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Ecological Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ecocon

Analysis

Bringing Class Analysis Back in: Assessing the Transformation of the Value-Nature Nexus to Strengthen the Connection Between Degrowth and Environmental Justice[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Autonomist Marxism
Carbon trading
Degrowth
Green economy
Value-nature nexus

ABSTRACT

The article aims at showing the relevance of understanding the transformations of class composition for strengthening the connection between degrowth and environmental justice (EJ). In particular, I suggest the heterodox line of Autonomist Marxism as enabling factor of such connection. From an ecological perspective, the changing components of the working-class can be grasped by assessing the historical development of the value-nature nexus, and specifically of labour's role within it. In fact, capitalism does not have but rather is an ecological regime. Value creation occurs not upon nature, but through it – that is, within socio-natural relations emerging from the articulation of capital, power and the environment. My basic argument is that in contemporary capitalism conditions of existence and reproduction of society have become key drivers for surplus value production – most notably in carbon trading. Hence, EJ resistances are instances of class struggle and degrowth theoretical elaboration would benefit from incorporating such class-character. In this unprecedented situation, the task of the critique of political economy is not only that of unmasking ruling class' attempts to *naturalize capitalism*. It also requires resisting to elites' endeavours to directly *capitalize nature*.

1. Introduction

This paper engages in a dialogue with thesis IV and thesis V of the Introduction to this special issue. In particular, my aim is to problematize the latter in order to provide additional solid ground for the former. Thesis IV states that “[d]egrowth and Environmental Justice are complementary – EJ lacks a broader theoretical roadmap while degrowth lacks a wider movement” (Akbulut et al., 2018); such complementarity, however, is not yet a given reality. Rather, it is a potential, a task to be accomplished both conceptually and on the ground. Moreover, it suggests that a good starting point for this endeavour “can only be world-systemic and class-based” (Akbulut et al., 2018). Thesis V claims that “[w]hereas Marxism emphasizes the capital vs. labour contradiction, both degrowth and EJ emphasize the contradiction between capitalist growth vs. living conditions” (Akbulut et al., 2018). More specifically, the core idea is that “[u]nlike traditional labour movements, EJ and the degrowth critique do not usually focus on the capital vs. labour conflict within processes of (re)production, but are rather concerned with the defence of the community, its territory and the environment against capitalist accumulation. In other words, the

focus of EJ and degrowth is often less on the conditions of production and more on the conditions of existence and reproduction of society” (Akbulut et al., 2018).

My basic argument is that in contemporary capitalism conditions of existence and reproduction of society have become – to a significant extent – drivers of valorization (for example in environmental markets, and most notably in carbon trading). In this sense, they are not only traversed by multiple forms of social oppression but also by *class divisions* (i.e. they concern the capital vs. labour conflict). Here I follow Erik Olin Wright in his Marxist interpretation of the notion of class divisions as “primarily defined by the linkage between property relations and exploitation” (Wright, 1997: 13). Thus, what I want to show is that some commodities exchanged in environmental markets contain value as their production involve the exploitation of a peculiar form of labour.

A fitting case in point is the green economy: what was once considered an unsurpassable obstacle to valorization (the ecological crisis as a political issue, imposed to reluctant elites by social unrest between the 1960s and the 1970s) is today regarded as a profitable opportunity for business. The internalization of the environmental limit within the logic of value as an accumulation strategy – no matter how problematic

[☆] This research is co-funded by the European Social Fund through the Operational Human Potential and by the National Portuguese Funds through the Foundation for Science and Technology in the context of the Post-Doctoral Grant SFRH/BPD/96008/2013; Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.09.012>

Received 22 February 2018; Received in revised form 20 July 2018; Accepted 11 September 2018

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or ‘ideological’ – represents a major shift in the history of capitalism. Such internalization, however, requires a specific labouring practice to take place: the *general intellect* as the organizing principle of contemporary (re)production. This means that conflicts in defence of the community, its territory (and knowledge) and the environment against capitalist accumulation should be considered instances of contemporary class struggle rather than anti-oppression practices that may or may not build alliances with the labour movement. In other words, “where we live, work, play and eat” (Gottlieb, 2009) is nowadays a direct element of capitalist production and exploitation. Thus, the research question I address in this article is the following: what is the relevance of the transformations of working-class composition for analytically understanding and politically empowering the connection between degrowth and EJ or, to use Irina Velicu’s fitting wording, for “degrowth EJ” (Velicu, 2018)? This question is particularly relevant because the link between class and ecology has traditionally been thought in ‘additional’ terms, namely as the connection between two different ‘entities’ that could or could not be ‘composed’ within a political strategy. As I will discuss below, this was the case with regard to 1968–1973 social movements. If, however, class and ecology are thought as two sides of the same coin – capitalist value as predicated on labour exploitation – then it may become possible to politically articulate a class dimension of environmental conflicts and an ecological dimension of class struggle.

