

Land reform, accumulation and social reproduction: The South African experience in global and historical perspective

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Abstract

The reality of capitalist economy, its inherent dynamics and contradictions, must be understood as central to policy debates about land reform in South Africa today. Progressive land reform should strive to promote 'accumulation' from below, through the redistribution of productive land to a large number of petty agricultural commodity producers. Supporting the social reproduction needs of the rural poor is also important, and securing their rights to communal land must be a key goal of tenure reform. Beyond South Africa, the experience of redistributive land reform more broadly suggests that southern Africa is a unique context in some ways (e.g. there is a need to break up large and productive farms) but not in many others. Many of the problems facing land reform in South Africa have been experienced elsewhere. Beyond land reform, the world is currently in the grip of several overlapping crises, notably the increasing precarity of working populations, ecological breakdown, large-scale migration, technological advances that threaten both jobs and democracy, and a swing towards right-wing and authoritarian modes of governance. Again, the centrality of the logic of capital to these simultaneous crises must be acknowledged.

Keywords: accumulation, capitalism, crisis, land reform, social reproduction

Introduction

Land reform in post-apartheid South Africa has promised sweet satisfaction: justice, redress, repossession of stolen land and, for some at least, real opportunities for enhanced incomes and livelihoods within a restructured and dynamic rural economy. In practice, it has been a thin and bitter lemon, juicy only with scandal and low in vitamin C. Why? Beyond 'sell-out' and 'state incapacity', however relevant, a deeper explanation is required, not least because deep-level understandings are the best guide to action.

A narrow, sector-focused answer is bound to be inadequate. The failures of land reform are rooted in the wider dynamics of our society as a whole, including the continuing reproduction of key structural features of the political economies of previous regimes.

But South Africa, however 'extreme' a case, also needs to be understood in the light of larger-scale processes and patterns at the global level, and in the context of longer-term histories and transitions. Hence the question: what does the experience of land reform in other countries and at other times have to teach us?

The past is important, no doubt, but what of the present and the immediate future? I argue that land reform now has to address radical environmental change precipitated by global warming and biodiversity destruction as a key priority, in order to be truly pro-poor, and not seen

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as a distraction from redistribution. This in turn requires us to respond to a series of inter-linked global crises: increasingly precarious livelihoods, large-scale migration, turns away from democratic and towards authoritarian forms of governance (and the violence that this often entails) ... and technological advancements that threaten rather than support human well-being.

Large questions, seemingly intractable, but necessary to think through. Remember that old bumper sticker: 'think globally, act locally' ... But: how to 'think', using what theories and concepts, is also a key question.

Theories and concepts 1: capitalism

In my view, none of the ills of contemporary society can be understood without a theory of capitalism, the dominant economic system across the world today, framing and influencing every single decision we take. It is important to give a name to this particular and peculiar system, to understand its specificities, and not to conflate it with a chaotic notion of 'the economy' in general.

The most influential theorist of capitalism remains Marx, many of whose ideas remain relevant today.

The essential features of capitalism are (in an inevitably simplifying sketch):

- A fundamental class divide: those who own means of production and those who do not – and who must sell their capacity to work to the owners, in return for wages
- Private property allows owners to benefit from social labour
- Competitive markets discipline individual capitalist enterprises and require reinvestment of profit to survive
- This produces both technological dynamism and the drive to expand through capture of new markets for new products, within national economies and across borders
- Accumulation or expanded reproduction via reinvestment of profit is the central dynamic, the basis of economic growth
- When accumulation stalls, as in the post-2008 'Great Stagnation', the system goes into crisis, and 'creative destruction' is required to lay the basis for a new cycle of growth
- The source of profit is the production and appropriation of value (produced by labour and appropriated by capital)
- The portion of value appropriated by capital is over and above that required to reproduce the worker via wages, or 'surplus value'
- The other source of value is Nature – the direct appropriation of natural wealth, as when logging forests or catching fish
- Value under capitalism is 'abstract value', requiring continual expansion via reinvestment and growth
- Classes of labour are responsible for their own social reproduction, using wages to purchase goods and services, as well as their own labour (often feminised) to cook, clean and care for children, old and sick.

