

# The Capitalist Mode of Conservation, Neoliberalism and the Ecology of Value

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## Introduction: Who Gets to Represent Nature's 'Real Value'?

### Selling Nature to Save it: The Entrenchment of a Worldview in Policy Circles and Civil Society

For decades whales have been worth more dead than alive. We're talking about worth in a dual sense here of course: in several societies, the consumption of whale meat is culturally sanctioned and the money expended sustains an industry that, despite the International Whaling Commission's (IWC's) persistent efforts, continues to harvest cetaceans in large numbers. In early 2012 three American academics proposed a solution that could, in their view, deal with 'market failure' and make whales worth more alive than dead. Christopher Costello and colleagues (Costello *et al.* 2012) suggested that the IWC create a cap-and-trade system that would introduce the market power of conservationists morally opposed to commercial whaling (often euphemised as 'whaling for scientific purposes'). They reasoned that money currently spent by conservation NGOs and their donors on anti-whaling campaigns could

be better deployed incentivising some whalers not to kill cetaceans. In the long-run, Costello *et al.* argued, money accumulated by whaling less could be used by members of the industry to find different ways of making a living.

This scheme to put a price on the cultural preferences of the anti-whaling constituency is but one recent example of a 'selling nature to save it' (McAfee 1999) approach to environmental management that has been de rigeur for some time now (even before *The Stern Review* [2006] broadcast globally the 'win-win' logic of pricing environmental bads today lest mitigating them becomes prohibitively expensive in future). This approach has the look and feel of a paradigm, though in ways Thomas Kuhn (1962) could scarcely have imagined. Where Kuhn famously situated paradigms in academic disciplines and university departments, the proposals advanced by Costello *et al.* reflect a much broader development, albeit one with intellectual roots in the once small sub-field of environmental economics. Today epistemic and practitioner communities in universities, in think tanks (e.g. the Property and Environment

Research Center), in environmental NGOs (e.g. Conservation International), in governmental organisations (e.g. the United Nations Environment Program) and – increasingly – in commercial enterprises (e.g. Inflection Point Capital Management) exchange knowledge, proposals and experience so as to normalise three cardinal ideas worldwide. The first is that there is (or should be) sufficient market demand to meaningfully preserve, conserve or restore aspects of nature deemed important for non- (or not wholly) economic reasons. The second is that governments should create the necessary regulations and agencies to allow the effects of this demand to be felt. Only in cases where nature's value cannot – for technical or moral reasons – be priced through seller-buyer exchanges should states assume direct responsibility for environmental management. And the third idea is that markets to engender environmental 'goods' can operate globally and over the long-term – thus fitting themselves to the spatio-temporal scale of the earth surface systems being materially altered by present day *Homo sapiens*. That these ideas are shared among people inhabiting otherwise different institutions says much about how porous organisational boundaries now are. For instance, leading environmental economists these days get seconded to large conservation NGOs. While there, they might attend an event – such as the first Global Business of Biodiversity Symposium held in 2010 – where they could encounter a person like Ricardo Bayon, co-founder of EKO Asset Management Partners. Like so many other walks of contemporary life, there are numerous open doors permitting traffic between the worlds of environmental analysis, policy making and business. The ethos of academia, public service and money making now routinely bleed into each other.

A full history of how 'free market environmentalism' has eclipsed other ways of managing nature has yet to be written.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtless a messy story of how ideological belief, pragmatism and serendipity combined to discredit the 'visible hand' of the state

1 For instance, Jamie Peck's otherwise excellent *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (2010) ignores environmental policy and focuses, instead, on the 'mainline' areas of fiscal, monetary, trade and social policy. Steven Bernstein's *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* (2001) does a good job of explaining how market-based environmental policy became progressively entrenched up to the mid 90s, but does not cover the last 20 years.

approach. However, what's clear is that the global financial crisis of 2008–9, the alarming results of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) and the unequivocal conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 4th Assessment Report (2007) have emboldened its advocates rather than sowed seeds of doubt. In their view greening the global economy is the best way to properly value the increasingly scarce gifts of nature (such as whales and fresh water). It could also, they hope, initiate a new long wave of growth based on 'clean technologies,' delivering 'development' in both North and South. The self-same rationality that has led to species extinction, polluted oceans and melting ice sheets can, with government as a hand-maiden, assume a new eco-friendly form – so the argument goes. As Bayon and Jenkins recently opined in the pages of *Nature*, "The past 20 years have seen the emergence of a range of ... instruments that ... put a price on the services nature provides. Governments now need to ... build ... on these and scale them up to a level that will have a real effect" (2010:184).

The planetary ambitions of Bayon, Jenkins and fellow-travellers are not infeasible. Today they have the backing of important global institutions such as UNEP, which is currently coordinating The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) project – an international attempt to, as its subtitle declares, 'make nature's values visible' by pricing them. Add to this the new found popularity of the 'ecosystem services' concept – an umbrella idea as encompassing as the rather older term 'biodiversity' – and you have a charter for the likes of Costello, Bayon and Jenkins to price the value of virtually *everything* non-human. As Sian Sullivan (2013a:200) shrewdly notes, this constitutes "a putative saving of nature to trade it" rather than the opposite.

### **Bram Büscher, Jim Igoe and Sian Sullivan in *New Proposals***

All of the above is offered by way of a preamble to this paper's principal aim. In the following pages we engage with three closely related essays recently published in *New Proposals*. Authored by Bram Büscher (2013a), Jim Igoe (2013) and Sian Sullivan (2013b) respectively, they take issue with the market-based

approach to natural resource management. Not only do they see it as failing to live up to its own aspirations. Relatedly, they propose an alternative interpretation of this approach inspired – in non-orthodox ways – by Marxian political economy. Of course, there's nothing novel about either move. However, where the authors (hereafter Büscher *et al.*, when we mean to address the papers collectively – they are presented as a 'triptych') try to break new ground is in their topical focus, nature conservation. Since the birth of capitalism this mode of production has materially transformed the non-human world as a means to the end of accumulation – so much so that the 'Capitalocene' is arguably a better descriptor of our geological epoch than the in-favour neologism the 'Anthropocene.' Since the birth of the modern conservation movement in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and North America it has been conventional to separate valued parts of nature from the world of commerce, with the local or national state as legal enforcer of the Maginot Line. In light of this, how can stocks of finite and renewable resources and iconic sites and species be protected by an economic system whose hallmark is creative destruction? What sort of 'conservation' occurs when one extends the frontiers of capitalism into a domain once thought to be off-limits to money making? Who gains and who (or what) is excluded in the process? Büscher *et al.* offer answers to all these questions. In so doing they present a truly comprehensive analysis of market-based conservation or, as Bill Adams (2010) would have it, of 'Conservation plc.'

This paper began life as an invited introduction to the papers authored by Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan. But as we read the triptych we realised we wanted to exceed our brief. A short, supportive introduction turned into a long, critical engagement with papers we are otherwise disposed to agree with. As readers will see, Büscher *et al.*'s analysis of capitalist conservation is a fairly totalising one. We mean this not simply in the sense that it explores the connections between biophysical nature, finance capital, far-flung consumers of spectacular representations of nature, and much more besides. We mean it also in the sense that Büscher *et al.* present capitalist conservation as a metaphorical bulldozer that, in its short life, has been able to neutral-

ise putative opposition and alternatives with alacrity. As readers will discover, this analytical move has some important implications for normative reasoning and practical action in respect of nature conservation.

In what follows we identify some key assumptions and claims made by Büscher *et al.* We raise some questions about their veracity and the take-home lessons they convey. We do so as constructive and sympathetic critics, ones steeped in the rich tradition of Marxist theorising that the three authors draw from. This paper aims to give readers of the essays one critical tool-kit with which to interrogate the plenary arguments presented. We will deliberately refrain from offering a detailed summary of each essay: it is important that readers encounter them on their own, lest any précis we might offer substitute for a first-hand interpretation of the arguments.

Those new to the subject of nature conservation and to 'free market environmentalism' (aka 'green capitalism') will, we suspect, find Büscher's essay especially demanding (we certainly did, and we're no neophytes!).<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, the other two pieces are more accessible. In simple terms, where Büscher focuses on the production-circulation connection, Igoe focuses more on the circulation-consumption link. Meanwhile Sullivan explores the representation of nature that comes to stand for nature *tout court* throughout the whole circuit of capitalist accumulation in its conservationist form.<sup>3</sup> Where Büscher focuses on forms and flows of value in nature conservation, Igoe and Sullivan are together more concerned with their forms of appearance and the 'governmentalities' they engender. Before we itemise the key claims of the three authors – claims which, if accepted, constitute a novel interpretation of contemporary nature conservation – we want to say something about their analytical and political role as epistemic workers who have helped to create a new community of critics of which we ourselves are sometime members. The relevance of this will become evident toward this essay's end.