In order to develop such argument, I will proceed as follows. First, I inscribe my reflection within a methodological framework based on a political understanding of the theory of value and on the heterodox line of Autonomist Marxism (also known as Workerism, or *operaismo*) (Mezzadra, 2009; Wright, 2002) (Section 2). In this context, I critically assess the value-nature nexus – which is to say the categorial relation between economy and the environment – as established by classical political economy (Section 3). Here, nature is *internalized* within the capitalist dynamic as an *enacting limit* of its unfolding: an infinite provider of raw materials at the beginning of the economic process, an equally infinite garbage bin at its end. I will also focus on the political implications of this configuration for the interface between capitalist production (*source* of value) and social reproduction (*condition* of value), namely the rise of the wage-growth dyad at the core of Fordism (Section 4). I will then analyze its conflict-induced crisis and the resulting trajectory of capitalist development – marked by the rise of the *general intellect* as an organizing principle of production (Section 5). Following this I will focus on the emergence of a ‘new’ value-nature nexus, which does not substitute the ‘classical’ one but rather supplements it and complicates the sharp subordination of reproduction to production *vis-à-vis* valorization (Section 6). Here, parts of nature are further internalized within the capitalist dynamics and in some specific situations (e.g. carbon trading) can act as *sources* of value production. Only at this point it will become clear how class struggle is not only a desirable supplement of EJ mobilizations and degrowth analyses; rather, it is part and parcel with them and should be assessed as such.

2. Methodological Remarks

My attempt to elaborate on the class-character of EJ movements and degrowth-inspired theories is grounded on two methodological insights:

- 1) Following Jason Moore’s (2015: 2) analysis of world-ecology, I posit that capitalism does not *have* but rather *is* an ecological regime, which is to say “*a way of organizing nature*”. Thus, the abstractions mobilized by the theory of value act as structuring principles of reality (as opposed to simple descriptive tools). In particular, ‘society’ as an exclusive reign of productive humans and ‘nature’ as a reservoir of reproductive humans and non-humans are *not* merely deceptive or ideological mystifications. Rather, they convey a profound violence that carves up social reality until it is made functional to the perpetuation of value. This understanding of the theory

of value as a historical agent implies what Moore (2017: 602) calls the double register of “capitalism as a *project*” and “as a *process*”. In the first case the theory of value poses a certain vision of nature as external – composed by discrete, commensurable and manageable entities, framed as free and infinite taps and sinks. In the second case it coercively *imposes* such vision onto reality. In this sense, the theory of value produces at the very same time a capital-looking world and the myriad resistances which ceaselessly question it. Thus, value’s *categories* (as expressed by political economy) and their historical *validity* are strictly imbricated: criticizing the former on the exclusive basis of their ‘falseness’ or ‘wrongness’ fails to target their practical effectuality and is therefore to be regarded as a necessary but insufficient strategy. This does not entail a dismissing attitude towards non-capitalist forms of valuation (Martínez-Alier, 2008). Rather, it stresses that conflicts over alternative valuations do not occur on a smooth space of mutual recognition and transparent communication, but in the dire materiality of power unbalances where capitalist value is not an option amongst many but a political framework which, in its own deployment, forcefully constitutes the conditions for its reproduction.

- 2) Following Edward P. Thompson’s (1963) observation that the category of class is better understood in its processual character – its *making* – than as a static entity, I intend to show how the historical variability of the social subject which produces surplus value by being exploited also concerns nature. To do so I subscribe to the methodological pillars of Autonomist Marxism: a) the primacy of class struggle over capitalist development, which implies that capital’s restructuring is actually set in motion by class conflict: the interplay between cycles of struggle and cycles of accumulation suggests that the latter merely displaces the former at a higher, more socialized level; b) the ambivalence of workers’ condition – labour power (objectively) *within* capital, working class (subjectively) *against* capital – whose historical contingency defines the *antagonistic tendency* of capitalist development, namely the field of possibilities in which class struggle both innovates valorization and threatens its survival; c) the centrality of class composition, in both its *technical* and *political* dimensions: the former regards labour power as organized through the capitalist division of labour – namely the relationship between labour practices, level of technology and workplace hierarchy; the latter concerns the working class as a potentially autonomous political subject with its own culture, economic interests and social behaviours. In other words, as relations of production change under the pressure of antagonism, so are modified the organic composition of capital and the technological composition of the working class. I will briefly refer to these transformations in the following sections, here I simply want to recall their function: to grasp not only the origins of the theory of value, but its historical mutations – and their ecological relevance – in the last century and beyond.

3. The ‘Classical’ Value-Nature Nexus

According to Marx’s critique of political economy, something like a value-nature nexus could only emerge with capitalism since the primacy of exchange-value over use-values within the commodity-form is the *differentia specifica* of such mode of production with regard to preceding ones. The “natural distinctness” of needs (and of the multifarious ways through which use-values can satisfy them) is systematically downplayed in favour of the “economic equivalence” enacted by exchange-value within market-oriented production (Marx, 1993: 141). In fact, whereas in pre-capitalist economic formations nature is seen as a transcendent force, as an external normative entity – Marx’s wording is telling: “*nature-idolatry*” (Marx, 1993: 410) –, in capitalism its function is from the very beginning mediated by surplus value as uncontested economic goal. From this perspective, the value-nature nexus as expressed by Classical Political Economy sees *nature as an indirect, yet*

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