In the contemporary version of capitalism, many Marxists would argue:

- Globalisation of capitalist relations has been vastly extended
- Financial capital, essentially unproductive, leads and dominates
- The current 'Great Stagnation' is at root a crisis of low investment due to lowered profitability, rather than inadequate demand. No end is in sight, despite quantitative easing and zero interest rates
- Deepening inequality is the result: according to the recent Credit Suisse report, the bottom half of adults in the world accounted for less than 1% of total global wealth in mid-2019, while the top 10% possessed 82% of global wealth and the top 1% owned nearly half (45%) of all household assets.

Today, capitalism is undoubtedly in deep crisis, perhaps not terminally, but sufficiently so that even mainstream economists are beginning to call for fundamental reforms.

Theories and concepts 2: Capitalist accumulation in agriculture

How do Marxists approach and understand the question of land reform? Issues of accumulation and social reproduction, class relations and the tensions these generate are as central as they are in the general theory. Driven by the logic of value, large-scale capitalist agricultural enterprises are similar in their functioning to manufacturing industries, mechanising their production systems and greatly increasing the productivity of labour. However, they also attempt to 'tame' the vagaries of nature (uneven soil fertility, drought, disease, etc.) by converting farming into factory-style, standardised 'throughput' operations, in efforts to increase yields and weight gains (physical productivity). Biotechnology is another key method.

What about small-scale farming?

In one influential approach, small productive enterprises based on family labour are best understood as *petty commodity producers*. Such producers combine the class places of capital and labour: they possess the means of production, unlike landless workers, and are in this sense capitalists, but they also rely mainly on family labour (unlike capitalists) and have to meet their social reproduction needs as workers. Petty commodity producers thus exploit themselves within the production process – one way of understanding the labour-intensive character of small farming. And sexual divisions of labour also result in the exploitation of female and child labour by men, if they direct the production process – and in effect occupy the class position of capital.

Some agricultural petty commodity producers make use of opportunities to produce a substantial surplus over and above the amount needed to secure their subsistence, or simple reproduction, and can reinvest all or part of this surplus in extending the material base of production unit, e.g. cultivating more land, purchasing equipment, hiring more labourers. Such producers move beyond *simple reproduction* into *expanded reproduction*. Lenin termed these the 'rich peasants', some of whom indeed succeed in becoming fully-fledged capitalist farmers.

Other producers are unable to reproduce themselves from their own production alone, as a result of drought, crop and livestock losses, the death of a productive adult, etc., all of which undermine farming capacity. They may become increasingly dependent on the sale of their labour to survive (i.e. become wage workers), or rely on support from family members or the state (e.g. as social grants).

A Marxist view of the tendency of small-scale farmers to differentiate themselves into agrarian classes is sometimes disputed by those influenced by the views of the Russian agricultural economist, Alexander Chayanov. Chayanov argued forcefully that peasants are subordinated by capitalism, but are not themselves capitalist (van der Ploeg 2014: 15), and constitute a fertile source of resistance to the capitalist mode of production. I do not find this view persuasive. Surely no economic space exists 'outside' of global capitalism today?

This chronic instability of petty commodity production and its tendency to class differentiation thus derives from the inherent contradiction between capital and labour internalised within the household economy. As Henry Bernstein (1986) puts it:

*Petty commodity producers experience contradictions between reproducing themselves as **labour** (daily and generational reproduction, or social reproduction) and as **capital** (maintenance, replacement, and possibly expansion of the means of production). Reducing levels of consumption, and increasing or limiting numbers of children according to specific circumstances, in order to maintain, replace or expand the means of production (i.e. accumulation) is an expression of this contradiction.*

The degree to which agricultural petty commodity producers are able to successfully negotiate these contradictions is generally uneven. This has important implications for land reform, and in particular for the question of who benefits most from the redistribution of productive resources.

Theories and concepts 3: Social reproduction

Efforts to theorise social reproduction are blossoming at present. Since the 1970s, Marxist and feminist scholars have engaged in fierce debates on how the reproduction of capital crucially depends upon the social reproduction of labour through a range of 'non-commodified' forms of production, and 'non-economic' relations. Although wages remain key for the purchase of consumer goods, social reproduction also relies on institutions such as marriage, households, and the state, and the governance of largely feminised unpaid labour, often under oppressive conditions.

