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The Neoliberalization of (African) Nature as the Current Phase of Ecological Imperialism†

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Introduction

One of the more critical sets of literature in political ecology concerns the “neoliberalization” of the environment. Neoliberalism, according to this literature, has restructured the social and property relations governing nature and ultimately allowed for its enclosure, privatization, and marketization. This broad trend is seen as the most recent phase of capitalism and consists of cohesive ideological and policy attributes, even as this “neoliberalization” manifests differently according to localized context (Heynen et al. 2007). Closely related are recent re-interpretations of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation. The core idea of Marx’s primitive accumulation is that the accumulation of capital necessitates an initial separation of workers from the means of production, such as the land. Recent interpretations argue that primitive accumulation continues and in fact operates throughout the entire world (De Angelis 2001; Harvey 2005).

This essay seeks to contribute to the literature on the neoliberalization of nature and related literatures in several ways. First, it connects the concept of “ecological” imperialism as espoused by Marxist Ecologists and the neoliberalization of nature literature, bringing together two important sets of literature in political ecology explicitly for the first time. Both sets of literatures could benefit from their synthesis. Ecological imperialism can deepen our understanding of the fundamental causes behind neoliberalization in the periphery as well as broaden our capacity to evaluate its effects through relating it to the accumulation of capital at the global level. The rapidly burgeoning neoliberalization of nature literature, in turn, can ground the theorization of ecological imperialism through analysis of geographically specific, concrete neoliberal structures and policies. Such a synthesis could offer a powerful radical framework from which to criticize mainstream work on society and the environment, especially work on global economic integration, which

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often deals with economics, environmental degradation, and imperialism as separate and unrelated issues.

From a broad perspective, I argue that when viewed in historical context, the neoliberalization of peripheral resources created the political-socio-economic institutions necessary for the expansion of ecological imperialism. Specifically, this essay focuses on important historical changes in the regulations surrounding foreign investment in African resources, where the nexus of ecological imperialism and neoliberalization can clearly be witnessed. When viewed temporally, this neoliberalization can be interpreted as the most recent phase in the ongoing, expansionary tendencies of capital to subsume peripheral resources and part of the most current strategy of accumulation.

Additionally, this paper is the first work on ecological imperialism to explicitly incorporate the role of Third World resistance, in particular from the important era of economic nationalism, in shaping the current structure of ecological imperialism and neoliberalization of nature. The neoliberal turn can arguably be interpreted as a backlash against the protective measures many post-colonial countries enacted during the post-independence era in their quest for economic and national sovereignty. This political economic/ecological context arguably set the stage for the neoliberal backlash following the debt crisis of the developing world in the early 1980s which restored the accessibility, and amenability, of peripheral resources to foreign capital accumulation.

**Ecological Imperialism: A Brief Overview**

In its simplest definition imperialism is the system by which a dominant power is able to control the trade, investment, labor, and natural resources of other peoples. Theories of imperialism have always acknowledged the role of natural resources in global capital accumulation. Lenin and Magdoff both emphasized the role of raw material investment in the developing world for capitalist industrialization in the core countries. However, there are several reasons for bringing the ecological dimension into the discourse on imperialism more explicitly. To begin with, mainstream discourses on sustainability are proliferating, but largely deal with economic policies, environmental degradation, and global structures of inequality as if they are separate and unrelated issues (see World Bank 2011). Effort must be made to trace and uncover the sources of accumulation (biophysical as well as monetary) in one place, and the political economy, policies, and ideologies that support it, while also examining the socio-ecological impacts that such accumulation may have.

