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NATURAL CAUSES, UNCERTAIN CONSEQUENCES?

Some Critical Comments on James O'Connor's Ecological Marxism

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Over the last ten years, the well-known North American political economist James O'Connor has turned his attention to matters that might be loosely termed "environmental". In this time, O'Connor has established himself as a leader in the field of radical environmental-social thought.¹ His new focus has generated the following promising outcomes: institutionally, the interdisciplinary socialist journal, *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* and the Centre for Political Ecology (Santa Cruz, California); theoretically, the "second contradiction of capitalism" thesis; and politically, a systematic engagement between Marxists and the "new social movements". These three outcomes intersect in O'Connor's latest book, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (published in 1998). This book is undoubtedly an important contribution to neo-Marxism, and indeed, to radical political

* Thanks to the anonymous JAPE referees for their comments and suggestions. All errors are the author's responsibility.

1 There are, of course, other notables working within this newly emerging branch of neo-Marxism (such as Elmar Altvater, Ted Benton, Paul Burkett, Jean-Paul Deléage, John Bellamy Foster, David Harvey, and Enrique Leff). Whilst a comparative analysis of these authors, vis-à-vis O'Connor, would be interesting and perhaps fruitful, my intention here is merely to focus more particularly on O'Connor himself. The tyranny of space prevents anything more than this.

JOURNAL OF AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY
ISSN 0156-5826. ISSUE No. 45, JUNE 2000, pp. 100-122.

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thought generally because, for the first time, it brings together O'Connor's most recent writings on and around the topic of ecological Marxism. It also provides us with an ideal tool with which to outline O'Connor's most recent theoretical interventions.²

This paper will firstly provide a straightforward account of the themes that O'Connor has been developing over the years, and will then critically reflect upon some of the basic issues raised.

An Outline of the Themes of O'Connor's Ecological-Marxism

O'Connor's work covers a vast area. His central objective is to revitalise Marxism and provide theoretical backing and political direction to a wide range of topics and concepts. As per the structure of *Natural Causes*, this is developed in three stages:

- an engagement with the general framework of historical materialism, broadening its scope and affirming its complexity;
- an outline of a substantial theoretical hypothesis - the second contradiction of capitalism; and
- an evaluation of the links and tensions between Marxism and new social movements, pointing to the possibility of a coalition between them.

Whilst the theoretical fulcrum on which O'Connor's work turns is the second contradiction of capitalism, this thesis itself turns on a still larger hub: the process of structured and yet indeterminate socio-economic change through crisis in which socio-economic categories are constructed as structures/powers that shape, and are shaped by, political agents. This framework aims to provide a systematic causal explanation of crisis-phenomena while at the same time including a measure of

2 With respect to O'Connor's published work cited here, a large number of the journal articles have been reprinted in (or revised for) *Natural Causes*. In most cases, the original article is referred to and the corresponding chapter is indicated.

contingency generated by indeterminate political agency.³ This social ontology is given voice in Chapter 1 of *Natural Causes*, "Culture, Nature, and the Materialist Conception of History".⁴ In this chapter, O'Connor places the notion of necessary but contradictory ideals, the social category of co-operation, and the elements of nature and culture centre stage, arguing that together (and when dialectically related), they make for a more complex, complete, and concrete historical materialism (both as a method and as a set of theoretical propositions). This framework is used to provide a revised historiography that gradates epochs from the mid-18th century through to the late-20th century. O'Connor argues that environmental history in the current epoch must incorporate within it the economic, political, social and cultural histories that have marked-off previous epochs, and in so doing give a totalizing account of the dialectical humanisation (or more appropriately, capitalisation/commodification) of nature and naturalisation (material mechanisms and boundaries) of humanity.⁵

Whilst the above is important as a conceptual framework, the core of O'Connor's work is the second contradiction of capitalism thesis.⁶ Indeed, most of his other contributions to ecological-Marxism are either direct or indirect "descendants" of various parts of this thesis. For these reasons, it requires a little elaboration.

The second contradiction thesis argues that under capitalism, the structurally generated short-term-focused motive to accumulate capital, and generate and realise profit tends to destroy, degrade, and/or defile the three conditions of production (labour-power, social infrastructure and

3 This framework is evident to some extent in O'Connor's earlier work, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (O'Connor, 1973; cf. O'Connor, 1981), *Accumulation Crisis* (O'Connor, 1984) and *The Meaning of Crisis* (O'Connor, 1987).

