Neoliberalism and the Biophysical Environment 2: Theorising the Neoliberalisation of Nature

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Abstract
There now exists a significant body of theoretically informed empirical research into ‘neoliberal environments’. It comprises numerous studies which together explore the connections between neoliberal principles and policies, on the one side, and the biophysical world on the other. However, making sense of them is by no means straightforward, despite their common focus on neoliberal environments. It is currently left to readers of these studies to synthesise them into a wider, joined-up account of neoliberal environments. This and two companion articles aim for precisely this sort of broad and coherent understanding. The contribution of this second instalment is to present an overarching political economic theory of ‘neoliberal environments’. By synthesising concepts from the work of Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi and James O’Connor, this article presents a framework for thinking about how neoliberal policies relate to the biophysical world.

Introduction
This is the second of three articles that together aim to make sense a body of new research which explores the relationships between neoliberalism and the non-human world. The first article presented some definitions – specifically, of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberalisation’ – and suggested why they should not be conflated. The article then outlined why, in general terms, neoliberal ideas and policies inevitably have an environmental dimension. This having been done, the present contribution puts forward a political economic theory that explains the ‘neoliberalisation of nature’ over the last 20 years. This theory arises from a close study of theoretically informed empirical research published of late by critical geographers examining nature’s neoliberalisation. Most of them would self-identify as political economists of the environment. I thus begin with a definition of ‘political economy’.

Why Political Economy is Political Ecology Too
As Clive Barnett (2005) shows, the wider literature on neoliberalism produced by critical social scientists has a Foucauldian strand too (see, for instance, Traub-Werner 2007). However, few critical geographers have so far used Foucault’s work on ‘governmentality’ to examine the neoliberalisation of nature. Instead, they have frequently drawn upon (though not exclusively) the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) and James O’Connor (1936–) – political economists all. I will present these ideas later in this essay.

Political economy is as old as classical liberalism. There are countless definitions of the term (see Bowles and Gintis 1988; Mohun 1993; Sutcliffe 1996). The one closest to the intentions of Marx, Polanyi and O’Connor can be stated thus: political economy enquires...
into the origins, character and distribution of wealth. Its principal question about wealth is: ‘who gets what, why and with what consequences?’ It is political economy (not ‘economics’) in the sense that it sees the creation and distribution of wealth as a process involving both regulation by extra-economic institutions (notably the national state and its ancillary bodies) and social struggle – struggle between different actors over their size of the economic pie (e.g. capitalists and workers), and/or with those contesting the wider implications of economic activity on ostensibly non-economic grounds (such as ‘deep ecologists’ protesting against airport expansions and road building programmes). As this last bracketed example implies, political economy – even if its many practitioners have not always acknowledged it – is simultaneously and necessarily political ecology. It regards the economy as a domain of social relations between different empowered actors and institutions; and it insists that economic activity also depends upon, and ‘spills-over’ into, various non-economic domains of existence.

In the sections below, I want to extract from several of the published studies on nature’s neoliberalisation an overarching theory of the various processes and outcomes involved. However, since the nature and aims of ‘theory’ do not speak for themselves, I will briefly venture some comments on these matters – before explaining why an ‘over-arching’ theory of nature’s neoliberalisation is both necessary and worthwhile.

The What and Why of ‘Theory’

Theory is as much a keyword for researchers of all stripes as are staple academic terms like ‘methodology’, ‘hypothesis’ and ‘evidence’. But the intellectual practices it describes are quite varied, meaning that ‘theory’ signifies different things depending on who is using the term. I cannot possibly adjudicate between competing meanings to proffer a putatively ‘correct’ definition of the word. What I can do is describe the nature and aims of theory in a way that is, I think, consistent with the practices of the researchers whose theoretically informed empirical work this article and the one to follow aim to synthesise.

