

# Political ecology, variegated green economies, and the foreclosure of alternative sustainabilities

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## Abstract

Over the past two decades, political ecologists have provided extensive critiques of the privatization, commodification, and marketization of nature, including of the new forms of accumulation and appropriation that these might facilitate under the more recent guise of green growth and the green economy. These critiques have often demonstrated that such approaches can retain deleterious implications for certain vulnerable populations across the developing world and beyond. With few exceptions, however, political ecologists have paid decidedly less attention to expounding upon alternative initiatives for pursuing both sustainability and socio-environmental justice. Accordingly, the contributions to this Special Section engage the concept of the green economy explicitly as a terrain of struggle, one inevitably conditioned by the variegated forms that actually-existing 'green economy' strategies ultimately take in specific historical and geographical conjunctures. In doing so, they highlight the ways in which there is likewise not one but many potential *sustainabilities* for pursuing human and non-human well-being in the ostensibly nascent Anthropocene, each of which reflects alternative – and, potentially, more progressive – constellations of social, political, and economic relations. Yet they also foreground diverse efforts to pre-empt or to foreclose upon these alternatives, highlighting an implicit politics of precisely whose conception of sustainability is deemed to be possible or desirable in any given time and place. In exploring such struggles over alternative sustainabilities and the 'ecologies of hope' that they implicitly offer, then, this introduction first reviews the current frontiers of these debates, before illuminating how the contributions to this issue both intersect with and build upon them.

**Key words:** Green economy; political ecology; political economy; alternative sustainabilities

## Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les écologistes politiques ont fourni des critiques approfondies sur la privatisation, la marchandisation et la commercialisation de la nature, y compris des nouvelles formes d'accumulation et d'appropriation que cela pourrait faciliter sous l'aspect plus récent de la croissance verte et de l'économie verte. Ces critiques ont souvent démontré que de telles approches peuvent avoir des conséquences délétères pour certaines populations vulnérables à travers le monde en développement et au-delà. À quelques exceptions près, cependant, les écologistes politiques ont accordé une attention nettement moins importante à l'élaboration d'autres initiatives visant à promouvoir à la fois la durabilité et la justice socio-environnementale. En conséquence, les contributions à cette Section Spéciale engagent explicitement le concept de l'économie verte comme un terrain de lutte, inévitablement conditionné par les formes variées que prennent les stratégies d'économie verte existantes dans des conjonctures historiques et géographiques

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spécifiques. Ce faisant, ils mettent en évidence les façons dont il n'y a pas non plus une seule, mais de nombreuses possibilités de maintien pour la poursuite du bien-être humain et non humain dans l'Anthropocène naissant. Chacune reflète des constellations alternatives - et, potentiellement, plus progressives - de relations sociales, politiques et économiques. Cependant, ils mettent également l'accent sur divers efforts pour prévenir ou éliminer ces alternatives, mettant en évidence une politique implicite dont la conception de la durabilité est jugée possible ou souhaitable à tout moment et lieu. En explorant ces luttes sur les alternatives de durabilité et les «écologies de l'esérance» qu'elles proposent implicitement, cette introduction passe d'abord en revue les frontières actuelles de ces débats, avant d'éclairer la manière dont les contributions à cette Section se croisent et s'appuient sur elles.

**Mots-clés:** Économie verte; Écologie politique; économie politique; Durabilité alternative

## Resumen

Desde las últimas dos décadas, los ecólogos políticos han aportado numerosas críticas a la privatización, la mercantilización, y el comercio de la naturaleza, incluyendo las nuevas formas de acumulación y apropiación que estas facilitan bajo la apariencia de crecimiento y economía verde. A menudo estas críticas demuestran que tales acercamientos pueden traer implicaciones nocivas para ciertas poblaciones vulnerables en el mundo en desarrollo y más allá. Sin embargo, con escasas excepciones, los ecólogos políticos han decidido prestar menos atención al trabajo sobre iniciativas alternativas que persigan tanto la sustentabilidad, como la justicia socio-ambiental. Por lo tanto, las contribuciones de esta edición involucran el concepto de economía verde explícitamente como un terreno de conflicto, que se encuentra inevitablemente condicionado por las diversas formas de estrategias que la "economía verde" existente toma en ciertos contextos históricos y geográficos. En este intento, ellos resaltan las formas en que puede haber no una, sino varias *sustentabilidades* posibles para perseguir el bienestar humano y no humano, en el visiblemente naciente Antropoceno. Cada una de estas *sustentabilidades* refleja constelaciones alternativas -y potencialmente más progresivas- de relaciones sociales, políticas y económicas. Además, ellos encabezan los esfuerzos para adelantar o llevar a cabo estas alternativas, destacando políticas implícitas de aquellos cuya idea de sustentabilidad es considerada como algo posible o deseable en cualquier lugar y momento. Para explorar dichas dificultades en las sustentabilidades alternativas y en las "ecologías de esperanza" que implícitamente ofrecen, esta introducción primero explora las actuales fronteras de estos debates, para luego indicar cómo las contribuciones a este tema intersectan con y elaboran con respecto a ellos.

