's insistence on continued economic growth and the North's demand for environmental protection, as both agendas were redefined by neoliberalism and the "autonomous lex mercatoria" that emerged from new international trade and investment treaties in the 1990s (Gill and Cutler 2014, 2).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the developing countries gathering around the NIEO movement had opposed any retreat from economic growth without change in terms of trade and aid (Alam

et al. 2015). The 1974 NIEO Declaration had made no reference to the environment, and the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States stipulated that environmental policies should not affect the pace of development in the Third World.[8] The ongoing debt crisis and structural adjustment in the South, coupled with the stagnation in the North, had shrunk the space for any genuine move toward degrowth (Reid 1992). Reagan's withdrawal from the North-South negotiations in the aftermath of the 1981 International Meeting on Cooperation and Development in Cancun, Mexico, led developing states to re-articulate their positions on economic growth (Franczak 2019). Ultimately, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/228, which launched the preparations for UNCED (developed based on the Group of 77 draft), emphasized the "interlink between environment and economic development" (Mohd Taib 1996, chap. 1).

In October 1989, Malaysia hosted the Conference of the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth, with Mahathir acting as the chairman. As it became clear that a forest convention was going to be pursued at UNCED (alongside two other conventions on climate and biodiversity), the declaration drafted under Mahathir's supervision emphasized the "compelling necessity of economic growth." The instrument argued that environmentalism should not become a "pretext for creating unjustified barriers," and, instead, that further support should be provided to "the work of organizations such as the ITTO in increasing the export of value-added forest products"[9] (Heads of Government of the Commonwealth 1989, para. 6). A year later, Malaysia again hosted the Meeting of the Summit-Level Group for South-South Consultation and Cooperation, known as the Group of 15 (G15). The group was set up by the Non-Aligned movement during the 1989 summit as a strategic move in the face of the decline of the East-West détente, the neoliberal pressure against the developmental state, and the need for re-articulation of demands for aid (Sridharan 1998). Malaysia again took up the task of drafting the final declaration, which called for new financial resources and the transfer of technologies from the North, laying the groundwork for what became the "principle of shared but differentiated responsibility" in the 1991 Declaration of the Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development in Beijing, China.[10] The principle embedded a historicist vision of capitalist development—that today's ecological degradation was the product of the North's extractivism during its industrialization journey, and the South has to bear a lighter burden as it industrializes (Dehm 2021). In that spirit, the declaration advanced that it was, ultimately, upon the industrialized world to "take the lead in eliminating the damage to the environment as well as in assisting the developing countries to deal with the problems facing them" (paras. 8–9).

On the developing world's front, while Japan and Europe (including Britain under Thatcher's neoconservative administration) were willing to give concessions to the developing world in exchange for environmental commitments (Gray 1995), the Bush Sr. administration opposed any constraints on the free market—a retreat from the Clinton administration's admission that the North's consumption patterns were in fact excessive (Harris 2002, 389). In the case of Japan, starting in 1989, the newly established Council of Ministers for Global Environmental Conservation began funding research for environmental technologies and official development aid to the Third World for environmental protection (Gotoh 1997). UNCED Secretary-General Maurice Strong had earlier called on Japan to take leadership on the issue of tropical deforestation, and in a white paper published ahead of the Rio Summit, the Japanese government acknowledged the large scale of tropical timber imports into the country and the environmental responsibilities

[8] G.A. Res. 3281 (XXIX), Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States, art. 30, UN Doc. A/RES/3281(XXIX) (Dec. 12, 1974).
[9] Commonwealth Heads of Government, Langkawi Declaration on the Environment, Langkawi, Malaysia, October 21, 1989, para. 6.
[10] Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development, Beijing Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development, UN Doc. A/CONF.151/PC/85, annex (Aug. 13, 1991).

it involved (Ministry of the Environment 1992, sec. 3-1-3). Yet, as Peng details, "technological fix" took the central stage in Japan's environmental leadership in the 1990s, with massive funds being allocated to carbon capture and technology transfer, and questions of degrowth being completely excluded (1993).[11]

