
SYMPOSIUM

The Neoliberalization of Nature: Governance, Privatization, Enclosure and Valuation

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The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relationship to the rest of nature. ...All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men [*sic*].

Karl Marx¹

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

Karl Marx²

Introduction

These passages by Marx help to explain the inextricable logic and ongoing momentum behind global economic, political, cultural and environmental relations. As Marx suggests, there can be no human history without the environment, because human history has been made possible only through the metabolization of the environment through human action. Today, neoliberal capitalism drives the politics, economics and culture of the world system, providing the context and direction for how humans affect and interact with non-human nature and with one another.

Neoliberal capitalism is by no means the first capitalist era, however. Capital has required global solutions for its proliferation and expansion for centuries, and while recent events have made its inherent contradictions all the more evident, the history of capitalism demonstrates that neoliberalism is but the most recent embodiment of a well-established cycle of movement and reconfiguration, investment and production, and scouring, destruction, and abandonment.

¹Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 37.

²Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Signet Classics, 1998), p. 54.

This special issue of *CNS* unites political ecological analyses of four dominant relations inherent to capital's neoliberal agenda: *governance*, the institutionalized political compromises through which capitalist societies are negotiated; *privatization*, where natural resources, long held in trust by regional, state and municipal authorities, are turned over to firms and individuals; *enclosure*, the capture of common resources and exclusion of the communities to which they are linked; and *valuation*, the process through which invaluable and complex ecosystems are reduced to commodities through pricing. In our symposium, we scrutinize both the causes and socionatural effects of this fourfold agenda and the ideology that undergirds it.

Neoliberalization as an Unnatural Process

Too often, notions of neoliberalism are fetishized so that it comes to appear as a single, monolithic and undifferentiated process that is somehow distinct from capitalism, rather than as a diverse and interlinked set of practices that reflects a heightened, evolved and more destructive form of capitalism. As opposed to an ontological category with its own set of definitions and meanings, we stress the need to consider *neoliberalization* as a process instead of *neoliberalism* as a "thing."

Perhaps most problematic – and certainly contributing to the triumph of narrow capitalist interests – is the way neoliberal ideology has been presented as an inevitable and natural state. With certainty and conviction, neoliberal apologists have convinced friends and foes alike that neoliberalization is fated, inescapable, and evolutionary.³ The invocation of a "politics of inevitability" make this political project especially interesting in its encounter with the nonhuman world, as both "neoliberalism" and "nature" have both too often been treated as static, inert, and as things unto themselves.

In this regard over the last few decades, there has been a notable and disturbing shift in the way that more-than-human nature has been conceived, controlled, distributed, managed and produced. Revolutions in law, policy, and markets are accelerating the ongoing commodification of natural things, laying bare the structurally driven and environmentally destructive tendencies of capitalism. This has been remarkable both in the case of common property resources, which have long resisted enclosure due to their fugitive nature, as well as in the privatization of urban nature, where stark environmental inequalities have been produced through new systems of property and governance. Overcoming the socionatural difficulty of enclosing water, air and wildlife, emerging property and governance regimes have devastated public ecologies and quashed resistance to enclosure in both urban and rural contexts. Market systems are being extended to fish, carbon and water, with scarcities becoming an increasing *result* rather than *cause* of this re-institutionalization. So, too, the marketization of

³See Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), especially the contribution by Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, "Neoliberalizing Space," p. 33.

public urban ecologies has produced uneven access to water, vegetation and clean air, a path Polanyi cautioned against more than a half-century ago.⁴

Such efforts have been redoubled in the last few years as social movements that resist such enclosures take root, challenging the master narrative of neoliberalism. The effects of these shifts and the concomitant social and environmental resistances that both spur and contradict them are yet under-examined, especially the unintended consequences and complex bio-social feedbacks created in ongoing struggle.

This encounter between neoliberalism and nature also draws attention to sometimes overlooked scalar dialectics of political economic change. The inherent connections between city and country, local and extra-local, and regional and national, intensify as spatially complex environmental processes (e.g., animal migration, carbon diffusion, and water flows) encounter various scales of human-imposed economic structures, such as property rights, markets, and regulation.

Resistance against the environmentally destructive forces of neoliberalization also operates at and produces a range of geographic scales – feedbacks and responses that emerge from both human and non-human communities. Only by meticulously examining these intended and unintended consequences and breaking down monolithic and aspatial conceptions of both economy and nature can the shift toward neoliberal capitalism be fully understood, perhaps opening the door for further resistance, community, and the restoration of a people's nature.

The articles assembled here push the boundaries on how we understand the destructive effects and complex interactions of neoliberal capitalism with nature. Together, these papers: 1) examine the effects of the neoliberalization of nature, explicitly through the relations inherent to manipulations of governance, increased privatization, enclosure and market valuation, and; 2) engage the issue of how urban/rural dialectics, when considered in a collective framework, can further elucidate the complexity inherent to the neoliberalization of nature.

The article by McCarthy examines the recent proliferation of calls for the creation of, or return to, commons of various kinds. Such calls are evident at nearly every scale and encompass a tremendous array of resources and existing property relations: from the atmosphere to local woodlots, and from wild genetic resources to the most highly manufactured pharmaceuticals. Correia's article demonstrates how the United States Forest Service regulated nature and labor in service to the industrial production of timber in northern New Mexico. He argues that the conditions necessary for capital to exploit the region's natural and human resources were made possible through the state's mediation of capital and nature by way of a state – private timber monopoly constructed under the rationale that this would benefit local communities. Robbins and Luginbuhl examine efforts to privatize public wildlife in the U.S. Their article

⁴Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); also see James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, "Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism," *Geoforum*, 35, 3, 2004.

focuses on both institutional and physical efforts at enclosure. Reviewing these efforts in the context of the changing political economy of the rural American West, they show the way in which nature and labor both resist such efforts. St. Martin's article examines the socionatural relations inherent to contemporary fisheries in New England. He suggests that it is constituted by a dominant discourse of economics that produces a singular narrative of the development of the fisheries economy – organized around the neoclassical problematic of an absence of private property, individuated self-interest, and the “tragedy of the commons” – that relegates non-capitalist class systems and economic difference to a pre-industrial past or the ever more distant periphery of an expanding fishing industry. Swyngedouw's article considers how tactics of “accumulation by dispossession” have become pivotal strategies in contemporary global accumulation dynamics. This is assessed in the context of the recent waves of privatization and de-collectivization of water resources around the world, particularly urban water. Finally, Heynen and Perkins explore the scalar contradictions inherent to the neoliberalization of Milwaukee's urban forest. In so doing, they expand upon Luke's discussion of the environmental importance of “small g” global cities and how the proliferation of urban private property regimes demonstrate, yet again, the logical inconsistencies of neoliberal capitalism and the neoliberalization of nature. Because of the timeliness and importance of the papers within this issue, the theme of neoliberalism and nature will be continued in the next issue of *CNS* (June 2005) in an article by Douglas Young and Roger Keil on the political ecology of water in Toronto.