

INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION, UNEVEN GEOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

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INTRODUCTION

This editorial aims to introduce the papers of this special dossier and critically reflect on the connection between the ongoing financial crisis and crises in the sphere of environment and development. The environmental crisis relates to the interconnected global crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, forest loss, and so forth (Heynen *et al.* 2007; CBD 2010). The development crisis is one of global inequality or the further accretion and concentration of wealth in fewer hands while large pockets of poverty remain or become entrenched across the developed and developing world (Edward 2006; Harvey 2010; Saith 2011). Both, we argue, are inherent to contemporary capitalism, but have not received the type of concentrated political and economic investment of capital that we have observed during the financial crisis.

Capitalist production systems are, however, increasingly trying to take emerging natural limits and growing inequality into account. Recent years have seen an astonishing array of 'partnerships' among and between governments, corporations, academic institutions, development agencies, NGOs and others to deal with the consequences of environmental problems and world poverty (Lemos & Agrawal

2006; Glasbergen *et al.* 2007; Ros-Tonen 2007; Neves & Igoe 2012). Obvious examples are climate change and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, the mainstream efforts here are remarkably in line with the general response to the 2008/2009 or rather the ongoing financial crisis: they aim for the surface effects, not the root causes (e.g. Macartney 2009; Harvey 2010). The main response to the environmental crisis has been neoliberal conservation, which, simply put, comes down to making environmental conservation compatible with capitalism (Brockington & Duffy 2010; Büscher *et al.* forthcoming). The main policy response to the development crisis continues, despite acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of poverty by the MDGs, to rely almost entirely on economic growth alone (Vandemoortele 2011), thus further stimulating and intensifying 'uneven development', the 'hallmark of the geography of capitalism' (Smith, 2008, p. 4).

By exploring the concepts of neoliberal conservation and uneven development in the context and wake of the recent and ongoing financial crisis, we argue that this special dossier of *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* will be able to shed some light on recent changes in contemporary capitalism. More specifically, the following key questions

are addressed: What are some of the most pertinent characteristics of current dynamics in contemporary capitalism and how do these connect to the issues of neoliberal conservation and uneven geographical development? We believe these are fundamental questions that need revisiting time and again if we are to develop in-depth understanding, and address the global crises we are currently facing. As Harvey (2006b, p. xxii) argued: 'something crucial is lost when we refuse to confront the internal contradictions of capitalism as the crux of our problems. I believe . . . that a politics that evades central contradictions can only ever address symptoms'. This introduction, then, will first briefly introduce the (relevance of the) concepts of neoliberal conservation and uneven geographical development in the light of the financial crisis and then connect the contributors' insights to these issues.

NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION AND UNEVEN GEOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER THE CRASH

The concepts of neoliberal conservation and uneven geographical development derive from rich, nuanced literatures that cannot be done justice to in a short introduction (see e.g. Braun & Castree, 1998; Smith, 2008; Arsel & Büscher, 2012; Büscher *et al.* forthcoming). The purpose of this section is therefore not to provide a full genealogy of the concepts but rather to explain their key characteristics with a view to paving the way for the contributions to the special dossier. Importantly, both concepts are rooted in critical political economy analyses that frame the interplay between interests and markets – and their social and environmental constitution and effects – within an explicit configuration of structural power (Arrighi 1994; O'Connor 1994; Heynen *et al.* 2007; Storm 2009). The historic configuration that is currently dominant is that of late capitalism. Hence these analyses have the critical study of capitalist structures of power and modes of production and value creation at their core. This is why the global financial crisis that has been unfolding since 2007 has been of particular interest, as it confirmed once more the essential instability and contradictory nature of capitalism (Bellamy Foster & Magdoff 2009).

