Title of Paper: ‘Market Civilization’ and Global Agri-Food: Understanding their Dynamics and (In)Coherence through Multiple Resistances

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Abstract
Gill (2014) has recently described neoliberalism as ‘market civilization’ – ‘market’ and ‘civilization’ capturing its twin material and legitimacy underpinnings. Many features of ‘market civilization’ are embodied in the neoliberal agri-food regime. This paper examines the (in)coherence of these underpinnings and asks by what means, and where, the ‘irresilience’ of market civilization/the neoliberal agri-food regime is being/may be engendered through resistances. Both ‘market civilization’ and the neoliberal agri-food regime are often conceptualized in terms that are perhaps too ‘structuralist’ or ‘monolithic’ in character, creating a somewhat simplistic binary between ‘systemic’ accumulation and ‘anti-systemic’ resistance. This ‘structuralist’ and ‘monolithic’ reading radically oversimplifies both the nature and coherence of market civilization and resistances to it. The relative ‘resilience’ of market civilization lies in its ability to reproduce through co-optation and compromise (Gramscian hegemony), leading to its polylithic and variegated character. This variegated character is structured around the intimate relation between capitalism and the state, and has the effect of blurring boundaries between capitalism and its ‘other’. Rather than a binary, the reality appears to be a spectrum of ‘class’-based positions extending from hegemonic, through, sub-hegemonic, to counter-hegemonic. How, then, to define, let alone achieve, more radical, counter-hegemonic resistances to global agri-food? The paper goes on to suggest that we require a more precise definition of capitalism and a better understanding of the capital-state nexus if we are to subvert it through a new frontier of resistance as counter-hegemony. Such resistance, the paper argues, will need to be focused on contesting market dependence through food and land sovereignty.

Keywords: Market civilization, neoliberal agri-food regime, counter-hegemony, food sovereignty

Over the last decade, neoliberal capitalism has transmuted from its apparent embodiment as ‘Prometheus unbound’ to a veritable Pandora’s box of contradictions as it has encountered a series of mounting crises manifested variously as financial, austerity, unemployment, poverty, food, environment, climate and energy. We find ourselves in an era in which there is an uneven, multi-scalar, crisis driven and contradictory neoliberal reconfiguration of the ‘political’ and ‘ecological’ on a world scale, a condition that may be characterized either as an ‘emergent’ or a now ‘fragmenting’ ‘market civilization’ (Gill 2014). Whether the former or the latter depends on the capacity of its class protagonists (trans-nationalized fractions of capital) to sustain both the legitimacy and material coherence of neoliberalism, this being dependent on its ‘political’ and ‘biophysical’ dynamics (Tilzey 2016). This paper asks whether this capacity, particularly in relation to the neoliberal food regime, is
now in doubt. In so doing, it pays particular attention to the ‘political’ dynamics of contestation and transformative resistance to neoliberalism, both in the form of sub-hegemonic movements (other forms of capitalism) and in the form of counter-hegemonic movements (advocates of anti-capitalist social relations). Rather than the simple binary of ‘corporate capital’ or ‘empire’ versus the ‘multitude’ that appears to characterize the schematics of Hardt and Negri (2001), Polanyi (1957), McMichael (2013), van der Ploeg (2008, 2013) and others, the picture presented here is therefore one of a spectrum of resistances of both a ‘systemic’ and an ‘anti-systemic’ kind. This picture is further complicated by the continuing (rather than simply historical) and intimate relation between capitalism and the state, which, through processes of class co-optation and compromise, has the effect of blurring boundaries between capitalism and its ‘other’. Despite such complexity, this paper argues that there are nevertheless compelling reasons, both social and biophysical, to sustain advocacy of a counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist position to which agroecology and food sovereignty are central. This requires the construction of both an imaginary and a political strategy (pathway) premised, in turn, on a more precise definition of capitalism and a better understanding of capital-state dynamics as imperialism (Tilzey 2016) if these are to be subverted through a new frontier of resistance as counter-hegemony.

