

# NEW PROPOSALS

## JOURNAL OF MARXISM AND INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY



VOLUME SEVEN, NUMBER 1, SEPTEMBER 2014

New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry  
Volume 7, Number 1, September 2014  
ISSN 1715-6718

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*Our Mandate*

This journal represents an attempt to explore issues, ideas, and problems that lie at the intersection between the academic disciplines of social science and the body of thought and political practice that has constituted Marxism over the last 150 years. New Proposals is a journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry that is dedicated to the radical transformation of the contemporary world order. We see our role as providing a platform for research, commentary, and debate of the highest scholarly quality that contributes to the struggle to create a more just and humane world, in which the systematic and continuous exploitation, oppression, and fratricidal struggles that characterize the contemporary sociopolitical order no longer exist.

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*Cover:* On Strike. C. Menzies

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## *Introduction*

Charles R. Menzies

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### **On Strike!**

Workers have one real power – the power to withdraw their own labour. This is a risky move. Individual workers have much to lose by striking: personal economic security, increased stress, even facing abuse on the picketline. Just the same organized collective action can have powerful progressive outcomes. Very often the only way to move an employer or to enact a progressive social change is through collective action.

Over the past several months here in British Columbia we have been witness to public school teachers taking a heroic stance against a provincial government that appears intent on dismantling public education. Teachers went out on strike as a collective pressure tactic, but it is not simply about wages or benefits. For well over a decade BC's professional teachers have been fighting a struggle in support of a fully funded public education system that meets the needs of all students. There is a clear connection between a teacher's working conditions and the learning conditions for a student.

Teachers in BC have faced a government that demeans and dismisses their labour, their value, and

their contribution to society. BC Premier Christy Clark closed an inflammatory press conference by claiming that teachers were making unreasonable demands for an extra day off and unlimited massages. Aside from being patently wrong, Ms Clark's pronouncements deliberately trivialized teachers: implying that the issue was simply one of back rubs and free time: if only that were the case. The real issue relates to overcrowded, underfunded classrooms, the removal of specialist non-enrolling support teachers, the slow dismantling of BC's public education system.

A tentative deal has finally been reached between the teachers and the provincial government. Irrespective of the outcome this teachers' strike, like many other public sector labour disputes, is about more than basic economic conditions: it's about the type of society that we wish to live in. The end of the teachers' strike won't end the provincial government's drive to privatize the education system. It does, however, provide a brief breathing space and an opportunity to push harder for an education system based upon learning, citizenship, and democratic practice.

## The Left, Labour, and the Future of U.S. Radicalism: The Struggle for Immigrant Rights

Steve Striffler

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper first explores the decline and current state of the U.S. left, with a particular emphasis on the proliferation of progressive campaigns, causes, and coalitions that are relatively isolated from each other, as well as the labour movement, and have little capacity to shape public debate or policy. The second part examines this tendency through a case study of one of the left's most promising initiatives: the immigrant rights movement.

**KEYWORDS:** left, labour, Latinos, immigration, social movements, Sensenbrenner

The subject of this paper does not, in a strict sense, exist. To be sure, the “solidarity left” in the United States consists of a diverse group of actors who have orchestrated an ever-changing collection of progressive campaigns, causes, organizations, and even “movements.” And these initiatives have animated many of the most prominent examples of left activism during the past three decades: anti-sweatshop, anti-war, Worker Centers, international solidarity, immigration rights, global justice, environmentalism, women's issues, etc. The solidarity left also has a rich history, with deep political-intellectual roots in various progressive traditions dating back at least to the 1960s and the New Left. Indeed, the solidarity left is one of the three core constituents of the broader U.S. left, along with organized labour and the working poor.

Yet, to define the solidarity left in this (admittedly imprecise) way is not to say that “it” actually exists in the sense of an even vaguely, semi-coherent, political force that can effectively intervene in public

debates, let alone shape public policy. There are no institutions, organizations, or parties of the “solidarity left,” nothing holding “it” together. Even most of the “single” issues listed above are, in reality, an amalgam of largely disconnected, uncoordinated, and resource-poor organizations and actors. Progressive initiatives are everywhere in the United States, yet the presence of the left in public life, public debates, and public policy has become almost non-existent. We are thoroughly marginalized and ceding more ground every day. This paper explores why, first through a broad, but brief, discussion of the current state of the solidarity left and, second, through a case study of one of the solidarity left's most promising initiatives: the immigrant rights movement.

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There is no single reason why the left has fragmented and become virtually absent from public life within the United States. It could certainly be argued that the current moment, defined by a repressive legal-political apparatus, neoliberal policies, growing

economic inequality, and a powerful right, is not a good one for building a left.<sup>1</sup> It is also reasonable to conclude that although the material and human resources may be sufficient to allow for individual causes and campaigns to emerge (if not always thrive), they are not at a level to sustain movements and organizations on larger scales. Individual efforts often lack resources, tend to be isolated, and are frequently surrounded by allies who are equally weak. Stuck in survival mode, small campaigns and organizations are in no position to act on larger scales.

Without dismissing these explanations, it is worth noting they do not really help us understand how we got from there to here, how the current situation became so bleak, how the left in the United States became so marginalized and fragmented, or what role the left has played in making this mess. The weakness, fragmentation, and lack of coordination within the solidarity left (and the left as a whole) is a political problem that limits our capacity to build class power and confront capitalism, but it is also an intellectual problem that requires explanation. The source of this problem is not wholly external. It cannot be laid entirely at the feet of repressive and inequitable political, legal, and economic systems; or blamed on a right that increasingly sets the terms of debates while controlling political power and the corporate media; or passed off on a public that appears unreceptive to our ideas and projects. These are all, in varying degrees, valid intellectual explanations as to why there is no left within the United States today.

Yet, it is also the reality that we must work within, change, and have strategies for confronting. To say that a certain strategy failed because of repression or inequality, conditions we know exist, is to fail to develop viable paths for confronting these conditions, and to doom ourselves to ever-deepening marginalization.

### The Era of Campaigns, Causes, and Coalitions

The solidarity left in the United States is currently defined by a seemingly endless array of campaigns,

causes, organizations, and coalitions. On the one hand, the presence of so many initiatives and “movements” can and should be taken as a sign of the breadth and energy of left activism during the past three decades. We put a lot of time, energy, and resources into fighting sweatshops. Over one hundred Workers Centers now exist throughout the United States. The immigrant rights movement mobilized some of the largest protests in U.S. history. Hundreds of thousands fought against war in the Middle East. There is something going on here.

On the other hand, the endless proliferation of campaigns is problematic on a number of levels, and says something about the left in general. To begin, the simple fact is we do not have a lot to show for our efforts. It takes an exceptionally creative intellect to conclude that the anti-sweatshop movement has significantly improved the lives of workers, let alone made a dent in global inequality or advanced labour organizing; or that immigrant rights activism has generated anything resembling decent immigration policy; or that anti-war activism has stopped, or even significantly slowed, U.S. militarism. It also seems overly optimistic to suggest that these defeats have established the building blocks for a future movement, that in losing these many battles we somehow gained the alliances, knowledge, and resources to eventually win the war.<sup>2</sup>

The inability of our campaigns, causes, and initiatives to produce more positive change is, of course, due to a whole host of structural factors, but there is something perverse about a strategy that seems to suggest we should all struggle independently. To be sure, virtually all of the issues that the solidarity left addresses have local manifestations. They can, and in many cases should, be fought at the local level. And single-issue campaigns and organizations, peopled by professional experts, certainly have their place. Yet,

1 Though one could easily argue the opposite, that the objective conditions have fully exposed the brutality of capitalism and made it ripe for organizing.

2 One can argue that many of these fights had to be fought regardless of the outcome. Had we not mobilized by the thousands it is likely that the U.S. military and its foreign allies would have been even more aggressive and dangerous. We saved lives. Had we not fought against attacks on public education and healthcare the neoliberal agenda would be even further advanced. This matters. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these battles were, in a sense, lost from the very moment we engaged in them. They were rear-guard struggles in which, as Adolph Reed Jr. has so aptly put it, the left “negotiates the best possible terms of defeat” (Reed 2010:12).

the fact is that (a) most of these “different” issues are produced by a common set of root causes (i.e. it is all connected) and (b) in many cases only the federal government has the authority, resources, and capacity to address these issues. These are national and international battles with local expressions. And yet, the un-stated, *de facto*, strategy of the solidarity left seems to be to wage dozens, even hundreds, of isolated campaigns in order to limit our losses on the local (or issue) level. This strategy seems both defeatist and not particularly efficient in terms of the use of resources. It also potentially contributes to the marginalization of the left in the United States, whereby we no longer occupy a meaningful space within national debates, where we have no common platform for influencing the national machinery.

Moreover, despite a lot of rhetoric and sloganeering about unity, the solidarity left’s varied stances with respect to organizing on larger scales more typically ranges from the overly optimistic (i.e. focus on local efforts and larger scale organizing will inevitably emerge) to the overly pessimistic (i.e. it can’t be done so why bother), to the disinterested, openly hostile, reluctant, or subtly resistant. Some of this resistance to larger scale organizing is understandable as a reaction to somewhat domineering efforts at “party building” during the 1960s and 1970s, whereby (to over simplify a bit) organizations run by white men worked from somewhat rigid notions of class and effectively compelled folks to toe the party line. This forced unity led a variety of groups to not only demand full membership in the left, but to rethink left politics in the U.S. more broadly. For some, unmet demands for a full seat at the table led to various forms of separatism, initially and most typically along gender and race lines. Yet, into the 1980s most groups understood (either explicitly or implicitly) this separation as temporary, as a necessary stage on the path to a broad revolutionary movement that would include men, women, and children of all types.

What this meant in practice, then, was a move away from large-scale social movement building (that often struggled for ideological and organizational cohesion) towards social mobilization that engaged in a large variety of conflicts through smaller-scale campaigns (that typically had shorter term goals).

Had things gone (quite) differently, it is possible that this shift would have been temporary, with various progressive groups eventually finding their way back together in some form of political movement. This did not happen for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the process unfolded during, and was ultimately stimulated and distorted by, neoliberalism. As neoliberal policies in the U.S. remade state priorities, and the government’s ability to address social problems was further undermined, many progressive groups not only shifted their political activities away from the state, but an important sector of the left devoted much of their energy towards offering services previously provided by the state.

