CHAPTER 10

THE SOCIAL METABOLISM OF KARL POLANYI'S FICTITIOUS NATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Many have rightly lauded the singular character and enduring relevance of the work of Karl Polanyi, specifically his best-known book, *The Great Transformation* (hereafter TGT). In TGT, Polanyi attributes the dissolution of nineteenth-century European internationalism and an extended period of geopolitical violence and protectionism lasting from 1914 to 1944 (the year the book was first published) to what he refers to as the "stark utopia" of international market self-regulation. Polanyi's analysis has been celebrated – in some cases by commentators with sharply contrasting views– as one highly relevant to late twentieth-century liberal globalization qua international capitalism and to the associated rise of, and resistance to, neoliberalism as both an intellectual movement and political project.[1]

Among the unique and important features of Polanyi's analysis in TGT is an "ecological" moment of his critique of market self-regulation. Polanyi specifically argues that land (that is, nature) was one of three (along with money and labour) species of "fictitious" commodity, focal points of political contestation in societal "double movements" pushing for and against market liberalism and unfettered commodification. In a paper that serves in large measure as the inspiration for this chapter, Nancy Fraser argues that Polanyi's ecological critique of free-market capitalism helps make his work both singular within the political economy tradition and highly relevant in the current planetary conjuncture (Fraser 2014). As she puts it:

1. See, for instance, the contributions of Joseph Stiglitz and Fred Block to the 2001 Beacon Press edition (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). More generally, see Block & Somers 1984; Burawoy 2003; Dale 2008; Fraser 2014; Granovetter 1985; Jessop 2001; Peck 2013b; Prudham 2013; Silver & Arrighi 2003.

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> [TGT] interweaves an account of financial breakdown and economic collapse with accounts of natural despoliation and social disintegration … Refusing to limit himself either to the economic, on the one hand, or to the ecological, on the other, Polanyi elaborated a conception of crisis that encompasses both those dimensions, as well as the dimension of social reproduction.
>
> (Fraser 2014: 543)

Although she recognizes the importance and enduring relevance of Polanyi's unified economic–ecological–sociological critique, Fraser nevertheless raises important questions and concerns about how Polanyi might be and has been interpreted. One of her specific worries pertains to whether or not his argument lends itself to what she called an "ontological interpretation" – that is, an essentially dualistic framework in which nature is understood to comprise a domain wholly external to society, culture and human history more generally.

I share Fraser's concerns with an ontological interpretation of Polanyi, for reasons I will discuss. I also agree with Fraser that Polanyi's writing offers ample justification to support an ontological reading. Polanyi does, after all, write in TGT that "land is only another name for nature, *which is not produced by man* [sic]" (2001 [1944]: 76, emphasis added). He later repeats the same unfortunate statement in his important essay "The economistic fallacy" (Polanyi 1977a: 13).[2] Nevertheless, in this chapter, I argue for a different interpretation of Polanyi, one that is not ontological in the sense that Fraser discusses. I do so because of the evident shortcomings of the ontological interpretation as a way of seeing the world and acting in it, aspects of which are also discussed by Fraser, but also because, in my view, the ontological interpretation of Polanyi is difficult to reconcile with the broader architecture of Polanyi's writing, in TGT and beyond.

Before proceeding, I want to make clear that my purpose is not to differ from Fraser. Fraser is more than fair, carefully avoiding the suggestion that Polanyi intended to advance a strictly dualistic ontology of "nature" apart from "society". Fraser is more cautionary than exegetical, arguing less against Polanyi and more against the pitfalls of an ontological interpretation of his work. I agree with her larger point. In an age that is increasingly, if problematically, being labelled "the Anthropocene" (see, for example, Chakrabarty 2009, 2017; Moore 2016), it is important to consider Polanyi's views carefully and comprehensively as intellectual and political resources. In that spirit, I wish

2. This essay comprises the opening chapter of Polanyi's important book *The Livelihood of Man* (Polanyi 1977b), edited by Harry Pearson and published posthumously after Polanyi's death in 1964.

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to place some of Polanyi's more problematic statements into context with his work more generally in order to argue against the ontological interpretation.

A focal point in my argument is Polanyi's definition of a commodity as something "produced for sale on the market". I differ somewhat from Fraser, in that I ascribe considerable significance to the inclusion of the word "for" in Polanyi's definition. This inclusion suggests (to me) that Polanyi's intent may in fact have been to differentiate between production in general and capitalist production more specifically, or what he refers to in TGT as production coordinated solely by market self-regulation. In offering this interpretation, I draw on Polanyi's conception of economic relations and behaviours as they are embedded within a broader socio-cultural context, what has been referred to as his "substantivist" or "instituted" perspective. I invoke Michael Burawoy's (2003) development of the idea of "active society", as it is inspired by Polanyi's work, as well as Bob Jessop's (2001: 219) elaboration of Polanyi's emphasis on ways in which "capital accumulation always and everywhere depends on a precarious and changing balance between commodity relations and other forms of social organisation".

