# BEYOND GREEN CAPITALISM: PROVIDING AN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: Natural resource extraction is understood as existing within a singular capitalist economy that promotes primary production as a source for unimpeded economic growth and expansion. Due to the seeming hegemony of capitalism, the environmental movement has worked against the exploitation of resources by working against capitalism itself or, more recently, working with capitalism. In both cases environmental management, conservation, and environmentalism are practiced relative to a capitalist economy. This has led to, for example, ecological strategies such as "green capitalism" which advocate for protection and preservation of natural resources within the context of capitalist economic growth and profits. This "capitalocentric" approach reduces the possibilities for environmental management, conservation, and environmentalism because it ignores the noncapitalist economic activity that often coincides with resource use and extraction. In order to provide an alternate economic discourse by which we can understand the multiple economies of resource extraction, I rely upon the emerging "diverse economies" literature in economic geography and political ecology. This approach allows me to assess mushroom hunting as a distinctly non-capitalist class process. By recognizing the diversity of economy, activities such as mushroom hunting and the gathering of other non-timber forest products, typically ignored as either archaic or irrelevant relative to "the" economy, can be discussed in economic terms more suited to their positions independent of capitalism. This in turn produces openings for new forms of resource management previously unimaginable.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the United States and other post-industrial countries, one often gets the sense that to talk about the economy means to talk solely about capitalism. In natural resource extraction a singular capitalist image has been created that promotes primary production as a source for unimpeded economic growth and expansion. This approach to federally managed lands was a hallmark of Fordism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and eventually led to widespread concerns about the environment. One aspect of post-Fordism has been to deal with the continued distress over environmental degradation and resource extraction through the "greening" of business and increasing association between business and environmental advocacy groups (Hayter, 2003). During this time government regulations and control have fallen out of favor (Watts, 2002; Hayter, 2003).

Within the environmental movement<sup>1</sup> there has been a growing concern over continued natural resource extraction and its negative effects on ecosystem integrity and sustainability (Nash, 1990; Wilmsen and Isom, 2003). During post-Fordism the environmental movement has increasingly come into direct contact with capitalist economic practices, and

has created a binary in which the environmental movement is forced to engage solely with economic practice in terms of capitalism. Matching the environment with this singular vision of the economy leaves no room for discussion of resource extraction practices which are not based on unimpeded growth, such as organic agriculture, fisheries, and the use of non-timber forest products (Jones et al., 2002; St. Martin, 2005). Recognizing this synthetic binary capitalism relationship of and environment demonstrates the constraints placed on the environmental movement by approaches such as green capitalism. In this paper I explore the practices of a group of people precariously occupying the tension point between the environmental and economic in order to construct an alternative economic space for engagement between these two discourses. Through this broadening of our lens on what constitutes economic activities, additional relationships may emerge that are otherwise ignored because of the intensive focus on capitalist activities (Emery and Pierce, 2005).

This piece originated out of my preliminary dissertation work, on morel mushrooms and the people that collect them, in Maryland and West Virginia in the spring of 2005. During that time it became clear that the economic positionality of mushroom gatherers did not fit clearly within

capitalist practices, and so this paper is an exploratory piece to theorize the economic positions of people engaging in this and similar activities. In the first section I outline the emergence of green capitalism as a compromise strategy that has benefited business, while doing a disservice to the original ideals of environmental movement (Nash, 1990). My goal is to show that green capitalism does not make sense given the conflicting ideologies of environmentalism and capitalism. This is certainly not a new argument, but one that is worth revisiting here to compare and to contrast with an alternative approach.

In the second section I explore a "thin" definition of capitalism which allows for the retheorization of the economy as diverse. I address the class position of a subset of people who depend on the existence of natural resources and natural spaces for their economic and cultural livelihoods. I argue that the persistence of NTFP gathering is an ancient class process that is concurrent with capitalism in the U.S. economy today, potentially providing environmentalists with a different economic discourse in which to advocate for environmental conservation.

In the third part I discuss the ways in which NTFP hunters and gatherers interact with the federal government. I will attempt to examine the complexities inherent in the articulation of a state which appears to be increasingly structured towards capitalism, while still regulating land and resources being used by people occupying multiple class positions and alternative economic spaces. Issues of scale and community become increasingly important and relevant within the context of a diversified economy. I conclude with an idea for exploration of diverse economic strategies based on ecological relationships.