2 As readers will see, one major challenge in comprehending Büscher's paper is that he uses key terms – notably 'value,' 'capital,' 'circulation' and 'fictitious' – in a range of ways without ever formally unpacking the several meanings merged under each signifier.

3 We should note, however, that Sullivan has elsewhere covered some of the same ground as Büscher: see Sullivan (2013a).

## An Oppositional Epistemic Community in the Making

### Bram Büscher, Jim Igoe and Sian Sullivan: An Intellectual Resumé

Bram Büscher is based at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and has a background in political science and anthropology; Jim Igoe is an anthropologist at the University of Virginia; and Sian Sullivan (based in London at Birkbeck College) has long had feet planted in both geography and anthropology. All three are also contributors to the interdisciplinary field that is 'development studies.' Additionally, all have a history of doing fieldwork in the global South (especially eastern and southern Africa). What's more, their research has paid close attention to how nature conservation is experienced by communities living on (or adjacent to) areas that are targeted for conservation by governments and environmental NGOs/foundations/charities. In part, this is because 'community-based natural resource management' (CBNRM) became a favoured alternative to state-led approaches in many countries from the late 1980s. But it is also because, historically, many conservation sites were once inhabited by non-Europeans who were subsequently displaced to create 'natural' landscapes. Indeed, CBNRM was intended in part to redress this historical dispossession.

Since the late noughties Büscher *et al.* have turned their attention to the already mentioned sea-change in the philosophy and practice of nature conservation. This has involved a continuing engagement in multi-sited research and research partnerships, be they in Africa or elsewhere (e.g. Latin America, India, Oceania). For Büscher and Igoe it has also involved a broadening of analytical focus beyond the 'special' landscapes and resources we have traditionally associated with conservation (e.g. the Kruger National Park). As per our introductory comments, this extending and broadening reflects, at least in the present papers – although Büscher *et al.* might not agree – the totalising behaviour of capitalism now that it has the chance to profit from 'conservation.' Conservation today encompasses many 'ordinary' locations and resources, and it now

implicates a plethora of spatially dispersed actors in the private, public and civic domains. Put differently, Büscher *et al.*'s writings represent a wider and thicker understanding of what 'market-based conservation' entails than is offered by advocates of this approach (such as Chris Costello, Ricardo Bayon and Michael Jenkins).

### Disseminating Knowledge, Building Epistemic Alliances

This is all to the good. How have Büscher *et al.* articulated their recent claims and by what means? There are a number of things to say here. First, they have favoured the terms 'neoliberalism' and (as already noted) 'capitalism' when describing contemporary conservation over less loaded descriptors like 'payments,' 'transactions' and 'markets.' In using the former, because they are apt ideological frames, and – to a lesser extent – the latter, they've not only signalled an affiliation with like-minded critics based (largely) in universities and also the world of political organising and campaigning. They have also thereby declared present-day conservation to be a new arena in which highly systemic and far-reaching processes of change already experienced in other arenas (e.g. labour relations, social policy, trade) are taking-hold. Second, in various ways we'll come to presently, our three authors are largely opposed to the phenomena they are analysing. They not only regard it as being other than its (deceptive) self-presentation but as also objectionable in its operations and outcomes. Among other ways and means, this is expressed rhetorically through phrases like Nature™ Inc. (the title of a new edited book by Büscher, Wolfram Dressler and Robert Fletcher 2014), 'derivative nature' (Büscher 2010) and 'neoliberal conservation' (Igoe and Brockington 2007).

Third, Büscher *et al.* have been prolific authors and presenters. They have each published a large number of books, book chapters and articles, and in ways intended to reach a wide range of audiences within and (to a lesser extent) without the academic world. For instance, Sullivan's recent essays have appeared in *Antipode*, *New Formations* and *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, while Büscher published no less than six peer review articles in 2012 alone and authored a



just-released Duke University Press monograph (Büscher 2013b). Relatedly, Büscher *et al.* have each been frequent presenters of papers at – and sometimes co-organisers of – key conferences designed to influence and learn from a group of like-minded scholars in the social sciences and humanities. Notable here have been: the ‘Capitalism and Conservation’ symposium at Manchester University in summer 2008; the ‘Nature™ Inc? Questioning the Market Panacea in Environmental Policy and Conservation’ meeting held at the ISS three years later; the summer 2013 ‘Grabbing Green: Questioning the Green Economy’ conference in Toronto; and the forthcoming ‘Green Economy in the South: Negotiating Environmental Governance, Prosperity and Development’ meeting to be held in Tanzania (2014).<sup>4</sup> Though some of these meetings have brought a fairly wide mix of scholars together, all have included analysts disposed to be fairly critical of conservation capital.

The opportunities for peer learning and networking afforded by these and other conferences have led to an impressive amount of co-publishing with other authors. This is the fourth thing to note. Though their essays in *New Proposals* are single authored, Büscher *et al.* have not only published together but also with other people who are now among the most prominent academic analysts and critics of contemporary nature conservation. Key figures here are Noel’s Manchester colleague Dan Brockington, Bill Adams (of Cambridge University), and Rosaleen Duffy (of London University). This decision has not only lent additional prominence to Büscher *et al.*’s thinking among a readership spread across several social science disciplines. It has, we conjecture, also ensured a degree of analytical and normative sharing that has necessarily reduced – at least for now – the degree of potential disagreement otherwise possible (or likely) if these various authors had continued to act as lone scholars. This is not to deny that Büscher *et al.* are each members of other networks or communities, and we don’t want to suggest that hard boundaries

4 Arguably the ‘Brief Environmental History of Neoliberalism’ conference held at Lund University in May 2010 was formative event too, connecting several critical conservation scholars with a wider group of analysts examining neoliberal political economy. The 2008 Manchester meeting mentioned above led to a special issue of the journal *Antipode* (volume 42, number 3) which contained issues authored by most of the meeting participants. One of these was Jim Igoe.

exist. Yet, co-publishing aside, the bibliographies of the three essays under scrutiny here suggest that Büscher *et al.* are intellectual affiliates of scholars who attended one or more of the events listed above.

Finally, in their recent writings Büscher *et al.* have arguably led with ‘theory’ rather than with empirics or in-depth case material. This is not to say *merely* theory, nor to suggest an utter lack of empirical engagement in their work as such – on the contrary. By ‘led’ we mean to say that several of Büscher *et al.* recent writings foreground concepts and broad arguments *en route* to empirical specifics. Theory is, of course, an indispensable tool of social analysis – though there remains no agreed definition of what exactly ‘theory’ is (or should be). At its simplest, theory is a set of connected conceptual abstractions that shed light on the key relationships and processes that produce continuity and change, power and (in) equality, risk and reward, gain and loss in the world at large.<sup>5</sup> As one of social science’s most accomplished theorists once insisted, “In the final analysis, it is the unity [between theory and empirical inquiry] which is important ... projected into the fires of political practice” (Harvey 1982:451). In Büscher *et al.*’s writings on capitalist conservation, as their *New Proposals* essays make plain, there is a predilection for fairly abstract descriptive and explanatory concepts, laced with evaluations of the phenomena these concepts shed light on.

This is most overt in Büscher’s essay, which introduces the triptych. The concepts, it is claimed, can (with whatever necessary refinements) be used to make sense of conservation in its different geographical milieu, not least because many are relational categories designed to respect the connectivity of the socio-economic world (like Marx’s ‘value’). Though Büscher *et al.* make significant mention of Marx (albeit in different ways), Igoe draws too on the ideas of Guy Debord, while Sullivan makes much of Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s writings. Büscher, who makes most formal use of Marx’s ideas, supplements them with recourse to recent scholarship about ‘financialisation’ and ‘brandsapes’ (among other

5 This doesn’t, of course, mean that theorists only focus on global scale processes and relations. Much that is organised on a smaller scale is socially or ecologically significant and as theorisable as larger scale phenomena.

sources). This not only ensures nature conservation experts are drawn-in to wider conceptual currents in the critical social sciences. Conversely, it promises to get the work of analysts like Büscher *et al.* and their co-authors better known in the broader community of left-leaning scholars. ‘Theory,’ however defined, remains a powerful tool for ensuring intellectual exchange and solidarity among otherwise independent researchers, teachers and scholar-activists. Indeed, it will be a key reason some readers are drawn to this and other issues of *New Proposals*.

### Reading Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan in Context

What the last two points mean is that the three separate essays by Büscher *et al.* deserve to be read in the context of their other single and co-authored publications. Though we realise that many (indeed most) readers will not (yet) have the time or inclination to digest such a prodigious body of writing, our commentary on the triptych will be informed by a wider, though hardly definitive, understanding of Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan’s published work. Though we will, of course, respect the specifics of their *New Proposals* essays, we want to treat them as components of an intellectual tapestry woven as much by their co-authors (like Wolfram Dressler and Dan Brockington) as by Büscher *et al.* themselves. This means that the questions we raise about the triptych conceivably apply as much to members of the epistemic community Büscher *et al.* belong to – and have helped actively to create – as to the trio alone.