**Palabras clave:** Economía verde, ecología política, sustentabilidades alternativas

## 1. Introduction: of hatchets and seeds...

Prior to and following the UN Commission on Sustainable Development's (UNCSD) 'Rio+20' conference in June 2012, a variety of organizations released framework documents on 'green growth' or the 'green economy', ostensibly seeking to catalyse renewed support for sustainable development in the context of global environmental and economic crises (e.g. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2012; UN Environment Programme [UNEP] 2011; World Bank 2012). Not unlike the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, then – in which a decidedly 'millennial' version of global capitalism promised us deliverance from the scourges of war and authoritarian rule (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) – capital's proponents have once again highlighted its apparently messianic qualities. Indeed, as UNEP (2011: 19) would have it, our contemporary intersection of financial tumult and global environmental change is best seen as an 'opportunity' rather than a 'crisis' – one in which the simple reallocation of investment capital to the correct 'green' initiatives will not only deliver us from socio-ecological calamity, but potentially also realize the original ideals of the *Our Common Future* manifesto (Brundtland Commission 1987). In short, however – while a turn towards green(er) economies and development pathways might admittedly lead us toward a certain version of 'sustainable development' – these broad concepts are also subject to a wide range of interpretations, power struggles, vested interests, and, ultimately, the vagaries of their geographically-specific implementation.

Understandably, this emerging policy field has attracted the attention of political ecologists and other critical scholars of development, who have begun to explore the various ways in which these initiatives

threaten to interact with existing social and economic inequalities, vulnerabilities, or injustices (e.g. Arsel and Büscher 2012; Bailey and Caprotti 2014; Caprotti and Bailey 2014; Corson *et al.* 2013; Fairhead *et al.* 2012; Marino and Ribot 2012). Of course, these recent inquiries into the 'nature' of the green economy build upon well-established research foci in political ecology and related fields, such as the 'neoliberalization of nature' (Heynen *et al.* 2007; McCarthy and Prudham 2004) and associated processes of environmental privatization, commodification, and marketization (Castree 2010), as well as the implications of this for otherwise conventional forms of forest and biodiversity conservation (e.g. Igoe and Brockington 2007; Holmes and Cavanagh 2016). Further, such 'new' discourses and practices also intersect with legacies of the (post)colonial enclosure of land and resources for conservation or commercial agriculture (e.g. Borras *et al.* 2011; Neumann 1998; Peluso and Lund 2011; White *et al.* 2012), as well as the various ways in which related power relations shape discourses of environmental governance, practices of knowledge and policy construction, and definitions of ostensible 'environmental crises' (e.g. Adger *et al.* 2001; Forsyth 2003; Goldman *et al.* 2011; Stott and Sullivan 2000) – all familiar terrain for political ecologists.

Yet incipient discourses, policies, and practices of green growth and the green economy also present us with a certain degree of novelty. Current proposals for pursuing these objectives notably perceive entire landscapes as sources of alternative energy, carbon sinks or biodiversity preserves, 'climate-smart' agricultural crops, and ecosystem services (e.g. Minang *et al.* 2014). In many ways, this has led to a sweeping re(e)valuation and (re)production of both space and nature in relation to a variety of new epistemologies and discourses, oriented around buzzwords such as 'sustainability science' (Turner *et al.* 2003), 'climate-resilient development' (Frankhauser and Schmidt-Traub 2011), 'socio-ecological systems' (e.g. Ostrom 2009), and 'planetary boundaries' (Rockström *et al.* 2009). Selected examples of such revaluations include:

- (1) food price hikes in 2007-08 and 2011, which caused international capital to 'rediscover' the agricultural sector in the Global South (Borras *et al.* 2011);
- (2) volatile energy prices, which have occasionally provided an impetus for the conversion of farmland from food crops to biofuels, as well as the identification of other alternative energy sources (Borras *et al.* 2010); and
- (3) new economic incentives for the utilization of land for environmental change mitigation, either in the form of carbon offset forestry (including REDD+), biodiversity offsetting, ecotourism, species and wetland banking, and related schemes (Benabou 2014; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2014; Sullivan 2013).

Importantly, moreover, the governance of these interventions increasingly necessitates second-order practices and economies of 'green' auditing, evaluation, accounting, and certification – involving government agencies, multilateral organizations, consulting firms, and NGOs – and thus facilitating forms of technocratic environmental governance that potentially alienate or marginalize non-expert stakeholders (Lohmann 2014).

Thus far, critiques and analyses of these and related phenomena have certainly yielded fascinating insights into the character and operations of political economies, power relations, and broader governmentalities within the context of global environmental, political, and economic change (e.g. Peet *et al.* 2011).<sup>2</sup> However, there is also a danger that these patterns of critique, notwithstanding their sophistication, will lead us into a form of what Wendy Brown (1999: 20) – drawing on the writings of Walter Benjamin – once termed *left melancholy*; that is, a condition of being "attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing upon possibilities for radical change in the present." Differently put, regardless of whether the *object* of our critique is development, capital, or the green economy,

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<sup>2</sup> See, further, the following Special Issues and Sections, which constitute but a selection of this critical literature: *Geoforum* 35(3), *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16(1), *Conservation and Society* 5(4), *Antipode* 42(3), *Antipode* 43(3), *Development and Change* 43(1), *Geoforum* 43(3), *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31(3), *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(2), *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 103(2), *Human Geography* 6(1), *Global Environmental Politics* 14(3), and *Geografiska Annaler B* 96(3).

