On Wednesday 11 November 05:00-22:00 GMT, we'll be making some site updates on Taylor & Francis Online. You'll still be able to search, browse and read our articles, where access rights already apply. Registration, purchasing, activation of tokens, eprints and other features of Your Account will be unavailable during this scheduled work.

New Political Economy ›

Volume 20, 2015 - Issue 1

20,567 Views | 222 CrossRef citations to date | 4 Altmetric

Original Articles

The New 'Passive Revolution' of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism

Thomas Wanner

Pages 21-41 | Published online: 31 Jan 2014

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.866081 Check for updates

Sample our Politics & International Relations Journals
>> Sign in here to start your access to the latest two volumes for 14 days

Full Article | Figures & data | References | Citations | Metrics

Reprints & Permissions | Read this article | Share

Abstract

This paper analyses the rapidly emerging discourse of a green economy based on green growth. It highlights inherent conflicts and contradictions of this discourse such as the myth of decoupling growth from the environment, pollution generations and resource consumption. Using key theoretical constructs of both Gramsci and Polanyi, the paper argues that the green economy/growth discourse can be seen as a Gramscian 'passive revolution' whereby the dominant sustainable development

discourse, subsumed by capitalist hegemony, is protected in the context of global environmental, economic and development crises. The ‘neoliberalising of nature’, or in other words, the privatisation, marketisation and commodification of nature, akin to Polanyi's fictitious commodities, continues and intensifies with green economy/growth strategies. Greening the economy and associated strategies of green growth divert attention from the social and political dimensions of sustainability and issues of social and international justice. In this way, the inexorable march or ‘sustainable development’ of neoliberal capitalism is maintained. This paper goes on to argue that contesting the claims of green economy/growth discourse through political struggles by civil society against the neoliberalisation of nature is a sign of a slowly emerging counter-hegemonic ‘double movement’ which challenges capitalist hegemony and the commodification of society–nature relations.

Keywords:

green economy | green growth | sustainable development | passive revolution | fictitious commodities | neoliberalising nature

Notes on contributor

Thomas Wanner is a lecturer in the discipline of Geography, Environment and Population at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. His research and teaching interests concentrate on the political economy of environment and development issues with a particular focus on international environmental governance, gender and development, and education for sustainability.

Notes

I wish to thank Toby Carroll for his very insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I also thank Darryl Jarvis and the participants at the New Approaches to Building Markets in Asia workshop at the National University of Singapore in February 2012 for their feedback on a presentation of this earlier draft.

1. The Rio+20 UNCSD was held from 20 to 22 June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The other major theme was the institutional framework for sustainable development.

Twenty years after the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or ‘Earth Summit’ in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development had the objective to renew political commitment to sustainable development, find solutions to the implementation gaps in regard to international sustainable development agreements, and to address new and emerging challenges, such as climate change and food security.

2. Achieving the green economy is a process and therefore it would be more helpful to speak about greening the economy than a green economy (which implies an end-state of low-carbon or carbon-free economies).

3. Brand is also critical about the green economy discourse and its role in perpetuating capitalist society–nature relations (Brand 2011; Brand and Wissen 2012). The various global crises are seen by him and others as an opportunity to start thinking about a ‘post-neoliberalisation of nature’ (Brand 2009); whereas I argue that these crises are part of continued neoliberalisation of nature.

4. Green growth and green economy are often used synonymously in policy papers as both are inextricably linked. In this article, I often talk about ‘green economy/growth’ discourse to highlight this linkage. Otherwise, I clearly separate between green economy when talking about the overall economic system and its goal of moving away from fossil economies to low-carbon (or even carbon-free) economies; and green growth as both the ‘motor’ of economic development in a green economy and the outcome of green economy (similar to ‘green jobs’).

5. Gramsci distinguishes between ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’ which refers to what is usually called in contemporary society ‘common sense’ – the practical and empirical application of the intellect. ‘Good sense’ is needed to question ‘common sense’ (i.e. the belief system and norms around the dominant ideology) and to search for new thinking and understandings of social reality (Gramsci 1971: 41).

6. To clarify, I have extended Wood's neat explanation of the disembeddedness of free market economies with brackets about nature which are also embedded in the economy rather than the reverse.