As Fraser herself also notes, insights along these lines point to ways of reconciling Polanyi with long-standing emphases in feminist political economy on capitalism's constitutive "outside", including the appropriation of non-waged labour. I seek to develop and extend these notions, arguing that Polanyi's admittedly contradictory statements about land qua nature may be seen to converge in important respects with contemporary critical perspectives on human/non-human entanglements, as a unified socio-ecological "metabolism" constitutive of the substance of what is commonly understood (and reified) as "society". In this light, Polanyi's critique of the self-regulating market as a "stark utopia" actually turns on the consequences of a strictly dualistic nature–society ontology of the sort that Fraser warns against.

NATURE AS FICTITIOUS COMMODITY

Although the enduring relevance of what Fred Block refers to as the "fresh" and "indispensable"[3] character of TGT and of Polanyi's writing is widely noted, his importance in providing a foundation for contemporary, critical and explicitly green political economy is even more striking (see, for example, Barry 1999; Fraser 2014; Low 2002; O'Connor 1988; Prudham 2013). One reason for this is that Polanyi's critique of market self-regulation – that is, of a market in which all inputs to production are commodities allocated by

3. See the introductory chapter in Polanyi (2001 [1944]: xviii).

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price alone – turns centrally on his conceptualization of land as a form of fictitious commodity. For Polanyi, this quality of fictitiousness stemmed from the seemingly simple fact that land does not conform to his empirical definition of commodities as "objects produced for sale on the market" (2001 [1944]: 75).

Crucially, this definition follows from Polanyi's discussion in TGT of the historical emergence of capitalism and the rise of machine manufacture – that is, "the production of commodities by commodities" (to use Karl Marx's phrase). In order for increasingly machine-dominated production to operate continuously without interruption, Polanyi stresses the importance of all inputs to production being available in the commodity form and allocated by "one big market", which is:

(a) a self-regulating market, in the sense that price alone determines allocation; and
(b) a comprehensive market, in the sense that *all inputs are available as commodities*.

From this, Polanyi identifies an ostensibly self-evident contradiction:

> The crucial point is this: labor, land, and money are essential elements of industry; they also must be organized in markets; in fact, these markets form an absolutely vital part of the economic system. But labor, land, and money are *obviously* not commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been *produced for sale* is emphatically untrue in regard to them.
> (Polanyi 2001 [1944][4]: 75, emphasis added)

Polanyi's definition of commodity is problematic. Note, for instance, that he asserts that commodities are simply "objects". As Marx (1977 [1867]) argues, generalized capitalist commodity production and circulation tend to mystify the origins of commodities, leading to their reification as mere objects or things. For Fraser, however, a different problem lies in Polanyi's assertion that "labour, land and money are obviously not commodities", because, as Polanyi puts it, they have not been "produced for sale". Polanyi also writes specifically of land, as already noted, that it "is only another name for nature, *which is not produced by man* [sic]" (2001 [1944]: 76, emphasis added).

4. Polanyi's use of the term "land" to point more broadly to nature has a basis in classical political economy, and he was generally consistent in this connotation in TGT, even if, confusingly, most of his substantive statements in the book elaborating on the notion of nature as a fictitious commodity pertain more narrowly to land.

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Although these statements provide foundations for a sweeping proto-ecological critique of market self-regulation, they are also troubling. As Fraser argues, an ontological interpretation would have Polanyi asserting that "nature" comprises a domain wholly external to and independent of society. This would mean that Polanyi embraced a strict nature–society dualism under which ecological limits impose themselves as objective, externally given constraints on market self-regulation. If this is indeed how Polanyi is to be read, then, as Fraser notes,

> the ontological interpretation posits that to commodify labour, land and money is to violate their *inherent* nature. As a result, it obscures their historicity – covering over the fact that none of the three is ever encountered pure, but only in forms that have already been shaped by human activity and relations of power.[5]
>
> (Fraser 2014: 547, emphasis added)

This interpretation would place Polanyi in the intellectual tradition of what Paul Robbins (2004) refers to as "apolitical" ecology, in the same category as Malthusians and environmental determinists. Is that what Polanyi really had in mind? Despite the damning character of the statements quoted, I wish to argue for a different interpretation.

THE PROBLEM OF DUALISM

Before proceeding, it is worth being explicit about what is so problematic about the ontological interpretation. Why is a strictly dualistic conception of "nature" apart from "society" politically and analytically unsatisfying, if not dangerous? As Fraser notes in emphasizing the importance of *historicity*, the ontological interpretation would have Polanyi asserting that nature is to be understood as a biophysical domain wholly external to human transformations, and, conversely, that, once biophysical processes and entities of various kinds have been transformed by human hands, by whatever means, they no longer have ontological standing as forms of "nature". At the same time, Polanyi would also have committed himself implicitly to an epistemological stance in which knowledge of the natural world is mimetic, removing any sense that knowledge and experience of the non-human world is mediated by our senses, by language and by concepts. There are several interrelated limitations to this way of thinking that have been much discussed across a

5. See also Christophers (2014b), who echoes Fraser's critique vis-à-vis land, albeit in a discussion about land qua land, not as nature.

