

From Predator to Parasite: Private Property, Neoliberalism, and Ecological Disaster

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ABSTRACT

The institution of private property forms the basis for ecological disaster. The profit-seeking of the vested interests, in conjunction with their modes of valuing nature through the apparatuses of neoclassical economics and *neoliberalism* proceed to degrade and destroy life on Earth. We assert that the radical, or *original* institutional economics (OIE) of Thorstein Veblen, further advanced by William Dugger, have crucial insights to offer the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology and ecological economics which seek to address the underlying causes and emergent complications of the unfolding, interconnected, social, and ecological crises that define our age. This inquiry will attempt to address what, to us, appears to be either overlooked or underexplored in these research communities. Namely, that the usurpation of society's surplus production, or, the accumulation of capital, is a *parasite* that sustains itself not only through the exploitation of human labor, but by exploiting society and nature more broadly, resulting in the deterioration of life itself. We attest that the transformation of the obvious predator that pursues power through pecuniary gain into a parasite, undetected by its host, is realized in its most rapacious form in the global hegemonic system of neoliberal capitalism.

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Ecological Economics, Environmentalism, Neoliberalism, Original Institutional Economics, Political Ecology

This inquiry seeks to establish that the institution of private property forms the basis for ecological disaster. The profit-seeking of the vested interests, in conjunction with their modes of valuing nature through the apparatuses of neoclassical economics and *neoliberalism* proceed to degrade and destroy life on Earth. We assert that the radical, or *original* institutional economics (OIE) of Thorstein Veblen, further advanced by William Dugger, have crucial insights to offer the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology and ecological economics which seek to address the underlying causes and emergent complications of the unfolding, interconnected, social, and ecological crises that define our age. This inquiry will attempt to address what, to us, appears to be either overlooked or underexplored in these research communities. Namely, that the usurpation of society's surplus production, or, the accumulation of capital, is a *parasite* that sustains itself not only through the exploitation of human labor, but by exploiting society and nature more broadly, resulting in the deterioration of life itself. We attest that the transformation of the obvious predator that pursues power through pecuniary gain into a parasite, undetected by its host, is realized in its most rapacious form in the global hegemonic system of neoliberal capitalism.

Extant Literature

We wish to make the case for examining “The Institutional Origins of Crises for Economy and Ecology” (1998), authored by Daniel A. Underwood in the *Journal of Economic Issues (JEI)*. Underwood initiates our discussion by defining some basic concepts in the field of ecological economics. In brief, we shall accept that the “throughput” of energy and matter first extracted from, and then returned to, the “biosphere” is transformed by a “provisioning process” that constitutes our “econosphere.” The joint “crises for economy and ecology” identified by

Underwood (1998, 519) stem from the fact that the econosphere, or, “capitalism, as an institutionally directed evolutionary pathway,” necessitates an ever-increasing throughput of energy and matter for its survival. This contradiction is famously described by Donella H. Meadows et al. in *The Limits to Growth* (1972). To put it plainly, an economic system oriented towards unlimited growth cannot be sustained on a finite planet. Thus, we assert that attempts to avert the intensification of social and ecological disaster must examine this central contradiction radically and intrinsically, at its root.

In doing so, Underwood (1998, 518-519) invites us to consider the institution of private property. As an inherently exclusionary set of habitually conditioned rules and behaviors, the institution of private property effectively denies universal access to the necessities of life. The capitalistic system, based on a so-called “natural right” to property, is not organized to direct the throughput, or to provision energy and materials effectively to meet the welfare of all members of society. Rather, as Underwood states, it is organized to inflate the prestige and the power of the vested interests. “As the predominant institutional force in the provisioning process,” writes Underwood, “production only occurs if *profits* are forthcoming” (emphasis added). Production does not, in fact, occur to provide the means necessary to sustain life. The provisioning process of the capitalistic system works “not to improve the material well-being of the general population, but to aggrandize vested interests controlling the process.” Additionally, Underwood notes that what the vested interests really seek is power, and that “power is garnered by controlling an increasing flow of resources” to fuel the accumulation process. To reiterate, unlimited economic growth, characterized by the ever-increasing throughput of matter and energy necessary for the accumulation of capital, is not only at odds with the biophysical processes of the planet, but because of its roots in the institution of private property, it is also at

odds with the needs of society at large. We derive from this that a radical institutionalist critique which specifies and attacks the institution of private property is necessary, both for overcoming and for making sense of the socio-ecological crises that mark our epoch.

