

# Chapter 21

## From the Soil to the Soul: Fragments of a Theory of Economic Conflicts



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### 21.1 Introduction

Environmental conflicts and movements are a core concern of the Barcelona School of Political Ecology and Ecological Economics. Inspired by the work of Joan Martínez-Alier, many scholar-activists at or around the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (“ICTA”) have helped deploy concepts like the environmentalism of the poor, contested metabolisms, activist epistemologies, conflicting languages of valuation, or degrowth. I have myself engaged with several of these concepts since my doctoral years in Barcelona. One of my main interests since then has been to try to strengthen the School’s institutional analyses – focussing on ownership and debt – as well as its psychological dimension – mobilizing psychoanalytic and ecopsychological insights.

This chapter draws on recent research along those lines and seeks to expand the School’s understanding of environmental struggles. After outlining an overview of the various types of conflicts over market economies, I will suggest that the prominent points of contention of today’s neoliberal capitalism are related to its metabolism (ecological dimension) and to its debts (institutional dimension) and that both dimensions are intimately linked with each other. Furthermore, I will argue that capitalism also generates ‘inner conflicts’ rooted in alienation (psychological dimension). Alienation devitalizes, isolates, and disorients. It disconnects people from themselves, their communities, and their ecologies (Rosa, 2019). To address alienation is politically as important as contesting the immediate causes or the structural causes of economic conflicts. Fortunately, as we can expect, the current state of affairs is generating its countermovements and a new blend of radical ideas is emerging in degrowth and similar ‘commonist’ movements.

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249

Throughout the chapter, I will rely on a broad definition of the economy seen as the various ways by which humans organize their sustenance (Gerber & Steppacher, 2014). The economy ranges from the ecological to the existential and encompasses the fundamental processes of appropriation, extraction, production, distribution, consumption, care, flourishing/alienation, and ‘excretion’ (waste).

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 21.2 outlines a broad historical framework that systematizes the various struggles over market economies, while Sect. 21.3 delves into the contemporary neoliberal era and its particular combination of conflicts. Section 21.4 then proposes a way of analyzing the triggers and targets of these movements, and Sect. 21.5 illustrates how radical change can only take place via an expansion of consciousness, using debt and degrowth as examples. Section 21.6 offers some concluding remarks.

## 21.2 Points of Conflicts Over the Economy: A *Longue Durée* Perspective

Different ways of organizing the economy have generated different kinds of conflicts, which have themselves generated different radical ideologies supporting alternatives. But since the birth of market economies in the Fertile Crescent some 5000 years ago, I suggest that it is possible to identify five major sets of economic relations that are especially conflict-prone: land, tax, labour, debt, and ecological resources (Fig. 21.1). These five categories of conflict have varied in combination and intensity over time and space, and they articulate in different ways to class, gender, and race, which is another constant source of fundamental conflicts over the economy.

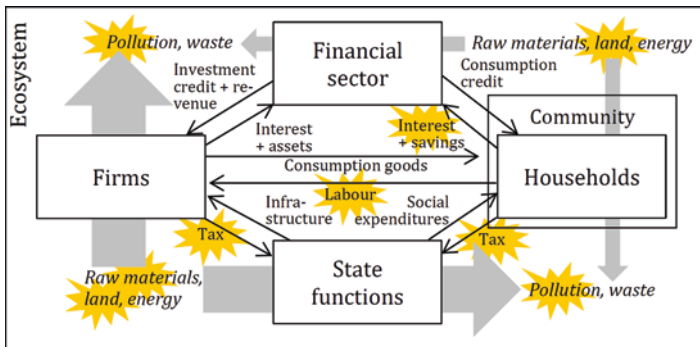
I will briefly illustrate these ideas with a few examples taken from pre-capitalist Europe, before devoting more space to the capitalist ‘early modern’, ‘modern’, and ‘neoliberal’ eras, respectively. In classical Antiquity, debt and land were arguably the key points of economic conflict. De Ste. Croix (1981: 298) noted that “[t]he programme of Greek revolutionaries seems largely to have centred in two demands: redistribution of land, cancellation of debts” (see also Finley, 1983). Linked to these struggles, the anti-systemic ideologies of the time were often demands for more democratic forms of government (Graeber, 2011). In the Middle Ages, the perennial cause of revolts was associated with the various types of taxes in cash, kind, or labour. Countless peasant rebellions started around tax issues (Burg, 2004). Facing the demands of élites typically justifying themselves on religious grounds, the radical ideologies of the time drew on alternative socio-political understandings of religion. In medieval Europe, there were many anti-systemic movements, such as those around radical theologians like John Ball, Jan Hus or Thomas Müntzer, that experimented with alternative ways of organizing society.