Contemporary, neoliberal ‘market civilization’ draws directly on the thinking of Locke, Hume, and Smith in 17th and 18th century Britain. This is no accident since it was this period that first saw the emergence of ‘market civilization’ in its pristine form (Wood 1991) in which social practices and political institutions came to be subordinated, and defined in relation, to a new, insulated and ‘self-regulating’ sphere designated the ‘economy’ (in other words, capitalist ‘market forces’). Central to this process was what Marx (1972) termed ‘primitive accumulation’, undertaken by means of the enclosure movement of 17th and 18th century Britain and subsequently extended, internationally, through colonization and imperialism. In this process, the peasantry and indigenous peoples were expropriated from their direct and customary access to the means of livelihood and subsistence, a process that not only continues today, but is accelerating in the global South, particularly, as a key element in ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 1993). This ongoing process of dispossession and (semi)-proletarianization forces producers to become ‘free’ wage labour in order to survive. This process is a fundamental element underpinning the genesis and reproduction of capitalist social relations. It is unsurprising, therefore, that it has been associated historically with profound contestations surrounding access to land (and water and other resources) as the basis of the means of production. Today, as market civilization continues the process of enclosure, primarily in the global South, dispossession and (semi)-proletarianization are reflected in ongoing struggles over the conditions of livelihood, part of the contestation between ‘civilization’ and ‘uncivilization’. It is essential to understand that at its core the social reproduction of market civilization involves the process through which people are dispossessed of their means of livelihood, generating the

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1 Semi-proletarianization means that part of the labourer’s subsistence needs is still derived from food production for home consumption, but this is insufficient, due to lack of land, to supply in full the subsistence needs of the family, generating the need to sell labour.
compulsion to depend on the market for subsistence and survival. Capital inserts itself, via a state mandated process of expropriation, as gatekeeper or mediator between people and their access to the means of livelihood. Capital’s ambition is to deepen and extend this new market dependence through the progressive commodification (enclosure and the generation of the ‘scarcity’ beloved of neoclassical economists) of formerly common pool resources. A key part of the legitimating narrative of market civilization is the portrayal of this process of ‘agrarian transition’ as a apolitical and ineluctable teleology (Perelman 2000). Food (land) sovereignty, as counter-hegemony, subverts this narrative by identifying the deeply contested character of primitive accumulation, together with its profoundly dysfunctional social and ecological consequences. By implication, the food sovereignty counter-narrative is one of obstructing and reversing primitive accumulation and market dependence through re-appropriation of land and resources as the basis for socially equitable and ecologically sustainable production. But, as suggested, this counter-hegemonic or ‘radical’ narrative is hedged about, and potentially subverted, by other resistances, both sub-hegemonic (reformist capitalism) and alter-hegemonic (‘progressives’, alternative food networks). How then to understand and disentangle this complexity in order to retain a focus on the need for a counter-hegemonic resolution to contemporary and spiraling social and ecological crises?

In order to understand these complex and contradictory dynamics, there is a need, we suggest, to move away from the structuralist notion of ‘agentless’ neoliberal imposition that still appears, despite disclaimers, to characterize the work of one of food regime theory’s most influential thinkers (McMichael (2013)), towards a strategic relational or structured agency approach (Jessop 2005, Potter and Tilzey 2005, Sum and Jessop 2014). This is to re-affirm the centrality of class struggle and political agency in capital’s dynamics, whereby these are structured not merely by its protagonists, but also by its opponents, with struggle taking the form of both intra- and inter-class contestation. Accordingly, capitalism’s dynamic is seen here as inherently agential, class-based (including ethnic, racial, and gender-based mediations), conflictual, and enacted through the state and inter-state system as the necessary container for, and guarantor of, capital’s ‘relational sustainability’ (Drummond and Marsden 1999). This implies that capitalism is not simply an accumulation regime. It requires essential ‘flanking’ measures (as ‘modes of regulation’ according to Regulation Theory), provided by the state or the inter-state system, to secure its reproduction.

Consequently, it is problematical to view capitalism, or more specifically neoliberalism, either as ‘agentless’, as responding only to the logic of its protagonists, or as moving along a global to national ‘vector’ on the ‘conveyor belt’ model of diffusion (Tilzey 2006). Rather, there is a need to direct attention to the differentiation of neoliberalism as a result of the varying nature and balance of class forces within different states and, therefore, to the degree to which neoliberalism is accommodated, compromised, ‘embedded’, or otherwise (Tilzey 2006, Potter and Tilzey 2007). Furthermore, the apparently ‘super-ordinate’ gaze of McMichael (2013) fails to take account of the strategic role of receptive class interests as active
progenitors of neoliberalizing institutional reforms in favour of the ‘corporate food regime’ (Brenner et al. 2014). As Otero notes (2014), the extent to which neoliberalization is materialized in each country’s agriculture largely depends on the interaction between states, domestic mobilization, and resistance. While, under neoliberalism, the state apparatus has indeed contracted and cut social programmes, the state continues to be the central actor in both facilitating corporate domination and managing its contradictions.