Neoliberalism, in this sense, not only stimulated the on-going fragmentation of the left, but did so in a particular way, channeling us further down the path of NGOization, whereby individual progressive organizations each “carves out special areas of expertise or special interest, gets intensely informed about the area, conducts campaigns on that area, and then uses this market specialization to attract members and funds. Organizations that ‘do too much’ bewilder this landscape” (Armstrong and Prashad 2005:184). Identity politics clearly contributed to this tendency. Still, there is nothing inherently wrong with a degree of expertise or specialization, and a certain amount of division of labour makes some sense. NGOs do not make movement building inherently impossible.

Yet, what seems to have happened as the process of NGOization and professionalization deepened, and defined (too) much of the left, is that the path back from fragmentation, to some sort of larger-scale, anti-capitalist, movement, has become much more difficult in both a practical and imaginative sense. Even when the problem is recognized, and it often is through much of the progressive non-profit community, NGOs remain much better equipped to attract funds than to mobilize members. As they develop expertise, conduct the next project, and become focused on demonstrating (short-term) “success” to funders, most NGOs become disconnected from “their” constituencies to the point where there is a definitive gap between the activities of NGOs and real activism on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

3 Shaun Joseph (2008) has a good discussion of this phenomenon.

In this sense, the fragmentation of the left, and our collective inability to forge a common political platform, operates as both cause and effect. On the one hand, it is very difficult for the individual causes, campaigns, and mini-movements to succeed, sustain themselves over time, envision how they fit into a larger progressive project, or connect with each other without the presence of a coherent left. On the other hand, it is very difficult for a coherent left to emerge out of a landscape defined by hundreds of relatively isolated campaigns, many of which barely exist beyond a webpage, that are struggling to survive with few resources, have little in the way of a social base, and are peopled by folks who are often exhausted, demoralized, and have little time to think about the relationship between their individual efforts and broader social change.

As a result, being part of the U.S. left is exhausting. Elizabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad capture this nicely with a sense of humour:

An initiate into the world of the [U.S.] Left is advised to buy a date book. On Monday, you have to be at the feminist anti-war meeting. On Tuesday, the environmentalists have a hearing that has to be attended. On Wednesday, there is a meeting for a new group on anti-racist justice. On Thursday, it is imperative to be at the union meeting. On Saturday, the collective meets and you have to be there. On Sunday, God rests, but since we are all atheists, we have to be at an inter-faith meeting. This is just for each evening. Forget the lunch breaks, the late afternoons, the conference calls. To be an American activist in this period is to have a heroic schedule... Our lives are governed by the logic of coalitions and if we don't think about this model, we'll tire out, waste away, lose the ability to grow beyond those hard-core folk with a well of energy. [Armstrong and Prashad 2005:183]

This model is unsustainable not simply because few individuals can keep up the pace for very long, but because despite all the hard work we are often doing little more than putting out the neoliberal fires that crop up in every locale.

It can also lead to disengagement. Because many of us on the left know nothing but defeat, and recognize that the injustices and inequalities we abhor

are so entrenched and interconnected, there is a tendency to feel that unless we devote our entire life to ten different causes that there is no point in doing anything. This can encourage us to disengage completely, or look for assurances that if, as individuals acting alone, we buy fair trade coffee from Chiapas, eat less meat, or adopt energy-saving technology we will then be able to continue our lives, guilt free, more or less as we had always envisioned. By this logic, if you don't have the time, resources, or commitment to tackle capitalism, anything less seems pointless (except being a really good consumer). Many of us have been there, and it is an understandable position in a political landscape in which there is no visibly present left to offer alternative visions or meaningful avenues for action.

It can also lead to the polar opposite of being disengaged, what Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti have called activism, an anti-intellectual hyper-pragmatic emphasis on acting, acting without analysis, where action is privileged regardless of its value, impact, direction, or connection to political aims (2002:27). This action-will-be-taken mentality, where action is by definition righteous (and potentially provides "the spark") circulates in many vaguely progressive circles and leads to the any-direction-is-as-good-as-any-other orientation that is so prevalent today in the U.S.

So where do we go? There are no easy answers, but the recent takeover of the Wisconsin capitol (2011), the unexpected emergence of the Occupy movement (2011), and the immigrant rights protests (2006) reinforce the fact that there is no future for the left without the labour movement and (ultimately) an independent political party. Some sort of national machinery is necessary, and only the labour movement or a labour-affiliated political party can provide it. The labour movement does not have all the answers, and is problematic on so many levels, but there will be no viable left in the United States without it.

For the solidarity left, for progressives disconnected from or on the margins of the labour movement, this recognition is significant for how we spend our political energy. We need to find more and better ways to engage organized labour, or sectors

of organized labour, as a way of building a coherent left. Similarly, if we recognize that many of our causes, projects, and mini-movements are destined to fail in a climate devoid of a broader U.S. left, we must work on creating an independent, national-level, organization that strives to effectively influence state power and public policy. Building what essentially amounts to a political party will not be an easy task, has been tried before, and is filled with pitfalls, but if we spend less time on causes and campaigns that the past tells us are destined to fail, we might actually take some steps in the right direction. Put another way, I would rather fail at building something that has the potential to get us to where we want to go than to “succeed” in building something we know will take us nowhere. On some level, it doesn’t matter how hard something is to do if that is in fact what needs to be done.

### **Building a Left through Immigrant Rights**

There is perhaps no better place to understand the need, potential, and current limitations of a strong alliance between the solidarity left, the U.S. labour movement, and *los de abajo* (in this case, Latinos) than in the immigrant rights movement. This alliance simultaneously produced the largest protests in U.S. history and failed to translate this “street energy” into sustained power or even modest policy reform. It is a prime example of what the left is not and what it could be.

In a four-month span during the Spring of 2006 somewhere between about 3.5 and 5.1 million people rallied for immigrant rights in the streets of over 160 U.S. cities and more than forty states (Barreto et al. 2009:736; Bloemraad et al. 2011:3). For most cities, these rallies represented the largest mobilizations in history, and in virtually all cases saw more people take to the streets than any protest in recent memory. The marches also caught the mainstream media and public completely by surprise, in part because few people in the United States knew about House Bill 4437, much less understood how a piece of legislation could serve as a catalyst to bring hundreds of thousands of Latinos into the streets. Immigrants, even legal Latinos, were supposed to remain silent and invisible. The protests disrupted this norm in spectacular form.

Had House Bill 4437, also known as the Sensenbrenner bill, actually passed the U.S. Senate and been signed into law, it would have turned undocumented immigrants into felons subject to imprisonment and deportation while also imposing criminal penalties on those employing and/or assisting the undocumented. The legislation also potentially exposed anyone who helped undocumented immigrants to up to five years in jail, including educators, businesses, health care workers, priests, friends, and even family members who were U.S. citizens. It was this combination of both being overly punitive and targeting a wide range of people that brought so many into the streets so quickly.

Protests literally followed protests. Following a first wave in March, in which 300,000 took to the streets in Chicago, a second wave gripped nearly 100 U.S. cities in April, and began to push a broader set of demands, including a viable path to citizenship and social justice for undocumented immigrants.<sup>4</sup> May 1st, known both as the “Great American Boycott” and “A Day Without Immigrants,” then saw hundreds of thousands of (mostly) Latinos skip school, leave work, and/or not purchase anything for a day while taking to the streets. “Eight of these rallies attracted at least 100,000 participants, with perhaps half to three-quarter million people marching in the streets in Chicago and Los Angeles on May 1” (Bloemraad et al. 2011:7).

The combination of the size, spontaneity, long-term potential, and unprecedented nature of the protests led to hyperbole and somewhat uncritical enthusiasm from the solidarity left, hyperbole and backlash from the Right, and some combination of the above from media and politicians. It was widely observed that a “sleeping giant had been kicked” and Latinos would now flex their political muscle in a way that reflected their demographic might. According to Justin Akers Chacón, a “new civil rights movement for immigrants” had emerged that had “blown wide open” the debate over immigration politics, in effect redrawing “the parameters of the debate – previously

4 By contrast, 250,000 went to Washington DC to hear Martin Luther King in 1963 while somewhere around 300,000 marched in Washington to protest the Vietnam War in 1969. (Bloemraad et al. 2011:3).

restricted to criminalization on one side and partial legalization combined with a guest-worker program on the other” (Chacon 2006:1). The National Immigrants Solidarity Network “saw themselves as the vanguard of the first civil rights movement of the twentieth century.” Many activists, according to Kevin Johnson and Bill Ong Hing, “believed that the anti-immigrant tide that had dominated the national debate since the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, might have turned. In the heady days following the marches, even positive immigration reform, including amnesty for millions of undocumented immigrants appeared possible” (Johnson and Hing 2007:100).

This was not to be. The protests did stop Sensenbrenner in its tracks (an important victory), but did not lead to federal legislation that would provide a path to legalization. Nor did the protests, at least in the short term, help realize a broader set of goals and hopes surrounding amnesty, a civil rights movement, or a progressive coalition that could effectively push for social justice on a number of fronts. Rather, the mass movement dissipated and disappeared from public view almost as quickly as it emerged. Once the more controversial features of Sensenbrenner lost support in Congress, the common enemy that had united so many and brought more mainstream groups into the streets was eliminated. With the immediate threat gone, large numbers of people breathed a sigh of relief and returned to their day jobs; many immigrants were effectively silenced by the subsequent backlash and returned to the shadows; and organized labour and the mainstream media shifted their resources and attention to the 2006 Congressional elections.

More than this, the mobilizations did not shift the terms of the immigration debate in any significant way. Quite the opposite. They confirmed a slowly deteriorating, if not entire stable, status quo. After 9-11, so-called “amnesty” was effectively off the table, and any substantive differences between the two political parties narrowed considerably as both Republicans and Democrats converged around a bi-partisan immigration policy defined almost exclusively by punishment. Debate between the two parties was now largely limited to how much money would be spent to militarize the border and punish

immigrants. The post-2006 “plan” that the federal government delivered came in the form of 700 miles of fence along the border, increased raids, and greater enforcement. All the vaguely progressive features of comprehensive reform were effectively gutted as the terms of the debate shifted decidedly to the right.

The inability of progressives to turn massive street protests into effective pressure on President Obama and the U.S. Congress to pass decent national-level immigration reform has had real consequences for the immigration battle. For one, failure on the national level has allowed the right to take the fight local, to the city and state level – a la Hazelton, PA, Arizona, and Alabama.<sup>5</sup> “In the immediate aftermath of the protests of 2006 and the failure of H.R. 4437, no fewer than 1,059 pieces of immigration-related legislation were introduced in state legislatures, and 167 of those became law in 2007, more than double the number of immigration-related laws enacted in all of 2006” (Bloemraad 2011:36). Here, we can include sanctions on employers who knowingly hire those lacking documents, laws preventing the undocumented from obtaining drivers licenses or business licenses, and a variety of laws making it difficult for the undocumented to attend and/or afford public higher education (Varsanyi 2010:3). The rapid expansion of the 287(g) program during the second Bush term, whereby Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) trains local law authorities to enforce immigration law, can also be seen as part of the localization of the immigration struggle.