Geography’s most famous theorist – the Marxist David Harvey – once asserted that ‘[t]heories provide cognitive maps for finding our way in a complex and change-able … [world]’ (Harvey 1989, 2). Likewise, in his magisterial book The limits to capital, he maintained that ‘[t]he aim is … to create frameworks of understanding, an elaborated conceptual apparatus, with which to grasp the most significant relationships at work within the intricate dynamics of social transformation’ (Harvey 1982, 450–451). These comments recall Marx’s famous observation that reality is the ‘unity of the diverse’. Faced with complex situations, the analyst must wield his/her mental scalpel and propose concepts that, together, can describe and account for one or more elements of the observed complexity. To theorise is thus to engage in a process of abstract, rather than concrete, argumentation. To ‘abstract’ means to ‘take from’: abstraction thus involves pulling something out of its context of operation in order to understand how it works. Theorists thus do intellectually what clinical researchers do surgically. They dissect a whole (e.g. a social system, a particular city) in order to inspect the parts so that the particular function of these parts and their inter-relationships can be understood. Generally speaking, and to return to Harvey’s cartographic imagery, ‘theorists’ therefore try to represent social (and/or biophysical) reality in terms of a conceptual map that highlights the key topographical features, their relative positioning and their relationships.

Theorising (so understood) is inevitably an ongoing process rather than a road to a final destination. From initial observations of evidence, analysts propose theoretical formula- tions that describe events and processes that, had they actually occurred, would explain...
the evidence. Should these formulations fail, upon close empirical inspection, the theory either requires amendment or else countervailing effects and forces in practice rendered those represented in the theory impotent or latent. Ultimately, ‘good theory’ should serve as a tool for understanding significant elements of any concrete situation. It aims to decipher a complexity we do not understand – that of the real world – with one that we do – the conceptual complexity of theory. As such, theory is not a substitute for empirical work but a necessary precursor to it – and theory ought, in turn, to be modified where necessary as a result of new empirical findings. The theoretical and the empirical are thus symbiotic (or certainly should be).

Those geographers who have used theoretical propositions put forward by Marx, Polanyi and O’Connor have done so in different topical and geographical contexts, albeit as part of a wider effort to interrogate ‘neoliberal environments’. For instance, the Pennsylvania State University geographer James McCarthy (2004) uses O’Connor’s concept of the ‘conditions of production’ and Marx’s idea of ‘primitive accumulation’ to theorise the behaviour of transnational corporations operating within the rules of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Morgan Robertson (2004), also in the USA, uses Marx’s concept of economic value to understand how the science of wetland conservation gets articulated with the logic of profit making. Meanwhile, Ohio State University geographer Becky Mansfield (2004) has used Polanyi’s notion of the ‘double movement’ to make sense of the regulation of US fisheries industries in the north Pacific. There are many other examples I could offer. What is needed, I suggest, is a way of bringing these separately deployed theoretical propositions together. The result would be a more joined-up conceptual understanding of nature’s neoliberalisations in its varied detailed forms. This is the sort of ‘overarching’ conceptual map I want now to draw in next two sections.

Elements of a Holistic Theory: Marx, Polanyi and O’Connor

The intellectual link between Marx, Polanyi and O’Connor is strong. Marx was a political economist whose principal object of analysis (and ire) was the economic system we know as ‘capitalism’. Polanyi, writing some 50 years after Marx’s death, was profoundly influenced by his writings. Meanwhile, O’Connor (an emeritus professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz) bases his work about capitalism–nature relations on that of Marx and Polanyi combined. The connection to neoliberalism is as follows: the work of both Marx and O’Connor suggests that, while capitalism assumes different detailed forms through time and across space, it nonetheless retains a consistent ‘operating hardware’; meanwhile, Polanyi’s most famous work (The great transformation, 1944) was an historical analysis of one of these detailed forms – namely, neoliberalism’s predecessor, classical liberalism. Together, their writings provide us with a cognitive map for thinking about nature’s neoliberalisation as a specific manifestation of processes of capital accumulation. Let me explain.