Intimately related to his portrayal of capital as essentially monolithic, is McMichael’s deployment of the Polanyian ‘double-movement’ (Polanyi 1957) as a relatively simple binary comprising the ‘corporate food regime’, on the one hand, and ‘resistance’ (from the ‘outside’), on the other. This binary neglects the ‘flanking’ measures that the state-capital nexus is compelled to construct and which embody compromise and co-optation between neoliberal class interests and sub-hegemonic and oppositional social movements. It elides both the differences within capital (intra-class contestation) and the differences in opposition to it, for example, between alter-hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements, or between ‘progressives’ and ‘radicals’ (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). This has important implications, because not only does it blunt our analysis of the complexity of capital’s dynamics, it also, normatively, and through conflation in the significant degrees of resistance to ‘capital’, subverts our capacity to specify definitions of, and pathways to, anti-capitalistic futures.

The co-optation of ‘market constraining’ interests through modes of regulation, means that neoliberalization’s successive iterations are the outcome of contextually specific forms of resistance engendered through this process of intra- and inter-class contestation primarily at the level of the state. A singular world-scale application of the Polanyian double-movement scheme represents an undifferentiated depiction of neoliberalization processes associated with the ‘corporate food regime’ and the resistances to it. The concept of *variegated neoliberalism*, within and between states, can, however, advance our understanding of neoliberalization, its crisis tendencies and the nature of opposition, and the possibility of its transcendence (Brenner et al. 2014). In this way, significant elements of the Polanyian ‘double-movement’, typically sub-hegemonic positionalities, are already instantiated, through co-optation, within variegated neoliberalism as modes of regulation. The consequence is that there is no simple binary between neoliberalism and its opposite, but rather various gradations from hegemonic, through sub-hegemonic and alter-hegemonic, to counter-hegemonic class positions. Awareness of these gradations sensitizes us to what is ‘anti-capitalist’ and what is not, rather than subsuming all beneath the assumed alterity of generic ‘resistance’ as the ‘multitude’.

The dynamics of variegated neoliberalism, and the intra- and inter-class antagonisms and alliances that inform these dynamics, are well illustrated in the work of Tilzey and Potter (2006, 2007, 2008) with respect to country case studies in the global

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2 Polanyi (1957) argued that once the ‘free market’ attempts to separate itself from the fabric of society, social protectionism is society’s natural response, which he called the ‘double movement’.
North. In a similar vein, but with a global focus, Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) break down the double-movement binary through a quadripartite structure denoted as ‘neoliberal’, ‘reformist’, ‘progressive’ and ‘radical’. These nuanced gradations in intra-class and inter-class positions enable these authors to lay out the complexities of contestation and compromise in the dynamics of agri-food regimes, allowing them not only to better explain such dynamics, but also to detail the definitional content of ‘resistance’, not as one, but rather as several, contested, class positionalities. This enables these authors to paint a more realistic picture of the potential fusions and fissions that, flowing from these class positionalities, are likely to attend food movement mobilizations. Thus, Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck’s ‘progressives’ may be members of La Via Campesina (LVC), but their aim is not so much the transcendence of capitalism as the re-localization and ecologization of markets in conformity to the alternative food networks paradigm (Goodman et al. 2012). For the ‘radicals’ of LVC, by contrast, it is the critique of market dependence, defined by the re-unification of producers with the means of production, which appears to constitute the essence of their class position. It is also necessary to note in this context that, while LVC wages much of its struggle at transnational level, its constituent organizations are firmly rooted at the national level, with their objects of struggle being primarily their national states and the state’s involvement both in local-level legislation and in international regulations (Otero 2014).

Capitalism, to date, has been remarkably successful, therefore, in neutralizing and co-opting opposition and resistance to its exploitative dynamic, through hegemony within the necessary context of the state-capital nexus. This success, however, has been located differentially in the global North. An essential part of this ability to neutralize and co-opt resistance lies in the fact that the capitalist world system is characterized by a broadly bi-polar structure: the socially ‘articulated’ states of the global North, and the ‘disarticulated’ states of the global South. Tendentially, the oppositional relations between capitalist and non-capitalist classes in ‘articulated’ states have been defused by ‘flanking’ measures based on (re)-distributional, nation-building, environmental and other policies, together with the bestowal of citizenship rights that have mitigated the conferral on capitalists of absolute property rights in the means of production. Agri-environmental and ‘post-productivist’ policies in the global North represent examples of such flanking measures that have served to co-opt and neutralize ‘small farmer’ resistance to neoliberalization, simultaneously dulling more radical, and potentially anti-capitalist, imaginaries (Tilzey 2006, Tilzey and Potter 2007). This, typically, is the terrain of the ‘progressives’, encompassing alter-hegemonic alternative food networks and the ‘new peasantries’ of van der Ploeg (2008).