Before we scrutinise Büscher *et al.*’s triptych closely, a quick word about this community.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the sizeable network whose ideas and practices it interrogates, it is relatively small and its members based almost exclusively in university departments, schools or research centres. Consider the forthcoming book *Nature™ Inc: New Frontiers of Environmental Conservation in the Neoliberal Age* (Büscher, Dressler and Fletcher eds., 2014). Aside from Büscher *et al.*, the other eight contributors are all full-time academics, except for Larry Lohmann of The Corner House

(a small but vocal UK-based think tank). The book evidences the fact that the academic freedom Büscher *et al.* and their interlocutors enjoy has allowed them to find their voice. Not working in the world of conservation practice has, perhaps, afforded them the critical distance, and the time and resources, to present an alternative view on what the likes of Costello, Bayon and Jenkins are proposing and successfully actioning. But this raises questions about what to do with the ‘critical knowledge’ Büscher *et al.* and others are creating. Towards the very end of this essay we will focus squarely on issues of knowledge dissemination and audience. These issues are relevant to other epistemic communities with which Büscher *et al.* overlap, such as analysts of ‘neoliberal nature’ in Geography, our own disciplinary home.

### Making Sense Of Capitalist Conservation in a Neoliberal Era

If the period immediately prior to the global financial crisis was a largely neoliberal one, the years since have – to many people’s surprise – witnessed the continuation and even entrenchment of neoliberal policies and values. Concurrent recessions, austerity programs and not a few public protests in most large Western economies have not led to neoliberalism’s demise in its various concrete forms. Indeed, environmental policy is arguably one of the areas where it has gone from strength-to-strength globally (e.g. via UNEP) and in many countries (e.g. Britain has recent piloted a national biodiversity-offset scheme). The attempt to conserve valued components of the non-human world by translating voluntary or mandated ‘preferences’ into prices is more than a matter of economics. As Büscher *et al.* rightly insist, it is a question of political economy (or, more accurately, political ecology): markets in environmental goods and services cannot be separated from social relations of power and inequality. It is also, as students of Karl Polanyi remind us, a question of moral economy too: there’s nothing ‘natural’ about the assumption that only those things demanded by a sufficient number of buyers have the right to survive, let alone flourish. To institute this assumption a lot of work must be done to alter cultural norms and people’s sense of self and environment.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Community’ is one those words that suggests close bonds and cohesion among people who share similar characteristics, experiences or values. We make no empirical claims here about quite how well integrated Büscher *et al.* and their interlocutors are, simply noting that they are speaking a similar analytical language and have a shared scepticism about the means and ends of ‘market-based nature conservation.’

However, whether for reasons ideological or pragmatic, advocates of market-based nature conservation have tended not to accent any of this. Instead, they depict well designed and regulated markets as efficient and flexible mechanisms for achieving ‘sustainable development.’ And it is *markets* we are talking about here (in the plural), not that mythical Smithian phenomena ‘the market’ in the singular. Market-based nature conservation already takes a range of detailed forms, and will continue to do so. It includes everything from species banks to carbon offset payments to keep forests intact to firms offering eco-tours of beautiful places owned by private landlords. Some markets are genuinely international (like the mandatory carbon trading scheme created by the UN-brokered Kyoto Protocol), others national or sub-national. The institutional design of these markets varies a lot, and the property arrangements involved, the number of buyers and sellers, the volume and geography of revenue flows, the enforcement mechanisms to punish market outlaws etc. all differ in the detail. Because of this heterogeneity it may be tempting to interrogate market-based conservation on a case-by-case basis, respecting the empirical particularities and basing judgments thereon. However, this move discounts the possibility that otherwise different market-based initiatives are not only similar in a substantive sense but are also causally connected (directly or otherwise) through an array of institutions, rules and relationships.

Büscher *et al.* and like-minded analysts have explored this possibility vigorously. They situate contemporary conservation in a mode of production whose peculiar hallmark is to make economic growth *per se* its *raison d’être*. To various degrees Büscher *et al.* have appropriated some of the substance and spirit of Marx’s political economy in order to make sense of conservation in a period of capitalist history marked by ‘the strange non-death of neoliberalism’ (to borrow Colin Crouch’s [2012] apt phrasing). They have taken theoretical inspiration from elsewhere too, as we noted in passing earlier. But we will begin with their use of Marx’s ideas before describing their other conceptual borrowings and applications.

### **Making Money From Nature Conservation: The Relevance of Marx**

As Marx (and Engels) continually emphasised, the ‘endless accumulation’ of capital is predicated on ceaseless ‘creative destruction.’ Incessant change is the only constant. In capitalism’s lifetime – a very short period of human history, and a mere blip of Earth history – it has altered and destroyed the material world at an unprecedented speed and on a scale previously achieved only by natural evolution or other kinds of (non-human) biophysical change. The recent proposals to protect remaining stocks of valued trees, wetlands, whales etc. by exposing them to the forces of capital accumulation may thus seem like a contradiction in terms: conservation, after all, is about stasis and non-destruction, or at least remaining within the bounds of the ‘natural range of variability.’ The question thus arises: does market-based conservation on a growing scale necessitate the adaptation, even alteration, of capitalism? The answer lies in determining the relative balance between two tendencies. One is where capitalists, under pressure from governments, are required to offset the negative effects of conventional economic activity. This sort of conservation involves switching profits from the so-called ‘real economy’ towards places, institutions and social groupings who maintain what eco-Marxist James O’Connor (1998) calls ‘the conditions of production.’ These conditions are essential to all life – economic and otherwise – and capitalists are increasingly paying the costs of their maintenance directly.

The other tendency is different, though in practice it overlaps with the first. Here capitalists new and old try to make a profit from nature conservation. This is less about receiving compensation and maintenance payments from firms required to make them. It is more about creating new business opportunities so that conservation *as such* becomes part of the accumulation process Marx famously analysed. In Marx’s terms, it’s about making conservation a means to *create* rather than simply capture or divert value. In more conventional terms, it is about ‘de-coupling’ economic growth and environmental destruction. If conserved nature can be seen as a form of fixed capital that must be variously protected or restored, then how can value be created from leaving it be rather



than making new commodities out of it? More pointedly, how can conserved nature be made to *move*, since motion (not stasis) is hard-wired into capitalism's DNA? This is the same as asking *how capital can circulate through conserved nature on an expanding scale without physically altering it?*

*Büscher's Use of Marx's Political Economy*

These are the questions Büscher poses. For him, Marx's basic analysis of capitalism remains correct, even 125 years-plus after his death. This means that a new breed of entrepreneurs has had to conjure-up clever ways of making conserved nature 'liquid.' Echoing Polanyi's and O'Connor's claim that the conditions of production are pseudo-commodities at best, Büscher argues that these conditions in-and-of-themselves are unlikely to be sources of value in the Marxist sense of the word. For him, there are limits on the concrete labour that can be expended on and around them simply because their *non-transformation* is the goal. The implication is that nature conservation must, if it is to be profitable, underpin the creation of value *elsewhere* – in places beyond the landscapes and waterscapes being maintained. To understand how, Büscher turns to one of Marx's most orthodox contemporary representatives, the geographer David Harvey (1982).

Like Marx, Harvey has argued that, in aggregate, a significant portion of capital must circulate ahead of itself and on ever-larger spatial scales. Credit (loaning money) and the investments and expenditures it translates into are forms of 'fictitious capital.' This is because they depend upon profits subsequently generated by the 'real economy.' They are *purely* fictitious until such time as they generate enough value to be redeemed. Fictitious capital is not only necessary to keep the engine of accumulation ticking over. Additionally, because reducing the time between value production and realisation is – as Marx and Harvey both insist – part of capitalism's logic, ways and means of making fictitious capital turnover faster are continually being sought. Büscher argues that it is in this frenetic world that the 'value' of nature conservation is increasingly being created and appropriated. This is a largely metropolitan world of offices, IT systems and university-educated knowledge work-

ers, based largely in the Global North. However, in fleshing-out this argument Büscher seeks to refine and update the propositions of Marx (and Harvey) as we will soon see. Whether this makes his writing neo- or even post-Marxist is something we will need to consider in relation to his writing companions too.

