



Reintegrating economy, society, and environment for cooperative futures: Polanyi, Marx, and food sovereignty



Mark Tilzey

Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to 'put in their place' (Sum and Jessop 2013) some key issues that frame the question of 'the more-than-economic dimensions of co-operation'. In particular, it asks why capitalism deconstructs socio-natural reality into the 'common-sense' and discrete institutional spheres of 'economy', 'society' and 'environment', an institutional constellation in which the 'economy' is usually afforded pre-eminence. Building on this, the paper further asks: why does the organization of society around the commodity form, and specifically around the generalization of the commodity form to labour-power that is *the* defining feature of capitalism, have the tendential effect of fragmenting, atomizing, and marginalizing social collectivities and cooperative behaviour? This question is answered through examination of the work of Polanyi and Marx, arguing that it is the latter who is best able to explain the nature and dynamics of capitalism, and its relationship to cooperative activity. The paper elaborates the Marxian approach and suggests strong linkages with the 'radical' fraction of the food sovereignty movement. The latter, like Marx, appears to invoke unconstrained cooperation as 'actual' autonomy; the paper asks what the political and ecological prerequisites for the realization of this social imaginary might be.

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1. Introduction: situating cooperation, the 'economic', and the 'more-than-economic' in relation to capitalism

In this paper, we wish to suggest that, in attempting to address and secure cooperative behaviour in relation to the 'extra-economic' domain (that is, 'society' and 'environment'), it is essential to problematize the premise of the desirability of competitive behaviour in the 'economy' itself. This is so because much cooperative behaviour in farming 'communities' appears to be delimited by, and designed to mitigate the environmental and social disbenefits of, competitive, capitalistic rationality in the 'economy'.¹

E-mail address: mark.tilzey@coventry.ac.uk.

¹ Cooperation within agriculture typically assumes two forms: production cooperatives, where production resources and labour are used jointly, symptomatically a rarity in the capitalist global North; and service cooperatives, where services are provided to *individual* farming members, again symptomatically almost exclusively the meaning of cooperative in the global North. Service cooperatives take the form of supply cooperatives, supplying their members with inputs for agricultural production, and marketing cooperatives, undertaking transportation, packaging, distribution, and marketing of farm products. Such service cooperative activity within the 'economy' is, perhaps paradoxically, designed to enhance competitiveness or to insulate producers from the secular downward pressure on prices/incomes that competition induces. Cooperative activity in the 'more-than-economic' is designed typically to mitigate, but not to resolve, the social and ecological disbenefits flowing from the 'economic'. A classic case of this within a fully neoliberalized context is National Landcare in Australia (see [Tilzey, 2006](#)).

We will contend here that it is capitalism itself, specifically on its Marxian definition (see below), that erodes and delimits cooperative behaviour, engenders the contradictions that cooperative organization attempts to mitigate, and generates the separate, institutional/conceptual domains of 'economy', 'society' and 'environment' that comprise the problematic of this special issue.

Anticipating our argument, we suggest that this is so because of capital's singular focus upon accumulation through the valorization of human labour power. This has the effect of de-collectivizing and atomizing society, both in terms of the creation of a workforce now 'free' to sell its labour power to the capitalist at a competitive rate, and in terms of capitalist or petty commodity enterprises themselves in their compulsion to secure survival through necessarily competitive, rather than cooperative, behaviour ([Perelman, 2000](#); [Teschke, 2003](#); [Lacher, 2006](#)).² As we shall see, this arises from

² We should note here that, in transitions to capitalism, small farms might lose their ability to reproduce themselves outside commodity relations and markets without necessarily being dispossessed of their land and other means of production. Indeed, this dynamic of the *commodification of subsistence* as [Brenner \(2001\)](#) terms it, may provide a more generic basis of the subsumption of labour by capital than the outright dispossession usually suggested by notions of 'proletarianization'. In fact the vast majority of small and family farms fall into this category even when they have supposedly secured a level of 'autonomy' within 'embedded markets', rather giving the lie to [van der Ploeg's \(2008\)](#) assertion that these constitute 'new peasantries'.

the conferral on capitalists, by the state, of absolute property rights in the means of production, a feature unique to capitalist social relations. The obverse of this condition is the alienability of assets, including land, via the medium of the market. This has the following, vitally important implication: since not only is the surplus alienable, as in all class societies, *but also the means of production* (from the perspective of this paper, most particularly land), a surplus expropriator (the capitalist) must compete with other appropriators in order to reproduce his/her social position, since he/she has no extra-economic right to his/her property. It is this condition for survival, founded on these historically specific social property relations, which creates the drive to maximize profit, to accumulate, to compete with other capitalists and petty commodity producers, and to keep social and environmental costs to a minimum (that is, to 'externalize' these costs). The competitive individualism that arises from these circumstances is not merely an ideology (see Emery, 2015), therefore, it is a key component of the material reproduction of capitalist social relations.