The broader point is not that “we” will lose all local battles. In fact, in most cases, the worst of the right’s local-level legislation has been stopped or stalled, and despite what it might seem like from the media, localities are actually more likely to propose, and much more likely to pass, legislation that works to integrate immigrants in some way than they are to pass legislation that is openly hostile (Voss and Bloemraad 2011:x-xi). Arizona and Alabama are not

<sup>5</sup> There may be a longer history of this type of legislation, but the current round started with the passage of the Illegal Immigration Relief Act in August of 2006 by the Hazelton (PA.) city government which, among others things, targeted landlords who rented to undocumented immigrants and made English the city’s official language. The city was quickly criticized by immigrant rights groups and contacted by hundreds of cities who wanted to implement similar laws.

the norm. The point, however, is that regardless of the outcomes in particular locales, the “local” turn itself signals that the terms of the immigration debate have moved dramatically to the right – especially when what passes for national immigration policy is now reduced largely to increased policing. Leaving the basic rights of immigrants up to the balance of forces in particular locales is a bit like leaving basic civil rights for African Americans up to local authorities in Mississippi in the 1950s – in some cases it may turn out fine, in others not so much, but the broader point is that doing the right thing should not be optional or left to the vagaries of particular locales. Local is not always good. Hundreds of progressive NGOs working in isolation to confront the local excesses of the anti-immigrant right is not a recipe for success.

The question is why? Why, despite some of the largest street mobilizations in U.S. history, were progressives unable to push through even mildly decent immigration reform? On the one hand, it is hard to see how things could have turned out differently in the short term. The fact that a draconian bill that would not have seen the light of day prior to 9-11 nearly passed in 2006 was not a signal that a progressive social movement was about to blossom and transform the political landscape. It was a sign of how quickly the political landscape had deteriorated. In this sense, although the ability of immigrants and their allies to turn back Sensenbrenner was significant, the fact that such a hostile bill had political legs in the first place was perhaps even more indicative of where the country was politically, and how much ground had been ceded to the right on this issue as well as many others.

On the other hand, the inability of the immigrant rights protests to either generate significant transformation or to develop into a more sustained movement also speaks to the weakness of the progressive foundations upon which the mobilizations rested. Contrary to the perception that the protests came out of nowhere, they can in fact be traced to longer histories of organizing and alliances between core sectors of the broader left, including Latinos (an important component of the working poor, or “*los de abajo*”), organized labour, and the solidarity left

(largely in the form of progressive churches and community/advocacy organizations of various stripes). These groups are central to the formation of a U.S. left, and it is the weakness of these groups and the links between them that partially explain the inability of immigrant rights movement to develop further.

In Los Angeles, the epicenter of the 2006 marches, Latino social activism dates back at least to the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. More recently, efforts to organize against a series of anti-immigrant initiatives in California during the 1990s (Prop 187, 209, 227) laid the groundwork for 2006. And, as Randy Shaw points out, the protests were themselves the immediate product of an even more recent alliance between Latinos, labour, and the solidarity left that was consciously built during the decade prior to the protests:

In a little over a decade, prior to the mass marches of 2006, a conscious effort was made to connect labor unions, and to reconnect the religious community, to the immigrant rights movement. This effort was primarily focused in Los Angeles, where activists like Miguel Contreras, Eliseo Medina, and Fred Ross Jr., who got their formative training with Chavez’s UFW, played key roles in mobilizing labor and religious support for immigrant rights. The building of an immigrant rights movement that included labor and the religious community in key roles was a multifaceted project that took many years and entailed changing the orientation of the national labor movement toward immigration. [Shaw 2011: 83]

Such organizing was possible in part because of the peculiarities of Los Angeles, namely a large and longstanding Latino population, a cohort of seasoned union leaders and activists with roots dating back to the United Farm Workers, and a level of union density that is almost unique within the United States. Such conditions exist nowhere else. Nevertheless, it was the same combination of groups – particularly Latinos, labour, religious progressives, and left activists – that insured the 2006 mobilizations would be national in scope.

Central to this entire process was a fundamental, if uneven, shift within organized labour – a national-level shift that itself was driven by the successful

unionization of Latinos in places like Los Angeles in the 1990s. The AFL-CIO, which had long been on the wrong side of the immigration debate, on the sidelines, or insistent that immigrants could not be organized, changed its stance in 2000 by calling for a general amnesty and asserting the rights of all workers, including those without papers, to organize.

It then organized a number of large rallies in major cities across the country in 2000 that highlighted how employers took advantage of undocumented workers and used them to divide the working class as a whole. This led into the Immigrant Workers Freedom Rides of 2003, spearheaded by UNITE HERE and SEIU (and sponsored by the AFL-CIO), which brought together a coalition that looked very similar to the one that provided the driving force behind the 2006 rallies – organized labour, religious progressives, students, civil rights groups, community-based organizations, immigrant rights advocates, and others. The momentum from this dissipated as the AFL-CIO was inevitably seduced away from organizing by the 2004 federal elections, but much of the groundwork was in place for 2006, especially in Los Angeles where two decades of immigrant unionization meant that Latinos were at the heart of a vibrant labour movement (Chacon 2006:1-2; Voss and Bloemraad 2011:3; Milkman 2011:201-203).

At roughly the same time as organized labour was embracing immigrants in major urban areas, the Latino-Labour alliance got an additional boost from the spread of Worker Centers throughout the United States, many of which serve immigrant communities in regions with little union presence and a growing immigrant population. Worker Centers, a key initiative of the solidarity left, typically provide services for and/or advocate on behalf of immigrants, and in doing so also “organize” in the sense of building connections, forging a sense of community, and deepening people’s understanding of workplace rights, discrimination, and exploitation. In this respect, it is noteworthy that “the congruence between the geography of the spring 2006 marches and that of worker centers themselves [was] especially striking” (Milkman 2011:210).

In short, between organized labour’s presence

in major urban areas and the existence of Worker Centers in less densely inhabited parts of the country (populated with new immigrant populations), the labour movement as a whole has a significant presence within many Latino-immigrant communities across the country. This presence was central to both the scale and breadth of the mobilizations themselves and, perhaps more importantly, put the labour movement in a potentially important position after the protests as one of the only actors with a national reach within immigrant working communities.

It has also led some observers to conclude that “there is good reason to expect that the political dynamic that unfolded in California in the 1990s could now be replicated on a national scale. If that occurs, unionism could once again become a key agent of social transformation” (Milkman 2006). In other words, just as organizing in California during the 1990s – and with it the emergence of a strong Latino-Labour-Left bloc – provided the basis for the 2006 mobilizations, the 2006 protests themselves may provide the groundwork for future mobilization outside of California, in parts of the country with a more recent history of Labour-Latino-Left organizing.

Such claims seem overly optimistic. Few places have the deep history of Los Angeles activism between and among Labour and Latinos, few have the density of unions, Latinos, and the solidarity left, and virtually nowhere else has the history and density of Los Angeles. We should also be leery of any claims that Latinos or, more narrowly, recent immigrants are a panacea or vanguard for the U.S. labour movement. It is a bit ironic that, within the span of about a decade, immigrants have gone from job-stealers who cannot be organized to (within some circles) a potential saviour of organized labour and the liberal-left. Such claims tend to obscure more than illuminate, and ignore the remarkable diversity within the category of “Latino” itself. Moreover, recent and/or undocumented immigrants, those who are most often seen as leading the revitalization of labour/left, are frequently not citizens, often do not speak English, have limited knowledge of and access to the U.S. political system, tend to be poor and marginalized, and are in an all-around disadvantageous position to spearhead any sort of movement. Again,

Los Angeles (or even New York or Chicago) is not the norm. It is not representative of the rest of the country, where the balance of power is just as likely to produce reactionary immigration policies – a la Arizona and Alabama – as they are to generate a progressive coalition of any substance.

More than this, however, is the simple fact that none of the principle parties – Latinos, labour, or the solidarity left – is particularly strong at this moment in terms of human, financial, and organizational resources, or in the sense of possessing something resembling a reasonably clear, unified, and left political vision. This broader weakness of the left, of all its constituent parts, helps explain why an immigrant rights coalition that exploded onto the scene in 2006 could not sustain itself in California, Chicago, or New York, much less on a national scale. Nor is the immigrant rights movement alone. This tendency defines many of our efforts, including more recently Wisconsin and Occupy, both of which emerged with great drama and fanfare, but either ended in defeat, were unsustainable, and/or did not have the capacity to operate on larger scales.

To be cautious about the immediate prospects for the emergence of an effective, nation-wide, Latino-Labour-Left bloc is not to suggest that time and effort should not be spent building these bridges. Both labour and Latinos, in the form of the immigrant rights movement, have shown more signs of life than virtually any other progressive force within the United States. And the solidarity left, for all its faults, is an important ally and resource. On some level, you just have to go where the energy is. Although the immigrant rights movement consists of a largely uncoordinated and resource-poor amalgam of community and faith-based organizations (i.e. NGO-type civil rights groups, worker centers, student organizations, etc.), “it” has not only demonstrated the capacity to mobilize large numbers of Latinos but possesses a dynamic sector of left organizers and organizations with substantial experience in US labour-left circles, Latin American solidarity, and other campaigns and causes that extend well beyond immigrant rights. This more militant sector of the broader immigrant rights movement can be an important ally for more radical actors within the

labour movement – especially in terms of thinking and acting critically about the left’s relationship with the Democratic Party, elections, legislation, policy, organizing, etc. In short, Latino/immigrant rights represent both an important demographic sector and a site with some organizing momentum.

Perhaps more importantly, if the point is to build progressive political power and shift the terms of public debate, and if the way to promote class politics in the short term will be more through issue-oriented campaigns than electoral politics, then the issue of immigration must be central to strengthening a Latino-Labour-Left bloc and building class power. Such an alliance almost demands a deeper analysis of immigration, one where the fight is not simply about securing a set of vitally important political and civil rights (i.e. citizenship, voting, basic access to public services, etc.), but that moves us towards related economic justice issues such as living wages, working conditions, education, healthcare, and corporate power.