MARX

Marx said little of a systematic nature about the non-human world. But he did, of course, say a great deal about capitalism as a specific kind of economy. The Marx of Capital (1867) regarded capitalism as a process not a thing; that is, a system whose governing logics ensure that it is astonishingly dynamic. Three logics – or ‘rules of the game’ – stand out above all others within this mode of production. First, capitalism is growth-orientated: it is a process of commodity production, distribution, sale, servicing and consumption
whose central goal is to realise more wealth (notably, in the form of money capital) than was required to make, move, maintain, sell and dispose of commodities in the first place. Secondly, commodity production occurs within a competitive environment: firms of various kinds in diverse economic sectors find themselves vying for market-share with rival producers, except in relatively rare cases of monopoly control where barriers to market entry are high. Third, the compulsion to accumulate wealth in a competitive economic environment ensures constant pressure for producers to innovate in any and all aspects of their business practice. These innovations can relate to new products, new processes and locations of production, the creation of new needs and wants among consumers, the search for new markets, efforts to alter regulatory rules, and a host of other things too (see Figure 1).

Together, this trinity of logics ensures that the accumulation of capital is a restless and unstable process. The fine details and, in time, broad outlines of prevailing patterns of commodity production, transportation, sale, servicing, consumption and disposal are always being remade. Periodically, and excepting highly skilled regulation by governmental bodies and other powerful state-like actors, this ceaseless process of change produces crises by virtue of the internal contradictions between growth, competition and innovation. The classic example is when numerous firms increase productivity and efficiency by replacing wage labour with machinery, causing consumer purchasing power to tendentially decline – this being Marx’s famously identified tension between the forces and relations of production. Crises take the form of surplus capital (commodities, money, capital equipment, fixed plant and so on) existing in the midst of insufficient opportunities for their absorption. This seemingly peculiar combination of surplus and scarcity reflects the specific form in which wealth is measured in capitalist societies: not as material wealth (the quantity and quality of diverse commodities) but as social wealth (represented as the real abstraction money, and created in the process of production by wage workers). Because workers are commodified within the capitalist mode of production they require wages (money capital) in order to live, and accordingly lack the capacity to self-produce the basket of basic and (depending on their income) more luxury commodities they use their wages to purchase. Capitalist crises are thus, fundamentally, both crises of ‘over-production’ and ‘under-consumption’ at the same time: material abundance juxtaposed with social want is part of capitalism’s irrational rationality because of the contradictions surrounding the source of both wealth and consumer demand (i.e. wage labour).

Such crises are also ramified events for the simple reason that ‘economic’ affairs are always more than simply ‘business’ matters – this applies equally during periods of economic growth and stability. State bodies dependent on taxes and loans to fund their suite of activities can suffer fiscal and legitimacy crises when the motor of capital accumu-

Fig. 1. The process of capital accumulation. In capitalist societies firms must compete for market share in their search for profit, leading to innovation in acts of production and in the final product. Marx argued that all profit ($\Delta$) is ultimately derived from workers’ labour (LP) yet, contradictorily, the ‘logic’ of capitalism entails replacing workers with technology (e.g. smart machines).
lation dies down. Workers and their dependents – whose reproduction depends on requisite jobs and wages – can find themselves un- or underemployed, poorly paid, compelled to migrate or even completely destitute. And all manner of civil society, voluntary and charitable organisations, necessarily dependent on flows of money from the productive sphere, can also find themselves unable to perform their roles and functions effectively or at all. Even when crises do not unfold, Marx argued that capitalism’s contradictions keep all the relevant parties on their toes: workers must fight for good wages, capitalists must fight to secure profits for themselves and shareholders, and so on (see Figure 2).

