

CAPITAL ACCUMULATES WASTE AND WASTE CONTRIBUTES TO CAPITAL ACCUMULATION. CONFLICTS OVER DISPOSSESSION AND CONTAMINATION

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Introduction

Looking at socio-ecological processes, we have seen that the changes and expansion of social metabolism can lead to socio-environmental conflicts, from the extraction of resources to the disposal of waste (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Martinez-Alier et al., 2010). More efforts can be devoted at the theorisation of this phenomenon, in particular in clarifying its driving forces and the correspondent typologies of conflicts.

The multidimensional crisis that our societies are facing shows the instability and the crisis tendencies of capitalism. It offers the possibility to revitalize the theory of over-accumulation, meaning that the economic crisis is due to a lack for capital of opportunities for profitable investments. Potential solutions can be found in the search for lower costs of inputs (i.e. land, raw materials, labour,...) and widening of markets (i.e. trade with non-capitalist social formations). Capitalist development appears in need of something 'outside of itself' and for this reason continuously opening up 'territories' (Harvey, 2003). The question of interest here is how this process interacts with social metabolism and which are the social and environmental consequences.

Theoretical framework

In this article we intend to apply this framework of analysis to one particular sector: waste management. The complexity of the waste sector and its social, economic, and political implications make it the quintessential for ecological economics (Barata 2002, pag. 117, Bisson K., Proops J. 2002). A system of waste management could be said to be integrated and sustainable. However this should not only refer to the sense of perfectly matched technical options of waste treatment (Nelles et al. 2010) but to a common bad implying a wide range of environmental, economic, social and political factors (Barata 2002). Therefore waste management should be addressed more as a social and political process rather than as a pure technical matter (K. Bisson, J. Proops 2002, Winiwarter V. 2002).

The complexity reached by the sector of waste management seems to be translated into profitability opportunities, meaning a very tempting market for the over-accumulated capital in search of profitable businesses. Our hypothesis is that that the appropriation of bad commons such as waste is one of the several strategies for expanding the scale and scope of capital accumulation as Prudham (2007) explain properly in the case of biotechnology. These socio-ecological processes are justified and legitimized by a narrative of progress and (sustainable) development that turn out to be challenged when socio-environmental conflicts emerge.

Therefore this paper attempts to link two lines of thoughts, ecological economics and political ecology, to show how capitalism appropriates nature and labour force to expand his dominion via dispossession (expropriation of rights) and contamination (cost-shifting). We intend to argue that the neo-liberal project is about the release of assets (both inputs and outputs of the social metabolism) at a very low cost.

In the case of dispossession, something that was pre-existing outside the capitalist system is brought inside (i.e. privatization of the public assets or commons). Normally a specific social group is dispossessed by another one to obtain profit.

In the case of contamination an appropriation of de-facto property rights takes place resulting in the shifting of costs and risks (i.e. exploiting the sinks over their sustainable assimilative capacity). The consequences most likely fall upon the most vulnerable social groups, but the society as a whole can be affected. Such unequal distribution can be intra-generational and/or inter-generational.

Case studies

Three case studies are discussed. First we look in Colombia at the dispossession of wastepickers' livelihood while the waste management system is centralized, industrialized and privatized in the name of modernization. Second we look in Naples (Italy) at the contamination of an extended population group via massive incineration. Third we discuss a combination of the two with a case in Delhi (India) where the wastepickers are dispossessed of the waste that has to be burned into the incinerators. The intention is to explore the explicative ability of the two concepts: accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) and accumulation by contamination.

Discussion and Conclusions

Socio-environmental conflicts have emerged in the three cases. In the first case animated by wastepickers, in the second by local people and in the third a combination of both.

Socio-environmental conflicts can be seen as a reaction to the expansion of capitalist accumulation that deteriorates the social and environmental conditions. In the case of dispossession people complain about the expropriation of their means of production, while in the case of contamination people complain about the costs shifted to the detriment of their environment and health.