We remain in a historical moment where progressive forces in the United States are, at times, still able to turn back the worst of the right’s agenda, where, if lucky, we can negotiate the best possible terms of our defeat. The longer this continues, however, the weaker we become, the further our political climate shifts to the right, and the more often we find ourselves working to repel some reactionary piece of legislation or policy that would not have been imaginable even ten years ago. Such battles are necessary, Sensenbrenner had to be stopped, but it is not a good place to be in. There is no point in pretending that there is an effective left in the United States today.

There are no easy formulas or paths forward, but part of the task is to figure out which of the necessary, but primarily, defensive struggles, have the potential to become the building blocks of a revitalized labour movement that moves us forward by reshaping public debate and political power. This is absolutely crucial not only for the United States, but for the rest of the world. The absence of a viable anti-capitalist movement in the United States not only means that US militarism runs amok, but insures that US policies will continue to promote an unrestrained capitalism that is impoverishing much of the world’s population while destroying the global environment.

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# 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. Conservational 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 recently 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

17 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 Jurgen 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 Böscher *et al.* continue to operate with potentially chaotic concepts, unwarranted assumptions and not a few shibboleths.

Second, the epistemic community of critics to which Böscher *et al.* belong might consider communicating (in print and face-to-face) more often with their erstwhile opponents. Böscher *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. Böscher *et al.* are well set to broadcast some of their messages more widely.

Third, and relatedly, the sort of 'grand critique' Böscher *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 Böscher *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 Böscher *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 Böscher, 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.

## Acknowledgement

We are very grateful to Bram Büscher, Jim Igoe and Sian Sullivan for giving us the opportunity to think carefully about the subsumption of nature conservation by neoliberal capitalism. Inevitably, perhaps, they will regard us as having misunderstood much of their purpose. But we offer our assessment in good faith and trust they take our critique of their work in the intended spirit. We're also grateful to Charles Menzies of *New Proposals* for agreeing to publish a much longer paper than the one he expected, one also different in purpose and tone to the originally-planned 'introduction.'

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# Reviving Working Class Politics: Canadian Labour and the Struggle for Public Services

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*The trade unions ought not to forget that they cannot continue to hold the position they now occupy unless they really march in the van of the working class. – Friedrich Engels*

## Introduction

This article begins with an exploration of the work of Marx and Engels in an effort to shed light on the progressive potential and political limitations of trade union organizing as an end in itself. Although trade unions emerged from the working class, they did not come to represent the interests of the class as a whole. While organizing workers at the point of production is not only important but necessary, Marx and Engels argued that in failing to come to terms with the root sectionalism of trade unionism organized labour risked impeding the formation of an alternative political and class project. Challenging the entrenched power of capital and the state, they argued, required the development of a class-oriented trade unionism that sought to develop the radical potential of the working class as a whole. In doing so, however, trade unionists would need to come to

terms with the structural constraints of organizing within the political and economic parameters of capitalism, developing a counter-culture of resistance that pursued social justice and workplace democracy. In making their case, Marx and Engels maintained that unless unions took the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back while they still had *some* capacity to do so, they risked extending the impasse of labour and becoming more an impediment to rather than an instrument of a radical working class politics.

In what follows, I explore the relationship between Marx and Engels' theoretical insights and their contemporary relevance to the general circumstances of Canadian labour. In doing so, I explore demographic shifts to the makeup of the organized sections of the working class, drawing attention to an increasingly feminized and public sector-centred labour movement. Although the long-standing pattern of labour radicalism may have shifted from the private to public sector over the course of neo-liberalism, I make the case that while strikes and other forms of labour protest are important and

necessary they rarely translate into a political and class-conscious movement beyond the immediate event. This raises important concerns about how trade unionists understand the dynamics of capitalism, the challenges confronting organized labour as a social and political force, possible remedies put forward for challenging the power of capital and the state, as well as the relationship of organized labour to the rest of the working class.

Finally, as I argue in section three, making the case for an expanded public sector counters the prevailing orthodoxy of neoliberalism and challenges private capital accumulation as the engine of economic growth raising a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. In creating new inroads into spaces currently seen as private, Canadian labour, rooted as it is in the public sector, may begin to challenge the structural power of capital and the state, enhancing democratic control and potentially serving as an example for other sectors of the economy.

### Marx and Engels on the Progressive Potential and Political Limitations of Trade Unionism

For Marx and Engels, the combination (Marx's term for union) of workers represented an initial attempt on the part of labour to collectivize their power and defend themselves against the imperatives of capital:

The immediate object of trades' unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediencies for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labor. This activity of the trades' unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalized by the formation and the combination of trades' unions throughout all countries. [Marx 1866]<sup>1</sup>

While trade unions were important for sporadic and episodic “guerilla fights” between capital and

labour, they argued that they were still more important as “organized agencies for superseding the very system of wage labour and capital rule” (Marx 1866). In their view, the freedom of association to collectively bargain on behalf of and in accordance with other workers was for them a fundamental *potentiality* that under definite social conditions embodied an emancipatory force capable of transcending social relations of servitude. As Engels elaborated:

[Unions] ... feel bound to proclaim that they, as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social circumstances ought to yield to them as human beings; because silence on their part would be a recognition of the social conditions, an admission of the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit the workers in good times and let them starve in bad ones. ... But what gives these unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. [Engels 1845]

Because trade unions were among the first attempts by workers to constrain competition, Marx and Engels much-admired their demands for improved wages, workplace health and safety standards, a shorter working-day, an end to child labour, respect for prison labour, the collection of workplace statistics, union recognition and legislative safeguards.<sup>2</sup> As workers struggled together, unions increasingly began developing a counter-culture of resistance that served as a guiding framework for programmatic demands, popular educational and collective strategizing. Despite being separated by trade, language, skill, ethnicity and religion (notwithstanding significant exclusions), many workers came together in makeshift community centres seeking to break down prescribed sociocultural, political and economic barriers. This included socializing at meetings and community events, sharing resources, experiences and collectively developing strategies for resisting managerial prerogatives. These ‘labour tem-

1 Of course, such an assertion is today hardly revolutionary, although it increasingly seems so. But placed in historical context, apart from the aristocracy and bourgeoisie that were intent on restricting labour's ability to unite, Marx and Engels encountered a good many radicals (e.g. Bakunin) whom were also hostile, if not unsympathetic, of workers' rights to organize collectively.

2 Placing the context of growing labour activism in perspective, Engels (1845) wrote: “It is, in truth, no trifle for a working man who knows want from experience, to face it with wife and children, to endure hunger and wretchedness for months together, and stand firm and unshaken through it all. What is death...in comparison with gradual starvation, with the daily site of a starving family, with the certainty of future revenge on the part of the bourgeoisie.”

ples' were often built by volunteer and unemployed labour, and financed largely by individual donations (Eley 2002; Kimeldorf 1973; Lipton 1973). The emphasis was on overcoming employer and state efforts intent on dividing and separating workers in order to socially and politically defeat them. For these reasons, Marx and Engels suggested that unions possessed the potential to become "schools of socialism." However, as these nodal points of community participation faded or were forcefully expelled from view, often incorporated into official trade union structures where radical/socialist views were marginalized or severely repressed by state and capitalist militancy, the sociocultural and political praxis of organizing working class communities often became disembedded from the formal practices of organized labour.

While organizing waged workers at the point of production was necessary, Marx and Engels insisted that failing to carry such political momentum forward beyond the workplace could potentially impede future gains. This meant at every opportunity turning seemingly 'economic' advancements into political openings that could translate gains for a small number of workers into larger ones for the benefit of the class as a whole. But while craftworkers and later industrial unions increasingly became larger and more organized, the failure to translate these gains to the non-waged, especially for ethnic minorities and women, deepened existing cleavages among the working classes.

For Marx and Engels this played a dual role. First, in fomenting internal working class resentment aimed at a so-called "labour aristocracy" and second, in leading some unionized sectors into an alliance with capital – to be mediated by a "neutral" state – and social democratic parties in the hopes that such improvements would continue. The irony for Marx and Engels was that rather than developing the capacities of workers as class organizations, unions were increasingly becoming less "points of attack" or "agencies of organization" as they had hoped, than they were integrating the logic of capital into the process of production and trade union practices (e.g. tying wage gains to increases in productivity and encouraging competition rather than demanding the abolishment of the wage labour system). In other

words, although unions emerged out of the working class, they were not representing the interests of the class as a whole but rather the sectional interests of their own members even if some gains were extended to others.<sup>3</sup> In narrowly devoting their energies to maximizing the value of their members' commodified labour power, unions were increasingly failing to come to terms with the systemic tendencies that progressively undermined the extension of those workplace gains to the non-unionized, un(der)employed and those who work but are not paid (e.g. caregivers and domestic workers responsible for social reproduction).

As a consequence, Marx and Engels became increasingly concerned with what they saw as the growing opportunism and trenchant economism of elected union officials. For instance, they wrote of "venal trade union leaders" who in finding employment with the liberal party were able to deliver working class votes.<sup>4</sup> This worked to not only depoliticize but declass the growing militancy of trade unions, while integrating workers into the dependent orbit of capital. Writing of the perverse ability of political parties to draw votes from labour unions whose class interests were largely hostile to the party they were supporting, Marx and Engels anticipated to a significant extent the gradual integration, discipline and when necessary expulsion of the more militant and radicalized trade union activists.<sup>5</sup> (All problems that have increased by several orders of magnitude in the ensuing 150 years).

Lured by the competition for self-preservation among workers, trades unionists increasingly moved away from building the union as part of asserting the interests of the class as a whole and instead towards

3 As Marx (1866 n.p.) put it, "Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements."

4 Reflecting on this point, Marx wrote: "When I denounced them [trade union leaders] at the Hague Congress I knew I was letting myself in for unpopularity, calumny, etc, but such consequences have always been a matter of indifference to me. ... In making that denouncement I was only doing my duty" (Marx 1874).