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1A short piece written by the author on ecological imperialism, ecologically unequal exchange, and the scramble for African resources was first published by Palgrave’s Encyclopedia on Imperialism and Anti-imperilism as “Ecological Imperialism and the 21st Century Scramble for African Resources.” (see Frame 2015).
in another place. An explicitly ecological theory of imperialism contributes to these gaps for a less fragmented and more political discussion of sustainability at the global level. Marxist ecologists such as Foster, York, Clark, and Moore, and theorists of imperialism such as Magdoff, have already contributed significantly to the topic of ecological imperialism. While the drive for capital accumulation fundamentally undergirds ecological imperialism in all accounts, different theorists emphasize different particular dynamics. Magdoff's work (2003) argues that capital, in its drive for endless accumulation, undergoes technological changes that require specific and strategic resources, many of which are largely found overseas. Competition between capitalist powers intensifies the expansionary dynamic. Moore conceives of imperialism as a “symbolic-material bundle of human and extra-human natures,” a way of organizing relations between humans and the rest of nature in the ceaseless pursuit of capitalism accumulation. Increasing the extraction of surplus value hinges on increasing labor productivity, which involves technical and social innovation, but also the abundance of “free gifts” from nature. Capitalism, Moore asserts, has sustained itself on the basis of cheap inputs and through mobilizing a succession of great leaps forward in the relative ecological surplus. These dynamics necessarily push expansionary tendencies on a global scale, as they typically result in the rapid exhaustion of nature (and human nature) which can act as fetters on the accumulation of capital (Moore 2001, 2003, 2011, 2012). Re-formulating Marx’s original concept of metabolic rift, Foster, Clark, and York (2011) argue that capitalist social relations of production, that is, the separation of the workers from their means of production, are both cause and condition of a historically distinct and environmentally destructive capitalist geography. Foster (2002) and Burkett (2006) have pointed out that on the level of individual capitals, attempts to overcome ecologically produced crises of capital accumulation can become a new source of profit and investment, a dynamic that can be witnessed in ecological imperialism. Clark and Foster (2009) have linked the issue of ecological imperialism with ecologically unequal exchange. Ecologically unequal exchange is a related literature that asserts that the world-system is characterized by asymmetrical flows of resources from peripheral to core areas underlying nominally equitable monetary exchanges (Hornborg 2011). Substantial empirical work, much of it creatively using current environment-society indicators, has corroborated many of the tenets of ecologically unequal exchange (Muradian, O’Connor, and Martinez-Alier 2002; Perez-Rincon 2006; Jorgenson, Austin, and Dick 2009; Vallejo 2010; Jorgenson and Clark 2011; Jorgenson 2012; Manrique et al. 2013).²

²Ecological imperialism and ecologically unequal exchange are not necessarily the same, as ecological imperialism can potentially occur in absence of a net unequal flow of resources from periphery to core. However, they are related in that they both address the ecological exploitation of the peripheral areas by more industrialized regions. See Frame (2014) for a more in-depth discussion.
Drawing from the works of the above theorists, I had summarized some essential attributes of ecological imperialism in other works (Frame 2014, 2015). First, ecological imperialism is rooted in the endless drive for capital accumulation and occurs under specifically capitalist relations of production. Further, ecological imperialism hinges upon dynamics of unequal power (economic, political, military, ideological, and so on) and dependency within a hierarchical international division of labor in the world-system, as a historical result of colonialism and uneven development. Third, ecological imperialism results in some sort of negative socio-ecological impacts for peripheral countries. Overall, ecological imperialism allows for displacement of environmental burdens outside of core/semi-peripheral national borders.

To the existing literature, I had added that the form that ecological imperialism takes is also an outcome of the dialectical unfolding of movements and countermovements that arise in response to social resistances. Ecological imperialism necessitates an amenable political-economic context within the imperialized country; historically this has been met with resistance at certain times. As O’Connor (1998) originally noted, nature, like labor, must be made available to capital in requisite quantities and qualities, at the right place and time, often by an extra-economic actor, namely the state. Contrary to neoclassical economic theory, the price of nature in the periphery depends not only on market supply and demand and ground rent but also on class, anti-imperialist, and environmental struggles.

Overall, then, we define ecological imperialism as the subjugation of the economic, political, and/or social institutions of a (generally peripheral) country for the biophysical, metabolic needs of the (generally core or semi-periphery), inextricable from the purpose of making such resources accessible and amenable (in the right quantities and for the right price) to the needs of (foreign) capital accumulation. Understanding the structures and policies that ensure the continued flow of both resources and profit from certain regions and social groups to other regions and social groups is, I suggest, the study of “ecological imperialism.”