Many of the central contradictions of capitalism derive from the nature of capital, defined as 'value in process, money in process . . . It comes out of circulation, enters into it again, preserves and multiplies itself within circulation, emerges from it with an increased size, and starts the same cycle again and again' (Marx 1976: 256). Capital, as Harvey (2010) recently emphasised, is always on the move; it cannot stop but on penalty of the death of the system. The financial crisis again made this abundantly clear. From Washington via London to Tokyo, all leaders of rich and many poorer countries were, and are, primarily concerned with making sure that banks start lending again in order to get the economy out of the slump and money back into circulation. As such, capitalism is inherently expansionist, and so cannot help but to seek and bring more and more facets of life into its orbit, including the natural world (Castree 2008; Büscher 2010). Making clear the (monetary) exchange value of nature so as to calculate what price has to be paid in order to conserve its services, then, has only superficially to do with trying to preserve ecosystems, as the currently popular adage 'payments for environmental services' would have it. Rather, it should be looked at in Polanyian terms of capitalism trying to mediate its worst excesses while simultaneously trying to open up new avenues for 'moving capital' and securing profit (Igoe *et al.* 2010).

It is here that we get to the concept of neoliberal conservation. McCarthy (2012), as well as Büscher (2012) show that one of the ways in which to conceptualise neoliberalism is as a particular ideology to subject social and political (and environmental!) affairs to capitalist (market) dynamics. Neoliberalism has been the globally dominant ideology since the early 1970s and has deeply influenced the issue of environmental conservation by trying to make it compatible with capital circulation (Neves & Igoe 2012). Of course, this is not to say that conservation has only recently become associated with capitalism. The literature (e.g. Brockington *et al.* 2008; Igoe *et al.* 2010), increasingly emphasises that conservation has played a vital role throughout the history and development of capitalism. In part, this relates to Polanyi's 'double movement': conservation as a political backlash against the environmental effects of

modernisation and capitalist industrialisation. But as Igoe *et al.* (2010) show, this is only a minor part of the story. Conservation has in actual fact been an essential part of capitalist expansion since the nineteenth century and was deeply dependent on elites and rising business tycoons (Adams 2008).

Neoliberal conservation, then, is the contemporary push to making environmental conservation not only compatible with capitalism but also a source for economic growth (Arsel & Büscher 2012). Hence where after the Great Depression it was the automobile industry that led many of the technological changes that helped to generate economic growth for decades, many world leaders, including Barack Obama, have been pushing 'green technologies' to provide economic growth, development *and* environmental stewardship.¹ Obviously, these (so-called) 'green technologies' have a longer history, but the financial crisis really catapulted them into the global political limelight, especially through the United Nations Environment Programme's call for a 'Global Green New Deal' and, more recently, the 'Green Economy' (UNEP 2011). In particular due to the pressing problems of climate change, loss of biological diversity and fresh water resources and pollution, the capitalist system is trying to find ways to cope with and incorporate these in order to safeguard future economic growth (Stern 2006). But what exactly are the consequences of further integrating conservation with contemporary capitalism? This is one of the issues that the contributors to the special dossier address.

This question is extremely important yet oddly enough hardly discussed in mainstream discussions and policy environments. Everybody knows and recognises we live in a capitalist time, yet no policies on the environment ever start with 'biodiversity conservation is highly influenced by capitalism'. As Newell (2011, p. 4) put it succinctly for the realm of academia, 'capitalism is ever present, yet largely unsaid, in many academic debates on global environmental change'. We believe that this recognition is desperately needed in the mainstream debate because its view on how further integration of conservation with capitalism leads to multiple 'wins' is in fact based on a history of many environmentally harmful contradictions.

Furthermore, it relates to the question of how the benefits and burdens of conservation are distributed across the globe (Brockington & Duffy 2010). This then brings us to the second main concept, that of uneven geographical development.

Proponents of neoliberalism have been at pains to stress the specialness of this crisis – Greenspan called it a 'once in a century credit tsunami' (BBC 2008) – in order to buttress the perceived strength of the foundations of the global economic order. However, from a critical political economy perspective, such crises confirm that capitalism has progressed historically according to what Harvey (2006a, p. 71) terms "uneven geographical development": the extreme volatility in contemporary political economic fortunes across and between spaces of the world economy (at all manner of different scales). Importantly, the benefits and burdens of the crisis, as well as the abilities and capabilities of states to deal with the crisis have also been extremely unevenly distributed. Büscher (2012) shows that the continent that least contributed to the crisis was nonetheless severely hit, while rich, Western nations at least had the ability and capacity to provide lavish bail-out packages.² Such an ability is often missing within the context of developing nations, whose states not only lack the resources to undertake the protection of their citizens who suffer from myriad negative impacts of financial crises, but are also actively prevented by intergovernmental organisations from undertaking meaningful action lest these disrupt the workings of markets (Akyüz 2011).