5 "[Because] every class struggle is a political struggle... The organization of the proletariat into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves" (Marx and Engels 2002:229).

the preservation and betterment of their own memberships. This was accompanied by an increasing entanglement of labour unions with officially social democratic parties that accepted the logic of capital and thereby an electoral landscape that marginalized extra-parliamentary and extra-judicial actions in favour of incrementalism, unionism as an end in itself, “reformism” and representative democracy.<sup>6</sup>

In their view, this depoliticized, even co-opted, form of trade unionism hindered the formation of an independent working class political initiative. In protecting their marginally advantaged positions at the expense of the unorganized and underemployed majority, unions were essentially paving the way for their own decline. Seeking to reorient and broaden the scope of trade unionism in the form of a class unionism, Marx argued:

The trade unions are an aristocratic minority. The poorer workers can not join them: the great mass of workers, driven daily by economic developments from the villages into the cities, remain outside the trade unions for a long time, and the poorest of all never belong to them. The same goes for the workers born in London’s East End, where one out of ten belongs to the trade unions. The farm workers, the day laborers, never belong to these trade unions. The trade unions by standing alone are powerless – they will remain a minority. They do not have the mass of proletarians behind them. [Lynd 2001:53]

In other words, when unions focused almost exclusively on workplace gains, particularly those economic in nature, exclusion from the benefits of unionization often aroused working class resentment. And while their gains often translated into some concessions from capital or legislative benefits for the non-unionized, these came to be associated with the party in power rather than

6 See Kolasky 1990; Penner 1992; Bercuson 1990; Upchurch et al. 2009; Carroll and Ratner 2005. Also, writing in response to the development of social democratic trade unionism and the inability of unions to represent the class as a whole, Engels wrote: “The trade-union movement, among all the big, strong and rich trade unions, has become more an obstacle to the general movement than an instrument of its progress; and outside of the trade unions there are an immense mass of workers in London who have kept quite a distance away from the political movement for several years, and as a result are very ignorant. But on the other hand they are also free of the many traditional prejudices of the trade unions and the other old sects, and therefore form excellent material with which one can work” (Engels 1871).

the class struggles which led to their making. Moreover, these legislative gains would always be under attack and temporary owing to the volatile fluctuations of market demands. Marx and Engels argued that a one-dimensional emphasis on union gains was a political trap because capital and the state promoted the view that “privileged” unionized workers gained at the expense of their non-unionized counterparts. Instead, they emphasized that neither protective legislation from the “great trade union of the ruling class” (i.e. the state), nor the resistance of the trade unionists alone abolished the main thing that had to be eliminated: “The capital-labour relationship, which the antagonism between the capitalist class and the wage-working class always generates anew” (Lapides 1987:161). For Marx and Engels, if trade unions were going to have a progressive future they needed to recognize that while they could bargain within the system they could not escape the political and economic contradictions that stymied their continual expansion owing to their class exploitation. The challenge before unions, then, was to simultaneously improve the working conditions of their members while extending those gains to the non-unionized, underemployed and unwaged as part of generating a socialistic class consciousness.

As long as capitalistic social relations were dominant and the imperatives of cut-throat competition, labour rationality and profit maximization most important, Marx and Engels argued that the working class would remain in a position of modern-day serfdom.<sup>7</sup> As such, they stressed that the labour movement alone was incapable of abolishing the root causes of workers’ distress. Unless unions made an effort to broaden their aims and advocate on behalf of and in accordance with all of society’s oppressed (i.e. class-struggle unionism), unions risked degenerating into almost reactionary enclaves of privilege, upholding the manifest divisions of the working class and stunting its political development. Rather

7 Thus Marx and Engels emphasized the need to challenge the centrality of “wage-slavery.” Certainly improved wages were important but would amount to little more than “better payment for the slave, and would not win wither for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity” (Marx 2001:118-119).

than applying palliatives, trades unions must cure the malady: if unions were to become progressive forces of movement, rather than reactionary, even if defensive, opportunists, this meant building unions as expressions of working class unity.<sup>8</sup>

But of course this did not mean that unions should dogmatically assert the one ‘right way’ forward, but rather that they must lead to the radical left.<sup>9</sup> Marx and Engels were vehemently critical of doctrinal sectarians and narrow-minded trade union leaders that sought to put their goals and ambitions above the interests of the working-class: “It is far more important that the movement should spread ... than that it should start and proceed, from the beginning, on theoretically correct grounds. There is no better road to theoretical clearness of comprehension than by one’s own mistakes *durch schaden warden* [to learn by bitter experience]” (Engels 1866). Instead the challenge facing trade unionists was to go about actively building the political and organizational capacities of both its membership and the class in its entirety.<sup>10</sup> As

8 “Apart from their original purpose, they [unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves as acting as the champions of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men [the unorganized and unwaged] into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as agricultural laborers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions” (Marx 1866).

9 Extending their analysis to include intellectuals, professionals and party leaders, Marx reminded: “The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot, therefore, go along with people who openly claim that the workers are too ignorant to emancipate themselves but must first be emancipated from the top down, by the philanthropic big and petty bourgeois” (Marx and Engels 1879).

10 As Marx (with guidance from Engels) wrote: “That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves, that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule; That the economical subjection of the man of labor to the monopolizer of the means of labor — that is, the source of life — lies at the bottom of servitude in all its forms, of all social misery, mental degradation, and political dependence; That the economical emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means; That all efforts aiming at the great end hitherto failed from the want of solidarity between the manifold divisions of labor in each country, and from the absence of a fraternal bond of union between the working classes of different countries; That the emancipation of labor is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists, and depending for its solution on the concurrence, practical and theoretical,

they argued in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The real fruit of their battle lies not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of the different localities in contact with one another. [Marx and Engels 2002:229-230]<sup>11</sup>

For Marx and Engels the recognition of the simultaneously classed, gendered and racialized underpinnings of production and reproduction (notwithstanding important weaknesses) was central to developing the political capacities of workers to challenge the rule of state and capital (Anderson 2010).<sup>12</sup> But while they emphasized the transcendence of class privileges, they were aware that intersecting axes of oppression would not be mechanically resolved with the overcoming of class rule. They were apprehensive, however, about a politics based on differences alone and sought the means through which the diversity of the working class could be transformed via a class project that genuinely acknowledged and addressed these differences while recognizing their social and political interdependencies. In other words, a working class social and political formation united in difference.

Of course, this is not the place for a detailed overview of debates about class, but a few general points are nevertheless necessary to emphasize. For Marx and Engels classes are not things, a partition where neatly demarcated typologies, iron-like, clearly separate the producers from the appropriators.

of the most advanced countries; That the present revival of the working classes in the most industrious countries of Europe, while it raises a new hope, gives solemn warning against a relapse into the old errors, and calls for the immediate combination of the still disconnected movements.” And thereby declared: “That all societies and individuals adhering to it will acknowledge truth, justice, and morality as the basis of their conduct toward each other and toward all men, without regard to color, creed, or nationality; That it acknowledges no rights without duties, no duties without rights” (Marx 1864).

11 In other words, despite important, even if short-lived victories “it is necessary that our aims should be thus comprehensive to include every form of working activity” (Marx 1871).

12 As Kevin Anderson has recently reminded, “Marx’s mature social theory revolved around a concept of totality that not only offered considerable scope for particularity and difference, but also made those particulars – race, ethnicity or nationality – determinants for the totality” (Anderson 2010:244). See also, Brown 2013.

Classes do not exist independently of the changing historical circumstances and social relations in which they arise. For Marx and Engels, the “Lazarus-layers” of the working class are constantly shifting and redefining themselves, displacing past relationships and recreating them anew.<sup>13</sup> The concept of the working class never precisely delineated a specific body of people but was rather an ongoing expression for a social and historical process. Of course, in analytical terms the working class can be defined based on its relationship to the means of production and those who must sell their labour-power in order to live. But a broadly defined working class politics is about all labourers and their families, their paid and unpaid experiences, and the ways in which intersecting axes of oppression simultaneously influence other dimensions of social life.<sup>14</sup>

Put differently, it is necessary to do away with the notion that class oppression is experienced only when one works for a wage or participates in paid employment. Rather class oppressions penetrate deeply into the very fabric of social life and includes the waged, unwaged and those denied a change to work because their skills are apparently unproductive or of inferior efficiency. Thus the working class is constantly changing not only in terms of how it sees itself but also in its relationship to others within the class. As Marx and Engels argued, unions needed to look beyond limited membership gains and seek to advance social and political ones that extended to the class as a whole. If organized labour was going to have a progressive future it would need to be anchored in a politics that oriented its struggles toward the emancipation of the entire working class and therefore the transcendence of class privileges. Certainly much has changed since the time of Marx’s and Engels’s writings. In what ways are their insights useful to the Canadian labour movement, particularly public sector workers, today?

13 In other words, as Braverman argued more than three decades ago, “classes, the class structure, the social structure as a whole, are not fixed entities, but an ongoing process, rich in change, transition and variation, and incapable of being encapsulated in formulas, no matter how analytically proper such forms may be” (Braverman 1998:282).

14 See Thompson 2002; Roediger 2005; Collins 2003; Paap 2006; Fletcher Jr. and Gapasin 2008; Moody 1988.

How have compositional changes impacted private and public sector trade unionists? And what challenges might this pose?

### **Shifting Demographics and the Feminization of Organized Labour**

There have been major structural shifts to the composition of union membership by sex, age, industry and sector over the last three decades. Recently, public sector unionism has eclipsed private sector unionism in terms of both density and militancy. Whereas public sector union density stayed relatively consistent from 1984 to 2003 hovering around 72 percent, total Canadian private sector density fell from 26 percent to just over 18 percent. By 2011, private sector union density had fallen to just 16 percent, while public sector density remained largely unchanged (Uppal 2011:6). This has taken place in conjunction with a significant shift in the gender makeup of Canadian labour. From 1977 to 2003 women’s share of unionization rose from just 12 percent to 48 percent. And by 2011, more than 32 percent of women were unionized compared to just 29 percent of men (Uppal 2011:6; Akyeampong 2004:5). These aggregate density measures, however, mask important differences for public and private sector workers. In the private sector, men’s union density rates continue to outpace women (19 percent versus 12.5 percent), but the reverse is true in the public sector where women are concentrated in higher numbers (73.2 percent versus 68.5 percent). While public sector unionization rates have remained fairly consistent over the past three decades – buoying total union density (around 30 percent) – private sector unionization has been nearly halved.

In Ontario for example, once the heartland of industrial unionism in Canada, total union density has fallen from 37.6 percent in 1984 to just 26.6 percent in 2011 (second-lowest to Alberta). Here too, total union density rates mask important differences between public and private sector work. While the former has stayed relatively consistent over the last three decades fluctuating around the 70 percent mark, private sector union density fell from 19.4 percent in 1997 to 16 percent by 2011 (Uppal

2011:6; Akyeamong 2004:5). Paralleling national trends, women continue to outpace men in the rate of unionization in the public sector, while men tend to predominate (although in much lower densities) in the private sector (Uppal 2011; HRSDC 2011). In addition to the long-term gender and sectoral changes in union density rates, important changes in full-time and part-time work arrangements have also changed the distributional makeup of Canadian labour.