It was, indeed, in the context of these diverging views within the industrialized bloc that the July 1991 G7 Summit in Houston, Texas, acknowledged the "threats of irreversible environmental damage," while insisting that "market economies can best mobilize the means for protecting the environment." Houston Economic Declaration, G7 Economic Summit, Houston, July 11, 1990 (hereinafter Houston Declaration), para. 47. When it came to tropical forests, however, the Bush administration viewed supporting a forest convention as low-hanging fruit to respond to ecological concerns at home and a suitable alternative to decreasing carbon emissions (Davenport 2005; Weissman 1992). As such, the declaration called for "the launch of the international negotiations on a global forest convention or agreement." Houston Declaration, paras. 62, 67. This was one of the nine proposals prepared for a forest convention. Others had characterized tropical forests in various ways ranging from "global commons" subject to global decision-making and "national resources" subject to state sovereignty, to global commons under "the stewardship of the tropical governments"—each with fundamental and long-lasting impacts on the future of the global forest policy (Humphreys 1993, 43, 45; Dehm 2021, chap. 4). [12]

Two months ahead of the June summit, UNCED Secretary-General Maurice Strong took a trip to Malaysia to meet Mahathir in person ahead of the conference and to take part in the Second Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development in Kuala Lumpur (Mohd Taib 1996, 18). However, Malaysia had already taken the lead in uniting the developing world against any forest convention. The "aid-for-nature" rhetoric was particularly gaining ground in the Malaysian campaign. In his keynote at the Kuala Lumpur conference, Mahathir insisted, "[i]f it is in the interests of the rich that we do not cut down our trees, then they must compensate us for the loss of income" (Humphreys 1996b*,* 101). If anything, Bush's statement during the Rio Summit that the "American way of life is not up for negotiations" reinforced Mahathir's argument about the ongoing extractivism of the Global North. Soon, Malaysia was joined by India to argue that the G7's push for a forest convention was nothing but a convenient way to use tropical forests as "a carbon sink" for greenhouse emissions that the North was not inclined to reduce (Mohd Taib 1996, 125). In the face of the diplomatic crisis, Japan sought to replace the disinterested US administration to create a consensus between the South and North, and made a pledge of $7 billion US in environmental aid (Peng 1993, 382).

As the US and the UK continued to insist on a forest convention—accompanied by Bush's pledge of $150 million US to forest conservation (Devroy 1992)—Malaysia announced a counterinitiative for "Greening the World" that involved afforestation of 30 percent of the world's terrestrial area by the year 2000 and was enforced through coordinated national targets. The initiative failed to gain support, and soon enough, the Malaysian delegate proposed an ad hoc working group to identify issues for further study of global forest governance, hoping to restore control to the G77 (Mohd Taib 1996, 91–95). During the preparatory meetings, the head of the Malaysian delegation, Tin Wen Lian, framed deforestation as an implication of poverty and conditioned the conclusion of any forest treaty to financial compensation from the G7. By the third Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting in the summer of 1991, the G77 had united in its opposition, and the Bush

[11] The Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth and the International Centre for Environmental Technology Transfer (ICETT) are two examples.

[12] Other proposals were produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the European Commission, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and the World Resources Institute.

administration decided not to push for the convention any further (Davenport 2005). Japan's leadership also proved to be "limited and unobtrusive" (Kei 1996, 78).

With the demise of the forest convention, the 4th PrepCom meeting instead adopted the G77's proposal for a soft law document titled "Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation, and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests" (UNCED 1992a). The document was a bland re-articulation of the old rhetoric; it recognized the importance of forests to "economic development and maintenance of all forms of life," "the sovereign and inalienable right of states to utilize, manage, and develop their forests in accordance with their development needs and the level of socio-economic development," "the duty to conduct sustainable forestry," and the "importance of local consultation," among other things (UNCED 1992a). Proposals were advanced to include a clause that committed the signatories to future negotiations on a forest convention. Yet Malaysia and India threatened to step back from signing the declaration until the clause was deleted (Humphreys 1996b, 102). Additionally, the link between global trade and deforestation or the potential of setting caps for clear-cutting were entirely excluded from deliberations. The instrument, in fact, declared any unilateral measures to restrict or ban the international trade of timber as "a barrier to sustainable management of forests" (UNCED 1992a, para. 14(a)). The summit also adopted "Agenda 21," a long list of areas for future programmatic activities "covering everything under the sun" (Hoffman 2005, 256). Chapter 11, titled "Combating the Deforestation" recommended the expansion of forest administrations, data collection, and economic analysis, and enhancing the participation of private actors alongside women, local communities, and Indigenous people in forest management, among others (UNCED 1992b).