7. In Polanyi's (2001) words:

> Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor

> can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized; land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual money, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. (75–6)

8. Castree (2008, 2010), also using a Marxian-Polanyi theoretical framework, provides a detailed analysis of various critical studies and his own series of analysing the ‘logics, processes, outcomes, and evaluations' of the neoliberalisation of nature. My paper is a critical analysis of green economy/growth which is, as argued, the new instrument in neoliberalising nature.

9. This has only been countenanced by the inaction in relation to earlier attempts to reconcile growth and environmental concerns with, for example, little progress globally towards the global goal of sustainable development enunciated at the 1992 UNCED (which was followed up by the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, proclaimed beforehand as the ‘summit of action’ to tackle the massive lack of implementation of sustainable development policy).

10. ‘Environmental sustainability’, as defined by UNESCAP (2008), refers to ‘the capacity of economic growth processes and social change to ensure that natural resources are not depleted faster than they can be regenerated and that ecological systems remain viable' (14).

11. Similarly, the World Bank (2012) takes an ‘economic approach – using the standard tools of mainstream growth and environmental economics' (3).

12. Schafer (2011), the Director of Strategy and Operations at the Sustainable Development Network of the World Bank, stated in a meeting about ‘sharing green economy best practices’ in Warsaw, Poland, in October 2011, that the ‘World Bank, in partnership with GGGI [Global Green Growth Initiative], OECD, and UNEP, has launched the GGKP [Green Growth Knowledge Platform] to identify and then fill key knowledge gaps related to green growth policy and practice' (emphasis added). The role of the World Bank in knowledge construction and dissemination of knowledge about green economy and growth through the Green Growth Knowledge Platform and other avenues demands more research. Knowledge, as Jessop (2007) has argued, needs to be seen as a ‘fictitious commodity’ in the moves towards knowledge economies.

13. ‘The Myth of Decoupling’ is taken from the title of Chapter 5, in Jackson (2009).

14. Decoupling ‘at its simplest is reducing the amount of resources such as water or fossil fuels used to produce economic growth and delinking economic development from environmental deterioration' (UNEP 2011c: xi).

15. Natural capital is defined by UNESCAP (2008) as

> both the ecosystem goods (raw materials) that enterprises transform into value for humanity every day (for example agricultural products, water and minerals) and the equally and perhaps more important ecosystem services that make Earth habitable by stabilizing the global climate, cleansing water and air, pollinating agricultural crops, storing nutrients in soils, and supporting spiritual values, cultures and recreation. (40)

16. As stated in a recent report, ‘the global economy has passed from an era in which human-made capital was the limiting factor in economic development, to an era in which the remaining natural capital may well be the limiting factor' (UN and ADB 2012: 41).

17. See MEA (2005) or the recent report about the state of the global environment by the UNEP's (2012) Global Environmental Outlook 5.

18. For the distinction between weak and strong sustainability (which includes acceptance and restructuring of society and economy according to ecological limits), see Neumayer (1999).

19. Daly (1974) termed the phrase ‘growthmania’ for this obsession with economic growth without the recognition of ecological limits. See also Altvater (2001).

20. As was discussed earlier, this is what Polanyi has argued about the ‘disembedding’ of capitalist market societies. Altvater also uses Polanyi in his arguments against economic growth.

21. ‘Decommodification is conceived as any political, social, or cultural process that reduces the scope and influence of the market in everyday life', such as initiatives of fair trade, microfinance and social enterprises (Vail 2010: 310).

Related research

People also read | Recommended articles | Cited by 222

Is Green Growth Possible? >

Jason Hickel et al.
New Political Economy
Published online: 17 Apr 2019

The future of 'environmental' policy in the Anthropocene: time for a paradigm shift >

Frank Biermann
Environmental Politics
Published online: 22 Nov 2020

Sustainable development – historical roots of the concept >

Jacobus A. Du Pisani Professor of History
Environmental Sciences
Published online: 16 Feb 2007

View more

Information for

Authors

R&D professionals

Editors

Librarians

Societies

Open access

Overview

Open journals

Open Select

Dove Medical Press

F1000Research

Opportunities

Reprints and e-prints

Advertising solutions

Accelerated publication

Corporate access solutions

Help and information

Help and contact

Newsroom

All journals

Books

Keep up to date

Register to receive personalised research and resources by email

Sign me up

Copyright © 2026 Informa UK Limited Privacy policy

Cookies Terms & conditions Accessibility

Registered in England & Wales No. 01072954
5 Howick Place | London | SW1P 1WG

Taylor & Francis by informa