this can occasionally inspire little more than melancholia if not coupled with an assessment of possibilities for progressive action at multiple scales in the present (Gibson-Graham 2006, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing such dangers, then, and invoking one of the simplest insights from what is for many an introductory text to this field – Paul Robbins' *Political ecology* (e.g. Robbins 2012: 98) – we therefore find ourselves compelled to ask: of what use is the 'hatchet' of academic critique, however elegant, erudite, or articulate, if not accompanied by a substantive attempt to plant the 'seed' of more socially and ecologically just futures? Political ecologists are of course all-too-familiar with debates concerning both the practical and the political 'usefulness' of our field, not least because Piers Blaikie (2008, 2012), Peter Walker (2006, 2007), Paul Robbins (2006), and several others have raised such concerns (see, *inter alia*, Batterbury 2015; Dwyer and Baird 2014; Forsyth 2008). In his case for a "practical and dynamic approach to engaged PE research", for example, Blaikie (2012: 233) urges political ecologists to "resist the lures of post-structuralism", in particular, given that such analyses allegedly "infect their own authors with a post-rhetorical feel good factor" despite the ostensible fact that "no one else outside the academy is listening, let alone feeling enlightened and encouraged toward practical action." Similarly noting the potentially disempowering effects of what we might term "critique for critique's sake", Walker (2007: 365) beseeches us to avoid a future for political ecology in which it "remains largely focussed inward, confined to academic publications that are unavailable or unintelligible to those who might benefit from the research." Further still, as Robbins (2006) argues, research without some form of progressive engagement might in fact be seen as a form of "theft" that reproduces colonial relations of knowledge production – especially if data is extracted from respondents and used for publications that enhance academic careers, but little is done with such knowledge outside of the academy. Collectively, such interventions remind us of the hypothetical risks of a wholly self-indulgent political ecology, one that might remain uninterested in both policy relevance and public engagement, as well as activism and potentially transformative forms of political action.<sup>4</sup>

None of this is to say, of course, that we should abandon critique as an integral mode of inquiry in political ecology – only that we should perhaps seek to continuously reinvigorate it. As Michael Hardt (2011: 19) notes in an essay on the final lectures of Michel Foucault, the term critique is not necessarily limited only to practices of "fault-finding", questioning of authority, or efforts to expose the operations of power within allegedly 'benign' social and political-economic formations. Indeed, as Foucault's (2007, 2011a, 2011b) final lessons remind us, *critique* in the fullest sense of the word arguably also involves the identification and pursuit of potentially emancipatory alternatives, in which the Greek notion of *parrhesia* (free, frank speech) is simultaneously combined with various forms of theoretically-informed practice. For Hardt (2011: 33), Foucault's "thick" understanding of critique in turn suggests the possibility of a more substantive form of critical theory, one that aims not simply at analysis and conceptualization, but "at constructing a new life and creating or at least prefiguring a new world." A renewed deployment of critique in this latter sense of the term is worth considering, we suspect, as it will perhaps assist us in highlighting constructively the prospects for spaces – as well as, necessarily, ecologies – of hope in times of both calamitous economic and environmental change (see also Harvey 2000; Peet and Watts 2004). Differently put, by revisiting this "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2013) of both ourselves as academics and the participants in our research, we may assert more centrally 'the political' in political ecology amidst the rise of ostensibly technocratic or post-political modes of both societal and environmental governance (e.g. Swyngedouw 2010). Indeed, in this particular historical-geographical moment, there is perhaps no better metaphor for Hardt's call for "prefiguring a new world" than the act of 'planting the seed' of more emancipatory political ecologies.

In this vein, the contributions to this Special Section strike a balance between analysis and critique of actually-existing green economy discourses and initiatives with the exploration of struggles for and against what we will call 'alternative sustainabilities.' In what follows, we situate these contributions in three sections. First, we revisit analyses that have interrogated capital's attempts to 'produce' the nonhuman world

<sup>3</sup> On the possibly diminishing returns of such forms of 'radical' critique, see also Latour (2004).

<sup>4</sup> This is not at all to say that such efforts towards engagement don't exist. See, for example, the ENTITLE network's excellent *Political ecology for civil society* manual: <http://www.politicalecology.eu/documents/events/94-entitle-manual-may-2016/file>

"all the way down" (Smith 2007: 25), identifying selected drivers of this process as essential for understanding the emergence of the green economy. Second, however, we also draw upon recent scholarship in critical development studies and related fields, which suggests a number of ways in which the green economy will also variegate, articulate, and mutate as it encounters other emerging modes of politics and governance (e.g. Ong 2006; Sassen 2014). Third, we transition from 'the hatchet' to 'the seed' by illuminating the ways in which the contributions intersect with, and respond to, the aforementioned critical literatures - highlighting in particular the co-production of critical theory related to struggles over these 'alternative sustainabilities.' Finally, we conclude with a discussion of pressing new research questions raised by struggles for actualizing these alternatives, as well as the promise of both social and environmental justice arising from their pursuit.

