
Men and things: Karl Polanyi, primitive accumulation, and their relevance to a radical green political economy

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Abstract. Now is an important moment to be thinking and talking about a critical and normative green political economy. Whether via attempts to develop effective and socially just climate policies at multiple scales of governance [including REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation) schemes], or to develop proliferating and controversial neoliberal instruments for dealing with undesirable environmental change, environmental governance, and environmental change in the context of contemporary global capitalism are on the agenda. What would a critical and normative green political economy for the current moment look like? This paper draws on Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* as a resource for answering that question. In particular, Polanyi's discussion of problematic and dualistic notions of nature and society in early political economy and the role he accords social struggles over land in developing his theory of fictitious commodities, embeddedness and the double movement are revisited. The paper stresses how Polanyi's ideas, at once conceptual and polemical, draw centrally on Marx's theorization of primitive accumulation as an inherent, 'extra-economic' facet of historical-geographical capitalism, a differentiated unity linking the commodification and objectification of human and nonhuman natures as exchange-values. In this respect, Polanyi offers (or seems to offer) a potential reconciliation of a politics of nonhuman and human nature through his emphasis on primitive accumulation as a site of both political struggle and epistemic transformation.

Keywords: green political economy, primitive accumulation, Karl Polanyi, economism

Introduction

"The classic view of the Marxist/socialist left was that the proletariat, defined as wage workers deprived of access to or ownership of the means of production, was the key agent of historical change. The central contradiction was between capital and labour in and around the point of production The focus was, therefore, on class relations and class struggles within the field of capital accumulation understood as expanded reproduction. All other forms of struggle were viewed as subsidiary, secondary, or even dismissed as peripheral or irrelevant

While the single-mindedness was productive, it was bought at the cost of innumerable exclusions. Attempts, for example, to incorporate urban social movements into the agenda of the left broadly failed, except, of course, in those parts of the world where communitarian politics prevailed. . . . Social movements such as feminism and environmentalism remained outside the traditional left."

David Harvey (2003, pages, 169–171)

Tensions or schisms between environmentalism and the sort of traditional left political sensibilities described by David Harvey remain important features of the political landscape. They also remain obstacles to forming effective progressive intellectual and political coalitions

able to articulate compelling alternatives to neoliberal capitalist social regulation, let alone to formulating a broader critique of capitalism per se. This is not to deny there are hopeful signs. Here in Canada, for instance, we may point to such initiatives as Blue Green Canada, founded in 2008 by Environmental Defence and the United Steelworkers and since joined by other groups.⁽¹⁾ Internationally, there are myriad attempts to bring a progressive environmentalism together with traditional left labour organizations. However, in other ways, things could not seem worse. The stalled fate of post-Kyoto international climate policy negotiations stems primarily and rather obviously from an unwillingness to transcend self-interest by those nations and corporate entities benefitting most from the fossil-fuel-fired status quo. But it also exposes the failure of a progressive left–green coalition to adequately capture centre-left political leaders and parties, at least to the extent necessary to transcend the influence of wealthy lobbies and elite influence peddling (see eg, Monbiot, 2012).

Moreover, if, as Harvey argues, the traditional labour-led left has been too often indifferent to environmentalism and green critiques of capitalism (and of course, as Harvey well knows, there have been important exceptions to this rule), the environmental movement or significant factions of it have also found their accommodations elsewhere. We have seen since at least the mid-1980s an increasing rapprochement between capitalism and neoliberal social regulation on the one hand and environmentalism on the other, thanks in no small part to the fusion of a growth and development agenda with an environmental conservation and management agenda. This was the potent formula promulgated by the Brundtland Commission's 1987 report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), consolidated in a more market-fundamentalist guise at the Rio summit of 1992 (Bernstein, 2002). More recently, a broad front encompassing, variously, REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation); entrepreneurial conservation; payments for ecosystem services schemes; ecotourism projects; privatization of common and public resources from genes to water to fisheries; and of course the uneven development of carbon markets signifies how deeply capitalism has been ostensibly greened, but also how environmental policy increasingly embraces rather than resists enclosure and commodification (see, eg, Bailey, 2007; Bailey and Wilson, 2009; Bakker, 2005; Bumpus and Liverman, 2008; Dempsey and Robertson, 2012; Fairhead et al, 2012; Igoe et al, 2010; McAfee, 1999; Prudham, 2007). More and more, markets, commodification, monetary valuation, private property rights, and the like are seen less as *the problems* to be confronted by environmentalism and more as *solutions* unto themselves (Castree, 2008; Heynen et al, 2007; O'Neill, 2007). One might even say that the accommodations of environmentalism to the neoliberal agenda comprise not only extensions of a broad neoliberal consensus (whether its time is past or not), but that in fact these accommodations are part of what has constituted the extended neoliberal moment since the early 1970s (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004).

In this context, the formation of an enduring so-called red–green coalition is an important challenge, part intellectual/imaginary, and part political/coalitional. Despite contributions by geographers and others to melding a green critique with a direct critique of capitalism (see, eg, Altvater, 1993; Benton, 1989; Boyd et al, 2001; Harvey, 1993; Leff, 1995; McCarthy 2004; O'Connor, 1988; Prudham, 2005; 2009; Robertson, 2006; Smith, 2008), a critical, progressive, and normative political economy that incorporates environmentalism remains sadly elusive (Dryzek, 1996). This is not to deny important interventions across a range of established disciplines seeking to transcend both utopian and technocratic approaches to a radical, engaged 'green political economy' right for the moment (see, eg, Barry, 2007; Buttel, 2000; Clapp and Dauvergne, 2008; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Monbiot, 2007; O'Connor, 1998; O'Neill, 2007). Rather, it is to say that political schisms remain, while the intellectual work of

⁽¹⁾ See <http://bluegreencanada.ca/>

integrating concerns about “capitalist nature” (O’Connor, 1993) into a critique of capitalism more generally in a manner that is engaged with political and social movements presents ongoing challenges.