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range of scholarly literatures in recent decades. I briefly highlight three of them here.

The first problem is the so-called "pristine myth". This argument links ontological dualism with a tendency to erase or overlook historical transformations of nature out of a misplaced belief that lands not bearing evident or obvious signs of occupation or transformation must thereby exist in a condition that has remained pristine. Considerable critical scholarship has exposed the ways in which ethnocentric norms by which landscapes are interpreted and/or ahistorical attempts to "read" landscapes lead to systemic failures to recognize past (or sometimes ongoing) anthropogenic changes in the land (Cronon 1983). For example, in his influential seventeenth-century treatise "On Property", John Locke famously argued that the legitimacy of private property and the enclosure of communal land lies in the inherent right to claim the products of one's labour as one's own (Macpherson 1978). He also argued, however, that "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing" (Locke 1952 [1690]: § 42). Locke thus reified parochial agrarian norms prevailing in the England of his day, making them universal signifiers of claims to private land title more generally. Locke also described late seventeenth-century North America as "wild woods and uncultivated waste" (1952 [1690]: § 37), fuelling arguments that he was an apologist for colonial dispossessions (see, for example, Armitage 2004; Corcoran 2018).

Another example comes from William Denevan's (1992) critique of the "pristine myth" as it was applied to the colonial landscapes of North America. Denevan specifically argues that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans tended to represent the then prevailing condition of North American landscapes as empty wilderness. But, Denevan claims, such representations were the product of Romantic-era nostalgia combined with a failure to appreciate the cumulative effects that war and disease had on Indigenous populations subsequent to first European contact in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Indigenous population decline lowered the intensity of human pressure on land and resources, allowing landscapes to recover and making them look more pristine.

Related arguments concerning the potential pitfalls of ignoring (wilfully or otherwise) social influences on historical processes of landscape change have been made by numerous others across a variety of geographical contexts (Cronon 1996; Fairhead & Leach 1995, 1996; Langston 1995; Leach & Fairhead 2000; Mitchell 1996). "Ignorance" of this kind carries more than academic significance; it may reinforce racialized stereotypes concerning what kinds of people are capable of "mastering" nature, and can also carry important public policy consequences. Both are evident, for instance, in the ways in

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which contemporary enclosures of genes and genetically modified organisms privilege the practices of contemporary biotechnology at the expense of traditional or customary plant and animal breeding regimes (Haraway 1997; Kloppenburg 2004; Prudham 2007).

A second significant problem with the ontological view is a theme strongly expressed in generally critical scholarship dealing with ostensibly natural disasters, risk and vulnerability. In this literature, emphasis is placed on the ideational processes through which biophysical and geophysical forces helping to propel calamitous events come to be known and represented, as well as the role of social relations and institutions in the production and social distribution of vulnerability (such as the role of urban planning and development processes in producing spatially uneven exposure to risk in urbanized areas prone to tropical storms). As Kenneth Hewitt puts it in his classic critique of technocratic approaches to hazards:

> [N]atural disaster, its causes, internal features and consequences are not explained by conditions or behavior peculiar to calamitous events. Rather they … depend upon the larger social order, its everyday relations to the habitat and the larger historical circumstances that shape or frustrate these matters.
>
> (Hewitt 1983: 25)

These and related themes are points of emphasis in a tradition of scholarship emphasizing the social and biophysical co-constitution of risk, hazard and vulnerability (see, for example, Comfort *et al*. 1999; Davis 1995, 1998; Watts 1983; Pelling 2001, 2003), including more recent literature on geographies of climate justice (see, for example, Bulkeley, Edwards & Fuller 2014; Eriksen & Lind 2009; Klein 2008; Rice 2014).

A third reason why a strictly dualistic view of nature/society is highly problematic originates in conceptions of subject and object expressed through knowledge claims about non-human natures. Feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway memorably refers to the Cartesian notion of strictly independent human observation and representation of a passive external nature as the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1988: 581). In the abstract, and in the extreme, mechanical objectivity is a difficult epistemological position to sustain (Sayer 1979), particularly if one accepts the basic premise that observation and representation are inevitably forms of intervention (Hacking 1983). The notion of "objective" nature in a strict sense becomes either an impossibility (because "it" cannot be faithfully represented) or, alternatively, a triviality (because, if "it" exists, we cannot know it as such). External nature can come to be known only through the values and meanings caught up in acts of classification and representation – that is, via what

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Ian Hacking calls different "modes of knowing" (Hacking 2015) and what Haraway labels "situated knowledge" claims (Haraway 1988). Working to ground or situate knowledge claims about nature implicates the specific cultural registers and institutional practices that underlie those claims, including the sometimes hidden or obscure ways in which they inform environmental policy (see, for example, Demeritt 2001; Robbins 2001). Situating knowledge claims about nature also allow for recognition of the ways in which the specific, differentiated and even lively materialities of nature constitute claims made about and on them (for example, Collard & Dempsey 2013).