*Igoe and Commodity Fetishism*

Jim Igoe, in his paper 'Contemplation becomes speculation,' turns his attention to how conservation is these-days sold to far-flung consumers – be they large corporations or private individuals. He builds on Büscher's argument in the form of a 'conceptual schema' (46). This schema makes significant use of Marx's well-known idea of commodity fetishism. For Marx, fetishism was something 'objective': while all capitalist commodities 'embody' the processes and relations that produced them they do not make them visible. But this objective fetishism, besides being necessary in capitalism, is also something that can be manipulated by those wanting to sell their wares. The obfuscation intrinsic to commodities stands to be enhanced in any number of conceivable ways. This manipulation, as advertising has long demonstrated, is a key aspect of inter-capitalist competition and pivotal for determining the volume, geography and timing of capital realisation. Igoe focuses on the highly selective and stylised representations of conservation sites that span continents and bring pieces of 'conservation hotspots' (concentrated in Africa, Asia and Latin American) into the daily lives of rich-world consumers. These representations comprise partial and usually spectacular images of everything from migrating herds of wildebeest to teeming rainforests to charismatic megafauna (like endangered tigers). For Igoe, their hallmark is their splendour, their similarity and the positive image they portray that money spent (e.g. on an ecotour or sponsoring a baby gorilla) will protect the 'realities' being depicted. They transport distant places and environments across oceans and continents, offering a sense of personal connection for their intended audiences. These images occupy the sphere of what Büscher, following Michael Carolan (2005), Jim Carrier and Paige West (2009), considers to be a 'virtual nature' existing at several removes from the peoples, insti-



tutions and biophysical phenomena involved in nature conservation. It is *this* ‘nature’ that is liquid, this nature that’s principally generative of economic value – even though valueless without the ‘underlying assets’ it purports to represent.

*Sullivan on Capitalism and the Modern ‘Culture Of Nature’*

In the most rhetorically charged essay in the triptych, Sian Sullivan casts a critical eye over the virtual nature that, Igoe argues, is the phenomenal form that Büscher’s circulating nature currently takes.<sup>7</sup> Despite publishing in a Marxist journal she adopts more the spirit of Marx, making little reference to the letter of his key texts (though see Sullivan [2013a] for fulsome reference to his ideas). However, because her essay is presented as the third part of the triptych it invites a reading conditioned, in part, by the Marxism employed by her coauthors. In her view, the ‘onto-epistemology’ of nature constructed by everyone from wetland mitigation scientists to firms selling wetland credits to property developers thousands of miles away has two characteristics.<sup>8</sup> First, it holds the biophysical world at a distance, being yet another iteration of the ‘modern’ worldview we have come to call Cartesian or Aristotelean as a short-hand. Nature yet again becomes an object to be measured, managed and appreciated rather than – as many cultures would have it – something we are part of, responsive to or reverent towards. Second, for Sullivan this distancing and objectification produces a ‘nature’ that’s lifeless, despite conservation’s avowed intention to protect flora and fauna. None of this is a *necessary* part of capitalist conservation. Sullivan’s point is that an Enlightenment worldview coincident with the birth of capitalism persists, such that market-based

7 Most of Sullivan’s recent essays have a rhetorical punch to them when compared to the calmer, cooler analysis of ‘neoliberal conservation’ presented in Pawliczek and Sullivan (2011). Of course, *all* language is rhetorical. By ‘punch’ we mean to draw attention to the fact that she laces her analyses with ‘overt’ rhetoric. This is not, in itself, a problem. Indeed, it is a way of expressing what she considers to be good and less good about conservation capitalism. As ever, readers need to be mindful of how far various rhetorical tropes employed communicate – as opposed to substituting for – reasoned justifications of the underpinning analytical and normative claims being made.

8 She does not herself refer to wetland banking (it is our example) but the range of her intended meaning suggests this ‘onto-epistemology’ is pervasive in the world of international nature conservation.

conservation becomes a new frontier for its further institutionalisation.

For capitalists this is a happy coincidence: to create markets in things like whale life/death it is necessary to be able to abstract, count, measure, disembed and compare – the qualitative must be made quantitative and commensurable. Igoe calls this ‘eco-functional nature’ (38), a biophysical world made to appear eminently manageable by a global cadre of experts and professionals. As Sullivan sees it, under capitalism’s totalising impulses the representations of conserved nature now traffick-ing hither-and-thither squeeze-out more lively and intimate onto-epistemologies of humanity’s connections to the non-human world.<sup>9</sup> These representations amount to a moral economy designed to govern the attitudes and norms of all those involved in the world of contemporary nature conservation (see also Sullivan 2010). They are bound-up with a family of keywords designed to silence other ways of apprehending nature – words like ‘offsets,’ ‘banks,’ ‘services,’ ‘green growth’ and ‘natural capital.’

**Supplementing Marxist Theory**

Drawing inspiration from Marx gets Büscher *et al.* a long way. But to complete their intellectual journey towards a full interpretation of capitalist conservation they borrow ideas from other theorists. In Büscher’s case these ideas are used to significantly update Marx’s political economy, as we will now see.

*Capitalism, Conservation and the Dominance of Value Circulation*

In Büscher’s view capitalist conservation involves a different type of capital wherein value is created at an accelerating rate in the sphere of circulation not production. This is because the ‘services’ that conserved nature offers humanity can only yield economic value derivatively, in the liquid world of representations of the underlying biophysical ‘assets.’ This liquid world was already large and sophisticated prior to conservation becoming a part of it. It has thus, Büscher argues, been an historical coincidence that a ‘bloated’ sphere of fictitious capital has existed at exactly the

9 Such as those typically associated with indigenous peoples in various part of the Western and former-colonial worlds.

same time as conservation – the antithesis of ‘productive capital’ – has become a candidate for serious money-making. The result is what he calls ‘fictitious conservation’ because the majority of commodities sold and money made have little *direct* relationship to the husbandry of the natural capital that vouchsafes them.

In support of this thesis, Büscher turns to the writings of anthropologists Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, coauthors of *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (2004). The details of their argument are many and complex but have been summarised in a dense 2005 *Economy and Society* essay. To simplify (but not, we hope, over-simplify), LiPuma and Lee suggest that a very large volume of ‘speculative capital,’ an elaborate financial industry marketing a myriad of derivative products, and the new capacity to quantify various commercial risks with extraordinary precision (though not, by definition, with certainty) have conspired to give “growing autonomy and power [to] ... the sphere of circulation” (2005:407) since the late 1970s. To quote them at length:

Freed from the constraints imposed by production, there appears to be no real limit to the size of the market for financial derivatives ... [I]ndeed, all the production-based derivatives, futures on commodities and standard stock options have over the past two decades become an insignificant fraction of the derivatives market ... [O]nce the speculative capital devoted to financial derivatives becomes self-reflexive and begins to feed on itself it develops a directional dynamic towards an autonomous and self-expanding form ... In a capitalism tilted towards circulation, risk is progressively and structurally displacing ... the abstract form of labour that socially mediates the production-based parts of the economy. [LiPuma and Lee 2005:412]

This last comment is an unmistakable reference to Marx’s *Capital* (in which Marx argues that commodity exchange renders abstract the labour that produces the commodities being exchanged, i.e., exchange invokes socially necessary labour time) and thus constitutes a claim that capitalism has structurally mutated: evidently, ‘circulation’ contains no

abstract labour (since abstract ‘risk’ is the form that social mediation takes) and is almost wholly detached from ‘production.’

What sort of labour occurs in the domain of circulation? For an answer Büscher turns to communications scholar Phil Graham, author of *Hypercapitalism: New Media, Language and Social Perceptions of Value* (2006). Graham focuses on the plethora of new knowledge workers in the financial, media and entertainment industries who have dedicated themselves to designing and selling new informational and symbolic commodities. His view, quoted by Büscher (who also brings Hannah Arendt [1958] to his aid), is that

today it is not the muscle-power of people that provides the most highly valued labor forms. ... Value production ... has become more obviously ‘situated’ in ... powerful institutions, such as legislatures, universities and TNCs. In official political economy, value has moved from an objective category that pertains to ... precious metals ... to become located today in predominantly ‘expert’ ways of meaning. 2006:174]

The upshot, Büscher argues, is that value in circulation is highly ephemeral and transient, something constantly growing and moving as symbolic workers in the conservation world (e.g. species bankers) seek competitively to make their wares valuable. He argues that for market participants, the connections of this value to ‘real conservation’ are increasingly opaque. He also suggests that there is the high risk of a conservation repeat of the subprime mortgage crisis that triggered the global financial crisis five years ago. This is because, ultimately, liquid nature has little to do with nature conservation and almost everything to do with accumulation for accumulation’s sake. Even so, until another crisis hits, Büscher fears that conservation’s internalisation by neoliberal capitalism is a key part of its “perhaps unprecedented strength” (33).