# PART I: ECONOMIC VALUES ARE NOT THE ONLY VALUES

With the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s, opposing views on business and growth vs. environmental protection created intense debate surrounding the use and abuse of natural resources. Responding to severe criticism, the U.S. federal government adopted a strong stance on environmental issues through policy and regulations. This had the unintended effect of a rise in market and civic driven economic approaches to the environment such as eco-taxes, community-driven environmental regulations and green consumerism (Watts, 2002).

These approaches were collectively rolled into "green capitalism" by the late 1980s:

Suddenly, environmentalists were proposing regulations that relied on the most basic tenets of capitalism to protect the world's natural resources, and some corporate leaders were saying they could live with pollution control and resource conservation....If a resource, whether it be a barrel of oil, a patch of Louisiana swamp or old growth forest, or a breath of fresh air, is priced to reflect its true and complete cost to society, goes the argument, markets will ensure that those resources are used in an optimally efficient way, reducing environmental destruction. (Alper, 1993, p. 1884)

Within green capitalism, economic value is assigned to natural systems based on their content and services as valued within the capitalist free market system. Material resources like trees and clean air, and more conceptual ideals like biodiversity and culturally significant landscapes, are theoretically all able to fit within this model. For example, providing clean air is a specific ecosystem service, so it can be valued at a specific price in the market that theoretically reflects its true value, which may be more than the timber which could be extracted from the same area. In other words, the forest becomes more valuable intact, thereby earning the right to exist rather than be cut down.

Mainstream environmentalism promoted by global multi-lateral institutions has created a system in which "being green" is cost effective and supportive of both "green goals" and consumption. Within this system, organizations such as the World Bank have been able to advocate for pro-growth climates which will "provide the profit incentives needed to spur technological advances that will enable the world economy to continue growing and getting greener at the same time: a neat circle of reasoning that begins and ends with "growth," (McAfee, 1999, p. 136). The valuation and trade of ecosystem services is now a popular tool of such environmental organizations as The World Wildlife Fund (WWF, 2006) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC, 2006). At the same time there has been an explosion in consulting organizations aimed at helping companies "increase profitability and efficiency while becoming more environmentally and socially responsible," (Natural Capitalism Inc., 2006).

This free market environmentalism binds the welfare of the environment to the market, reinforcing a capitalism: environment binary and continuing to exclude natural resource practices which are not inherently capitalist, or simply forcing them to be classified within the context of market capitalism. This method of valuation is problematic because

there is no clear way to account for the dynamism of the environment economically, and therefore its true value cannot be determined. While there have been environmental and financial benefits through marketdriven environmentalism, the approach assumes that economic value within the capitalist framework can be placed on such things as old growth forests, swamps, even fresh air. "A more grounded approach would recognize that centers of biological diversity are unique, and that most ecosystems are irreducibly complex, composed of an incalculable variety of interspecies dependencies," (McAfee, 1999, p. 137). Any attempt at environmental valuation should be location specific and linked closely to human communities, cultural systems, and relationships (McAfee, 1999). These variables cannot be integrated into economic growth models.

Making a place for nature and the maintenance of natural resources within capitalism is appealing because it seems to be better than nothing, and comes at a time when many people are increasingly desperate about the state of the environment. This system also seems to allow for continuity of lifestyle, which appeals to a majority of citizens who are concerned with the environment but at the same time do not want to give up their amenities. However, green capitalism essentializes natural resources as actors in an economic marketplace driven by the need for profit and growth because it creates a set of circumstances in which nature must earn the right to exist in the world market economy (McAfee, 1999). This line of argument gives the position of power to the capitalists, who intensively manipulate the relationships of supply and demand to influence whether a tree is really more valuable in the forest or in the mill. Ultimately, green capitalism fails to actually protect the environment or the laborer, leading to environmental destruction and exploitation (Crook and Clapp, 2002; Vlachou, 2001).