In a more recent work, Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis ask, “Is Green Growth Possible?” (2020). A thorough examination of empirical evidence produces a resounding, *no*. At least, not in a manner sufficient to avert the overshoot problem. What Hickel and Kallis (2020, 475) conclude is that economic growth, or increasing gross domestic product (GDP), “ultimately cannot be decoupled from growth in material and energy use, demonstrating categorically that GDP growth cannot be sustained indefinitely.” Despite empirical data suggesting that *some* decoupling of GDP growth from material and energy throughput may be achievable *by wealthy nations in the short-run*, the authors assert that this would be “physically impossible” to maintain in the long-run, not to mention at the global scale required to stave off total ecological collapse (see also, Dorninger et al. 2020).

Elke Pirgmaier and Julia K. Seinberger question what has, in their view, become a fixation on growth in “Roots, Riots, and Radical Change” (2019). In their own words, the field of ecological economics “might itself be caught up in a growth fetish” (2019, 5). Their concern is that ecological economists may “overemphasize growth in economic and biophysical terms at the expense of underpinning social drivers of ecological destruction.” Whereas, they argue that growth emerges as an *outcome* of the underlying capitalist system dynamics, not as its fundamental imperative. To address these underlying system dynamics, the authors suggest a pivot towards Marxian political economy. We would like to offer an additional, Veblenian insight to supplement Pirgmaier and Seinberger’s work. That, as the authors attest, endless growth is not the root of the problem; rather, it is the institution of private property animated by

the profit-seeking of a predatory culture to the detriment of the community at-large that is to blame for the overshoot of the econosphere past biophysical limits. The problem is not *simply* growth, but private gain at the expense of the social and ecological systems of the planet, or, the misalignment of the provisioning process with social and ecological need.

Robert Fletcher and Bram Büscher seek to advance a structural analysis of payments for ecosystem services (PES) programs in “The PES Conceit: Revisiting the Relationship between Payments for Environmental Services and Neoliberal Conservation” (2017). In doing so, Fletcher and Büscher address the nature of the provisioning process of neoliberal capitalism as it manifests as programs for ecological conservation. The authors attest that despite their lack of adherence to typical neoliberal modes of organization and action such as market-based instruments (MBIs) on a micro scale, PES programs remain tethered to neoliberal ideology at the macro level (see also, Dunlap and Sullivan 2020). What constitutes “the PES conceit,” according to Fletcher and Büscher is that through PES, neoliberalism is simultaneously recognized as both the cause of and the solution to ecological disaster. This article, and the perplexing debate that follows (see Van Hecken et al. 2018; Fletcher and Büscher 2019), touches on and effectively demonstrates what we recognise to be evident of the successful transformation of the predatory culture into parasite, continuing its accumulative venture hidden from view. Through the dissemination of neoliberal modes of conceptualizing nature, such as the Cartesian dualism that separates human beings from nature and the framing of the latter as a resource for human consumption, PES programs promote the logic of the business enterprise, even if they fail to produce immediate pecuniary gain for any vested interests. This is true regardless of their failure to adhere to MBIs in practice. It follows that marketization cannot be viewed as the single defining feature of neoliberalism. The refusal of Van Hecken et al. to recognize and engage with

the overarching structural aspects of the process of neoliberalization as described by Fletcher and Büscher, *in addition to* actor-oriented accounts of PES on the ground, amounts to a reinforcement of the status quo that seeks to embed its logic into all aspects of society so as to become hegemonic, undetected, and unchallenged.

The Fallacy of Private Property

In “The Beginnings of Ownership” [1898] (1964) Thorstein Veblen rejects the natural rights theory of property which claims the rightful owner of something is, “naturally,” the person who produced it. To the contrary, Veblen (1964, 33-34) understands that “all production is, in fact, a production in and by the help of the community, and all wealth is such only in society.” This worldview holds that it is the joint stock of knowledge of the community at-large that makes production possible at all. And, it is *only* through society that the transmission of technical knowledge, tools, cultural traditions, and customs can occur. There simply can be no production without this transmission of knowledge. Thus, there can be *no such thing* as individual production, and there can be no “natural” right to property either because it is based on this fallacy of individual production. It follows that the institution of private property is emphatically *not* a natural phenomenon, as the natural rights theory suggests, but is a culturally constructed institution that is inherently bound to a notion of individualism that contradicts the very essence of society.