Clearly, this is only a sketch of Marx’s theoretical word-picture of capitalism. One of its key attributes, it seems to me, is its demonstration that processes of capital accumulation not only have creative destruction written-into their DNA but are also *tendentiously all-encompassing*. They insinuate themselves far beyond the formal sphere of the ‘economy’, influencing daily life, patterns of social and biological reproduction, state strategies and options, the public domain and much more. This means that the (il)logics of capital accumulation both ‘internalise’ a set of putatively separate domains of existence, and that these domains – even if they are ultimately irreducible to these (il)logics – cannot fail to be affected by them, often profoundly so.^{2}\footnote{Fig. 2. Crises of capital accumulation and their wider impact. Capitalism, according to Marx, is an internally contradictory mode of commodity production. Periodically, more-or-less severe economic crises ensue, where firms cannot find markets for their products. Firms go bankrupt, workers lose jobs en masse and communities suffer a dry-up of income and expenditure.}

**POLANYI**

*The great transformation* is a work of history, but it is perfectly possible to extract some general insights from Polanyi’s otherwise specific argument that can help us make sense of the neoliberal present. As with my summary of Marx, I am not going to dwell on different possible readings of Polanyi’s work [see, among many examples, Block (2003)] – instead I extract what I regard as some powerful and useful insights from his best-known text. Polanyi wrote *The great transformation* in the early 1940s in an attempt to make sense of the long era of ‘liberal capitalism’ that had ended in a global, 6-year conflagration. A close student of Marx’s writings, Polanyi’s argument repeats but also usefully supplements the former’s political economic teachings. Four Polanyian insights stand-out. First, *The great transformation* made use of the important idea of a ‘pseudo-’ or ‘fictitious commodity’. This is any commodity whose social, cultural and/or ecological value *exceeds* the market value placed upon it within a capitalist system. Polanyi identified labour (workers, their dependents and the unemployed) and land (nature and environment) among his list of fictitious commodities because neither human beings nor the biophysical world exist to meet the demands of capital accumulation. Even so, both are deeply affected by its
logics and rhythms meaning that they are characterised by ‘doubleness’ or ‘duality’: they inhabit a world both within and beyond ‘the market’. Secondly, this connects to the notion of ‘embeddedness’ – the idea that a capitalist economy must exist in a more-than-capitalist world. This is a world of social, cultural, economic, political and biophysical diversity that confronts capitalist economies as both opportunities and barriers: ‘outsides’ that can be made profitable given the right conditions but whose non-commodification may, also, be necessary to capitalism’s survival.

Thirdly, Polanyi coined the term ‘the double movement’ to describe a situation where attempts to expand the reach and depth of capitalist commodification are met by more-or-less vocal (even violent) forms of resistance. The ‘self-protection’ of society from the excesses of liberal capitalism – such as low wages, a minimal public sector and unchecked environmental externalities – can take various forms. It is, Polanyi showed, an indication of free market capitalism’s inability to disembed itself socially and biophysically from what historian E. P. Thompson (1991, 10) called ‘a tissue of beliefs and usages’. However, the double movement need not be read as a prediction – borne-out by past history – of the likely fate of neoliberalism. For Polanyi’s fourth key insight was that a ‘market economy’ can extend itself quite far so long as what he called a ‘market society’ can be engineered and suitably regulated. A market society is one where individuals and communities are somehow encouraged to ‘live with’ the fairly stark forms of creative destruction that are the hallmark of ‘capitalism unleashed’. Capitalism can, then, live with, as well as influence, a wide range of ‘moral economies’ – some of which are more accommodating than others. See Box 1 for a summary of Polanyi’s key insights.

