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## **Re-regulating socioecologies under neoliberalism**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this chapter is to consider the relationship between neoliberalism and environments. The neoliberal era involves governments overhauling regulatory environments that govern access to and control of nature. This entails shifting regulatory regimes, not merely eviscerating them – a re-regulation. We centre our chapter on three processes of re-regulation in the neoliberal era: 1) new regulatory conditions that allow for further exploitation of natural resources; 2) innovations in private and voluntary forms of governance; and 3) the transformation of environmental problems into market-like solutions. But all is not “neo”, of course; neoliberalism inherited from liberalism particular ideas about what are the “right” ways for ecologies and subjects to be governed, the right practices through which humans should relate to and use the environments in which they are situated. For liberals, old and new, when all individuals pursue their self-interest economically, when they relate to nature and land through market logic as a resource to be constantly “improved,” all of society will be wealthier. Yet liberal and neoliberal governing strategies rely on the violent rendering of whole peoples and places as less valuable, making certain people, species, lands, waters available to be sacrificed, developed for the supposed ‘common good’.

### **Introduction**

Neoliberalism is a continuation of much older logics and processes. Think of its most sacred principles: private property, individual freedom, a state whose main role is to protect these property rights and freedoms, and a laissez-faire approach to environmental regulation in order to facilitate economic development - essentially, principles that forms an “ongoing effort... to construct a regulatory regime in which the market is the principle means of governance” (Mann 2013, 148). These principles are far from new. They stem in particular from classical liberalism, a western political ideology that is classical because it pre-dates the modern age, and liberal because it holds that “the golden road to collective wealth” is through individual freedom and a society unconstrained by the state (Mann 2013, 142). Classical liberal ideas - advocated most famously by thinkers like John Locke and Adam Smith - were put to work in colonial centres and peripheries, formalized in laws, enshrined more generally in the makeup of the nation-state. This might seem like ancient history, but when we read definitions of neoliberalism, we see that

it has crucial resonances with these longer logics that are about defining the right way to live, not only with other humans, but also with the more than human world.

The objective of this chapter is to consider the relationship between neoliberalism and environments. But we start with liberalism because it was, like its neoliberal antecedent is, very much about transforming environments and how people relate to them. Neoliberalism inherited from liberalism particular ideas about what are the “right” ways for ecologies and subjects to be governed, the right practices through which humans should relate to and use the environments in which they are situated. For liberals, classical and neo, when all individuals pursue their self-interest economically, when they relate to nature and land through market logic as a resource to be constantly “improved,” all of society will be wealthier. The “all”, of course, must be put in quotes. The liberal and neoliberal projects have always relied on the violent rendering of whole peoples and places as less valuable, making certain people, species, lands, waters available to be sacrificed, developed for the supposed ‘common good’. The Canadian tar sands, for example, which are one of the largest industrial projects in the history of the world, are a blight on First Nation’s land. The enclosure, extraction and pollution endemic to tar sand production are continuous with the colonial dispossession that began in 1670 when large parts of Western Canada were claimed by the Hudson’s Bay Company (a fur trading company started by imperial Britain), with ruinous disregard for the Indigenous Peoples whose territories suddenly “belonged” to a foreign company.

Given these historical continuities, why even refer to neoliberalism at all? From technological developments facilitating a more globalized economy, to the increased political organization and power of economic elites, there are important distinctions between liberal and neoliberal capitalism. Other chapters in this handbook carefully excavate what is distinctive about the “neo”, in particular by pointing to the break with so-called “embedded liberalism” (see Chapter ?? by Jessop), as well as to the rise of globalization and finance (see Chapter ?? by Aalbers). In this chapter we build from previous reviews of “neoliberal environments” (e.g. Heynen et al. 2007; Castree 2010; Himley 2008) to focus on the re-regulations of nature that characterize neoliberalism and that are producing a host of uneven socioecological effects. By re-regulation, we simply mean that under neoliberalism there is a changing regulatory environment - policies and laws are shifting, with varying effects. One of the hallmarks of competitive states jockeying for investment in the neoliberal era involves governments overhauling regulatory environments that govern access to and control of nature. When it comes to these regulatory environments, the favoured approach is one in which markets are king. This means not only that environmental regulation is increasingly reconfigured so that it does not impede economic development (or improvement), but also that environmental regulators are more and more often turning to markets themselves as regulatory tools. This involves shifting regulatory regimes, not merely eviscerating them. We therefore avoid using the term deregulation because even though environmental regulation is often curtailed in the neoliberal era, what this frequently amounts to is a repositioning of governing bodies and strategies. Overall, the neoliberal era involves creating the regulatory conditions for further exploitation of natural resources; the innovation of private and voluntary forms of governance; and regulations that transform environmental problems into market-like solutions. These three processes are the focus of the chapter. They are continuous with older logics, but also present their own unique challenges and openings for resistance.