Part of the problem (and I stress, part), is the pervasive and well-rehearsed problem of nature–society dualism and the related and sometimes conservative bent of environmentalist sensibilities (Harvey, 1993). These days, we are confronted everywhere we turn by well-founded critiques of dualistic thinking, by admonitions that “we have never been modern” (Latour, 1993) and by the haunting realization that our environmental politics cannot come to us unmediated from the nonhuman world, particularly if they do so in the guise of turning back the clock to some prior age before an ostensibly pristine nature was adulterated (see, eg, Braun and Castree, 1998; Cronon, 1995; Williams, 1973). In critical scholarship it has become increasingly problematic to use the word ‘nature’ without the scare quotes. Instead, across a spectrum of broadly critical perspectives, we deploy concepts emphasizing the co-constituted character of social and environmental change (see, eg, Braun, 2002; Haraway, 1997; Latour, 1993; Swyngedouw, 2004; Whatmore, 2002), signified by terms such as ‘socio-nature’, ‘cyborgs’, and ‘hybridity’.

Epistemic dualism finds its reflection in political dualisms of the sort Harvey points to. Yet it remains unclear at times how intellectual moves to transcend dualistic thinking relate or lend traction to contemporary debates about resource depletion, environmental degradation, and environment injustices ‘on the ground’ as it were. Specifically, how might transcending nature–society dualisms inform a normative left political economy that includes a green or environmental critique of capitalism, one in which socio-natural relations are seen to be constitutive of what we mean by capitalism and what we mean by capitalist society as well as our critiques of these (Moore, 2011)? I will say up front that as the definitive answer to those questions, this paper will fall far short. But, as a contribution to this collection on Karl Polanyi, I want to read *The Great Transformation* (hereafter TGT) as a resource for the conversation.⁽²⁾

The Great Transformation, active society, and the primitive accumulation

Polanyi’s masterpiece, TGT is rightfully and even increasingly lauded as a landmark work in political economy. The book has had an important influence on, inter alia, economics and economic history, political science, economic and social geography, sociology, anthropology, and interdisciplinary fields such as international relations and globalization studies. Part of the book’s influence stems from what is seen as its somewhat prescient critique. Despite Polanyi having (wrongly) announced the death of *laissez-faire* with the cataclysm of World War II, much of what he had to say about late-19th-century international political and economic liberalism applies more generally in the contemporary world of globalization and neoliberalization. Moreover, via TGT and other works, Polanyi has had an important contemporary influence on the so-called ‘cultural turn’ deconstructing and exploring the genealogy of ostensibly stable referents such as ‘the economy’ (Mitchell, 2002; 2008) and ‘society’ (Burawoy, 2003) as part of a critique of economism and narrow materialism.

As is made evident elsewhere in this theme issue, all of these intersecting threads have made their appearances in geographical and related scholarship (see, eg, Block, 2003; Dale, 2008; Guthman, 2007; Jessop, 2001; Wainwright and Barnes, 2009). My focus, however, will be on TGT for thinking about environmental politics in relation to the politics of capitalism, and, specifically, for exploring the interconnections between a critical normative green or environmental political economy, the politics of primitive accumulation, and the problem of nature–society dualism as it is manifest in the schisms mentioned by Harvey.

⁽²⁾ My page references and citations in this paper drawing from TGT are based on the 2001 reprint from Beacon Press (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]).

Though it has not been among the more prominent influences of TGT within the geographical literature, I am by no means the first person to suggest that the book and Polanyi's work more generally remain salient to the current conjunctures of capitalism and environmental change (see, eg, Bernard, 1997; O'Connor, 1988). My emphasis here, however, is on a reading of TGT that situates the dynamics of environmental politics and environmental change as internal to or part of the *totality* of capitalist social relations, with emphasis particularly on the importance of processes of primitive accumulation. By internal, I mean that environmental politics and environmental change are seen to be actively constitutive of what we understand to be capitalism as well as capitalist society, and vice versa. My argument draws on Michael Burawoy's (2003) discussion of what he called Polanyi's notion of "active society": that is, the complex and certainly underspecified (by Polanyi) collection of formal and informal social organizations and movements located between (and within) state and market that included, at least in the England Polanyi wrote about in TGT, "trade unions, cooperatives, the organization of the factory movement to curtail the length of the working day, the Chartist movement to extend political rights, and rudimentary development of political parties" (page 198). As Burawoy argues, this active society is constituted as a distinctly modern, capitalist form of society by the fight over market fundamentalism, what Polanyi called market self-regulation, and what we might now refer to as neoliberalism. This is the site for Polanyi where both the "durability and transcendence of advanced capitalism" (Burawoy, 2003, page 194) are contested.

Drawing on this reading of Polanyi and TGT, I want to explore the ways in which active society is constituted by (in part) *socionature*: that is, the specific coalescence of human relationships with the nonhuman world, tied in turn to diverse material and semiotic practices, claims, and dispositions toward what Polanyi calls "land" (and by which he meant 'nature' writ large in the more modern sense). How might we think about active society being shaped importantly by the complex *metabolic* relationships linking people and land as these relationships are transformed by the drawn-out struggle over *laissez-faire*? More specifically, how does TGT make sense, again in part, if we connect its core conceptual notions of social embeddedness and the double or dual movement, to the character and far-reaching consequences of *primitive accumulation*, the drawn-out and sometimes violent processes whereby large numbers of people were separated from direct access to land qua nature via enclosure and the institutionalization of new norms of private and exclusive property? For Polanyi these consequences included the reification of bourgeois norms of enclosure and private property within classical debates in political economy concerning the 'nature' of poverty, and were manifest in an epistemic separation of 'society' and 'nature' constituting classical and subsequent mainstream political economy (and modern economics) as exclusively social sciences.