One area that would push further the work on ecological imperialism – a very broad and complex topic – is continued study of concrete political economic structures in the global economy, in particular surrounding international trade and foreign investment. In terms of resource transfer in the current global economy, ecological imperialism occurs through two primary mechanisms – international trade and foreign investment (though illegal activities like smuggling also occur, and unequal appropriation of the global atmosphere commons could conceivably count as well). Tracing the historical development of concrete economic policies – in this study, the policies governing foreign investment – allows us to recognize neoliberalism as capital’s most current strategy of accumulation.
Ecological Imperialism and the Neoliberalization of Nature: Toward a Synthesis

The neoliberalization of nature literature has proliferated, with case studies describing the process of intensified enclosures and privatization (Robbins and Luginbuhl 2007), to case studies documenting the scaling back of environmental protections by the state (McCarthy 2007). In his broad overview of this burgeoning literature, Castree (2008a) identifies four issues that still need deeper exploration: the why of the neoliberalization of nature; the ways in which the neoliberalization of nature operates; the effects of this neoliberalization; and how such effects are to be evaluated. Theories of ecological imperialism can help address these questions. In turn, such questions can push discussions of ecological imperialism.

Based upon his broad survey, and drawing on Polanyi, Marx, and eco-Marxists, Castree (2008a) argues that, in a capitalist world, attempts to neoliberalize nature can be understood as “environmental fixes” that are “rational” for private producers and the state. Arguably Castree’s most relevant “environmental fix” in the context of ecological imperialism would be “Fix 2,” which stresses that certain neoliberal measures are primarily about exposing hitherto protected or state-controlled aspects of the natural environment to market rationality and capital accumulation. Ecological imperialism pushes this general line of argument further. For one, Castree frames his environmental fixes as providing the “rational” for private producers and the state to adopt neoliberal policies. However, imperialism stresses the issue of subjugation. The debt crises and adoption of structural adjustments as conditionalities are very substantial reasons why neoliberal policies were adopted in the first place. It is not just about “rationality” on the part of private producers and the state; neoliberalization of peripheral nature also involves subjugation and lack of alternatives, born in part by the collapse of economic nationalism, the ensuing debt crisis, and intransigent structures of inequality in the world-system.

Relatedly, in answering the “why” of neoliberalism, ecological imperialism offers a historical context. Work on ecological imperialism is historical, often tracing the beginnings of the subjugation of the periphery to colonization. By historicizing neoliberalism, one can trace the evolution of economic structures and policies that affect the terms and conditions in which imperial countries appropriate peripheral resources. Through such historical analysis the power struggles over peripheral resources is made visible.

Further, ecological imperialism offers important ways to evaluate the effects of neoliberalization in recipient countries. Castree (2008b) overviews a number of works that examine the socio-economic and environmental effects of the neoliberalization of the nature. Apparently, the discourse focuses largely on the socio-ecological impacts, negative or positive, for the
receiving country. While understanding the multitudinous impacts of neoliberalization of nature in particular contexts is vital, what is missing are relational questions about distribution and accumulation at the global level. Ecological imperialism, as discussed, concerns the subjugation of peripheral environments so that both profit and biophysical resources flow from imperialized to imperial regions.

Thus, through the lens of ecological imperialism, we could ask, for example, the following relational questions: in terms of accumulation, does neoliberalism re-structure governance of peripheral natures in order to channel profits to imperial centers? Does this trend further enrich imperial countries and thus further expand their purchasing power and capacity to make continuous claims on peripheral resources? In terms of the environment, does the neoliberalization of nature policies allow core countries to “import” sustainability and result in some sort of externalized environmental degradation from core to periphery? Do the neoliberal policies facilitate ecologically unequal exchange, an asymmetrical transfer of resources beneath a nominally equitable monetary exchange? Are neoliberal policies at least partially responsible for enabling certain social groups to appropriate and consume a disproportionate amount of the Earth’s resources?

In turn, studies of how nature’s neoliberalization operates in practice further the study of ecological imperialism. Identifying how neoliberalization operates allows for a comprehensive analysis of the concrete structures and policies that facilitate the transfer of resources and profit to imperial regions. This is especially salient in the study of cases where, as Castree points out, different places and environments are affected by the same set of transnational processes and rules (e.g. global trade agreements).