Problems originating in dualistic conceptions of nature/society or nature/culture are widely discussed themes across scholarly literatures, from critical conservation studies to environmental history to political ecology to science studies. Scholars working in these fields increasingly seek to transcend dualistic thinking by emphasizing ways in which social and environmental processes and entities are so thoroughly intertwined in accounts of historical and geographical change that we must rethink notions of ontologically distinct realms of "society/culture" and "nature". Maverick environmental economist and philosopher Richard Norgaard (1988) stresses the historical processes of "co-evolution" shaping simultaneous and entwined social and environmental transformations. Others have deployed terms such as "hybridity", "cyborg" and the rather more clunky invocation of conjoined "socio-ecological", "socio-environmental" and "socio-natural" processes or entities (Gandy 2005; Haraway 1991; Swyngedouw 1995). These efforts reinforce Bruno Latour's insight (1993) that dualistic thinking about "nature" as an external realm of objective reality is a historical product of modern Western thought. Latour in turn echoes an observation made much earlier by Marx, who noted:

> [I]t 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. (Marx 1981 [1858]: 489)[6]

Many now working in a broadly neo-Marxian tradition of critical environmental studies, eco-Marxism and political ecology make use of the term "metabolism" to express the idea of unified or conjoined social and ecological transformation. As discussed by John Foster (1999), Marx adopted and

6. See also Alex Loftus (2009) on the significance of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach".

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adapted the term from nineteenth-century soil chemists, including Justus von Liebig, who identified the cycling of nutrients from soil into plants and back again, and who also identified a disruption or "rift" introduced in this cycling by the displacement of organic wastes from the country to the city as an effect of nineteenth-century agro-industrial development and urbanization. Metabolism, for Marx, became a broader term reflecting his view that the transformation of nature to meet social needs and wants was the point of departure for historical materialist analysis within any society, capitalist or otherwise (Ekers & Prudham 2017; Loftus 2009; Marx 1981 [1858]; Sayer 1987; Smith 2008 [1984]). As Marx wrote in volume 1 of *Capital*:

> Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man [sic] and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, *he at the same time changes his own nature.* (Marx 1984 [1867]: 127, emphasis added)

The essential insight in Marx's use of metabolism, well captured in this quote, is that environmental change and social change are seen as unified or conjoined processes whose specific dynamics can only really be understood in a specific historical-geographical context (see also Harvey 1974; Sayer 1979). This is consistent with Fraser's emphasis on retaining a sense of nature's historicism in the politics of environmental change.

Jason Moore (2015: 76) argues that the goal of embracing the term "metabolism" in the neo-Marxian sense is to understand "life-making within the biosphere" – what he refers to as a "singular metabolism of humanity-in-nature … beyond dualism". It is a relational ontological move that disrupts many of the accepted strategic essentialisms animating scholarly analysis, such as culture, urban, rural, nature, society – and economy! A metabolic perspective calls, instead, for accounts of environmental change that are historically specific rather than being based on generic or universal laws, as in, for example, neo-Malthusian accounts of resource scarcity propelled by abstract population increases. Equally, however, metabolism calls for accounts of social change that are situated in relation to patterns of appropriating, transforming and representing nature.[7] As I will argue, there are echoes of this view in Polanyi's

7. For powerful examples of putting this notion "to work", see Swyngedouw (1999, 2015).

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development (in TGT and particularly afterwards) of his instituted and substantive approach to the historical analysis of actually existing economies.

POLANYI, ECONOMISM AND THE METABOLISM OF ACTIVE AND MARKET SOCIETY

I argue that, if Polanyi intended to be read ontologically when it comes to nature and society, then that would have been an ironic blunder – so much so that I think it unlikely. More than wishful revisionism, my case turns on important currents within Polanyi's writing that point towards a different interpretation. These currents include: (a) Polanyi's critique of the economistic fallacy as an ahistorical reification of human nature or subjectivity in economic behaviour, and, more generally, of modern capitalism and market economies; (b) Polanyi's embrace of holistic substantivism as an approach to economic history; and (c) the specific and under-appreciated link Polanyi drew between market-self-regulation and machine manufacture or the production of commodities by commodities.

Polanyi was highly critical of economism. This includes his critiques of the classical economics paradigm that helped to animate nineteenth-century liberalism and of the emerging neoclassicism of his day (including the Austrian school of thought being advanced by economists such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek). Polanyi's aversion to economism also implicated variants of teleological and popular or political Marxism, however (Block 2003; Block & Somers 1984; Burawoy 2003; Polanyi 1977b).