But as the transition to capitalism took place, new economic conflicts and new anti-systemic ideologies appeared. The rise of capitalist social-property relations

saw the emergence of new classes of commercial landlords, commercial tenants, merchants, and a nascent working class (Brenner, 1985). For the first time in history, households and workplaces started to be systematically separated, and financial relations began to grow dramatically (Gerber, 2014). Figure 21.1 represents the basic economic relations of market economies (black arrows). The figure includes an ecological dimension: the grey arrows show the flows of materials and energy that run throughout each economic entity, from the input stage (with raw materials, land, and energy) to the output stage (with waste and pollution), following the conventions of a socio-metabolic representation (Gerber & Scheidel, 2018). The stars represent the key sites of potential conflicts. This figure systematizes and intertwines the five fundamental categories of conflicts over market economies.

Capitalism requires at least two basic elements without which it cannot function: the separation of the producer from its means of production – through various forms of enclosure and dispossession – and a strong government able to enforce contracts on a large scale. Accordingly, struggles over land (related to dispossession) and taxes (related to the consolidation of the nation-state) can be seen as dominant economic conflicts in many parts of the world witnessing an early strengthening of capitalist dynamics. The corresponding radical ideologies can be sheer escapism from the state, as discussed for example by Scott (2009) in early modern Southeast Asia, or various forms of revolutionary republicanism, like in the French Revolution which started as a tax revolt.

While the basic relations of Fig. 21.1 remain as valid as before, the ‘modern era’ that started in the early nineteenth century was a period of colossal changes at the world scale. Polanyi (1944) argued that it was the time of a ‘Great Transformation’ that separated the economic sphere from the rest of society. And after World War II, this era witnessed a ‘Great Acceleration’, a period characterized by the exponential rise of many ecological-economic indicators such as the use of natural resources and the amount of emissions (Steffen et al., 2011). This ‘modern era’ is the period



**Fig. 21.1** Basic economic relations of market economies. Black arrows represent key socio-economic relationships which can be further differentiated within an intersectional perspective; grey arrows represent the metabolic flows running throughout each entity; stars represent key sites of struggle

of rapid industrialization linked to waged labour as the strategic site of economic conflict, at least in industrialized countries. Elsewhere, other economic struggles were dominant. In India, for example, debt remained a major cause of rebellion throughout the nineteenth century, and in the colonies more generally tax and land continued to be at the forefront of economic discontent. However, the radical ideology of European modernity was, without a doubt, embodied in the various forms of socialisms.

### **21.3 Neoliberal Growthism: New Conflicts and New Radical Ideas**

Around 1980, the world system can be seen as entering a distinct period, that of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism coincides, among other things, with a massive increase of environmental problems in terms of pollution, biodiversity loss, resources peaks, and climate change. These new circumstances have generated environmental protests to an unprecedented scale in human history. Martínez-Alier (2002: 1) has compared their explosion with the beginning of the socialist movement and the First International. Interlinking a given socio-metabolic configuration with its ecological distribution conflicts has become the hallmark of the Barcelona School and a powerful way of understanding and systematizing environmental struggles.

It is now also possible to link metabolic contestations to their institutional dimension, something that has been relatively less discussed in the Barcelona School. Facing biophysical limits and slower GDP rates, neoliberal capitalism seems to have gradually shifted its strategic form of surplus appropriation from industrial profits to financial rents. The various forms of debt are indeed located at the very heart of the neoliberal project and they have increased to unparalleled levels (Durand, 2017). A new debt-driven proletarianization has taken place since the 1980s, reinforcing the key function of debt as a control and disciplinary device over lower and middle classes, not only specifically over the working class. Unsurprisingly, anti-debt conflicts have exponentially risen since 1980 (Gerber et al., 2021). Class struggle seems to have somehow moved its centre of gravity from the capital/labour relation to the creditor/debtor relation (Lazzarato, 2012).

In sum, ecological conditions and debt represent two most prominent sites of tension over contemporary economies, whether openly or tacitly. Because both are so intimately linked to economic growth, it would not be a surprise if the radical ideologies that emanate from them are articulated around a critique of growth and accumulation. If this is confirmed, degrowth ideas are likely to become central to the radical ideologies of the twenty-first century. This is an important difference with more classic land and labour struggles which are not centred on a critique of growth (Gerber, 2020). While both anti-debt and environmental conflicts can be seen as an attack on growth, they target different ‘levels’ of it. Anti-debt conflicts contest the ‘virtual’ financial level, while environmental struggles target what

Martínez-Alier (2009) called the ‘real-real’ level of economic growth, that is, its metabolic foundation. The ‘real’ level, for its part, refers to the realm of production and consumption and may not be where the most acute conflicts are taking place right now. This is not to say, of course, that this level is conflict-free; but I suggest that economic struggles have recently expanded to the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real-real’ levels with a revenge.