The rest of the paper comprises an attempt to develop this way of reading TGT. I do this first through revisiting aspects of Polanyi's biography, with particular emphasis on his involvement in worker and public education, and his relationship with other prominent left intellectuals in Budapest and Vienna, notably Georg Lukács. This biography, I argue, is important for understanding Polanyi's specific engagements with Marx and Marxism, but more importantly, his concerns with the ideological reification of bourgeois values and the dangers of economism in popular and working-class culture. Subsequently, after a brief discussion of primitive accumulation and its significance for bridging the schisms between the conventional concerns of political economy and a specifically green or environmentalist critique of capitalism, I delve into the text of TGT more deeply to explore the ways in which, often implicitly, Polanyi's critique of market society may be understood, at least in some measure, as just that.

Polanyi's biography and its significance

Karl Polanyi's biographical details have been chronicled elsewhere, notably in Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell (1987), as well as in Block (2003) and Burawoy (2003). My goal in this section is not to repeat any more of that material than is necessary to support the argument here. However, I do hope to draw from the biographical overview to emphasize three points. First, one of the goals Polanyi embraced was to combat the reification of bourgeois values and to advocate politically for a broad, social democratic class consciousness. Like his friend and colleague Georg Lukács, and very much influenced by him, Polanyi's work, including TGT, reflects a desire to subvert the reification of bourgeois social norms and relations (including private property) within wider popular and working-class circles in the context of capitalist transformation (Burawoy, 2003). Second, Polanyi viewed democracy and capitalism as being in tension with one another, embracing the view that this tension would have to be resolved via subordinating the latter to the former. Third, his views on democracy and socialism were influenced most profoundly not only by Robert Owen, who appears prominently in TGT, but also by a sustained engagement with the writings of Karl Marx (Block, 2003; Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987). I want to argue that this engagement specifically echoes Marx's deployment of a use-value/exchange-value dialectic to critique the economism of both capitalism and classical political economy, together with Marx's emphasis on the social significance of primitive accumulation and the property relation as sites of political struggle.

Karl Polanyi was born in Vienna in 1881, and raised in Budapest. The family's life was generally one of the professional, upper-middle-class sections of Hungarian society. Polanyi's father, Mihaly Pollacek, worked in an engineering and managerial capacity in the railroad business. His mother, Cecile Wohl, ran a salon patronized by some of the more prominent intellectuals and artists of Budapest and through which, in part, Karl was exposed to a wider community of political and intellectual elites.

While in school, Polanyi became involved in student and intellectual groups, activities he continued later at the University of Budapest where he obtained a PhD in philosophy in 1908. It was while at university that Karl helped to found a group called the "Club Galilei", a political and intellectual circle committed broadly to instituting modern and liberal values in Hungarian society, including through popular and worker education. Through the Club Galilei, Polanyi also met other prominent young intellectuals, including Georg Lukács (Burawoy, 2003), author of *History and Class Consciousness* and one of the founders of Western Marxism.

Drawing on the various intellectual and political influences within his orbit, Polanyi became increasingly critical of early-20th-century society in the Austro-Hungarian empire, and particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie. As early as 1909, for instance, Polanyi had written an essay laying out some of his ideas and fears about the emerging capitalist Europe. In the essay he articulated his worry that the bourgeoisie would essentially co-opt democratic and humanist values of contemporaneous working-class and socialist movements. While arguably a prescient comment on European fascism, the essay also conveyed the depths of Polanyi's commitment to a truly democratic socialism, one that could transcend market capitalism by subordinating economic relations to the broader social being of humankind (Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987).

A committed democratic socialist but averse to so-called scientific and what he called "popular" (ie, economic and nondemocratic) Marxist political movements, Polanyi, along with Lukács, fled Budapest for Vienna when the Károlyi government gave way to the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. There, in the Red Vienna of the 1920s, Polanyi continued to develop his ideas about the social character of human beings. This included what he had already begun to conceptualize as a capitulation in both liberal and some radical conceptions

of human nature and society. Polanyi worried about ceding primacy to formally or putatively economic forces and decision making, and was averse to modernizing processes that induced alienation from the communal character of humankind (Dale, 2008).

It was in Vienna that Polanyi came into direct contact (and conflict) with the ideas of Ludwig von Mises (mentor to the young Friedrich Hayek) and the emerging Austrian neoclassical school. These engagements and arguments would directly and decisively shape TGT. Specifically, Polanyi came to conceive of democratic society and the fundamental features of capitalism (including the private property relation) as a deep antagonism or schism that could be addressed only through one of two far-reaching solutions. One was to institute democratic decision making over economic activities, including thereby the abolition of private property and private control of the means of production. A second was the suspension of democracy and the full subordination of society (and human nature) to the imperatives of production: fascism (Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987).

These ideas continued to develop for Polanyi during his Vienna years. From 1924 to 1938 he worked as a left-leaning member of the editorial board of an Austrian newspaper *Der Osterreichische Volkswirt*. In this capacity he wrote many articles and commentaries, including chronicling fascist sentiment and political movements in Italy and Germany, as well as in Austria itself (Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987). As a consequence of his criticisms of fascist movements and sentiments, in 1933 Polanyi came under pressure from Austrian fascists, prompting his relocation to England. There he remained until the early 1940s, working with the Workers Educational Association of the Universities of Oxford and London as a lecturer.

During this period in England, and inspired by a desire to learn about and teach the preindustrial and industrial history of England to English workers, Polanyi developed much of the substantive content of TGT (Block, 2001). This is important context for reading and interpreting the book. The emphasis on specifically English history in TGT reflects not only that Polanyi had been teaching in England, but also his (mistaken) belief that the English working classes would be the key architects for a democratic and socialist international postwar order (Block, 2003). Polanyi believed this could happen only if English working-class people could confront their own past, including their somewhat problematic nationalism, while also transcending a narrow articulation of their class interests in order to speak for society more generally.

