
Visions

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Capital Versus the Commons

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The classic meaning of “the commons” is in reference to the land and the bounties of nature pertaining to it: water, soil, timber, fish and fowl, and so forth. In the broadest sense, commons are those places and things beyond the bounds of settled society, potentially open to all for use and enjoyment. In a more restricted sense, the commons denotes areas and resources shared by agrarian communities (whether farming, fishing, or gathering) on a local or regional basis and governed by certain rules of usage and moral economies of sharing. In modern capitalist society the term commons has virtually disappeared in the face of universalized private property over land and resources, but the concept reappears in a new form as countervailing types of public property like parks, city streets and squares. Of course, there is still a lingering sense of a commons beyond the frontiers of capitalism and nation states, as in the ocean depths or polar icecaps, and a growing sense of humanity’s common responsibility for the fate of the earth.

In this essay, I shall argue the classic commons and lingering commons areas of the world are under threat by the untrammled rule of capitalism. Capitalism is many things, but at its root are three defining elements: the production of commodities, the extraction of surplus value, and the unlimited accumulation of capital. All three elements necessarily involve nature: natural resources as the material basis of commodities, exploitation of the forces of nature in production and the extraction of surplus value, and ever greater inputs and surpluses to keep the wheels of accumulation turning. Capital must necessarily, therefore, mine the earth for its resources, never pay fully for the value it withdraws, and never stop expanding the frontiers of exploitation. The commons of the earth always stand in the way of these processes, by preventing the earth from being turned into capitalist property,

demanding social recompense for extraction, and limiting the area within which capital can operate.

I will lay out these three themes—accumulation, exploitation, and expansion—in the three sections of this essay. While there is so much that could be said about capitalism and the commons, I simply wish to establish the foundations for an uncompromising model of collision between the two and the unrelenting victory of the former – much to the ultimate cost of humankind and the planet. The commons must forever be pushed back and the earth exploited beyond all limits to feed the capitalist machine and its masters. Therein lies the essential danger – among many dangers – facing us all as we witness unrelieved plunder of oil, gas, and minerals, devastation of forests, fields and fisheries, endless damming and diversion of rivers, extinction of habitats and hosts of species, and unchecked global warming.

The vortex of accumulation

Capitalism rests on markets and the rise of generalized commerce in and around Europe by 1500. While market exchange had been present long before then, this was the first time that truly commercial societies emerged in which production, exchange, and consumption began to be governed by markets. In this new regime, goods production came to be driven by the need to produce for sale, taking the form of commodities, and as time passed the inputs to production became commodified as well, as private property in land, equipment and wage labor. Meanwhile, money rapidly became the universal means of payment for all commodities.

Moreover, “the economy” started to appear as a realm apart from family, polity, and society, acting under its own laws. In such an economy, the value of commodities came to be regulated by market-determined prices embracing a wider and wider scope of producers, places, and methods. Barring extremes of demand and supply, such prices rested on the costs of production, which, classical political economists quickly realized, could be

reduced to a common denominator, (socially necessary) labor time. While neoclassical economists abandoned the labor theory of value as both too complex and too controversial, there is good reason to believe that it is still the solid ground on which capitalist valuation rests (Walker 2016).

Marx’s first great insight into the economics of such a system was not value theory; all he did there was clean up the contradictions of his predecessors. Rather, he saw how capital emerged from the new commercialized economy and comes to command it. It begins with how money serves as the measure and store of congealed value and the way generalized markets ‘sweat money from every pore.’ Money begins by facilitating exchange but ends up taking charge of markets by being invested in trade and production in order to make more money. Such money becomes capital in the modern sense. It is thrown into markets, returns with profit and is thrown back in again in an endless cycle of capital accumulation. And because money knows no limits, neither does accumulation. For the first time in history, wealth can be piled up apart from land, gold, granaries, or wives in a simple, fluid, and universal form (Marx 1863).

But where does the profit on investment come from? This was Marx’s second great insight: it cannot arise from perfectly equal exchanges, and the original source of value, labor, must be the source of surplus value, i.e., produce more value than it is paid in wages. Surplus value is the unique source of profit, the motor that feeds capital and powers the spiral of accumulation.