In the middle of the book, TGT contains an extended if somewhat disjointed discussion of the historical rise of economics as a social science, and, with it, the development of a reified rational economic agent, *Homo economicus,* in classical liberal thought. Polanyi notes a break from natural philosophy that he attributes to Adam Smith's rejection of the Physiocratic notion that economic value and wealth ultimately originate from agricultural soil: "The fallacies of the Physiocrats served [Smith] as a warning: their predilection for agriculture tempted them to confuse physical nature with *man's* [sic] *nature*, and induced them to argue that the soil alone was truly creative" (2001 [1944]:118, emphasis added). Polanyi notes the significance of Smith's emphasis on the division of labour; on a supposedly inherent human tendency to "barter and truck"; and, most of all, on a humanistic theory of value and wealth in which the determining influences were attributed to the quantity and skill of available labour. These provided a foundation for the study of economics as a social science and for liberal conceptualizations of value and wealth reified as strictly "social" phenomena.

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But, as Polanyi notes, after Smith, conceptions of human nature were further transformed. A rational, atomized, individual and independent utility-maximizing actor making choices under conditions of scarcity became the universal human subject.[8] The specific context in which choices were made, and, equally, the objects of choice, ceased to be of consequence. How did this come about? Polanyi points to the context of industrial take-off in parts of Europe (notably in the United Kingdom), characterized by social dislocation in the countryside, rapid urbanization and the appearance of a historically unique form of landless poverty. The spread of such misery amid spectacular increases in economic growth and private wealth presented early political economists, including Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo, with political and intellectual challenges. Yet, Polanyi notes with some irony, rather than drawing on historical processes – notably the dissolution of communal and shared rights to agricultural and forest lands and their replacement with more exclusive individual private claims – poverty was seen as trans-historical, a product of inherent tension between population and available resources (most centrally food).[9] This link is most closely associated with Malthus (1798). But, as Polanyi notes, Joseph Townsend had earlier argued in his *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* that observations of non-human predator–prey dynamics suggested (to Townsend at least) that deprivation should be used as a public policy tool: "'Hunger will tame the fiercest 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" (Townsend, quoted in Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 118). Townsend thereby provided not only a critique of the relief laws but an account of human nature more generally. Malthus (1798) then built from Townsend, providing a universal theory of the inherent tension between human population growth and available means of subsistence, while also using universalist and abstract claims about human nature to echo Townsend's laissez-faire prescriptions for reform of British poor laws. A bizarre alchemy thus transformed modern liberal conceptions of human nature and the economy during this crucial period, connecting Smith to Townsend to Malthus. Although wealth and the economy came increasingly to be seen as entirely social phenomena, without need of substantive reference to the non-human world, human nature was universalized and reified by means of analogy with the observed behaviour of non-human species and the effects of scarcity in resources. As Polanyi (2001 [1944]: 130)

8. For more discussion of Polanyi's engagement with *Homo economicus*, see Dale (2010, esp. chap. 3).
9. See also Michael Perelman (2000), who argues that classical political economists wilfully obscured the role of material deprivation in inducing wage labour.

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writes: "As … the laws governing a market economy were apprehended, these laws were put under the authority of Nature herself." Crucially and ironically, in the case of both Townsend and Malthus, although unique historical circumstances obviously informed their analyses (that is, landless and increasingly urban poverty together with the relief laws against which they inveighed), those very circumstances were stripped of significance in their articulations of universalist claims regarding human nature.

Reified notions of an essential or universal *Homo economicus* comprised one part of Polanyi's critique of economism in TGT and other writings. Another was what he called the economistic fallacy, manifest, it should be stressed, as he saw it in both mainstream economic thought, but also in variants of Marxism. In each case, the failure was a lack of historicism. Of the former, Polanyi (1957: 10, original emphasis) notes that the economistic fallacy originated in "a broad, generic phenomenon … taken to be identical with a species with which we happen to be familiar. In such terms, the error was in equating the human economy in general with its market form (a mistake that may have been facilitated by the basic ambiguity of the term *economic*…)." Referencing teleological variants of historical materialism and popular Marxisms, Polanyi writes:

> Never has there been such an absurd superstition as the belief that the history of man [sic] 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.
>
> (Polanyi, quoted in Polanyi-Levitt & Mendell 1987: 22)[10]

These sentiments animated Polanyi's embrace of an alternative, holistic and substantive perspective on economic systems, relations and subjectivities. Crucially, this perspective was founded on the constitutive importance of human relations with the non-human world, what we might now call socio-ecological entanglements. As he writes 13 years after TGT, in "The economy as instituted process" (Polanyi 1957: 243): "The substantive meaning of economic derives from man's [sic] dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows. It refers to the interchange with his natural and social environment, in so far as this results in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction." Later in the same essay he writes: "The fount of the substantive concept is the empirical economy. It can be briefly (if not engagingly) defined as an instituted process of interaction between man [sic] *and his*

10. See also Burawoy (2003).

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environment, which results in a continuous supply of want satisfying material means" (Polanyi 1957: 248, emphasis added).