Increasingly Marxist-feminists see social reproduction not as a separate and autonomous, non-commodified social sphere, but as an integral feature of capitalism. It is *not* about 'two separate spaces and two separate processes of production, the economic and the social – often understood as the workplace and home', but about understanding capitalism as a 'complex totality' or connected system (Bhattacharya 2017).

Capitalism both requires a sphere of non-commodified social reproduction, and tends to erode or destroy the relations that constitute it. In an era of financialised capitalism underpinned by neoliberal policies, the contradictions between accumulation and social reproduction have deepened, and been exacerbated in the period since the global financial crisis of 2007/08.

Nancy Fraser sees these contradictions as life-threatening. Capitalism's 'drive to unlimited accumulation threatens to destabilise the very reproductive processes that capital – and the rest of us – need'... If social reproduction is threatened, over time the effect will be that 'capitalism's accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail' (Fraser 2016: 103). She argues this for the ecological dimension too – natural processes renew the biological health of the planet, but are under attack as a result of capitalism's drive for endless growth.

In agrarian societies in the global South, production and social reproduction are also dynamically intertwined, but in a distinctive manner. Access to and control over land and natural resources, in conjunction with the labour required for production, are key. Given the generalised commodification of contemporary life, cash income is a necessity for subsistence, gained either through employment by others, locally or further afield, or from non-landed forms of petty production.

Bernstein locates the reproduction squeeze facing many small-scale farmers today within the global reality of the increasing (structural) fragmentation of 'classes of labour', by which he means people depending, directly and indirectly, on the sale of their labour power for their daily reproduction.

The working poor of the South have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and typically increasingly scarce wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure 'informal economy' survival activity, including marginal farming ... livelihoods are pursued through complex combinations of employment and self-employment (Bernstein 2010: 111).

'Fragmentation' refers in part to hybrid and diverse combinations of precarious forms of livelihood and sources of income available to classes of labour in global capitalism today, as well as the 'forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity' (*ibid*).

Over the past 10 years, together with two wonderful groups of PhD students, I have explored these issues in rural South Africa, in both communal areas and on land reform farms.

We argue (Cousins *et al.* 2018a) that social reproduction in these contexts has the following features:

1. Land and property rights are significant, despite the relatively small contributions of agricultural production to the incomes of most households: they are pivotal for the establishment of a homestead, the locus of daily and generational reproduction, and customary norms and practices offer guaranteed and free access to land;
2. Rural homes offer key advantages for South Africans belonging to ‘fragmented classes of labour’. The cost of living is significantly lower than in urban contexts, partly because homes are cheaper to build and maintain, and infrastructure has been improved by the state. Care of children and the old at rural homes helps to anchor family structures and kinship networks in a time when employment prospects are bleak and livelihood strategies are precarious;
3. Communal areas and land reform farms involve rights to landed resources, which offer important supplements to cash income and also some opportunities for ‘accumulation from below’, especially in fresh produce and livestock production;
4. Since access to productive land is mediated by either ‘customary’ norms and values (communal areas), or collective property institutions (land reform farms), incipient processes of accumulation generate tensions and conflicts over unequal benefits from shared resources;
5. Customary institutions give rise to a ceremonial economy with two key features: (a) considerable amounts of cash are spent in reproducing the interdependence of individuals within families, kin networks and ‘communities’, expressed in rituals surrounding marriage, death and celebrations; and (b) livestock play key roles in ceremonies, which support a large and lucrative market in live animals for slaughter.
6. Social institutions such as marriage are in flux, many women bearing children outside of stable relationships, and rural homesteads increasingly including adult females with children. This is leading to a range of tensions with ‘customary’ relations and identities both affirmed and subverted in processes of land allocation to female-headed households;

Land reform and rural development policies, we suggest, have to take these issues into account if they are to have traction – and communal tenure reform that secures the land rights of the rural poor, in particular.

Policy debates

A key distinction we have employed in our work is between ‘accumulation from above’ and ‘from below’. ‘From above’ refers to extra-economic strategies to exploit labour or to secure state support, or support from existing capitals, in order to engage in expanded reproduction. ‘From below’ refers to economic processes of successful surplus production and its reinvestment into the enterprise. For Lenin, writing in the late 19th century, accumulation from below, typified in the American path, was inherently more progressive and democratic than accumulation from above, as in Prussia. Here the Junker class, feudal landlords, transformed themselves into large-scale capitalist farmers.

