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CAPITALIST NATURE

Towards a Synthesized Critique of Neoliberal Biodiversity Conservation

*Bram Büscher, Sian Sullivan, Katja Neves, Jim Igoe & Dan Brockington**

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a synthesized critique of neoliberal biodiversity conservation. This, we think, is necessary for two reasons. First, most work on the intersection of neoliberalism, capitalism, and non-human nature(s) has focused on neoliberal *natures* (Castree 2008a; Castree 2008b; Heynen and Robbins 2005; McCarthy and Prudham 2004), neoliberal *ecologies* (Castree 2007), and neoliberal *environments* (Heynen, Prudham, McCarthy, and Robbins 2007), not on neoliberal *conservation*. These literatures explore ways in which natural realms are transformed through and for capital accumulation. McCarthy and Prudham (2004, 279), for example, refer to neoliberal nature as “the politics of transforming and governing nature under neoliberalism”; Heynen and Robbins (2005, 6) refer to the acceleration of “the ongoing commodification of natural things”; while Heynen, et al. (2007, 3) refer to neoliberal environments as “the ways that attempts to ‘stretch’ and ‘deepen’... the reach of commodity circulation rely on the re-working of environmental governance and on entrenching the commodification of nature, and vice versa.” Our synthesis, by contrast, focuses on neoliberal conservation as an amalgamation of *ideology and techniques* informed by the premise that natures can only be “saved” through their submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms, what McAfee (1999) has aptly labeled “selling nature to save it.” Put another way, neoliberal conservation shifts the focus from how nature is used in and through the expansion of capitalism, to how nature is conserved in and through the expansion of capitalism.

Second, a spate of recent publications investigates the trend of neoliberal conservation, yet their lessons remain disconnected. We refer, amongst others, to Sullivan (2005; 2006; 2009), Igoe and Brockington (2007), Dressler and Büscher (2008), Büscher (2008; 2010a; 2010b), Brockington, et al. (2008), Brockington

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(2009), Igoe (2010), Fletcher (2010), Brockington and Duffy (2010), Roth and Dressler (2012), and Arsel and Büscher (2012),¹ as well as several writings in conservation biology that deal with “neoliberal” conservation in all but name.² This flurry of scholarly activity recalls Castree’s (2008a) critique of geographers’ understanding and writing about neoliberalism and nature: practitioners and scholars are “using the same terms—‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberalization’—to refer to and judge phenomena and situations that are not necessarily similar or comparable.” James Ferguson (2010) additionally asserts that “uses of neoliberalism” in “progressive scholarship” can produce something of a kneejerk reaction against any initiative that contains neoliberal elements, even while that initiative might manifest progressive outcomes in some terms and at some scales. For these reasons, it is important to synthesize the wider lessons of this emerging literature, especially since ongoing work on neoliberal conservation and neoliberal natures remains strangely disconnected.³ We attempt in the discussion that follows to provide a clearer picture of what is meant by neoliberal conservation, how it relates to literatures on neoliberal nature, ecology and environments, and why it bears relevance for those interested in biodiversity conservation and human/nature entanglements.

Given the diverse and hybrid “uses of neoliberalism” (Ferguson 2010; Larner 2000), and in order to simplify our mission, we use the term neoliberalism in a specific way: as a *political ideology* that aims to subject political, social, and ecological affairs to capitalist market dynamics (Büscher 2008; Foucault 2008). However, we do not see neoliberalism as functioning as some universal code behind practices. We follow Foucault in understanding neoliberal ideology to be accompanied by and made manifest through distinct governmentalities (techniques and technologies for managing people and nature) and embodied practices in social, material, and epistemological realms. Combined, these work as biopower to construct and regulate life and lives in significant ways (Nally 2011). We commence with the assertion that there has been a conflation of what is generally (and simplistically) referred to in conservation discourses as *economics* with the ideological assumptions of neoliberalism. Through elaborating this conflation, its links with wider capitalist processes, and their effects on ecosystems, we argue that it becomes easier to distinguish various negative impacts of neoliberal win-win models for biodiversity conservation and so to construct a more synthesized critique around three main points: 1) the stimulation of contradictions; 2) appropriation

¹And the articles in the special issues of *Antipode*, *Geoforum*, and *Development and Change* introduced by the latter three articles.

²See, for example, Vira and Adams (2008), Walker, et al. (2009), Chan, et al. (2007). Peterson, et al. (2009) is an exception where the structuring influence of neoliberalism specifically is highlighted.

³Existing writing on neoliberal natures, ecologies, and environments seems largely to ignore scholarship on neoliberal conservation. Certainly the relative youth of the latter may explain its scarcity in key collections such as Heynen, et al. (2007). But that could not explain its complete absence from, for example, Bakker’s (2010) recent paper in *Progress in Human Geography*. A major exception is Robertson’s (2004) prescient work on wetland mitigation banking.

and misrepresentation; and 3) the disciplining of dissent. Inspired by Bruno Latour's recent "compositionist manifesto," our conclusion outlines some ideas for moving beyond critique. First, however, we briefly outline what marks a focus on *conservation* and why this is important.

Conservation, and Why it Matters

Biodiversity conservation is incredibly diverse, and we can distinguish many different strategies such as protected areas, education programs, ecotourism, mitigation offset schemes, payments for ecosystem services, trade interventions, rewilding programs, and so forth (Salafsky, Margoluis, Redford and Robinson 2002). There is an equally great variety of conservation institutions, such as non-governmental institutions (NGOs), international organizations (entities like the World Conservation Union, IUCN); academic unions (such as the Society for Conservation Biology); government departments; local "community-based" resource management institutions; and—increasingly—commercial ventures. Given this diversity, to speak of "neoliberal conservation" risks unfair generalizations. We argue, however, that it is precisely *because* the strategies and institutions of conservation can be so varied, while the similarities neoliberal conservation produces are so pervasive, that a systematic understanding and critique of neoliberal conservation is so important (Igoe, Neves and Brockington 2010; K. MacDonald 2010a).

Among critics of the neoliberal "project," however, there is a notable absence of this kind of analysis with regards to conservation. David Harvey (2003, 166-168), for example, tends to view environmental conservation as providing alternatives that actively counter neoliberal capitalism. In *The New Imperialism*, his list of struggles against accumulation by dispossession is also a litany of *environmental* protest. Yet he only glancingly acknowledges that peasants might be dispossessed from their land as effectively for a national park as by a new sheep run. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, he describes a "sprawling environmental movement hard at work promoting alternative visions of how to better connect political and ecological projects" without tracing the complex politics that tie some elements of this movement firmly into mainstream political economy (Harvey 2005, 186; Dowie 2006). He does clearly recognize the role of NGOs in promoting neoliberalism but does not mention conservation NGOs among their number (Harvey 2005, 177). Indeed, conservation does not appear in these books as a focus of interest.