## **Re-regulation for economic development: The cases of agriculture and mining**

Neoliberalism involves setting the conditions for economic development, where the state puts its formidable power behind the extension of enterprise (Polanyi 1944). As Nancy Peluso (2007, 90) explains, the regulations that neoliberal states develop do not seek to protect the state's citizens and territories but rather aim "to gain or maintain a piece of their sale". States do not work alone in this pursuit. Multilateral trade agreements, a major regulatory shift in favour of markets (McCarthy 2004), have proliferated in the last two decades and continue to be actively sought after by states. These agreements not only ramp up protections for private investors (for example by protecting against the nationalization of their assets), but also can effectively privatize conditions of production. A prime example of this is the expansion of trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) to include parts of nature, like genetic material, that was previously considered part of the public domain (McCarthy 2004). Also over the past quarter century, there has been a concerted effort by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), to use the severe fiscal crises that have occurred in the Global South to enforce neoliberal conditions in exchange for debt restructuring (Klein 2008). These conditions include requiring fiscal austerity (reducing state expenditures), trade liberalization (opening up markets to foreign investment), the privatization of resources (selling national assets). A host of socioecological effects have followed in the wake of these re-regulations.

For example, in exchange for debt restructuring, Bolivia underwent the "shock therapy" of the IMF and WB, requiring them to undertake "currency devaluations; road construction; export tax rebates; reduction of import taxes; and suppression of price controls" (Redo 2011, 231) - all to attract national and international investment. Policies were enacted to increase export earnings needed to facilitate loan repayment, which led to the increase of foreign actors particularly in agriculture. The effect of these policies was an increase in deforestation (see Hecht 2005; Redo 2011) and unequal land distribution. As Susanna Hecht (2005, 397) describes, "the rampant deforestation in Amazonia's 'arc of fire' that extends from Maranhao to Santa Cruz reflects a powerful economic dynamic, a kind of market and technology triumphalism". Chile also experienced rapid growth of export oriented forestry after its forests were privatized and all export restrictions lifted, and there are links between these policy changes and the loss of old growth forests with widespread conversion to plantation forestry (see Liverman and Vilas 2006, Clapp 1998).

The case of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994, is also illustrative. As outlined in Liverman and Vilas (2006) (themselves drawing on a wide range of research in Latin America), NAFTA is built upon the basic notions of neoclassical economics. In agriculture, the theory was that trade liberalization (reduction of subsidies, tariffs) would lead Mexico, US and Canada, to specialize in the products for which they hold a comparative advantage. Mexico, it was thought, would specialize in labour intensive vegetables, nuts, coffee and tropical fruits, moving away from 'inefficient' grain production. Mexico reformed its constitution to encourage investment and efficiency in agriculture, and to move away from common property towards private ownership (because private property was considered more economically efficient). Over a decade later, researchers have found that small-scale farmers were negatively impacted by these changes. "Smaller and poorer farmers have

found it more difficult to access the credit, water, and technical expertise to convert to exports and because of low grain prices and difficult economic conditions have actually expanded the area in corn in order to maintain even modest incomes” (Liverman and Vilas 2006, 349). Additionally, ecological impacts include increased pressure on water supply, heavy use of agricultural chemicals, and deforestation.

Alongside a revamped agricultural sector, a globalized mining industry has been a linchpin of neoliberalism. In the early neoliberal era, as Gavin Bridge (2007, 85) catalogues, over 90 states adopted new mining laws in an effort to, as he colourfully describes, produce the “underground as a site for the circulation of international capital”. As a demonstration of the new world order of hyper competitive capital, Bridge quotes a Guyanese document worth reiterating:

From west to east, there is a global preoccupation with advertising one’s mineral heritage, revising mining laws and fiscal policy, in some instances, offering fiscal incentives; advertising one’s mining culture, infrastructure, educated human resources, etc. as additional attractions to the potential investor. In some ways it’s like jostling for attention in a crowded marketplace” (quoted in Bridge 2007, 78).