(Note: The distinction does not imply that there is a Chinese Wall between these processes, as Mamdani (1987) emphasises in his well-known article on Uganda; in practice, they often complement one another to a degree.)

For Bernstein (1996), the transition to a highly productive capitalist agriculture in South Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries took the Prussian path, via massive state support for white farmers and the dispossession of indigenous populations. This resolved the classic Agrarian Question, which is about the nature of this transition and the class forces that benefit. This was the Agrarian Question of *capital*. But it did not resolve the Agrarian Question of ‘**the oppressed**’

– or, as Bernstein asserts more generally, of **labour**, which helps explain the many popular struggles over land that continue to erupt across the Global South.

I have argued that in post-apartheid South Africa the fundamental rationale for a pro-poor rural land reform must be sought in the prospects for ‘accumulation from below’ by small-scale, market-oriented black farmers, who emerge from the ranks of the rural poor. If occupying profitable niches in the agricultural economy, they can make a small but significant contribution to reducing unemployment and poverty. A challenging task, no doubt, given the dominance of most value chains by large agribusiness capitals, in farming and in inputs supply, processing and retail. On the other hand, capitalist agriculture is also highly differentiated, with the largest 3 000 – 5 000 farming operations accounting for the great bulk of value – possibly 80% of the total (Cousins 2015).

My preferred policy option:

Land reform that promotes ‘accumulation from below’

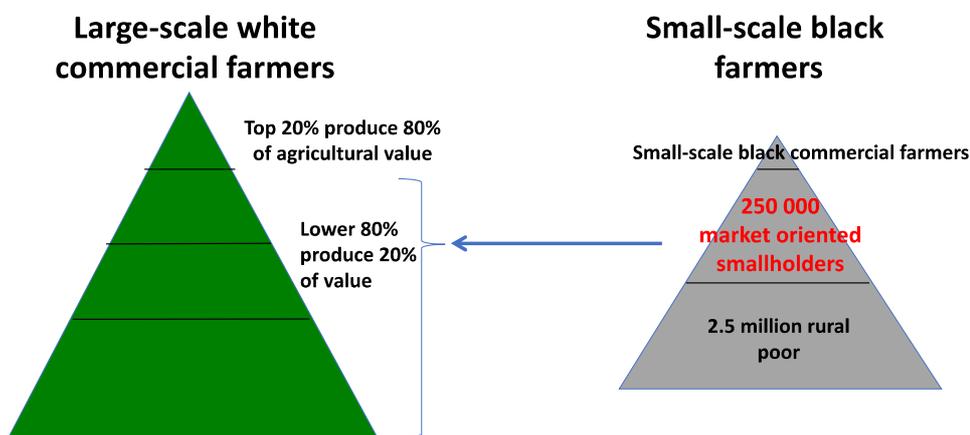


Figure 1. Proposal for pro-poor land redistribution

This is controversial, of course, and seems to be hated by mainstream agricultural economists in particular – perhaps because it threatens their (ideological) view that large-scale capitalist farming is the ONLY ‘viable’ option for redistributive land reform.

What about the mass of rural residents? Can they benefit from land redistribution?

One way to understand poverty in SA today is as a legacy of the cheap labour policies pursued by capital and the state under the colonial and segregationist eras. Under apartheid, however, as argued by Harold Wolpe, rural reserves became increasingly orientated to housing an African population ‘surplus’ to capital’s requirements. Giovanni Arrighi and his co-authors (2010) suggest that the unintended wider consequences of these policies were in fact negative for South African capitalism: a narrow domestic market was impeded by stagnant black wages, small-scale agriculture collapsed, and together with the racially exclusive character of social welfare, these limited the potential for import-substituting growth in the manufacturing sector.

Overcoming these legacies remains the major challenge to economic policy, and it seems to me that land redistribution can play only a relatively minor role in meeting that challenge –

generating, at best, around 1,2 million 'jobs' (if we include self-employment), that will be only modestly remunerated (Cousins *et al.* 2018b).

Lessons from global and historical experience – a comparative analysis

What can South Africa learn from wider global and historical experience, especially of reforms in the 20th century? Most land reforms have involved transferring rights of ownership from wealthy landlords to poor, small-scale farmers working the land under various kinds of tenancy arrangements. These are often described as 'land to the tiller' reforms. Much less common are redistributive reforms that resettle small farmers on large, productive farms subdivided into smaller plots. Southern Africa, the Africa of 'settler states', is somewhat of an outlier in this respect.