There is good reason to think that this, too, is still a valid way of explaining profit. But it appears to exclude nature in all its forms from the heart of the story of capitalism and capital accumulation. And, indeed, in Marxist theory the role of nature, its forces, and matter, ecologies and environments mostly disappeared from the narrative for a century after old Karl wrote *Das Kapital*. While Marx left many hints about his appreciation

for the interaction of labor and nature, they were no more than that, and his followers mostly dropped the subject. This was a monumental mistake.

The natural foundations of capital

So how does nature figure into the story of capital and the capitalist economy that now dominates the world? We might perhaps forgive Marxists of the past for focusing on labor and class struggle to the exclusion of natural resources, ecological processes, and environmental damage, but we can no longer tolerate such blindness to such fundamental concerns of human life and economic fortunes.

The place of “nature” in the economy begins with the material basis of all commodities and their production. Commodities are not simply things we use and value, they are things of substance.¹ They have material shape formed out of material inputs (including energy) that, in modern economies, are called “natural resources.” Such natural resources are themselves normally commodified, that is, turned into marketable objects, long before they enter into production and consumption.

In the process of production, natural resource inputs are worked on by human labor, which transforms them into new and useful goods to be sold on the market. Human labor is, as the classical political economists thought, the initiator, planner, and universal element in all social production, but it is far from the sole actor in the process. “Nature” is forever present in all human activity, including the metabolism of people themselves. Natural forces, whether biological, chemical, energetic, or subatomic, are always at work alongside labor: yeast turns grain into beer and grapes into wine, molecular combination and crystallization turns iron into steel, flowing water turns mill wheels and flowing electrons turn digital commands into computations, and so on and so forth. This is a general condition of human

¹ On why commodities are mostly solid goods and not insubstantial ‘services’, see Sayer and Walker (1992). I am begging off the question of complex divisions of labor here.

life and work, quite apart from its present capitalist form, as Marx (1863, chapter 7) pointed out.

Yet under capitalism, production takes the specific form of creating commodities with a market value and that value ultimately rests on the socially necessary labor time involved. Does that exclude nature from a productive role in the model? Not at all. Socially necessary labor time always presupposes the necessary natural resources and forces implicated in every labor process, just as it presupposes the necessary skill, tools, and so forth that the worker brings to the job. Labor and nature work hand-in-hand or root-and-branch, or whatever metaphor best suits. Their relation is symbiotic, synergistic, or dialectical, whichever philosophical term pleases the ear.²

This essential insight translates to our understanding of exploitation, as well. As Marx intuited, capitalist profit has to rest on an unpaid portion of total labor time, measured as surplus value. A worker that does not yield the normal surplus value by being too costly or too poor at the job will be dismissed.³ But the same is true of nature’s contributions: they must function properly to activate and propel the labor process in a normal way and they must yield more than they cost. An old horse that eats too many oats is put out to pasture, or worse, just as worn machine parts, contaminated yeast, and brittle steel will be rejected—as will inputs like oil, electricity, or flour that cost too much relative to the social average and profitable sales. Nature, too, is exploited by humans for their own ends, but only the exploitation that

² I discuss this at more length in Walker (2016).

³ The exploitation of labor in capitalist production rests on the prior and continuing exploitation of household labor (mostly by women) in raising children and supporting families (Fraser 2014). This does not directly generate value, but it does augment surplus value by reducing the cost of reproduction of labor power (Moore 2015).

takes place in tandem with labor exploitation counts as surplus value in the peculiar capitalist form of modern production.⁴

In the expansive model of capital accumulation outlined above, nature has still another role to play. That is, with the relentless reinvestment of profits (surplus value) in new rounds of production, the amount of capital and size of the economy must expand. This is capital's historic advance over all previous modes of production, as Marx and Engels foresaw in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). It cannot stay at rest, it must grow without end, and in the process it expands in two ways: extensive and intensive (to employ an imprecise dualism).

Extensive growth means drawing more and more people into the system as wage-laborers and, at the same time, sucking up more and more natural resources to feed the machinery with materials, water, and energy, to be embodied in ever more commodities for sale—or what Chandler (1977) called the growth of “throughput.” Intensive growth refers to rising productivity in order to raise the degree of surplus value extracted from every unit of input. Productivity is, of course, normally measured as labor productivity, but it necessarily encompasses output per unit of materials, energy, machinery, chemicals, etc., which is why economists often flip back and forth between labor productivity and total factor productivity.