Angling for international investment means countries like Guyana strive to become more hospitable places for foreign capital. So, as Bridge outlines, Guyana re-worked its institutions and laws that allocate private access to mining exploration and mineral extraction. In 1989, Guyana revised its Mining Act to liberalize exploration - which led to an explosion of new claims, more than doubling in three years (from 1,316 in 1988 to 3070 in 1991). To attract further international capital into the country, in 1993 the government created a new kind of permit (longer term, larger size). This led to a twenty-fold expansion in the area of land claimed or permitted, from 200,000 acres in 1990 to 3 million acres in 1994. Bridge (2007, 82) describes this as a “process of enclosure in which private property rights ... were assigned to lands formerly vested in the state”. In some areas of the country 100 percent of land was claimed for gold and diamond mining.

These examples carry with them a central take home message: neoliberalism is fundamentally tied to the deeply rooted classical liberal logic that self-interested competition lifts all boats. Neoliberalism is an attempt to create the conditions for such competition to take place, facilitating efficient economic development. What the above examples show is that this involves the creation of further rules and regulations to speed up and extend economic flows of capital with significant socioecological effects. But it would be wrong to suggest that overall ‘capital wins’, although it surely comes out ahead. Effects of re-regulating socioecologies in favour of markets can be unpredictable and varied. For an example, we can return to the height of NAFTA, when Mexico had just eliminated a federal institution that helped to regulate coffee markets. In the hole left, struggles ensued between political elites, producers and social movements to control the market in coffee. In some cases this led to strong social movements and small producers being able to capture more surplus for themselves, whereas in less organized spaces, elites came to control markets (Snyder 2001). As Liverman and Vilas (2006, 350) comment, “local and historical factors mediate the effects of neoliberal processes and how the withdrawal of national controls can open up new forms of control and regulation at the local level”. In several sectors (coffee and forestry, for example), too, these trends in environmental governance

towards free trade and freer investment flows take place at the same time as the explosion of *fair* trade and certification, to which we now move.

### **Corporate Voluntarism: The fox guarding the henhouse**

The rise in prominence of NGOs and other non-state entities has been a major change in global environmental governance since the early 1990s. With states circumscribed in their ability to regulate increasingly transnational industries and trade, NGOs began to circumvent governments and attempt to directly influence corporations. The resulting “private” governance bodies - certification regimes, in particular - have been described as “non-state, market-driven” governance (Cashore et al. 2004) or “informal” regulation (Newell 2001). Their authority can be wielded through carrots (promise of access to particular markets or higher prices, for example through certification regimes) or sticks (such as consumer boycotts or shareholder activism). Their unifying characteristic is that state sovereignty is not used to force compliance (Cashore et al. 2004), at least not directly. Compliance - and authority - is instead rooted in the market. For example, if a forest company fails to comply with a standard required in order to be certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), FSC can withdraw its certification and the company will lose access to particular markets for FSC-certified wood.

While some of the scholars tracking these trends do not link them to neoliberalism (Cashore et al. 2004), for many others the connection is obvious, particularly because of the way the market is leveraged to achieve political influence and market transactions serve as the seat of authority (Newell 2008; Klooster 2010; Guthman 2007). For Peter Newell (2008, 522), then, “marketised environmental governance is a mode of neoliberal governance.” In particular, for him, it is the emphasis on *voluntarism* that betrays a neoliberal disdain for traditional command-and-control state regulation. For example, voluntary food labels, including everything from “dolphin safe” tuna (Baird and Quastel 2011) to organic vegetables (Guthman 2007), have clear neoliberal marks (see McCarthy 2006 for an overview). A mix of state, private, NGO and multilateral bodies govern these labels, which “attach economic values to ethical behaviors... and ‘devolve’ regulatory responsibility to consumers” (Guthman 2007, 457). As such voluntary labels not only fall back on the market as the means to regulate; they may also create new markets.

Three points are important to make here. First, the voluntary food label example points to a broader shift: not only consumers are becoming mobilized as political actors, “shopping to save the planet” (Liverman 2004), but also shareholders and pension holders are using their collective influence to attempt to shift the terrain of investment toward, for example, decarbonized portfolios, as in the recent expansion of fossil fuel divestment movement. Second, to characterise this growth in market- and consumer/investor-based politics as neoliberal is to miss how it can also work to undermine neoliberal and broadly capitalist forces. To go back to food labels, Guthman (2007) points to Karl Polanyi’s “double-movement” at work. Organic labels, she says, both deploy neoliberal techniques and at the same time push back against the abstracting tendencies of capitalist trade and perhaps even address the inequities such trade produces. Eco-labels possibly even create new political openings, such as “novel possibilities for collective action at transnational, subnational, and regional scales” (Foley and Hébert 2013, 2736). The same can be said about other consumer-based movements - boycotts, divestment - that may have

a neoliberal face but also work to undermine neoliberal markets and orders, and curtail their effects (Rowe, Dempsey and Gibbs forthcoming).