Box 1: Karl Polanyi’s key ideas in The great transformation

- Capitalism depends upon ‘fictitious’ or ‘pseudo-commodities’ in order to function, notably wage workers and the non-human world. These commodities are not, however, created to serve the needs of capitalism and must be made to bend to the will of capitalist entrepreneurs.
- Capitalism as an economic system exists in diverse concrete forms and is always ‘embedded’: that is, situated in a wider world of social practices, values and phenomena that make a difference to how capitalism can operate. So there is no such thing as a universally consistent ‘capitalism’ unaffected by circumstances of time and location.
- In its nineteeth liberal form, the growth and expansion of capitalism in Europe led to a ‘counter-movement’ as ordinary people sought to protect themselves from the worst consequences of ‘market rule’ – such as the lack of social security payments for the unemployed.
- The ‘market economy’, if it is to accepted by people, requires a shift in societal values of the sort that Margaret Thatcher sought to achieve in 1980s Britain – a shift towards a ‘market society’ with its emphasis of individualism, self responsibility and weak sense of social solidarity.

Clearly, Polanyi’s argument takes its leave from the late Marx’s analysis of capitalism. It is ultimately an account of how capitalist crises occur, but with an accent not only on ‘internal’ contradictions but also (and equally) ‘external’ friction between capitalism and what we might call its ‘constitutive outsides’. Where Polanyi differs notably from the late
Marx is in two areas. First, he brings biophysical issues more directly and crisply into a critique of political economy via the concept of ‘fictitious commodities’. Secondly, where Marx hoped that capitalism would be undone by revolutionary struggle instigated by waged-workers, Polanyi’s argument points alternately to cooptation (a market society) and reform from within (the double movement). This means that Polanyi was ultimately far less sanguine than Marx about the possibility for crises (of capital, the state, working people, of resource availability, and/or within civil society) leading to structural change (i.e. the overthrow of capitalism; see Burawoy 2003; cf. Birchfield 1999).

O’CONNOR

As I noted above, Marx said little of a systematic nature about capitalism–environment relations. James O’Connor is one of a few contemporary Marxists to make amends. In his book, *Natural causes* (1998) and a series of programmatic Marxist articles, O’Connor has coined the terms ‘the second contradiction’, ‘the conditions of production’ and ‘under-production crises’. This trinity of concepts is useful, properly understood. The first and second connect Marx and Polanyi in order to suggest that the ‘external’ contradictions capitalism confronts are just as important to its evolution (and potential demise) as the internal dialectics. By conditions of production O’Connor refers to all those phenomena upon which capitalism depends for its existence but which, either absolutely or relatively, it is unable to produce from within. This is a version of the fictitious commodity and embeddedness arguments, but it is given a systematic spin by O’Connor. He identifies ‘environmental conditions’ (biophysical resources, be they economically productive, indirectly productive or ambient), ‘personal conditions’ (all those things necessary to self-reproduce a living person, like housing) and ‘communal conditions’ (all those shared amenities and assets that people rely upon for social and biological reproduction, like roads, public transport, schools, the legal system, etc.). So ‘conditions of production’ is O’Connor’s way of capturing the umbilical connection between capitalism, the domain of human reproduction and the realm of biophysical nature. It is his way of suggesting that the ‘first’ (specified in Marx’s crisis theory) and ‘second’ contradictions may be concurrent and causally related rather than separate – even though it is possible for a growing economy to be governed in such a way that a sharp deterioration in the conditions of production occurs (think of China today or early-to-late Victorian Britain).