4 This chapter is original to *Natural Causes*.

5 The paper, "What is Environmental History? Why Environmental History?", (originally published in O'Connor (1997) and reprinted in *Natural Causes* - chapter 2) is the most general kind of application of this approach. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of *Natural Causes* are specific applications of this new, more complex understanding of historical phenomena (chapter 3 is a reprint of O'Connor (1995) and chapter 5 is a composite of two articles - O'Connor (1991d) and (1994b) respectively.)

6 O'Connor (1988) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* - chapter 8) and O'Connor (1994c) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* - chapter 14), are most important here.

space, and the environment). Under an ordered capitalist system, an agent external to the production and valorisation process is required to regulate the quality and the availability of the conditions of production (be they discovered or created). This agent is generally (though not exclusively) the State. In order to facilitate accumulation, the State institutes regulations for the generation of "fictitious prices" for the conditions of production so that they can enter into the production process *as if* they were genuine commodities. Further, the State will tend to attempt to legitimate its own and capitalist practices in this respect.⁷

A contradiction is said to arise within capitalism in two instances. In the first instance, there is a straightforward decrease in the quality and availability of the conditions of production as a direct result of capitalist (profit maximising) practices, thus "externally" restricting such capitalist practices. And in the second instance, agents (predominantly "new social movements") who are opposed to capital's destruction, degradation, and/or defilement of the conditions of production emerge. These agents challenge existing capitalist practices by acting "through" and/or against the State, thus potentially "internally" restricting such capitalist practices. Importantly, these two aspects interact, the second "overdetermining" the first.⁸ The type and degree of cost increases is also partly determined by the institutional environment currently in existence (e.g., the extent to which there are market mechanisms in place or not, and the types of regulations in place). The various types of costs include: environmental taxes, fees and compensatory penalties; restructuring expenditure (e.g., expenditure on the R&D for "green" goods and services, "green" advertising to maintain rates of profit realisation, workplace organisation, pollution emission control devices and methods, etc.); higher or new "fictitious prices" that are directly determined by the State; and higher or new "fictitious prices" as determined by "mimicked" market pricing mechanisms (e.g., tradable pollution permits, contingent valuation,

7 The paper, "The Conditions of Production and the Production of Conditions" (published for the first time in *Natural Causes* - chapter 7), deals with the conditions of production and the role of the State respectively.

8 On the concept of overdetermination, see the recent work by Cullenberg (1996) and Wolff (1996). A particular example of this is O'Connor (1990) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* - Chapter 11).

comparisons with existing markets, etc.) that are indirectly determined by the State.

Now, if for structural reasons related to the circuits of capital, these costs are passed on throughout the economy, then this spawns a generalised cost crisis which in turn results in an underproduction crisis - or in crudely macroeconomic terms, a kind of supply-side shock: aggregate supply falls relative to aggregate demand thus giving rise to inflation and falling aggregate output. A generalised cost crisis gives impetus to a general restructuring of capitalist practices so that average costs fall and a greater capacity to accumulate is generated. This may be achieved in a number of ways, both formally internal and external to capital.⁹ The precise form that such a restructuring would take depends in part upon political and ideological contestation between (and within) old and new social movements, the State and capital itself in specific geo-political sites.¹⁰ The outcome of this struggle is indeterminate, but there are basically two inferred possibilities:

- *If* agents within the State, old and new social movements, and national monopoly capitalists succeed in establishing a set of long-term sustainable structures, *then* this would tend to beget new and more "socialised" forms of co-operation and regulation of the conditions of production and of capitalist practices generally. This in turn would create the logical possibility of a transition to an explicitly eco-socialist (or some other non-capitalist) social formation.
- *If*, on the other hand, these agents fail to establish a set of long term sustainable structures, thus allowing the short-run profit motive of capital to prevail, *then* this will result in a long term systemic tendency towards increased accumulation and even greater destruction, degradation, and/or defilement of the conditions of production. If this were followed through to its logical conclusion,

9 The economic "mechanics" of this process are outlined in chapter 9 of *Natural Causes* (some of this chapter has already been published in O'Connor (1991a)).

10 With respect to "specific geo-political sites", O'Connor outlines some very general issues related to North-South relations in O'Connor (1989) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* - chapter 10).

then presumably the ultimate result would be a long run generalised systemic ecological crisis.