Third, the growth of voluntary labeling regimes is consistent with a broader rise in voluntaristic environmental governance. Voluntary standards and certification regimes have proliferated in fisheries, forestry, and in numerous international standards regimes that pertain to labour and development. Non-profit certification organizations like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) (Foley and Hébert 2013) and the FSC (Klooster 2005, 2010) are becoming powerful players setting global environmental standards for harvests of fish and trees, respectively. Research on the environmental impacts of these environmental standards regimes is sparse, even for forestry (Visseren-Hamakers and Pattberg 2013), whose certification regime is the longest standing. The few studies that exist find mixed results: organic coffee certification in Costa Rica significantly reduced chemical inputs (Blackman and Naranjo 2012). The results are less promising for fisheries. Although MSC-certification has expanded considerably over the last decade, “there is little evidence... that the MSC has contributed significantly to arrest the decline of fish stocks... [and] risks defaulting to a marketing scheme for the seafood industry” (Gulbrandsen 2012, 335). An additional risk, of course, is that if market advantage cannot be demonstrated or sustained, companies may lose incentive to certify.

Governments are usually not formally involved in certification regimes, and typically they do not legally require that companies comply with them. But governments may advocate that companies adhere to voluntary standards. This is particularly the case with international standards that seek to guide corporate behaviour abroad. For example, Canada does not require its mining companies to follow Canadian regulation when operating abroad, instead leaving companies to follow the regulations of the country within which they are operating, even though many of these companies receive financial support from the federal government for their foreign investments (Gordon and Webber 2008). The Canadian government does, though, “encourage” its mining companies to act in compliance with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Convention 169, which requires, among other things, that Indigenous people be consulted before any development on their lands. Canada itself has not ratified the ILO, however, and companies’ compliance is entirely voluntary and there are no bodies able to enforce ILO 169. What this means is that “Canadian mining companies are largely left to govern themselves” (Nolin and Stephens 2010, 49).

If the previous section’s main message was that neoliberalism involves creating the environmental governance regimes in which self-interested competition and accumulation can flourish (albeit with unpredictable consequences), this section shows how NGOs and other non-state entities have also been hard at work to cultivate voluntary mechanisms like certification, which they hope can fill the regulatory void left by states unable - or unwilling - to create laws governing environmental development. While re-regulating socioecologies is, then, increasingly taking place beyond the state, the motivations of the groups involved vary. So too do the socioecological effects of these voluntary regimes.

### **Solving environmental problems with private property, markets and commodities**

This section focuses on a third type of socioecological re-regulation under neoliberalism - that of market environmentalism. It is linked to, but also distinctive from the previous section. Here we focus on the trend in environmental management over the past quarter century that aims to extend private titles to resources - land, water, forests, fisheries, genetic resources - as well as the trading of these resources and rights. The overall logic is that private ownership of common resources will create economic incentive that will lead individuals and firms to change to “environmental” behavior, in the most cost-effective way possible. These market-based approaches are counter to what are known as “command and control” approaches that simply set limits or regulations on firm behavior, meaning approaches to environmental governance that require firms to only emit X tonnes of GhG emissions, or disallow firms from certain land use changes (e.g. no draining of wetlands). These market-based approaches argue that command and control is inefficient, and that market-based approaches will allow for the most flexible and cost effective achievement of environmental goals. The resonances between free market environmentalism and the philosophies of classical economic liberals are deep. According to Mansfield (2006, 30), proponents of these approaches draw their ideas from “neoliberal economic and political thinkers such as Ronald Coase and Friedrich Hayek, who themselves draw on liberal thinkers such as Adam Smith”.

The 1990 Clean Air Act in the United States is exemplary of the market-based approach to solving environmental problems. It established a cap and trade system to deal with emissions leading to acid rain. The Act capped the source emissions (the cap lowered over time) and distributed rights to pollute to firms, creating a property right in pollution (in sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide) as well as laying the framework for their trading. Firms most efficient at reducing their emissions could sell their ‘right to emit’ to those that were not. Proponents argued that this market - cap and trade system - would lower the cost of pollution reduction for all of society, lower than say if the government implemented a law that required all firms to abate emissions. This rationale is directly linked to an Adam Smithian logic, in that it aims to put the “natural drive” of profit within a competitive market environment to work at reducing pollution (for an excellent overview of the evolution of cap and trade see McNish 2012). And the proponents were right: this and other early experiments in cap and trade are considered successful in improving air quality in the US at reduced cost (McNish 2012). The success paved the way for cap and trade’s application to other pollutants.