As the dust of UNCED settled, a process of revision of the 1983 International Tropical Timber Agreement began to take the ITTO beyond its pure trade logic and incorporate a degree of environmentalism by including the Year 2000 Objectives (requiring the organization's members to ensure the sourcing of globally traded timber from sustainably managed forests) in the ITTA. The new agreement, coming into force in 1994, mandated the organization to continue "to promote the expansion and diversification of international trade in tropical timber," while also "enhancing the capacity of members to implement a strategy for achieving exports of tropical timber and timber products from sustainably managed sources by the year 2000." International Tropical Timber Agreement, Jan. 26, 1994, UN Doc. TD/TIMBER.2/Misc.7 (hereinafter 1994 ITTA), art. 1(d)&(e). To align the revised agreement with the GATT negotiations, the new agreement went further and mandated the ITTO to act as a "forum for consultation to promote non-discriminatory timber trade practices," "long-term consumption and continuity of supplies," and "the prices which reflect the cost of sustainable forest management" (1994 ITTA, Article 1(b), (e)).

If the 1983 ITTA embedded the aspiration of the postindependence bureaucratic vanguards for control over natural resources, the 1994 ITTA captured the Third World states' co-optation of the North's liberal environmentalism (Humphreys 1996a). The retreat from "absolute sovereignty" was, in fact, part of the broader shifts within UNCTAD in the aftermath of the Eighth Conference in Cartagena in February 1992. The conference adopted the "New Partnership for Development," which acknowledged the role of private enterprise in the South's economic growth (UNCTAD 1992), what Lemoine described as "the offering by the developing countries of the olive branch and its acceptance by the developed countries" (1998, 410). UNCTAD's abandoning of the NIEO's militancy was followed with the Non-Aligned movement summit in Jakarta in September 1992, where, in the shadow of the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the debt crisis, a collective decision was made to move toward "a constructive North-South dialogue based on

interdependence, mutual interest, and shared responsibility" (Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries 1992).

In the years that followed, Malaysia's attitude toward a future forest convention changed. As the Malaysian timber industry expanded its operations overseas, the state began to view a comprehensive forest convention as useful to gaining access to resources abroad (Humphreys 2005, 5). Such a treaty never came into being, yet back home, the now-retired director general of the ITTO, Freezailah, helped set up the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) to issue sustainability certificates for Malaysian logs finding their way into global markets.

VII. Southern Entrepreneurialism: The Global Rise of the Malaysian Timber Firms

In a 1998 issue of *Ecologist*, Menotti reminded everyone that "far from the media circus assembled in Rio, trade ministers met secretly in Geneva to finalize a lesser-known agreement that would have far greater impact on natural resource exploitation into the next century: the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs" (Menotti 1998, 354). Indeed, as the GATT and subsequent trade liberalization agreements concluded in its aftermath committed states to lowering import tariffs, the 1991 ruling of the GATT Panel declaring the US's embargo on unsustainable Mexican tuna "illegal" opened the eyes of the forest conservationists to what really was at stake in the age of global free trade.[13] Although the decade-long efforts by the US forest and paper industry for an agreement on liberalization of forest products ultimately failed during the 1999 WTO Seattle Round (Humphreys 2006, 211), the wave of deregulation of national forestry sectors and wood processing industries around the temperate forests in and beyond North America put pressure on the tropical forests of Asia, Africa, and South America (Friends of Earth 1992; Bryant et al 1997). What is more, the currency crashes in many tropical countries—caused by liberalization of financial markets—pressured many of these states to open new forests and subsidize logging operations (Bryant et al. 1997).

