Towards a socio-political ecology

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Abstract:
This paper seeks to lay out a “socio-political ecology” which combines the methodology of political ecology with the theoretical framework of historical-geographical materialism and a conception of social capital framed within a view of “the political” based on radical contingency.

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1. A socio-political ecology

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1.1. Political ecology

1.1.1. A critique of apolitical ecology(ies)

Political ecology is, as the name suggests, an approach which above all distinguishes itself from traditional ‘apolitical’ ecology (Robbins 2004:5). This ‘apolitical’ ecology had failed to bring political (or rather, politico-economic) analysis to human-environment interactions, a failing which emerged particularly in relation to environmental crises. Political ecology reacted to three forms of apolitical ecology – neo-Malthusianism, cultural ecology, and apolitical “natural disaster” research.

The first form, now generally referred to as neo-Malthusianism, was in the 1970s in fact described as ‘political ecology’ – as referenced for example by one of the earliest political economy reactions to it: Enzenberger (1974)’s essay titled “A Critique of Political Ecology”. This body of ‘political ecology’ ascribed environmental problems to natural limits – an excess of population (Ehrlich 1968) in relation to natural resources, summed up in the Limits to Growth thesis (Meadows, Randers et al. 1972). One strand of political ecology, beginning with Wolf (1972), therefore developed out of a typically Marxist political economy critique (eg Harvey (1974)) arguing fundamentally that the problem was not one of lack of resources, but of their distribution. This strand is associated with radical development geography more generally (Bryant and Bailey 1997:11), a subdiscipline closely associated with political ecology.

The second form of apolitical ecology was referred to as neo-Malthusianism, was in the 1970s in fact described as ‘political ecology’ – as referenced for example by one of the earliest political economy reactions to it: Enzenberger (1974)’s essay titled “A Critique of Political Ecology”. This body of ‘political ecology’ ascribed environmental problems to natural limits – an excess of population (Ehrlich 1968) in relation to natural resources, summed up in the Limits to Growth thesis (Meadows, Randers et al. 1972). One strand of political ecology, beginning with Wolf (1972), therefore developed out of a typically Marxist political economy critique (eg Harvey (1974)) arguing fundamentally that the problem was not one of lack of resources, but of their distribution. This strand is associated with radical development geography more generally (Bryant and Bailey 1997:11), a subdiscipline closely associated with political ecology.

The third form of apolitical ecology was referred to as “cultural ecology” in geography, or as “ecological anthropology” in anthropology (Watts and Peet (2004:7-8)). Cultural ecology provided insight on the nature-society relationships of isolated rural communities (eg Vayda and Rappaport (1967)), with an approach based on showing socio-ecological adaptation, function, and equilibrium. Later criticised for crude "neofunctionalism" (overemphasising the logic of adaptation, sometimes crudely seeing everything as adaptive), it nonetheless "open[ed] the door to a range of productive questions, allowing a continuing exploration of the complex and sophisticated adaptations of people who had historically been characterized as backward."(Robbins 2004:35) However this approach could not explain the changes occurring to previously sustainable local socio-environmental systems in the context of increasing urbanization, marketization and commodification, and globalization. Cultural ecology's later innovation, by Vayda (1983), subsequently adapted by political ecology, was to explain people-environment interactions through a chain of “progressive contextualization”, i.e. placing the interactions in “progressively wider or denser contexts” (1983:265) But, as Robbins (2004:39-40) argues, this was ultimately an atheoretical approach, merely a tool for better organising a fuller description, rather than explaining. Even the most sophisticated attempts to describe the social and economic context at multiple scales above the locality study (eg Nietschmann (1973)’s pathbreaking book on Miskito Indians in Nicaragua) could not escape the need for political economy analysis. What was needed was “an integrated set of critical concepts, methods, and theories from which to explain problems and upon which to build alternatives”. (Robbins 2004:40)

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1 We discount two uses of ‘political ecology’ which do not apply here: as a metaphor for human politics, and as a term for the political wing of the environmental movement (Page 2003, Forsyth 2003)
2 ‘an extremely diluted, diffuse, and on occasion voluntarist series of explanations’ (Peet and Watts, 1996: 8).
Finally, a third lineage for political ecology may be identified in natural hazards/disasters research (Watts and Peet 2004:8). This developed less confrontationally than the previous two lineages, out of the increasing work in geography and sociology developing particularly in the United States in the 1960s and 70s, on the interdependence between nature and society in the making of “natural” hazards and disasters.