The casting of almost any form of conservation as progressively opposed to the forces creating environmental crisis is especially problematic when an alarmist language of crisis is used to justify policies and practices that may be injurious to local livelihoods (often in the name of capturing landscapes for environmental conservation) (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Leach and Mearns 1996; Stott and Sullivan

2000).⁴ Crisis-driven critiques also often miss the larger point that *environmental (and other) crises increasingly are themselves opportunities for capitalist expansion*. Martin O'Connor thus writes in 1994: "environmental crisis has given liberal capitalist society a new lease on life. Now, through purporting to take in hand the saving of the environment, capitalism invents a new legitimization for itself: the *sustainable and rational use of nature*" (O'Connor 1994, 125–126, emphasis in original).

So, while conservation conventionally is conveyed as something different, as "saving the world" from the broader excesses of human impacts under capitalism, in actuality it functions to entrain nature to capitalism, while simultaneously creating broader economic possibilities for capitalist expansion. Markets expand as the very resolution of environmental crises that other market forces have produced. Capitalism may well be *The Enemy of Nature*, as Kovel so aptly put it. Conserving nature, paradoxically, seems also to have become *the friend* of capitalism.

Thus we see that 1) conservation is vitally important to capitalism; and 2) that this importance is often not recognized. These are compelling reasons for a synthesized critique of neoliberal conservation.

Why Focus on *Neoliberal Conservation*?

One of neoliberalism's *raison-d'être* is to expand and intensify global capitalism (Harvey 2005). Capitalism, in turn, is at the heart of the dramatic ecological changes and crises unleashed in the last two centuries (O'Connor 1998; Foster 1999; Kovel 2002; Burkett 2006).⁵ With the rise of capitalism, the means for, scale of, and drive towards ecosystem transformation has grown dramatically. In dialectical interaction with technological developments and the intensification of colonial extraction (amongst other factors), emerging capitalist societies became more adept at "offsetting" local and regional ecological transformations extra-locally and extra-regionally, hence laying the foundations for ecological crisis on a world-scale, or a "crisis in the world-ecology," as Moore (2010) puts it. Across space (extensification) and within spaces (intensification), capitalism has disrupted and changed the

⁴See also: Nygeres and Green (2000), Bernstein and Woodhouse (2001), Dressler, et al. (2010), and Brockington (2002). There are of course many good examples of crisis; it might be apposite at this point to note that we are not climate change skeptics and have opposed the work of people like Bjorn Lomborg.

⁵There is no denying that the extent and scope of ecological problems in our era are qualitatively different from previous ones. This, of course, is not to say that problems of degradation did not exist before, or that they never led to the collapse of ecosystems on a large scale. Foster (1999, 34) speaks of the idea of "ecohistorical periods": periods in which "human activities have led to (relatively) uniform changes in nature over vast areas." He refers to early "civilizations" as societies where ecological collapse was most notably due to destruction of the soil and food production overstretch; and medieval, feudal European societies which had similar problems that often led to undernourishment, famines, epidemics, high (infant) mortality, forced labor, etc., although these were obviously also triggered by extremely exploitative feudal class relations. Yet, all of this remained "(extra-) regional" until the rise and globalization of capitalist relations of production in the 17th and 18th centuries.

metabolism of ecological processes and connections (Kovel 2002, 82). Bearing in mind our comments on environmental crises above, here we emphasize two key aspects of capitalism's propensity to stimulate large-scale ecological crises.

The first has to do with the nature of ecological crisis. Diversity, connectivity and relationships are crucial for the resilience of ecosystems. Ecology 101 teaches students that "everything hangs together with everything else," which is both the reason why studying ecosystems is both such a joy and so complex. Capitalism's drive to turn everything into exchange value (into commodities that can be traded) cuts up these connections and relationships in order to produce, sell, and consume their constituent elements. Hence, as Kovel (2002, 130–131) shows, capitalism "separates," "splits" and—because in principle everything can be bought and or sold—"alienates" and estranges. To further bring conservation into capitalism, then, is to lay bare the various ecosystemic threads and linkages so that they can be further subjected to separation, marketization, and alienation, albeit in the service of conservation rhetoric.

The second point has to do with the nature of capital, which, as Marx (1976, 256) pointed out, is "value in process, money in process: it comes out of circulation, enters into it again, preserves and multiplies itself within circulation, emerges from it with an increased size, and starts the same cycle again and again." Capital is always on the move; if it ceases to move and circulate, the whole system is threatened. The recent (and ongoing) financial crisis has made this abundantly clear. From Washington via London to Tokyo, all leaders of rich countries were primarily concerned with making sure that banks would start lending again in order to get money back into circulation. As such, capitalism is inherently expansionist, striving continuously to bring more and more facets of life into its orbit, including natural worlds at multiple scales.⁶

Making clear the (monetary) exchange value of nature so as to calculate what price has to be paid in order to conserve its services, then, is not just about trying to preserve ecosystems, as the currently popular adagio "payments for environmental services" would have it. It is about finding new arenas for markets to operate in and thus to expand the remit, and ultimately the circulation of capital (Büscher 2012). Payments go to those able to capture them, rather than directly to nature, and this explains why conservation responds to ecological crises, although popularly understood as in contestation to the environmental effects of capitalism, now are providing such fruitful avenues for further capitalist expansion (Sullivan in press). One of the key ways in which this has occurred has been through infusing conservation policy and practice with the analytical tools of neoliberal *economics*,

⁶McAfee (2003, 216), in discussing biotechnology, talks about "neoliberalism on the molecular scale" and concludes that "this molecular-reductionist paradigm, far from being born from genomic biotechnology, has long supported the project of techno-science in support of capital accumulation in agriculture, in support of social control, and, from time to time, of explicit agendas for eugenics." See also Prudham (2007).

without recognizing that these are themselves infused with, and reinforce, particular *ideological* positions regarding human relationships with each other as well as with non-human natures.

Conflating Economics and Ideology

In conservation policies and practice, “capitalism” is rarely mentioned. Instead, many actors speak about the need to engender conservation through “economics,” “markets” and/or “payments.” As Thrift (2005, 4) argues, “the language of [neoliberal] economics has become common linguistic currency, making it increasingly difficult to conceive of the world in any terms except those of a calculus of supply and demand.” The thinking seems to be: “humans need (or demand) ‘environmental services’? Then their supply can be guaranteed through payments.” The economic language in recent policy solutions to the ecological crisis thus frames interventions in particular directions—namely towards market and technological innovation—in ways that arguably, and often intentionally, deflect understanding away from systemic causes of ecological (and associated socio-economic) crisis.