Neoliberalism as “Counter-Countermovement”: The Historical Context

Ecological imperialism may have begun with colonialism, but the process of accumulation is never static. At any given point in space and time the ideological, political-economic and policy context that allows for accumulation are distinct, and respond to a capital-society dialectic of resistance and counter-resistance. From such as perspective, neoliberal policies embody a backlash to what can be conceived of as a Polanyian “double movement” that arose post-independence in many peripheral countries.

In the post-WWII era, as theorists of imperialism (Girvan 1975, 1976; Magdoff 2003) have pointed out, transnational corporations (TNCs) were dominant actors in the system of production and accumulation. Features of transnational capitalism, according to Girvan (1976), included diversified, internationalized production under centralized control; the massive size and huge financial resources of the basic institutional unit; technological
dynamism and vanguardism; and high and continuously growing concentration of economic power. This new system came to dominate the world economy, whether developed, underdeveloped, or socialist (Girvan 1976). Consequently, even with independence, foreign control continued to dominate post-colonial economies (Nkrumah 1966; Rodney 1981).

Due to this contradictory state of political independence coupled with economic neocolonialism, the Third World began to challenge the control of TNCs over their economic affairs, which necessitated asserting their sovereignty over their resources. The Third World began to realize that First World dependency on their resources constituted a potential source of economic power and sovereignty (Lozoya 1980). In fact, the years 1972–1974 witnessed a shortage of many primary commodities, especially those of strategic importance in high-growth industries, such as petroleum, bauxite, and phosphates (Girvan 1976).

Polanyi (1957) argued that the dynamics of 19th- and early 20th-century society were governed by a double movement: the self-regulating market economy expanded continuously (first movement) but this movement was met a by a countermovement (second movement) checking the expansion. In particular, the countermovement consisted in checking the action of the market in respect to specific factors of production: labor, land, and money. Polanyi’s double movement expresses how the market system is continuously shaped by social resistance. Already implicit in Polanyi’s own work, we can more explicitly broaden this concept to include countermovements against an expanding global market in regards to the environment. Mittelman (1998), Bernard (1997), and Bridge (2007), for example, have extended the Polanyian framework in conceptualizing environmental resistance politics as a countermovement against globalization. In the neoliberalization of nature literature, McCarthy and Prudham (2004) have used the Polanyian dual movement to describe the environmental protection enacted under the Keynesian state and the subsequent assaults on it under neoliberalism. To their work, an important consideration should be added. Many of the previous developmental policies enacted in the mid-20th century by developing countries in their quest for national sovereignty and protection from the vicissitudes of the international market can be included as part of a Polanyian double movement in regards to the environment. That is, not only did the protections enacted under the Keynesian state have important environmental repercussions, but the quest for national sovereignty over resources did as well, through affecting the access, and terms of access of Third World nature to foreign capital.3 During the post-independence period, many

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3It can be argued that the bourgeois state did, in a number of cases throughout the Third World, displace indigenous and colonized groups from natural resources. To discuss imperialism, however, it is crucial to differentiate between foreign capital and indigenous capital.
developing countries had adopted various state-centered, interventionist development plans that explicitly involved regulation of foreign capital (Haque 1999). Subsequently, however, the whole of the neoliberal project was oriented toward the removal of these obstructions.

In the 1960s Third World countries began to challenge the power of transnational capital and their neocolonial situation under the aegis of economic sovereignty. Central to this issue of economic sovereignty was sovereignty over their own natural resources, manifest in a series of events from the 1960s to the mid-1970s. Such events included numerous state expropriations of foreign-owned natural resource industries, the formation of primary commodity cartels such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and sets of proposals that voiced Third World grievances put forth through the United Nations platform known as the New International Economic Order (NIEO).