Given the second contradiction of capitalism, O'Connor attempts to sketch out, both normatively and positively, the theoretical and political links, tensions, and grounds for a constructive coalition and exchange between "reds" and "greens". In this, O'Connor looks at the progressive and regressive tendencies in various "ideal types" of new political-social movements - social ecology, ecological socialism, environmental justice movements, deep ecology, and ecological-feminism.¹¹ O'Connor sees all of these movements as having something to contribute to a larger left-wing coalition, but simultaneously, sees them as being one-sided in that they focus on particular conditions of production in particular contexts. This analysis is extended to political strategies (in relation to the State in particular) where it is argued that material political "interests" (as opposed to "rights" and "desires") have to be put forward as the keystone to political action.¹² The central strategic concern here is to look specifically at how the socialist, green, "identity", and "place" social movements can learn from, and attempt to incorporate each other.¹³ The underlying message, however, is that all new and old radical social movements need to progress towards a reconstructed ecological-Marxist (and, of course, socialist) position as the required theoretical and political synthesis. O'Connor sets this up neatly in the last two (previously unpublished) chapters of *Natural Causes*: Chapter 20 makes a sweeping analysis of capitalism in the 1990s ("the global model of accumulation"), outlines the conservative and left-reformist responses to it, and then provides some concrete illustrations of a paradigmatically different response to capital's fundamental failings - "Preservation First!". This is then given some theoretical veracity in the final chapter of *Natural Causes*. It is here that O'Connor sketches out the bare outlines of an

11 This is done in O'Connor (1994a) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* - chapter 16).

12 This can be found in O'Connor (1991b) (reprinted in *Natural Causes* under the title "Ecology and the State" - chapter 19). O'Connor's political ideal of democratised and internationalised social relations is hinted at here.

13 This can be seen in "Flatland Politics" (*Natural Causes*, chapter 17), which focuses on the politics of identity and place, and in the papers O'Connor (1991c) (reprinted as chapter 15 in *Natural Causes*) and O'Connor (1992a) (reprinted as chapter 18 in *Natural Causes*), which both deal with socialist and green movements.

answer to the question: "What is Ecological Socialism?" In the first instance, O'Connor defines Ecological Socialism by identifying what it is not. Predictably, it is not the actually existing socialism (entailing only "distributive justice") as we have known it. The defining concepts are instead "productive justice", democratisation of the State and internationalism. The defining struggle is against abstract exchange-value and for concrete use-value with respect to both labour and nature: "In this sense, ecosocialism seeks to make traditional socialism live up to its own critical ideals". In many ways, this is the finale of O'Connor's work on ecological-Marxism. It is also, however, embryonic.

Some Criticisms - Philosophical, Theoretical, Political

Despite the efforts made in the introduction to Part I and Chapter 1 of *Natural Causes*, O'Connor's work as a whole does not satisfactorily engage with the deeper philosophical issues that ultimately underpin it. The ontological and epistemological presuppositions at work within the second contradiction of capitalism thesis remain, to a large extent, unexamined. In this section, I shall examine an important foundation that O'Connor's work relies upon, and identify a problem that then affects the theoretical and political assertions flowing from the second contradiction of capitalism thesis.

Philosophical

The first, and in a sense, "genetic" problem with the second contradiction of capitalism thesis lies in O'Connor's attempt to re-fashion historical materialism as a philosophical foundation.

As expressed within a systematised historical materialist theory about history in Chapter 1 of *Natural Causes*, O'Connor is particularly concerned to point out that the categories of culture and nature are crucial in order to obtain a complete understanding of the social formation. Here, O'Connor is not denying the importance of the historical materialist framework in general, but rather, is criticising it for its failure to incorporate all the categories necessary to represent social totality.

O'Connor conceives of the social totality as a complex set of practices entailing each of the interpenetrating categories of the productive forces, social relations of production and social relations of circulation, *plus* the conditions of production and conditions of reproduction (broadly defined). Thus, O'Connor claims:

In sum, social labor defined as a force and a relation of production mediates and is "mediated back" by culture and nature, language/intersubjectivity, and ecology, including the language of ecology and the ecology of language. ...The forces and relations of production are thus both cultural and natural (O'Connor, 1998: 37-38);

and:

Social labor is inscribed by culture, and vice versa. Human labor is organized not only by class power and the law of value but also by cultural norms and practices, which in turn are shaped by forms of social labor...

Social labor is also inscribed by nature - and vice versa. Human labor is organized not only by class power, valorization, and culture but also by nature's economy, which, in turn, is constantly modified by social labor...