## PART II: ANCIENT CLASS CONSTRUCTION OF THE HUNTER/GATHERER EMBEDDED WITHIN THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM

In Marxist economic theory natural resources facilitate capitalist growth, but are without inherent value (Wolff and Resnick, 1987). Once resources are processed they become valuable because they are produced as commodities (Crook and Clapp, 2002). This approach sees nature as a source of wealth and value, but not as creating value.

Value is created with the addition of labor through a fundamental class process; a process which relates peoples' labor, production and creation of surplus<sup>2</sup>. It is the moment of production and appropriation that defines the fundamental class process, not the later realized exchange. Class as a process occurs outside of capitalism. This shifts the focus to the production and appropriation of surplus, and away from the distribution of that surplus through the market. Without this differentiation between the mode of production and the place of exchange, all economic activity is much more likely to be subsumed under capitalism. This is a particular definition of class that originated from Marx, but through Resnick and Wolff (1987) has been differentiated from questions of markets. Utilizing this very specific definition of class allows me to approach the economy as diverse rather than singular.

Marx defined five major fundamental class positions through history: slave, feudal, capitalist, ancient, and primitive communist or communal (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). The first three of these are exploitative, where the surplus labor is appropriated by someone other than the laborer. The last two are non-exploitative. In the case of the communal class position, work and its benefits are distributed among a group. In the case of the ancient, work and surplus are determined by the individual. Gatherers of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are perhaps the epitome of Marx's fundamental class, ancients. They immediately accrue and benefit from the fruits of their labor, figuratively and literally. People use a wide variety of forest products recreationally, spiritually, and in times of economic hardship for supplemental income. NTFPs were historically important in the U.S. They continued to be important after the period of industrialization, and were a critical component of survival for many families through the Great Depression (Emery and 2001). Despite O'Halek, the common characterization of the United States as a "postindustrial developed society", the collection and use of NTFPs persists. Since the mid-1990s NTFP gathering has again received increasing attention in the U.S. (Love and Jones, 2001). Within NTFP discourse, there are different entry points such as ecology, politics, health, safety, race and class. There are many insights to be gained by examining the class positions of NTFP gatherers, who seem to be fulfilling the very basic role of gatherer in an ancient class position. Based on traditional Marxian theory, this fundamental class position should have been absorbed or destroyed by emerging capitalism some time ago, or should at least be on the way out. Instead, it is a useful theoretical approach to explain a natural-resource-related myriad of economic

activities that are inherently not capitalist.

The issue of access to natural resources may be examined in terms of class, where natural processes and class processes are mutually constitutive (Vlachou, 2001). For example, national parks allow the collecting of wild foods for oneself and ones family in a way which is consistent with the ancient class position. Legally, people are only allowed to collect specific items, and only enough for their own consumption; no collecting of items for commercial sale is allowed. With the rapidly expanding global trade in mushrooms, species specific permitting systems have been implemented in many areas of the Pacific Northwest (Jones et al., 2002). In North Carolina NTFP gatherers, especially recent immigrants, have relied on the formal and informal markets around galax (Galax aphylla), an understory species that is an important floral green on the international market. As the commercial market for galax expanded, regulation of harvesting increased significantly on galax harvesters. The federal government strictly enforced regulations and made new laws to protect this species from being harvested (Emery et al., 2005). The informal (local) markets around mushrooms and galax were fine because they was relatively hidden, but once the market expanded and collecting increased, the government was forced into action in opposition to resource extraction.

In Marxist terms, the harvesters in these examples fall into the Ancient class process because they work for themselves. When NTFP gatherers are theorized as ancients the local scale is able to be explored independent of its place in the global economy. Building on Marx's ideas, Gibson and Graham (1992) call attention to the multiplicity of class positions held by each individual at any given time. By examining class as a social process, rather than a social grouping, this multiplicity can be addressed. To embrace the idea of class process is to allow class to be overdetermined, where each individual can be fluid in identity and more than the sum of their parts, combining cultural, political, economic and natural aspects of one's life in different ways to adapt to different situations. This interpretation of overdetermination ultimately fulfills Marx's intentions about class by referring to a particular social process rather than a social classification. In this respect Resnick and Wolff's approach to the interactions between political, natural, cultural and economic life is a radical departure from the classification and structure that forms the basis of the American system, where class is comparatively static.

