

## Commentary

---

### **Researching neoliberal environmental governance: a reply to Karen Bakker**

Most papers published in peer-review journals are rarely read or cited, and the minority that are seldom become the subject of sustained critical attention. I am therefore grateful to Karen Bakker, not only for taking the trouble to interrogate the arguments presented in my two back-to-back review essays (Castree, 2008a; 2008b), but for doing so constructively (Bakker, 2009). Her commentary is aimed as much at the research community whose published work I sought to survey as it is at me. Indeed, Karen is an exemplary member of that community. Her intervention continues a conversation I was hoping to initiate by seeking to make some sense of a relatively new but fast-growing body of research into the neoliberalisation of environmental and resource governance—or what, as a shorthand, she simply calls ‘neoliberal nature’.

I will address Karen’s substantive points below. But first I would like to make a few contextual observations so that this exchange not be seen as ‘merely academic’. Writing in 1944 Karl Polanyi said that “In retrospect, our age will be credited with having seen the end of the self-regulating market” (page 142). Would that we could say the same about the late noughties. I believe it is important to dispel the idea—now fashionable in some quarters—that we are ‘after’, ‘beyond’, or somehow ‘post’ neoliberalism. There has never been (nor will be) a single, homogenous, globally integrated thing called ‘neoliberalism’, though the last thirty years have certainly seen various local, national, and international experiments in *laissez faire* political economy worldwide. Britain and the USA are arguably the iconic cases, but there are many other examples one can call to mind. The question, then, is this: to what extent are these spatiotemporally connected but differentiated forms of ‘market rule’ now unravelling in the face of the ongoing crises in both the financial sector and the so-called ‘real economy’? Since the historical geographies of what Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) usefully called ‘neoliberalisation’ are complex and uneven, the answer will necessarily be a messy one that is sensitive to contingency, difference, and circumstance.

Yes, the present ‘crisis’ is global in the sense that, unlike the regionalised economic calamities of the mid-1990s or the early noughties (eg in Southeast Asia and Argentina), it is not readily containable spatially or temporally. The ubiquity of job loss, downsizing, firm closure, stalled lending, tax-payer-backed rescue packages, soaring budget deficits, and the like is precisely due to the finance capital-led policies of the last three decades, which have rendered national states ever more interdependent and ever more vulnerable to ripple effects emanating from any one part of the global economy. But the current crisis is not ‘global’ in the sense that it somehow takes the same form at all points of the compass or has the same precise consequences worldwide. To suppose otherwise is to buy into Thomas Friedman’s (2005) ‘flat earth’ perspective. We therefore need to pluralise the singular term ‘crisis’ and inquire, instead, into its spatiotemporally dynamic and variegated character: there are multiple particular crises within the putative whole. There will surely be no worldwide ‘Berlin Wall moment’ for a thing called ‘neoliberalism’. The likelihood is that, while certain varieties of neoliberalism will be thoroughly eclipsed in some situations, in many others the substance (if not necessarily the discourse) of neoliberal political economy will persist. What economic sociologists are wont to call ‘path dependency’—in simple terms, the sheer inertia of existing arrangements—means that, in many situations, specific modalities of

---

neoliberalism will not only cling on but, possibly, become further entrenched in the immediate future (see Peck et al, forthcoming). As a doctrine whose tenets were first made flesh in moments of acute socioeconomic distress and disorder, what is to stop the supposed crisis of neoliberalism turning into a self-actualising opportunity in more than a few situations rather than simply a threat (cf Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007)? It is therefore wishful thinking to pronounce global neoliberalism dead—the sort of thing that activists (understandably) do in order to energise their movements, and the sort of thing that some academics (cynically) do in order to increase their citation impact.