### 1.1.2. Political economy(ies)

As Watts and Peet (2004:9) point out, just as the meanings of ‘ecology’ in political ecology differ (see above), so do the meanings of ‘political economy’. Bryant and Bailey (1997:14) identify two historical phases – a neo-Marxist-based literature from the late 1970s to mid-1980s focussing on the political economic aspects of class relations in their interaction with ecology; and a second phase from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s widening the scope of analysis to all aspects of power relations in their interaction with ecology, using all manner of theories to do so. Early Marxian examples include Watts (1983) and Blaikie (1985), which despite rich empirical insights neglected the role of local politics in favour of structural explanations rooted in class relations and surplus extraction through globalised capitalist production.

Later political ecology often invoked the formula of a “broadly defined political economy”, as Blaikie, Brookfield et al (1987) put it. This is understood in contrast to ‘narrowly defined political economy’, which concerns itself with issues of ownership and labour. Broadly defined political economy looks at who controls resources and how the rules and conditions of production and exchange are defined through political struggle, not just in a labour context, but wherever power is exerted at the interface of politics and economics. Thus political ecology authors have drawn on, among others, neo-Weberianism; social movements theory (eg Scott (1985)’s ‘everyday resistance’), household studies and feminist development studies (eg Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter et al. (1996)).

### 1.1.3. Poststructuralist political ecology

As Bryant and Bailey (1997:1) note, Peet and Watts’ influential (1996) book suggested that a “more robust” political ecology might emerge if incorporating insights from poststructuralism (eg Escobar (1996), Escobar, Berglund et al. (1999)). As it turns out, developing in the mid-1990s, this has been a very substantial trend in political ecology, enough that one may reasonably describe it as a third historical phase, following Bryant and Bailey (1997)’s first two, noted above (the neo-Marxist and broad-political-economy phases). Thus classic works such as Fairhead and Leach (1996) – “a book which has done much to inspire debate regarding the legitimacy of dominant environmental narratives” (Stott and Sullivan 2000:5) – have begun to deconstruct environmental and development narratives. As Forsyth (2003:8) puts it, political ecology has incorporated “poststructuralist approaches … that focus… on the historical and cultural influences on the evolution of concepts of environmental change and degradation as linguistic and political forces in their own right”.

However, as Forsyth (2008) points out, earlier political ecology also included substantial deconstructive elements, such as Roe (1991) on the political ecology of ‘tragedy of the commons’ narrative. Equally, early political ecology work on soil erosion in Africa (eg Blaikie (1985)) showed how coercive colonial soil ‘conservation’ was justified by claims made by colonial scientists. Blaikie, Brookfield et al. (1987:16) even talked about the need for a ‘plural approach’ – “plural perceptions, plural definitions … and plural rationalities.” Indeed, the very roots of political ecology in challenging neo-Malthusian grand narratives can be read as deconstructionist.

### 1.2. Historical-geographical materialism

The term “historical-geographical materialism” was introduced by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Harvey 1990). This approach – as expanded on in later works, especially *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Harvey 1996) – amends historical materialism with three
additional dimensions. These are the treatment of difference and ‘otherness’ (aspects of social stratification such as race and gender); post-structuralist concerns with image and discourse as part of the reproduction of any symbolic order; and space and time (the “real geographies of social action” – 1990:355). In addition Harvey insists that historical-geographical materialism should be “an open-ended and dialectical mode of enquiry rather than a closed and fixed body of understandings” (Harvey 1990:355).

This historical-geographical materialism is founded on a dialectic conception of the world which contrasts with the modern, Cartesian notion of the world is of a system made up of parts. In this view, the world is understood through a series of moments of the social process; no single moment can be understood on its own. “Each moment is constituted as an internal relation of the others within the flow of social and material life.”(Harvey 1996:80)