If we are to accept the idea of a diverse economy and reveal the economic processes apparent

in the household and in communities, is it still possible to separate harvesting into strictly commercial or personal activities? Like the truckers in Fried and Wolff's "Remarx" (1994), NTFP gatherers are occupying an ancient fundamental class position embedded in and interacting with capitalism. Within the capitalist system, their commercial activity is solely defined within the free market. Using a broader economic perspective, the class positions of NTFP harvesters are more complex, and defined outside the market. For some, NTFP harvesting provides a direct alternative to menial labor jobs though the opportunity for self-directed earning (Hansis, 2002). For others it is a way of legitimating time spent wandering in the woods (McLain et al., 1998).

By working through an alternative economic approach for Joe<sup>3</sup>, relationships between natural resources, community and economy can be uncovered. Let us think of Joe as someone who enjoys mushroom hunting. Every spring Joe goes out morel hunting in the national park near his house for a few hours a day during morel season. In good years, Joe finds too many morels for his own family's consumption, so he trades with his neighbor for some fresh venison. If this only happens once it is considered a trade between friends, but if it were to become a regular exchange, would it be illegal (since collecting for commercial sale is illegal in national parks)? In this case, federal law enforcement officers (LEOs) are left to determine what passes for commercial activity. They are unknowingly creating and justifying an alternative economic space, and their decisions are clearly influenced by their relationship with the people involved, their understanding of local community relationships, or even perhaps their own morel hunting activities. Including all these other factors in this economic decision making process, we would say that the LEO's decision is overdetermined.

The morel hunter in this case is a community member, a naturalist, a friend. He may also be a mechanic, a volunteer fireman, or a stay-athome-dad. Within the context of green capitalism, Joe's position vis-à-vis morels is unclear, and rests in a place of tension between recreation and economic theft based on the economic value defined in the free market and placed on that species. In this way the federal government is placed in the position of reifying the capitalist defined values for biodiversity and individual species worth, and at the same time regulating recreation and enjoyment of activities that are supposed to be an escape from capitalism.

Theorizing Joe as engaging in an ancient class process takes him out of the capitalist state and green capitalism because in this case Joe, rather than

the market, determines the value of his labor and of the resource. In other words, he is in control of the production and the appropriation of the surplus which he is creating. He is an example of modern ancients whose work will not be taken over or made obsolete by the seemingly hegemonic capitalist system. Examining NTFP gathering in this way gives us the freedom to position this activity safely and securely outside capitalism, without the need to explain its embeddedness. We see an alternative economy that operates with its own value system based on principles other than the dollar. For example, many morel hunters may not sell their morels, but gain prestige from collecting the most, the biggest, the best. Morel hunting fosters communal relationships, and those that have great success are praised and looked up to (Fine, 1998). These types of complex social relationships form the basis in the Community Economies Project (2003), spearheaded by Gibson-Graham (1996).

# PART III: INTERACTIONS WITH FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT

The state does not directly support one type of class process. In other words, the processes that compromise the state are neither dependent nor independent of class. This provides a foundation for a variety of class processes to occur based on political, natural, cultural and economic inputs and choices. The state, market, communities and the environment exist in a delicate balance, and are mutually constitutive. Resnick and Wolff (1987) do not directly address resources management in their theory of the state, but do deal with natural processes. In "Knowledge and Class" they posit that:

"The state performs *natural* processes that permit and shape, that is, participate in the overdetermination of, the capitalist fundamental class process. For example, state enterprises (non-industrial, i.e. non-commodity producing) dig, dredge, and clean harbors, thereby facilitating trade, extending markets, and thus contributing toward the reproduction of the capitalist fundamental class process," (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, p. 234).

I would add "long-term management of natural resources" to this list of state facilitated natural processes. The U.S. government manages forests for timber extraction and sale, shores for the fishing industry, and plains for cattle. Federal maintenance of natural resources in national parks includes protecting resources, providing selective access to resources through the construction of roads and trails,

interpreting the landscape for the public, and engaging in the scientific study of environmental and social processes that affect the landscape. Subsumed class revenues support these activities in the form of general taxes collected by the government from all citizens, and entrance fees that allow visitors general access to the area. This is a subsumed class process because no commodity is actually purchased, and also because only part of the fee goes to the park, while the other part goes back to the general government.