Implicit assumptions of people as rational maximizers of economic opportunity, and an emphasis on investment, profit, (natural) capital, growth, derivatives, and the like, however, demonstrate that the normative *values* infusing conservation economics are those of neoliberal capitalism (Fine 2009). At the same time, the kinds of economic activities and relationships one finds *within a capitalist system* (as opposed to other economic systems) are rarely explicitly located and attributed to these capitalist contexts in mainstream conservation discourses. What we wish to emphasize here is that ideas in and of economics are historically and geographically diverse and socially constructed, with consequences for both social and ecological realms. They are thus worth “unpacking,” both to highlight the very specific meanings attributed to them in mainstream biodiversity conservation, as well as for pointing to alternative ways in which these concepts might be understood and applied in the realm of conservation.

The field of economic anthropology is useful for distinguishing between capitalist and other types of economic systems (Gudeman 2001). Economic anthropologists deploy a much wider definition and understanding of economics, as a social sphere of production, distribution, and consumption, warranting emphasis on economic processes as they emerge and operate in specific socio-cultural and ecological contexts. In this sense, economic anthropology echoes Marx’s theorization and analysis of economic systems as socio-historically and culturally situated modes of production, although it also goes beyond Marx’s contributions by offering “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) and in-depth analyses of specific socio-economic arrangements. In other words, within the contexts of Marxist and anthropological approaches, each economic “system” is understood and presented substantively and, therefore, as relatively unique in relation to other economic systems. By contrast,

orthodox liberal economics produces generalized abstractions that offer formal and universal rules to explain the emergence and operation of economic processes. Because of this high level of abstraction, economic systems (seem to) look the same anywhere anytime, regardless of their specific contexts.⁷ Anthropological perspectives on economics are thus known as substantivist, whereas orthodox economics offer formalist views of the same issue.

Formalist perspectives are based on abstractly conceived individual economic agents whose presumed rationality seeks to maximize economic gains. At the aggregate level, the collective behavior of rational economic agents is assumed to result in optimal market functioning and equilibrium. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have shown that actual human beings in “real world” contexts incorporate endless other elements into economic decision-making processes, such as family-social obligations and diverse cultural values, including those associated with non-human natures (Graeber 2001; Angelis 2007).⁸ Economic decisions are therefore rarely reducible to the maximization of economic gain or profit, and contrary to assumptions held in orthodox (neo)liberal economics, are not based on the possession of the kinds of full information required for optimal rational economic performance.⁹ In turn, while formalist perspectives assume that markets automatically respond to the aggregate demand of fully informed rational agents (e.g., the demand for healthy, resilient ecosystems desired in neoliberal conservation), substantive perspectives show that which demands get to be met, more often than not, are the result of dominant ideological standpoints and the interests of elites (Neves 2006).

The anthropologist Marcell Mauss thus argued in the 1920s that much of what economic science had to say about human history was inaccurate, particularly as it relates to the role of barter and the nature of exchange. As Graeber (2000) summarizes:

In the beginning, goes the official version, there was barter. People were forced to get what they wanted by directly trading one thing for another. Since this was inconvenient, they eventually invented money as a universal medium of exchange. The invention of further technologies of exchange (credit, banking, stock exchanges) was simply a logical extension. The problem was, as Mauss was quick to note, that there is no reason to believe a society based on barter has ever existed. Instead, what anthropologists were discovering were societies where economic life was based on utterly different principles, and most objects moved back and forth as gifts—and almost everything we would call “economic” behavior was based on

⁷Ironically Marxists sometimes make the same kind of mistake in their critique of capitalism.

⁸For human non-human knowledge and value practices specifically, see, for example, Berkes (1999), Posey (2004), and Viveiros de Castro (2004). Rich work in ecological philosophy and ethics complements these ethnographically informed analyses. See, for example, Plumwood (2006) and Curry (2008).

⁹See also the growing economics literature on the significance of “bounded rationality” for economic behavior, e.g., Simon (2008).

a pretense of pure generosity and a refusal to calculate exactly who had given what to whom. Such “gift economies” could on occasion become highly competitive, but when they did it was in exactly the opposite way from our own: Instead of vying to see who could accumulate the most, the winners were the ones who managed to give the most away.¹⁰

These insights resonate with Marx’s earlier observations that capitalism is presented as an economic system that is inevitable and “natural,” as if it were not the direct effect of the interests of specific powerful elites, infused with layers of ideological belief and shored up by historically contingent but structural inequalities. It is thus no coincidence that substantivist economics were key to the revival of Marxist thinking in the 1970s. The potent combination of empirically grounded cross-cultural analysis and Marxian economics resulted in two essential contributions with direct relevance to the arguments we are making here: 1) they reveal the diversity and rather large nuances in how economies are operationalized differently in different societies across time and place; and 2) they thus also reveal precisely how distinct contemporary capitalist economics is in historical and cultural terms.

An additional aspect of this distinctiveness of capitalism is an intense focus on the future, accompanied by dismissal of historical context and awareness. For companies, last year’s performance is important primarily as a reference point for this and next year’s performance. The future, not the past, is the only avenue for further profits.¹¹ This is echoed in contemporary development policy, for which Mosse (2005, 1) notes that: “better theory, new paradigms and alternative frameworks are constantly needed; in the development policy marketplace the orientation is always ‘future positive.’” In conservation, ideas about a “sustainable future” similarly are rarely moderated through discussions of our rather unsustainable (recent) past. Instead, the opposite seems to be occurring. As Stahel (1999, 124) elaborates:

Only within a mechanical time framework can the economic valuation of single species be conceived. It is only within this framework, too, that the global value of an ecosystem’s biodiversity can be expected to be obtained by simple summing-up of single values, ignoring the emergent properties which arise from the interrelations and interdependencies of the different species within the whole.

¹⁰From a formalist perspective, as well as for evolutionary economists, such behavior of course would be understood as guided at some level by calculated self-interest: by “making rational decisions about the allocation of scarce resources with the aim of getting as much as possible for oneself,” as noted in Graeber (2001, 28). As Graeber and others argue, however, this acts to throw the baby out with the bath water—i.e., to deny that there ever can exist qualitatively different assumptions for organizing social and “society-with nature” relationships. Also see Nurit Bird-David (1992).

¹¹Obviously, historical artifacts that can provide profit in the future are the exception here; they indeed are often turned into spectacles for purposes of profit.