This unequal and differentiated ability of (and within) developing and developed nation states to respond to crises, forms another dimension of uneven geographical development. In this regard, it is important to remember that 'neoliberalism uses uneven geographical development as a means to promote the universality of its own world project, which has nothing to do with the well-being of the whole of humanity but everything to do with the enhancement of dominant forms of class power' (Harvey 2009, p. 1276). To this end, Arsel (2012) demonstrates that even explicitly post-neoliberal leaders in Latin America, who are pursuing redistributionist policies, have to make use of the neoliberal

toolkit in developing their policies. This seeming contradiction arises from the tension between the traditional logic of the developmental state, namely, to deliver socio-economic progress through economic growth, with its newly acquired, or at times imposed, role to protect the integrity of ecosystems not only for the benefit of local communities who depend on them but also for the parts of the global society at large who demand their preservation.

Of course, to say, in general, that things develop unevenly does not seem to say much. This is why the addition 'geographical' is so important: not only do actors have uneven capabilities to deal with environment and development problematics, the benefits and burdens of these are also inherently unevenly distributed across and between spaces of the world economy (Smith 2008). In turn, capitalism, and especially capital circulation attribute uneven importance to different spaces, with specific geographical expressions. This was, of course, Smith's (2008, p. 4) basic message: 'uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital'. Crises, then, as Smith (2008, p. 170) also points out 'can also be acutely functional for capital' as it shakes up the playing field within which class interests can be rearticulated, and particularly, reinforced (as is what Harvey 2010 argues is what happened with the US\$700 billion bailout package in the US).

Crisis can also be an opportunity to question these dynamics and practices, and this is what the special dossier is all about: interrogating important issues like environmental conservation, poverty and development within an explicit configuration of structural power. This, as Newell (2011, p. 6) also stresses, is highly necessary and overdue: 'the extension and deepening of the logics of capitalism to new geographical and ecological areas of the planet appears to be unprecedented. This process needs to be adequately understood as a political and economic phenomenon with important social and environmental consequences of interest both to scholars of global environmental change and to all of us as citizens who, some more than others, will live with the benefits and problems it brings'. Exploring the issues of neoliberal conservation and uneven geo-

graphical development can contribute to this understanding, and each of the contributors touches on different aspects. Let us briefly introduce their main concerns and arguments.

CONNECTING THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL DOSSIER

Just as there has been a 'scramble' in academic contributions trying to make sense of the crisis (Castree 2010), so the crisis signifies a scramble over resources and over how to appropriate and value these. In the various geographic spaces of concern, as well as on the various scales of the contributions, one can detect these dynamics at play, whereby struggles over resources and their value are played out against the background of variegated forms of capital accumulation – and thus uneven geographical development. In Büscher's (2012) contribution about the place of the African continent within the world system, the unevenness is arguably starkest. Büscher shows how 'Africa's place in the global world order' has long been signified by a seemingly paradoxical situation of intensive, one-sided and violent resource exploitation and equally intensive, one-sided and violent resource conservation. From his contribution, it is clear that the old 'scramble for Africa' has not only transitioned into the neoliberal era, but taken on distinct new forms of geographical unevenness, scales and intensities. Büscher argues that the financial crisis has given globally dominant actors renewed vigour to intensify familiar processes of neoliberal conservation and neoliberal exploitation behind a win-win façade: good for outsiders and good for Africa's poor.