In this view, processes have ontological priority over things (Swyngedouw 2000): historical-geographical processes constitute things in a double sense: these processes produce things, and things can be understood as having no separate ontological existence from the processes which produce them. This contradiction is both apparent and real, and is maintained through the human impulse to reify the world – to turn processes into things by both linguistic and material means.³ As (Harvey 1974) put it, this “involves a discursive and practical ‘cut’ into the seamless complexity of the world in order to name discrete ‘noun-chunks’ of reality that are deemed to be socially useful.” (Castree 2003:180) At the material level, the biophysical environment is physically transformed, by producing physical “objects” more readily understood as “things” because of their functional purpose (“use value”). At the social level, the socio-political environment is transformed, by producing social objects by reifying social relations as “things” – reification which is ultimately rendered visible by the transformation of the biophysical environment or of socialised physical “objects”. In each case, processes remain ontologically prior, but the epistemological production of “things” renders those things socially real.² The result is not so much that processes “crystallise” into “permanences”, as Harvey has it (Harvey 1996:81): it must be emphasised that permanences are actively produced by human action, and must be continuously reproduced.⁵

If the world in fact consists of processes and we must categorise them in some way in order to think about them, we may do so in terms of circulating flows of power. These flows actively constitute and continuously (re)produce the sociophysical world. As Ekers and Loftus (Ekers and Loftus 2008:706) note, “whilst Foucault and Gramsci deploy different conceptualisations of power in their work, in both cases power circulates throughout the sociophysical fabric.” As Foucault put it, “in a society such as ours - or in any society, come to that - multiple relations of power traverse, characterize, and constitute the social body.”(Foucault 2003:24)

Since the world ontologically consists of processes, the production of things operates through the imposition of boundaries – both discursive and material. This is as true for the operation of organic life as social life. Organisms constitute themselves through the creation and policing of physical boundaries (between the external and the internal) as means to organise physical flows of energy and

³ Žižek makes a similar point in psychoanalytic terms based on a linguistic construction of reality. “Relying on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, his argument proceeds something like this: ‘reality’ goes hand in hand with, but is opposed to, the ‘Real’ (Zizek, 1989: 69; 1999:74). Reality is what we (mistakenly) take to be wholeness or harmony, while the Real denotes the impossibility of wholeness, a fundamental lack that troubles any attempt at closure and consistency. For Zizek, from the moment we enter into the world of language, reality is where we escape to avoid the Real (1989: 45, 47).” (Kapoor 2005:1205)

⁴ We can draw an analogy with quantum mechanics, where probabilistic waveforms are only “collapsed” into definite forms through the intervention of an observer.

⁵ Although one cannot deny the physical permanences have physical moments which have a materiality which has a certain inertia. For example when a city is abandoned it ceases to be a city-process permanence, but the physical moments of that social process do not vanish in the same way as other moments. However, once the social process ceases, they no longer constitute physical moments of the social process: they disappear socially (and thus later, being no longer reproduced as part of that process, they disappear physically).
matter within and across that boundary in a manner that reproduces those organisms. Those (porous, fluid) boundaries appear to give the organism a power independent of its environment. Yet those boundaries themselves are biophysical processes, so that organic life remains constituted by processes which flow in and through it.

The same process of boundary imposition operates in the social world – in the reification of social processes which constitutes social things. Social boundaries are produced and maintained – for example, between nations, between “the economic” and “the political”, and between “the state” and “civil society”. The state/civil society dualism has been criticised, for example, by Giddens:

"With the rise of the modern state, and its culmination in the nation-state, ‘civil society’ in this sense [of something separate from the state] simply disappears. What is ‘outside’ the scope of the administrative reach of the state apparatus cannot be understood as institutions which remain unabsorbed by the state.” (Giddens 1985:21-22)

Using the dialectical ‘flows of power’ schema then leads us to a Gramscian view of the integral state as both centralised and diffuse, as against the more usual view (derived from Hegel) of state versus civil society. This has affinities too with Foucault’s view of governmentality as a form of dispersed rule which ultimately constitutes the state (Ekers and Loftus 2008:703): “Thus, Foucault regards the state as a relational ensemble and treats governmentality as a set of practices and strategies, governmental projects and modes of calculation, that operate on something called the state. This something is the terrain of a non-essentialized set of political relations, however, rather than a universal, fixed, unchanging phenomenon. In this sense, while the state is pre-given as an object of governance, it also gets reconstructed as government practices change” (Jessop 2007:37). In Foucault's words: “all these power relations do not ...emanate from a single source; it is the overall effect of a tangle of power relations that allows one class or group to dominate another.”