Contemporary capitalism thus presents a unique combination of unsustainability, debt, and addiction to growth. These three elements form a kind of ‘complex’ that also brings anti-debt and environmental movements together. It turns out for example that many environmental movements are, knowingly or not, targeting the debt economy that pushes companies and indebted countries into predatory extractivism in order to ensure loan repayments (Steppacher & Gerber, 2012).

Another commonality of anti-debt and environmental conflicts is that both often involve different social classes, from workers to entrepreneurs, from landless peasants to wealthy farmers. These conflicts, as a result, usually cannot be understood on the sole basis of traditional class politics. They therefore often lack a clear ideological commitment: their outcome can be radical-revolutionary as well as populist-opportunistic (Gerber et al., 2021). For ecological conflicts, this latter orientation has sometimes been called ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY); for anti-debt struggles, one could call it ‘not from my wallet’ (NOWA). Having said this, it’s important to note that both NIMBY and NOWA movements may represent important starting points for further politicization.

Yet we are left with a perennial puzzle: why do some movements become populist and others radical? How are some protesters able to ‘radicalize’? And what makes a radical project viable over the long term? These are crucial questions for the Barcelona School and for any scholar-activist interested in deep transformation. We will examine them in the next section.

## 21.4 Triggers and Targets: Outline of a Theory

Conflicts over the economy have three different layers of causes and hence also of targets. The first one is concerned with the *immediate impacts* on the protesters’ wealth, health, or, following Honneth (1996), recognition. These impacts may for example result in demands for higher wages or equal rights (labour), agrarian reform (land), or the halt of a given polluting industry (ecological resources). Taken together, these demands can be quite radical, but taken individually, they do not really challenge the power structure in place, and in the long run, they may actually reinforce it. Hence, the well-known need for broader answers.

The second layer of causes/targets of conflicts over the economy is thus concerned with the *politico-institutional structure* such as the distribution of ownership or the growth imperative. Within this layer, movements may start with the five fundamental conflict-prone categories of land, tax, labour, debt, and ecological

resources, but they typically aim at replacing the entire arrangement represented in Fig. 21.1. Among the structural alternatives put forward, there is, for example, state socialism, radical municipalism, or degrowth. These political projects undoubtedly go beyond a set of top-down policies and do challenge capitalist relationships at their roots. We are so far still in a familiar Marxian terrain – but this is not quite enough yet.

Conflicts over the economy have a third layer of causes and of potential targets: the realm of *consciousness*, namely the protagonists' self- and situational awareness. This is the realm of inner phenomena: why, in terms of collective consciousness, did a given movement start or never started? What are the internalized norms that enable or deter mobilization? How to build a caring community of activists enabling the healthy deployment of a radical ideology? What are the shadow sides of leaders and organizations? To start addressing such questions, one must acknowledge that unconscious forces and emotions are important drivers in the social and political sphere (Gerber, 2022).

This third layer has received much less attention – including from the Barcelona School – and this general neglect has led to too many failed attempts at radical transformation. This is for example true of revolutionary republicanism and communism where, to make it short, one élite was quick to replace another one and reproduce the same old relations. Without a proper psychological theory and praxis, classical Marxism could only coarsely understand the process by which a 'class in itself' ('objective factors') could become a 'class for itself' ('subjective factors') as well as the inner conditions for the long-term viability of socialism. Busy seeking to seize state power, classical Marxism did not emphasize prefigurative politics, that is, the concrete building of emancipated pockets seen as an essential learning ground for further and deeper transformations (Grubačić & Graeber, 2004).

My point is that radical politics requires some kind of 'awakening' work in order to free oneself and heal the multiple potential forms of alienation (Rosa, 2019). The focus should not only be the deeper awareness/healing of the subject's relationship to herself and others, but also to the rest of nature and to the 'underlying reality', be it the unconscious or the divine (Brown, 2017). This work of de-alienation is not an easy one. Recent psychoanalytic work has suggested that the development of capitalism was of course not inevitable, but that "we are, one might say, psychically disposed to invest ourselves in the capitalist system", and this explains its extraordinary grip on many of us (McGowan, 2016: 22). Capitalism's genius, in short, is to postulate that there are solutions for the subject's alienation and emptiness because the resulting desires can be fulfilled by commodities. The contemporary dominant superego commands us to 'enjoy', 'transgress', and even 'self-actualize', but always through consumption. Besides sheer power relations, there are therefore also many unconscious ties which bind us to the system in place. It is thus not enough to rationally criticize capitalism or neoliberalism; it is also essential to identify and come to terms with our own unconscious investments in the system (Gerber, 2022). Next, I will add a few words on how consciousness can be expanded to sustain radical change.

