

Nature, Food, Crisis: New Problems, Old Debates

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TILZEY, Mark. *Political ecology, food regimes, and food sovereignty: crisis, resistance, and resilience*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018. 394 pp.

In 1998, Giovanni Arrighi wrote an article with a curious subtitle: “Rethinking the non-debates of the 1970’s”.³ He was referring to the “non-debates” between Immanuel Wallerstein, Robert Brenner, Fernand Braudel and Theda Skocpol, that remained undeveloped. These “non-debates” of the 70’s, especially the one between Wallerstein (with his world-system perspective) and Brenner (with his “Political Marxism” stance), now reemerge in Tilzey’s book, with Tilzey in the role of the “political Marxist” challenging the conceptions of Jason W. Moore and the proposals of his “world-ecology”, as well as Philip McMichael and Harriett Friedman’s conceptions of “food regime” (both developments of Wallerstein’s “world-system” perspective).⁴ This is not simply a repetition, to be sure: the return to thematic and methodological questions derives from the rise and intensification of problems and questions in the present, specifically, how to treat ecology/nature and crisis in our historical and theoretical concepts of capitalism in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene era, characterized by repeated economic crashes. These new questions and problems motivate Tilzey’s timely effort. Nevertheless, many “non-debates” remain undebated, including Arrighi’s intervention in them. 282

The first chapters of Tilzey’s book condense his ontological and methodological premises. Tilzey tries to build an ontology on which his propositions on political ecology and food regimes would be based. In chapter 2, he criticizes Jason W. Moore’s “world-ecology”, claiming that his notion of “double internality” of society and nature is a “flat ontology”. Tilzey opposed a four-level stratification of ontological relations to this: a non-hybrid, extra-human reality, nature (level 1); a hybrid, socio-natural level of trans-historical use-values (level 2); an “allocative” hybrid level, related to class-mediated distribution and historically-specific technologies (level 3); a non-hybrid “authoritative” level, the underlying political dimension in class dynamics in which to seek “structural causality” (level 4) (p. 28). Tilzey claims that the ontology he proposes is better equipped to deal with class relations and the “authoritative dimension” than Moore’s is. This ontology sets the tone of the rest of the book. Despite his critique of Moore’s general approach, Tilzey recognizes his contributions related to the capital’s dependency on “cheap natures” and commodity frontiers.

It is worth it then to make some critical observations on this foundational first chapter. Tilzey’s assertion that Moore proposes a “flat ontology” is problematic. For starters, Moore denies it explicitly.⁵ Moore also asserts the differentiation of humans in that “humans relate to nature as a whole from within, not from the outside. Undoubtedly, *humans are an especially powerful environment-making species*.

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³ ARRIGHI, Giovanni. Capitalism and the modern world-system: rethinking the non-debates of the 1970s. *Review*, 21, n. 1, 113-29, 1998.

⁴ WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. *The modern world-system I: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 [1974]; BRENNER, Robert. The origins of capitalist development: a critique of neo-Smithean Marxism. *New Left Review*, I, 104, p. 25-92, July-August 1977; MOORE, Jason W. *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital*. New York: Verso, 2015; FRIEDMANN, Harriet; MCMICHAEL, Philip. Agriculture and the state system. *Sociologia Ruralis*, XXIX, no. 2, p. 93-117, 1989.

⁵ MOORE, Jason W. *op. cit.*, p. 39.



But this hardly exempts human activity from the rest of nature”.⁶ Finally, Moore distances himself from a “flat ontology” by qualifying Nature and Society as “real abstractions”, the “real historical power of ontologic and epistemic dualisms” that are in contradiction with the co-production of humans and nature.⁷ Tilzey’s argument on the “flat ontology” of Moore could have been more convincing if he had addressed and criticized these elements of Moore’s work, but they are left untouched, and so his critique appears to be one-sided. Moore uses “value as method”, in which capital, class and nature conflate in a peculiar, historically-specific way, operating in the formation of classes and concomitant organization of historical natures. Sharply separating or hierarchizing them would be a “violent abstraction”, according to this perspective.⁸

Additionally, Tilzey’s conception of dialectics is not very clear. Both Lucio Colletti and Levins and Lewontin are known to support his position (p. 19-29), references that are at opposite ends regarding the methodological and historical statute of dialectics. For Levins and Lewontin, dialectics is trans-historical and imputed to nature itself (like in Engels’ “dialectics of nature”), while for Colletti it is historically-specific to capitalist modernity, including relations with nature but not extended to nature itself and neither to history as such.⁹ The assertion that Tilzey’s ontology entails “principles that are not specific to capitalism but to all social systems” (p. 24) clearly indicates the adherence to a trans-historical conception of dialectics, though it is not clear whether it is extended to nature as such or not.

