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Ribot Forward

The step from nature to commodity requires a moment of vision in which the social uses of nature are apprehended. This is a first step in the commodification of what we call natural resources. These essential inputs to capitalism are mixed with labour and mobilized as tradeable commodities. Nature as a commodity, however, is a kind of fiction. Polanyi (1944) understood that land (e.g. nature), labour and money can never be real commodities since they are not produced by and for the market. None is a market creation. Hence none possesses the market magic of self-regulation – none provides a signal to the market that would give these three entities appropriate meaning and value to beget their sound management and protection. Their meaning and value must be imagined, like the vision that starts the path from nature to commodity. These “fictive commodities” require special treatment so that society can envision them in ways that sustain them as productive inputs.

Nature sits precariously with labour and money (and with knowledge, added by Burawoy, 2011) as fictions beyond the immediate concern of market forces – threatened by the very inability of the market to sense their origins and limits.¹ In reaction to these destructive tendencies, Polanyi (1944) described counter-movements that demand protection for these productive inputs – inputs that the market cannot produce or reproduce. Polanyi’s “double movement”, the destructive force of the market countered by the protective impulses of society, emerges from the pain of destruction mixed with the enlightened self-interest of capital.

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Governance of Natural Resources: Uncovering the Social Purpose of Materials in Nature recognizes that the envisioning, construction, transformation into resources and commodification are social processes with deep economic, political and ecological implications. They are part of the production and reproduction of the state, civil society and the world of commerce. Attempts to influence the meanings, uses and management of nature, and its governance, are inherently political. The ways we view and engage resources shape the boundaries of state and society – what remains in a state of nature, what is to be brought into use and trade, who has rights, who does not, who is in and who is out, who is friend and who is foe. Resources and their emergence from nature are governed. Government is defined by its relation to these essential inputs to markets and its position on the reproduction of nature, labour, money and knowledge. It is legitimated by what it controls and by the claims that it is able to enforce or mediate. Natural resources in this sense become the material basis of government. As Sikor and Lund (2009) indicate, authorities seek resource claims to enforce in order to come into being as authorities; simultaneously, resource claimants seek authorities to enforce their claims so as to continue to exercise their enjoyment of things. Access and authority are mutually constituted.

It is very important to locate governance within political economy and nature in politics – both of which this book achieves. Polanyi's (1944) double movement – market destructions countered by protections on nature, labour and financial systems – is useful for thinking along these lines. The double movement is not simply about *destructive* markets countered by protective movements. Governments create and dissolve boundaries between state and society. They are part of the making of nature into resources, resources into commodities, movements into protections; they also facilitate the destruction that can undermine the entire workings of enterprise and of state. Social stability and, dare I use the term, ecological “sustainability”, are not natural by-products of stateness and resource as fixed categories, but products of the social dialectics that constitute both. Protections are social and political-economic creatures. But do protections manifest only as social movements that counter markets and governments that regulate them? What steers this dynamic interaction? Where does emancipation or marginalization of the governed in governing enter the process of defining and mobilizing states and resources?

Unfettered markets can destroy fictive commodities; but they can also be productive and emancipatory. Disembedding timber markets from the oligopsony control of urban traders can provide income and associated freedoms to forest-edge farmers – simultaneously undermining an oppressive ruling elite. Of course, exposure to such free trade can result in

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new abuses of land and labour. Countermovements and the social or environmental protections that abuses inspire can be productive and liberating, but can also be socially and economically damaging. Affirmative action aimed at fair access to labour opportunities can reify race identities – requiring the definition and bounding of categories such as Black, Latino or indigenous – creating new forms of inclusion and exclusion.² As political ecologists well know, environmental protections can unleash painfully abusive exclusions of resource-dependent people. Balancing these markets and protections is the social struggle to create a healthy and equitable society – to govern those who govern by and for those governed. Fraser (2011) sees a third movement that cuts across Polanyi’s (1944) double movement: people subject to markets or protections (social or environmental) mobilize to demand the right to judge and influence the making of both. This third movement is emancipation. It is a demand that state intervention in the creation of markets and in the establishment of social, environmental and financial protections be subject to public scrutiny in which the public judges and decides on a level field of engagement. In this process boundaries between state and society are hammered out again and again. The demand for participatory parity is emancipatory politics.

Against this backdrop, this book outlines multiple ways by which individuals and collectives operating at multiples scales can engage in the making of nature and mediate its transformation into resources. Natural resources are more than just a fictive commodity. They also form a key part of the material basis of production and of authority. Hence they play a double role in the relation between state and society. They are the basis of authority and wealth – as is their protection. These are the very basis of the legitimacy and power of states that govern. The destruction or unjust management of natural resources, then, brings into question the basis of authority and therefore the stability of future wealth – environmental decline is social decline. This volume correctly treats “resources as catalysts that constantly form the constituents surrounding them” (Sato, Introduction).³

Resource governance in this volume is about how “people negotiate and interact with each other over the utilization of nature” (Sato, Introduction). It is about the relations among people *vis-à-vis* things. The book expands this property-related concept beyond bundles of rights (Meek, 1938: 1), beyond bundles of powers (Ghani, 1995: 2), to what the authors call “bundles of possibilities” (Sato, Introduction). Hence resource governance becomes the basis of a political possible. The properties of this notion are in the creative negotiated spaces mutually constituted by society and state over the definition and use of natural resources. As Arendt ([1960]

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2000: 460) reminds us, the “twofold gift of freedom and action” enables people to “establish a reality of their own”. It is creativity through freedom in action that produces the miracle of political change – a miracle more frequent and intentional than that of nature, whose evolution is authored by probability. It is this human creativity that is the basis of the possible and of an emancipatory politics.

Notes

1. To nature, labour and finance, Burawoy (2011) added knowledge – another essential input to all capitalism that is destroyed when our universities and schools are turned into commerce. The very vision that enables us to imagine new boundaries between nature and resource is a product of a creativity born beyond the bounds of market logic – although Schumpeter ([1942] 1994) might disagree.
2. Indeed, by reifying group identity, recognition obscures internal cultural differences and subordinates the “struggles within the group for the authority – and the power – to represent it” (Fraser, 2000: 112; also see Povinelli, 2002: 6–13).
3. Note that this position does not attribute agency to resources (or any other material objects or animals) – as Bruno Latour (2005) would have us do – but shows the ways in which resources form a basis of power and agency of those who govern.

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