One might quibble with terms such as "interchange" and "interaction", suggestive as they are of an underlying dualistic ontology. Yet what is important to note here is Polanyi's insistence on the idea that economic analysis should be an empirical, historicist undertaking, starting with *real* economies, not the abstraction of formalistic approaches, whose starting points are universal assumptions about economic behaviours and subjectivities and whose focus is too often the means of analysis unto themselves (Dale 2010). As Jamie Peck (2013b: 1555) notes, substantivism "entails a close methodological engagement with a range of actually existing economies (past and present), in a fashion attentive to the various social and institutional ways in which provisioning for material wants have been (and can be) organized. It calls, moreover, for grounded and granulated forms of analysis." At the same time, as Peck points out elsewhere in the same paper, Polanyi's substantivism is irreducibly "ecosocial", in that the empirical and instituted practices constitutive of real economies – material *and* semiotic, it should be stressed – always include transformations of nature for the purposes of meeting human aspirations.

Crucially, these kinds of statements about "man" and "nature" in Polanyi tend to convey holism, entanglement and even co-production, not ontological dualism of the sort that Fraser warns against. Consider, for instance, Polanyi's comments near the opening of the key chapter in TGT elaborating on the fictitiousness of nature as a commodity (chapter 15, "Market and nature"):

> The 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 life without land. And yet to separate land from man and organize society in such a way as to satisfy the requirement of a real-estate market was a vital part of the utopian concept of a market economy.
>
> (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 187, emphasis added)

This passage is not consistent with the notion of objectively given, nature-imposed limits on human action. Instead, nature is expressed in relational terms as being internal to society. Earlier in TGT he was explicit in this respect: "But labor and land are no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists. To include them in the market mechanism means to subordinate the *substance of society itself* to the laws of the market" (2001 [1944]: 75, emphasis

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added). In this quote, importantly, Polanyi expresses the fictitiousness of land and labour as being *conjoined*, not simply two items in a list of independent variables. Moreover, he emphasizes that surrender of the allocation of nature to the market was a threat to the "substance of society" – that is, not to an external society but to a society constituted by socio-ecological relations.

These kinds of representations in Polanyi's writing anticipate in important respects ideas about society "in nature" and "life-making within the biosphere" articulated by analysts such as Moore (2015). They also, tellingly, echo Marx's deployment of the concept of metabolism as a point of departure for historical materialist analysis. Although he was critical, as noted, of economistic Marxism, Polanyi was nonetheless, at various stages of his life, a committed Marxist on his own political and intellectual terms (see Dale 2008, 2010; Polanyi-Levitt & Mendell 1987). Certainly, he was quite familiar with Marx's written work. That being the case, it is difficult to miss the ways in which Marx's adaptation of the concept of metabolism is echoed by Polanyi's emphasis on the role of socio-ecological transformations in constituting a social domain located formally outside (even if coupled to) capitalist commodification and market allocation. In fact, Polanyi's justification echoes substantivism, as it turns on "man's [sic] dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows … in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction" (Polanyi 1957: 243), a statement that very closely echoes Marx's adaptation of the concept of metabolism to capture the ways in which social labour involves the conjoined transformation of both the external world and human or internal nature.

My comments on Polanyi's explicit commitments to attending to socio-ecological or "eco-social" entanglements are informed by Burawoy (2003) and what he calls "active society". Burawoy uses this term to capture Polanyi's emphasis on the role of diverse, complex and internally contradictory elements of a semi-autonomous realm of society as it aligns in relation to market self-regulation. Burawoy stresses the importance of the way in which Polanyi locates market capitalism within a broader and more complex social architecture:

> Polanyi is not always clear about what populates active society, but in nineteenth-century England it includes 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.
> (Burawoy 2003: 198)

This is crucial. And, although Burawoy fails to note it explicitly, Polanyian active society specifically includes organizations that we might call

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"environmental", whether they be social movements in the proper sense (such as Extinction Rebellion) or merely social organizations concerned with aspects of the non-human world (such as outdoor recreation societies). It also includes individual claims on the non-human world that are not easily reducible to instrumental or materialist motivations. The key quote from TGT is:

> Once we are rid of the obsession that only sectional, never general, interests can become effective, as well as of the twin prejudice of restricting the interests of human groups to their monetary income, the breadth and comprehensiveness of the protectionist movement lose their mystery. While monetary interests are necessarily voiced solely by the persons to whom they pertain, other interests have a wider constituency. They affect individuals in innumerable ways as neighbors, professional persons, consumers, pedestrians, commuters, sportsmen, hikers, gardeners, patients, mothers, or lovers – and are accordingly capable of representation by almost any type of territorial or functional association such as churches, townships, fraternal lodges, clubs, trade unions, or, most commonly, political parties based on broad principles of adherence. (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 161–2)