It seems to follow that culture and nature meet and combine in socially organized social labor. Cultural ecology and ecological culture are expressed in the social relations of material production, distribution, exchange, and consumption (O'Connor, 1998: 45-46).

Given this, one might well expect that if O'Connor is to be consistent, he must treat the various components that make up the social totality in the same way as the totality is itself treated: i.e., the components - culture, nature, etc. - must themselves be complex entities entailing many determinants. This expectation would appear to be fulfilled with respect to the conditions of production: he argues that there are various economic, political and ideological factors involved in the very definition and empirical identification of changes in the conditions of production.¹⁴ Now, whilst this would appear to be a move in the right direction in

14 See *Natural Causes*, chapter 7 with respect to all the conditions of production, and chapter 6 with respect to ecological crisis in particular.

terms of a more complete account of capitalism, I would argue that O'Connor employs a problematic ontological demarcation in his identification of these determinants. This demarcation can, without too much imprecision, be called "Cartesian" in that it neatly divides the (theoretical) world into ideational (i.e., political, ideological and cultural) and material (i.e., economic and ecological) determinants: "The importance of both "objective" and "subjective" factors cannot be stressed too much" (O'Connor, 1998: 129). This is made particularly clear in the discussion of ecological crisis:

A number of examples can be adduced to show that "ecological crisis" is as much (or more) a political and ideological [read: ideational] category as it is a scientific [read: material] construct (O'Connor, 1998: 137);

Whether or not a species dies of, an ecosystem is destroyed, or a wilderness or wetland threatened are political, ideological, and cultural [read: ideational] as well as ecological [read: material] questions (O'Connor, 1998: 138);

Once we start thinking about ecological crisis in terms of material interests, we can link the concept to political [read: ideational] and economic [read: material] crisis tendencies (O'Connor, 1998: 139).

Why is this demarcation problematic? Essentially because, *prima facie*, the two "sides" are philosophically incompatible. The positing of two distinct ontological realms immediately raises the problem of how they could possibly interact without the theorist positing a third mediating realm – a logical trap of the *ad infinitum* variety. O'Connor does not fall into this trap, but rather, appears to leave the matter quite unsolved. The effect of this is a "bi-polar" account of the second contradiction: i.e., sometimes the ideational determinants of crises are stressed, and sometimes the material determinants are given greater weight. For example, in referring to capitalist crisis, O'Connor, on the one hand, makes it plain that ideational ("sociopolitical") determinants are central:

In sum, whether or not capital faces "external barriers" to accumulation, including external barriers in the form of new social struggles over the definition and use of production

conditions (i.e., "social barriers" that mediate between internal or specific and external or general barriers); whether or not these "external barriers" take the form of economic crisis; and whether or not economic crisis is resolved in favor of or against capital are sociopolitical and ideological questions first, and socioeconomic questions only secondarily (O'Connor, 1998: 165);

but on the other hand, it also seems equally clear that material ("economic") determinants are central:

Especially in today's crisis, however one theorizes its source, capital attempts to reduce production and circulation time, which typically has the effect of making environmental practices, health and safety practices, and so on, worse. Hence capital restructuring may deepen, not resolve, ecological problems (O'Connor, 1998: 171).¹⁵

One way of interpreting this problem is to say that O'Connor is trying to extricate himself from economism – i.e., at a more concrete level of analysis, allowing for ideational factors, and thus contingent/indeterminate outcomes, while at a more abstract level of analysis, still retaining a Marxist sense of *telos*, and thus tendentially¹⁶ determinant outcomes. (This, indeed, is a central theme running through all of O'Connor's work going as far back as the early 1970s.) Within the given paradigm, however, the only way this schism can be closed is by allowing one "side" of the demarcation line (either ideational/indeterminate or material/determinant) to be ultimately subsumed by the other. So, which is it? It would seem plausible to suggest that since O'Connor is unwavering in his claim that the second contradiction, as a general socio-economic phenomenon, is *tendential* in nature, it is the latter "side" of the ontological demarcation line that

15 For an overwhelmingly economic interpretation of ecological problems, see O'Connor (1991a) (reprinted as Chapter 7 in *Natural Causes*).