## **2. Between global environmental change, uneven development, and the overaccumulation of capital**

As David Harvey (2014: 252-253) notes in some of his most recent work on "capital's relation to nature", the rise of the green economy concept should perhaps prompt us to reflect somewhat critically upon previous generations of the environmentalist critique of capital(ism). We bracket the latter suffix, in the first instance, as Harvey (2014: 7-11) and other political economists increasingly distinguish between capital – both as a process and as a "thing" that manifests in various forms – and various *capitalisms* (e.g. Peck and Theodore 2007). Where the former concept refers to the *general* process of accumulation, circulation, and expanded reproduction of capital, the latter refers to its imbrication with various political-geographical institutions, *specific* modes of accumulation (such as neoliberalism), and related forms of governance, including systems of racial and gender-based domination. While this disaggregation of capital and capitalism might admittedly at first seem overly narrow, it perhaps assists us in accounting for the variegations between – to take an instructive range of examples – Liberian, Norwegian, Emirati, and Chinese *capitalisms*, whilst simultaneously noting the implication of each of these forms in broader networks, processes, or networks of compounding global 'economic growth.'

Regarding the issue of environmental change, for example, radicals (Benton 1989; O'Connor 1998) and neo-Malthusians (Club of Rome 1972; Ehrlich 1968) have argued that the biophysical environment will ultimately constrain various incarnations of capitalism, whether through resource scarcity or the deleterious consequences and feedbacks of excessive pollution and waste. Yet, in an observation that is now increasingly obvious to political ecologists and resource management practitioners, Harvey (2014: 248) reminds us that – rather than serving as some sort of critical limit for accumulation – *capital* has instead now "turned environmental issues into big business." Even the most cursory survey of the policy literature on the green economy makes abundantly clear that this holds true in a growing number of ways: from the development of technologies for geo-engineering, carbon capture, and ostensibly 'clean' energy (Hamilton 2013; Jean-Buck 2012); to the acquisition of land for more 'efficient' or 'climate-smart' commercial agriculture (Borras *et al.* 2011); to the commodification of carbon, biodiversity, and various ecosystem services (Sullivan 2013); to the collapsing distinction between technology, commodities, and animal, bacterial, or virological life (e.g. Prudham 2007). From the atmosphere to the gene, in other words, capital insidiously attempts to (re)produce all aspects of the human and nonhuman world in ways that are legible to itself (Smith 2007: 25). Moreover, it is worth noting that – while some of these manifestations certainly constitute a type of "fictitious commodity" (Brockington 2011), such as carbon or biodiversity offsets – others are all-too-real indeed, especially those entailing the development of novel energy and biotechnological infrastructures.

In addition to serving as strategies of accumulation in their own right, however, many of the aforementioned initiatives also constitute attempts to identify material 'ecological fixes' for the environmental crises engendered by the process of expanded reproduction (Bakker 2004; Castree 2008). As Bakker (2004: 33-35) notes, the increased throughput and externalities generated by capitalist production processes may indeed degrade both local and global "conditions of production" – ecosystems, natural resources, and so on (*à la* O'Connor 1998) – in ways that periodically challenge sustained profitability and growth. Differently put, deleterious processes of global environmental change might be seen, from this perspective, as being largely

the material expression of capital's uneven development and compound growth over the past several hundred years (see also Clark and York 2005). Consequently, for Bakker (2004), capital must continuously seek to 'fix' such ecological challenges – and particularly so through the profitable 'internalization' of environmentally damaging 'externalities' – such as carbon dioxide, greenhouse gases, and other by-products of the production process. In turn, this leads to what Arsel and Büscher (2012: 74) term the "dialectic between change and limits", wherein feedbacks signalling deleterious ecological consequences and falling rates of profit catalyse spatial, temporal, and/or ecological 'fixes' that respectively avoid, delay, or even renegotiate the barriers to further growth. Accordingly, then, if capital is becoming 'green' in response to this context, this is because of its decidedly chameleonic nature: its inherent adaptability and capacity to transform the disasters and crises of capitalism into yet another driver of expanded reproduction (see also Fletcher 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat ironically, therefore, the underlying logic of these 'ecological fixes' in many ways inverts the spirit of then-World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence Summers' allegedly satirical memo that Africa is 'under-polluted' and thus a suitable receptacle for the world's toxic waste (Harvey 1996: 366). Today, instead, we are told that land and ecosystems in the developing world are comparatively under-utilized and thus economically optimal for environmental change mitigation – as *sinks*, still, but this time for carbon and biodiversity rather than conventional forms of waste. Accordingly, such re(e)valuations of space and their apparent revival of a previous era's *terra nullius* logic (Geisler 2012) of course present significant risks related to various forms of both land and 'green' grabbing or environmentally-justified accumulation by dispossession (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Fairhead *et al.* 2012). Indeed, this is particularly the case in empirical contexts characterized by the unresolved legacies of (post)colonial state territorialisation and resource appropriation, in which allegedly 'under-utilized' spaces were in fact forcibly alienated from indigenous and other rural populations under the *imprimatur* of colonial or state trusteeship (Cavanagh and Himmelfarb 2015).