Between 1984 and 2002, full-time-equivalent union density has fallen from 45 percent to 33 percent, whereas part-time union density has remained stable around 24 percent. By 2011, the full-time rate of union density had fallen to 31 percent, while the part-time rate was 23 percent. However, among men part-time employees had a lower rate of unionization than full-time employees (18 percent versus 29 percent), while women's rates were slightly higher (25 percent versus 32 percent). By 2009, women made up 47 percent of the labour force and, although more women worked part-time than men, close to 73 percent of women who worked were full-time (Uppal 2011:9; Statistics Canada 2010).<sup>15</sup>

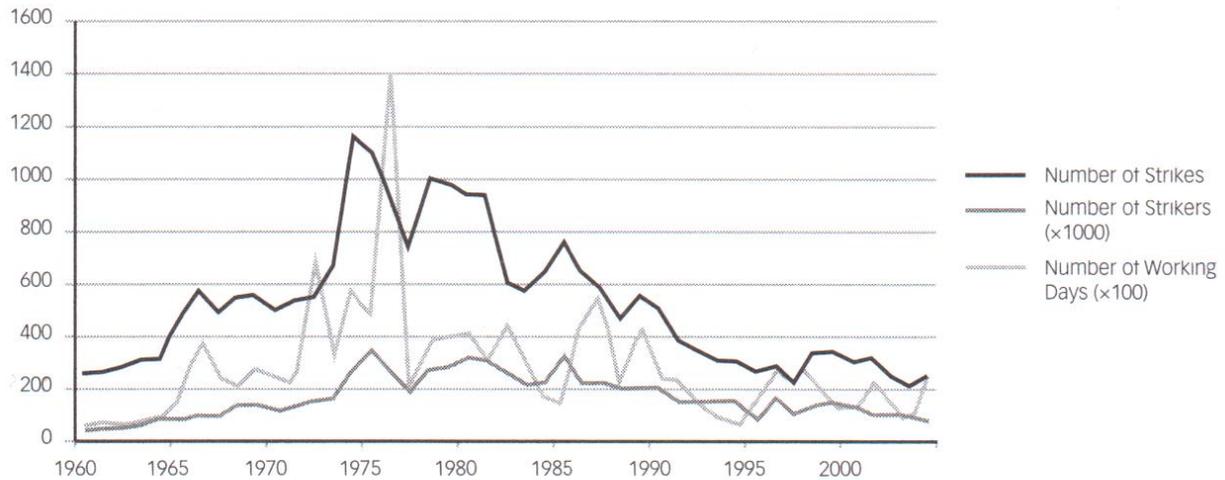
While women earned an average hourly rate equal to 81 percent of men's wages in 1998 by 2009 this had only risen marginally to 84 percent indicating an ongoing gender wage-gap. However, among full-time women who were unionized their wages were equal to 95 percent of men's wages, while unionized part-time women earned an average of 8 percent more (Uppal 2011:10; Statistics Canada 2010). Thus the evidence suggests that unionization plays a far greater role in reducing gender-based wage discrimination than equity-seeking legislation does. In addition to being concentrated in the public sector and in greater numbers among full-time

15 Research by Marshall (2011:13-14) shows that the employment rate between men and women is converging. Whereas in the 1980s men's labour force participation rates were 12 percent higher than women, by 2010 the gap had fallen to less than 3 percent. Likewise, although women continue to do the majority of unpaid domestic labour, Marshall's data suggests that time spent on domestic labour and childcare rates are becoming increasingly similar between spouses in Canada. A parallel narrowing of the housework gap has been found among teenage boys and girls. On the whole, progressively, from late baby boomers (those born between 1957 to 1966) to Generation X (born between 1969 and 1978) and those in Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1990), there has been an increasing similarity in men's and women's involvement in paid employment and housework, although the substance of the latter remains hotly contested.

workers, recent data also suggests that unionization is increasingly associated with older and higher educated workers. In 2011, 36 percent of workers aged 45-54 were unionized compared with only 14 percent of those aged 15-24, with marginal increases the further one goes up the distributional ladder (HRSDC 2011). There has also been a significant domestication of trade union organizations. For instance, in 1962 international (largely U.S.) unions accounted for two-thirds of all Canadian union members, but by 1995 this number had dropped to 29 percent. Over the same period, national union representation had risen from 21 percent to 57 percent (Akyeampong 2004:7). By 2010, the share of international unions in Canada had fallen to 27 percent, while Canadian-based unions rose to 67 percent (HRSDC 2011:14). Much of the shift from international to domestic unions has had to do with the simultaneous growth of public sector unionization as well as the general decline of unionization in the goods-producing sectors as capital restructured and relocated to the global south.

Today public sector unions are the first (Canadian Union of Public Employees: 601,976), second (National Union of Public and General Employees: 340,000), sixth (Public Service Alliance of Canada: 188,462), eighth (Fédération de la Santé et des Services Sociaux: 122,193) and tenth (Service Employees International Union: 92,781) largest of all Canadian unions. While some of these unions are branching out into the private sector, their members remain largely concentrated in the public sector. In other words, public sector unions today represent nearly 60 percent of total union coverage in Canada (HRSDC 2011:14). By 2011, just nine of the largest unions covered 50 percent of all trade unionists in Canada.<sup>16</sup> This suggests, paradoxically, a simultaneously concentrated yet highly fragmented representational structure. But while the sectoral and demographic composition of labour may have changed, has this resulted in a corresponding wave of trade union militancy or closer identification with one's class interests?

16 All of these unions have over 100,000 members. Another 42 percent of trade unionists are in unions with more than 10,000 members but less than 100,000, while the remaining 8 percent are in unions averaging around 2,000 workers. HRSDC 2011:14.

**Figure 1: Labour Militancy in Canada, 1960-2004**

Source: Briskin 2010: 222

In terms of trade union militancy – a rough gauge of working class consciousness and confidence in collective action – the responses since the 1990s have been generally mild in comparison with previous decades of workplace discontent. (See Figure 1.) Where such stoppages have centred has also shifted. From 1970 to 1981, the data reveals a particularly heated decade of trade union militancy. But since then the number of strikes, workers on strike and work days lost to strikes has declined in lockstep. Research suggests moderate and declining levels through the 1980s and a sharp drop in the 1990s, continuing through the 2000s (Gunderson et al. 2005).<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps more tellingly, however, the data also reveals an important shift away from the long-established dominance of private sector trade union militancy. As Briskin (2010:223) notes:

Even though many public-sector workers are deemed essential, denied the right to strike, and possibly legislated back to work, between 1995 and 2004, 27 percent of all stoppages (787) were in the public sector (the highest percentage since public-sector unionization). The stoppages involved more than 71 percent of all workers on strike. Furthermore, in this period, almost 20 percent of

all work days lost were in the public sector.<sup>18</sup>

Comparing the period 2001-2005 to 2006-2010, federal work stoppages declined from 4 to 2, while provincial work stoppages declined from 32 to 17. There has also been a considerable fall in the average number of workers involved in major work stoppages: a decrease of 91 percent in federal jurisdiction and 68 percent in provincial jurisdiction over the same periods. (HSRDC 2011:16.) As Figure 2 shows, the average number of workers involved in major work stoppages has also declined significantly, although with important differences in the public and private sectors.

The average duration of strikes also reveals some important insights. Comparing 2001-2005 to 2006-2010, the average duration of major work stoppages in federal jurisdiction dropped from 50 to 13 person-days not worked, whereas this increased from 20 to 24 for workers under provincial jurisdiction (HRSDC 2011:10.) From 2005 to 2010, 90 percent of all work stoppages occurred under provincial jurisdiction. Part of this is explained by federal devolution onto the provinces which, despite delivering the bulwark of services, had their revenue drastically reduced in the form of tax points and transfer payments. On the whole, from 2000 to 2011 the total yearly amount of workplace stoppages four times reached new all-time

17 The highpoint of worker involvement in strikes was 1976 when strikes involved some 18 percent of total employment. Since 1999, they have dropped to about 1 percent of total employees.

18 Additionally, Gunderson et al. 2005 suggests this number may actually be even higher when contracts settled through direct legislative intervention and those denied the right to strike are included.

**Figure 2. Sectoral Strike Activity, 1960-2004**

Year	Sector	Number		Workers		Work days lost	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
1960-1994	Public	3751	17.8	5,177,586	47.0	77,634	11.8
	Private	17310	82.2	5,831,247	53.0	582,706	88.2
	Total	21061	100.0	11,008,833	100.0	660,340	100.0
1995-2004	Public	787	27.3	1,334,162	71.7	24,392	19.5
	Private	2096	72.7	526,343	28.3	100,376	80.5
	Total	2883	100.0	1,860,505	100.0	124,768	100.0
1960-2004	Public	4538	19.0	6,511,748	50.6	102,026	13.0
	Private	19406	81.0	6,357,590	49.4	683,082	87.0
	Total	23944	100.0	12,869,338	100.0	785,108	100.0

Source: Briskin 2010:223

lows, while the total yearly amount of person-days not worked twice reached new all-time lows.

Over the same period, workers under provincial jurisdiction six times reached new all-time low workplace stoppages, while setting a new yearly low for the total number of person-days not worked (HRSDC 2012). When disaggregating these stoppages, it is revealed that from 1960 to 1994 educational services, health care, social assistance and public administration accounted for about 7 percent of all strikes and 14 percent of all striking workers. Between 1995 and 2004, however, these sectors had come to represent 17 percent and 38 percent indicating growing public sector militancy in the context of workplace conflict (Briskin 2010). Moreover, public sector strikes tend to involve much larger numbers and be shorter in duration, whereas private sector strikes have fewer workers and are longer in duration. The escalation of public sector trade union militancy can in part be attributed to the increasing participation of women and ethno-racialized groups in union activities and particularly in leadership roles. “Women have promoted women’s leadership, challenged traditional leaderships to be more accountable, encouraged unions to be more democratic and participatory, organized networks of women’s committees to represent their interests, and pressured unions to take up women’s concerns as union members and workers – through policy initiatives and at the negotiating table” (Briskin 2010:219). But what does militancy actually

reveal? Is militancy alone indicative of trade union offensives, defensive struggles or a growing awareness of class consciousness?

As Michael Mann (1973) has argued, while strikes can be explosions of class consciousness the working class solidarity they generate rarely gathers momentum beyond the immediate event. Hence while strikes may lead workers to question the unequal relationship between employers and employees, those concerns rarely translate into a coherent awareness of class differences and class struggles, let alone critical assessments of deficiencies in the political structure or capitalist system.