Periodisation

Changes in the distribution, character and legal status of rights to land and natural resources, as well as in the class character and productivity of the agrarian economy, have powerfully shaped the making of the modern world. Land reform has played a central role in the transition from pre-capitalist forms of economy, in which classes of unproductive landed property dominated the countryside, to capitalism.

(a) 1900 – 1939: reform and revolution

Two revolutionary convulsions in the early 20th century, in Mexico in 1910 and in Russia in 1917, saw peasants play key roles in the overthrow of autocratic states and their replacement by popular democracy (Mexico), and socialism (Russia). In both cases the mass of the population were engaged in small-scale peasant farming, but power and wealth in the countryside were concentrated in the hands of a small land-owning elite. Radical redistributive land reforms were driven 'from below' and large areas of land were transferred to the rural poor. Subsequent developments in Mexico, however, saw the take-over of the agrarian economy by large-scale capital. The fate of the Russian peasantry was even more tragic.

(b) 1945 – 1980: reform in the contexts of decolonization, national liberation and the Cold War

After World War II, pressures for decolonisation and national liberation increased dramatically, and European colonial powers had to give up their direct control of large areas of the world. Tensions between the capitalist West and the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union heightened – the Cold War period.

A majority of the population in the former colonies was still engaged in small-scale farming, and land reform featured strongly in many national liberation struggles – described by Eric Wolf (1969) as 'peasant wars'. It also formed a key focus of post-independence policy. In most cases these were 'land to the tiller'-type reforms, but in some countries large estates were collectivised by socialist governments (Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba).

In China, with the mass of poor peasants and landless labourers under the domination of wealthy landlords, land reform initially involved 'land to the tiller'. Collectivisation followed, and from 1978, the Household Responsibility System, land ownership remained with the collective. Currently, of course, China is encouraging capitalist farming.

In Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, agrarian reform helped to consolidate capitalism and underwrote rapid industrialisation, with reforms driven from above by authoritarian states (backed by occupying United States forces) and designed to pre-empt a turn to communism. Powerful landlords were expropriated and their land redistributed to tenants. Technological innovation raised productivity, but administered prices, taxation and supplies of cheap rural labour to emerging industries meant that capitalist accumulation was subsidised by appropriation of the agricultural surplus.

(c) 1980s to the present: reform in the context of neo-liberalism

The 1980s saw something of a hiatus in relation to land reform, as the 'developmental state' gave way to neoliberal, market-oriented reforms. In a few countries, however, political conjunctures created openings for radical reform – as in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, the Philippines and Zimbabwe, and in the 1990s, large-scale peasant mobilisations in Indonesia and Honduras.

From 1990, after the collapse of Soviet-style communism, 'new wave' land reform was promoted by the USA and the World Bank as a way to consolidate capitalist property relations. In Nicaragua and Vietnam, individual land titling formed part of the roll-back.

In contexts where redistributive land reform was necessary because of historical legacies (e.g. in southern Africa), the advocates of 'new wave' reform argued for policies based on market-friendly transactions between 'willing sellers and willing buyers', with expropriation avoided. This influenced negotiated transitions and land reform policies in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

Since the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism, many governments across the developing world have strongly promoted large-scale, commercial and export-oriented farming. With capitalism now hegemonic, the terrain on which land reform takes place has dramatically altered as a result.

These shifts have not been uncontested, however. Global social movements such as Via Campesina, the 'way of the peasant', have emerged to resist neoliberal-style reform and urge redistribution to the poor. At the same time, a range of new issues loom large within debates on land reform: gender equity, claims to resources by indigenous peoples, the unequal and often unhealthy character of global agro-food systems, and environmental sustainability.

Variable processes and outcomes

Comparing these experiences, what can we conclude?