Taking the long view on Polanyi's biography and intellectual development, we see not only several phases in his engagement with Marx (see variously Block, 2003; Dale 2008; Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987), but also a consistent concern with working-class consciousness and the evolution of popular ideas in the context of social transformation. Polanyi was particularly concerned with the influence of bourgeois values on popular and working-class ideology, and how processes of reification and alienation could (and should) be subverted politically. As he wrote:

“the chances of classes in a struggle will depend upon their ability to win support from outside their own membership, which again will depend upon their fulfilment of tasks set by interests wider than their own. Thus neither the birth nor the death of classes, neither their aims nor the degree to which they attain them; neither their cooperation nor their antagonisms can be understood apart from the interests of society, given by its situation as a whole” (TGT, page 159).

As Burawoy (2003) notes, there are obviously convergences with Gramsci here. But Polanyi's commitment to worker and public education and his broader commitment to democratic socialism are important keys to reading and interpreting TGT. That is to say, the book needs to be read, at least in part, as something of a manifesto, with real limits as a piece

of academic social theory read back through modern eyes and outside its context. Despite the very real dangers of reading texts *solely* through the context in which they are written, including in this instance (Roth, 2003), recourse to context does help to make sense of TGT, a book that can at times be frustrating, internally contradictory, and even baffling (Block, 2003).

It is also important to recognize in TGT Polanyi's active engagement with ideas and political movements in the Europe of his day, most centrally the political Marxism of early Soviet-era Europe as well as the fascism he witnessed developing around him in the 1930s. Polanyi's antagonism to economistic Marxism has been well documented, notably in the work of Fred Block (Block, 2003; Block and Somers, 1984). As Polanyi wrote:

“Man [sic] believes in development as he once believed in God. But God lives in the human heart and we can read his laws in the soul. Development lives in the future Never has there been such an absurd superstition as the belief that the history of man is governed by laws which are independent of his will and action. The concept of a future which awaits us somewhere is senseless because the future does not exist, not now or later. The future is constantly being remade by those who live in the present. The present only is reality. There is no future that gives validity to our actions in the present” (Polanyi-Levitt and Mendell, 1987, page 22).⁽³⁾

Obviously there is a repudiation of crude materialism and the teleology of certain strands of Marxism reflected in this quote. But it is a mistake, in my view, to dissociate TGT more generally from Marx's critique of capitalism and classical political economy (see, eg, Dale, 2008), particularly on the question of economism. Tellingly, Polanyi writes in TGT that “the essential philosophy of Marx centred on the totality of society and the non-economic nature of man [sic]” (page 158). I offer an interpretation of the book as a critique of economism largely consistent with Marx's own, but more specifically and more importantly, as (in part) an attempt to reflect on and rearticulate the centrality of processes of primitive accumulation in constituting active ‘society’. In this register, TGT can be seen to emphasize the significance of the historical dissociation and alienation of people from nonhuman nature via the dynamics of enclosure and commodification, processes constitutive on the one hand of Polanyi's conception of the fabric or substance of society, and along these lines, central to his normative political argument about the articulation of society's interests.

Primitive accumulation

Karl Marx's account of what he called the “so-called primitive accumulation” appears in the closing chapters of volume one of *Capital*. In this section Marx was concerned to respond to and critique the account of “original accumulation” offered by Adam Smith. For Smith, original accumulation provided a launching pad for the modern capitalist and capitalism via the build-up of stored wealth that could be used as capital outlays. Marx rejects this, arguing instead that capitalism was predicated on the often violent expropriation of common property, resulting in separation of primary producers from access to the means of social reproduction, particularly land. This separation, unevenly achieved over time and space, created capital as a social relation between a property-less class forced into dependence on paid work to survive and a property-owning class enjoying a monopoly (or close to it) over the means of production.

At a minimum, Marx's account of primitive accumulation is integral to his explanation of the historical origins of capitalism. Marx's account shatters naturalist or organic conceptions offered by Smith and others since. As Marx (1977 [1867], page 873–874) put it:

⁽³⁾This is quoted from an unpublished 1922 manuscript called “Behemoth”.

“In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part. In the tender annals of Political Economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial. Right and ‘labour’ were from all time the sole means of enrichment, the present year of course always excepted. As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic.”

Considerable debate continues as to whether or not Marx believed that primitive accumulation was an historical phase in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or if in fact he viewed the creation of new forms of private property by some combination of legal, administrative, political, or violent/forceful means as a necessary and ongoing dimension of the broader reproduction of capitalism. This debate has been renewed in the context of contemporary neoliberal enclosures, with the central question being the degree to which such enclosures are actually integral to the reproduction of capitalism as new forms of private property rights over people, places, and things serve as both means of production as well as new forms of commodities produced for exchange (Bonefeld, 2001; Federici, 2004; Glassman, 2006; Perelman, 2000). De Angelis (2001) may be the best known and most forceful spokesperson for the argument that the reproduction of capitalism at a systemic level does indeed rely on ongoing separation of people from access to social means of (re)production and that this separation takes on many guises. But Harvey (2003) too highlights the centrality of contemporary “accumulation by dispossession” in the reproduction of capitalism.

In this context, more and more attention is being directed toward contemporary privatization and primitive accumulation (including debates about the equivalence of these terms) under the guise of environmental policy and the neoliberalization of nature. At least two main themes are discernible in this literature. The first involves emphasis on deepening and extending the commodification of nature as an end unto itself via new rounds of enclosing nature: eg, in the creation or strengthening of private claims over genes and genetically modified organisms (Kloppenborg, 2004; McAfee, 2003; Prudham 2007). The second involves the creation and extension of private claims over land, natural resources, and the like as means of conserving, preserving, or otherwise regulating their appropriation and transformation: that is, the use of privatization as an environmental policy objective (Bakker, 2005; 2007; Mansfield, 2004a; 2004b). Clearly, these underlying imperatives may converge.