It was, indeed, in the context of this new material and ideological hegemony that cash-rich timber firms from Malaysia's Sarawak expanded their operations to tropical forests of other continents, building on emerging international and regional investment and trade agreements (Faeh 2011; Findlay 2015; Athukorala 2020). Just as Japan became a source of capital, technology, and ideology for capitalist industrialization in Peninsular Malaysia, and the Peninsula became a blueprint for economic development in Sabah and Sarawak, the Malaysian trajectory of industrialization inspired tropical Africa and South America (Jomo 2016). Mahathir's "Look East" policy promoting Japanese-style trading firms, and his "Vision 2020" for a fully industrialized Malaysia, became the harbinger of a new economic policy at home and abroad (Lim and Gomez 1994; Jeshurun 1993; Yacob and White 2011).

The global rise of the Sarawak timber firms, such as Rimbunan Hijau, Samling, Shin Yang, KTS Group, and WTK Group, followed a longer trajectory of the Chinese migration to Sarawak under the supervision of the Brooke administration in the early nineteenth century. Subsequent colonial administrations enforced a division of labor between, on the one hand, the local population confined to subsistence production and, on the other hand, European and Chinese migrants conducting commercial activities. During the British direct rule after World War II, ethnic Chinese businessmen were encouraged by the state to set up political parties and run in elections. As the British began to leave Borneo in the late 1950s, timber entrepreneurs engaged in "aggressive

[13] GATT Panel Report, *GATT Doc. DS21/R, United States—Restrictions on Imports of Tuna (Tuna I)*, 30 I.L.M. 1594, 1598 (Aug. 16, 1991).

political encroachment in the initial phase of mass politics in Sarawak" (Tien Ngu 2011, 51), paving the way for crony capitalism in the state (White 2004).

The 1971 Malaysian New Economic Policy, reserving a 30 percent quota for ethnic Malays in the national economy, practically increased Malays' share to 60 percent while the Chinese Malaysians' share plummeted to 30 percent by 1990s (Beeson 2000, 339). This, in addition to the arrival of rival timber firms from Sabah and neighboring Indonesia in Sarawak during the timber boom of the mid-1970s, led the Chinese Sarawakian firms to reposition themselves by growing into conglomerates and establishing global linkages. Following the example of Peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia, in 1992 the state of Sarawak imposed a quota on raw logs to promote the processing and export of value-added products (Nagata and Tachibana 2003, 39). To meet the growing demand of these new industries, wood had to be imported from the rest of the tropical world, but also from the temperate forests of Russia (Morishita 2008, 435).

Like with Japan, trade and investment by private firms abroad was backed by development assistance by the Malaysian state. As the North-South conflict over the terms of the global economy gave its place to South-South economic cooperation in the 1990s, the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), set up in 1980, became highly active. The Mahathir administration restructured the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to give higher priority to global economic expansion, and throughout the 1990s, dozens of Malaysian firms followed the prime minister on his trips to Asia, Africa, and South America to take part in formulation of bilateral investment and trade agreements (Hamid 2005, 18). On the eve of the creation of the G15 by the Non-Aligned movement in 1989, Malaysia hosted the International South-South Conference, and Kuala Lumpur was selected as the headquarters for UNCTAD's new South Investment, Trade, and Technological Data Exchange Center (SITTDEC)—a repository of business opportunities in the developing world, used by Malaysian firms in their overseas expansion.

The Malaysian timber industry found its way into West and Central Africa in the early 1990s but more intensely from the mid-1990s onward, setting up subsidiaries or subcontracting smaller logging firms for high-pace logging operations. Private firms such as Rimbunan Hijau, KTS, WTK, and Samling Group, but also state-owned companies such as the Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation (STIDC), took over Africa's rainforests one by one. In the span of a few years, these firms operated as license holders or contractors in areas accounting for 50 percent or more of the total concession area in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Guyana, and Vanuatu (Forest Monitor and World Rainforest Movement 2002, 90). Unlike their European counterparts, Malaysian timber firms did not confine themselves to logging. They engaged in extraction, processing, and marketing of timber and palm oil, but also shipbuilding, insurance, and property development, among other things, insulating themselves from public scrutiny. Palmer and Bulkan speak of "new colonialists taking over prime natural tropical moist forests" (2007, 1). The new enclosures in the tropical forests of Africa, South America, and Oceania materialized in the context of neoliberal states in the South turning their backs against former colonial and semicolonial firms and building novel alliances around the South-South capitalist entrepreneurism.