While strikes are certainly important and can go a long way toward galvanizing broader community support in defense of decent jobs, legalistic straight-jackets and authoritarian employers, they rarely translate into a clear ideological opposition and political perspective. Because workers are not inherently radical or conservative but adapt to the structured conditions they face, any process of radicalization will inevitably be uneven and fraught with ongoing tensions as diverse interests, levels of class consciousness, experiences and political preferences come into play. The challenge, then, confronting Canadian labour and activists, is to revive the dormant state of class politics lest unions continue to face both resentment from the unorganized sections of the working class as well as mounting pressures from capital and the state to rescind past achievements.

Far from creating a crisis of neoliberalism, the capitalist classes have emerged emboldened in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Ironically, despite a significant economic downturn that should have put labour and activists on the offensive, many are more atomized than ever. As Marx and Engels argued, should unions strive to regain their once prominent role in the pursuit of social justice and workplace democracy they will need to take the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back while they still have *some* capacity to do so or risk continuing along the several decade long union impasse and general decline in living standards. But as James Rinehart reminds, unions are paradoxical institutions:

While they are an effective vehicle to advance workers' interests, they have also become a force for accommodating workers to corporate capitalism... Unions emerged in response to alienation and exploitation, but collective bargaining, the defining characteristic and essential function of unions, takes as given the prevailing power relations at the workplace... At best, unions nibble away at the margins of power, modifying but not altering in any fundamental sense relations of domination and subordination. And since capitalist power is at the heart of alienated and exploited labour, unions are not in a position to offer real solutions to these conditions. This does not alter the fact that, in capitalist society, unions constitute critically important organs of struggle and are still the only viable means most workers have to realize better lives on and off the job. [Rinehart 2006:203-4]

In seeking alternative forms of trade unionism, rank-and-file workers, labour organizers, academics and activists have generally converged on three points: (1) issues related to union bureaucracy, transparency and calls for deeper democracy; (2) the need to avoid economism and include issues related to workplace harassment and gender/racial oppression; (3) and a focus on increasing militancy and developing social movement coalitions.

Many have engaged in a lively debate as to what such forms a militant, grassroots social movement unionism might take.<sup>19</sup> My focus here, however, is

19 For typological overviews see Albo and Crow 2008; Ross 2007;

on the irreconcilable limitations of unionizing within a social system premised upon the exploitation of one class by another and the structural and systemic imperatives that stymies the extension of unionization to the non-unionized and unwaged which lies at the heart of capitalism.

As argued throughout, challenging the consolidated power of capital and the state requires developing a broader ideological framework in which to anchor political-economic ambitions. Given the continuing onslaught of neoliberalism within the context of a reinvigorated austerity agenda, understanding the capitalist context that leaves workers dependent on the imperatives of capital is crucial to developing a political program potentially capable of reversing labour's decline. Part of the problem, as Sam Gindin (2013:3) has pointed out, is that:

Capital does the investing, organizes production, manifests the application of science and technology, provides the jobs, and generates the growth and tax revenue for social programs and public employment. The understandable inclination of workers with only their labour power to sell is to accommodate to this naturalized reality, and this is expressed in the union form as the instrumental mechanism to meet their needs.<sup>20</sup>

While the power of unions lies in their willingness to act collectively in the interests of members, unless the root sectionalism of labour is addressed renewal efforts are unlikely to be successful. In order to potentially reverse the cumulative defeats which have befallen Canadian unions over the era of neoliberalism, a renewed labour movement, in addition to reclaiming strikes, sit-ins, work-to-rule campaigns, mass secondary picketing, workplace takeovers and sustained general strikes, will need to come to terms with the way capitalism permeates all avenues of peoples' lives. Absent a fundamental critique of capitalism, labour will continue to cling to the false hope that capital and the state will treat labour as an equal partner at the table when such a system of

Camfield 2008. See also Kumar and Schenk 2006; Tait 2005; Turner et al. 2001; Brofenbrenner et al. 1998.

20 It is for these reasons that Marx and Engels stressed that: "Instead of the conservative motto, a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, they [unions] ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword abolition of the wage system" (Marx and Engels 1865).

exploitation is premised upon the very subordination of labour to the logic of capital.

The consequent tendency for labour, as Marx and Engels pointed out, has been that rather than fighting their true enemies – the capitalist class and state which sustains them – the tendency among the working class has been to fight the enemies of their enemies and particularly amongst themselves.<sup>21</sup> This is a common and widespread phenomenon, often illustrated as such: How can public sector unions demand a pay raise when the private sector is getting battered? Is this why taxes must be raised? Are unions to blame for a particular company moving elsewhere to take advantage of “competitive” wages? It is often claimed that unionized workers should be happy they have a job at all – “someone who’s unemployed will do it for half the wage.” These sentiments and this fragmentation is not without cause, of course. As Michael Lebowitz (2003:122) has reminded a “necessary condition for the existence of capital is the ability to divide and separate workers – in order to defeat them. Rather than a contingent, incidental characteristic...this is an inner tendency of capital.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, given the structural antagonism central to the production and reproduction of social life, only clearly articulated political messages rooted in an understanding of capitalism’s inner processes may stem or reverse labour’s decline.

Looking forward, because Canadian labour is generally older, suggesting that unionization was inherited rather than explicitly fought for, a class perspective must be regenerated in order for unions to come to terms with how to renew themselves as a social and political force. Beyond episodic displays of labour’s potential, most clearly demonstrated during mass job actions, it is unlikely that labour will be able to remake itself without a simultaneous renewal of the radical and anti-capitalist left. Additionally, as Thom Workman (2009:130) has argued: “Without an enriching dialogue about capitalism in Canada, an

21 As Marx and Engels put it: “At this stage, therefore, the proletarians do not fight their enemies, but the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy, the landowners, the non-industrial bourgeois, the petty bourgeois” (Marx and Engels 2002:229).

22 Or as Marx (in Anderson 2010:20) argued: “This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power.”

informational network that counters the nonsense of the nightly news, a working-class culture that affirms the insights and experiences of working people and the coherent resistance of organized labour, all we are left with is a diverse collection of issue-based, resource-poor, small-scale organizations biting at the heels of the corporate Leviathan.”

Building on worker dependency and union sectionalism, and absent collective identities and alternatives:

Working-class families found individualized ways of ‘getting through’ that reshaped working-class consciousness and contributed to the reproduction of the neoliberal ethos. Working hours increased dramatically, young workers stayed at home longer, married couples moved in with parents to save for a mortgage, credit cards became ubiquitous, families increased their debt loads. Housing became an asset to be used to obtain even more credit; stock markets were anxiously watched for their impact on pensions; tax cuts were welcomed as the equivalent of wage hikes. Intensified competition and worker dependence on ‘their’ corporations weakened class solidarities, as did two-tier wages within the workplace (alienating the very young workers that union renewal would depend on). [Gindin 2013:5]

Because neoliberalism not only subjugated and attacked working people but integrated and built upon workers’ social interdependencies, a successful project for union renewal will need to reestablish an emphasis on working class politics. As part of this process a renewed Left would need to have connections both inside and outside of the labour movement and seek to link these issues across workplaces, engaging in political debates and organizing across communities. This requires simultaneously working to build the capacities of the entire union to fight back against concessionary demands; developing a movement inside the union that pushes for enhanced democratic participation and control; a radically feminist, antiracist, class struggle-oriented political praxis that engages with the struggles of the broader community; and educational efforts intent on building a cadre of workers and activists that embody intellectual understanding and are active.

The stark reality is that unionized, non-unionized, underemployed workers and those in transition continue to be hard-hit from the aftershocks of the global financial crisis. On average, laid-off workers from the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s suffered an 18-35 percent contraction in wages five years after being laid-off (Bernard and Galarneau 2010:11).<sup>23</sup> The 2008 recession seems to have intensified these long-term trends, but with important demographic differences. Whereas a larger share of those who lost employment in the 1980s and 1990s were predominantly male and employed in the manufacturing sector, workers laid-off during the period 2008 to 2011 were older, better educated, equally male and female and tended to work in service-oriented professions. While 46 percent of laid-off workers in the 1980s came from primary industries, this ratio had declined to 43 percent in the 1990s downturn and 38 percent during the 2008-11 recession. Likewise, almost 40 percent of laid-off workers were aged 45 or older, twice the rate observed in the 1980s (Chan et al.:14).

On average, workers who were laid-off between 2008 and 2011 and found employment within one-year saw their average weekly wages fall from \$734 to \$703. In other words, one quarter of re-employed laid-off workers saw their weekly wages fall by 23 percent or more, while 10 percent experienced losses of more than 50 percent.<sup>24</sup> Finally, workers who lost union coverage while moving across jobs experienced average hourly wage losses of 16 percent and (average weekly losses of 17 percent, while workers who moved from a firm with at least 100 employees to a smaller firm experienced hourly wage and weekly wage losses of 11 percent and 15 percent. Workers who changed both occupations and industry saw average weekly wages fall by 10 percent. In

23 Like workers laid-off between 1993 and 1997, workers who lost employment between 2002 and 2006 found themselves in a much more polarized labour market: more than one-half of total wage losses and gains exceeded 20 percent. Moreover, the data confirms a downward trend in the quality of work as roughly 14 percent of laid-off workers over 1993-97 and 2002-06 found themselves in employment with lower skill levels than the job lost. Similarly, while approximately 16 percent of laid-off workers over the period 1993-97 lost pension coverage, this had risen to 20 percent for workers over 2002-06 resulting in more than 6 in 10 jobs providing no pension plan (Bernard and Galarneau 2010:14-15).

24 These findings are consistent with similar results over the period 2006 to 2008 (Chan et al. 2011).

contrast, employees who gained union coverage or moved to firms with 100 or more workers averaged weekly wage gains of between 8-11 percent suggesting an ongoing union wage premium (Chan et al. 2011:20).

Since the recession, the quality of work has continued to degrade with most new positions being part-time, temporary or self-employed. This has hit youth (15-24), the elderly (55 and over), women and racialized persons especially hard as long-term unemployment has surged from 15 percent before the downturn to nearly a quarter of jobless people ever since. In light of ongoing attacks against public services, labour unions and activists within the context of austerity, a radical working class politics that places social justice and workplace democracy on the public agenda is sorely needed.