These social boundaries, whilst in an ontological sense do not exist, have real effects, and in those real effects the things (permanences) they define gain a power which appears independent of the processes which constitute them. One of the best examples is “the state”, which must be understood as a 'social reality' emergent from the everyday practices (processes) of socio-political power: as Foucault puts it (quoted in (Jessop 2007:36)), “the state is nothing more than the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities”. The illusion that the state exists independently of these practices is what we mean by reification or fetishisation. The state is “not a concrete object (consisting of ‘institutions plus territory’) at all, but is really an idea” (Painter 2002); emphasis in original); or, better, “an imagined collective actor” (Painter 2006:758). The state is thus “not a unitary object but is, rather, a set of practices enacted through relationships between people, places, and institutions.” (Desbiens, Mountz et al. 2004:242). Of course, as Castree (2004) reminds us in the context of the economy-culture debate in human geography, citing Tim Mitchell (1998:91): “an idea is ‘never, as it always pretends to be, a mere representation’.” The state narrative is always historically constructed by particular constituencies for particular purposes, and insofar as a particular constituency (class) dominates the ‘discussion’ (a discussion that is constituent of both speech acts and other acts), its narrative becomes hegemonic (Gramsci 1971). However, as (Jessop 2007:38) points out, these classes and groups are not to be fetishised either: “Foucault … never regards the state, capital, or the bourgeoisie as pre-

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6 The subject of ‘the political’ will be one to return to. “Poulantzas argues that the definition of a separate political sphere is itself the outcome of the social relations of the capitalist state, and that the appearance of separation does not involve the insulation of ‘society’ from ‘the state’ but is in fact ‘one specific form of the State’s presence in socio-economic relations’ (1978: 70).” (Painter 2006:759) The declaration of “economic” and “political” spheres in a democratic capitalist society functions partly as an obvious protection of economically powerful interests.

7 Similarly, Foucault “never regards the state, capital, or the bourgeoisie as pre-constituted forces, treating them instead as emergent effects of multiple projects, practices, and attempts to institutionalize political power relations.” (Jessop 2007:38)

constituted forces, treating them instead as emergent effects of multiple projects, practices, and attempts to institutionalize political power relations.”

If, then, the state is socially constructed through everyday material and symbolic practice, this raises the issue of whether the state has any autonomous power to in turn control individuals and construct society. The answer, I argue, lies with an understanding of the state as a reified category of socioeconomic relations (symbolic and material practices), which creates a “recursive relationship between agency and structure”(Cleaver 1999:600). As Judith Butler puts it, “there is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability.” (Butler 1993:9). Or as Foucault would have it, power “is diffuse and circulates through the social body in a myriad of relations that are considered to be productive.”(Ekers and Loftus 2008:705) However, as a result of individuals and social groups acting as if the state has power, the state appears as a quasi-object which seems actually to have (some) power vis-à-vis any given individual or social group. However its power is a property emergent from (Harvey and Reed 1994) and enacted through socioeconomic relations as ideological and material practice, which are two moments of the same process.9 The state, in other words, is constructed by a continuous process of fetishisation, analogous to the process of commodity fetishisation. Following Holloway (Holloway 2005) and distinguishing commodity fetishism (established fact) from commodity fetishisation (“as a continuous struggle, always at issue” – Holloway 2005:78), we can say that the state is continuously constructed in an ongoing process of fetishisation (of the active reproduction of fetish). This understanding opens up possibilities10 of everyday resistance (Scott 1985) against hegemony constructed in and enacted through the state – for example in the “everyday production of the waterscape” (Loftus and Lumsden 2008:110). As Ekers and Loftus (Ekers and Loftus 2008:698) put it, “can we understand everyday relations to water as being imbricated in the operation of hegemony and in the maintenance of subtle forms of rule?” With increasing “statization” of society affecting the water sector as much as any other (eg (Bakker 2003; Bakker 2003) on privatization in England and Wales being accompanied by more regulation), we may answer yes.

This brings us to the sphere of the “economic” – the production of things through “capital”. Capitalist production operates through a historical-geographical social process with multiple moments (Harvey 1996) which we may call different ‘forms of capital’ (Bourdieu 1986). These forms of capital must in turn be understood as processes, each being a moment in the overall production process (which operates by transforming the socionatural environment, broadly defined, into commodities). Conventionally they are understood as stocks – a conception equivalent to a snapshot of a process at a particular point in time. For some purposes this stock conception is adequate. More precisely, however, each form of capital represents a process (moment) which, in conjunction with other processes (moments) constitutes a flow of a certain productive (transformative) power.11 Even physical capital does not consist of stocks of machines - it consists of machines operating as part of the production process.12 All forms of capital – all moments of the capital process – are only capital as long as their transformative (productive) power is embedded in a process of continuous commodification in which all moments of the process of production are operative. To reify these moments as “factors” of production – as independent sources of value – is to fall foul of what Murray

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9 It has no more autonomous power than does another quasi-object constructed in a similar fashion – the “market price” in a competitive market.