There is a problem for accumulation, however. Some balance must be maintained between the voracious appetite of capital for the services of labor and natural resources and the efficient utilization of all inputs. If efficiency is not maintained and even increased over time, shortages will arise and prices will go up, cutting into profits (surplus value). Sharply rising prices have appeared several times in recent memory with regard to oil, for example, in ways that put the brakes on large sections of the world economy. At the same

⁴ Jason Moore (2015) argues that nature is not exploited, only appropriated, by capital. We have worked out a mutually satisfactory position on the question in a forthcoming paper (Walker & Moore, ms).

time, markets react and capitalists adjust by reducing usage and increasing efficiency, as well as by seeking out new sources of fuel, like shale gas and oil, with the result that prices calm down again.

This play of demand and supply led mainstream economists to declare many years ago that resource shortages were a chimera and cannot ever plague capital accumulation for long (Barnett & Morse 1963). They believe that absolute shortages, feverishly predicted in times of scarcity, never seem to arrive. Indeed, no radical environmental view of capitalism should fall into the trap of hasty predictions of doom. Nevertheless, capitalist expansion is inexorable and the earth is only so big. What used to look like an infinite horizon of exploration for and exploitation of resources no longer seems so plentiful and free of blowback. Where does this leave us?

Frontiers of extraction

The expansion of capitalism has created an unprecedented pressure to provide the necessary inputs and forces of nature to keep the vortex of accumulation spinning—and rising ever higher. This has in turn driven the inexorable exploitation of the earth (and humankind) along three frontiers of growth: the resource frontier, the commodity frontier, and the technological frontier. These are, as the term frontier indicates, highly geographical in texture, both spatially and physically.⁵

The natural resource frontier refers to the extensive search for new sources of water, timber, copper, and all the other materials of modern production, along with sources of energy such as oil, coal, and gas. It not only means more of each kind of resource, but constantly adds new kinds of resources over time as industry demands, from asbestos to rare earths. It necessarily involves pushing into new territory and downward to greater depths of the surface of the earth and the oceans. Moreover, it invariably runs

⁵ I take the use of frontiers of extraction from Jason Moore on whose work much of this section is based.

up against exhaustion of local sources, whether forests or mines, which requires capital to pull up stakes and move on to virgin territory. As Moore (2007) has shown, this leapfrogging onward and outward has been a notable dimension of capitalist expansion from the earliest days of European commercialization, world trade, and colonialism. A dramatic example is the movement of sugar plantations from Europe to the Americas, and even from island to island in the Caribbean. Another is the rapid-fire mining and timber frontiers that accompanied US expansion across North America.

But the scramble for resources is more than a physical-geographical process. It goes hand in hand with social transformation, a social frontier of capitalist expansion that collides with pre/non-capitalist societies and their ways of organizing economic life and their relations to the earth. Moore calls it "the commodity frontier" because as new resources and territories enter into the orbit of capital and are absorbed into the capitalist order, their natures (and labor) become commodified, i.e., carved up as private property and entered into market relations. There are three main ways in which this proceeds. The first is what Marxists call "primitive accumulation" or, after Harvey (2003), "accumulation by dispossession." It is the taking possession of land and resources by conquest, theft or catastrophe, seizing resources and, in many cases, literally carrying off the booty. The second route is converting farmers, artisans, hunters and others into small commodity producers, where they remain the owners of their own land and resources but their products enter into the wider circuits of market exchange in the world. The third method of the commodity frontier is to begin direct capitalist production/extraction on new territory after it has been secured or purchased by capitalist enterprise. The three commodity frontiers are often sequential, although the persistence of small commodity production in agriculture,

forestry, and mining is often long-standing because of the intensive self-exploitation of those owner-workers and of their local resource base.⁶

The social revolutions taking place along the commodity frontiers constitute a systematic assault on all forms of the commons in pre-capitalist areas. Seizure and privatization bring with them the carving up of common lands and termination of the social practices of managed and shared extraction carried out in earlier regimes. Even where small commodity production continues in ways that appear to maintain pre-capitalist relations, the augmented pressures of market production, including specialization, homogenization of land uses, competition, falling prices, and rising expenses for commodified inputs, force producers to move into former commons to survive and drop communal practices (Watts 1983). Finally, the insertion of modern modes of extraction, however distant from major capitalist cities and regions, brings massive social disruption in its wake, along with wage-labor, migration, and debt. Moreover, such activities are notorious for encroaching on formerly marginal and communal lands.