16 "Tendential" is interpreted here as meaning that the entity in question – in this case, the social formation itself – has a specific structural dynamism that will, under particular conditions, result in a known outcome; and further, that "incorrect conditions" (or countervailing factors) are not structurally imbedded in the entity, so that in the long run, they will give way to the correct conditions such that the known outcome will become an empirical reality (cf. Bhaskar, 1975; Gibson, 1983; Ruben, 1982).

ultimately prevails. O'Connor is able to accomplish this by giving the more ideational/non-economic factors a teleological character that hinges on the general material tendency of the second contradiction as expressed in its economic-ecological form. In other words, O'Connor is able to consistently posit both an ideational and a material component by giving the ideational component (basically, political struggle) a tendential nature that roughly corresponds to the material tendency (basically, economic logic). Specifically, this means that the new and old social movements will act in ways that reinforce the economic-ecological *telos* of crisis faced by capital(ism).

This is a philosophical solution to a philosophical problem that is, at base, generated by O'Connor's attempt to reformulate the foundations of historical materialism. As such, it is of limited scientific (and political) value quite simply because there is no empirical reason why such philosophical propositions should be believed. The philosophical notion of "*telos*" (and its associate, "tendency"), when taken on its own, is empirically vacuous. It can only have genuine scientific and political value when it is coupled with the particular contingent conditions that make it viable. If those particular conditions do not hold, then it becomes possible to pose scenarios that contradict the "predictions" of the thesis at hand. In what follows, I shall attempt to show that this is plausible.

Theoretical

On the material side, the second contradiction of capitalism manifests itself as the tendency towards a cost crisis via ecological destruction. If, however, one supposes that capital(ism) is an adaptive process, rather than a (relatively) rigid structure, then one might well doubt that such a tendency will manifest itself.

With respect to economic issues in particular, it can be argued that capital can and does employ strategies that do not increase costs. For example, the expenditure on concrete labour entailed in the production of "environmentally friendly commodities" need not be unproductive as

O'Connor supposes (Sandler, 1994).¹⁷ If the additional concrete labour-time entering into the production of, say, a "green" commodity is, due to political contestation, perceived by consumers/society to be socially necessary, then the commodity will by definition have greater value, and will therefore cease to draw upon the surplus value generated in other branches of the economy. The same principle *could* apply to all unproductive expenditures by capital related to the improvement of the conditions of production. Extending upon this theme, it is always possible that State regulations may arise (either directly or indirectly) that further commodify/capitalise the conditions of production (and the effects thereon), thus resulting in new Department II industries that generate value and profit (e.g. recycling, garbage collection, environmental assessment consultancies) or the reinvigoration of existing Department I industries (e.g., high-tech industries) (Altvater, 1993: 221; O'Connor, 1992). A second example might be the ambiguity of the effect of the State in regulating access to conditions of production via restriction of availability, where capital is involved in the extraction and refinement of raw materials (e.g. timber). In order to produce the same amount of value, extraction in a given area may be intensified by the use of more advanced (unregulated) equipment, such that in the calculation of the constant capital component there is little change, and thus (assuming no change in living labour aggregates) the rates of exploitation and profit would not change significantly (cf. Recio, 1992: 119). Alternatively, labour may be increasingly exploited by individual capitals in order to make a compensatory gain in rates of profit. Again, the same principle *could* apply to all restrictions of the availability of conditions of production (although in the most extreme cases - a total ban - this would obviously not be so).

With respect to ecological destruction itself, there is also some scope for doubt.¹⁸ First, the notion of the physical destruction of nature and the implications of this are still problematic. The science of ecology is still

17 With respect to pollution abatement commodities, O'Connor comments: "These things just add to costs, they don't produce surplus value because they don't reduce the cost of reproducing labor power" (Cockburn, 1989: 19).

18 While it must be admitted that the claim that serious ecological damage is a "scam" (e.g., Bailey, 1993) is unjustified, this is not to concede that ecological devastation is a well-defined and well-established universal truth.

immature and entails much empirical speculation and theoretical "metaphysics" – even about the basics of what constitutes "destruction" (cf. Evernden, 1992). Second, it is not clear that the physical destruction of the conditions of production, as they are currently conceived, entails the physical destruction of the conditions of production *for all time*: no clear account has been made of potential new forms of "second nature" (e.g., advances in genetics seem to be on the brink of being able to produce new forms of "synthetic nature"; changing scope for the rapid reproduction of some renewable resources). Further to this point, some important conditions of production may not be destroyed by current practices (e.g. wind and solar power). And third, the physical destruction of the conditions of production may not necessarily entail the destruction of capitalism as an ideological system, anyway. Again, the tendency status seems at least questionable even here.

On the ideational side, one might also bring into question the link between the posited agents of the *telos* of crisis and the empirical realm by claiming that the new social movements and the labour movement will not necessarily (successfully) agitate for increasingly costly regulations over the conditions of production.