Without question, there are difficult and potentially unresolvable debates about the intentions (apparent and otherwise) that animate contemporary enclosures, about agency (eg, who is being dispossessed by whom and how), and about who is accumulating and whether they are the same people as those who are doing the dispossessing, etc [for an excellent discussion, see Hall (2012)]. But there is also widespread recognition that neoliberal emphasis on private property rights under the rubric of conservation, sustainable development, payments for ecosystem services, and the like is resulting in a massive wave of private appropriations of nature or “green grabbing” (so named by *Guardian* writer John Vidal) (Fairhead et al, 2012). However contingent is the relationship between privatization on the one hand and accumulation on the other, it is clear that privatization in a broader context that is overdetermined by capitalist relations of production and exchange can and often does lead to expanded accumulation and the consequent hybridization of capitalism and environmentalism (Igoe et al, 2010; Prudham, 2007). It would seem then that a green political economy right for the times must include within its ambit attention to the importance of these dynamics: that is, of the role of primitive accumulation within contemporary dynamics of environmental change, environmental justice, and, clearly as well, environmental policy (given the importance of property rights issues within contemporary environmental policy discussions).

Confronting whether and how primitive accumulation comprises and combines with contemporary environmental policy includes, however, thinking about the relationship between primitive accumulation and society–nature dualism. As noted at the outset, green or

environmental political economy must confront this deeply entrenched dualism in thinking about the relationship between what we call ‘society’ and what we call ‘nature’, lest it be one more exercise in thinking about the ‘environmental impacts’, implications, or applications of neoliberalism, commodification, and even capitalism itself (Moore, 2011). Claims that, for instance, neoliberalism is an inherently ecological or environmental project (see McCarthy and Prudham, 2004) need to be backed up by an analytical framing that sees conjoined socionatural relations as actively constituting the ‘objects’ and categories of our analysis, including the very idea of the ‘social’. Transcending this dualism is important if we are to explore the ways in which conventional left and green politics are actually linked both politically and intellectually, and if we are to confront nature–society dualism itself not as pre-given, but as an historical experience and construct that itself requires explanation. One thinks here of Marx’s now celebrated quote on exactly this point:

“It is not the unity of living and active humanity, the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation, or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital” (Marx 1981 [1858], page 489).⁽⁴⁾

This quote and its underpinnings are touchstones for a recent ecological turn in historical materialism, including by those attempting to develop Marx’s concept of ‘metabolism’ (see Clark and York, 2005; Foster, 1999; Moore, 2011) as a relational approach to conjoined and mutually constitutive socioecological transformations. Capturing the gist, Erik Swyngedouw (1999, page 446) succinctly summed it up in his brilliant essay on the Spanish waterscape:

“Any materialist approach necessarily adheres to a perspective that insists that nature is an integral part of the metabolism of social life. Social relations operate in and through metabolizing the natural environment which, in turn, transforms both society and nature and produces altered or new socionatural forms.”

My contention is that one way to read TGT as a resource for contemporary environmental political economy is as a reflection on the socionatural implications of primitive accumulation in constituting active society. This includes Polanyi’s concern with the reification of primitive accumulation in public and working-class consciousness, a problem that carried with it the foremost danger that the English working classes would fail to see common cause with the various social organizations and movements whose diverse claims on nature comprised part of society’s pushback against market self-regulation: that is, that they would make the mistake of the sort of single-mindedness (or narrow economism in Polanyi’s terms), itself a reification, that Harvey (see above) laments in hindsight.

Polanyi, primitive accumulation, and ‘nature’

Polanyi’s basic argument, in the simplest terms, is that there are three kinds of what he calls fictitious commodities: land, labour, and money. What makes them fictitious is that none is or can be produced exclusively for sale on the market, Polanyi’s definition of commodity. This definition, deceptively simple and certainly consequential to Polanyi’s entire argument, draws on Aristotle’s notion that chrematistics (ie, the making of money and the pursuit of commerce and exchange as ends unto themselves) represents a corrosive influence in society. For Polanyi as for Marx it is not the mere fact of exchange (nor, importantly, the prevalence of exchange per se, as some would read TGT), but rather specifically the increasing prevalence of production *for* exchange, gain for gain’s sake, that underpins capitalism’s singularly problematic economism (TGT, page 57).

⁽⁴⁾Also cited in Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003, page 907).

But for Polanyi, uniquely, struggles to promote and resist rendering the three fictitious commodities to market self-regulation (ie, to have them produced as pure exchange-values) comprise fundamental tensions running through and constituting market society, giving rise to a dual or double movement. Liberal attempts to subordinate the allocation of the three fictitious commodities to the price mechanism are met with responses aimed at resisting what Polanyi sees as the “stark dystopia” of laissez-faire. Polanyi sees the inherently embedded character of economic relationships, including markets and market exchange, as the basis of society’s pushback, revolving centrally around contending claims to the three fictitious commodities. Polanyi argues this tension simply cannot be overcome by laissez-faire prescriptions because society will never allow land, labour, and money to be wholly alienated from broader social integuments in the name of allocation strictly by price. Put differently, the social use-value of these commodities to society cannot be fully subsumed by the exchange-value animating capitalist production. Instead, active society constitutes itself in the double movement (Burawoy, 2003).

Within this, Polanyi is quite clear that for him, as in much of classical political economy, ‘land’ is central, but also taken to mean nature more generally. So at the very least we have a critique of laissez-faire capitalism—and equally importantly, a notion of the constitution of the ‘social’—turning centrally on the politics of the commodification of nature. Polanyi’s is not a pre-given critique of capitalist commodification extended to a consideration of the implications for environmental change and environmental politics, but, rather, a conceptualization and critique of the two as conjoined. Commodification, in its full-blown guise, includes (and must include) transformation in socionatural relations. In turn, environmental politics and environmental change are part of what constitutes the broader social response to capitalist transformation. We have a theory, undeveloped and frustratingly imprecise though it may be (Block, 2003; Dale, 2008), of a politics of market self-regulation and an active society turning fundamentally on social frictions pushing and resisting the social allocation of nature in liberal society. That alone makes TGT significant in the long tradition of political economy, particularly as that tradition was received in the mid-1940s, when TGT was written. Polanyi, perhaps more so than anyone before him going back to the French Physiocratic tradition, made the politics of social relations with the nonhuman world *internal* to his critique of capitalism and of laissez-faire liberalism.