Perhaps most famously, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which established binding reductions of GhG emissions for developed countries, followed in the footsteps of the Clean Air Act in its cap and trade approach. But as McNish (2012) outlines, it differed from the previous markets in allowing firms to purchase carbon offsets of various kinds, not simply buy allowances from other firms producing the same gas in the same region. Carbon offsets are reductions in GhG emissions (certified or voluntary) that “offset” emissions made elsewhere. The Clean Development Mechanism under the Kyoto Protocol, for example, was created to allow countries of the Global North to meet their obligations for emissions reductions by investing in an emission-reducing project in the Global South (an offset), such as renewable energy or reforestation projects. The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) validates and measure projects to ensure that they are “additional” emissions reductions that would not have happened because they are uneconomic. The argument, again, is that an international carbon market will reduce emissions at lower costs compared to command and control regulation, finding the cheapest way to lower emissions via



the profit imperative (the argument is that offset developers will seek out how to make the lowest cost emission reductions, namely reductions in the global South). Countering the notion of elegant markets, McNish (2012) characterizes the international carbon market as more akin to a Rube Goldberg-esque process (meaning, more complex and expensive than necessary) (see also Lohmann 2009, 2011).

Overall, the impact of the Kyoto Protocol and the Clean Development Mechanism on emissions reductions is “highly suspect” (McNish 2012, 418, see also Wara 2007, Bond 2015) with cases of fraud, and widespread problems in accounting ‘additionality’ that is the basis for a certified offset. As Patrick Bond (2015, 2) summarizes, so far the international cap and trade systems, including the European Trading Scheme, appear “unable to either cap or regulate GHG pollution at source, or jump start the emissions trade in which so much hope is placed”, with the value of these markets dropping year-on-year since 2011. Further, much of the carbon finance flowing for “clean development” – a major aim of the CDM - is concentrated in only a few countries, bypassing most places on the planet, especially Africa.

Another early environmental market is wetland banking in the United States (Robertson 2004, 2006). In this case, the US government capped development of wetlands by adopting a legislative framework of “no net loss” (of wetlands). This legislative decree is the constraint on development: the cap. However, within this cap, there are provisions for regulators to allow impact to a wetland in exchange for protection or restoration of a wetland in another site. The developers of a suburban housing development, for example, may be allowed to impact a wetland on the condition that they purchase a “wetland credit” from a firm (or ‘bank’) that creates government-certified credits in wetlands by restoring or creating new wetlands. This has led to a market in wetland banking, where private actors create credits and sell them to those who impact wetlands (see Lave et al. 2008 on stream restoration banking; Pawliczek and Sullivan 2011 on species banking).

Questions about the environmental effectiveness of these ecosystem offsets abound, as even the most advanced ecosystem banking system in the world has not been subjected to serious systematic assessment (Robertson and Hayden 2008) and there is evidence that wetland banking is not working to achieve “no net loss.” For example, one study found that a majority of projects (67 percent) that restored or created wetlands were not successful at meeting permit requirements in terms of wetland area (Kettlewell et al 2008). Another study in Ohio found that many of the bank credits were not up to standard when checked against stringent scientific criteria (in spite of the fact that they had been studied and monitored by the Army Corps and the Environmental Protection Agency) (Mack and Miacchion 2006). Only three banks scored in the “successful category,” while five passed in some areas and failed in others. The remaining four failed nearly every assessment, with wetlands functioning more like “shallow dead pools” than wetlands (Mack and Miacchion 2006). There is also growing evidence that compensation and offsetting are taking priority over other aspects of most banking schemes, which require proponents to avoid and minimize impacts prior to offsetting (Hough and Robertson 2009; Clare et al 2011). This means that offsets such as wetland banking may be working perversely in some cases as incentives that support developments that may be ecologically problematic. And despite arguments that market approaches are a more cost-efficient approach to environmental policy,

researchers raise serious questions about the reality of that claim (Kroeger and Casey 2007; Walker et al 2009; Muradian et al 2010).