O’Connor’s central argument is that capitalism has a tendency to ‘underproduce’ these conditions of production, though not necessarily all at the same time or to the same degree. In all its roles and capacities, the biophysical world has a materiality that capitalist production cannot ultimately master or control. For example, raw material deposits become exhausted; insufficient space may be available in the right places for new infrastructure projects; and environmental sinks may become polluted and harm a range of constituencies. Cases like these, O’Connor argues, are not just problems for capitalist firms and their employees. They are also problems for society at large because resource scarcity and environmental degradation pose the wider issue of who has access, or suffers the consequences, when particular elements of the biophysical world are enclosed or altered by processes of capital accumulation. If that world is, for capitalists, merely a means to the ultimate end of profitability, for diverse other stakeholders it is variously a source of spiritual meaning, aesthetic pleasure, subsistence use-values and so on. This immediately poses the question of how conflicts over the appropriate way to value the non-human world are to be avoided or somehow negotiated. And here O’Connor points-up the central role of the national state and its adjuncts, building on his germinal work *The fiscal crisis of the state* (1973).
O’Connor regards the national state as the key regulator of capital accumulation within its sovereign territory. It must somehow work within and outside the capitalist system, helping to ensure economic growth and social stability by ameliorating the system’s internal contradictions and playing a role in providing, and maintaining the health of, various conditions of production. This involves a mix of setting framework conditions for business practice (e.g. commercial law), being a service provider to the full range of social groups and, more generally, steering the content and discursive framing of public debates about national affairs. For business, the national state – and the sub- and supra-national institutions it may distribute some of its power to – can help to mitigate or offset the first and/or second contradictions. For instance, it can raise business taxes to pay for environmental clean-ups or craft taxation policy so as to encourage the development of replacements for declining natural resources. However, other national stakeholders – workers, non-governmental organisations, charities and so on – may politicise the conditions of production in ways that run-up against business interests. In this situation the state somehow has to mediate, depending on the balance of power among competing parties. As I suggested earlier, objective material changes to nature caused by capitalist firms do not speak for themselves. They are, instead, framed discursively by a range of actors who may – as wage workers often do – find themselves, rather uncomfortably, wearing more than one hat (are you an employee, a consumer, a shareholder, an environmentalist, a concerned parent or all of these things?). Whether and how capitalism’s tendency to ‘under-produce’ the conditions of production is deemed to be a ‘problem’, let alone a ‘crisis’, depends greatly on how these actors represent these conditions semiotically and their ability, at any given time, to use the state apparatus or other institutions to their advantage (see Figure 3).

O’Connor’s work is, as my summary suggests, very relational and holistic. It works biophysical issues into Marx’s political economy in a fairly systematic way, building on Polanyi’s ideas. It has several specific things to recommend it. First, it strongly accents the ‘spill-over’ effects of capitalist political economy onto ecology and society, even as it highlights capital’s absolute dependence on these two connected domains. Secondly, it rightly focuses on national states and their adjuncts as key mediating bodies in the triangular relations between capitalists, nature and the wider society [see also Block (1994) and Eckersley (2004)]. Thirdly, it moves beyond ‘objectivist’ accounts of environmental problems and crises, reminding us that discourses and power-plays of various kinds occupy a key role in determining whether and how ‘real’ contradictions become politicised by those who stand to suffer from them [see, also, O’Connor (1987)]. Fourthly, it makes plain how the socio-economic and cultural positionality of different actors makes a difference to how the internal and external contradictions of capital are experienced, negotiated and/or reacted to.

Finally, and relatedly, O’Connor’s work shows that the labour movement and the (now not so ‘new’) new social movements have much to gain by working in concert. ‘Environmentalisms’ of various kinds are still typically represented by social scientists as social movement struggles, as are those concerning identity, cultural recognition, gender, ‘race’ and the like. Yet classic labour movement concerns about the workplace and the reproductive sphere, O’Connor suggests, cannot be divorced from a consideration of putatively ‘non-economic’ issues like a person’s right to clean water, unpolluted air or access to the environmental commons. They bleed into each other because capitalism perforates whatever membrane formerly separated them. Revolutionary and reformist movements against capital cannot, therefore, begin-and-end with classic labour struggle a la ‘traditional Marxism’. In the case of the environmental movement – specifically
its left-wing components – the challenge is to connect productively with labour politics while somehow negotiating the ‘jobs versus environment’ antithesis that partly explains the historic ‘red-green’ antipathy.\(^5\)

**Conceptual Synthesis**

It is no surprise that geographical researchers like Becky Mansfield, James McCarthy and Morgan Robertson (among many others) draw variously upon Marx, Polanyi and O’Connor to inform their empirical work. If we weave this trio’s insights together we can derive a set of ‘strong’ theses and expectations about the why and wherefore of nature’s neoliberalisation today. These theses and expectations can be summarised as two ideal-typical scenarios which may (or may not) apply in different situations where relations to the non-human world are neoliberalised (see Table 1). They are theses and expectations about ‘neoliberalism’ in a capitalism world. Since, as I have argued, such
A singular neoliberalism is not synonymous with neoliberalisation, the conceptual map presented in this section provides a diagnostic tool with which to identify commonalities and gaps between theory and reality. To phrase it in ‘scientific’ terms, the theory can generate testable hypotheses.

