

## THE NEO-COLONIALISM OF GREEN GOLD

Until not long ago, high oil prizes were attributed in part to the need of transnational enterprises that exploit oil to make large investments for the exploration of difficult oil, that which is located in places of difficult access (high seas or the permafrost). But now, could it be that the abrupt fall in oil prices indicates that transnational companies do not want to continue investing in difficult oil exploration?

An explanation that could be the most accurate one is that the fall in oil prices was due to the economic crisis stemming from the financial problems of the mortgage banking system in the more developed countries.

The world oil consumption is 30 Gbbl/year, and according to Hubbert's curve, conventional oil reserves will last about 50 years. Such reserves are defined as those fields that can be economically exploited by conventional methods. They do not include high sea deposits nor permafrost, remnant oil in exhausted fields, heavy oil, tar sands nor distant stranded gas deposits. The latter could become very important reserves when new processes for *in situ* extraction through gas to liquid technology can be implemented.

The low prices of oil limit the offer. Transnational companies are not interested in oil being sold at a very low price, and although producing countries (OPEC) could be tempted to control production, they seem to lack the know-how needed to increase their income, in addition to the fear of consuming what little is left.

The inhibition in the oil offer favors the increase of the production of another, non-fossil, type of fuel: bio-fuels. Unfortunately, the increase in their production could affect food supply if it is carried out in countries with poorly developed agriculture. Furthermore, it can lead to the destruction of tropical forests as they are converted into raw material mono-cultures (African palm, sugar-cane, etc.) for

bio-fuel production, given that the best conditions for their culture are in the tropical regions. The transformation of tropical forests with the purpose of producing raw materials for bio-fuels has already started in a large scale in Asian tropical regions (in Malaysia and Indonesia palm culture areas cover 2/3 of the cultivated land), posing a danger of extinction to many species. The green gold fever intensifies in Asia, while large extensions of tropical forests in Central Africa and the Amazonas remain prone to contagion.

Bambi's syndrome, that makes any development of the tropics seem catastrophic, appears to become accentuated with the forecast of an increase of such mono-cultures. Most tropical forests are found in developing countries that, in order to increase the energetic consumption associated with development (access to electricity, automotive transportation, etc.) could be tempted to grow raw materials for bio-fuels, both for its own consumption as well as to satisfy the strategic reserves of liquid fuels in the more developed countries, which in the future perhaps will not be of oil, but of bio-fuel. Considering that one hectare of African palm or sugar-cane can produce an average of 30 bbl/year of bio-diesel or bio-ethanol, the global jungle area existing between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn (~1Gha) would be sufficient to supply bio-fuel to cover for the global oil production indicated above.

The past and present of the American continent have been characterized by a succession of colonialisms; first that caused by the gold search in the mountain ranges by the conquerors arriving from the European empires, and afterwards that caused by black oil, first found in the North American plains and thereafter in the Maracaibo Lake, the Gulf of Mexico, etc. It seems that we are now heading towards a new colonialism, that of the green gold, localized in the tropical forests.

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