Under neoliberalism, attempts to sustain this compact in the global North have been undertaken increasingly by means of imperial relations, both ‘informal’ (economic)
and ‘formal’ (polito-military) with the global South. Surplus value from the classes of labour now flows from South to North, ‘subsidized’ by the massive and destructive haemorrhage of ‘ecological surplus’ that lies behind this relationship (Smith 2016, Exner et al. 2013; Moore 2015). Burgeoning levels of social and ecological dislocation in the South have been the consequence of this extractive relationship, arising from the combined, although differentiated, operation of these ‘political’ and ‘biophysical’ dynamics of the state-capital nexus (see Tilzey 2016). Neoliberalism has similarly subverted the incipient processes of nation-building in the South that had characterized the Keynesian ‘developmentalist’ era. Neoliberal re-assertions of absolute private property through primitive accumulation, with the state acting as an organ of the expropriators and agro-exporting fractions of capital, have served to undermine the legitimacy functions of the capital-state nexus throughout much of the global South. The outcome of this ‘new imperial’ relationship (Harvey 2003) between North and South is that citizens of the former are accorded certain privileges (public services, social welfare/protection, higher consumption) denied to those in the capitalist periphery (see, for example, Mooers 2014).

This lack of legitimacy and effective ‘flanking’ measures for capital in the global South carries with it, however, the increased likelihood of challenge to the state-capital nexus by counter-hegemonic forces of a ‘radical’ complexion. The implication is one of an increased, immanent possibility of attempted re-appropriations of the state by counter-hegemonic social forces in re-assertions of national, and possibly post-national, forms of sovereignty. Such ‘radical’ counter-hegemonic social forces potentially challenge the essential foundations of capitalism, propounding a more Marxian, rather than Polanyian, imaginary of social relational transformation. This has occurred in partial and varying degrees in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela in Latin America, and in Nepal in Asia, for example. Nonetheless, these global Southern re-assertions of sovereignty in its national form are not without ambiguity – there is no singular ‘other’ counterposed to neoliberalism. Rather, these re-assertions of national sovereignty comprise a complex mélange of sub-hegemonic (national capital fractions) and counter-hegemonic (lower/middle peasantry, landless, proletarians, and indigenous) social forces. The assertion of national sovereignty here, as a counter-narrative to neoliberalism, represents a tension between populist ‘neo-developmentalist’, on the one hand, and ‘post-developmentalist’ (combining environmentalism, indigenism, re-peasantization, agroecology and food sovereignty), on the other.

The Marxian, rather than Polanyian-based, analysis deployed here suggests that global capitalism and its state form are much less monolithic, and more fractured, than van der Ploeg, or McMichael, through their binary of the ‘corporate empire’ versus ‘society’, would lead us to believe. There is, firstly, an evident tension between the desire of transnational capitalist fractions to transcend the

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4 The other side of this picture is, of course, the increased use of coercion and violence by the peripheral state-capital nexus in the exercise of primitive accumulation, frequently supported financially and militarily by the imperial powers whose corporations benefit directly from the expropriation of land and resources from peasant and indigenous populations for the purposes of agro-export or mineral/fossil fuel extraction.
state and implant a global system of ‘frictionless’ capital flows, on the one hand, and the need by imperial states, particularly, to continue to respond to more nationally-based class fractions and to secure legitimacy amongst the non-capitalist citizenry, on the other. Secondly, given the nature of continuing inter-imperialist rivalry (the necessarily state-based nature of capitalism), the emergence of semi-peripheral states as the outcome of ‘globalization’ (notably the BRICS) contending to become members of the core and responding to nationally-based class fractions, represents resistance to neoliberalism by sub-hegemonic social forces. Thirdly, the burgeoning social and ecological contradictions of imperial relations concentrated largely in the South, and perpetuated by policies of neo-developmentalism and neo-extractivism, are generating resistances to the state-capital nexus by ‘radical’ counter-hegemonic social movements. The fracture lines in the current neoliberal conjuncture are, therefore, numerous. These fracture lines are at their widest in the global South because, as a periphery for the core, it is here that the contradictions of accumulation are greatest and the legitimacy of the state is lowest. Consequently, it is in the South that the potential for transformations towards ‘radical’, counter-hegemonic futures appears greatest. Meanwhile, for the reasons outlined above, the potential for conflation of class positionalities is perhaps greatest in the global North. Here there is an evident blurring of boundaries between a prevalent discourse of market localization and ecologization (alter-hegemony of the ‘new peasantry’ narrative), on the one hand, and a discourse of market supersession, embodied in a commons-based imaginary (counter-hegemony), on the other.

The longer version of this paper goes on to explore the dynamics of accumulation and resistance, with particular reference to Latin America and Europe, in order to understand the political and ecological conditions in which a ‘radical’, counter-hegemonic transformation of social relations, invoking land and food sovereignty, might be germinated. In its final section, the paper interrogates what this counter-hegemonic imaginary might entail in terms of new social and ecological relations of production, subverting the institutional foundations of the state-capital nexus.

References