The first scenario shows neoliberalism proceeding apace sectorally and spatially, extending capitalism’s reach still further within existing capitalist states while also entraining territories hitherto non- or only weakly capitalist to dramatic effect. The biophysical world becomes increasingly commodified – creating profits and jobs. New raw material sources, energy sources, physical spaces and waste disposal zones are sought-out and used. This commodification of nature can also involve remediation, conservation and nature-protection so that raw material stocks, energy sources, physical spaces and waste sinks are not always aggressively suborned to profit (or, rather, their protection/remediation becomes the means to the end of profitability). This is a generalisation of the so-called ‘environmental Kuznets curve’ idea (see Stern 2001), a neoliberal version of ‘sustainable development’ which even some Marxists reluctantly concede may not be too far fetched (see Buck 2007). The successful interpellation of people as ‘individuals’ allows them to exercise producer and consumer choice over how they relate, through the market, to the biophysical world. The dependence of large numbers of jobs upon nature-based commerce additionally binds many individuals to the continuation of nature’s neoliberalisation. More generally, the creation of a set of ‘market societies’ smooths the transition to a set of interconnected ‘market economies’. This minimises dissent regarding the various remaining ‘externalities’ of the market, not least because previously ‘political’ issues become bureaucratised and monetised. It means the business sector can proceed with broad public, worker and consumer consent. It means that the state does not, on the

Table 1. Neoliberalism and the biophysical environment: contrasting theoretical scenarios.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neoliberalism triumphant</th>
<th>Neoliberalism on the back-foot</th>
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<tr>
<td>Geographical expansion of neoliberal capitalism into new territories.</td>
<td>Geographical contraction of neoliberal capitalism as it suffers a crisis of legitimacy among various populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased commodification of the biophysical environment and natural resources, leading to their heightened exploitation and conservation.</td>
<td>Increased environmental problems linked to heightened exploitation of nature plus failure of markets to adequately ‘internalise’ environmental ‘externalities’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Successful creation of an individualist ethic among national and regional populations; erosion of an ethic of social solidarity.</td>
<td>Resurgent anti-neoliberal moral economies posit collectivist values accenting solidarity and public welfare.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing levels of paid employment binds individuals to the work- and consumption-sides of the prevailing order.</td>
<td>Increasing social inequality and unemployment leads people to demand a new political economic model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many otherwise ‘political’ issues get depoliticised as they become matters for ‘the market’ to decide and to manage.</td>
<td>‘The market’ is unable to address a range of social and ecological problems of its own making, such that these problems become live political issues which national and supranational state bodies must address through reform and tighter regulation of the market.</td>
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<td>NGOs, NSMs, charities, etc. increase in number and act as ‘fanking institutions’, applying sticking plaster to the wounds inflicted on society and environment by neoliberalism.</td>
<td>NGOs, NSMs, charities, etc. seen as unable to manage the negative side of neoliberalism, leading to calls for ‘interventionist’ state policies that protect the public and environment more robustly.</td>
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whole, get dragged into – let alone become the focus of – outstanding problems of ‘market failure’, be they biophysical or social. And it means that various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), new social movements (NSMs) and voluntary groups are, for the most part, able to act successfully as flanking organisations that, through their piecemeal actions, do not threaten the neoliberal order or encourage others to seriously challenge it.