In the next chapter, Tilzey uses his proposed ontology to discuss the origins of agrarian capitalism, “combined and uneven development” and the first agricultural revolution in Britain. Regarding the origins of agrarian capitalism, Tilzey defends a Brennerian position of a British origin of capitalism with specific “social-property relations” (with fully commodified land and labor), contrasting with the world-system perspective which proposes a West European (and American) origin based on for-profit production of commodities under different labor regimes in a world market, the “commodification of everything”.¹⁰ The presentation of world-systemic perspectives on the origins of capitalism is oversimplified as the “Braudel-Wallerstein-Arrighi school”, when actually there are significant differences between these three authors’ view on the transition from feudalism to capitalism (p. 48-9). A discussion of these differences would have been important, especially because Arrighi claims to have incorporated Brenner’s critique of Wallerstein in his version of the theory of transition.¹¹ Though Tilzey rejects the world-systemic conception of core-periphery relations, he recognizes the crucial importance of cotton plantations in the American South for the Industrial Revolution (or, more generally, the interaction between English capitalism and the “external arena”). To conciliate both positions, he uses a theory of “combined and uneven development” based on Trotsky and more specifically on Anievas and Niasanciglu. It should be noted that what Anievas and Niasanciglu propose as “combined and uneven development” is a trans-historical ontology that is projected back to the time of hunter-gatherers.¹²

The combination of the reference to Levins and Lewontin when referring to dialectics and Anievas and Niasanciglu in relation to uneven and combined development indicate that there seems to be a tension in Tilzey’s theoretical framework: on the one hand, an attempt to specify capitalism in such a way that only England would initially comply; on the other, the use of analytical methods that lack historical specificity to deal with “nature” and the “external”, non-capitalist world. Contrasting with this trans-historical methodological choices, for example, Moishe Postone and Lucio Colletti would argue that dialectics and the dialectical method are historically-specific to capitalist modernity; and in the world-system perspective, core-periphery relations are historically-specific to a capitalist world-economy (which is not necessarily coincident with the whole globe, but comprises the states that

⁶ Ibid., p. 46. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

⁸ Ibid., ch. 2. SAYER, Dereck. *The violence of abstraction: the analytical foundations of historical materialism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

⁹ LEVINS, Richard; LEWONTIN, Richard. *The dialectical biologist*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1985. COLLETTI, Lucio. *Marxism and Hegel*. Trans. R. Garner. New York: Verso, 1973.

¹⁰ WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. *Historical capitalism*. New York: Verso, 2011.

¹¹ Inspired by Braudel, Arrighi proposes an interstitial transition based on Italian city-states, which would include competition for mobile capital, thus addressing Brenner’s critique that competition was not a part of Wallerstein’s model. See ARRIGHI, *op. cit.*

¹² ANIEVAS, Alexander; NISANCIOGLU, Kerem. *How the West came to rule: the geopolitical origins of capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2015, p. 46-7.

are integrated in a single, large-scale market) that arose in the sixteenth century and will become extinct in the future. This world-economy would constitute an integrated market comprised of several states, with a scale and level of integration that characterize it as qualitatively very different from any exchange that might have occurred between groups of hunter-gatherers¹³.

One passage reveals this difficulty in using a combination of historically-specific and trans-historical categories: “through the institution of slave plantation in the colonies, capitalists were able to reduce significantly the costs of constant capital in the form of *raw materials*” (p. 71, emphasis mine). The reader should note that while “constant capital” is a historically-specific category, “raw materials” is trans-historic; the historically-specific category would be “circulating capital”. There is no difficulty here for the world-system perspective, especially if considering Dale Tomich’s concept of “second slavery”.¹⁴ But for the “social-property relations” approach, characterizing slave-produced cotton as “circulating capital” might be inconsistent, as that would mean that slave production was already subsumed under the law of value and the dynamics of the organic composition of capital. But if it was not produced as circulating capital from the beginning (which is difficult to accept, as the relation between Mississippi Valley plantations and English factories was systematic, instead of contingent) then we remain with the difficult question of defining where, between the plantation in the American South and the factory in Britain, this trans-historical “raw material” was converted into a historically-specific “circulating capital”, thus mediating the organic composition of capital and counteracting the profit rate’s falling tendency (a mediation that Tilzey correctly admits as being key for the Industrial Revolution). The problem does not seem to be solved by attributing this “raw material” to level 3 in Tilzey’s ontology, as “class” is still a historically indeterminate category (contrary to value).

The rest of the book is an “application” of the ontological premises presented in the first two chapters. Chapters 4 to 6 are dedicated to the discussion of food regimes. Tilzey characterizes them as the first or British liberal regime (1840-1870), the second or imperial regime (1870-1930), the third or “political productivist” regime (1930-1980) and the neoliberal regime. Tilzey proposed the first regime as a complement to the others that were previously proposed by Friedmann and McMichael. Here, in accordance with his proposed ontology, the emphasis is on class politics, class fractions and how they shape what he calls the “capital-State nexus”. For Tilzey, the “Polanyian” approach of Friedmann and McMichael regarding the State (the “double movement”) obliterates the “state as comprising the condensation of the balance of class forces in society” (p. 113). One of the best moments of the book is the explanation of the different interests of American corn, cotton and wheat farmers and how this class-fractional struggle shaped state policies and food regimes (ch. 5).