Among many timber giants, the history of Rimbunan Hijau has been a history of rising from rags to riches. Owned by the Chinese Malaysian tycoon Tiong Hiew King, the firm began operating hundreds of logging concessions across the globe, many of which were in Central Africa. The firm's subsidiary, Shimmer International, obtained a concession from the Cameroonian government in 1995 to both log and develop palm oil plantations across the country. In Gabon, the firm created three subsidiaries to circumvent a cap on surface areas for timber companies, embarking on extracting high-value okoumé trees alongside other Asian firms that had united by setting up the *Union des Forestiers et Industriels Asiatiques du Gabon*, taking over French logging firms

(Karsenty 2022). Most of the logs, both high and low value, were intended for the Chinese market, which has taken over the Japanese share in the global timber trade since the late 1990s. Shimmer International also extracted massive amounts of okoumé trees from Equatorial Guinea, where the logging was not restricted by a concession system or minimum diameter. The logs were processed into veneers in Malaysia and China before being exported into the US's construction market (Environmental Investigation Agency 2023).

Timber logging in many Central and South American rainforests has also been dominated by Malaysian firms. In Belize, logging concessions were given to the Malaysian company Atlantic Industries at costs as low as $1.50 US per hectare (Forest Monitor and World Rainforest Movement 2002, 145). In Guyana, Samling's subsidiary Barama was given a twenty-five-year concession over 1.6 million hectares of the country's forests in exchange for what some viewed as "ludicrous underpricing" (Palmer and Bulkan 2007, 11). In Suriname, the Malaysian firm Berjaya Timber Industries Suriname N. V. operates logging in ways that have been described as "a type of mining operation" (Sizer and Rice, 1995). Malaysian firms entered the Amazon forests of both Peru and Brazil in the mid-1990s. In Peru, the agrobusiness company Asian Plantations cleared a massive surface of primary forests (around six thousand hectares) illegally and through land grabs to develop cocoa and palm oil, soon becoming the subject of national and international criticism (Joshi 2016). In Brazil, Malaysian firms began buying interests in local logging companies in the mid-1990s. In an expected turn of events, WTK's affiliate Amaplac and Rimbunan Hijau's Carolina encroached on their permits, leading the Brazilian courts to issue fines (Macqueen et al. 2003).

VIII. Conclusion

This article sought to offer an account of industrial logging across the tropical forests of the developing world in the post-WWII era by tracing the journey of material capability, ideologies, and institutions from Japan to the forests of Malaysia, and from there to tropical Africa and South America. The history of tropical logging during this era was marked by an oscillation between the creation of new spheres of production and exchange for tropical timber, on the one hand, and managing deforestation on the other hand. Intergovernmental organizations such as the ITTO played a crucial role both in linking the untapped forests of Asia, Africa, and South America to the market and in depoliticizing the politics around these forests by "offering technical solutions" to problems of enclosure and extractivism. Indeed, the normative and discursive enterprise of "sustainable forest management," taking over global policy spheres in the late 1980s and early 1990s, exemplified a convergence among neoliberal states in the North and South and liberal environmentalists to pay lip service to earlier narratives of "limits to growth."

Simultaneously, the internationalization of forest governance in and beyond the 1992 Rio Summit, and after decades of resistance by tropical states, came to embed a retreat by the new and developing world from state developmentalism, the embrace of neoliberal entrepreneurism, and the co-optation of liberal environmentalism for that purpose. It was in this context that the net rate of deforestation in the tropics reached 62 percent between 1990s and 2000s, way higher than FAO's reported 25 percent for the period, and against the background of increasing international norms and standards for forest conservation (Kim et al. 2015). The structural forces generated by the neoliberal turn have since metamorphosed into self-enforcing mechanisms shrinking the space for progressive policymaking. The crises-driven move by Asian firms to the forests of the Congo Basin and South America in the late 1990s—taking place in the context of resource depletion in Southeast Asia and under the banner of "South-South Cooperation"—has become a vivid manifestation of the never-ending cycle of spatial fix and crisis management.

Distant from the dominant ideology and modus operandi of global policy spheres, of course, the hope persists for radical ecologism and a gradual return to self-sufficient modes of living—an aspiration to be achieved through existing political institutions, but also perhaps direct action (Rajagopal 2009; Malm 2021).

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