Further to this, however, the green economy also conceptualises developing countries as sinks in an additional sense – that is, as sites for the absorption of surplus or overaccumulated capital, the profitable reinvestment of which is necessary for the continuation of expanded reproduction. As Harvey (2010: 45) defines the concept, an overaccumulation crisis occurs when "there appears to be an excess [...] of capital relative to the opportunities to use that capital profitably"; in other words, when the absence of investment opportunities leads to a situation in which surplus capital "is devalued or destroyed." In this sense, the green economy potentially offers a solution to these crises in two interrelated ways. First, it promises to mobilize investment and support economic growth in an historically conventional way – via the profitable extension of larger volumes of capital into new geographical frontiers, whether within individual cities, states, regions, or internationally (Harvey 2003; Smith 2008). Secondly, however, the green economy increasingly offers an additional solution – namely, the actualization of novel investment frontiers via the creation of new commodities and sectors. Here, comparisons might be drawn between the explosion of markets for financial derivatives and insurance prior to the 2007 financial crisis and the emergence of new markets for carbon, biodiversity offsets, and ecosystem services – themselves a form of derivative commodity (Büscher 2010; Büscher and Fletcher 2015; Sullivan 2013). In turn, moreover, these derivate commodities increasingly produce still *further* derivatives, as we now see – for instance – in the provision of insurance for carbon offsetting projects, including for, rather ominously, contingencies related to 'political risk' (e.g. Ecosystem Marketplace 2013).

The success of these *attempts* to implement ecological fixes and realize new investment frontiers is, however, far from certain (Dempsey and Suarez 2016). Markets for carbon offsets perhaps serve as an instructive example; in the European Union's Emissions Trading System (ETS), for instance, the price of tradable European Union Allowances (EUAs) has declined from a high of approximately 30 Euros (US\$32) in 2008 to slightly more than 4.5 Euros (US\$4.8) in September of 2016 (European Energy Exchange 2016). Over the same period, the price of Kyoto Protocol-related offsets declined to less than one Euro (US\$1.07,

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<sup>5</sup> At least in principle, Dempsey and Suarez (2016) usefully call into question whether the rhetoric surrounding various iterations of the 'green economy' will be met with sufficient volumes of private and public investments in practice.

World Bank 2013: 41), raising questions about the very feasibility of compliance markets for carbon offsets. Similarly, initial optimism about an alleged 'clean energy transition' has more recently been tempered with critical analyses of the reliance of such technologies on rare earth elements (REEs) and other minerals, suggesting a complex relationship between lower-carbon energy and land use changes related to the expansion or intensification of mining activities (Jeffries 2015; Vidal *et al.* 2013). Coincidentally, most of the world's supply of REEs is presently controlled by China (US Government Accountability Office [GAO] 2010), whereas other crucial minerals used to manufacture advanced electronics – such as coltan and cassiterite – are frequently sourced from conflict zones such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which retains an estimated 80 percent of global reserves of the latter (Mantz 2008).

Moreover, as Siamanta (2017) notes in relation to state support for the 'green' photovoltaics industry in Greece, subsidies and other incentives for the large-scale production of 'clean' energy technologies may in fact contribute to the impoverishment of low and middle-income consumers via the imposition of higher energy prices. Notably, Siamanta theorizes this process as a form of 'green grabbing' or green dispossession via the market, in which the costs of the clean energy transition are essentially redistributed downward to everyday consumers, while profits are redistributed upwards to private firms via subsidies and other forms of corporate welfare. In turn, these and similar examples suggest the emergence of a new geopolitics and class politics of clean energy in the green economy, as well as the risk of new forms of a 'green resource curse' in the extractive sectors of the developing world (Vandever 2013). In other words, then, capital's pursuit of both spatial and ecological fixes increasingly encounters – or even produces – new social and geographical barriers, whether in the form of the geopolitical interests of the Chinese state, class struggles in Greece, or the "militant particularism" (Harvey 1996) of insurgents in the eastern DRC.

In the ensuing section, we explore in more detail this theme of the green economy's variegated implementation in specific places, drawing in particular upon recent work in critical development studies and related fields. As this literature suggests, discourses, policies, and practices of green growth and the green economy will inevitably variegate, articulate, and mutate as they encounter distinct forms of governance and accumulation in different empirical contexts, perhaps catalysing the production of new social and geographical barriers to capital such as those identified above.

### **3. The green economy: variegations, articulations, mutations**

Thus far, we have primarily addressed the relationship between the green economy and the machinations of capital, rather than of various *capitalisms* in the sense of Harvey's broader usage of the term (2014: 7-11). It must be said, however, that precise empirical manifestations of the green economy in particular contexts will also be greatly influenced by their intersection with specific modes of governance and (especially neoliberal) accumulation, ongoing state and non-state territorializations, and numerous cultural formations. As such, we concur here with critics of 'capitalo-centric' approaches to critical social theory (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006) that – while a basic understanding of capital perhaps constitutes a necessary condition for conceptualizing the emergence of the green economy – such an analysis, by itself, is ultimately still insufficient. Indeed, 'actually existing' manifestations and implementations of the green economy in specific empirical contexts will be 'overdetermined' by a number of related political, social, and cultural logics, to an examination of which we now turn.

By noting such complexities, we depart somewhat from recent analyses of this topic, many of which have attempted to disaggregate the notion of the 'green economy', and to highlight the ways in which different actors or "discourse coalitions" (Hajer 1995) have in fact proposed quite distinct versions of it. For instance, Tienhaara (2014) distinguishes between three types of 'green capitalism' – the green new deal, the green stimulus, and the green economy – where each is characterized by varying roles for and approaches to economic growth, technology, markets, and finance. Likewise, Death (2014) proposes four 'discourses' of the green economy operating in South Africa: green revolution, green transformation, green growth, and green resilience, which similarly differ in both their proposals for and visions of more sustainable modes of politics and economics. Further still, Bailey and Caprotti (2014: 1800) identify four "functional domains" in which green economic initiatives will operate – including financial, institutional, regulatory, and 'green cultural

economy' dimensions – suggesting that specific empirical manifestations of the green economy will potentially involve qualitatively distinct combinations of each.