The concept behind primary commodity cartels such as OPEC was to allow countries in the Third World to actively control their terms of trade with the industrialized world and the returns they got from the powerful multinational corporations (MNCs). The power of transnational capital was actively contested through the nationalization of foreign natural resource industries. Conflicts between Third World states and MNCs involved in their natural resource industries took place as early as 1937/1938 in Bolivia and Mexico with expropriations of foreign oil companies, reaching their zenith in the mid-1970s (Kennedy 1992). Finally, the Third World realized that without major structural changes in the international economic system, economic independence and development would be difficult. Hence, despite ideological differences, the Third World adopted a series of coherent demands. The NIEO demanded the full and permanent sovereignty of every state over its natural resources and all economic activities, including the right to nationalization or transfer of ownership to nationals (NIEO Charter 1974). Importantly, the NIEO also demanded the right for developing countries to regulate TNCs operating within their territories in accordance with plans of national development. The NIEO also sought to establish a more equitable relationship between the prices of exported raw materials and imported manufactures by improving terms of trade (NIEO Charter 1974).

The reaction of the West to the Third World’s demands for adjustment of the international economic order was a resounding rejection, heralding what Amin regards as a new phase of aggressive anti-Third Worldism (Amin 1990). Even before the NIEO, Northern hostility to the increasing economic nationalism of the Third World was apparent (Girvan 1976; Bhagwati 1977). Foreign investment in African resource industries, for example, dropped dramatically due to uncertainty generated by the backlash against foreign-owned operations in the 1970s (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] 2005). From a political ecological perspective, the main
issue is simple to understand: developed countries were, and continue to be, crucially dependent on various resources from the periphery, and the push for sovereignty and greater returns for their exports run directly counter to the need for cheap and accessible resources.

Yet due to a complex convergence of factors, developing countries across the world fell into crippling levels of debt and were forced to undertake extensive structural adjustment programs. By the 1980s economic nationalism in much of the Third World had essentially collapsed, and their societies underwent extended series of radical structural adjustments realigning their economies with the principles of laissez faire capitalism, comparative advantage, and increased external integration. Under the neoliberal reforms, Third World ecological resources were once again made accessible to the demands of foreign capital accumulation, as lingering obstructions enacted during the developmentalist era were removed one after the other. The Third World countermovement was replaced by the neoliberal “counter-countermovement,” in a context of economic and political crisis. By the late 1970s economic nationalism was replaced by market principles through binding trade agreements and new rules and regulations regarding foreign investment, ultimately opening countries for foreign capital through privatization and various incentives to attract MNCs.

**Ecological Imperialism Today: Neoliberalization and Foreign Investment in Africa**

Ecological imperialism today is marked by both differences and continuities with previous eras of imperialism. In Africa, despite political independence, MNCs still concentrate in and exercise substantial control in the natural resource sectors, supported by a comprador elite. However, in contrast to previous eras, the scale of the global ecological crises in which the current imperialism is occurring is historically unprecedented, an issue intensified by the saturation of global capitalism and industrialization of so-called emerging economies. This section discusses these issues in the context of the neoliberalization of nature (specifically investment policies) and ecological imperialism.

**Neoliberalization and Foreign Control over African Resources**

In contrast to the colonial era, the dynamics of imperialism are occurring in politically independent African countries. Neocolonialism today is largely rendered through neoliberal policies and market ideology based on a particular concept of export-led development and foreign investment. A major feature of continuity with the pre-economic nationalist era, however, is the control of key sectors of the economy by MNCs. Foreign industries dominate
over metals and minerals production in Mali, Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana, Gabon, Ghana, and Namibia, among others; in oil and gas, foreign industries accounts for over half of the production on average in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNCTAD 2007).

According to the UNCTAD (2012) report, the volume of Africa’s material trade in physical terms (metric tons) rose substantially, reflecting the global interest in African resources in the 21st century. Overall, the volume of Africa’s material trade in physical terms rose from almost 260 million tons in 1980 to 506 million tons in 2008. Fossil fuels, followed by specific metals, are African countries’ main exports in physical terms. After a decrease during the mid-1980s, exports of fossil fuels reached a peak in 2008 amounting to 534 million tons.

The influence of MNCs in this trend is reflected in part in increased foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. According to the UNCTAD World Investment Report 2013, investment in extractive industries remains the most important driver of FDI to Africa. In East Africa, for example, recently discovered gas reserves in Tanzania and oil fields in Uganda resulted in increased FDI, as inflows to the region rose from $4.5 billion in 2011 to $6.3 billion in 2012. Central Africa also saw its inflows rise to $10 billion, a record high, maintaining a trend of increasing FDI into natural resources from mining TNCs since 2010. In West Africa, investment in oil-producing Ghana remained stable at $3.3 billion and mining interests in Mauritania helped that country’s inflows double to $1.2 billion (UNCTAD 2013). Ferguson (2005) argues that such concentration in the resource sectors creates a form of enclavism and uneven development, as natural resource industries generally lack linkages to the broader economy. Ecologically, despite major reserves, international trade and foreign investment are contributing to the depletion of region’s stocks of non-renewables (UNCTAD 2012).