What has all this got to do with environmental and resource governance? A great deal, and this brings me to my second scene-setting observation. If the cascading events triggered by subprime mortgage lending in the United States still dominate the headlines, so too do a plethora of issues often assembled under the banners ‘environmental change’ and ‘resource scarcity’. Not since the late 1960s and early 1970s have questions about human usage of the biophysical world commanded such serious and widespread attention. Though these questions were very much ‘on the radar’ of politicians, business people, and publics post the Brundtland Report and the first Earth Summit, the recent spike in concern about everything from rising sea levels to ‘peak oil’ could scarcely have been anticipated even three years ago. Many political activists and even a few professional politicians have recently promoted the idea of a ‘green New Deal’ as a way of (i) drawing a line under the all-too-recent neoliberal past, and (ii) achieving a long-overdue marriage (and a properly equal one too) between social and environmental justice goals within mainstream government. In my view this is an idea to be championed and further developed, but—apropos my comments in the previous paragraphs—it must confront a world in which (i) neoliberal policies are often entrenched rather than fragile, and (ii) there is a frequent disconnect between principles and policies in different arenas of government activity at a range of temporal and geographical scales. This means that, while there may indeed soon be moves towards ‘post-neoliberal’ policies in certain times and places, in these selfsame situations there may also be a continued commitment to neoliberal approaches in other spheres of governmental responsibility. The most visible and global example of this is surely the evolving Kyoto Protocol. Though the fine details of this will change, and though the signatories will also alter (with President Obama almost certainly bringing the USA into the agreement soon), I doubt very much that the protocol’s market philosophy will be challenged. In symbolic terms, one can scarcely imagine the intellectual figurehead of global climate change policy—economist Sir Nicolas Stern—soon being replaced symbolically by, say, the likes of George Monbiot—the outspoken British left-wing campaign journalist and author of *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning* (2006)—let alone a more centrist thinker (indeed New Labour insider) like Jonathan Porritt, former UK Green Party leader and author of *Capitalism As If the World Matters* (2005). To the extent that there will be moves ‘beyond’ neoliberalism in specific situations worldwide, these moves will be partial rather than all encompassing, and policy pertaining to environmental and resource management is as (un)likely to remain market based as is any other policy domain.

This means that the continued analysis of ‘neoliberal nature’ is very much a necessity. It is not yet time for the research community that has examined it to date—be it in human geography or any other discipline—to ‘move on’ to other matters of political economic and political ecological importance. Which assertion leads me to my third and final contextual observation. The two review essays to which Karen Bakker has responded comprised my attempt to make sense of what, four years ago, was a new body of research that appeared to be focusing on the same or similar things

yet whose metaphorical organs and limbs did not comprise an anatomical whole (see also Castree, 2007). The essays proved difficult to write, for at least two reasons. First, much of the research that I sought to synthesise critically (including Karen's own rigorous inquiries into the privatisation and commodification of water and sewerage services) had emerged piecemeal. In other words, although ostensibly about 'neoliberal nature', the publications that I reviewed—pretty much all of which were authored by critical human geographers—touched upon different dimensions of the broader topic and typically did so in 'intensive case study' mode with the selected study sites ranging far and wide geographically (Britain, Canada, South Africa, Colombia, the US, and so on). Secondly, it was clear that the authors whose work I reviewed did not necessarily see themselves as an 'epistemic community', even though I ventured to suggest that, in effect, they were by virtue not only of deploying the same 'master concept' ('neoliberalism') but also because they drew upon radical political economists for theoretical inspiration (notably the works of Karl Polanyi, Karl Marx, and several Marxists including geographers such as David Harvey). In addition, they not only made the nonhuman world a key focus of their inquiries but often also paid full attention to that world's material properties and its 'pseudo-commodity' character.<sup>(1)</sup>