These core dynamics are also evident in other parts of the world that are the focus of some of the contributions. Arsel (2012) focuses on Latin America and Ecuador in particular, and shows that the scramble there is to transfer the hold on vital resources, particularly oil, from foreign corporations to the 'refounded' state. Through a broader Latin American strategy of 'Socialism of the twenty first century' which reflects the driving force behind the ongoing 'Left Turn', President Correa of Ecuador saw only one way to lessen foreign influence, namely to strengthen state control over resources and environmental and

developmental processes in the country. Paradoxically, one of the key ways of doing so for Correa proved to be a policy that strongly resembles neoliberal conservation. To the extent that the Yasuní-ITT (Ishpingo-Tambocoha-Tiputini) initiative is path breaking as an attempt to transcend the tension between the need for continued socio-economic development in the South and the necessity of preserving ecosystems critical for the health of the planet, it too has succumbed to the dominant logic of the markets. The state control over resources was supposed to fund development projects, which led to a jostle with primarily European ‘contributors’ who are interested in buying the credits and prefer the funds to be used for conservation of the ‘globally significant’ Yasuní park. While this problem seems to have been resolved by the involvement of the UNDP in the architecture of the Yasuní-ITT trust fund, the process of negotiation showed once again the difficulties inherent in North-South relations regarding global environmental change and conservation.

What is striking about these two contributions is how they signify both new and familiar forms of unevenness, but also new and contradictory forms of neoliberal conservation. At the same time, it is hard to compare the two continents as their experiences in uneven geographical development and neoliberal conservation are so vastly different. Castree (2008, p. 135) warned about this recently: ‘Where one is dealing with *sui generis* forms of neoliberal environmental governance – at the national or local scale, say – the hoary question of how far one can compare from case to case in geographical research arises’. Neves and Igoe’s contribution, however, does attempt to make this comparison across vastly different cases and natures: whale watching in the Azores and community-based conservation in Tanzania. In both cases new legal mechanisms are created to define and restrict access to resources. In contrast to Arsel’s description of the Ecuadorian state, ‘these forms of “re-regulation” . . . and “territorialisation” . . . are not based on ownership but on carefully monitored managerial relationships between people and resources’ (Neves & Igoe 2012, p. 164). Yet, where in Ecuador more ‘traditional’ and raw power politics seem to be decisive, Neves and Igoe (2012,

p. 164) point towards more obscure forms of power: the ability of actors at various political and geographical scales to ‘remake reality’ ‘around imagined possibilities of opening nature as a new realm for capitalist expansion’. While this may be beneficial for certain spaces and species, the broader outcomes demonstrate the inherently divisive and, in final reckoning, destructive impact of neoliberal conservation on nature as a whole as well as on the livelihoods of disenfranchised communities.

This, finally, brings us to McCarthy’s contribution which deals with this more obscure struggle that takes place primarily at the level of ideas and ideologies. McCarthy asks the vital question what the likely or possible trajectories are for relationships between political-economic structures and environmental governance ‘after’ the crisis. Focusing on the US, McCarthy (2012, p. 180) also shows how the financial crisis has led to a struggle over resources, whereby ‘responses to the crises have come to focus overwhelmingly on restoring dominant political economic arrangements to where they were several years ago, rather than taking the opportunity to “green” them in any deep, substantive sense’. As such, McCarthy’s conclusion is that the fallout from the financial crisis demonstrates the pervasive nature of neoliberal policies, which have not only spread across the globe but also penetrated into the very fabric of policy discourses of diverse actors, and that they are likely to remain and to exacerbate the process of uneven geographical development. At the same time, he believes that there are ways to ‘contribute to more just, democratic, and sustainable activity’, and that even though ‘any “de-neoliberalisation” of environmental governance is likely to be slow, difficult, and uneven’ McCarthy (2012, p. 180), there have been positive contributions to this project.

We hope the papers in this special dossier contribute to this project in one way or another at this important moment in history. While the focus of mainstream policy, business and government circles, three years ago and today still, is on “fixing” rather than reconstructing global finance’ (Macartney 2009, p. 116), we believe that the financial crisis has also opened up space to discuss the more fundamental political

and economic processes related to contemporary capitalism. In fact, we argue that the continuing stream of 'financial crises' make it highly necessary and relevant to develop nuanced analyses that link the nature of these crises to relevant contemporary political issues. The concepts of neoliberal conservation and uneven geographical development enable these types of analyses and the contributions to this special dossier of *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* point to the deeper, more structural insights that these can lead.

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Notes

1. Although, it must be said, the earlier enthusiasm quickly waned and Obama's track record on environment and energy is generally considered very disappointing. See McCarthy (2012) for a fuller discussion.
2. Although this, again, seems to be nearing its limits, particularly in Europe, considering the current 'debt crisis'.

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