

Capital Accumulation, Hegemony and Socio-Ecological Struggles: Insights from the ENTITLE Project

Diego Andreucci, María Jesús Beltrán, Irina Velicu and Christos Zografos

This special issue presents findings and reflections of scholars who participated in a five-year interdisciplinary research and training programme, the European Network of Political Ecology (ENTITLE)¹. Through an engagement with key topics and debates of ENTITLE research, which included the themes of socio-ecological struggles and movements, commons, democracy and disasters, it aims to advance understanding of the relationships between capital, nature and social transformation, as well as related conceptualisations. It brings together theoretical and empirical contributions from diverse disciplines within the overarching framework of political ecology, such as critical geography, environmental history, development studies and ecological economics. It aims to advance what the final ENTITLE conference called “undisciplined environments,”² meaning collective efforts to think and enact political and ecological struggles in new ways, beyond scholarly traditions and conventional disciplines.

The contributions mobilise conceptual frameworks from several strands of critical theory on society, politics and the environment, including Marxist and post-structural theory. All papers are based on original empirical research that employs a diversity of methods including participant and direct observation, qualitative interviews, life stories and archival research. Articles include case studies from Southern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, East Africa and South Asia. Taken together, they provide analysis of and reflection on: *a*) new and re-emerging tendencies in the political ecology of capitalism; and *b*) historical and contemporary socio-ecological struggles and movements around the world.

Political Ecologies of Capitalism

The articles in this special issue advance critiques of the political economy and ecology of contemporary capitalism, with an emphasis on accumulation strategies associated with the uneven expansion and crisis of neoliberalism. In the last four decades, important shifts have taken place in global capitalism with considerable socio-ecological implications, which are associated with the reassertion and intensification of various guises of “primitive accumulation.” Harvey (2003) has convincingly argued that forms of accumulation based on “dispossession” have gained prominence in many geographical contexts and social spheres over “traditional” forms of capital accumulation and expansion based on labour exploitation. Of course, this is not to say that accumulation *strictu sensu*, that is, the generation and further valorisation of surplus value in commodity production, has lost its relevance. Indeed, exploitation has also intensified, and capital dominance over labour strengthened via the geographical and technical reconfiguration of production and the consequent flexibilisation and deterioration of working conditions.

¹ The network was funded by European Commission’s 7th Framework Programme; for more details see: <http://www.politicaecology.eu>

² The conference took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from 20 to 24 March 2016. See details about the event here: <http://www.ces.uc.pt/undisciplined-environments/>

Yet it is clear that a crisis-ridden capitalism is increasingly reliant on processes of commodification, privatisation and the *enclosure* of a multiplicity of socio-ecological commons (De Angelis, 2001).

Political ecologists have extensively documented those processes in the last decade, through exploring different instances of “nature’s neoliberalisation” (Heynen and Robbins, 2005) and other ways in which nature is turned into an “accumulation strategy” (Smith, 2009). Yet, conceptually refining and empirically grounding the analysis of such processes are still at their early stages. The contributions in this special issue provide important inroads into this work. Specifically, all of them confront in some ways the problem of “accumulation by dispossession”. The authors have productively mobilised this analytical lens to examine phenomena as diverse as the politics of austerity in post-crisis Europe (Calvário *et al.*), commons enclosure through colonial relations in Puerto Rico (García López *et al.*) and hydropower and dam hazards as an instance of “*capital-driven disasters*” (Huber *et al.*). The concept of accumulation by dispossession is extremely useful for showing that similar processes are at work in seemingly incomparable historical and geographical contexts and for helping discern the generality of the process of capitalist dispossession and enclosure expressing itself in the specificity of diverse socio-ecological phenomena. Yet, this same malleability implies that Harvey’s idea risks becoming overstretched and losing its conceptual sharpness.

The paper by Andreucci *et al.* shifts attention to the category of rent. It aims to unpack accumulation by dispossession by identifying two key moments that get often conflated or confused. First, the moment of *enclosure*, which establishes or redefines property rights and thus generates the basis for rent extraction for the individual or organization that is assigned the right. And second, the appropriation of rent, as surplus value generated in production, by the property title-holder at the expense of other actors. This is what the article’s authors call “*value grabbing*,”³ a term that aims to render visible and politicise taken-for-granted distributional relations that have implications for socio-ecological struggles and inequalities. As the authors show through drawing examples from cases of struggles around housing, land grabbing and resource extraction, this notion offers insights into political ecological conflicts that cannot be reduced to accumulation *per se*, and helps us to see the similarities between them.