I was thus trying to create a conversation that, in my view, was very much a latent, or at least patchy, one. Was I trying to 'force' this conversation and, in any case, why did I think it worth trying to forge a greater sense of common purpose and debate among those whose work my two essays were parasitic upon? Human geography is a highly heterodox and polyglot subject. This is both its strength and its weakness. The discipline, for a variety of reasons, these days finds it difficult to generate 'critical mass' when it comes to the analysis of any given topic or issue. Practitioners are also inclined to jump onto the newest bangwagon. As Peck (2005, page 131) notes there is "a reluctance to *sustain* theoretical or methodological commitments." Human geographers' 'issue-attention cycle' is often very short. 'Neoliberalism' has proven something of an exception (just as 'post-Fordism' and 'flexible accumulation' did during the 1990s). In relation to environmental and resource governance issues, as well as a range of other topics (eg labour markets, trade agreements, and urban policy), it has inspired a certain convergence of research energy among left-leaning geographers who might not otherwise have found substantive points of cognitive and normative commonality. What is especially exciting about this is that it has challenged existing subdisciplinary mind-sets and obliged economic, political, urban, and development geographers to pay greater attention to each other's work than might have otherwise been the case (see, for instance, England and Ward, 2007). I wanted to capitalise on this potential rather than see it unactualised, and I note with approval that Nik Heynen, James McCarthy, Scott Prudham, and Paul Robbins's (2007) edited book *Neoliberal Environments* (which Karen and I both contributed to) puts me in good company in relation to the topic of our discussion here.

If the world is to be understood, and changed progressively, then it is surely important to distil the lessons emerging from the efforts of individual researchers whose topical focus is ostensibly the same. When one considers that neoliberal ideas gained traction only because of the concerted efforts of an evolving 'thought collective' (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2008), then equally concerted—rather than piecemeal—efforts will

<sup>(1)</sup> This said, in any attempt to review publications whose connections are rather latent questions arise over selection: quite how does the reviewer know what to include or exclude? This is a tricky question to answer robustly, as I discovered when selecting the literature on neoliberal nature. Is the reviewer throwing ropes around things that do not necessarily belong together?

---

be required to replace neoliberal ‘common-sense’.<sup>(2)</sup> These efforts will need to be as much intellectual as practical: there is, as ever, a war of ideas and evidence to be waged. As I have already suggested, the current ‘crisis’ conditions are no guarantee that a greener, more socially just political economy is on the horizon. There could just as well be a resurgence of conservative, nationalist and even xenophobic politics—with commensurate economic agendas—in the years to come.

The trio of contextual comments helps, I hope, to establish why this exchange with Karen is not so much about she and I but about the way a whole cohort of researchers goes about its business. What, then, of her substantive arguments and suggestions? My two essays posed four overarching questions and used the published research literature to craft answers where I could and, where I could not, to suggest ways forward. When it comes to ‘neoliberal nature’ I asked: why are market approaches being adopted serially?; how are they implemented and enacted?; what effects are they having; and how ought we, as critics, to judge them? Parsing the published literature to address this quartet of questions would, I felt, offer valuable insights not readily evident if one got drawn too far into the details of any given case study. I wanted to see the proverbial ‘wood’, not in order to discount the various ‘trees’ but in order to see if they were arranged into some sort of pattern or order. Karen kindly compliments me for aspiring to “analytical rigour” and approves of my broad aims, but she disagrees with several of the claims made and conclusions reached.

Her first criticism pertains to my highly abstract, theoretical answer to the first question above. Focusing on capital and the state, I suggested that a wide range of neoliberal policies focused on a plethora of biophysical entities and systems could be understood in terms of four ‘environmental fixes’. Karen advocates a more parsimonious approach on the grounds that some of my fixes are not *specific* to the nonhuman world. On the latter score she is right. But I would argue that, in many cases, the reason that certain biophysical entities and systems become targets for ‘free market’ approaches has little to do with their material specificities over against other dis/investment opportunities. From the perspective of states and specific fractions of capital all that is important—and, again, I offer this only as an abstract proposition—is that targetting certain biophysical entities and systems happens to be a way to achieve certain important goals. These goals may have little *intrinsic* connection with either the degradation or the protection of the nonhuman world.

