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Green neoliberalism: Recycling and sustainable urban development in Sekondi-Takoradi

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A B S T R A C T

Sustainable development has been embraced by neoliberalism in the form of marketising the environment in a 'green way'. While political economists have considered this movement in terms of the emissions trading scheme and other price based mechanisms posited as solutions to global environmental crises, the particular nature of such discourses at the urban level in Africa is not well understood. Using primary data from Sekondi-Takoradi, a mid-size city in West Africa, this paper demonstrates the origin, nature, problems and contradictions in this form of green neoliberalism. It argues that the tenets and approaches of sustainable urban development are fundamentally inconsistent with green metropolitan neoliberalism. In turn, it is highly unlikely that, recycling, a medium of 'marketising the environment to save it', can provide a sustainable solution to the plastic waste glut, engendered by the private provision of urban water.

Introduction

Africa is now a key location for implementing the view that the 'environment can be sold to save it'. This idea of marketising the environment to promote sustainable development has gained a strong presence in policy and research circles. It entails the use of price mechanisms or the creation of markets in the management of land and natural resources (e.g., emissions trading scheme and carbon tax) as a way of pursuing sustainable development (Stilwell, 2012). In Africa, most of the attention to this green washing of neoliberalism has focused on the activities of so-called environmentally friendly groups that buy large parcels of land which they claim without 'preservation' will be destroyed by local populations (Pearce, 2012).

This movement is the new phase of neoliberalism – a concept that is widely used but poorly understood and so requires some elucidation here. Neoliberalism is a political economic concept, a set of ideas, or even a framework used to describe the commodification of all sectors of society (Cahill, Edwards, & Stilwell, 2012, p.6). It refers to the financialisation and marketization of society, economy, and environment. Neoliberalism is normally regarded as the economic philosophy of the capitalist system. It owes its rise and popularity to consistent propagation and defence by neoclassical economists such as Friedrich von Hayek, James Buchanan, and Milton Friedman; political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and George Bush (snr), and right wing think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs in London (for a detailed history, see Cahill et al., 2012: 1–11; Harvey, 2006: 11–24; Jones, 2010). While neoliberalism espouses 'free markets', 'actually existing neoliberalism', that is, neoliberalism in practice, entails the use of considerable state power to ensure its spread and entrenchment (Cahill, 2010). Thus, David Harvey (2006: 25–29) has coined the term 'neoliberal state' to describe institutions that either suppress opposition to neoliberalism or support neoliberalism by lubricating the policy sphere with market enhancing tools such as tax breaks and holidays, and creating the requisite business conditions to allow neoliberalism to fester. Neoliberalism has spread widely, from its early days in the Global North and, since the 1980s, two of its apparatchiks, the IMF and World Bank, have greatly helped to propagate it in the Global South through the introduction and guided implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (Owusu, 2003). In recent times, however, neoliberalism has gained a new momentum in the 'green' or environmental sector with the current global land grabs – that have focused mainly on Africa and hence elicited several studies looking at the dynamics on the continent (see, for example, Alden Wily, 2011; Borras & Franco, 2012; Cotula & Vermeulen, 2011) – as its new phase.

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Research on how this new movement in neoliberalism pans out in cities in Africa is, however, difficult to find. Yet, the forces of marketising the environment are at play in urban Africa too. They are most evident in the drive to encourage the establishment of corporate recycling entities supported by 'plastic merchants' who buy plastic waste from poor collectors or pickers to make profit (Njeru, 2006).

One African country where this notion of sustainable urban development is fast catching on is Ghana. According to the recent *State of the Nation Address*, delivered by the country's president, the '[f]ocus is on waste and sanitation management systems not just waste collection and disposal. The emphasis will also be on waste recovery and *recycling* as well as providing incentives to *increase private sector participation* in the hygiene, sanitation and pollution control sector' (Mahama, 2013: 15, emphasis added). There is a clear policy position of promoting private recycling and private collection of plastic waste in cities. So, the emphasis on plastic waste management is gradually expanding from just private waste collection to private recycling and treatment. Indeed, the Government of Ghana, for example, through the Ghana Investment Promotion Council (GIPC) brochure, *Doing Business in Ghana* (Ghana Investment Promotion Centre, nd), calls on investors in Ghana and overseas to invest in the recycling business for a clean environment. The government promises a 7-year tax holiday incentive and, as with other businesses, investment laws that guarantee 100% transfer of dividends and profits.

Similarly, members of the Parliament of Ghana have recurrently called for a policy on waste disposal that is broader than collection and entails private recycling for clean urban development (see the report by Adu-Gyamera & Vinorkor, 2013). The idea of marketising the environment also enjoys considerable support in the media (see, for example, the editorial of the Daily Graphic, 2013). Thus, both within and without executive policy circles, in theory and in practice, recycling waste for profit has been promoted in Ghana.