If capitalism shifts towards dispossession and rent extraction, austerity emerges as a “class politics for re-engineering society and privately appropriating the commons” (Calvário *et al.*, 1). After being imposed through debt conditionality and with nefarious social consequences by the World Bank and the IMF on several countries in the so-called “global South” throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, austerity has “come home,” as it were. It has emerged as the central political response to the financial crisis of 2008, becoming a keyword for accelerating neoliberal restructuring in Southern (and more general, peripheral) Europe and for launching an unprecedented attack on social and labour rights. Through focussing on Greece, Calvário *et al.* pose the important and under-explored question of how the restructuring that accompanies austerity influences socio-ecological issues and related dynamics of struggles. One of the cases they present is the Halkidiki gold mine, which exemplifies how capitalism’s shift towards a *value-grabbing* mode pushes the privatisation and financialisation of natural resources and socio-ecological commons. The authors show how the sense of urgency attributed to the crisis becomes a justification for escalating land

³ It is not our intention here to make a case against Harvey. Indeed, it was David Harvey himself who—after listening to some of the contributors to this special issue present their work at an ENTITLE Summer School—commented: “it seems to me that what all of these cases have in common is the centrality of rent”.

dispossession and rent-based activities such as extraction, luxury tourism and large-scale energy production.

Another important theme in the special issue is that of “disaster capitalism.” The book by Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), explicitly inspired by Harvey’s analysis of neoliberalism, drew a parallel between the shock-therapy style of intervention associated with neoliberal restructuring and the co-production and exploitation of disasters. The contribution by Huber *et al.* deals precisely with the topic of “unnatural” disasters, specifically those associated with large-scale hydroelectric production. While the issue of “socially constructed” disasters is a long-explored topic in natural hazards research and political ecology, the novelty of this paper resides in questioning the apolitical character of the social origin and consequences of disasters, as captured by the phrase “socially constructed” in mainstream as well as critical debate.

It is well known that in most cases natural disasters are not an “act of God” but the product of bad planning or management, and that the impacts of disasters are often the avoidable product of political decisions. Yet Huber *et al.* push the argument further by showing that disasters are not just socially constructed, but indeed *capital-drive*. As they illustrate through comparing historical cases of dam-related disasters in 1960s Italy and Francoist Spain with the contemporary case of the Lower Subansiri dam in Northeast India, the capital-driven nature of disasters is visible in at least two ways. First, the “development imperative” behind capital’s need to “produce nature” through enclosure and rent extraction, and the close association between state interests, capitalists and financiers, leads to ignoring not only socio-environmental standards but also the knowledge of those most affected and best positioned to detect possible disastrous outcomes. Second, the impacts of disasters reinforce pre-existing patterns of uneven development and environmental injustice or racism. This happens to the point that—as the authors conclude (18) drawing on Andy Storey (2008)—“capitalising on (or in spite of) disasters is not a new form of capitalist technique but rather part of the historical continuum of processes of accumulation through dispossession.”

The “discursive” moment necessary for facilitating and legitimising capitalist expansion through de-politicising socio-ecological restructuring is the last theme that runs through the four papers of this special issue. The papers provide four key insights as regards this process. First, the attribution of property rights to all sorts of hitherto uncommodified socio-natures, from water and GMOs to software and cultural products, relies necessarily on a discursive “lifting” (Prudham, 2007) that sustains the fiction behind such pseudo-commodities (Andreucci *et al.*, this issue). Second, the growth or development imperative is increasingly mobilised in order to promote large-scale infrastructural projects, such as resource extraction or energy production activities, which facilitate the inclusion of natural resources in global circuits of capital accumulation and value circulation at the expense of livelihoods and ecologies (Huber *et al.*). Third, similarly, important ideological work is invested into producing, controlling and sanitising historical memory, as in the case of past disasters analysed by Huber *et al.*, in order to reinforce and silence critiques of high modernist faith in technology’s and capital’s mastery over nature. Lastly, discourses such as that of crisis and “austerity” are mobilised by neoliberal governments and bureaucrats in Europe to create a sense of urgency and a “there-is-no-alternative” closure around large-scale, capital-driven, socio-ecological re-organisations (Calvário *et al.*, García López *et al.*).

Beyond counterproductive dichotomies separating the political economic from the ideological, discursive processes are treated by the contributors to this special issue as a material force shaping the creation of consent around capital-driven restructurings, enrolling natures and subjects in the process. Yet, as the

papers show, these processes are also contested and challenged from below. A second goal of this special issue is precisely to explore the implications of the tendencies sketched above for socio-ecological struggles and alternatives.