1. Agrarian and land reforms have often been driven 'from below' in the context of wider political struggles. In other cases, they have been driven 'from above' by state actors and their allies in pursuit of their own goals, or combined state power and resources 'from above' with the energies of mobilised interest groups 'from below'. It seems to me that South Africa's is pre-eminently a state-driven programme, and increasingly a state that has been captured by elite interests. Can this change?
2. It is clear that significant reductions of rural poverty have followed some cases of land reform (e.g. in China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Cuba and Kerala in India), increasing productivity, output and income, and making a significant contribution to development more generally. However, there have also been many disappointing outcomes (e.g. little or no rural poverty reduction; the benefits of reform being captured by the relatively wealthy). South Africa to date clearly falls in this category.
3. Issues of scale of production and farm size are always highly contested. Both neoclassical economists and Marxists are skeptical of populist claims for a generalised 'Inverse Relationship' between farm size and yield. Marxists, however, point to crises of social reproduction alongside the productivity of capitalist farmers. Radical populists argue that high yields can be achieved by peasant farmers, and point to the hidden or externalised costs of industrial farming systems.
4. Another core disagreement is around state vs. market-led reform. For mainstream economists, market-friendly mechanisms are key – although some acknowledge that markets cannot by themselves redistribute wealth. For radical populists, the exercise of state power is essential for promoting the interests of popular classes. For Marxists, state power has been crucial in enabling 'land to the tiller' reforms to replace parasitic land-owners with productive

farmers, both small and large – but the logic of capital remains a key determinant of outcomes, at least until socialism is achieved.

5. Issues of ecological sustainability in agrarian/land reform have not figured much in debates to date, an exception being the stress on environmental benefits in arguments for 'food sovereignty' advanced by radical populists in recent years. Climate change and the extreme urgency of efforts to address its root causes means that questions of the sustainability of systems of land use and food production are increasingly central in debates about land reform.
6. Land reform in southern Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Mozambique) is quite distinctive in some ways, and typical in others. Distinctive in its focus on breaking up large and productive farms, in its somewhat muted rural struggles and hence state-driven character (with Zimbabwe as a partial exception), and in its ambitions to undertake both redistribution and tenure reform on a large scale (and with the added complication of restitution in South Africa). It is not at all distinctive in the fate of land reform being closely tied to shifts in wider political economy, and hence class bias and elite capture, and in its turn away from small-scale farmers towards large-scale capitalist agriculture (Zimbabwe is again unique).

Everywhere, land reform in the 21st century is being forced to confront the overwhelming threat of ecological collapse. Although South Africa's rural reforms have not yet done so, asking questions about how to address this challenge is in fact an urgent task facing us now.

Global crises

Crises of social reproduction amongst working populations are evident across the globe. These result from the extremely lopsided version of economic development that capitalism always entails, given its underlying logic, necessarily centred on exploitation, accumulation, and abstract value. This logic is also largely responsible for the gathering crisis of ecological collapse, as well as large-scale waves of human migration. Through these converging threats to livelihoods and ways of life, it is deeply implicated in the turn to right-wing politics and authoritarian state formations, and to violence, at micro- and macro-scales.

Even technological advance, once thought of as inherently benign, is assuming an ever more sinister character: social media are being used not only to gather personal data for targeted advertising but to send fake news on a very large scale, and thus manipulate politics and subvert elections. And artificial intelligence is putting the employment of very large numbers of people at risk, without any serious policy proposals to date on how to respond.

Systemic connections amongst these crises are easy to identify: precarious livelihoods and climate change are driving migration in pursuit of improved life chances – and the material insecurity of former working-class populations in the North informs their response to migrants, giving rise to right-wing forms of politics. Information technology undermines liberal democracy, but also contributes to global warming: data centres (the 'Cloud') across the world now use more electricity than the entire UK, and account for 2% of global emissions – around the same as the airline industry.

These interconnections can be represented as follows:

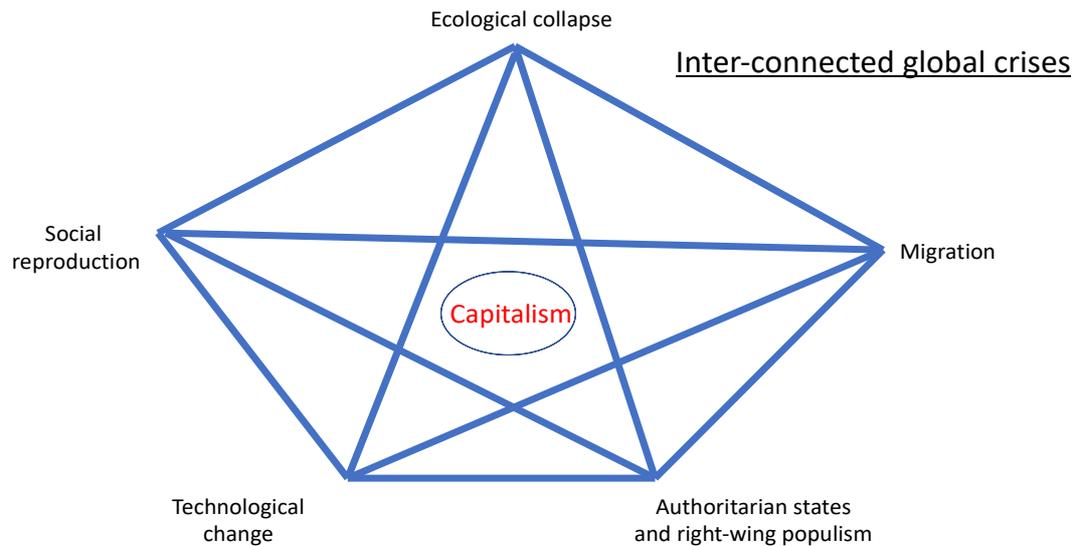


Figure 2. Interconnections between global crises

The problem with this kind of diagram is that simply tracing systemic interconnections does not by itself explain very much; causal connections can be obscured. Yet, to act effectively in the world requires of us an understanding of these – addressing symptoms rather than root causes does provide real solutions.

In my view, the underlying logic of *capitalism* is what is driving these multiple crises – as many are now beginning to argue. Here is Meehan Crist, an environmentalist at Columbia University, in a recent London Review of Books:

... climate catastrophe has revealed global capitalist systems to be fundamentally bankrupt, as well as illuminating the inadequacy of liberal orthodoxy's tendency to valorize moderation and incremental change. Only immediate transformative change, including direct confrontation with the powerful global interests behind the carbon economy, will come close to salvaging the biological systems on which all human life depends ...

Yet for many activists, the leap to identifying the logic of capital as at the root of global crises is a step too far. Why? Timothy Morton, the philosopher, defines a 'hyperobject' as something that surrounds, envelopes and entangles us, but is literally too big to see in its entirety ... hyperobjects are so close and yet so hard to see, and defy our ability to describe them rationally, or master or overcome them in any traditional sense. Examples include global warming, the internet, evolution, nuclear radiation ...

And perhaps *capitalism*? Although the reasons for the widespread failure to grasp the nature of the economic system that rules the world probably include the discursive hegemony of capital, the stigmata of failed versions of communism, and the unconvincing character of the arguments still offered by the traditional left.

In my view, to avoid collapse, decay and the violence that these will unleash, we have to move beyond capitalism and construct a completely different, post-capitalist economic system. A hopeful sign is that political mobilisations focused on this task are now in resurgence, alongside powerful re-assertions of democracy in response to increasing authoritarianism.

How would a post-capitalist economy be organised? I simply do not know, myself, other than that the logic of capital will have to be broken with, and replaced by one centred on the

fulfilment of human needs. I suspect, however, that property relations will be key, and that new forms of social property will have to emerge, including the commons and co-operatives, but also creative variations at different scales. On this question, critical agrarian studies might even have some insights to offer to this larger debate.

Post-capitalism, or socialism and communism, as we used to say once upon a time? The problem here is that systems so-designated in the 20th century were for the most part both brutal and inefficient (with a few honourable exceptions). Perhaps a new political imaginary and terminology is called for.

At the end of Michael Moore's film 'Capitalism: a Love Story', made in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, he asks the question: since capitalism is self-evidently evil and has to be eliminated, what is the alternative? 'It's Democracy' is his answer.

This is both naïve, in some respects, but also potentially profound – if the implications are pushed all the way. The alternative we need must surely be based on the extension of the notion of democracy ('government by the people, for the people') into the heart of the economic system. This raises a host of complex questions about the role of politics, and its forms, in democratic post-capitalist systems, which I am not well equipped to answer.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper will be of at least some interest to the readers. It is also addressed, of course, to my colleagues at PLAAS, suggesting an approach and a set of agendas that a university-based and socially-engaged research institute might adopt as a small contribution to the continuing struggle to survive and prosper in these difficult times.

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