While the proliferation of such disaggregations and conceptual models is of course helpful, we also highlight the likely variegation of green economy initiatives in diverse historical and geographical conjunctures. As a growing number of anthropologists, geographers, and critical theorists of development remind us – albeit in different ways – processes of neoliberalization, structural adjustment, and globalization since the end of the Cold War have perhaps irreversibly reconfigured the relationship between sovereignty, territory, and capital in much of the (developing) world (e.g. Ferguson 2006; Ong 2006; Sassen 2008, 2014; Tsing 2004). Although conventionally discussed primarily in economic terms, these processes also appear to have spawned new forms of governance and rule in various geographical *milieux*, which retain significant implications for the translation of the green economy from discourse, to policy, and onward again into practice.

For example, Achille Mbembe (2001: 66) famously describes the emergence of what he calls "private indirect government" in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, in which processes of neoliberalization have articulated with existing systems of patronage, clientelism, and 'customary' authority. In some cases, this has given rise to an increasing dissolution of the distinction between public and private accumulation; or, as Mbembe more vividly puts it, to the occasional manifestation of a *de facto* indistinction between 'taxation' and 'extortion'. Writing on the Southeast Asian context, Ong (2006: 3) relatedly contends that neoliberalism is best understood not simply as an economic doctrine, but as "a new mode of political optimization" that consequently reconfigures "relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality", leading her to a conception of sovereignties and territories that are asymmetrically 'graduated' and interpenetrated across time and space. Further still, Ferguson (2006) draws our attention to such interpenetrations via the proliferation of an 'enclave' mode of extractive governance under neoliberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, wherein private firms, NGOs, and development agencies manage small territories in regions that have otherwise been abandoned by – or even seized from – the state (e.g. Mann 2014). Accordingly, this process of non-state territories 'debordering' state territoriality (Sassen 2013) – whether for oil and mineral concessions, conservation areas, or agricultural export processing zones – also highlights the decentralization and gradation of sovereignty within and between states amidst the overarching context of globalization and variegated capital accumulation.

Crucially, various initiatives to implement the green economy will inevitably articulate or otherwise intersect with many of the aforementioned phenomena. Already in the case of conventional biodiversity conservation, for example, states increasingly utilize NGOs or private firms as intermediaries, leading to a form of what Corson (2011) terms "neoliberal territorialisation." This is visible, for instance, in the ways in which the management of state conservation enclaves are increasingly co-managed with *both* international NGOs such as the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) or the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), as well as private firms in the extractive industry sector (Seagle 2012). Taking a broader view of these partnerships between conservationists and corporations, Adams (2017) describes such engagements as a kind of "Faustian bargain" in which what might first appear to conservationists as a pragmatic alliance, may in fact undermine conservation *and* livelihood objectives. Furthermore, these partnerships will also perhaps 'mutate' in both form and content as they interact with modes of governing such as those resembling Mbembe's (2001) notion of 'private indirect government' in different empirical localities. Here, an early warning has already been raised by Tandon (2011), who beseeches us to account for the ways in which the green economy and related forms of 'climate finance' may reinforce or even exacerbate pre-existing 'kleptocratic' modes of governance in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet such articulations and mutations are not limited to 'low-income' countries in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, as Vladimirova (2017) and Turhan and Gündoğan (2017) show, green economy discourses are also being adopted to support a diverse range of state and private sector interests in the BRICS and other middle-income countries, as suggested by these authors' case studies in Russia and Turkey, respectively. For example, Turhan and Gündoğan undertook a case study of the Turkish government's submission to the UNCSD Rio+20 conference in 2012, entitled *Reclaiming the future*. Through a detailed

analysis of this document and a contextualization of it within Turkey's prevailing political-economic context, the authors conclude that green economy discourses in the country contribute to what Erik Swyngedouw has called 'post-political' forms of governance, wherein political (or in this case, political-ecological) problems are reframed as simply requiring technical and expert-led solutions, thereby foreclosing upon possibilities for more broad-based debates and deliberations concerning the pursuit of more socially just alternatives. In this sense, Turkish green economy policies certainly seek to 'reclaim' the future, albeit in ways that obscure questions of agency, distribution, and democracy: in other words, the very substance of what Swyngedouw terms *the political*.

Likewise, Vladimirova (2017) identifies a number of tensions and contradictions between Russia's official account of its attempts to implement a 'green economy' delivered in the international sphere, relative to the nature of green economy policies and practices at multiple scales in domestic Russian politics. In the latter, the articulation of Russian nationalism and incipient national environmental consciousness has paradoxically given rise to a perception that Russia is "too green for the green economy." Here, the simultaneous exploitation and protection of Arctic environments, in particular, is not necessarily thought to evince a contradictory set of policies, but instead to demonstrate the totality of the state's mastery of both nature and the economy, albeit in ways that now offer a much more central role for the private sector than in similarly "high modern" (Scott 1998) forms of Soviet environmental management.