Of particular significance in this quote is Polanyi's inclusion of a diverse set of individual and social claims on, ideas about and relations with the non-human world that are seen as (a) constitutive of the substance of society and real economies and (b) not reducible – or, at least, not easily – to monetary definition or expression. Yet, as Polanyi also writes in TGT, referencing the imperatives of machine manufacture as the production of commodities by commodities: "Machine production in a commercial society involves, in effect, *no less a transformation than that of the natural and human substance of society into commodities*" (2001 [1944]: 44, emphasis added). This phrasing is intriguing, since the substance of society is seen as resting on a conjoined or unified natural (that is, non-human) *and* human foundation. Moreover, and as I explain, this quote perhaps best captures Polanyi's attempts to convey an ecological contradiction internal to the project of market self-regulation arising from social claims on the non-human world.

Burawoy's notion of "active society" resonates with Jessop's exposition of the Polanyian concepts of "embeddedness" and "market society" in ways that are also germane to my argument. For Jessop (2001), one of Polanyi's key contributions is his emphasis on substantivism and the role of formally non-economic institutions, including as these operate in relation to capitalist social relations. For many scholars, Polanyi's criticism of the rise of market

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capitalism, expressed most forcefully in TGT, points to the ways in which capitalism may be understood as a historical process of "disembedding" or freeing up the market and individual economic behaviours from broader social integuments (see, for example, Dale 2008; Hodgson 2017). This interpretation would have Polanyi (and adherents to this interpretation and perspective) essentially agreeing with free-market advocates on the character of the historical process involved, while disagreeing on whether or not the outcome is desirable (on this debate, and ambiguity, see also Block 2003; Peck 2013b). Others, however (such as Block 2003: 296), interpret Polanyi's substantivism as applying equally to capitalist and non-capitalist social formations. Advancing the latter view, Jessop – to some extent echoed by Dale (2008) – stresses the importance of Polanyi's comment in TGT that the rise of capitalism and an autonomous market means that, "[i]nstead of economy being embedded in social relations, *social relations are embedded in the economic system*. The vital importance of the economic factor to the existence of society precludes any other result" (2001 [1944]: 60, emphasis added). Although Polanyi thus recognized an important qualitative distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist economies, this does not amount to an abandonment of the substantivist position, or the concept of embeddedness. Rather, as Jessop argues, Polanyi's critique of market self-regulation takes a different form:

> [W]hat Polanyi actually proposes is that society, in and through the agency of a wide range of social forces, seeks to constrain the destructive anarchy of the free market by subjecting it to various forms of extra-economic regulation that nonetheless support and sustain capital accumulation. To the extent that these extra-economic forms become interiorized within and/or become structurally coupled to the market economy they may be said to be "embedded" within it. But one could equally well (and with greater clarity) argue, as does Polanyi himself, that the market economy has been embedded within a market society. (Jessop 2001: 215)

"Market society" implies not only an institutional or structural coupling between market and society but, more specifically, that society be reorganized as an "adjunct to the market" (2001 [1944]: 60). As Polanyi was later to write in his essay on the economistic fallacy:

> Within an extremely brief period, the commodity fiction, as applied to labor and land, transformed the very substance of society. Here was the identification of economy and market in practice. Man's [sic] ultimate dependence on nature and his

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> fellows for the means of his survival was put under the control of that new-fangled institutional creation of superlative power, the markets, which developed overnight from lowly beginnings.
> (Polanyi 1977a: 12)

Yet, even with market society, an ostensibly self-regulating market remains propped up by a constitutive outside. As Jessop (2001: 219) also points out, "[C]apital accumulation always and everywhere depends on a precarious and changing balance between commodity relations and other forms of social organisation." Any real sense of market self-regulation is compromised by the necessary role of inputs that come in non-commodified or incompletely commodified forms. Moreover, these processes of "propping up" comprise sites of political struggle over contending claims, allocations and priorities (such as in the orientation of public education systems, in environmental regulation, etc.), animating a politics of commodity fiction.

I return at this point to the particular wording of Polanyi's definition of commodities "as objects produced *for sale on the market*" (2001 [1944]: 75, emphasis added). Taking note of the word "for", the definition points to the idea that what matters is not only whether nature is socially produced in general terms (and Polanyi categorically states that it is not, as I have noted) but also the more specific (and, for me, insightful) idea that not all forms of nature circulating in the commodity form are produced exclusively *for sale* on the market. In other words, production takes many forms, not all of them wholly capitalist. If this is taken to be Polanyi's meaning or emphasis, it is consistent with the distinction between production in general terms and production specifically for sale. Polanyi would in this respect echo Aristotle's critique of chrematistics or the art of acquisition as an end unto itself (see O'Neill 1995; Sayer 2001). Tellingly, Polanyi explicitly comments favourably on Aristotle's distinction between production for use and production for sale, and the critique of the latter, in TGT (2001 [1944]: 56).