One of O'Connor's most important theoretical innovations (built upon a synthesis of Marx and K. Polanyi) is the introduction of the notion of "fictitious commodities" - i.e., entities that are essential to the production of use-values and "genuine commodities", but are not commodities themselves (in that they have not been produced via a monetarised mode of production) even though they are treated *as if* they were. This would seem to entail a massive revision of the labour theory of value upon which Marxian economics is based quite simply because Marx emphatically believed labour-power to be an actual commodity, albeit a "special" one (Marx, 1976: 270-277; cf. Himmelweit, 1995). *Prima facie*, this theoretical innovation suggests that because the exchange values and prices assigned to the conditions of production are "fictitious", they are *entirely* politically determined by the social forces struggling for control over them.¹⁹ Once it has been posited that "The

19 In O'Connor's (1998: 163-164) words: "...whether or not raw materials and needed labor skills and useful spatial and infrastructural configurations are available to capital in requisite quantities and qualities and at the right times and

concept of "conditions of production"...needs to be subjectivized and historicized, that is, treated in less deterministic ways than Marx did and Marxists normally do", there is no longer anything mechanical or strictly "model-able"²⁰ about these prices as has been so often suggested of genuine commodities in orthodox Marxist theory. Because the abstract economic categories of value, price, and cost become transparently political categories, and economic laws and tendencies must be replaced with the contingencies of social contestation, this would indeed seem to herald the death of all separable and tendentially determinate theory, economic or otherwise.

As already claimed, in order to ensure that the theoretical integrity of a *telos* of crisis associated with fictitious commodities and prices is maintained, it is necessary for O'Connor to give a tendential status to the non-economic-ecological factors associated with these commodities. Two non-economic "agents" are identified by O'Connor – the new social movements and the labour movement. My claim here is that it is by no means self-evident that these two agents do in fact have a "directionality" that *must* conflict with capital's destruction of the conditions of production (assuming that this occurs). Both of these agents will be briefly dealt with in turn.

The *telos* of the new social movements is vital to the tendential status of the second contradiction thesis.²¹ The new social movements, through their political interventions, are the agents most responsible for the costs of production rising. It is interesting to observe, however, what, in theoretical terms, gives them their tendential power. First, it would appear that the new social movements are conceptually slotted into a pre-established model of social change - a model that in its most general

places depends on the political power of capital, the power of social movements that challenge particular capitalist forms of production conditions..., state structures that mediate or screen struggles over the definition and use of production conditions..., and so on".

20 Here I am using a strong methodological interpretation of modelling (i.e., where a model attempts to accurately represent certain aspects of reality), as opposed to a weak formalist interpretation as employed by many mainstream economists (cf. Rosenberg, 1983).

21 With respect to the place of new social movements, O'Connor (1998: 161) writes: "The agency of social transformation is "new social movements," or social struggles including struggles within production" [my italics].

outlines is very old, very orthodox and very deterministic: ecological crisis → new social movements' agitation → potential social change.²² Of course the content is an open question, but the form is not. And second, even here one might argue, as Stuart Rosewarne (1997: 104-112) does, that O'Connor pins the long-term potential of the new social movements on their being linked to an ecologically aware working class. (Essentially, Rosewarne argues that O'Connor does this by means of (*a priori*) "re-definition" of the working class as structurally opposed to ecological destruction.)

Now, if the new social movements are not, *in-and-of themselves*, structurally defined opponents of capital, then political outcomes related to them become indeterminate: the new social movements, in response to ecological destruction, degradation and defilement, may agitate for cosmetic, conservative, reformist or radical solutions, or combinations of them in different arenas – some of which may or may not result in increasing costs of production. In fact, the bulk of historical evidence reveals that the most prominent (and politically powerful) first-world new social movements have been, and are, very often reformist in their nature (cf. Hutton & Connors, 1999: 264; Sandler, 1994: 46-47), and that third-world new social movements are weak and embryonic (cf. Mingione, 1993: 88ff.) or not focused on ecological concerns as in the West (cf. Kabra, 1992: 91). This clearly undermines their role in bringing about the second contradiction of capitalism in a tendential fashion. Indeed, if one were to rely upon the practices of the new social movements, then one might say that the second contradiction would be *contingent*. So in order to retain the tendential status of the second contradiction it is necessary for O'Connor to call upon the labour movement to ensure a tendential crisis of capitalism.