We may, however, push the interpretation of the depth of Polanyi’s critique further to consider the ways in which the fictitious commodities argument builds on or takes as a point of departure the significance of primitive accumulation and its effects on the socionatural order. Putting aside the argument about money (which, for the record, I think actually fits in here nicely), Polanyi argues that “[l]abour is only another name for a human activity which goes with *life* itself, which is in turn not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life” (TGT, page 75, emphasis added). Of land (ie, nature), he writes “[T]he economic function is but one of many vital functions of land. It invests man’s [sic] life with stability; it is the site of his habitation; it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons. *We might as well imagine his being born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land*” (page 187, emphasis added). This language is important because the critique Polanyi offers is not one based on land and labour as separate, pre-given categories, but instead as relational categories whose separation is an historical creation (and fiction) of laissez-faire. Market allocation of land and labour involved the pulling apart of one from the other, tending toward a division, as his language suggests, between life and the conditions for life. No longer relational and linked, land and labour are treated by the self-regulating market as entirely distinct exchange-values. Critically, this prising apart takes place via the institution of private property and historical processes of primitive accumulation.

Polanyi clearly understood the significance of enclosure in the history of capitalism. But what he draws our attention to and reminds us (and his working-class audience) of is the relational or unified character of processes by which labour and means of production were historically dissociated and reconstituted in the commodity form, thereby taking on the appearance or character of mere instruments of exchange. Seen in this way, the argument in TGT goes far beyond an emphasis on how markets and exchange relations per se are politicized and contested, as has been emphasized in some of the contemporary literature on fair and ethical trading (Guthman, 2007). Rather, TGT elaborates directly on Marx's thesis that separation of primary producers from the means of production, and the relational or unified character of the commodification of land and labour (rather than the wage relation per se) is the defining feature of capital as a social relation. I believe this is a central aspect of Polanyi's message to his working-class audience(s) in imploring them to articulate the broad interests of society as whole, a central aspect of which is resisting a reduction of life and the conditions for life to mere exchange values.

This is, I admit, a fraught reading in part because Polanyi is an open apologist in TGT for enclosure in historical England. Still, Polanyi, like Marx before him, recognized enclosure as the singular genesis for both the commodification of land and the commodification of labour, and thus understood its social significance in constituting capitalist society. The uneven historical–geographical processes by which overlapping and often customary use-values were converted to monopolistic claims over parcels of space prised people and land apart materially and institutionally, but also fueled an epistemic rupture. As E P Thompson (1975, page 207) wrote in reference to this transformation in England:

“In the seventeenth century labour had been only partly free, but the labourer still asserted large claims (sometimes as perquisites) to his [sic] own labour's products. As, in the eighteenth century, labour became more and more free, so labour's property came to be seen as something totally distinct, the property of landowner or employer.”

The consequence is not only a rupture in the manner by which social labour was deployed and social reproduction secured, but rather also a far-reaching social and cultural dislocation or alienation.

The intertwining of enclosure, alienation, and displacement is of course a common theme in critical scholarship, including but not only in the Marxist tradition. As Kenneth Olwig (2005, page 28, emphasis added) put it:

“One consequence of enclosure was that land that might previously have been held in common was alienated from the commoners, becoming something that belonged to individuals as property over which the owner had exclusive rights. The transformation of land into private property was also alienating in the psychological and social sense, particularly for the poor, whose rights in common land disappeared when that land was enclosed. This not only reduced their resource base, leaving them much more dependent upon the property owners, it also estranged them from their sense of having a place in the land as a *polity*.”

As Olwig goes on to emphasize, for Raymond Williams, and before him for Lukács, and before him for Marx, the process of alienation also applied to relations between people and the nonhuman world. Enclosure, displacement, and alienation tended toward emptying socionatural relations of their prior substantive content and a reduction of human and nonhuman nature alike to mere ‘things’, objects and instruments of exchange. I believe this theme—ie, the far-reaching consequences of primitive accumulation—as an historical narrative, as a critique, and as a political call to arms may be more important in interpreting TGT than has been recognized to date. Under this interpretation, politicizing primitive accumulation (rather than simply regulating or reforming markets per se) presents for Polanyi the objective and subjective conditions for society to confront both economism and dualism

by refusing a separation of society from land, and to reject the wholesale subordination of each to exchange-value. Primitive accumulation, for Polanyi, is what puts capitalism and democracy on a collision course as the needs of a broader society confront and clash with the private property relation.

The interpretation I am suggesting helps integrate what is at times a disjointed book, and certainly speaks to Polanyi's reflections on the tension between suffrage and private property toward the latter stages of TGT. It also makes sense out of one of the aspects of the book that seems least well developed, Polanyi's argument about the emergence of distinct notions of 'society' and 'human nature' as they first appeared in classical political economy. In the chapter "Political economy and the discovery of society" Polanyi makes an intriguing but underdeveloped argument about the historical emergence of distinct realms of knowledge production pertaining to nature and society as a constitutive moment for political economy writ large. This is a break he associates with, among others, Adam Smith, Robert Townsend, and Thomas Malthus. The argument is somewhat underdone or immanent, and is neither completely clear on conceptual grounds nor on historical and empirical ones. But I do think it is highly intriguing, particularly in light of contemporary preoccupations with the ontology of 'economy', 'society', and 'nature'.

The main purpose of the chapter is actually to contribute to Polanyi's assertion that the analysis of poverty in England during the late 18th and early 19th centuries was constitutive of the rise of mainstream liberal and laissez-faire political economy. As he argues, political economists in this period were quite puzzled by the emergence of a new or modern form of poverty: ie, true destitution. Inequality was not new, and being poor was not new. But the appearance in large numbers of people who literally lacked the capacity to sustain and reproduce themselves was a relatively new phenomenon. Polanyi argues this novelty was misdiagnosed by contemporaneous political economists and liberal theorists. More specifically, he claims that poverty was reified as a permanent and 'natural' (in both senses of this word) feature of the emerging industrial capitalist and market society rather than as an historical by-product of enclosure and displacement.