Through such (currently very common) valuation efforts,¹² the discipline of capitalism's "mechanical (and linear) time" is further reinforced, which works well for conceptually entraining biodiversity with economic valuation and commodification methodologies, but has somewhat questionable implications for biodiversity (Walker, et al. 2009; Burkett 2006; Robertson 2008).

It is in failing to recognize these contributions that mainstream conservation conflates a seemingly general "economics" and related terminology with the ideology and practices of neoliberal capitalism. More fundamentally, this error conflates general human economic practice (the conceptualization, production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services) with the particular ideology of neoliberalism (as defined above). These confluences are often repeated in the broader realm of ecological economics through its emphasis on a "Coasean economics" that assumes the emergence of social and environmental optima through the incentivized bargaining of those with private property allocations (Muradian, et al. 2010).¹³ In outlining this argument, we seek to highlight our central concern with the ways in which particular ideologies, mistaken as objective and universal descriptions of human economic activity, are shaping economic thought and producing depoliticized policy discourses in conservation.

Synthesizing Critique of Neoliberal Conservation

We suggest here that our critique of neoliberal conservation might be synthesized into three main points: 1) the stimulation and concealment of contradictions; 2) appropriation and misrepresentation; and 3) the disciplining of dissent. These three points form a framework that captures the intents and outcomes of neoliberal conservation, the tensions between these and how these tensions are dealt with. By exploring how the literature on neoliberal conservation engages these three points, we hope to illustrate ways in which neoliberal conservation is embedded within, and contributes to, wider systemic failure of mainstream ideas and policies of "sustainable development."

¹²See, for example, the Natural Capital Project by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and Stanford University, a ten-year project to develop tools for the modelling and mapping of the economic value of ecosystem services to construct a global "natural capital database" (www.naturalcapitalproject.org); ARIES (Artificial Intelligence for Ecosystem Services), a project by Conservation International (CI) and partners to create "a web-based technology. . . offered to users worldwide to assist rapid ecosystem service assessment and valuation at multiple scales, from regional to global" (http://www.conservation.org/FMG/Articles/Pages/mapping_natures_benefits_ARIES.aspx); and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity program (www.teebweb.org) of the European Union and United Nations Environment Programme: a massive research initiative identifying lack of market prices for ecosystem services and biodiversity as the key driver for both biodiversity loss and negative impacts on human well-being, with the assigning of market prices to nature considered key for both ecological and social health.

¹³See also Burkett's book *Marxism and Ecological Economics* in which he aims to create a productive dialogue between the Marxist and Ecological Economist "camps." Yet, and despite its valuable contribution, it has far from penetrated the mainstream of ecological economics, which is why we iterate this argument here.

1. *Stimulating Contradictions*

All ideological systems are susceptible to their own contradictions, though degrees of contradiction vary. Capitalism contains several deeply rooted contradictions and, as noted above, those related to the environment are especially pertinent. James O'Connor (1998, 165) famously referred to the "second contradiction of capitalism" as "the way that the combined power of capitalist production relations and productive forces self-destruct by impairing or destroying rather than reproducing the conditions necessary to their own reproduction." The second contradiction arises where profit motives are *the* driving force in relationships between people and natures: the demand for profit will tend to trump positive social and environmental outcomes whenever it is at odds with them. This is a common refrain in much critical analysis of capitalism, and indeed, among its advocates. As international currency speculator George Soros asserts:

If I allowed moral consideration to influence my investment decisions, it would render me an unsuccessful competitor. And it would not in any way influence the outcomes because there would be someone else to take my place at a marginally different price. (McQueen 2003.)

In this system, then, investment and speculation in ecosystem services and biodiversity markets can only be concerned with their own profitability. Whatever the personal sentiments of any individual investor may be, the market will make sure that profit is always *the* first consideration.

Neoliberalism intensifies these contradictions through enabling further liberation of the forces driving them. Michel Foucault, for example, described economic growth as neoliberalism's "one true and fundamental social policy"—meaning that under neoliberal ideology, and its fetishization of what he calls the "truth regime of the market," economic growth becomes *the* assumed prerequisite for positive social, and currently environmental, outcomes (Foucault 2008; Fletcher 2010). Neoliberal conservation affirms this with the faith that the underlying ecological contradiction of capitalism can be resolved through the same mode of operation that produces this contradiction. In other words, neoliberal conservation's core axiom is that in order for natures to be "saved," acts of "nature saving" must be imbued with profit potential or else there is little incentive for rational actors to pursue it. The tautological consequence of this logic is that in a world where states are increasingly less able to take on "nature-welfare" programs, the only solution to environmental problems is to bring nature conservation to markets and private investment to variously conserved natures (Caldecott and Dickie 2011; Briggs, Hill, and Gillespie 2009).¹⁴

¹⁴The following websites, amongst others, exemplify the current popularity of this approach: www.ekoamp.com, <http://www.businessgreen.com/>, <http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/>.

Neoliberal conservation posits this inversion (of the “second contradiction”) in win-win terms by rendering the mission to save the “natural world” as its prime interest/concern, and concomitantly maintaining that the means to this end resides in the commoditization of nature to engender both economic growth and ecological sustainability. In so doing, it privileges as a solution the very structures and processes of neoliberal capitalism that produce the socio-ecological damages it seeks to redress.

The contradictions emerging from the amalgamation of neoliberal capitalism and conservation are simultaneously highly peculiar and highly consequential. Economic growth becomes, paradoxically, *the* prerequisite for healthy ecosystems, whose conservation in turn becomes the basis for further economic growth. This is dangerous because the relationship between economic growth and the health of ecosystems is considered from a very selective perspective, eliminating information which suggests that economic growth could be harmful in terms of both environmental factors (Harvey 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005) and widening wealth differentials (Le Quéré, et al. 2009; Norgaard 2010). This reasoning, for example, sees ecotourism as providing local and national conservation solutions, without considering its consumptive contribution to environmental problems at various scales (Duffy 2010). It is particularly surprising to observe ways in which natural scientists, who normally pride themselves on being data-driven, seem to refuse to apply the same empirical rigor when extending their work into the realm of the social (and economic) sciences.¹⁵ Such paradoxes are classic examples of what anthropologist Gregory Bateson called “closed-loop” thinking. He considered this as characteristic of pathology: whereby in failing to take into account the wider processes of which it is part, the self-corrective actions of an ill-functioning system perpetuate illness-causing conditions, while providing temporary illusion of improvement. In neoliberal conservation, by subsuming wider processes of ecosystemic sustainability into the narrow logic and premises of orthodox liberal economics, neoliberal conservation becomes impervious to corrective feedback from the human and nonhuman entanglements it is shaping and on which it depends. Ideological immersion means that protagonists of neoliberal conservation become unable to countenance its possibly detrimental effects, even when humans and non-humans may be communicating such effects.