These social property relations have given rise to the historically specific appearance of society as existing 'outside' the economy or, indeed, as seeming to have no existence at all. This, at base, has generated the differentiated disciplines of 'economics' and 'sociology'. At the same time, capitalism's singular focus on accumulation through human labour valorization leads to the objectification of the environment as if it were a fungible commodity, entailing the conceptual reduction and material degradation of its multiple use values in the drive to maximize surplus value, in the guise of exchange value, through processes of capitalization, intensification and specialization (the 'externalization' of environmental 'costs'). Within this institutional constellation, accumulation (economics) tentatively determines the subordinate place of, and contradictory relations with, the other domains of 'society' and 'environment'.³

These introductory remarks delineate some essential features of capitalism in relation to cooperative behaviour and the 'ecological dominance' (Jessop, 2002; Sum and Jessop, 2013) of the economy in relation to the 'extra-economic'. These essential characteristics, while 'real abstractions', exist nonetheless within the 'concrete' realities of 'variegated neoliberalism' (see below) in which, empirically, there is a spectrum of differing cooperative behaviours and organizational structures. Recent work in this area, addressing cooperation, neoliberalism, and nature (see, for example, Stock et al., 2014), has sought to examine such varieties of cooperation along a spectrum from neoliberal autonomy (competitive individualism) at one extremity, to 'actual' autonomy at the other. The latter is defined, perhaps symptomatically, as collective freedom for farmers as a (sic) social class, such that individual freedoms are integrally connected to the ongoing reproduction of the (sic) farming sector, a definition deriving, as we shall see, from Van der Ploeg (2008). Stock et al. (2014) examine four examples of cooperative organization along this spectrum: from New Zealand at one extreme (which we term hegemonic neoliberalism) to the *Movimento do Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil at the other (which we term counter-hegemonic anti-capitalism).

³ Typically, the modern state, within which capitalism emerged and without which it could not survive, steps in to mitigate this 'dis-integrated' and contradictory relationship, selectively ameliorating the costs of social alienation and environmental degradation for both capital and wider 'civil society' but, in so doing, prolonging the 'relational sustainability' of this contradictory nexus (Drummond and Marsden, 1999). Part of this mitigatory impulse, guided and/or funded by the state, involves 'more-than-economic' cooperative activities designed to bolster social or environmental 'capital'. Symptomatically, however, the state eschews interference in the sacrosanct economic domain itself, the principal perpetrator of the contradictions, its involvement confined to 'correcting' so-called 'market failure' in the arena of 'public goods'.

While this work, valuably, 'creates an opening' towards post-neoliberal alterity and more cooperative futures as 'actual' autonomy, as the example of MST implies, we suggest, however, that the attainment of this goal, together with explanation of the variegated cooperative forms presented, are somewhat constrained. This seems to be because of the authors' reliance on a binary (autonomy versus 'actual' autonomy) that appears to derive, via Van der Ploeg (2008), from Polanyi's concept of the 'double' or 'counter movement' (Polanyi, 1957). As we explain below, we argue that Polanyi fails both to uncover fully the real logic propelling capital's dynamic, and, in the concept of 'double movement', the complexities of political 'accommodation', 'compromise' and 'resistance' that accompany it. This is a failure that, we suggest, is reproduced in the work of van der Ploeg (2008, 2013) and other prominent theorists such as McMichael (2013). Indeed, the latter's notion of the 'corporate food regime', and associated assertions concerning the full trans-nationalization of capitalism and the state under neoliberalism, have become virtually axiomatic amongst the considerable number of scholars (and activists), including McMichael himself, who have construed or constructed the concept of food sovereignty as a generalized counter-narrative to this putatively undifferentiated process of neoliberalization (see, for example, Claey, 2015; Fairbairn, 2011; Wittman et al., 2011). Indeed, the justification for change towards food sovereignty, whatever that might entail, seems often to be couched in a relatively abstract, 'rights'-based master frame (see Claey, 2015 and below) that, while necessary up to a point, nonetheless evades the need for a more substantive analysis of the social relations that require subversion if 'actual' autonomy is to be realized (see Patel, 2011).⁴

If these authors, following Polanyi, van der Ploeg, and McMichael, have failed to uncover the essence of capitalism/neoliberalism, then the implication is that their definitions 'post-neoliberal alterity' and cooperative potentialities are likely to be similarly constrained. We argue that a more incisive and critical understanding of capitalism and the modern state – and their nemesis – needs to be founded centrally on a theory of social property relations, class, and exploitation – a theory that derives from Marx. Consequently, we will argue that there is a need to construct the notions of 'actual' autonomy, cooperative potentialities, and food sovereignty in Marxian, rather than Polanyian, terms. Here we suggest strong parallels between a Marxian approach and the 'radical' definition of food sovereignty (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011) where this implicates a direct challenge to market dependence through a *reversal*⁵ of the process primitive accumulation and subsistence commodification.

With these opening comments in mind, the overall structure of the paper is based on the following logic of argument:

⁴ Patel does not take the final plunge and advocate an explicitly Marxian approach, but he is there in all but name. 'This base inequality in power is one that food sovereignty, sometimes explicitly, seeks to address. And it is here, in challenging deep inequalities in power, that I argue we see the core of food sovereignty. There is, at the heart of food sovereignty, a radical egalitarianism in the call for a multi-faceted series of 'democratic attachments'. Claims around food sovereignty address the need for social change such that the capacity to shape food policy can be exercised at all appropriate levels. To make these rights substantive requires more than a sophisticated series of juridical sovereignties. To make the right to shape food policy meaningful is to require that *everyone* be able substantively to engage in those policies. But the prerequisites for this are a society in which equality-distorting effects of sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class power have been eradicated. Activities that instantiate this radical kind of 'moral universalism' are the necessary precursor to the 'cosmopolitan federalism' that the language of rights summons. And it is by these activities that we shall know food sovereignty.' (Patel, 2011, 194)

⁵ Or, perhaps more accurately, a dialectical negation of this process.

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