When seen in this light, the state has had a long role in regulating the relationship between natural resources and capitalism. In the early 1970s several landmark environmental policies were passed. The U.S. had one of the first governments to set up a federal level environmental protection agency, and passed ground-breaking laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act and the Water Pollution Control Act. This massive shift in government focus suggested that moderate environmentalism was a valid concern at the core of the federal government, and not coincidentally came at a time when the legitimacy of the federal government was in question due to the Vietnam War and other social movements of the time period (Dryzek et al., 2002). The environment fell out of focus in the USA in 1973 as national focus shifted to the burgeoning energy crisis, and by the early 1980s green capitalism was transforming the relationship between resources and the free market directly, leaving the state out of the middle as much as possible, in what has been called a neoliberal counterrevolution to "command and control" federal environmental policies (Watts, 2002). Through the implementation of neoliberal federal policies, the state now finds itself in the rather contradictory role of trying to work for economic growth and environmental protection at the same time. As alluded to previously, the state supports the ancient class process at a smaller scale, but when the scale of extraction becomes larger, it supports the capitalist process through increased governance, valuation, enclosure (Heyden and Robbins, 2005; Emery et al., 2005).

When the significance of the local scale is stressed in economic, natural and regulatory relationships, the importance of community must be considered. However, "community" in the case of mushroom collectors is very difficult to define. There is no one community around NTFPs, mushrooms, or even morels. These communities may come together around periods of harvesting, but they are dynamic. In order to identify places of community, Joe once again becomes helpful as the ontological starting point. What is the foundation of Joe's community

vis-à-vis morels? It may be constructed around fellow harvesters, local, family-based relationships, or all of these communities. Joe's communities form the basis for community economies, which in turn form the basis for diverse economic perspectives. Relating economic processes to community requires a different approach to the economic parts of life because of the multiplicity of community relationships. Seeing Joe's activities through the ancient class process allows movement away from capitalism to diverse economies.

Within the diverse economies perspective, green capitalism no longer makes sense. An overdeterminist approach to environmentalism allows for the use of ecology as an interesting entry point for exploring alternative relationships between economy and the environment. Capitalism is often compared to Darwinism. Survival of the fittest still stands: species, like businesses, go extinct because they are outcompeted, but there are many complex symbiotic relationships in which different species maintain close relationships. There are three types of symbiotic relationships: parasitism, commensalism, and mutualism. In parasitic relationships one species benefits and harms the other, but the parasite will often not actually kill the host. In commensal relationships one species benefits but does not harm the other, and in mutualistic relationships both species benefit (Campbell et al., 2004). These are diverse ecologies. What would economic models based on diverse ecologies look like, if community and economy articulated in a mutualistic way with the environment, for example?

Discovery is best explored through an overdeterminist approach where multiple factors may be incorporated, and individuals are allowed a level of complexity and agency absent in most capitalocentric models. Theorizing NTFP gatherers' economic activities as distinctly non-capitalist provides an alternative economic formation for the environmental movement to engage with, perhaps one that focuses more on maintaining resources for individuals' community and livelihoods, relationships, enjoyment. In this formation, nature is no longer forced to earn the right to survive. Rather, it becomes a physical place in which alternative economic relationships may be realized and practiced at the local level. Through this framework, NTFP related activities open a fresh theoretical space for environmental issues to re-enter economic discourse without being constrained by singular interpretations of the economy.

### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper I am defining the environmental movement as consisting of long-standing organizations such as The Sierra Club or The Audubon Society. By the mid-1980s, when green capitalism was taking shape, many of these groups were very successful organizations which were being heavily criticized by new environmental activists. For a more complete discussion of this see Kirkpatrick Sale in Nash. 1990.
- <sup>2</sup> For a more complete discussion of the concept of fundamental class process see (Wolff and Resnick, 1987) p. 146 148.
- <sup>3</sup> Joe and his experiences, as described here, are a combination of my preliminary interviews and recent research. It is a composite story not referencing any single person, compiled here to illustrate the complexity of economic relationships.

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