Various ideological techniques are deployed in service to this closed-loop thinking and the contradictions that are thereby stimulated. These act as “blinkers” to fashion conservation—an inherently political undertaking—into a neutral endeavor responding to technical, *apolitical* challenges (Ferguson 1994; Büscher 2010c). As such, neoliberal conservation has strong links with environmental managerialism, as framed by Redclift (1988, 638), as well as with ecological modernization, as articulated by Hajer (1995). Both of these understandings emphasize ways in which environmental issues become framed and understood

¹⁵As noted in particular by one of us in a survey of the 2008 meetings of the Society for Conservation Biology, detailed in Büscher (2008).

primarily as technical “management” issues, precisely through leaving many issues unsaid and untouched.

Neoliberal conservation thus takes on the appearance of being a technical design process to incentivize “stakeholders” (seen as predictable utility-maximizers) to produce idealized outcomes. As Fletcher (2010) argues, the logic of imbuing conservation strategies with potential for future economic profit extends to the assumption that human motivation is directed primarily by personal gain, and that the aggregate effect of thus oriented individual behavior leads to increased collective wealth and well-being. One of the central goals of neoliberal conservation, then, is to foster transformations that will incentivize people as “utility maximizers” to behave in certain and predictable ways that concord with conservation outcomes. In a recent essay in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, for instance, Mandel, Donlan, and Armstrong (2010, 3) suggest that “[i]f the trading of species derivatives were responsibly permitted,” then “those who do not currently incorporate a conservation ethic into their economic decisions would stand to profit from a change in behavior towards environmental stewardship.” Such suggestions imply a faith that teams of mathematical ecologists and economists can combine profitability and healthy ecosystem measures into complex derivative forms to produce grounded conservation outcomes even as the nature it aims to conserve is located in unintuitive layers of abstractions that are increasingly ungrounded (Sullivan 2010; Walker, et al. 2009).

Obviously, not all conservationists are so smitten by the allure of neoliberal solutions (Redford and Adams 2009; Child 2009; Chan, et al. 2007). Several are indeed quite outspoken: Walker, et al. (2009, 155) conclude that “viable biodiversity barter and meaningful biodiversity protection seem mutually exclusive,” while Peterson, et al. (2009, 115) argue that “efforts to commodify ecosystem functions as ecosystem services to humanity may prove deleterious to biodiversity conservation in some cases.” While we come back to these and other examples of critical conservation biologists below, these seem to be exceptions. For the most part, neoliberal solutions in conservation appear as a consensus, and dissent is rarely visible. The main questions then become: why are so many conservationists seizing upon neoliberal conservation policies, and why are the voices so seldom heard of those who do not? Our answer is precisely because neoliberal conservation functions as an *ideology*, becoming socially (and ecologically) embedded through generating the hegemonic governance structures and practices through which it is reproduced.

As an ideology it needs to be believed in; its central tenets should not be questioned. In fact, questioning the implicit assumptions of neoliberal conservation can be dangerous politically, with those who do so potentially risking various forms of disciplining. The deeply rooted contradictions of neoliberal conservation instead are believed to be “manageable” and/or able to be overcome either through *not* reflecting on them, or by simply pursuing neoliberal prescriptions more aggressively and forcefully. As such, many conservationists can seem to choose the safe road of doing conservation (i.e., managing ecological crises) through creating marketized

exchanges for conservation products (e.g., through tourism, trophy hunting, payments for environmental services, biodiversity offset schemes, etc.), while dissenting or “disobedient” voices that attempt to speak of neoliberal conservation’s contradictions and concealments are muted in various ways.

Neoliberal conservation thus becomes an essential contribution to neoliberalism’s most profound contradiction: the ability of its proponents to produce and favor discourses that are seemingly free of contradictions, while in fact these saturate its practices (Büscher 2010a). A major part of neoliberalism’s attractiveness and pervasiveness lies precisely in this ability to hybridize and stimulate consensus-oriented discourses, *despite* their increasingly contradictory realities (K. MacDonald 2010a). Put more strongly, we suggest that the very purpose of these discourses is discursively to mask contradictory realities so as to legitimate further neoliberal expansion (Büscher 2010a).

2. Appropriation and misrepresentation

As a realm popularly perceived to be contesting the environmental excesses of capitalist logic, conservation is uniquely positioned to be reconstituted so as to (re)present neoliberalism’s larger message that economic growth and the protection of nature are essentially compatible projects. It achieves this effectively and pervasively through use of what different analysts have called virtualism (West and Carrier 2004), simulacra (Baudrillard 1981), derivative nature (Büscher 2010b), and “the Spectacle of Nature” (Igoe 2010): shaping human-environment relationships and expectations through mass production, distribution, and consumption of modern and replicable forms of representation. Media theorist and revolutionary Guy Debord (1992 [1967]) defined spectacle as “the mediation of social relationships between human beings by image.” We extend this here to include “the mediation of relationships between people and the environment by images” (Igoe 2010). It is important to note, however, that spectacle cannot be reduced to “mere image.” It is much more than abstract representation. As Debord explains:

The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness.

Some brief examples serve to illustrate ways in which “spectacle” effects both the appropriation and misrepresentation of particular society-environment relationships in ways that serve the contradictions maintaining the ideological logic of neoliberal conservation, shaping “real world” society-environment relationships in the process. Echoing the creation of national park landscapes in settler U.S.A., i.e., as landscapes emptied of (particular) people, 19th century models of nature as pristine wilderness were imposed on East African landscapes like the Serengeti Plains. Over time the Serengeti has emerged as an iconic presentation of all African nature, indeed of Africa

tout court. In the mid-1950s, films like *Hatari* (starring John Wayne) and *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, a documentary produced by Austrian conservationist Bernard Grzimek, brought images of the Serengeti as “pristine nature” to movie and television screens around the world. The latter, which won the Oscar for best documentary in 1957, was instrumental in raising public support for the creation of a national park which prompted the eviction of people from the Serengeti. Subsequent productions by Grzimek opened markets for package tours to the Serengeti in the 1960s, at the same time as Western conservationists were lobbying leaders of newly independent East African countries to retain parks created under colonialism as a crucial source of economic development. In the intervening decades, images of Serengeti-like natures have become essential to the mobilization of people and resources for specific conservation interventions for a wide array of landscapes by hybrid networks of NGOs, state officials, and for-profit interests (Igoe 2010). Such idealized African landscapes have even become the inspiration for created African “national park landscapes”—populated by spectacular wildlife and peopled only by paying visitors, park management, and necessary service employees—in localities as far away as Kent in the U.K.¹⁶