Where I agree with Karen is that I was unable to demonstrate “*why* the neoliberalization of nature has intensified in scale and scope” (page 1790, emphasis in original) over the last three decades. This was because the literature I was surveying offered insufficient clues to provide other than the very abstract answer that I proposed. What is required to address Karen’s concern here is a systematic attempt to conduct cross-case, multiscalar, grounded empirical analysis with some historical depth. I will come back to the issue of comparative research below, but for now I would simply say that Karen is of course correct that the reasons for the widespread turn to ‘free market environmentalism’ extend beyond the sort of accumulation imperatives that so preoccupy firms, investors, states, and quasi-state bodies like the International Monetary Fund. We live in a ‘more-than-capitalist’ world, one chock-full of projects, values, processes, and aspirations that are irreducible to the rhythms of economic boom

<sup>(2)</sup>I note that a critical historical geography of ‘free market environmentalist’ ideas has yet to be written. Neoliberalism’s most famous promoters, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, said relatively little about environmental and natural resource issues. The running here was made by economists like Arthur Pigou and Ronald Coase, among several others. A project on their and fellow-travellers’ ideas akin to what Peck (2008) has done for neoliberalism’s major thinkers and organisers would be well worth undertaking.

and bust. It is precisely the articulation of all these things that commands so much of our interest as thinkers and researchers. But then we get into knotty territory regarding ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ factors, the nature and purposes of ‘theory’, and the point at which theory ceases to be that and shades into the messy complexities of the empirical world. In his *Rule of Experts*, Tim Mitchell (2002) argues that the theory lies in the specificity of the case (in his book *Egypt*), but I know that Karen—who cites Mitchell’s work—is not advocating a return to idiography as an intellectual goal. I, for one, regret the fact that human geographers—including those whose work we are debating here—seem today to have less appetite than a previous generation did for discussing the theory–reality connection in a rigorous way [cf Sayer (1992) and Markusen (2003)].<sup>(3)</sup> A key aspect of this concerns types and levels of ‘abstraction’, topics that probably seem old hat to many but which remain of great importance to our analytical practices.

This mention of abstraction brings me to Karen’s concern that my seven-point ideal-typical specification of ‘neoliberalism’ does not map clearly or cleanly onto my four-fold typology of environmental fixes. She is right, and there are two good reasons why. First, this typology was not intended to be definitive but was, instead, an amalgam of things that various different analysts (within and without human geography) have identified as distinctively ‘neoliberal’. Second, I did not mean to imply that all or most of these seven facets must be evident in each of the four fixes I described. If these two points seem like a fudge then it is worth recalling that one of the major issues I raise in Castree (2008b) is the relationship between a generic, conceptual description of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘actually-existing neoliberalisms’, which are necessarily ‘impure’ in an empirical sense. Karen’s table 1—which provides a framework for addressing on a cross-case, comparative basis my second question (‘how has the governance of the biophysical world been neoliberalised?’), and can be extended to address the third and fourth questions—is useful. Its tactics–targets distinction is sufficiently granular to facilitate systematic forms of inquiry within and between specific cases, while avoiding the potential banality (or implausibility) of using overly abstract and generic categories. However, it still requires that a nettle be grasped, as Karen knows. Again, it speaks to the links between ideas and actualities: how do we know ‘neoliberal nature’ when we see it? To turn her own criticism of my use of the seven-point definition of neoliberalism back on her, does *all* of Karen’s mesolevel template apply or only parts of it? Who decides and how do we achieve some sort of rough consensus? I have no ready answer to this question; it simply remains the case that we will not rigorously understand ‘neoliberal nature’ until we develop clear criteria for identifying ‘neoliberalism’ in its perplexingly diverse and shifting forms.

Karen rightly worries that “the chain of causality ... is so attenuated, and the confounding variables so numerous ..., that it is almost impossible to prove that the environmental ‘impacts’ we might identify do indeed arise from a particular strategy identified as neoliberal” (page 1792). She is referring to the third of my four questions, but her concern readily applies to forging answers to all of them. It is a concern I share (see Castree, 2006). But, the intellectual and methodological challenges that notwithstanding, we surely have to do better than (i) creating a false sense of

<sup>(3)</sup> By contrast, there seems to be an enormous appetite in some parts of the discipline for *philosophy*. I would even venture to say there’s been a ‘philosophical turn’, so preoccupied have so many human geographers become with interpreting and deploying the ideas of ‘big thinkers’ such as Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze, and many others besides. Since so little of this engagement is with analytical philosophy or philosophy of (social) science, it is relatively absent of the concerns of a previous generation schooled in critical realism and postpositivist approaches to empirical inquiry.