From Resistance to Counter-Hegemony

Unpacking accumulation by dispossession allows us to distinguish two interrelated forms of class struggles, struggles against enclosure and struggles against surplus value appropriation. First, a key axis of struggle against the expansion of capitalist relations takes place against privatisation and the establishment of private property rights over a variety of socio-natures, what Andreucci *et al.* in this issue call “pseudo-commodification” (the creation of “pseudo-commodities”). This is one side of struggles against accumulation by dispossession, resisting processes of enclosure over a multiplicity of socio-ecological commons. Opposing the construction of mega-dams as well as contesting large-scale gold mining or “fortress conservation” over communal forests are all examples of resistance to enclosure presented by the papers in this special issue. These types of struggles have intensified in the last decades, gaining increasing visibility alongside or even prominence over “traditional” (yet continuing) struggles over labour and the wage relation.

Second, parallel to both labour struggles and resistance to enclosure, a growing number of struggles articulate around reclaiming the value appropriated through rent relations. Struggles over rent are traditionally seen as struggles between the capitalist producer (or “industrialist”) and the property owner (or “landlord”). The establishment or redefinition of property rights over socio-natures creates an entitlement to rent for the property owner (irrespective of whether she actually owns land or any other pseudo-commodity, from the right to emit CO₂ to a software license or an oil concession in the Amazon). For the capitalist producer, who needs the pseudo-commodity or “asset” thus created for its profit-making purposes, this entails ceding a portion of its profit (or “surplus value”) to the property owner.

While struggles have taken place historically over this industrialist–landlord axis, there is a much broader array of struggles over rent. As the paper by Andreucci *et al.* shows, a surprising amount of what political ecologists call socio-environmental conflicts may also include an important dimension of struggles over rent, that is, over a portion of surplus value that is accrued by the property owner in a rent relation. The most typical case is perhaps that of mining conflicts in Latin America. These are multi-dimensional struggles that include in most cases opposition to enclosure as well as some form of environmental concern, often formulated (especially by indigenous-campesino movements) in the language of “defence of life” or territorial autonomy. Yet rent plays an important part here, too. For instance, movements may try to appeal to the state to demand a downward redistribution of mineral rents, or even assert territorial rights to force companies to give up a portion of surplus value in the form of compensation for environmental or other damages, as in the case of indigenous territories in Bolivia.

Resistance and distributional struggles are an important moment of the Polanyian “counter-movement” against capitalist expansion and the consolidation of capitalist class domination. However, these are fundamentally defensive struggles, often exploiting intra-class tension to reclaim a portion of surplus value or defend socio-ecological spaces from enclosure. Therefore, all contributors to this special issue point to the need to take a step forward and move from resistance to “counter-offensive”: from contesting capitalist forms of dispossession and hegemony to creating alternative hegemonic projects and

blocs. The piece by Calvário *et al.*, for instance, presents an important reflection on how solidarity networks of resistance to austerity can become the locus of articulation of alternative political ecological projects. Through focussing on the “no-intermediary” (“X-M”) food distribution network in Greece, the authors show how grassroots movements can present a solidarity-based alternative to austerity. The network seeks to transcend self-interest through building a fair and solidary relationship among producers, distributors and consumers, thereby shifting from “economic-corporate” struggle to a “universal ambition”. This is an example of how movements can move from resistance to counter-hegemony, by mobilising an alternative understanding of “nature” and adopting an explicitly subaltern position, thus also avoiding neoliberal co-optation of “alternative economies” for elite consumption.

Counter-hegemony also features centrally in the study by García López *et al.* Their paper focusses on the experience of Casa Pueblo in Puerto Rico, a movement that reclaims socio-ecological commons in the face of “environmental colonialism.” In this case, too, the movement builds on the historical experience of over thirty years of resistance, including to mining and forest extractivism. Yet, Casa Pueblo takes a step forward towards the construction of alternative project based on “communing.” The authors argue that not only commons emerge from contestation, but are in themselves a practice of exercising political power. Consequently, commons foster a transformation of power relations and challenge hegemony in two ways. First, as a political practice, commoning illustrates power as “productive” in everyday relational practices that people can perform and transform. Second, commoning challenges the discursive categories of nature and society produced by the project of modernity: they reconnect humans to each other, as well as to ecology. Here the Gramscian category of praxis, “critical thinking in action,” is mobilised by the García López *et al.* in alliance with Judith Butler’s idea of “performativity.” The authors show how Casa Pueblo challenges the dominant understanding of democracy, community and nature not just by proposing alternatives, but also by *performing* them. Examples include rethinking and enacting democracy through practicing self-government (*auto-gestión*); exercising rights, rather than demanding them; expanding the (common) sense of nation (*patria*) as “an open and expansive community of commoning” (10); and, practising a non-exploitative relationship to/with the forest as a lived community of production and enjoyment.