10 “How the social fabric is conceptualised has important consequences for how politics is conceived. If the social fabric is seen as fragmented and discontinuous, it becomes difficult to conceptualise political struggles that are not trapped in the local. …In contrast, if various parts of the socionatural world are considered internally related, it becomes possible to envision political practice that brings together coalitions cutting across different spatialities and positionalities.” (Ekers and Loftus 2008:708)

11 This can also be expressed as a monetary value through the capitalisation of future flows of such power (eg the capitalisation of future revenue streams of a PFI project, for the project stake to be sold).

12 This is amply illustrated by pointing out that even the most sophisticated factory in the world, with its machines suddenly transplanted to Pluto, is no longer capital, being no longer a part of the capitalist production system. (Any residual value ascribed rests on a hypothetical reintegration with the production system.)
(2002) argues is a fetish parallel to the commodity fetish (one might call it the “capital fetish”), which is to say, the transformation of social relations into (ahistorical, despatialised) objects.

1.3. Social capital

Social capital is an essentially multidisciplinary concept, with different conceptions traceable to uses of the term in economics (Loury 1977), sociology (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Coleman 1990), and political science (Putnam, Leonardi et al. 1993; Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000). Of these conceptions, it is Putnam’s which has been by far the most influential in the policy domain (where it resonated with communitarian perspectives) as well as forming the backbone of the outpouring of literature on social capital, through which Putnam became the single most cited author across the social sciences (Fine 2007:566). Patulny and Svendsen (2007:34) suggest there is now an “emerging consensus that social capital is comprised of networks and norms of trust and cooperation”, which emerges from Putnam’s (1996)’s definition of “norms, networks, and trust”.

1.3.1. Putnamist social capital

The core of the Putnamist social capital conception is that trust (and the norms and networks of reciprocity which sustain it by ensuring social sanction) can create a “logic of collective action” (Olson 1965) which can help overcome the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968), where common property resources are over-exploited (or underinvested in) due to rational self-interested opportunism (Putnam, Leonardi et al. 1993:172). Putnam’s methodological individualism (DeFilippis 2001:785) grounds an apolitical but morally “positive” understanding of social capital qua (voluntarist, apolitical) civil society. In particular, Putnam insists on the positive role of voluntarist associations (emblematically, bowling leagues and choirs) in underpinning democracy and development, sideling not only the social “downside” of networks such as the Mafia (Portes and Landolt 1996) and the role of internal conflict (Rankin 2002:6) and power (Fine 2001) but also the role of explicitly political associations or “adversarial movements” (Mayer 2003:117). Indeed, Putnam effectively conflates social capital with both civil society and community (Colclough and Sitaraman 2005:474). He focuses on horizontal social relations (between people of roughly equal social status) as opposed to vertical or hierarchical social relations, but also “bridging social capital” (Woolcock 1998) based on “weak [social] ties” (Granovetter 1973) as opposed to “bonding social capital” based on pre-modern affect (family, ethnicity, etc). This also corresponds to Portes (1998)’s “instrumental” motivation for investing in social capital, based on expectation of some specific gain (while the “consummatory” motivation relates more to the meeting of norms internalized as part of normal socialization processes, where failure to meet them would result in cognitive dissonance). Moreover, as Portes and Landolt (1996) point out, there is a real danger of social capital becoming meaningless when defined in purely functional terms: it becomes “tautologically present whenever a good outcome is observed” (Durlauf 1999:2), and absent when good outcomes are not observed (Portes 1998).