Though many of these cases suggest a number of ways in which green economy discourses may be used to further entrench exploitative governmentalities and political economies, such efforts have certainly not gone uncontested. Indeed, many of the contributions to this issue also highlight, as Turhan and Gündoğan (2017, emphasis in original) put it, "the impossibility of the opinion that there exists only *one* nature for the creation of a green politics". Accordingly, we now turn to struggles for and against the substance of these other natures and their underlying conceptions of sustainability.

#### **4. From hatchet to seed: alternative sustainabilities and the co-production of critical theory**

In advancing this notion of 'alternative sustainabilities', we invoke Marx's well-known observation that ideology often manifests as the subtle conflation of a general with a specific form: 'economy' with the capitalist economy, 'state' with the capitalist state, 'property' with private property, 'nature' with the nature produced by capital, and so on. Today, the vacuity of the concept of 'sustainability' is no exception – presenting this as general and monolithic, in other words, governments, donors, and multilateral development institutions obfuscate the fact that their concept of 'sustainability' primarily refers to the sustainability of capital. In attempting to undermine such a formulation, therefore, we concur and ally ourselves with Dressler *et al.*'s (2014) and Caprotti and Bailey's (2014) calls for examinations of the 'alternatives' to green capitalism, as such efforts inherently promise to destabilize this currently hegemonic conception of alleged 'sustainability.'

Simultaneously, however, we note that these alternative visions of sustainability are not *necessarily* mutually reinforcing – indeed, they in some cases offer us substantially distinct accounts of desirable political, economic, and ecological futures. Such tensions are also evident in recent scholarly literature: both Tania Li (e.g. 2014: 4, 15-16) and Henry Bernstein (2014), for instance, have recently criticized movements for small-scale 'alternatives' rooted in the management of local commons and food sovereignty, respectively, for being generally ill-conceived or otherwise potentially antithetical to the pursuit of more systemic forms of radical change. Conversely, Radcliffe (2015) notes the politically ambiguous outcomes that may arise when particular 'alternatives' become institutionalized in *larger* scale initiatives, pointing to the sustained inequalities, marginalizations, and conflicts present within even apparently 'post-neoliberal' regimes in contemporary Ecuador and Bolivia. Nonetheless, we foreground the ensuing alternatives collectively to stimulate debate and dialogue around these issues.

Crucially, each of the contributions to the Special Section have identified these alternatives not merely from (re)readings and exegeses of critical academic texts, but from sustained engagements with various

constituencies. In the articles that follow, references to Marx, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and other critical theorists feature prominently. However, the contributions of these thinkers have been qualified and perhaps even disciplined with the insights, observations, and aspirations of respondents from each contributor's empirical *milieu*. This results in what we will term the 'co-production' of critical theory, arising from dialogic interaction between each of the authors and their interlocutors, as well as from various textual sources of critical inspiration (see also Derickson and MacKinnon 2015). In addition, we note that none of the contributors to this issue espouse a kind of unqualified support for various 'alternatives'; instead, many of the articles either explicitly or implicitly reveal both tensions and potential contradictions within and between these struggles.

Firstly, alternative conceptions of sustainability are not imagined or enacted in a political or economic vacuum. As Lyons *et al.* (2017) show, in particular, social movements against land and 'green grabs' in Uganda have been enabled and constrained by prevailing institutional and policy contexts in the country. In turn, these constraints and opportunities have likewise led to debates amongst various constituencies about proper responses to perceived social and environmental injustices, particularly with regard to whether these responses should be generally reformist or more radical in nature. Whereas reformists tend to see radical proposals as either infeasible or otherwise unattainable, radicals view reformist strategies as far too time and resource intensive, and unlikely to address underlying drivers of recurring injustices. Nonetheless, even radical approaches are constrained by an increasingly draconian approach to the regulation of dissent in Uganda, wherein recent legislative amendments have granted the state wider powers to deregister and prosecute civil society organizations deemed to engage in 'inappropriate' activities. Such powers have been exercised recently not only with regard to Ugandan organizations, but also against their international affiliates, as suggested by attempts to deregister both Oxfam International and its local affiliate, the Uganda Land Alliance, following their criticism of evictions precipitated by a carbon offset forestry project run by the UK-based New Forests Company. Consequently, Lyons *et al.*'s analysis helps us to dispel simplistic accounts of alternatives and social movements emerging organically and uniformly from an unstratified 'local' constituency. Rather, they show in detail how local politics, capacities, and willingness to challenge policy and legislative frameworks results in substantial variegation amongst the approaches adopted by both Ugandan activists and their international allies.

Drawing on her fieldwork on conservation in north-western Namibia, Sullivan (2017) examines the ontological dimensions of alternative forms of sustainability, or the ways in which "people may understand the nature of how the world is constituted, and thereby demonstrate diversity in both meaning-making and actions in relation to this plurality of natures" (Sullivan 2017: 224). Reflecting upon her experience with intertwined resource management and cultural practices amongst Namibia's Damara community, Sullivan notes the ways in which local animist conceptions of environmental management do not only constitute simply an alternative ontology, but also perhaps an *oppositional* or counter-modern ontology (*à la* Latour 1993), in which practitioners of the latter are "in a state of conscious antagonism, resistance and banishment *vis à vis* the strongly hierarchical and instrumental powers associated with the modern state and capitalised markets" (p.227). Consequently, Sullivan shows how the practice and embodiment of such an ontology is not merely some conservative attempt to hold onto an idealized cultural past, but a largely political (and inevitably also ecological) initiative to draw upon a shared cultural repertoire in building a present and future deemed to be more socially and ecologically just.