### **Making the Case for an Expanded Public Sector**

David McNally (2001:175) has recently argued: “Every mass movement to change the world begins with struggles to reform society. No movement for radical change begins by demanding revolution as such.” Any movement seeking an alternative to neoliberal capitalism must find ways of integrating both immediate and medium-term demands with larger systemic ones in mutually-reinforcing ways. Of course, unless concessions are resisted more will follow. But resistance is not a proactive strategy in and of itself: making the case for an expanded public sector must be part and parcel of any coherent strategy for transformative change. In the face of ongoing attacks against labour, many Canadian unions have been unable to stop, let alone reverse demands for concessions. Part of the challenge confronting labour, particularly those advocating for enhanced public spending, has been to demonstrate the social, political and economic value that public services (and taxation more broadly) provides.

Research by Hugh Mackenzie and Richard Shillington (2009) has shown that the average Canadian enjoys approximately \$17,000 in annual public services; roughly equivalent to the average annual earnings of an individual working full-time

at minimum wage.<sup>25</sup> With broad-based tax cuts the reverse is true. In reducing the Goods and Services Tax by 1 percentage point, this deprived public coffers of some \$5.7 billion (and growing) in annual revenue. The irony, however, is that some 80 percent of Canadians actually lost out. Instead, the top income quintile benefitted the most. For households with incomes between \$110,000 and \$200,000 the net gain was roughly \$50 per year, while households with incomes over \$200,000 saw net gain averages of \$200 (Mackenzie and Shilington 2009:21-22). Using those tax dollars to fund, for example, a national childcare program or redirecting them to local governments would have been a far more responsible, productive and socially just use of general tax revenue than symbolic reimbursements. Expanding healthcare, public infrastructure, education and pensions has the potential to reduce dependence on markets and on the private sector. What's more, there has never been a better time to undertake the massive expansion of public infrastructure as governments can borrow money at historically-low rates making large-scale public reinvestments feasible.

What's more, a number of authors have suggested progressive reforms designed to mitigate volatile market swings. This includes increasing taxes on financial activities, eliminating tax preferences for stock options and capital gains, reversing corporate tax cuts, raising income taxes for high-income earners and corporations, clamping down on tax evasion and loopholes, instituting an inheritance tax, raising the minimum wage and implementing a universal basic salary without means testing or work requirements (Brenan 2012; Van Parijs and Vanderborcht 2012; Blais 2002). But while enhanced "regulations" on capital are important and necessary for any radical strategy aiming for a more equitable and just soci-

<sup>25</sup> Of course, the extent of usage changes through the life cycle. For example, seniors benefit less directly from public education than they do, say, from healthcare and pensions, although earlier, particularly if they were parents, the opposite was true. Furthermore, the authors of the study demonstrate how the median Canadian household realizes a \$41,000 in yearly benefits from public services, which is equivalent to roughly 63 percent of median disposable income in a 2.6 person household. Also, more than two-thirds of Canadians benefit in some direct form from public services, which are equal to nearly 50 percent of households' total earned income. Education, social services and healthcare in particular, account for 64 percent of total public spending, thereby playing a significant redistributive role (Mackenzie and Shilington 2009:6).

ety, a focus on redistribution must bear in mind the class exploitation that happens pre-distribution (i.e. extraction, production, social reproduction), raising a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. In other words, rather than continuing to rely on the private sector as the engine of economic growth and investment, an alternative political economic framework must come to advance a vision of democratic social planning within a vastly expanded public sector. It is here where the power of Canadian labour, rooted as it is in the public sector, has a chance to demonstrate the socio-political and economic advantages of universal public services. Without undercutting the structural power of capital and the private sector, plans to expand public services will always be at the mercy of the capitalist class and state more broadly. Thus pressures must include aims to not only "re-regulate" but to democratize and socialize the sector as a whole – the opposite responses to austerity and privatization.

Of course, in order to accomplish this it is necessary to change the social attitudes about the conflicting roles of the public and private sectors as well as taxation more generally, while making the connections between social justice, universality and demands for deeper democracy. Starting with increasing the tax share borne by the extremely wealthy is an important remedial step, but increases to corporate and income taxes are only a portion of the remedy. Focusing only on the rich reinforces a perverse kind of individualism that reinforces populist anti-tax sentiments. Making the case for an expanded public sector through massive investments in health care, education and public infrastructure may potentially reduce a dependence on private capital and markets, and shifts the focus away from deepening market incentives to extending collective capacities for the public good. In other words, by extending the scale and scope of public services (e.g. pharmacare, early childhood care, etc) they could become instruments of popular control and democratic social planning, which might create openings for democratizing broader aspects of the economy. It is worthwhile recalling Marx and Engels' truism that the equalization of classes was incompatible with the logic of capitalism, and that while greater 'balance' is impor-

tant and necessary a renewed working class politics must seek ways of transcending relations of social exploitation.

In this regard, renewed hopes about the viability of a social democratic resurgence is a non-starter as it is both politically misleading and fails to understand how capital(ism) has evolved over the course of neoliberalism (Bello 2009; Fernandez 2009; Desai 2009). Through the crisis, social democracy has moved further away from labour and increasingly toward centrist, even reactionary, positions. Equally important, it is necessary to recall that the demise of the Keynesian welfare state occurred not so much for a lack of creativity in policymaking, but rather because of its inability to sustain capital accumulation in light of rising working class standards of living and democratic/popular decision making capacities. This is a contradiction Keynesianism and social democracy are powerless to overcome. The working class struggles and mobilizations that launched the Keynesian welfare state emerged from an earlier period of capitalist crisis backed by militant trade unions and socialist-inspired political formations. However, social democracy today, particularly in its New Democratic form, has rid itself of whatever radicalism it may have had in the past having made peace with capitalism. Keynesianism and social democracy have shed any past commitments to “reformism,” having instead taken up the mantle as responsible managers of neoliberalism. (Carroll and Rater 2005; Evans and Schmidt 2012).

In other words, neoliberalism has eroded whatever ‘progressive’ remnants of social democracy that once remained. In fact, social democracy has increasingly shown signs of intellectual confusion having failed to break ideologically or politically with a social dependence on capital, let alone meaningfully intervene in recent labour struggles. Today, the New Democratic Party (NDP), in its various forms, has no transformative vision of society, adheres to the economic agenda of neoliberalism and displays no interest in challenging the logic of capital or the democratic functions of the state. The tenures of Premiers Rae in Ontario, Dexter in Nova Scotia, Doer in Manitoba, Romanow and Calvert in Saskatchewan and even Mayor Miller in Toronto,

for example, lead precisely to these conclusions as each sought to deal with the structural constraints imposed by neoliberal policies (and capitalism more broadly) by further entrenching market reforms, demanding concessions from workers and a strict adherence to fiscal orthodoxy. Moreover, the NDP, like the Liberals and Conservatives, remain trapped in top-down organizational structures with little interest in building mobilizational capacities with labour or at the community and grassroots level (Carroll and Rater 2005; Evans and Schmidt 2012). Dedicated organizing strategies by Canadian unions’ intent on creating new inroads into spaces currently seen as the sacrosanct domain of the private sector must emphasize the social value of extending public services. Making the case for an expanded public sector challenges private capital accumulation as the engine of economic growth and raises a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. This means not only expanding the redistributive role of the state but actually taking the lead in ensuring that access to housing, public transit, pensions, healthcare, as well as improved working conditions, immigrant and environmental rights are available for all. In not adequately reinvesting its profits in decent jobs, the private sector is openly admitting that it cannot provide decent jobs for everyone. The dead end of neoliberalism and austerity will only make things worse. Reducing public spending will increase unemployment, weakening consumption and exacerbating inequality. Rather, widely socializing the means of production with large-scale investments in the public sector could boost overall employment, fuelling domestic demand, and improving the work and living conditions of Canadians through a more equitable, participatory and democratic form of governance and social planning.

Collective political action has historically been organized labour’s most effective tool for progressive change. What structural changes to the broader political economy (e.g. enhanced capital mobility, re-regulation, offshoring) have not finished off labour as a progressive force in working class politics, anti-union legislation (e.g. “right to work,” changes to certification procedures) seeks to consolidate. While the courts have played an important role in protect-

ing basic rights to freedom of association, extending some gains to the unorganized and establishing workplace minimums, its progressivity has always been the result of sustained politicization and class struggles. As Larry Savage (2009:18) has argued,

No constitutional document, however progressive, can replace the need for sustained political struggle to protect and enhance workers' rights...over the long term, it may turn out to be the quickest path to irrelevancy for a labor movement that continues to tread water in an era of neoliberal globalization.

Considering the anti-workers architecture of the law (Glasbeek 1999), relying solely on the courts and the legal system to protect and enhance workers' rights and freedoms is an apolitical strategy that declasses trade unionism and is unlikely to be successful. As an alternative, a class-oriented labour movement espousing a renewed working class politics may offer a way out of the impasse of Canadian labour.

### Conclusion

The shape taken by struggles over austerity and social services may determine whether neoliberalism continues uninterrupted or alternatively whether something new and historically unique can capture the public's imagination. Given the scale and scope of what labour unions and the working class is collectively up against, organizing solely around specific issues and particular constituencies – as impressive and energetic it may be – cannot add up to the kind of strength, organization and structure that is

needed to bring about significant change. To that end, labour unions remain the largest, most organized, resourced and stable institutions – institutions of a class “in itself” but not yet “for itself” – fighting against the rule of capital. But, as Marx and Engels stressed, while trade unions must be a central part of this progressive political renewal, their renewal is equally dependent upon a broader revitalization of working class politics. The course of neoliberalism has thoroughly beaten back what vestiges remain of trade union militancy, notwithstanding important exceptions, while social movements generally remain isolated in small-scale and resource-poor coalitions. New coalitions, alignments and networks will most certainly emerge as the austerity agenda hardens. The inability of organized labour and social justice communities to significantly challenge the imperatives of capital and the state belies the need for a new kind of radical, anti-capitalist political project suited to the current social conjuncture. Accepting the existing social relations as unalterable would be to recognize the right of capital to exploit labour. As Peter Mieksins once put it: “To abandon class politics and the effort to unify the working-class becomes a sure way of maintaining the capitalist mode of production” (Mieksins 1986:118). The challenge facing trade union and social justice activists is to move left of social democracy – to the radical and anti-capitalist left – or risk increasingly becoming an impediment to rather than an instrument of a renewed working class politics. The failure to do so may regrettably amount to an historic class defeat.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Justin Paulson, Sam Gindin and Wally Clement for comments on earlier drafts. All errors are my own. Thanks are also due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their generous financial support.

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