*Conservation and the Society of the Integrated Spectacle*  
If Büscher draws on LiPuma, Lee and Graham to theorise conservation’s place in the production-circulation couplet, Igoe draws on the work of Guy Debord to theorise its forms of appearance in the

realm of consumption. To recap: Marx's notion of commodity fetishism describes the way relationships appear as things. Writing in the late 1960s, Debord famously declared that relationships are increasingly manifest as *images*, and *spectacular* ones at that. The 'concentrated spectacle' of Adolph Hitler's ground-breaking rallies and parades gave way to a commercially-driven 'diffuse spectacle' pioneered by American corporations in the 1940s bent on instituting mass consumption. By the time he was writing, Debord ventured that 'integrated spectacle' was becoming normalised: so pervasive had images of the real become on billboards, in magazines, on TV, in movies, in shopping malls, in movies and so on, that they formed a world of their own. In short, for Debord 'the society of the spectacle' is one in which the majority of relationships between people (and with the material world) are mediated by (or take the form of) a changing suite of visual representations of the real. By and large these representations are designed to facilitate endless commodity sale and consumption.

The connections to nature conservation are not hard to make. As Igoe reminds us, since the 19th century beginnings of the conservation movement, nature has been presented as an object of contemplation – as something to be seen, appreciated and sometimes awed by. Following Debord's extension of Marx's fetishism concept, he argues that today 'contemplation becomes speculation' because the sort of professionals Phil Graham describes circulate a circumscribed selection of spectacular images of nature's beauty and destruction in order to attract purchasers of Büscher's 'liquid nature.' Often containing celebrities and spot-lighting exotic locations, these images are typically depoliticised, depicting conservation as an issue of moral concern, money transfers to needy places and expertise. They are often moving images (blockbusters, documentaries or short videos), and often-times performances – such as the Live Earth concerts of 2007. As Igoe argues with reference to the TEEB website, among other examples, these images are also often combined with the expert signs and symbols of ecology and high finance to suggest to consumers a harmony between conservation and markets.

As part of the wider integrated spectacle of neoliberal capitalism, for Igoe these images are key to a new 'environmental governmentality' that operates largely in the 'consumption milieu' rather than in and through the domain of the state. If this sounds Foucauldian then it is deliberate. Drawing on the writing of neo-Marxist Jason Read (1993) and Foucault scholar Jeffrey Nealon (2008), Igoe regards the spectacular images that are today the face of market-based nature conservation as pervasive 'technologies of rule.' They are not simply commodities in their own right, or vehicles designed to sell conservation as a commodity. As Read would have it, they are also a new frontier for "the subsumption of subjectivity by capital" (151).<sup>10</sup> Igoe ends his essay on the same low note as Büscher. He concludes that "spectacle ... works to appropriate the diversity and commonality of human communication and experience, presenting it as an apparent singularity" (47). A new 'micro-politics' is required to disrupt the integrated spectacle to which we are involuntarily subject day-in, day-out.

#### *A Post-Cartesian, Post-Capitalist Onto-Epistemology of Life?*

To what ends would this disruption be geared? Sullivan directs us towards an entirely other onto-epistemology of life than the 'imperial ecology' foisted on us by capitalist conservation. While she approves of Marx's critique of political economy, she notes its undue dismissal of what she calls "amodern animist ontologies" (52n7). These worldviews are alive to the vitality and diversity of life, to its connectivities and many singularities. They refuse the dichotomies of Enlightenment thinking (e.g. nature-culture, urban-rural, object-subject etc.). For Sullivan, animist onto-epistemologies reveal the paradox of capitalist conservation. Notwithstanding their dynamism and ingenuity, the discursive and material practices of this

<sup>10</sup> In a related paper Igoe (2010) talks about the 'integrated spectacle' of capitalist conservation as a 'world making' enterprise. By this he means that the same sorts of spectacular images of nature, tweaked according to the genre of their appearance, circulate between big business, ENGOs, Hollywood movies, retail outlets, theme parks, zoos, magazines, wildlife documentaries, and so on. In his view, they encircle and encompass consumers, giving them the illusion of consistency and wholeness, as if 'nature' is no more (or less) than a service provider and thing of beauty in need of revenues to pay for its so-far undervalued contributions to human well-being.

world serve-up a nature that is passive, abstracted and distanced. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Bruno Latour (2004) and the research of several cultural anthropologists, she commends to us a more vital, embedded and wondrous sense of life on earth, human and non-human.

However, elsewhere (Sullivan 2013a) she's added Marx and Foucault together to express a serious concern that capitalist conservation is virtually extinguishing this sense. Following Nealon (2008), as Igoe does, she detects a pincers movement of 'disciplinary' and 'biopolitical' power foreclosing on other onto-epistemologies (Sullivan 2013a:210-12). The former is enabled by all those conservation scientists and environmental economists who together make nature intelligible, quantifiable and liquid. The latter is enabled by marketing and advertising professionals who interpellate consumers as rational, concerned, sovereign individuals for whom spending is the best way to realise affective and moral aspirations. As Sullivan sees it, disciplinary knowledge is technical and links 'production' with finance; biopolitical representations are popular and create subject-positions that normalise consumption as an ethical practice.<sup>11</sup>

### Additional Considerations

In sum, by both building on but pushing beyond the concepts Marx bequeathed us, Büscher *et al.* offer us an extremely broad interpretation of what capitalist conservation looks like. For them it is almost a world unto itself, a metaphorical ecology of concepts, institutions, workers and devices whose 'logic' departs from the 'real ecology' it purports to protect. Ironically, then, in the name of harmonising economic growth and nature's rhythms and capacities, capitalist conservation further decouples them. The 'value' of conserved nature is, for Büscher *et al.*, a complex contrivance designed to line the pockets of a few well-placed actors and silence all those who would have us value each other and non-humans in radically different ways. As such, what its advocates call 'market-based nature conservation' is a far more com-

plicated, larger and problematic phenomena than it is presented as being. According to Büscher *et al.*, it is proving to be worryingly successful through its selective, highly visible representations of what nature and itself are all about.

Before we evaluate Büscher *et al.*'s claims and contentions we should focus very quickly on other publications where they have written as co-authors. Unsurprisingly, these publications repeat much of what is contained in their *New Proposals* triptych. However, there are some supplementary sources and claims, both evident in a programmatic essay by Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe and Brockington (2012). It is entitled 'Towards a synthesised critique of neoliberal biodiversity conservation.' At various points the authors make reference to the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Goldman and Papsion's 2006 essay 'Capital's brandscapes' – trailer for their recent book *Landscapes of Capital* (2011).

From Gramsci they borrow the ideas of 'hegemony,' 'historic bloc' and intellectual functionaries (for Gramsci the antithesis of 'organic intellectuals'). They argue that otherwise different class fractions in contemporary society have seen it in their joint interest to conserve nature by acting together. In so acting they have called upon what Leslie Sklair (2001) has called 'the transnational capitalist' class for institutional, financial and ideological backing. Following Gramsci, they point to the likes of Chris Costello, Ricardo Bayon and Michael Jenkins as among the many intellectual foot-soldiers who aim to make the bloc's worldview 'commonsense' in society at large. These foot-soldiers are, as it were, the Foucauldian appearance of a body that remains resolutely capitalist and class-divided. And – as per the triptych – it is in the realm of appearances, so Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe and Brockington argue, that ever greater efforts are being made to create new conservation commodities so as to appropriate economic value. 'Prosumption,' for example, represents a new niche for ENGOs and firms intent on persuading customers to pay for nature's survival. It makes money, and entrenches hegemonic ideas, by manipulating meaning (words and images) rather than the actualities of forests, soils, rivers or grasslands (see Büscher and

<sup>11</sup> In Büscher's (2013b:13-18) new book, Foucault's disciplinary knowledge roughly corresponds to 'techniques of devolved governance' under neoliberalism, while biopolitics pertains to the practices designed to regulate the political conduct of neoliberal subjects.



Igoe 2013). For our authors it is a good illustration of Goldman and Papson's claim that we might usefully focus our attention on innovation and competition in the *symbolic* realm where cultural hegemony and profit-seeking harmonise.

### **'The Conservationist Mode of Production' According to Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan: A Critical Appreciation**

#### **Three Authors, Three Strengths**

Bücher *et al.*'s trio of essays (and their wider body of published writing) have something to offer at least two audiences. First, there are Marxists of various stripes seeking to understand the dynamics of global capitalism in these turbulent times. In particular, so-called 'eco-Marxists' focused on the capitalism-nature relationship should find these essays highly stimulating. Authors like Jim O'Connor, Elmar Altvater, Paul Burkett, John Bellamy-Foster, Jason Moore, the late Neil Smith and (occasionally) David Harvey have all had important things to say about the ecological contradictions of capital. But none have focused squarely on nature conservation, nor explored the ways it has been insinuated into the complex circuit of accumulation as a whole. Second, there are analysts of conservation in the academic and activist worlds. Those on the Left, especially if educated in the 1990s, have often been exposed to the insights of various post-prefixed approaches (e.g. Derridean 'deconstruction'). It is therefore pleasing to witness Bücher *et al.* try to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Marxism to their peers, even as they find it analytically incomplete. Of course, not all nature conservation specialists are opposed to market-based approaches and one can only hope that the sort of theory presented by Bücher *et al.* might be taken seriously by the likes of Costello, Bayon and Jenkins. After all, the point is to change the world not simply understand it – an injunction Costello and fellow-travellers have clearly taken to heart.