With respect to the labour movement, O'Connor is not claiming that there is a purely objective (or mechanical) link between working class

22 The form can be observed in the following: "The combination of crisis-stricken capitals externalizing more costs, the reckless use of technology and nature for value realization in the sphere of circulation, and the like, must sooner or later lead to a "rebellion of nature," that is, powerful social movements demanding an end to ecological exploitation. ...In sum, more social forms of production relations, productive forces, and conditions of production together contain within them possibilities of socialist forms" (O'Connor, 1998: 171).

interests and ecological issues. As always, the subjective component must be taken into account. However, as per the schema constructed above, in order for the labour movement to be *tendentially* opposed to ecological destruction, the subjective component must have a *telos* that corresponds to the objective component. (I will refer to this hereafter as "the structural postulate").²³ There are two very basic flaws in this approach. The first is a methodological flaw. As Rosewarne argues, the structural postulate is conferred upon the labour movement by means of *a priori* definition. Thus, if the postulate is treated uncritically as true, then it engages the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*. And further, as with all such *a priori* claims, it can be easily dislodged by means of simple re-definition: for example, one could re-define the labour movement as structurally "estranged" from nature, and thus as consciously and systematically opposed to the agitation by new social movements (cf. Mingione, 1993: 88ff.; Rosewarne, 1997: 111). Second, at the very least, because structures only determine the realm of possibilities - not actualities (Suchting, 1972: 251-254), there need not be an empirical link between the structural postulate and the actual behaviour and concerns of the labour movement. Further to this, historically, there has been a distinct lack of revolutionary activism with respect to the conditions of production (especially the environment) on the part of the labour movement as a whole²⁴ (albeit with some notable exceptions²⁵). The conclusion here is that there is in fact nothing necessarily tendential about the labour movement either. Again, the status of "accidental" or "contingent" threatens.

In sum, it would seem that O'Connor can be criticised for relying too much upon a framework that is both "mechanical and overly optimistic" (Spence, 1993: 94) with respect to the potential of the new social movements and the working class. This framework, ironically, seems to have prevented O'Connor from paying sufficient attention to (at least) two elements of his own work - ideology and the State - that might be important in giving body to the contingency suggested above.

23 See Cockburn (1989) for evidence of O'Connor's explicit advocacy of this postulate.

24 See Hutton & Connors (1999: 139-144, 157, 180).

25 See Munday (1987).

For example, it might be argued that both the new and old social movements, desperate to attain or maintain their basic material ends, are, without the elaborate intellectual defence mechanisms possessed by radical academics, informed by the ever-accumulating fraction of "ideology-capital" (e.g., media, recreation, education industries). *Ceteris paribus*, they fall back upon the dominant ideology of the day. This is what informs them of the means to obtain their ends, and in the worst case scenario, is what blurs the distinction between means and ends themselves (giving rise to reformism). It might also be argued that O'Connor has relied upon an overly sanguine view of the State's potential. Social movements are said to often act through the State to secure their desired aims. Now, as O'Connor himself has always argued, the State itself is an active agent (e.g., O'Connor, 1981). This would suggest that when social movements act through the State (are "mediated" by it), their aims in their "pure" form are not necessarily going to be expressed in legislation, etc. That said, O'Connor does not seem to see this as being an important means of preventing the social movements' agitation for change being expressed in, say, "pro-environment" regulatory strategies. (In this way, the tendency towards a cost crisis is allowed.) In other words, it must be remembered that this view of the State cuts both ways: we can equally say, based on this view, that the State can act and has acted *not* as a conduit for change, but as a filtering mechanism that prevents systematic change (*a la* the previous Australian federal Labor government) or, in the worst case, is a coercive body that is entirely regressive (*a la* the current Australian federal Coalition government).

Political

To posit a *generalised* tendency that, in the last instance, *incorporates within it* what would normally be regarded as empirically contingent conditions (i.e., the "dynamics" of capitalist practices, social movements and nature), one must employ what amounts to a rationalist approach: truths about long-run tendencies must be established by Reason (or Intuition) alone, for "the empirical" is, by its very nature, contingent. This is not to say that empirical claims are never made, but rather, is to say that they are (whether verified or not) based upon, and ultimately

justified by, *a priori* claims. This is an undesirable state of affairs in two ways. Firstly, in classical epistemological terms, this approach must lead to either scepticism or dogmatism (Suchting, 1986). Secondly, in political terms, it can lead to rigidity and vanguardism. Again, this is because an approach of this type cannot admit empirical refutation.