These kinds of transformations have created ample opportunities for “green-washing,” by systematically choosing to present only select fragments of actual reality, highlighting some connections while concealing others. Thus, for instance, Dawn dish soap commercials, which depict the product’s role in saving animals from oil spills, conceals the fact that Dawn could neither be produced nor delivered to the supermarket without the very same substance that it saves those animals from. A promotion from the African Wildlife Fund (AWF) to save African Wildlife by donating an old cell phone conceals the socio-environmental impacts of lithium mining for cell phone batteries in central Africa, while implicitly reminding people that it is time to get a new cell phone. The McDonald’s Endangered Animal Happy Meal campaign seeks to convince consumers that they can help end global warming through a partnership between McDonald’s and Conservation International to protect tropical rainforests, without acknowledging the environmental impacts of soy-based animal feed production and the central role of McDonald’s in the promotion and expansion of car culture in the United States. Credit cards embossed with photographs of endangered animals and the logos of conservation NGOs encourage consumers to “save the planet with every purchase”—and the list goes on and on.¹⁷

Aside from the obvious incentives this creates for corporate sponsorship of neoliberal conservation, this tendency is also indicative of neoliberal conservation’s emerging role in producing natures that appear to transcend capitalist contradictions.

¹⁶As in the creation of Fort Lympnae Safari Park in Kent, which attracts visitors to its “real” African Safari Experience. Discussed in Sullivan (2011).

¹⁷See: <http://www.lifelineforafrica.com/africanWildlifeFoundation.html>; <http://www.projectplanetcorp.com/index.php?go=waysToSave>; <http://www.conservation.org/discover/partnership/corporate/Pages/mcdonalds.aspx>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcv7-B8e02g>.

Thus spectacle in the context of neoliberal conservation intertwines propaganda, marketing, and governmentality to open up new conservation spaces for capitalist expansion while providing the marketed appearance that this trajectory bears no contradiction with ecological integrity or social equity (Brockington 2009; Igoe 2010).

This is essential for the opening up of new realms of investment while also consolidating the *appearance* of general consensus with the ideological assumptions of neoliberal capitalism. In short, through spectacle, accompanied by the creation of derivative products and the application of “managerial” approaches to conservation practice, neoliberal conservation is able to place itself outside of the realm of contradictions it stimulates, even while appropriating and misrepresenting these contradictions in critical ways.

Igoe, Neves, and Brockington (2010)—following Antonio Gramsci and Lesley Sklair—thus argue that neoliberal conservation is part of a current “Sustainable Development Historic Bloc.” For Gramsci (1971), a historic bloc is a moment in which diverse groups who share particular interests come together to form a dominant class, and their ideas come to dominate the ways in which other people consent to see—and are able to talk about—the world. As Goldman and Papson (2006, 9) describe:

In remarkable synchronicity, the sustainability crowd and the neoliberal development crowd have united to remake nature in the South, transforming vast areas of community-managed uncaptialized lands into transnationally regulated zones for commercial logging, pharmaceutical bio-prospecting, export-orientated cash cropping, megafauna preservation and elite eco-tourism.

The Sustainable Development Historic Bloc, according to Sklair (2001), is a historical moment in which a transnational class of corporate CEOs, professionals, government officials and bureaucrats, NGO leaders, merchants, and the media are working together to overcome the crises outlined above by offering easy consumption-based solutions to complex socio-ecological problems. To this we would add that they also produce versions of nature that are amenable to technocratic intervention to produce the “win heavy” discourses mentioned above.

Ken MacDonald’s groundbreaking work grapples with these realities at the 2008 World Conservation Congress in Barcelona. The Congress, organized and sponsored by the IUCN, meets every four years and is the largest global event of its kind. MacDonald (2010b) argues that such high-profile meetings are essential fields of cultural and social reproduction (and thus for research), as the moments in which conservationists come together as a tangible (as opposed to imaginary) global community and reaffirm their values and beliefs. His description of the deployment of spectacle in producing and orchestrating a powerfully hegemonic vision of beliefs and values consistent with neoliberal conservation is worth quoting at length:

The presence of European royalty was announced to the assembled audience who were then made to wait. . . [This] was followed by a procession of VIPs, distinguished by the red neck straps attached to their nametags (as distinguished from the green of regular attendees). The ceremony itself made a nod to royal courts of the past as musicians accompanied “larger-than-life” video presentations on the main stage; players appeared magically in the audience to “debate” different ideological approaches to the “environmental crisis that we all face”; acrobats and tumblers appeared on stage to perform and reveal large hanging banners emblazoned with the words: Sustainability, Awareness, Equity, Biodiversity and Action; and celebrities like Mohammed Yunus, David Attenborough (by video) . . . appeared on stage to deliver addresses. The next morning’s opening plenary was equally spectacular. Ted Turner served as celebrity;¹⁸ an IUCN partnership between IUCN and Nokia was foreground as a way of using mobile communications technology to engage youth in the environmental movement and a faux debate between panelists moderated by a South African television host. Indeed, this “debate” is useful to focus on to consider the work accomplished by spectacle, for as much as spectacle serves to mediate, it also has to be mediated and orchestrated. This is the job of the moderator skilled in the production qualities of the medium of television so that watching the “debate” unfold on stage was much like watching a television program. The entire event came off like a talk show, and was likely intended to. From the beginning, it was clear that the audience existed simply to view. And in all of this, the orchestrated narrative of the organizers lay under the surface: we’re all in this together and we must “move forward” and work with the private sector.

Spectacle is also essential to the production of what Büscher (2010b) calls “derivative nature,” in which selective use is made of social and material landscapes as underlying assets for the kind of images and slogans that speak to global tourism and consumption circuits. Likewise, Garland (2008, 62) asserts that conservation “lays claim to intrinsic or natural capital” and adds value to it “through various mediations and ultimately transforms it into a capital of a more convertible and globally ramifying kind.” Büscher (2010b) argues that in many contexts “globally ramifying” derivative natures actually gain more power and financial value than the original material assets from which they were derived. As brands they become “mechanisms that enable a direct valorization (. . .) of people’s ability to create trust, affect and shared meanings: their ability to create something in common” (Goldman and Papson, 2006, 336). The branding attached to transfrontier conservation areas is a case in point. These conservation areas across international borders are promoted under the sign “Peace Parks” to highlight the supposed peace-instilling qualities of transfrontier conservation. Research in Southern Africa has shown that “Peace Parks” trigger similar contradictions as other neoliberal conservation interventions, albeit

¹⁸Ted Turner is an American media mogul and philanthropist. He pioneered the concept of the 24-hour news channel and founded CNN (Cable News Network) as well as the first cable “superstation,” WTBS. He was also briefly married to Jane Fonda. For more on Ted Turner, see: <http://www.biography.com/people/ted-turner-9512255>.

often on a larger scale; it is especially ironic that they are also promoted as “the global solution” (Büscher 2010a).