Along with geographic expansion and social transformation comes the added impact of growing productivity and rising throughput across the capitalist economy. This certainly means greater demand for resources, and always at a price that does not pinch accumulation in the centers of industry and finance. This steadily drives the resource frontiers outward in search of ever more supply. But there is a counter-tendency to this in that technological advances in extraction often mean that resources near to capitalist core areas may be economically superior to those in virgin territories. Such "internal frontier" explain why Britain in the 19th century and the United States in the 20th led the world in resource output. In the US this meant not only westward expansion, but unleashed new rounds of

⁶ I will not get into the financialization of natural assets that so often lubricates the whole process of encumbering land and resources, but see Knuth (2015).

primitive accumulation that repeated displaced native peoples and frontier settlers.

With modern production and extraction, moreover, has come more intensive devastation of ever-larger swathes of territory. As we know, a simple way of keeping down costs of supply is to do the minimal possible to preserve and restore such degraded landscapes. Furthermore, an essential element of the devastating impact of resource extraction and industrial production has been the chemicalization of methods that leaves more than clear-cuts or mine tailings, but deadly wastes, like the arsenic piles at Cornish copper mines in the 19th century, the toxic residues of petro-based pesticides developed for California agribusiness in the 20th century, or the deadly potions dumped into the Ajkwa River of Irian Jaya/New Guinea in the 21st (Romero 2015). In the process, the last commons of the earth, including rivers, oceans, and rainforests, are compromised or rendered unfit for further use.

Conclusion

In sum, the unending vortex of accumulation puts intense pressure on the earth and humanity to feed the maw of modern production and consumption. It requires the essential inputs of labor and natural resources in all their forms and it does so on an ever-increasing basis. Moreover, this is not just a problem of supply but one of exploitation of labor and nature in their syncretic activity, which means that the rate of surplus value must be kept up—and even increased over time as sectors mature. That, in turn, demands that costs be kept under control, either through cheapening of inputs, greater absolute exploitation, or rising productivity of labor-nature. What the system ends up doing is always a combination of advances along both extensive and intensive frontiers of extraction.

This has brought about, over the long history of capitalist growth, a relentless geographical expansion of the territory commanded by capital (and

capitalist states) and unrelieved dismantling of pre-capitalist economic formations to bring new labor and resources under the dominion of capital. And this has, in turn, brought an unending attack on and dissolution of all prior forms of the commons.

Now, of course, the scenario I have sketched here is rather mechanical and deterministic. Without question, the assault on the earth's various societies and territories has not proceeded without enormous conflict, fighting back by peoples around the world, and many a defeat for the forces of capital. Nevertheless, on balance the advance of capitalism has been nothing short of earthshaking.

Similarly, people already embedded within advanced capitalist countries have resisted the plunder of the earth in various ways. Moreover, they have successfully recreated spaces and practices resonant of the traditional Commons within thoroughly capitalist territory, such as city parks, national parks, wilderness reserves, and greenbelts. The public park idea of the 19th century has many virtues, but also suffers from the aggressiveness of capitalism, which forced defenders of public space to impose strict limits on use based on often-fantastical ideas of pristine nature, not to mention elite notions of correct behavior and the exclusion of common people and their activities (Cronon 1995, Walker 2007). In recent years there has been a notable shift toward "working landscapes" that embrace shared use among previously separate realms of recreation, wildlife conservation, and grazing, among others (Sayre 2005).

This is not the place for a survey of new thinking, but it is important to recognize that the idea of The Commons has not disappeared; it remains a fount of inspiration that continues to guide experiments in both practical and utopian visions of a better world of relations with land, life, and geography than that imposed by capitalist imperatives. Only by such imaginings and through nascent alternative practices will it be possible for humankind to overcome the limits of capitalism and pull back from the brink of

unrestrained climate change, impoverishment of global ecologies, and unchecked toxicity in the environment.

Yes, capitalism will end one day; that is a certainty. How it will be transcended, however, is far from clear. It won't be by economics alone, that is for sure. I will not enter here into the debate unleashed by O'Connor (1998), Moore (2015), and others about resource underproduction, rising costs, and falling profits leading to accumulation crisis and potentially capitalism's economic end game. Whatever the future of profits, the ups and downs of economic growth, and the end times of accumulation, the control of capital can only be social control, and it will have to be brought about by political means. In the end, the fate of the earth may well hang in the balance, and will rest in our collective hands.

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RIVER OF FIRE

COMMONS, CRISIS & THE IMAGINATION

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