One could argue that this becomes evident in O'Connor's vision of ecological-socialism. O'Connor advocates a synthesis of the new social movements with Marxism on the grounds that each is in some way one-sided, and that a synthesis would generate a new ideal-political vision and a material-political alliance. Here one encounters a *telos* of political ideology. The problem with this is that O'Connor seems to prophetically know, before any such alliance has taken place, what needs to be done, and more importantly, what the best outcome is. Of course, this suggests that the conceptual framework *already* exists and that the theoretical vision is a *fait accompli*. In fact, when this observation is taken into account, one realises that in order to be "truly" progressive, the new social movements' theories and practices must be re-cast as ecological-Marxist, or to put it more bluntly, must be abandoned. There is a clear sense of latent dogmatism at work here; i.e., underneath all the discussion of indeterminate outcomes, historically emergent struggle, etc., there is theoretical determinism and historical essentialism (cf. Spence, 1993: 95; Toledo, 1992: 223). There is a sense of certainty in the discussion of the apparent problems associated with the new social movements that gives rise to an impression that O'Connor is trying to re-educate the new social movements (and unreconstructed Marxists), so that they too can become rational ecological-Marxists.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show that the second contradiction thesis contains an unresolved methodological problem of the "foundational" variety – i.e., an implicit reliance upon an overarching ontologically and epistemologically grounded *telos* that takes on theoretical and political forms. Unfortunately, it is a problem that has no easy solution. Indeed, I would argue that, at this level of analysis, it has *no* solution (cf. Gunn, 1989: 89-92). If this is the case, then, to put it

most starkly, the notion of *telos* is a piece of metaphysics (broadly defined) that needs to be done away with.

That this supposition robs historical materialism of its sense of certainty and clarity does not mean that a systematic framework for conceptualising social change is lost. I feel that *something* can be said by way of abstraction, without getting into *too* many theoretical difficulties. It is this: *If* a socio-economic practice results in experiences of potential or actual detriment to the attainment of particular goals or needs of material importance to participants in that practice, be that experience true or false, then the participants, using the economic, political and ideological materials available to them in that practice, *may* seek to change it (cf. Wood, 1995: 76-107). If the attempt to eliminate the obstacle is opposed to the interests/needs of other participants also somehow engaged in that practice (so that there is a conflict of needs), then the result *may be* material *conflict/contestation* between the participants. A change in social practices then depends on the outcome of that material conflict. It should be noted that contestation also revolves around substantive issues of what precisely the desired goals of the participants are, whether or not those goals are in fact being achieved, as well as the new ways of organising practices given provisional conclusions. *If* this contest has a positive outcome, *then* changes in socio-economic practices will occur. Importantly, this means very little in-and-of itself – it must be “filled out” by an investigation of concrete practices that constitute the social formation. This outline of the basis for an explanation of social change obviously does not *necessarily* preference particular social entities such as class in all cases, but *does* necessarily preference the *social practice of contestation* over overarching social relations on the one hand, and autonomous individuals on the other (cf. Suchting, 1983: 118-123).²⁶ This provides a conceptual opening for the social movements that weaves its way between a more traditional Marxist view and pluralist-individualist views of these movements. It

26 A theoretical preferencing of class could only result from a particular empirical investigation of concrete practices that find class to be of importance to its workings. As such, the above abstraction could be applied to any group of people engaged in a political practice that experiences a potential or an actual barrier to their particular goals or needs as affected by capitalist practices (be that experience true or false).

would mean that there is at least the theoretical potential for particular social movements to assert themselves as oppositional forces to capital in their own right, while not necessarily displacing others (cf. Harvey, 1996: 360-361). In short, perhaps a way forward in these matters is to treat "grand" theses (such as the second contradiction of capitalism) less as overarching ontologies and more as methodologically (and politically) contingent hypotheses (cf. Toledo, 1992: 224; Vlachou, 1993: 232).

In conclusion, O'Connor's work, in synthesising economic, social, political and natural categories, is at the most creative and engaging end of the radical green-left spectrum. Within the broader field of environmentalism, where embarrassing romanticism and cheap cynicism so often bubble to the surface of popular consciousness, O'Connor's work (along with Altwater's, Burkett's and Harvey's) is without doubt streets ahead of the pack. It is for these reasons that I believe that, like *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, O'Connor's work on the second contradiction of capitalism has the potential to ignite a larger intellectual and practical social movement that acts against capitalist practices. It is also for these reasons that this work needs to be critically evaluated with an eye to the empirical.



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