This same line of thought can, and we argue, *should*, be extended to the planet and all of its life-giving processes without which humans would not exist. Production could not occur - indeed, there would be nothing to produce - without an Earth from which to produce it. Nature is inherently communal; it is *ecological* (see Kropotkin [1902] 1972). Thus, the institution of

private property is unnatural in the real sense that *it contradicts the very essence of nature*. It is a natural fact that all of what is currently captured as physical private property will someday be returned to the Earth through the entropic cycle. For now, the institution of private property exists as a means of control that betrays the innately communal and ecological natures of existence.

It is well-established within the social sciences that when communal bands of hunters and gatherers, accustomed to surviving at the subsistence-level determined by their ability to adapt to their environment, learned instead, how to manipulate their environment to adapt *to them*, humans settled into city life. And so, the story goes that at the dawn of civilization, marked by the development of agriculture, humankind fell from grace into the trenches of various hierarchical systems based on dominance and control. In short, when humans began to produce more than was necessary for survival, the predatory culture was born. Recent work by the late David Graeber along with David Wengrow (see Graeber and Wengrow 2018) promises to challenge the simplicity of this foundational tale. The authors reference various anthropological studies that show that there were early civilizations who developed an agricultural surplus, but did not yield to the predatory behaviors of the few within their community, and remained decentralized and without the formation of hierarchies or classes. While it is important to note that the creation of a surplus did not make hierarchical civilization *inevitable*, it did make it possible for the institution of private property to form.

The usurpation of society's production is inherently violent. In "Veblen's Radical Theory of Social Evolution" (2006), William Dugger describes the transformation of the predatory culture into a parasite. He draws his interpretation of Veblen's work from *The Vested Interests and the Common Man* [1919] (2014). Veblen describes how a sentiment of national pride among

the common people around the time of the First World War was utilized by the vested interests in an attempt to naturalize their pecuniary mission. Dugger (2006, 667) aptly refers to the cozy relationship between the business enterprise and the nation state as “the business-state.” He writes that “[w]ith the common people deluded by their national pretensions, the economic usurpers of the community’s surplus can make good their claim to be community benefactors and no longer *appear* to be community predators” (emphasis added). At home, society’s predators achieve this by claiming that their accumulation of capital is a necessary part of the production process required for a strong nation. In foreign lands, they cipher their imperialism as charitable foreign development, and code their success in the business of theft as national excellence. We think to quote Dugger at length,

“A predator can be recognized as such by its prey and then be resisted or avoided.

However, a parasite can live off its host without being recognized, so it is not resisted or avoided. It may even be aided by its host. Better to be a parasite than a predator. Better to have a gullible host than a wary prey. Better to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing than a wolf openly on the prowl.” (Dugger 2006, 667)

In Dugger’s (2006, 667) example, the transformation of obvious predator to undetected parasite occurs through the “subreption” (see Hall et al. 2016) of the sentiment of national pride. What is essentially a communal proclivity, to identify as part of a group, becomes conflated with business interests. Through this process of “subreption,” pecuniary values are disguised in a cloak of benevolence, based in the myth (see Dugger 1988) that the usurpation of the community’s surplus through the accumulation of capital is a necessary factor in production. We assert that the extent of the successful transformation of predator to parasite can be witnessed in the global hegemonic system of neoliberal capitalism. It is under neoliberalism that the values of

business have become so embedded into our cultural institutions that they are often overlooked or mistaken for anything but the gluttonous parasite they are.

Dugger (2006, 661-662) writes that Veblen took issue with the “emphasis” placed on capital accumulation “as the cause of economic growth.” For Veblen, “capital accumulation subtracted from group welfare” and did not contribute to it, not even indirectly. As previously stated, all production occurs in and by society; it is made possible through the legacy of the joint stock of knowledge of the community at-large. Increases in production occur in spite of the predatory behavior of the business enterprise, not because of their habitual hoarding. While we do tend to agree with Veblen’s refusal to offer any credence to “capitalists” who claim to increase the productive capacity of society, we would like to push back against this refusal somewhat.