The neoliberalization of nature literature on international trade regimes and foreign investment, particularly the work of McCarthy (2007), helps to illuminate the political economic dynamics behind this trend. Two particularly significant changes in foreign investment policy have occurred with regard to the neoliberalization of nature; multilateral and bilateral investment treaties (BITs) and tax regimes governing the natural resource sector.

Under the auspices of creating favorable investment climates, foreign investment regulations in many multilateral and bilateral treaties have strongly shifted the balance of power to foreign capital. As a result, major sectors such as mining and manufacturing have come under direct control of foreign investors, especially due to acquisition of privatized state-owned enterprises (Haque 1999; Bridge 2007). For example, looking at multilateral trade agreements, McCarthy (2007) notes that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other recent trade agreements all share the primary goals of increasing FDI and homogenizing regulatory environments.
across and within national territories, and shifting important state functions to the private sector. Concerning multilateral organizations, trade-related investment measures (TRIMs) cover a broad variety of developing country economic activity, and countries that are members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) must satisfy the performance requirements of TRIMs. The central aim of TRIMs is to guarantee protection for Western investments. In doing so, it bans most performance requirements on foreign firms. For example, the TRIMs agreement bans performance requirements related to local content (which require that locally produced goods be purchased or used), trade balancing, export requirements (which require the export of a specified percentage of production volume), and it also bans requirements on public agencies to procure goods from local suppliers. A country that tries to impose such requirements can be taken to Dispute Settlement Mechanism, and will usually lose (Wade 2003). Moreover, the USA and EU want to modify current TRIMs agreement so as to ban all performance requirements, including for joint venturing, technology transfer, and research and development. In essence, TRIMs restrict the right of a government to carry through policies that favor growth and technological upgrading of domestic industries and firms for development purposes (Wade 2003). As such, some have argued that the WTO outlaws key investment regulations that were once crucial to many countries’ development strategies (Shadlen 1999; Correa and Kumar 2003; Green and Change n.d.).

Even more stringent are BITs that have been proliferating throughout the developing world since the early 1990s. BITs require host government to lift even more restrictions on foreign firms, to give even more concessions, in return for better access to the USA or other powerful party markets (Wade 2003). BITs clearly focus on foreign investment protection, and developing countries sign BITs in order to “signal” to investors and attract more foreign investment. In recent decades, BITs have become the most important international legal mechanism for the encouragement and governance of FDI (Neumayer and Spess 2005).

Prior to advent of BITs, the protection afforded to foreign investors was minimal, under the customary international legal rule of minimum standard of treatment and the so-called Hull Rule. The Hull Rule dealt exclusively with cases of expropriation and offered no general protection against discriminatory treatment. During the era of economic nationalism, developing countries had even challenged the Hull Rule’s validity as part of their demands for the NIEO (Neumayer and Spess 2005).

In essence, most BITs guarantee certain protection for foreign investors that contrasts strongly with the demands of the NIEO. For example, BITs typically ban discriminatory treatment against foreign investors, guarantee appropriate compensation for expropriated property or funds, guarantee free transfer and repatriation of capital and profits, all areas that economic
nationalism sought to regulate. Further, the BIT parties agree to submit to binding dispute settlement should a dispute concerning these provisions arise. Virtually any public policy regulation can be challenged through the dispute settlement mechanism as long as it affects foreign investors (Neumayer and Spess 2005).

The adoption of such treaties has been widespread throughout the developing world. Half of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) FDI into developing countries by 2000, for example, was covered by a bilateral treaty (Hallward-Driemeier 2003). In some regions, like Africa, most countries had by the early 2000s concluded bilateral treaties and signed multilateral agreements with international organizations. Ultimately, these regulations limit the capacity of developing country governments to constrain TNCs (Wade 2003). Consequently, they place serious constraints on the national development strategies of developing countries (Shadlen 1999; Adejumobi 2003; Wade 2003).