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In Part 2 (chapters 7 and 8), Tilzey discusses “crisis and resistance”. Tilzey’s previously defined ontology implies that crises are always “political” or legitimacy crises; an objective crisis of capitalism is out of question *a priori* (as well as the possible transition to a less democratic social order). In this respect, he distances himself from other authors for whom alienation plays a central role in crisis theory and that do consider the possibility of some kind of “regressive” transition, such as Moishe Postone or Robert Kurz, and is at least in this regard (crisis necessarily as crisis of legitimacy) in agreement with a non-Marxist scholar like Wolfgang Streeck.¹⁵ In his exposition in chapter 7, Tilzey identifies as contradictions of neoliberalism the general falling rate of profit due to the rising organic composition of capital and the rising cost of raw materials. It should be noted that he characterizes the falling rate of profit with the “power of capital over labor” (p. 200), in line with the posited priority of the “authoritative” level of his ontology. But here, perhaps this ontology produces another one-sided result. The falling rate of profit is the result of mechanization not only in a struggle of capitalists against workers but also in a struggle among capitalists (competition for efficiency); besides, the tendency itself is an objectified outcome that is not “authoritatively” planned. This is part of a dialectic

¹³ COLLETTI, *op. cit.* POSTONE, Moishe and REINICKE, Helmut. On Nicholas’ “Introduction” to the Grundrisse. *Telos*, 22, 130-148. WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ On “second slavery”, see TOMICH, Dale W. *Through the prism of slavery: labor, capital and world-economy*. Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2004.

¹⁵ POSTONE, Moishe. The current crisis and the anachronism of value: a Marxian reading. *Continental Thought and Theory*, 1, no. 4, p. 38-54, 2017. KURZ, Robert. The crisis of exchange value: science as productivity, productive labor and capitalist reproduction. In *Marxism and the critique of value*, ed. N. Larsen et al, p. 17-76. Chicago: MCM, 2014 [1986]; STREECK, Wolfgang. How will capitalism end? *New Left Review* 87, p. 35-64, May-June, 2014.

of subjectivity and objectivity peculiar to capitalism that seems to be obliterated by Tilzey's ontology. In relation to the food regime in particular, Tilzey develops the idea that food and financial crises are different manifestations of the neoliberal social disarticulation, which combines a crisis of under-consumption (level 4 of the ontology) with increasing costs of raw materials (levels 3 and 4).

Again following his ontologies of class and combined and uneven development, Tilzey analyzes peasant "resistance" movements as assuming three different forms: what he calls "sub-hegemonic" (reformist), "alter-hegemonic" (progressive) and "counter-hegemonic" (radical). The sub-hegemonic movement is represented by the "Pink Tide" in South America and its focus on the combination of extractivism and social policies, with peasants appealing to indigenous identities. Alter-hegemonic movements are represented by small commercial farmers, mostly in core countries, that demand regulation and protection against the market. Peasant movements, mostly those in the "global South" and among subaltern classes whose demands include the socialization of means of production (land), are counter hegemonic. It can be seen that the existence of, or potential for, reactionary movements is overlooked, as the ontology does not seem to be equipped with the necessary analytical tools.¹⁶

Part 3 (chapters 9-13) is dedicated to country case studies, which includes Bolivia, Ecuador, Nepal and China, in which the author tries to trace the commonalities and differences between them (Brazil is not included). Some of the best moments of the book appear here, such as when Tilzey explains the difference between recent peasant movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, on the one hand, and their weakness in Chile and Peru, on the other, based on their different class structures and histories. The last chapter is political-normative, advocating a "food sovereignty" based on peasant communal production using a "resilient" food production system grounded on agroecological methods.

It is clear throughout the book that Tilzey makes great effort to be consistent with his proposed ontology of "Political Marxism". Nevertheless, the one-sidedness of this ontology (despite the inclusion of "ecology" in lower hierarchical levels), which one could characterize as an extreme form of politicism (or a "violent abstraction"), might produce one-sided analyses, like a critique of Moore that ignores his use of "real abstractions" and a theory of crises that overlooks objectified tendencies (or is inconsistent by taking them into account). Additionally, the trans-historical elements of the ontology used to conciliate the supposed exceptionality of Britain and the intense relations with the "external arena" might generate problems of consistency and historical specification. But the approach can also produce useful sociological and class dynamics analyses and insights. The reader's evaluation of this ontology will ultimately shape his or her broad evaluation of the book. Hopefully Tilzey's book will be only the first of many to address the many "non-debates" that are still untouched, some of them barely scratched in this review and that include vitally important questions such as the concept of capitalism, its historical origins and its future demise.

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¹⁶ Critical Theory could be helpful, but it seems to be far from Tilzey's theoretical commitments.

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Recebido em: 04/10/2018 – Aprovado em: 04/11/2018