Faced with the existential threat of ecological collapse, characterized by the overshoot of the econosphere past the biophysical limits of the planet, we elect not to absolve the predatory culture and its business enterprise from any rightfully placed blame. With a parasite on the loose, sucking the life from the human and non-human ecologies of Earth, we acknowledge a certain imperative to continue to increase the productive throughput of society in order to make up for what is stolen. We infer that, in their writing on the topic, both Veblen and Dugger thought of increases in productive capacity as synonymous to economic growth, and in turn, viewed economic growth in a positive light. Whereas, as we have already established from our current standpoint in space and time, economic growth bears much scrutiny.

We assert that the parasitic nature of the enterprise of business disallows society at-large from easily recognizing its own ecological limits. When society’s surplus is continuously and thoroughly ripped from its hands, sacrificed to the ceremonial process of capital accumulation

that forces so many people to live and die below the subsistence level, the productive throughput will always *appear to be* insufficient to provide for the basic needs of society. Until the parasitic institution of private property is ousted, no amount of throughput ever will.

Neoliberal Environmentalism

In *Natural Catastrophe: Climate Change and Neoliberal Governance* (2016) Brian Elliott makes the case for an understanding of nature that is “intrinsically and inherently radical.” For this, Elliott (2016, 1-2) proposes that an “ideological paradigm shift” is required to properly grapple with and overcome our ecological crises. Without such a paradigm shift, he writes, the “catastrophizing” of climate change through demands for urgent action by the state, can and will only result in a replication and intensification of the status quo. This is because, according to Elliott, neoliberal environmentalism exists as a “social pathology,” in which neoliberal governance is simultaneously understood to be the cause as well as the solution to our ecological crises. This pathological nature of neoliberal environmental governance reveals itself in sustainable development (SD) initiatives which include conservation programs such as PES as well as green growth initiatives. Elliott’s stance both corroborates the conceit described by Fletcher and Büscher (2017) above, and supports what Hickel and Kallis (2020) concluded in their study of green growth. Elliott (2016, 1-2) argues that not only is SD an impossibility in the long run, and at a scale big enough to have any serious impact, but that when viewed “through the SD lens, climate change can only be tackled through radicalization rather than abandonment of the global neoliberal order.” And, the global neoliberal order must be abandoned if we are to achieve the paradigm shift needed to avert absolute ecological disaster.

The neoliberal project has sought to advance the pecuniary mission of the vested interests by attempting to embed their logic into all aspects of culture, in a concerted effort to secure their dominance over the common people (see Harvey 2005; Mirowski and Plehwe [2009] 2015). The state secures this dominance primarily through enforcing the institution of private property. This is why, as Elliott points out, climate change is ultimately viewed by the business-state not as a welfare issue, but as a security threat (see Hayden 2018). The drive to *combat* climate change manifests as precisely that: a mobilization of the security forces of capital against the people and the planet.

The United Nations (2020) defines “disaster” as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or society, which involve widespread human, material, economic or environmental impacts that exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.” We would like to, following Elliott’s lead, posit that the true socio-ecological disaster is not intermittent extreme weather events and oil spills that are understood to have a concise beginning, middle, and end; rather, the true disaster is an unravelling one. The “serious disruption of the functioning of a community” that plagues us is that of the capitalistic system based on the institution of private property, driven by a predatory culture that seeks power through the accumulation of wealth. Elliott (2016, 62) writes, “Climate change should not be grasped naively as the sudden revelation that capitalist development is damaging to ecological systems. The political response to climate change should be informed by a sense of the generations-long harm capitalism has done to human and non-human systems of collective organization.”

Our Collective Future

This inquiry has sought to establish that the institution of private property forms the basis for ecological disaster. Additionally, this inquiry has sought to establish that a radical institutionalist critique of the leading solutions proposed to address ecological crises is desperately needed. It is our imperative as academic researchers and as activists concerned with social and ecological justice, to be vigilant and discerning as we seek to uncover the predatory culture in all of its manifestations in order to expose the profit motive as the parasite that it really is. We must avoid being fooled by the conceit, or the social pathology of neoliberal environmentalism, so that we may, as Alexander Dunlap and Jostein Jakobsen welcome us to do in *The Violent Technologies of Extraction* (2019, iix), join with those who are “coming to daggers with the Worldeater,” in order to effectively create the broad, systemic changes required to obtain the social and ecological justice that we seek.

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