The second scenario, in contrast to all this, looks very different indeed. It depicts a world in which the rapid expansion of capitalism – which is, after all, what neoliberalism amounts to – produces massive additional environmental change that cannot be successfully managed discursively or materially. This change is caused by unprecedented levels of commodity production, transportation, consumption and disposal. Some of this change is highly localised and regionalised, some of it is slower, longer-term, large-scale change that may not be immediately apparent but which is nonetheless very significant over time. Alone, or together with the various employment and social problems created by neoliberalism, this environmental change gets politicised: there is a ‘double-movement’ against deteriorating ‘conditions of production’ as a market economy rubs-up against various pre-existing moral economies and ‘unruly’ biophysical systems. It is a reaction in which otherwise separate and atomised labour and non-labour movements, organisations and struggles may possibly find common cause. The interests and claims of those workers whose jobs are directly dependent on environmentally destructive practices are outweighed by those of other labour and non-labour groups. Unless new government policies can stymie this double movement, business practice in the environment/resource sectors becomes the focus of social protest. State bodies must somehow deal with all this, and may themselves become the subject of intense pressure from citizens, workers, NGOs and the like. Depending on how these bodies and capitalist firms respond, the double movement leads to strong reform at a minimum, or something even more radical and threatening to the neoliberal order.

The point, of course, is that these two rather stark scenarios should be seen as representing interpenetrating tendencies within the theory of neoliberal environments that I have laid-out. The dialectical interplay of multiple opposing forces – something which is internalised by numerous actors, individuals and institutions – defines a research agenda for the analysis of neoliberal environments in the real world. Which raises the crucial question: how can the theoretical ideas presented in this section be used as a strong heuristic to guide future empirical research into neoliberal environments, as well as to help us understand the already-existing concrete studies?

Conclusion

If the two scenarios outlined above were to operate in a largely ageographical, atemporal world they would describe a universal dialectic where one of them won-out, or where there was some sort of compromise. But actually existing neoliberalism does not, needless to say, correspond to this image of two sets of warring tendencies operative at all points of the compass. As Mansfield (2004, 580) insists,

> [t]he particular forms that neoliberalism takes should not be taken as aberrant from an ideal … [We] … need to acknowledge that [neoliberalism] … is something created in practice, and that through practice it becomes varied, fractured and even contradictory (emphasis added).

The value of Mansfield’s research into nature’s neoliberalisation – like that of many other critical geographers – is precisely this focus on practice: on the uneven geographies of
neoliberalisation that Wendy Larner, Jamie Peck and Aihwa Ong insist be the object of our attention (see the article prior to this one). It is to the concrete research that I turn in the next essay, the third and final one in the set.

Short Biography

Noel Castree is a Professor of Geography at Manchester University, England. He was educated at the universities of Oxford and British Columbia. His main research interest is in the political economy of environmental change, drawing on Marxian theory. He has also written about the history, nature and politics of Geography as a university subject. He is coeditor of *A companion to environmental geography* (2009, Wiley-Blackwell) and author of the forthcoming *Making sense of nature* (2012, Routledge).

Notes

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1 In geography, New Zealanders Wendy Larner and Richard LeHeron have been especially keen to marry Foucauldian and political economy perspectives together.

2 Despite his work falling out of favour among critical academics during the 1980s and 1990s, it is now making a minor comeback as a new generation of researchers and activists discover his work. See Bensaïd (2002, [1995]), Collier (2004) and Wheen (2000).

3 Andrew Sayer (2007) provides a contemporary reflection on the important but far-from-new concept of the ‘moral economy’.

4 This basic view of the capitalist state is not out-of-line with later, more fine-grained analyses of the complexities of, and dilemmas besetting, state bodies – see, for example, Jessop (2002).

5 As many readers will know, the aims of labour politics in general and Marxist-cum-socialist politics more particularly have not had much of an environmental dimension historically. Meanwhile, a lot of environmental thought and politics since the late nineteenth century has not, until the last 20 years, paid much heed to issues of social justice, livelihoods and human rights.

References