In the chapter Polanyi points to a ten-year period beginning with the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, and ten years later, with the publication of Robert Townsend's *Dissertation on the Poor Laws*. He writes (TGT, page 117):

"The change in atmosphere from Adam Smith to Townsend was, indeed, striking. The former marked the closing of an age which opened with the inventors of the state, Thomas More and Machiavelli, Luther and Calvin; the latter belonged to that nineteenth century in which Ricardo and Hegel discovered from opposite angles the existence of a society that was not subject to the laws of the state, but on the contrary, subjected the state to its own laws."

For Polanyi, woven through this evolving relationship between state and society is also a distinct change in the way 'society' and 'nature' are 'thought' in relation to one another. Adam Smith is pivotal. While conceptualizing economic relations as embedded within and inseparable from a broader moral and political sphere (similar to Polanyi's own thinking), Adam Smith decisively broke with the French Physiocrats who had conceptualized the foundation of social wealth as originating ultimately in agriculture and the soil. Instead, for Smith, wealth and economic growth became products solely of the quantity and skill of productive labour. That is, the study of economic growth and the accumulation of capital and wealth after Smith becomes an entirely 'social' science. Land and soil no longer had anything to do with it. As Polanyi put it (TGT, page 118):

“The fallacies of the Physiocrats served him as a warning: their predilection for agriculture tempted them to confuse physical nature with man’s nature, and induced them to argue that the soil alone was truly creative.”

Polanyi thus identifies in Smith an important rupture in the integrative study of social and ecological dynamics and, in this rupture, the origins of political economy as a social science whose object of analysis is constructed as solely human. The result is that human and nonhuman nature are split into distinct epistemic domains. What remains, however, is to conceptualize the fundamental character or essence of human-nature, the economic agent, or *homo economicus*.

Tracing the origins of modern economics (and the economic subject), Polanyi turns to Robert Townsend. Writing ten years after Smith, Townsend develops an argument about hunger and poverty that sees these having a regulatory influence on society and human behaviour, a framing which subsequently influences both Thomas Malthus and Charles Darwin. But Townsend, in a somewhat ironic contrast to Smith, reifies poverty and hunger, making them not social but entirely natural phenomena. He draws parallels from struggles over scarce resources in regulating the populations of nonhuman animals, and specifically, from apparently fictitious predator–prey dynamics in the animal world. As Townsend writes (quoted in TGT, page 118):

“Hunger will tame the fiercest of animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general, it is only hunger which can spur and goad them [the poor] on to labour; yet our laws have said they shall never hunger.”

In this manner, Townsend prefigures classical and neoclassical economics by reifying, naturalizing, and thereby universalizing human behaviour as essentially consistent with animal behaviour (though, curiously, he recognizes specifically social phenomena such as laws and labour). As Polanyi puts it (TGT, page 119, emphasis added):

“Hobbes had argued the need for a despot because men were like beasts; Townsend insisted that they *were actually beasts* and that, precisely for that reason, only a minimum of government was required.”

Yet, Polanyi seems well aware of the apparent paradox here, writing (TGT, page 130):

“As gradually the laws governing a market economy were apprehended, these laws were put under the authority of Nature herself. The law of diminishing returns was a law of plant physiology. The Malthusian law of population reflected the relationship between the fertility of man and that of the soil.”

What has been achieved, as Polanyi notes, in the space of ten years, is a remarkable and paradoxical intellectual double movement in its own right. Political economy becomes a social science whose object of analysis is exclusively human, and notions of ‘economy’ and ‘society’ emerge with their modern Western connotations, entirely human concerns hived off from natural philosophy and the sciences, largely devoid of concern with the nonhuman world. But the fundamental laws of this ostensibly social science are imported from (largely fictional) observations of behaviour in nonhuman species and predator–prey relationships.

This chapter, in some ways orphaned from the rest of the book, may be integrated into the broader architecture of TGT as Polanyi’s indictment of classical political economy and liberalism as forms of reification unto themselves, ideological faces of primitive accumulation. Recall that Polanyi is explicit in arguing that it is specifically via a misdiagnosis of the origins and character of modern poverty (a new, landless form) that helped give rise to laissez-faire liberalism. Rather than an historical consequence of enclosure, poverty was seen as a natural or inherent feature of society, thereby contributing to a decisive break in political economy’s field of vision and conception of human behaviour. This is a view of modern poverty that takes as given what is actually unique to its historical appearance: namely, enclosure.

Seen this way, Polanyi's critique of political economy fits into his larger project: namely, to portray society as something very different than what we get from the likes of Townsend, Malthus, and even Smith. It is also, however, to reinforce his historical argument, schematic though it may be, that it is in fact the plural, complex, and sometimes contradictory responses of a three-dimensional society being pulled apart and not simply the actions of an historically reified and narrow notion of class that resisted the excesses of liberalism. On page 169 he states this plainly "It appears reasonable to group our account of the protective movement not around class interests, but around the social interests imperilled by the market."

If we move from chapter 10 to chapter 15, entitled "Market and nature", Polanyi makes clear his view that struggles over enclosure and the commercialization of land were pivotal sources of social tension in 19th-century England and continental Europe. On the one hand, he recognized the significance of enclosure, the simplification of property claims, and the 'freeing up' of land from restraints on its exchangeability as foundational to the liberal project. A self-regulating market simply could not be pursued in the eyes of laissez-faire advocates without, as Polanyi puts it, the "final liquidation of feudalism" and the substitution of habitation for improvement. Land had to be made subject to market forces unencumbered by complex social constraints and contending claims. Yet, on the other hand, Polanyi argues that the rise of all manner of social forces aligned against surrendering land to a naked logic of exchange became a focal point in the struggle against the international integration of liberalized national economies. In explicit reference to the politics of enclosure and "free labour" he writes:

"no people could forget that unless they owned their food and raw material sources themselves or were certain of military access to them, neither sound currency nor unassailable credit would rescue them from helplessness" (TGT, page 199).