Brockington and Scholfield (2010) and Igoe (2010) argue that conservation NGOs are among the, if not *the* main producers and purveyors of these kinds of “derivative natures”—relying hereby on a broader systemic process of entraining and structuring economic and ecological “worlds,” which Igoe refers to as “ecofunctional nature.” In the context of the Sustainable Development Historic Bloc, ecofunctional nature becomes derivative nature *par excellence*. It is a construction and portrayal of nature in which economic growth and healthy ecosystem function can be optimized and synchronized through technocratic interventions overseen by experts. Through ecofunctional nature, hyper-consumption and environmental sustainability are taken to be fundamentally compatible projects.

These renderings provide justification and mystification for the kinds of interventions outlined by Goldman and Papsen above. They make it possible to believe that carbon emitted by an SUV in Los Angeles can be reabsorbed by rainforests in Congo and Indonesia. They are essential to the idea that environmentally destructive enterprises like mining, oil exploration, and hydro-electric dams can be mitigated by setting aside other land in compensation for the damage they cause. Such trade-offs are then portrayed as conservation success stories, and they benefit conservation NGOs, tour companies, local and national elites, and the agencies, foundations, and international financial institutions that fund them. They also help brand countries and communities in finding their competitive advantage in the world economy. They provide green makeovers for countries and companies with poor human rights and environmental records (C. MacDonald 2008; Dowie 2009; Dowie 1995; Dressler 2011). They remake large parts of the world according to Western tourist fantasies and promote the idea that eco-tourism is a “non-consumptive” activity, that is in fact, synonymous with nature conservation (Duffy 2006). It allows consumers to believe (or at least behave like they believe) that all they need to do is consume in order to conserve. It capitalizes on the dimensions of capitalism that are fun and seemingly without contradictions: playing into capitalism’s “crazy vitality” and “extravagant symbioses” to seduce engagement while minimizing reflection (Thrift 2005, 1).

Neoliberal conservation thus appears to have found a specialized and expanding niche for itself in the current world economy. Through its productions of spectacle and its visions of ecofunctional and derivative nature, it provides one of the means by which capitalism is able to both expand and secure the conditions of its reproduction. In other words, it does essential work in lending the ideology of neoliberalism the exclusive, and exclusionary, appearance of objective and common sense reality (Harvey 2005). In doing so, however, it jostles with, appropriates, and/or undermines alternative value practices regarding “human-with-human” and “human-with-nature” relationships. When these puncture and/or threaten the spectacularized consensual reality of neoliberal conservation, they can become

subject to the sorts of disciplining that points towards ideological assumptions that have become hegemonic.

3. *The disciplining of dissent*

It is well documented that the manufactured conservation landscapes and sutured contradictions emphasized above are accompanied by myriad forms of local displacement and everyday structural violence. These range from forced evictions to the constraining of resource access and more subtle erasures of value practices (Brockington 2002; Brockington and Igoe 2006; Adams and Hutton 2007; Harper 2007; Agrawal and Redford 2009; Dowie 2009).¹⁹ Various autonomous food production systems that may have been sustained over centuries have tended to be negatively framed and criminalized in favor of landscapes of biodiverse purity—created in paradoxical service to non-local lifestyles, agendas, and consumptive desires with arguably greater global environmental impacts (Adams 2008; Brockington 2009).

What is less widely acknowledged is the work done to discipline dissenting views. Social scientists involved with Madagascar's USAID-funded Ranomafana National Park Project have been systematically expelled from the project or country when their findings have conflicted with the discourses favored by the park management (Harper 2008). Local leaders charged with inciting a protest march to highlight growing concern over divisive neoliberal CBNRM²⁰ implementation practices in northwest Namibia were threatened with legal action by the main USAID-funded NGO, which later lobbied hard for the withdrawal of published work analyzing the complexities of this event (Sullivan 2003; Paudel, et al. 2007). In a workshop in 2008, a number of researchers and activists from varied contexts globally shared stories of sustained harassment, abuse, and threats by protagonists of neoliberal conservation when they attempted to speak and write of the contradictions and injustices flowing from internationally funded conservation endeavors (Igoe and Sullivan 2009).

But under a neoliberal political economy, alternative viewpoints do not always need to be actively suppressed in order to be disciplined. Indeed, they can—perversely—be stimulated as some kind of catharsis, without impacting on the broader hegemonic system. Thus we see, as mentioned above, dissenting voices in some of the main conservation biology outlets, in particular the journal *Conservation Biology* where its founding editor argued that:

¹⁹That these are significant outcomes of conservation efforts is indicated by the “in-house” establishment, in 2010, of the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights (CIHR), drawn up by the IUCN and key large conservation NGOs (http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/social_policy/scpl_cihtr/).

²⁰CBNRM stands for Community-Based Natural Resource Management.

The reduction of all conservation problems to economic terms is counter-productive and dangerous. Trusting to market forces and the laws of supply and demand to correct inequities and restore healthy equilibria does not work in economics and certainly does not work in conservation. (Ehrenfeld 2008, 1092).

While noteworthy and laudable in terms of journal policy, the question is whether these types of messages can form a serious challenge to the neoliberal ascent in conservation. For as far as we can discern from online sources, these types of messages are (quite obviously) not given any serious credit or attention in pro-neoliberal conservation platforms such as www.ecosystemmarketplace.com and other studies mentioned above. More seriously, critical messages are often ignored by mainstream organizations and media, and if they are acknowledged, often denied or twisted to suit particular neoliberal objectives. An interesting example of both points is a recent controversy over the giant consultancy company McKinsey. McKinsey was accused by Greenpeace of structurally misleading client governments in their advice on the distinctly neoliberal conservation strategy “REDD + ” (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) in favor of logging and mining industries. Greenpeace (2011) argued that “McKinsey’s advice does not, in any example studied by Greenpeace, lead to a cessation of deforestation or forest degradation” and that “McKinsey—and its cost curve—systematically play down the environmental impact of industrial logging and deforestation for plantations. At the same time, it routinely exaggerates the destructive impact of smallholders and farmers.” The company’s response was noted by the (itself firmly neoliberal) Internet news magazine *BusinessGreen*:

However, McKinsey said Greenpeace misinterpreted its work. The company declined to answer specific questions from *BusinessGreen* regarding its methodology, but in an emailed statement said: “We disagree with the report’s findings and stand firmly behind our work and our approach.” (Shankleman 2011.)