There are important questions to ask of these trends in carbon and ecosystem conservation: who is being awarded rights to resources, who is being excluded, are new enclosures created, and, do they work to solve the crises they set out to solve in the first place? Patrick Bond (2015) argues that these tactics - particularly of the international sort like the carbon market - tend to “*shift* problems around spatially, without actually solving them” (p.2), “stall a genuine solution to the problems” via promises of future market and financialized solutions, further allowing the North to “steal more of the world’s environmental carrying capacity – especially for greenhouse gas emissions – and perhaps pay a bit back through commodification of the air ... while denying climate debt responsibilities” (p.18). And if the evidence leans towards the ongoing failure of market solutions to achieve their goals – then the question we need to ask is how do they persist as the dominant approach to environmental policy-making options?

## **Conclusion**

The three neoliberal re-regulations of the environment that we have just charted are not smooth. As we point out, the motivations and outcomes of neoliberal governance are unpredictable and varied. In part this is because, as Sundberg (2007, 269) writes, “[d]espite the efforts of powerful elites to privatize natural resources and enrol individuals into the market economy...people resist, policies go awry, and contradictions emerge” (e.g. Bakker 2013; Harris and Roa-García 2013; St Martin 2007; Wolford 2007). The world is alight with such recalcitrance today - just think of the ongoing debates over new rounds of free trade liberalizations and investment agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, geopolitical resistance to austerity conditions imposed from financial institutions in Greece, and the rise of Climate Justice movements that reject false solutions like carbon offsets and instead stress the imperative to ‘keep the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole, the tar sands in the land’.

Meanwhile, though, states continue to bend over backward to facilitate investment and economic development in their country, leaving international regulation to voluntary agreements and NGO certification schemes. “Green” economic development promises go unfulfilled, especially when it comes to some of the global environmental issues of our time - climate change and ecological impoverishment. In many ways, it seems hard to imagine a worse way of organizing an effort to temper ecological crises. This begs the question - why? One explanation for this trend is found in the work of David Harvey: falling rates of profit lead to a need to find new fixes for capital. This means opening up new markets: agriculture in Bolivia, mining in Guyana, plantation forests in Mexico - all new ways to let capital circulate through socioecologies. Carbon and biodiversity markets are, too, framed as new sites of accumulation, this time green accumulation (Arsel and Büscher 2012; Brockington and Duffy 2010, Büscher et al. 2014, Smith 2007). Such policies aim to fix both environmental, “development” and capitalist crisis, together, but leave status quo relations of power and wealth unchanged (and, as we have charted, they fail to address environmental problems they set out to address). Certainly the rise of neoliberalism involves actively seeking to protect these status quo relations - for example by pushing-back against growing labour and environmental and Global South power (Harvey 2007, see also Mann 2013).

Yet, these kinds of schemes are not solely animated by logics of accumulation or resource capture. As Wendy Brown (2015) points out, neoliberalism is about more than accumulation; it is “a governing rationality within which everything is economized...[,] a governing form of reason, not just a power grab by capital”. Neoliberalism redefines the right way to live, cultivating competitive, market-like relations throughout the social sphere. In the world of global biodiversity politics, for example, the promise of economic and market-based approaches for solving global biodiversity are often more political than economic, animated more by desires to improve liberal democratic rule than profit (Dempsey, forthcoming). Ecosystem service accounting, especially, attempts to render the qualities of ecosystems, and rich socio-ecological relations, into representative forms that can be compared, ranked, and ordered quantitatively. But this effort is not always about the “tions”: privatization, commodification, accumulation (Dempsey, forthcoming). Rather, these accounting schemes often set out to make biodiversity tractable for modern liberal governance, to include it in cost benefit analyses and risk assessments, and to guide investments in green infrastructure.

Is there a unifying end-game for re-regulations of socioecologies under neoliberalism? These re-regulations, we argue, are ultimately reassertions of already existing, classical liberal principles in society: the sacrosanct nature of private property, individual and firm freedom, and state commitment to economic development and free trade, attributes thought to lead to greater societal wealth. Noting how neoliberalism is in this way a “continuation of a more deeply historical process” (Heynen et al. 2007, 10) is politically important. It means we cannot explain socioecological issues by simply pointing to neoliberalism as the culprit. When it comes to the question of ‘what we should do’ instead, we cannot simply seek to reverse the trends of the last 25 years, but rather must consider the way that neoliberalism deepens liberal tendencies and ask ourselves if political opposition should be oriented towards the most recent variant, or rather to tackle some of the root foundations.

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