commonality between separate cases by labelling them all ‘neoliberal’ in some loose and lazy way and (ii) getting so far into the fine detail of any empirical case that we regard it as unique. Karen suggests two forms of cross-case analysis that might move things on, one ‘vertical’ and one ‘horizontal’. I would amplify her recommendation in two ways. First, I think that far more research projects should be designed formally as comparative rather than single case ones from the get-go. Single case analysis has almost become disciplinary ‘common sense’ in wide sections of contemporary human geography. Secondly, whether single-site or comparative research is being undertaken, greater efforts should be made to trace the extralocal connections that enable neoliberal ideas, norms, and strategies to travel through time and over space. These connections are often studied in much less detail than the study site(s) proper. Here the ongoing conceptual debates over ‘scale’ and ‘networks’ have something to offer analysts of ‘neoliberal nature’, since they speak powerfully to the ways that we might analyse spatiotemporal connections between ostensibly different cases of nature’s neoliberalisation. Similarly, some of the recent conceptual essays by Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, Neil Brenner and Adam Tickell—writing in various duos and trios—are intended to help us think about historical geographies of neoliberalisation with an eye to local specificity and transnational connectivity and similarity.

What all of this shows is that no part of human geography can, ultimately, compartmentalise itself and bracket out the ‘big issues’ of philosophy, theory, and method. What is specific and special about research into ‘neoliberal nature’, relative to other geographical work on neoliberalism, is its preoccupation with the physical form and sociocultural significance of the nonhuman world. But in other respects it must, Karen and I agree, grapple with some larger questions. The effort could pay considerable rewards, and act as a template for the interrogation of more things than ‘neoliberalism’ alone.

**Acknowledgement.** I am grateful to Nigel Thrift for giving me yet another chance to opine on ‘neoliberal nature’.

Noel Castree

School of Environment and Development, Manchester University

### References

- Bakker K, 2009, “Neoliberal nature, ecological fixes, and the pitfalls of comparative research” *Environment and Planning A* **41** 1781–1787
- Castree N, 2006, “From neoliberalism to neoliberalisation: confusions, consolations and necessary illusions”, *Environment and Planning A* **38** 1–6
- Castree N, 2007, “Neoliberal ecologies”, in *Neoliberal Environments* Eds N Heynen, J McCarthy, S Prudham, P Robbins (Routledge, London) pp 281–286
- Castree N, 2008a, “Neo-liberalising nature I: the logics of de- and re-regulation” *Environment and Planning A* **40** 131–152
- Castree N, 2008b, “Neo-liberalising nature II: processes, outcomes and effects” *Environment and Planning A* **40** 153–173
- England K, Ward K (Eds), 2007 *Neoliberalization* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford)
- Friedman T, 2005 *The World is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York)
- Harvey D, 2005 *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford)
- Heynen N, McCarthy J, Prudham S, Robbins P, 2007 *Neoliberal Environments* (Routledge, London)
- Klein N, 2007 *Shock Doctrine* (Metropolitan Books, New York)
- Markusen A, 2003, “Fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence, policy distance: the case for rigor and policy relevance in critical regional studies” *Regional Studies* **37** 699–715
- Mirowski P, Plehwe D (Eds), 2009 *The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA)

- 
- Mitchell T, 2002 *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA)
- Monbiot G, 2006 *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middx)
- Peck J, 2005, "Economic sociologies in space" *Economic Geography* **81** 129–175
- Peck J, 2008, "Remaking laissez faire" *Progress in Human Geography* **32** 3–43
- Peck J, Tickell A, 2002, "Neoliberalising space" *Antipode* **34** 380–404
- Peck J, Theodore N, Brenner N, forthcoming, "Postneoliberalism and its discontents" *Antipode* **41**(6)
- Polanyi K, 1944 *The Great Transformation* (Beacon Press, Boston)
- Porritt J, 2005 *Capitalism As If the World Matters* (Earthscan, London)
- Sayer A, 1992 *Method in Social Science* 2nd edition (Routledge, London)