## 21.5 Expanding Consciousness for Radical Change: The Examples of Debt and Degrowth

Economic relations are ‘external’ (involving money, contracts, and enforcement) as well as ‘internal’ (involving values, emotions, and unconscious norms). Many authors have investigated the internal, subjective effects of debt and how these effects tend to hinder resistance. The specific morality of a credit relation is often framed in terms of personal responsibility, that is, of a staged ‘mutual trust’ between a creditor and a debtor. A loan becomes a bet on whether a particular individual will keep her promise and reputation. To default generates feelings of guilt and shame because lending is intimately linked to values like ‘honesty’, internalized since a very young age and often projected onto an unjust ‘debtfare state’ (Soederberg, 2014).

Accordingly, anti-debt mobilizations cannot just be outwardly oriented, but also inwardly, in a consciousness-raising process that requires a “specific kind of subjective conversion [...], leaving behind debt morality and the discourse in which it holds us hostage” (Lazzarato, 2012: 164). One way of proceeding, Lazzarato (2015) suggests in a way reminiscent of degrowth, is to collectively retreat from capital’s valorization processes by engaging less in the economy, by refusing to work, by consuming less, by organizing autonomously, and by claiming back forms of idleness. Such ‘pulling out’ would contribute to dissociate our subjectivities from capitalist production and open the time for joint production and for the inner and relational work required for sustaining such a radical project.

In my view, the degrowth movement – at least in its commonist and non-state-centric variants – has already done some work on the third layer of causes/targets I mentioned above. Degrowth goes beyond the ecological critique of capitalist accumulation and includes practical reflections on what constitutes an existentially meaningful mode of relating and coexisting on the planet. One of its core objectives is to overthrow the value system associated with the ‘imperial mode of living’ and to emphasize instead care as the key relation of (re)production. In short, degrowth is all about reconnecting with what truly matters, away from the noises of capitalist modernity and its ‘culture of uncaring’ (Weintrobe, 2021). Simplicity, conviviality, work-sharing, and commoning become new practices, and outer degrowth opens the door for inner (re)growth (Gerber, 2021; Kaul & Gerber, 2023).

Some elementary psychoanalytic and ecopsychological principles can be helpful along this path. To examine what has been put for us in our superegoic ‘laws’, to investigate the meaning of our fears and blocks, to seek the guidance of the whole person (the ‘soul’) instead of merely the ego, to reconnect with our ‘ecological unconscious’ and with the sacred could all be seen as third layer targets of degrowth as a radical ideology for the twenty-first century. Psychoanalysis advises a humble attitude towards the unconscious: we need to listen to what it seeks to say, as there are potentially destructive energies hidden in it, but also potentially healing and liberating properties. The point is to move from ‘ego’ to ‘eco’ and to realize that



reason “develops only when the brain and the heart are united, when feeling and thinking are integrated” (Fromm, 1973: 358). Without some inner work, exterior targets alone will be of limited success, especially if state power (at any level) is again taken.

## 21.6 Concluding Remarks

The problem of indebtedness goes back 5000 years but the prominence of ecological degradations is a very recent phenomenon. As we have seen, these two issues have become central to the current world system. They are intimately associated with the growth addiction of neoliberal capitalism which relentlessly seeks new accumulation opportunities, both virtual and material. These dynamics will intensify in the coming decade as no substantial measures are currently being taken to downsize the global metabolism and limit debt-driven growth. As a result, neoliberalism generates massive ecological and socioeconomic destabilizations that will need to be addressed structurally.

However, this chapter also tried to show that structural ‘outer’ solutions cannot be the ultimate goal of radical movements. ‘Inner’ work aimed at addressing alienation and creating caring communities is essential in any preparation or implementation of a revolutionary project. Theodore Roszak – a founder of ecopsychology and an important influence in the degrowth movement – noted that the psychotherapist’s role should primarily be “that of raising questions about our standard of sanity. That is an extremely important role, as much for what it might serve to downplay (careerist pressures, money, and status) as for what it might emphasize (our abiding need for wilderness, tranquility, or animal companions)” (Roszak, 1992: 311). For him, “both the therapists and the ecologists offer us a common political agenda for the good of the planet, for the good of the person. It is simply stated: Scale down. Slow down. Democratize. Decentralize” (ibid.). This is in a nutshell the degrowth project. Subjectivity, consciousness, and alienation are research frontiers for the Barcelona School. They have the potential to fortify its scientific and political agenda (Kaul & Gerber, 2023).

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