In our view what is most commendable about Bücher, Igoe and Sullivan's contribution is three things. First there's the commitment to holism. They steadfastly refuse to see contemporary conservation as simply a question of policy and technique. For them, it

is no longer a separate domain that is different in kind from others. They also eschew the idea that markets are merely social choice mechanisms, ones with potentially high 'intelligence' and flexibility. By insisting that market-based conservation implicates the biophysical world, environmental scientists, environmental economists, financiers, big corporations, ENGOs, advertisers, the media industry and ordinary consumers, Bücher *et al.* rightly diagnose it as a far-reaching phenomenon in societal and geographical terms.

Second, and relatedly, we applaud Bücher *et al.*'s focus on the different forms and effects of 'value.' As anthropologist Daniel Miller notes, "The word value has a rather extraordinary semantic range in the English language" (2008:1123). Bücher *et al.* take full advantage of its polysemic qualities. As we have seen, the kind of 'value' discussed by advocates of market-based conservation is three-fold. It refers to the various services nature provides (as a shorthand, 'objective value'), their perception by those willing to pay for them ('subjective value'), and the prices achieved by coupling both value forms in markets (monetary value in the quantitative sense). Together, Bücher, Igoe and Sullivan show that this rather asocial conception of value as what things appear to be worth is inadequate. Value, in the three senses just described, needs to be understood in relation to two other kinds of value. The first is value in the Marxian sense, that real but 'ghostly substance' whose creation and capture governs the actions and fortunes of most living things (human and non-human). The second is value in the linguistic-cultural sense meant by Ferdinand de Saussure. Bücher *et al.* show that capitalist conservation can never simply be about nature achieving a price high enough to survive (thus ensuring enough 'subjective value' is translated into money to reflect its 'objective value'). It is, they insist, entrained in capitalist valorisation processes that are articulated with a particular linguistic-cultural sense of how what we call 'nature' can be made available for valuation in the first place. These two forms of value subtend the one enumerated above. Moreover, Bücher *et al.* home-in on the enormous amount of effort expended by capitalists to shape 'subjective value' among consumers and stoke demand for conservation commodities. Contemporary conservation

is all about ‘valuing nature’ to be sure. But nature’s ‘real value,’ whatever that means, is but a small part of the story once conservation becomes a means to the end of capital accumulation.

Third, we applaud Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan’s sensitivity to the changing historical forms that capitalism assumes. Even someone as loyal to Marx’s original texts as David Harvey has long paid close attention to these mutations (see, most famously, Harvey 1989). Talking about the ‘fundamental laws’ of capital has only ever got Marxists so far. Büscher *et al.* accept that these laws remain invariant, but insist that capitalism today is significantly different to when Marx first anatomised it. As explained earlier, one of their key points is that incorporating nature conservation might be changing capitalism (or, at least, amplifying recent tendencies) rather than conservation simply being ‘colonised’ by a changeless mode of production. This is a thesis well worth exploring. Büscher pushes this furthest of all. His vision of a ‘conservation bubble’ (though he does not use this term) is an arresting one. It suggests that conservation will not so much be part of a new ‘green economy’ as a green fantasy in which a few enrich themselves while diverting precious resources away from conservation proper. As such, it simply fuels the hypertrophic tendencies that so spectacularly reminded us of capitalism’s dysfunctionality when the sub-prime crisis began a few short years ago.

### Questions in Need of Answers, Conceptual Conflations and Unexamined Assumptions

Having itemised key plus-points of Büscher *et al.*’s approach to nature conservation, we want to sound a more critical note in the remainder of this paper. Our’s will be a comradely critique intended to help Büscher *et al.* and their readers achieve a better understanding of the capitalist mode of conservation. It seems to us that three important features of the triptych and Büscher *et al.*’s related publications are these. First, they take the form of plenary interventions (they’re not hedged with caveats or qualifications). Second, aside from the insistence that Marx’s writings are necessary but insufficient, they are largely uncritical of their principal theoretical sources (e.g. LiPuma and Lee; Debord) – at least

in their *New Proposals* essays. Third, there is a lot of analytical focus on processes but when it comes to their effects the evidence-base presented is selective and rather thin.<sup>12</sup>

As we will now explain, all three features are at the root of several problems with the ambitious framework of understanding which Büscher *et al.* present. At best, we’ll argue, the framework amounts to a set of propositions that need sharpening, refining and testing empirically. We will contend too that its normative dimensions need significant development, and we’ll raise some questions about who should (or will) take notice of it. This last will tie discussion back to the opening section on Büscher *et al.*’s membership of a wider community of academic critics. Our critique comprises six points, as follows.

### *Does Capitalist ‘Production’ = The Large-Scale Physical Transformation of the Non-Human World?*

Büscher *et al.*’s argument rests on the assumption that nature conservation is incompatible with conventional commodity production. Büscher states this clearly, citing one of us (Henderson 2003) and also Neil Smith (2008) in the process. Obviously, so far in its history capitalist production has been hard-wired to massive environmental change (courtesy of primary resource extraction, large-scale farming and manufacturing). But is this a contingent occurrence or a structural necessity? In our view it is the former. Capitalism is utterly indifferent to the means whereby it achieves the end of perpetual accumulation. To suggest that capitalist ‘production’ is ineluctably tied to nature’s destruction – and thus incompatible with conservation – is surely to mistake an historical fact for an ontological imperative. As Elmar Altvater (2007) has reminded us, capitalism’s capacity to remake the world in its own restless image has been dependent on the energy surplus afforded by a finite supply of fossil fuels. Writing in the same edition of *The Socialist Register*, geographer Dan Buck (2007)

<sup>12</sup> This last claim may seem unfounded, at least in respect of several of Büscher *et al.*’s other publications. However, with the exception of Büscher (2013b), the journal articles published by the three authors that we have consulted in preparing this paper are all fairly light on presenting a large volume of in-depth data. This is, in our view, quite common among contemporary social scientists of a certain persuasion. However much empirical research underpins these papers – a good deal, as it turns out – it does not ‘come through’ in ways that we, at least, can register.

ventures that “capitalism may well accumulate itself out of, or through, an ecological crisis” (66) – not by minimising production but by altering its empirical forms.<sup>13</sup> “Capital, as value-in-motion, does not care what fleeting forms it assumes,” Buck writes, “so long as it ... expands itself within ... socially determined ... time horizons” (67). Why must the new commodities concocted and sold in the name of conservation be deemed largely outside the realm of ‘production’? They may, in part, be aspects of its reformation and recalibration.

*Does Capitalist Conservation Signal a Shift Away from ‘Productive’ Towards ‘Unproductive Labour’?*

A related question arises about the forms of work central to Büscher et al.’s image of conservation capitalism. One could be forgiven for thinking that it is largely ‘unproductive labour’ (a term not used by Büscher et al.) involved – that is to say, concrete forms of work generative of use values that, when exchanged, capture value produced elsewhere in the capitalist economy. Again, Büscher is explicit about this following Graham’s work: “These [environmental] services, like the land and nature they are derived from, are a form of fictitious capital: ‘capital without any material basis in commodities or productive activity’ [Harvey 2006:95]” (22). In Igoe’s essay there’s an implication that the labour involved in manufacturing spectacular nature is, because consumption- and exchange-orientated, equally part of Büscher’s universe of parasitic employment.<sup>14</sup> It follows that the (new) work of capitalist conservation is seemingly dedicated to rent-seeking or charging interest (we will return to these two forms of capital presently).<sup>15</sup>

13 For a contrary but still Marxist view see Blauwhof (2012).

14 Here it’s worth noting that both Büscher and Igoe make Phil Graham (2006), one of their key sources for thinking about labour and value in the realm of circulation, look much *less* Marxist than he actually is. This may, in Büscher’s case, be because he himself is unconvinced that the labour theory of value has much explanatory value anymore. We say this because, at times and without ever quite making the case systematically, his *New Proposals* essay flirts with the idea that a new form of value governs key parts of economic life. If taken seriously this idea contradicts his claim to be working in the Marxian tradition.

15 A related point here is the role of mercantilism, in which an economic agent acts as a distributor of commodities produced by others, intermediating between producers and consumers and charging a fee. It’s likely that ‘merchant capital’ is a part of the story Büscher *et al.* want to tell, though they don’t identify it as a separate kind of capital.