13 There is some debate about whether social capital is a theory, concept, or metaphor. Fulkerson and Thompson argue that “social capital is a theory in transition to becoming a paradigm … [with] many incompatible and conflicting images [from a variety of sociological traditions]” (2008:539).
14 Social capital concepts can also be read into the work of older authors, such as Weber (ref) and Veblen (Waldstrom and Svendsen 2008).
15 Although Putnam drew on Coleman’s work, and it is worth noting that Coleman is a rational-choice sociologist. Both Putnam and Coleman emphasise the collective good aspects of social capital, but Putnamist social capitalism focuses on quantitative aspects of social relations, where Coleman (and especially Bourdieu) are interested in the relations’ emotional, cultural and social qualities. (Svendsen and Svendsen 2003:620)
16 At times there is an element of deus ex machina (Schuurman 2003), underlined by an implication that social capital is “free”, rather than a resource which is costly to produce and maintain (Ballet et al 2007:365). For example, Ivan Light (in Putnam et al 2004), writes that “social capital is a kind of philosopher’s stone that, costing no money and available even to the humble, can metamorphose into rare and precious values.”
Putnam’s perspective was enthusiastically taken up by some within the World Bank, potentially as a “missing link” (Grootaert 1998) to incorporate “the social” into overly economic conceptions of development (Woolcock 1998; Bebbington, Guggenheim et al. 2004) – though critics charged that it could equally be construed as “self-help raised to the level of the collective” (Fine 2007:568), as if social capital could simply substitute for financial capital (Smith and Kulynych 2002:167). Putnam’s perspective has however inspired the World Bank and other development agencies to endorse once marginal approaches such as “microfinance” (Rankin 2002), which in some cases explicitly draw on local social capital to back small loans. But in many cases the problem may not be (merely) a lack of social capital on the part of the poor, so much as their active exclusion from social, financial, and other resources – as Mayoux (2001:449) concludes in a study on women’s social capital in Cameroon.

1.3.2. Bourdieu’s social capital

As a number of critics of Putnamist social capital have noted (Fine 2007:568), Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital is substantially different and offers some promise of retrieving the usefulness of the concept, and some of the more recent literature has begun to do this (Mayer and Rankin 2002; Rankin 2002; Svendsen and Svendsen 2003; Cleaver 2005; Ballet, Sirven et al. 2007; Bebbington 2007; Koniorodos 2008; Waldstrøm and Svendsen 2008). Bourdieu’s focus on the role of various forms of (material and non-material) capital in the reproduction of class fits well with the dialectical historical-geographical materialist views outlined above: as Bebbington (2007:156) remarks, “[Bourdieu’s] social capital will be historically and geographically situated.” Furthermore, Bourdieu’s structural analysis “draws attention to the ideological as well as material dimensions of social change.” (Rankin 2002:3), which links with the dialectics outlined above.

For Bourdieu, forms of capital exist in a number of different “states”. For example, cultural capital exists in an objectified state (books, musical instruments, etc); in an institutionalised state (eg academic degrees); and in an embodied state (as semi-permanent dispositions and tastes) termed “habitus”. (Svendsen and Svendsen 2003:618)

Bourdieu’s analysis focuses on habitus, which is the set of dispositions, tastes, and modes of thoughts through which individuals engage the world; in an important sense it is an understanding of how the social game is played (in a particular context). Habitus is acquired through socialisation, which socialisation is strongly dependent on the social context (class, gender, ethnicity; but especially class) in which it is embedded. This social context is characterized by unequal distribution of capitals: economic, social, and cultural, which are to some extent convertible. That convertibility is limited by a functional differentiation of society into many “fields” which have their own rules, so that a habitus key to operating, for example, in academia, may be unhelpful in the political arena.

Social capital, here, is defined as

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986:248-9).

In other words, Bourdieu understands social capital as resources accessed by social means (through social networks) – or, put another way, in social power. Similarly, economic capital and political capital can be understood as resources accessed by economic and political means (through the market and the state, respectively). The unequal distribution of these resources (in social networks which always exclude as well as include) thus reinforces the reproduction of class distinction, in ways mediated by the convertibility of capitals. To give a concrete example: an upper-class parent is likely

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17 In Bourdieu’s terms, improving the conversion rate between social and financial capital.
to have sufficient economic capital to ensure access to good education for their child, which builds up a habitus appropriate to their class, in particular through the acquisition of appropriate cultural capital. This habitus includes norms and internalised assumptions which typically endorse the socioeconomic system that produced them, so that the system’s ideology in effect is reproduced through habitus.  

(Whilst Bourdieu focuses on class distinction, it is clear that the social game which habitus helps to reproduce includes other distinctions – such as gender or race – which overlap with class in complex ways.) As Cleaver (2005:895) puts it:

“...institutions as embodiments of social process ensure that things are done “the right way” in cultural and symbolic terms. The ‘right ways’ of socializing, associating, and participating in public are generally those that confirm dominant world views, which reinforce existing relations of authority and which channel routinized and habitual everyday actions to reproduce such social structures.”