It is important to explore to what extent recycling is a panacea to the plastic waste pandemic. The existing studies are inadequate for this purpose because they typically focus on waste management generally, not plastic waste recycling (see, for example, Oteng-Ababio, 2010; Baabereyir, 2009; Baabereyir et al., 2012). This paper tries to fill the gap by adopting a critical immanentist approach to urban studies that recognises both institutions and structures within which they operate not as oppositional but as co drivers of urban environmental, economic, and social change (Karaman, 2012).

The data for the analysis *inter alia* are taken from primary material gathered from Sekondi-Takoradi, the third largest urban settlement in Ghana. The analysis shows that, the touted advantages of recycling are neither obvious nor assured. Rather, the focus on recycling generates contradictions, including diverting attention from the social conditions of labour both within and without the process of recycling. It is argued that these contradictions are systemic, although they are aggravated by whimsical institutional practices.

The rest of the paper is structured into four sections. The next section looks at methodology, followed by a discussion of the recycling model. Contradictions in the model are analysed in the third section, while the final section examines policy issues from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

Methodology

This is a case study, which provides an in-depth analysis of a single recycling system. While case studies have drawbacks such as uniqueness and limitations in generalizability (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1996), research by Bryman (2008: 52–62) has shown that they succeed in providing a detailed and intensive examination of a situation from which important insights can be extracted and brought to bear on pressing political economic issues. Case studies normally lead to the generation of qualitative evidence, but it is more effective if they lead to the collection of both qualitative and numeric data. Further, Bryman (2008: 52–62) notes that the challenge of peculiarity of conclusions can be mitigated if the case study is made to engage with a body of literature or theory. In that sense, the research problem or questions are generated based on the ongoing debate or theory, while the case itself is chosen in a way to exemplify the issues that ooze out of the debate or theory.

From these perspectives, the recycling system under study was chosen as an exemplifier of broader claims about recycling in the literature. The aim is not to generalise but to investigate in one case the posited merits of green neoliberalism and draw inferences from the study. Primary data were collected in Sekondi-Takoradi from December 2012 to March 2013. The choice of Sekondi-Takoradi as a case study area is appropriate because, although it has a substantial plastic waste problem, constituting 8.5% of solid waste in the metropolis or more than twice the proportion of plastic waste in Accra, little research has been done on the plastic waste issue in the city (Baabereyir, 2009). More so, plastic waste contributes significantly to the cholera (because plastic waste adds to the filth in the city) and malaria (because plastic sachets and bottles serve as breeding grounds for mosquitoes) menace in the metropolis (Gyamfi, 2012). Finally, the present focus helps to correct the over emphasis on primary cities in research on the urban question in Africa (Bryceson, 2011), so, overall, this case study area is appropriate for the current research.

Initially, transect walks were undertaken to observe the waste trail around the city, and the waste collection processes, while asking questions especially in the Market Circle area – without interviewing people. This method was used because it has successfully been adopted for the study of sanitation issues globally (see, for example, Kar, 2005). Subsequently, several in-depth interviews with the only recycling merchant in the metropolis and two (2) of his assistants were carried out. Further, interviews with three (3) plastic pickers were conducted. Finally, three officers at the Ghana Water Company Ltd. in Takoradi, managers of urban water and suppliers of water to plastic water producers were interviewed. The next section focuses on the recycling experience of Sekondi-Takoradi, in terms of origin, operation, and organisation, before looking at challenges.

The recycling model

The model is pyramid shaped: there are relatively large numbers of pickers at the base, a small number of agents who buy plastic waste from pickers in the middle, and a very small number of recycling companies mostly headquartered in Accra and Tema at the apex. Usually, because the recycling companies are mainly concentrated in the capital city of Ghana and in its satellite city, Tema, the role of agents and pickers seems to be fused together in those cities. That is, pickers in Accra and Tema typically sell water bottles and sachets directly to recycling companies such as Space Plus, Blue Plus, Race Start, and Topp Industry – all in Accra, but this *modus operandi* is different in Sekondi-Takoradi.

Currently, there is only one recycling merchant/agent in Sekondi-Takoradi. He is originally from Kumasi where the recycling model is better known than Sekondi-Takoradi. This merchant migrated to Sekondi-Takoradi with his recycling business idea because he wanted to avoid the competition in Kumasi, Accra, and Tema. He started the business as a picker, collecting and going to sell plastic waste to the people in Kumasi whom he had seen doing the business before his migration to Sekondi-Takoradi. With the