Lastly, the contributions by Calvário *et al.* and García López *et al.* both insist on the importance of the *ideological* moment in counter-hegemony. Drawing again on Gramsci, they see ideology “not as false consciousness but as enactment of concepts, languages and imaginaries” (García López *et al.*, 3). With Gramsci, they see the roots of ideology in “common sense,” the “uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world.” The task of building counter-hegemony is therefore in many ways centred on critiquing and re-working the dominant ways of perceiving and understanding socio-ecological relations, towards the construction of what the authors call “*commons sense*,” closer to the idea of “common liveable lives” as discussed by Butler and Athanasiou (2013). A parallel can also be drawn with the role of historical memory in reactivating alternative stories and what Huber *et al.* call “vernacular knowledge,” resonating with Foucault’s (1980, 81) idea of “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” In this sense, the “desubjugation” of collective memory is crucial for uncovering and opposing current socio-political and knowledge asymmetries, injustices and suppressions.

New Directions for Political Ecology

Collectively, the articles in this special issue offer suggestions that could be helpful for rethinking some theoretical and methodological dimensions in the study of the political ecology of capitalism. First, all contributions are explicit in “naming the enemy” (or enemies). Beyond understanding their critical stance as a broadly defined commitment to ethical sensitivity or progressive politics, these contributions firmly embrace an *anti-capitalist* position. While the recent insistence of much political ecology on the uniqueness of neoliberalism resulted in a very productive analysis and important debate, focussing centrally on nature’s neoliberalisation may mislead one to think that “another capitalism is possible.” The articles in this special issue do analyse neoliberalisation, yet they also contextualise it as part of broader historical-geographical developments of capitalism and capitalist class strategy, and confront it as such.

Second, these contributions try to overcome some specious dichotomies that may impair our analysis and critique. These include, for instance, the oppositions between “Third world” and “First world” political ecology, or between historical and contemporary political ecology research. Theoretically, they point to ways of bridging the epistemological gaps involved in combining a broadly defined Marxist framework with post-structural categories and insight, as the engagement with notions of discourse and performativity exemplifies. Gramsci emerges here as a key figure, representing an open, heterodox and epistemologically nuanced Marxism, which is attentive to cultural and historical dynamics as much as to political-ecological configurations, making possible to bridge contrasts between structure and agency, individual and class politics. In this sense, this special issue is also indebted, and seeks to add to, the emerging approach of “Gramscian political ecologies.”

Third, understanding how structures of oppression necessarily require ordinary, repetitive enactments in order to renew themselves in time and space implies that successful alternative or counter-hegemonies should work through the same performative logic. For instance, commoning projects are not inherently counter-hegemonic: that is why the whole point of looking at performativity is the “within and against” character of power relations at work (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, 99). While coupling Butler’s Foucaultian-inspired theory with Gramsci may seem awkward at first sight, the empirical findings of some of our special issue’s articles (Calvário *et al.*; García López *et al.*) show that, in practice, making everyday life liveable under a crisis of multiple dispossessions could involve repeating power “differently,” that is, in more egalitarian and solidarity-making relationships. Similarly, the findings by Huber *et al.* suggest that in order to provide more context-sensitive understandings of power/knowledge dynamics within society, the state, and the scientific domain, sharing experiences across space and time is a powerful way of emphasising the legitimacy of past and ongoing struggles. Through highlighting how oblivion and erasure of capital-driven destructions from the collective memory are organized, but also emphasizing the resilience of alternative knowledges across space and time, Huber *et al.* show how contemporary and future struggles that challenge structures of oppression can be supported, and their legitimacy strengthened.

Lastly, by drawing on Gramsci and other critical approaches, the contributions in this special issue offer a way of overcoming tensions around political strategy. They see a dialectical relation (rather than opposition) between addressing the state and constructing alternatives “at a distance” from it—for instance, around commoning—or between struggles around (re)production and distribution and those engaging the sphere of ideology and hegemony. All papers are conscious that distributional struggles, struggles against enclosure, alternative (re)production networks and other experiences of commoning are

also, and with no contradiction, class struggles—to the extent that they oppose the appropriation, upward redistribution and concentration of political power, surplus value and means of production and reproduction.

By bringing forth the counter-hegemonic potential of those new directions in political ecology, the authors of this special issue try to redefine new ways of thinking and enacting political and ecological struggles outside established scholarly traditions and conventional disciplines. They indicate that, as we live in “undisciplined environments,” we need undisciplined thinking to make sense of and hopefully change them.

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