

# NATURE AS ACCUMULATION STRATEGY

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On the basis of her research on genetically transformed organisms, including *OncoMouse*; Donna Haraway concluded in the late 1990s that the body now represented an accumulation strategy for capital : 'Life itself is a capital-accumulation strategy'. Cindi Katz has broadened this into a suggestion that nature *per se* may now represent an accumulation strategy for capital. As the parallel with Aglietta's analysis would indicate, the emergence of nature as an accumulation strategy applies not simply to changes in the production of nature but to changes in its consumption too. The natural foods industry which sprang from 1960s hippie environmentalism, quickly became a multi-billion capitalist enterprise. Oil companies, among the world's greatest polluters, routinely advertise their decimation of nature as environmental friendly, not least by celebrating their purchase of carbon credits. Recycling, once a quack demand by marginal environmentalists, is now (whatever its other merits) a major industrial sector that not only enjoys significant state subsidy and is run in some US states by the mafia, but has forcibly enlisted the work of consumers-sorting, storing and even delivering recyclables - in a very real subsumption of daily life to capital. In 2006 WalMart, the world's largest retail chain and emblem of capitalist consumptionism, announced that it was 'going green' with organic methods, sources and products. Little wonder that establishment environmentalists could belatedly come to the obvious realization that liberal environmentalism is dead. Actually, it is only dead as an anti-capitalist movement; it is very much alive, thriving and profiting as a multi-billion dollar enterprise in the board rooms of the same capitalist powers that it once challenged.

Remnant conservative opposition to environmentalism should not be taken as contrary to this argument. As regards wetlands, for example, the US Supreme Court seems to be squeamish about its support for existing wetlands legislation, without which the wetlands mitigation market may not expand as quickly as it otherwise would. On Kyoto, the US refusal to accept the protocols agreed on by most of the world is widely seen as a narrowly conservative and rather pugilist rejection of environmentalism. But in both cases these challenges to environmental legislation represent not so much a rejection of any and all environmental politics - George W Bush is the son of the 'environmental president' - as a protection of some capitalist prerogatives over others. Concerning wetlands, the struggle is very much about the sanctity of private property, enlisting individual property owners against big government. The US rejection of the Kyoto accords represents an internal ruling class jostle between more environmentally 'friendly' energy capitalists - think BP advertising - and more aggressive cowboy capitalists who, while quite happy to invest in the environmental market, see their immediate profits in terms of direct energy production for an expanding market. US rejection of Kyoto betokens a squabble within the global ruling class about the details of how to profit from the new environmental consciousness and who gets to profit how from the new capitalization of nature. At one level, the so-called conservatives simply have not yet caught up to the opportunities of environmental capitalism and will go down in history as such. On the other hand, they are on the side of an energy industry which is making record profits while presenting itself as environmentalist.

As with the subsumption of labour, there is no sharp historical distinction between the formal and real subsumption of nature. Just as sweatshop labour proliferates in many industries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, the extensive expansion of capital into nature remains a powerful frontier of capital accumulation, whether with bio-prospecting in the Amazon or oil drilling in the US Arctic; the outer edge of this

extensive expansion today is transplanetary, the coming colonization, scientific exploration, and exploitation of what is still known as outer space . What is new today is not that this horizontal integration of nature into capital has ceased, even if in some arenas it is significantly circumscribed as many raw materials become scarcer, harder to locate, and more expensive to extract. Rather, partly in response to these increasing constraints, a new frontier in the production of nature has rapidly opened up, namely a vertical integration of nature into capital. This involves not just the production of nature 'all the way down', but its simultaneous financialization 'all the way up'. Capital is no longer content simply to plunder an available nature but rather increasingly moves to produce an inherently social nature as the basis of new sectors of production and accumulation. Nature is increasingly if selectively replicated as its own marketplace.

Writing in the mid-1970s, Aglietta detected a 'crisis in the regime of intensive accumulation', a crisis which in retrospect people now recognize as the harbinger of a new phase of accumulation and a restructured capitalism dominated by neoliberalism and so-called globalization. In the 1980s the increasing appropriation of nature as an accumulation strategy contributed to the resolution of this regime crisis; today it promises to provide the nervous system of a new phase of capitalist accumulation. None of this happens without contradiction, of course, not least of which is that the new vertical capitalization of nature makes the fate of capitalism more dependent on nature, not less. In the past, economic recessions and depressions have traditionally provoked a slowdown in the appropriation of nature, an ironic environmental benefit amidst economic hardship. With the intensification of nature as an accumulation strategy, however, the destruction of value embedded in ecological commodities and credits both reaches further into the core of capital and threatens heightened environmental destruction. The same credit system that supposedly protects a wetland or forest can lead to its destruction when the credit system itself collapses.

Yet this does not happen without political opposition. Insofar as nature is more intensely integrated into capital as an accumulation strategy, the comprehensiveness of this social production of nature under capitalism becomes more and more apparent, and the necessity of a broad political response ever more urgent. It is important to fight GM crops, for example, on the grounds that they can contaminate and forever alter other organisms, including human beings, but if the analysis here has any meaning it also suggests that such a narrow focus on the use value of nature is not only limiting but skewed, and unlikely to generate a successful political challenge to the strategic production of nature *per se*. As the global capitalist class arrogates to itself comprehensive power over the production of nature, a power camouflaged in the language of markets, private property and free trade, an adequate response must be just as ambitious. In short, while struggles over GM organisms, biotechnology, working and health conditions, and other means of the capitalization of nature are of central importance, and have to be fought and won, it is just as vital to have a longer-term eye on the constitutive social relations. Put bluntly, if the production of nature is a historical reality, what would a truly democratic production of nature look like? The chance is there to take Virginia Woolf at her word, looking forward rather than backward, and to think how nature ought to change. And to think what kind of social power it will take-to democratize that production of nature. □□□

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