The mining sector attracts a substantial proportion of FDI in many developing/extractive economies, and from the perspective of political ecology, major changes in mining codes have been instrumental in making peripheral resources both amenable and accessible to the needs of foreign capital accumulation. The structural adjustments of the 1980s reformulated mining codes to facilitate state withdrawal from the sector, as well as expanded opportunities for the private sector and increased various incentives for investors (UNCTAD 2005). In the ten-year period from 1985 to 1995 over 90 countries globally adopted new mining laws or revised existing legal codes in an effort to promote foreign investment in their mining sector. Attracting foreign investors for economic growth and providing hard currency to developing countries continues to be prioritized above other important social and environmental objectives (Tockman 2001; UNCTAD 2005). Unsurprisingly, one of the most consistent outcomes from the International Monetary Fund imposed structural adjustment policies has been the intensification of natural resource extraction for export markets (Tockman 2001).

The reforms have certainly created a more favorable environment for foreign investors, but have also undermined norms and standards in areas of crucial importance for social, environmental, and economic development (Akabzaa 2001; Campbell 2003; Curtis and Lissu 2008). Developmental objectives that hampered these goals, such as measures that sought to retain greater earnings within the host country, or environmental regulatory measures, were at best placed in secondary position compared to policies to attract foreign investment and promote exports (Campbell 2003). The World Bank’s 1992 Strategy for African Mining – the first systematic presentation of reforms considered necessary by the Bank – was based upon a survey that was sent to 80 mining companies, and recommended a stable legal and fiscal framework, contractual stability, a guaranteed fiscal regime, profit repatriation, rule of
law, and so on. The report, however, did not articulate how the mining sector would contribute to broader developmental objectives of great import, such as the building of backward and forward linkages or the possibility of value-added processing of minerals (Campbell 2003).

The consequences of this neoliberalization and the dynamics of global capital accumulation became apparent in the incapacity of African countries to retain earnings in the commodity boom of the late 2000s, which resulted in robust world market prices for African metals but, due to low taxation levels, relatively little revenue actually earned by African states. The Africa Progress Report 2013 found that many such policies have continued, even despite the commodity boom of the 2000s and the increased profit margins of mining and petroleum companies. For example, the report writes that until 2010, the average royalty payment on gold exports in Sub-Saharan Africa was only 3 percent, one of lowest in world. However, world prices of gold increased from $300 to $1600 per ounce between 2000 and 2011, while investor profits increased at four times rate of government revenues (Africa Progress Panel 2013). For example, in 2011 exports of mining products from Guinea reached $1.4 billion, representing 12 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), but government mining revenues were just $48 million, or 0.4 percent GDP (Africa Progress Panel 2013).

Another report, written by the German Development Institute, similarly finds that Sub-Saharan Africa generally failed to benefit from the high prices of mineral and energy commodities from 2003 to 2008. While the extractive sector experienced strong sales revenues and high inflows of direct investments, the three case study countries of Zambia, Namibia, and Ghana indicate that they only profited “more than moderately” from tax revenues during the commodity boom. In Zambia, for example, the report finds that the copper and cobalt industry sold minerals to the value of over $13 billion and benefited from nearly $4 billion of FDI in the period from 2003 to 2008. However, the average implicit tax rate for the extractive sector in Zambia from 2003–2008 was below 2 percent, and consequently the government only raised tax revenues of about $393 million in that same period (Sturmer 2010).

Importantly, this trend is abetted by the corruption and collusion of local elites. The Africa Progress Report 2013, in a case study analysis of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), reveals how the privatization of the DRC’s minerals sector has been plagued by a culture of secrecy, informal deals and allegations of corruption. With some of the world’s richest mineral resources, DRC state companies are granting concessions to foreign investors, most registered offshore, that systematically undervalue natural resources. An analysis restricted to the years 2010–2012 and focusing on only five deals finds that between 2010 and 2012, the DRC lost at least $1.36 billion in revenues from underpricing mining assets that were sold to
offshore companies. The report also cites a pervasive problem of tax evasion by offshore companies and provides an estimate that firms that shift profits to lower tax jurisdictions cost Africa $38 billion a year (Africa Progress Panel 2013).