This confirmation of dominant worldviews constitutes an additional form of capital for Bourdieu: symbolic capital, founded in the “misrecognition and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986:255) of other forms of capital. This, inevitably, has affinities with Gramsci (1971)’s concept of hegemony and Marx’s concept of “false consciousness”. There are also parallels with Foucault’s notion of governmentality (Dean 1999) and power, as formulated by Judith Butler: power should not be understood merely “as what presses on the subject from outside, as what subordinates...” (Butler 1997:2) because power also forms the subject, “providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire” (Butler 1997:28). Nonetheless, for Bourdieu habitus merely provides the basis for the everyday decisions through which social structure is reproduced through the practice of individuals; it does not mean that social structures cannot change. Reproduction is never perfect, and societies undergo gradual evolution – or sometimes revolution, especially at moments of crisis. And it remains possible for individuals to set out to change that structure in large or small ways – and even to develop a “radical habitus” (Crossley 2003) in which transformational politics is internalised (Wilson 1996:622).

1.3.3. Radical social capital: social capital and radical contingency

Whilst Bourdieu’s conception of social capital includes the “misrecognition and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986:255) of other forms of capital, it lacks a fully developed elaboration of the the way in which social capital processes relate to the “radical contingency” of society: the “structural undecidability” of Derrida, the “internal dialectical contradictions” of Marx or Harvey, or more simply, the whispered belief that society is always a work in progress. Only by incorporating radical contingency can socio-political ecology fully marry analysis of social and political (that is, socio-political) processes with the analysis of ecological (that is, socio-natural/socio-politico-ecological) processes.

To this end I draw on the work of the political theorists Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007), who, drawing on work done by others such as Laclau, develop an ontology of “logics of critical explanation” based on the notion of radical contingency and a post-Marxist conception of “the political” as the process of institution or contestation of a social practice. Glynos and Howarth develop four dimensions of social practice along two intersecting axes, grounded in relation to dislocatory events: “occasions when a subject is called upon to confront the contingency of social relations more directly than at other times.” (Glynos and Howarth 2007:110) They label an “authentic response” (one which recognises the radical contingency of social reality) as “ethical”, and an inauthentic one as “ideological”, providing one ethical-ideological axis. They identify the “political dimension” of responses with the public contestation of social practice, and the “social dimension” with a lack of or prevention of public contestation.

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18 Habitus “produces practices that tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus” (Bourdieu 1977:78).
Glynos and Howarth discuss how these dimensions can be applied to particular social or political practices – or rather, practices in which either the social or the political is foregrounded. Thus, for example, following (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), they identify “the subordination way” as aspects of a practice which appear not to need public contestation; and “the domination way” as aspects of a practice which prevent the public contestation of social norms. Other elaborations include a distinction between unofficial and official political practice, and the identification of political practices as more or less ethical depending on the degree to which subjects pay attention to the radical contingency of their political practice: where such attention is prominent, a political practice may be considered to have a “radically democratic ethos”. (Glynos and Howarth 2007:123) Another elaboration is that political practices may be considered hegemonic to the extent that they articulate a grievance that has more or less universal appeal.

Within the framework of socio-political ecology, then social capital cannot be understood as an alienable, fungible commodity: it is a socionatural process which constitutes one moment of a historically-geographically embedded (Granovetter 1985) capital process in which multiple forms are always implicated. As Bourdieu emphasises, the capital process tends to reproduce the class structures which enable that process. But an understanding of “the political” grounded in radical contingency allows us to see how socio-political practices, in their institution and in their contestation, do produce social capital processes which can function in both radical and hegemonic ways.

1.4. Conclusion
This paper has sought to bring together elements of a “socio-political ecology” which combines the methodology of political ecology with the theoretical framework of historical-geographical materialism and a conception of social capital framed within a view of “the political” based on radical contingency. This enables an analysis of socio-political-ecological phenomena in which the dialectics and contingency of those phenomena are fully recognised. This is important for a conception of politics in which “it becomes possible to envision political practice that brings together coalitions cutting across different spatialities and positionalities.” (Ekers and Loftus 2008:708)
2. References


Smith, S. S. and J. Kulyntch (2002). "It may be social, but why is it capital? The social construction of social capital and the politics of language." Politics & Society 30(1): 149-86.