This may well be the case, but (i) how do we know ‘unproductive labour’ when we see it, and (ii) where is the evidence that it increasingly dominates nature conservation? Marx himself didn’t get very far with his discussion of how ‘value producing labor’ can be distinguished from its unproductive sibling. Many of his epigones have debated the issue at length, however.<sup>16</sup> One upshot is the insight that “the orthodox Marxist view can be ... unsatisfactory when it restricts all productive labor to basic acts of hacking, bending, bolting, hewing and the like” (Walker 1985:73). What Marxists traditionally call the ‘economic base’ is, in the detail, changeable, so too the forms of employment, forces of production and outputs that characterise it at any given moment. So long as a sufficient number of paying consumers can be persuaded, or perceived to be persuadable, that products X, Y or Z are desirable, workers can be employed and the value they create can drive capitalism forward.

This isn’t to say that the distinction between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive labour’ is useless (far from it: see Foley 2013). But it may be analytically unhelpful and factually incorrect to postulate that all the work of capitalist conservation – for Büscher *et al.* concentrated in the spheres of circulation, exchange and consumption – is derivative of value created by other kinds of employment. It also threatens to lose sight of the fact that *all* forms of capitalist employment instantiate a class relationship that brings hardship, stress and limited life opportunities to a great many. Surmising, it leaves open the question of whether Büscher *et al.* would be happier if more ‘real work’ was done to support nature conservation and the local communities who stand to benefit from it – that is to say the manual work of maintaining and restoring land- and waterscapes.

*Is There More Than One Form of ‘Conservation Capital’?*

At one point Büscher declares that “the emphasis in the *creation* of value has [now] shifted from production to circulation. The Marxian theory of value ...

16 In the 1970s many Anglophone Marxists debated this issue in light of claims about ‘post-industrialism’ and a ‘new service economy.’ More recently, Italian ‘autonomist’ Marxists have focussed on what the growth of ‘immaterial labour’ (e.g. software designers) means for the nature of capitalism.



becomes problematic ... when environmental services circulate as fictitious capital without having been produced by human labour” (31, emphasis added). This is confusing and contradicts the ‘unproductive labour’ idea discussed above. Apparently value in a Marxian sense is generated by non-produced environmental services! More consistent with the thrust of Büscher’s essay – especially given his reference to David Harvey on the role of the financial system – is this contention: much of the ‘liquid nature’ that circulates from real conservation sites to far-flung consumers embodies the logic of financiers (e.g. bankers, insurers, and futures traders) not the logic of productive capital. Without owning the ‘underlying assets’ or altering them physically, Büscher’s purveyors of liquid nature capture (or attempt to) a share of value created in the ‘real economy,’ made easier no doubt by the fact (as Marx noticed) that because money operates as a quasi-independent power virtually anything can be stamped with a price – including unaltered nature that can appear immediately to have ‘value.’

Though in point two we suggested that more productive labour may be involved in capitalist conservation than Büscher acknowledges, he is surely right that much of the new conservation industry aims to make (and take) money on the back of other people/institutions and their assets and undertakings. But is this largely a case of capturing interest-like revenues from actors located elsewhere in the capitalist mode of conservation? Büscher implies as much. But what of *rent*, a key source of revenue for many actors in capitalism and something Marx discussed frequently? Where and how often are rent-payments central to conservation capitalism, and not only in the circulatory sphere Büscher focuses on so much? These payments are charges for the use (or, in the case of a pristine forest or sperm whale, *non-use*) of assets (living entities, things, technologies, ideas etc.) created or owned by others. In the case of conservation capital we surely need a more forensic sense of how productive, financial and rentier capital combine since Büscher *et al.* take us only so far.<sup>17</sup> What’s more, the distinctions among

these forms of capital are not necessarily the same distinctions Büscher *et al.* appear to make among ‘real conservation,’ circulation (home of ‘ephemeral value’ and commodity-signs), and consumption/exchange (where ‘fictitious’ and ‘real’ value are realised).

*In What Sense Is Value Realisation Increasingly ‘Alienated’ from Value Production? In What Sense Is Value Circulation Detached from Value Production?*

Our third point of praise earlier highlighted Büscher *et al.*’s attention to capitalism’s historical dynamism. However, there is an occasional suggestion – once again most evident in Büscher’s essay – that its mutations might require Marxists to rethink the very nature of capitalism. We demur. In Richard Johnson’s possibly cynical view, “We all want to say something new about something new” (2007:96) and therein lies the risk of hyperbole and mischaracterisation. If conservation capital is largely circulation-based, geared towards value capture, and has cannibalistic and hypertrophic tendencies it should not surprise Marxists. While a key source for Büscher – the aforementioned Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee – utilise Marxist language, they deploy little of the analytical apparatus. This is unfortunate. Their presentation of “the growing independence of the circulatory system” (2005:416) is, in fact, perfectly consistent with Marx’s own view. As Marxists Rodrigo Teixeira and Tomas Rotta write, one of [Marx’s] ... central messages was the inherent tendency of capital to ‘autonomise’ itself from its own material support. [It] ... contradictorily tries to valorize itself while moving away from and undermining real value-creating activities” (2012:449; see also Sotiropoulos and Lapatsioras 2013). The key word here is ‘contradiction’: autonomisation is ultimately unsustainable because it imagines money begetting money is possible indefinitely. It can be, and is, a root-cause of a general crisis for capitalism. If Büscher’s broad analysis is correct, therefore, capitalist conservation should, in time, be contributory to another bout of socio-economic and political instability. There may also be struggles between capitalist class-fractions, ones that could implicate national and supranational

<sup>17</sup> Though there may yet be little work on how these three forms of capital entwine in the ‘capitalist mode of conservation,’ there has been some useful work on rent by analysts of food commodity chains that link farmers and consumers – arguably interesting comparators to the chains that connect conserved land- and waterscapes and those paying for products linked to their protection. For examples see Guthman

(2004) and Mutersbaugh (2005). We note too that, on another occasion, Sian Sullivan has written about rent in relation to environment governance: see Sullivan (2012:25-26).



states, over who profits from conservation, to what extent and where. All this may present opportunities for its reform or removal, and it could unsettle the historic bloc that supports capitalist conservation.

*In What Sense Is Conservation Capitalism Anti-Ecological?*

In both Büscher's and Sullivan's essays there's an unmistakable presumption that conservation capitalism is somehow a diversion from, even inimical too, 'real conservation.' For instance, Büscher invokes Paul Burkett's (2005) analysis of how money valuations of the biophysical world necessarily fail to represent nature's connectivities and rhythms. Meanwhile, Sullivan – as we have seen – criticises the 'deadening' and distancing effects of market-based conservation, its inability to communicate nature's vitality and humanity's necessary embodiment in a wider eco-sphere. However, while sympathetic to these claims, we want to ask which 'nature' (better still: *whose* nature?) is the logic of capitalist conservation antithetical to? Sullivan spells this out, but it is a big question that warrants a response both broad and yet detailed.

Reacting to a resurgent Malthusianism in the late 1960s, several Marxists worked hard to challenge the idea of an asocial nature comprised of absolute quantities and qualities (e.g. Harvey 1974). A generation later, some of the eco-Marxists mentioned earlier in this essay tried to square an apparent circle. How, they asked, can the idea of a thoroughly social and relative 'nature' be theorised alongside the 'fact' of large-scale environmental degradation courtesy of capital accumulation? Jim O'Connor's well-known 'second contradiction of capital' may be 'external' in one sense, but *not* in the sense that 'nature' lies outside the realms of social discourse and practice. British Marxist sociologist Ted Benton (1989) articulated this 'both/and' position particularly well by finessing the distinction between capitalism's 'internal' and 'external' limits. By contrast, unwary readers of the triptych might be forgiven for assuming that capitalist conservation is *absolutely* contradictory to 'nature.' That is simply not the case. Instead, it's contradictory to a whole set of alternative *social valuations* of what is worth conserving, in whose interest, and on what spatio-temporal scales. The 'ecological limits' to capital are every bit as

social as the abstractions and representations used to make conserved nature 'liquid.' The task is to show which social valuations stand to significantly challenge those hegemonised by capital.

*Is Conservation Capitalism (Already) Regnant?*

Reading Büscher *et al.*'s triptych and their other recent publications one gets the strong sense that nature conservation and its stakeholders have no real alternatives. Voluntarily or otherwise, they appear to be subject to the 'selling nature to save it' approach and the new industry it has spawned (located largely in the circulatory and consumption spheres). Given their histories of fieldwork, Büscher, Igoe and Sullivan can doubtless point to ample evidence to substantiate this gloomy perspective. But their apparent emphasis on capital's current 'colonisation' of conservation comes at a high analytical and normative price.