**Imperialism, Global Capitalism, and Global Ecological Crises**

While such issues represent continuities with previous eras of neocolonialism, one major difference of the imperialism of recent decades simply concerns the intensity of the global ecological crisis. Multiple crises exist at a scale previously unknown. In a very general way, one could claim that imperialism today is “intensified” in its ecological ramifications, as the very last of tropical forests throughout the periphery, for example, are being felled due to a scramble by foreign investors, or as industrial fishing dangerously depletes ocean stocks to the brink of collapse. Scholars such as Carmody (2011) and Southall and Melber (2009) have documented scramble for the totality of African resources, including its water supplies, timber, fisheries, minerals, and fossil fuels, with tens of millions of hectares of land already leased to foreign investors in the 21st century. Such a scramble has even pushed Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, to urge David Cameron to use Britain’s chairmanship of the G8 to end some of the “unconscionable” practices of companies exploiting Africa’s vast reserves of natural resources (Stewart 2013). What is needed is to situate this “scramble for Africa” within the broader trend of global ecological crises, neoliberalization of nature and ecological imperialism – issues which affect not just Africa but underscore serious contradictions in the whole of the global capitalist economy.

While the proximate cause for this “new scramble for Africa” is high commodity prices the deeper causes are the tension between a growing global capitalist economy and a world of finite natural resources – and, as noted, the outcome of a historical struggle that has made African ecologies both cheap and accessible through neoliberalization (UNCTAD 2005, 2012; Frame 2014). The scramble for African resources, abetted by high commodity prices, reveals an important dynamic in the operations of ecological imperialism discussed by Foster (2002) and Burkett (2006). Ecological crises do not always translate into crises of capital accumulation; on the level of *individual* capitals, attempts to overcome ecologically produced crises of capital accumulation can become a new source of profit and investment. Increased global demand, coupled with dwindling supplies, helped drive up prices in the first decade of the 2000s, incentivizing investors in the scramble for African resources. Hence, in contrast to the former period of imperialism, ecological crises – not just within the traditional former colonial powers but *global* ecological crises – are helping drive the imperialism of Africa today. For example, in a global context of shrinking resources, investors
from both developed and emerging economies are trying to achieve food, water, and energy security outside of their national boundaries through large-scale land investments (Smaller and Mann 2009), an issue linked with dispossession, deforestation, and social conflict. Such socio-ecological consequences demonstrate another fundamental tenet of ecological imperialism, the displacement of socio-ecological burdens from certain regions to more peripheral regions.

Such global ecological crises are also inextricably linked to another important difference of imperialism today, namely the degree to which capitalism has saturated the global economy. The overall economic growth and industrialization of emerging economies has skyrocketed the use of resources and their associated wastes, and is predicted to only increase (UNEP 2013). As Moore notes, capitalism sustains itself on the basis of cheap inputs and eventually this leads to the exhaustion of human and extra-human natures; this surely applies as much to the capitalism of the semi-periphery as the capitalism of the core. As has been noted in numerous studies (Cheru and Obi 2010), the intensity of the resource scramble in Africa is driven by both the continued investment from the traditional imperial powers as well as considerable investment from countries such as India and China. The capitalist industrialization of the emerging economies has turned such economies from net exporters of resources to their net importers (Singh and Eisenmenger 2010). And such “South–South” investment was abetted, perhaps unintendedly, by the neoliberal structural adjustments (Kragelund 2009).

Conclusion

The new scramble for Africa reveals how African resources have been made cheap and accessible, marking it as a last bastion of resources in a time of global ecological crises. Yet this scramble was enabled in large part by the neoliberalization of nature, a broader global trend. In turn, connecting this ongoing neoliberalization of nature to the broader issue of imperialism is crucial to understanding the accumulation of capital and biophysical resources, at a global level. Contextualizing the neoliberalization of nature as a historical phase of ecological imperialism, and in particular as a backlash against the economic nationalist policies of the post-colonial era, allows for a radical political-ecological critique of some of the most important economic policies currently governing international trade and foreign investment in the periphery of the world-system.

References