Dissenting voices are either denied or put in a particular light. What makes this example further poignant is that this news is brought by an online site that describes itself as follows: “*BusinessGreen* is a business web site offering companies the latest news and best-practice advice on how to become more environmentally responsible, while still growing the all-important bottom line.”²¹ Obviously, many other outlets exist where dissenting voices are heard or aired, but on the whole these are rather marginal or often met with the disciplining force of denial or disregard.

Through these purification strategies, the basic tenets of a profit-oriented, commodifying and privatizing resource system are maintained. They function additionally to sustain a refusal to countenance alternative value practices and organizational forms—particularly those oriented towards commons, reciprocal

²¹<http://www.businessgreen.com/about>.

distribution through multi-way sharing, and animistic conceptions of a sentient, communicative world of diverse embodied perspectives. These attempts to maintain hegemonic purity demonstrate precisely the ideological workings of neoliberal conservation (also see Corson 2010). As Gramsci (1971) writes, it is through such struggles that apparently civil hegemonic consensus is unveiled as the structural enforcing of particular elite power interests. The flattening and closing of dissent that pierces the veneer of neoliberal conservation niceties is precisely what reveals its hegemonic ideological *gestalt* (cf. Sullivan, Spicer, and Böhm 2011).

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to come to a synthesized critique of neoliberal *conservation*. We hope to have delineated neoliberal conservation both as *inherent* to broader capitalist processes, and as a particular set of governmentalities that seeks to extend and police profitable commodification processes based on artificial and arbitrary separations of human society from biodiverse-rich (non-human) natures. In thereby producing territories that are suitable for its own expansion, neoliberal conservation intervenes in diverse biocultural systems around the world, displacing, enclosing, commodifying, and spectacularizing these into the idealized natures that are to be saved. In neoliberal conservation, then, globally diverse actors produce proliferating and profitable commodities that rely on surprisingly similar packages of ideologies and practices, premised on constructed distinctions between human and non-human natures, while ironically promising the opposite to (normally non-local) consumers in the form of closer contact and intimacy with nature.

As elaborated in Bruno Latour's recent work (2004; 2005; 2010), what concerns us here are the sorts of *socionatures*—the sorts of assemblages of human and non-human natures—that thereby are composed and brought forth.²² We are interested in what these tend to include and enhance, and what these tend to demote and discard. Notwithstanding the generative and creative excitement of capitalist productive forms (as noted above), we maintain that significant alienations and socio-ecological degradations are thereby sustained. Non-human natures tend to be flattened and deadened into abstract and conveniently incommunicative and inanimate objects, primed for commodity capture in service to the creation of capitalist value. This extends a utilitarian construction of a passive nature as an object (of many objects) that is external and distant in relation to human presence and use. Similarly, the knowledge and value practices of diverse peoples frequently are displaced to make way for a neoliberal opening and pricing of land and “resources” as these are recomposed in service to neoliberalism via conservation. The peoples thereby affected become constrained to participate in and benefit from neoliberal conservation initiatives to the extent that they accept associated opportunities and compensation only in particular economic terms. The hegemonic edge of this

²²See also Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and De Landa (2006).

contraction of possibilities is felt in both the biopolitical (self-)disciplining necessitated by participation in such neoliberal assemblages (Norgaard 2010) and in the suppression of alternative value practices and dissent experienced by those contesting the socionatures that tend to be assembled through neoliberal conservation.

We maintain and hope, therefore, that this is an arena ripe for change in effecting transition to a world that, as Adams and Jeanrenaud (2008) put it, is both humane and diverse. We offer this consolidated critique as a gesture to affirm that such change requires nuanced understanding of the contexts and assumptions that are generating problems. As T.J. Laughlin wrote in 1892 in the introductory piece to the *Journal of Political Economy*:

It becomes very clear that possibility of change implies a knowledge of the thing to be changed; that a knowledge of the existing economic system is a condition precedent to any ethical reforms. Certain impatient people find it difficult to wait to acquire the knowledge of what is; and, unequipped, proceed rashly to say what ought to be.

Any transformative alternatives to systemic socio-environmental problems, thus of necessity, will be mediated through the political economy from which they have emerged, and are not predisposed to “quick fix” solutions within the structural contexts that generate such apparently structural problems. But we hope with this article to have drawn out some reasons why the amplification of political economic structures that have produced such systemic problems may, in fact, not be the most logical means of solving these same problems. We also hope to have illuminated some of the ideological reasons as to why the neoliberalizing of environmental conservation is so opaque and seductive to those involved with conservation work.

In thinking about future directions, we are inspired by Latour’s recent “Compositionist Manifesto” in which he proposes the concept of “composition” to represent the possibility for recycling critique and putting it to creative uses. To follow Latour’s (2010) metaphor, critique can be wielded like a sledgehammer, which can “break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices.” All of these things we have sought to achieve, and hopefully with some success. But the space we have opened in the process is sullied by the remnants of these things. Like broken bits of concrete and plaster on the floor, and dust in the air, all this makes it a difficult space to inhabit. How can we further clear the air and recycle this rubble? How can we also recycle the tools of critique, as Latour proposes, into ones that can “repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, and stitch together?” How is it possible, in other words, to compose more equitable and ecologically healthy compositions of human and more-than-human nature(s) in a world characterized by Latour (2010, 485) as having “no future but many prospects?”

Strategies towards these ends will need to build more effective connections between scholarly theorization, (local) social movements opposing neoliberal conservation, and the full diversity of human endeavors to animate socio-nature. As noted above, scholarly work has already revealed numerous examples of contexts where alternative understandings of human/nonhuman entanglements have been articulated as critiques of mainstream conservation practice, leading to hybrid solutions incorporating sound scientific ecological knowledge (Neves 2006). While these processes are themselves frequently fraught with their own tensions and contradictions, they also can entail successful efforts to re-embed conservation practice with (local) ecological and social concerns and ways of imagining and interacting with nature. Moreover, we hold that tensions and contradictions are ultimately more sufferable, productive or even creative and invigorating if they lead or contribute to ends that are humane, diverse, common, hopeful and animate as opposed to ends that are alien, privatized, divisive and apocalyptic. This is also the message of Neil Smith's (1996, 50) "production of nature" in that "it focuses the politics of nature around the question of how, and to what ends, alternative natures might be produced." Doom and gloom gives way to hope when we ask, "what kind of nature do we want," instead of "what is the price of nature?" It is these kinds of questions that change the terms of the debate and so help to "recycle critique" with the aim of composing and reanimating society-nature relationships.

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