Reading Polanyi this way would also parallel, reinforce and extend an aspect of Fraser's discussion of the notion of "fictitiousness". Specifically, she suggests that in some ways Polanyi anticipated feminist political economists (see, for example, Federici 2004; Katz 2001; Mies 2014 [1986]), who have emphasized the importance to capitalist accumulation of patriarchal exploitation that has women performing domestic work that is not fully or formally valued or priced (waged). The appropriation of unpaid domestic work serves as an example of the ways in which capitalist accumulation more generally relies on inputs secured by myriad extra-economic means (such as theft, state provisioning, imperialism, administrative and legal fiat, force, neoliberal sell-offs of public assets, patriarchal norms, etc.). Massimo De Angelis (2004)

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is among those who have argued that these appropriations, ongoing forms of what Marx referred to as so-called primitive accumulation (Marx 1984 [1867]), are essential to the reproduction of capitalist social relations and conditions of accumulation, thereby comprising part of capitalism's ontology. For Moore (2015), this argument applies specifically to forms of "cheap" nature not produced by capitalist social relations and yet appropriated into the circuits of accumulation.[11] To be clear, this is not the same thing as saying that capitalism relies on natural inputs that are not produced or transformed by prior human action – that is, that have no history. Rather, it is to argue more specifically that capitalist accumulation relies on raw material and energy inputs that are not fully capitalized or commodified (using Polanyi's language) because these inputs are not produced by commodities alone. Drawing these various threads together, capitalist commodification and accumulation are seen to rely *inherently* on unpriced (or incompletely priced) raw materials *and* labour (whatever their specific socio-ecological provenance) – that is, on human labour and non-human inputs that are not all made available strictly in the commodity form. Polanyi's notion of nature as a fictitious commodity, when worked through his analysis of the contradictions of market self-regulation more generally, arguably point in this direction by emphasizing the complex, not fully capitalized socio-ecological metabolism of market society and active society, thereby in turn sustaining the fiction of true market self-regulation.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that, as Fraser (2014) notes, Polanyi's theory of fictitiousness and, specifically, his conception of nature as a class of fictitious commodity, though a powerful critique of free-market capitalism, lends itself also to what she calls an "ontological interpretation". And there is no doubt that this interpretation would have Polanyi advancing a dualistic conception of nature and society, consistent with apolitical ecologies. This kind of ontology tends towards a view of nature as consisting of a realm wholly external to human transformations, and, conversely, towards viewing biophysical processes and entities of various kinds that have been transformed by human hands, by whatever means, as unnatural and as therefore less valuable. It would have us look down upon and disregard the environments of everyday life, and so, for instance, prioritize ostensibly pristine wilderness over urban green space. It also denies, as Fraser argues, nature's *historicity*, the complex and conjoined ways in which human and non-human processes and entities coevolve. And

11. See also O'Connor (1988) for a parallel line of argument.

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it lends itself to politically problematic forms of environmentalism in which the "right" answers to environmental problems are seen to reside in nature, external to politics, to culture and to situated forms of knowledge claims. In other words, it lends itself to the performance of what Haraway (1988: 581) calls the "god trick".

Although I agree with Fraser on the limitations of the ontological interpretation, I have offered a different reading of Polanyi. I have done so by putting his sometimes contradictory and highly problematic comments about nature in TGT into conversation with his broader work, and by drawing on some secondary literature concerned with Polanyi's life and the interpretation of his far-reaching ideas.

Why bother? As noted, many have found and continue to find Polanyi's work a source of intellectual and political inspiration. As planetary-scale anthropogenic environmental changes increasingly wreak havoc on everyday life, so too do environmental concerns and their politics assume a central place within what Fraser (2014: 541) calls a contemporary "crisis of great severity and great complexity". The current conjuncture poses fundamental questions about capitalism, about democracy, about social and environmental justice and about whether and how these are compatible with one another (Mann & Wainwright 2018). Polanyi's TGT and his other writings provide important insights in thinking these issues through. If that is to continue to be the case then the implications of Polanyi's work need to be interrogated closely and carefully, including specifically his theory of nature as a class of fictitious commodity. My purpose has been to provide what I hope is a compelling interpretation of Polanyi's singular theory of nature as a fictitious commodity within the broader scope of his work. I have also tried to consider the place of environmental politics within Polanyi's conception of society more generally, and to argue in doing so for a non-dualistic reading in which nature and environmental politics are understood to be, as Polanyi puts it, "part of the substance of society itself" (2001 [1944]: 75). Pursuing these and related threads provides intellectual means by which struggles over environmental politics and environmental governance may be linked to the broader struggle over the scope of market allocation and commodification, and, more fundamentally (building from the concluding chapters of TGT), over the contradictory relation between capitalism and freedom in a complex society.

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