Polanyi concludes the chapter with the simple statement that "[T]he dangers to man [sic] and nature cannot be separated."

We have here what seems to be an immanent moral economy approach to land: that is, an approach which posits that relations to land and nature are always more than economic. Certainly Polanyi does recognize material social interests in land unto themselves as important underpinnings of the countermovement against market liberalization. Land was food. Land was raw materials. Commenting on the virulence of social reaction to market liberalization in the 19th century, Polanyi writes:

"it had been forgotten by free traders that land formed part of the territory of the country, and that the territorial character of sovereignty was not merely a result of sentimental associations, but of massive facts, including economic ones" (TGT, page 193).

However, a major element of Polanyi's overarching conceptualization, not only of the politics of land, but of the character of society and of the embeddedness of economic relations (including property rights over land and material claims to nature more generally) is that these are never merely or simply economic or material. Instead, and as noted, Polanyi was highly critical of the economism not only of classical political economy, but also of what he referred to as "popular Marxism" and its "crude class theory of social development" (TGT, page 158). Writing against economism in thinking about land as a commodity, he wrote (TGT, page 178): "What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's [sic] *institutions*" (emphasis added).⁽⁵⁾

⁽⁵⁾ Though I know he is not as sympathetic to Polanyi as I am, this is a point on which I think Polanyi's Marxism on the land question actually converges, in spirit at least, with the argument Geoff Mann (2009) offers in thinking through what kind of 'materialism' suits political ecology best.

Conclusion

“the struggle over production conditions has redefined and broadened the class struggle beyond any self-recognition as such, at least until now. This means that capitalist threats to the reproduction of production conditions are not only threats to profits and accumulation, but also to the viability of the social and ‘natural’ environment as a means of life.”

James O’Connor (1988, page 34)

So what? If Polanyi’s TGT can be understood, at least in part, as a narrative of capitalist transformation and resistance turning fundamentally on the politics of primitive accumulation, does that really matter?

I like to think it does for a couple of reasons. First, in the context in which Polanyi wrote the book, and keeping in mind his audience, one of the lessons he offered was that a democratic socialism could only work if, as a minimum, the working classes could embrace and advance the interests of society as a whole. Polanyi viewed capitalism and democracy as being in fundamental tension with one another. His vision of a postwar, post-laissez-faire society involved the subordination of capitalist relations of private property and exchange to democratic institutions. This could only happen, according to Polanyi, if workers’ movements, particularly the English working-class audience to which TGT is primarily addressed, adopted a broad view of self-interest. For Polanyi this included embrace and internalization of environmental politics in the broadest sense.

What does that mean exactly? I confess, I don’t know. I doubt Polanyi did either. But he offers glimpses. One of the glimpses comes through his embrace of the chaotic, pluralistic pushback against laissez-faire. While Polanyi himself has been accused of being a pluralist, perhaps he was only suggesting that pluralism was part of the problem that is to be confronted and explained rather than denied and ridiculed.

At the very least, this reading of TGT suggests an attempt to reposition the central site of contestation in a capitalist society away from the wage relation *per se*. TGT in this sense is a reassertion of Marx’s insistence on the unity through which labour and means of production are dissociated via enclosure and then rearticulated as alienated instruments of exchange, stripped of their social content and commodified. Polanyi’s focus on exchange relations, though sometimes critiqued as fetishistic, in my reading draws directly from Marx’s critique of the elevation of exchange-value over use-value in bourgeois society, but (and again, thinking of the audience for the book) attempts to draw his readers into a critique of primitive accumulation and the reification of bourgeois values, and in particular economism, by linking exchange with private property and commodification as production for exchange. The critique of nature as pure exchange-value we find in TGT is actually echoed in interesting ways by Neil Smith’s (2008) brilliant argument that capitalism entails and in fact relies upon the simultaneous material and semiotic production of nature in the commodity form as, respectively, first and second nature and, thereby, the wholesale subordination of nature as use-value to nature as exchange-value. At the same time, however, by returning to primitive accumulation and the prising apart of ‘nature’ and ‘society’, we can begin to explore a political economy whose vision and terrain can encompass the ways in which the question is not merely capitalism, but the relationship(s) between capitalism and life itself, what it means, how it is lived, and by whom; questions that have never been more pressing [on the latter see, eg, Braun (2007), Li (2010), and Sunder Rajan (2006)].

In TGT the commodification of land, labour and money are unified as the three pillars on which active society rests. TGT is in this respect more than a rearticulation of Marx’s critique of economism and the domination of exchange value. Rather, it can be read as building from Marx’s conviction that primitive accumulation and the property relation is the *sine qua non* of capitalist society, forefronting the struggle of active society over the market-led allocation

of both labour and land (also money of course) as a singular rather than a differentiated struggle, while at the same time reflecting on the ways in which classical political economy was complicit in reifying primitive accumulation by, among other things, treating society and nature as separate epistemic domains. Socionature, we might now call it, constitutes a central aspect of Polanyi's active society as well as his notion of embeddedness. Polanyi reasserts the unity through which labour and nature are rendered as commodities via primitive accumulation, *and* posits a unity rather than a dualism in society's response.

The interpretation I am suggesting begins with unpacking the historical conditions that have constituted political economy's field of vision as a putatively social science, and recasts the 'problem' not based on a dualism that needs transcending, but with what might be called a metabolic understanding of socionature as a unified field of mutual transformations whose product is dualism. From his vantage point, it is not the task of a green political economy to extend the lessons, approach, theory, and method of a broad political economy to questions of environmental change and environmental politics. Rather, it is the task of a green political economy to approach these questions as internal relations historically and geographically constitutive of the very categories of social life that we use to understand and change the world around us, including as they have been received by conventional political economy. I would like to think this is indeed a way of drawing on Karl Polanyi that is of interest to (many) geographers, and as well, that geographers have much to (continue to) offer in taking up the challenge of putting Polanyi's exciting but often truncated and poorly understood ideas to work.

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