First, though capitalism is best understood as a 'totality' that reaches into every nook-and-cranny of life on earth, it is not *totalising* 'everywhere and all the way down' except under the most repressive of conditions. The reason Marx (and neo-Marxists like Karl Polanyi) accented contradiction is because they saw ample evidence of the ways people fight against the norms and effects that accompany life in capitalist societies. One of us has recently argued that Marx's very idea of value embodies capitalism's non-totalising quality, or more accurately it never coalesces in the manner often presumed, because of this non-totalising quality (Henderson 2013). Of course, peoples' struggles may not always be very effective, but they are rarely absent. Yet in the case of Büscher *et al.*'s *New Proposals* essays, these struggles are relegated to the analytical margins – whether it is radical ENGOs in the North, or local communities in the South. The way Büscher *et al.* link Marx-Debord-Foucault-Gramsci etc. suggests that capitalists have successfully subsumed conservation by means of co-optation, illusion, 'governmentality' and exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

18 We'd contend that critical theorists influenced by Foucault's writings have, in recent years, been given to seeing 'governmentality' as an almost irresistible 'micro-physics of power.' Paper after paper recounts how opposition and resistance are neutralised by the seemingly contradiction-free forces of neoliberal rule. Why, we wonder, is this Foucault so popular among erstwhile critics of neoliberal reason? And should Marxists be using this Foucault 'off the shelf,' as it were?

In principle, this is a testable hypothesis. However, in the meantime it threatens to ‘big-up’ the powers of capitalists and their functionaries. To put it more pointedly, does Büscher *et al.*’s image of a capitalist takeover of conservation risk “actively participating in consolidating a new phase of capitalist hegemony” (Gibson-Graham 1996:ix)? Analytically, is it in thrall to that which it wishes to supercede? These questions are inspired by a germinal critique of how Marxists have tended to represent capitalism (Gibson-Graham’s *The End of Capitalism [As We Knew It]*). Büscher *et al.* might profit from scrutinising their own predilection for “discursive figurings that ... constitute [capitalism] as large, powerful, persistent, active, expansive, ... dynamic, transformative, embracing, penetrating, disciplining, colonizing” (Gibson-Graham 1996:4).<sup>19</sup>

Second, the metaphors that Büscher *et al.* favour and the ‘muscularity’ of their theory of conservation capitalism pulls the normative rug from under their own feet. Büscher and Igoe’s essays conclude with some perfunctory observations about alternative futures. Sullivan, meanwhile, offers no reason to believe that the animist onto-epistemology she commends will be seriously ‘re-countenanced’ and gain broader acceptance any time soon. Indeed, for her it is a “completely *other* mode of cognition and experience” (2010: 126) – a sort of utopian ‘left imperial’ alternative to the imperialism of market-based nature conservation. That is not to say we would discount the political potential of the production of new forms of ‘the sensible’ at all (e.g. Rancière 2010). It is, as Rancière suggests, a question of whether such new forms can be prescribed and how they might grow out of the here-and-now. All this recalls the critical impasse the Frankfurt School arrived at before Jürgen Habermas sought to remap the basis of progressive societal change at a theoretical level. What Marxist Joe McCarney said of Adorno’s ‘retreat’ to aesthetics might also be said of Büscher *et al.*’s inability to identify progressive tendencies immanent to conservation capitalism:

If one insists on the emancipatory role [of critical theory], then [Adorno’s] critique ... ha[d] to give up its immanence. Cut-off from the malign purposes of things and the course of events which embodies them, it ... confront[ed] those realities as the most abstract *Sollen*, not simply ... extrinsic, but ... wholly antithetical. A critique that sets itself in this way in opposition to [its object] ... is dialectically an absurdity. [McCarney 1990: 31]

### Conclusion: What Sort of Knowledge for What Kind of Nature Conservation?

As we have seen, Büscher *et al.* and their coauthors are confident that capitalism and conservation are like oil and water: they don’t mix at all well, though this hasn’t stopped a set of determined actors from forging a union. As we have also seen, they’re confident that the market-based approach to conservation is sweeping viable alternatives aside so that they become virtually invisible. These writers are part of a relatively small but nonetheless vocal community of critics based largely in universities (though able, and often willing, to reach outside higher education). We ourselves are part of that community, having written extensively over the years on capitalism, value and ecology from a Marxian perspective. In closing we want to consider how Büscher *et al.* and their intellectual allies have used the academic freedom afforded by their institutional location.

It seems to us that Büscher *et al.* are still in a phase of intellectual network building with like-minded academic peers on the Left. The issue of *New Proposals* their triptych appeared in is arguably a good example. It is a means whereby analysts with similar dispositions can shape each others’ thinking and build solidarity around a set of concepts, propositions and evaluations. This is important, but what should follow? First, we’d argue that the epistemic community of critics to which Büscher *et al.* belong (albeit not exclusively) could usefully adopt a more critical stance on the knowledge it is creating and utilising. Having read Büscher *et al.*’s published writings closely, and those of several of their coauthors, it’s striking how little internal disagreement there appears to be so far. This is perfectly normal in the early years of oppositional scholarship, but it can usefully give way to something else. This essay is, in

<sup>19</sup> This view of capitalism as an almost all-powerful force penetrating nature conservation comes across in Büscher’s new book (2013b). His account of the ‘peace parks’ initiative in southern Africa accents what he calls ‘consensus,’ ‘anti-politics’ and ‘marketing’ as three weapons used to suppress opposition to ‘neoliberal conservation.’

part, intended to inspire some self-examination lest Büscher *et al.* continue to operate with potentially chaotic concepts, unwarranted assumptions and not a few shibboleths.

Second, the epistemic community of critics to which Büscher *et al.* belong might consider communicating (in print and face-to-face) more often with their erstwhile opponents. Büscher *et al.* have done a bit of this already to their credit (see Igoe, Sullivan and Brockington 2010; Sullivan 2012) but there is much more to be done. Here we can draw some useful lessons both from the history of Marxism and those who have successfully neoliberalised nature conservation. After revolutionary Marxism suffered a series of pre-1939 defeats, and after Western workers were bought-off by the Fordist-Keynesian regime of accumulation, historical materialism largely retreated to the universities (where it largely remains). That, at least, gave it an independent base from which to analyse the changing world of capitalism. But it severed most Marxists from the trades unions and social movements. By contrast, 'free market environmentalists' reached out into the policy world, ensuring the intellectual capital built in (e.g.) the field of environmental economics paid practical dividends. In short, it is not enough to criticise capitalist conservation if its advocates (be they ideologues or pragmatists) are largely deaf or indifferent to the salvos being fired. These days, the patient and laborious work of changing mind-sets in the world of business, politics and civil society seems to be undertaken by think tanks and foundations, which act as bridges between academics and the wider world. Büscher *et al.* are well set to broadcast some of their messages more widely.

Third, and relatedly, the sort of 'grand critique' Büscher *et al.* offer is necessary but also insufficient to inspire change in the highly professionalised world of contemporary nature conservation. Pragmatically, it deserves to be accompanied by a non-rhetorical 'internal critique' of market-based conservation. This sort of critique, which holds its object up to an empirical mirror so as to evaluate it on its *own* terms, tends

to get more traction among those it criticises than the 'fundamental,' 'defetishising' critique Marxists and others usually engage in. A recent example of such critique, and one directly relevant to Büscher *et al.*'s concerns, is an essay by Roldan Muradian and others published in *Conservation Letters* (Muradian *et al.* 2013). Having said this, we recognise the signal importance of maintaining a critical distance from those whose ideas and policies one opposes. While contributions like Muradian *et al.*'s can lead to useful engagement (see, for example, Sven Wunder's [2013] even-tempered riposte), there is a danger of having one's sting drawn. According to Blake Anderson and Michael M'Gonigle (2012), this has been the fate of ecological economics which now internalises too many precepts and methods of the environmental economics it ostensibly criticises.

This, then, brings us to a fourth way forward. If one is deeply opposed to capitalist conservation and if one wants to do more than preach to the academic choir, then one can simply forget trying to sway the Chris Costellos, Ricardo Bayons, Michael Jenkins and Sven Wunders of the world. One could, instead, aim to build a movement with others, one that maps-out tactically achievable alternatives in the near-term and establishes inspiring strategic goals in the long-term. This would involve Büscher *et al.* and others in the sort of action research that has, happily, become fairly popular on the Left of Anglophone and European academia. It would be conceived as a long 'war of position' designed to discredit the idea of green capitalism in the domain of civil society. To commit to such a war, however, one would need to stop believing that neoliberal capitalism is as regnant as many on the Left make it out to be(!).

As this critical engagement with their writings attests, Bram Büscher, Jim Igoe and Sian Sullivan have given us nutritious food for thought. We hope our interpretation is not a travesty of their published writings. We hope too that their readers can, in equal measure, learn from and challenge the framework of understanding conservation capitalism they present.

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