Other contributions to the issue engage the theme of alternatives in relation to their conspicuous absence – variously – in discourses, policies, and programmes for fostering the emergence of a green economy. Turhan and Gündoğan (2017), for instance, note how the Turkish state's efforts to "reclaim the future" through green economy programming have interestingly adopted "deliberative" and "participatory" rhetoric to aid in the elimination of opposition to the state's version of authoritarian neoliberalism. Here, as the authors put it, the state is framed as "a neutral (and non-ideological) structure that carefully considers the welfare of each citizen (if and when necessary, even by taking measures against them)" (p.291), thereby eliminating the need for more substantive forms of multi-party democratic politics. In response, Turhan and Gündoğan argue for the emergence of what they call – following Harvey (e.g. 2003: 169-180) – "co-

revolutionary theory", which would identify points of synergy between counter-movements oriented around degrowth, eco-socialism, and environmental justice, as well as around more locally-rooted or place-based struggles. Likewise, Adams (2017) shows how a longstanding environmentalist discourse on the alternative valuation of nature – one centred on its intrinsic, nonfinancial worth – appears to have been captured and increasingly extinguished by the "extreme pragmatism" evinced in corporate-NGO partnerships in the conservation sector, wherein well-worn NGO critiques of extractive industry and other environmentally damaging businesses are increasingly scarce in their own right among the sector's largest organizations. Collectively, while these studies and analyses of green economy initiatives and various reactions to them do not yield easy generalizations about the future trajectories of struggles over either the former or the latter, they do open up space for a range of salient new research questions and avenues of inquiry. We now turn to a discussion of these.

## 5. Conclusion

In a recent analysis of the 'contradictions of capital' and their implications for global development pathways, David Harvey wrote:

It is not entirely beyond the realm of possibility that capital could survive all the contradictions hitherto examined at a certain cost. It could do so, for example, by a capitalist oligarchic elite supervising the mass genocidal elimination of much of the world's surplus and disposable population while enslaving the rest and building vast artificial gated environments to protect against the ravages of an external nature run toxic, barren, and ruinously wild. (2014: 264)

While we certainly appreciate the rigour and insightfulness of Harvey's analysis, we also note the ways in which the above statement might be seen as a paradigmatic example of what Wendy Brown (1999) once termed "left melancholia." For Harvey and many other political economists, any political-economic transition beyond capital(ism) will necessarily be a long-term, even an epochal, process. Yet, as Springer (2014) rightly notes, Marxism's long-term transitional vision inherently also implies a "politics of waiting" – one that does not always squarely acknowledge the question of who can, and who cannot, afford to wait. Indeed, as Radcliffe (2015: 871) reminds us, "alternatives to the mainstream development frameworks are being experimented with (out of inspiration or desperation) on a daily basis among the poorest of the poor. They have no choice but to seek alternatives to what they are experiencing." In short, therefore, we see no reason why a politics of long-term transitions cannot engage with initiatives for radical change at multiple scales in the present.

Hence, while many of the contributions to this Special Section are certainly inspired by Harvey and other Marxist political economists in their critique of green economy discourses and practices, several also engage alternative visions of social and ecological futures that reject outright the inevitability of the above-quoted scenario. That said, these analyses do not offer unqualified support for these alternatives. Rather, each of the ensuing contributions illuminate the potential as well as the tensions within and amongst various responses to dominant conceptions of the green economy. Of course, mainstream versions of sustainability and their potentially radical alternatives retain their own political ecologies, the examination of which suggests interesting avenues for future research.

In what ways, for example, do conflicts over land and resources continue to manifest even within ostensibly radical or populist states, such as within the post-neoliberal societies of Ecuador and Bolivia? To what extent are the internal dynamics of social movements for social and environmental justice affected by varying degrees of professionalization and relative privilege amongst their leadership and other adherents? How can alternatives rooted in the management of local commons or in the pursuit of local food sovereignty 'jump scales' to effectively address global problems of food security and environmental change (Smith 1992; Glassman 2002), but without being co-opted or diluted by the strategic exigencies of larger-scale initiatives? By addressing such questions, political ecologists may contribute significantly to a realistic understanding of

the dynamics of various alternatives and 'counter-movements', while simultaneously identifying feasible pathways for the actualization of the social and environmental justice goals of the latter in an era of recurring global economic and environmental crises.

***Political ecologies of the green economy, edited by Connor Cavanagh and Tor Benjaminsen***

1. Sian Sullivan. What's ontology got to do with it? On nature and knowledge in a political ecology of the 'green economy'
2. Bill Adams. Sleeping with the enemy? Biodiversity conservation, corporations and the green economy.
3. Zoi Christina Siamanta. Building a green economy of low carbon: the Greek post-crisis experience of photovoltaics and financial 'green grabbing'.
4. Ethemcan Turhan and Arif Gündoğan. The post-politics of green economy in Turkey: re-claiming the future?
5. Vladislava Vladmirova. Politics of the green economy in Russia's European North.
6. Kristen Lyons, Peter Westoby and Adrian Nel. Reforming global carbon markets or re-imagining alternative climate solutions and sustainabilities? An analysis of selected NGO strategies in Uganda.

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