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Introduction

False promises

Nik Heynen, James McCarthy, Scott Prudham, and Paul Robbins

Meanwhile, capitalism rewards efficiency and punishes waste. Profit-hungry companies found ingenious ways to reduce the natural resource inputs necessary to produce all kinds of goods, which in turn reduced environmental demands on the land and the amount of waste that flowed through smokestacks and water pipes. As we learned to do more and more with a given unit of resources, the waste involved (which manifests itself in the form of pollution) shrank ... Property rights – a necessary prerequisite for free market economies – also provide strong incentives to invest in resource health. Without them, no one cares about future returns because no one can be sure they'll be around to reap the gains. Property rights are also important means by which private desires for resource conservation and protection can be realized. When the government, on the other hand, holds a monopoly on such decisions, minority preferences in developing societies are overruled (see the old Soviet bloc for details) ... Capitalism can save more lives threatened by environmental pollution than all the environmental organizations combined.

(Jerry Taylor, Director of Natural Resource Studies, Cato Institute, 2003)

Q: Do you think social movements are now on the offensive?
A: Yes, for me they moved to the offensive a long time ago. I always say that on February 27, 1989, the fourth world war began in Venezuela. The third had been the Cold War, and the fourth is the war against neoliberalism, which began in Caracas on that day.

Q: As the 6th WSF [World Social Forum] continues, have you seen a main issue of debate emerge?
A: All of the issues are central. It would be idle to speak of a dominant issue. Without ecology, we would all die; without the fight against poverty, ethnic, racial, classist discrimination, our societies would always be a confrontation of oppressors and the oppressed. Without the debate on gender issues, patriarchy would last forever, or would be replaced by maternalism, for example. It is precisely the social movements that emerge because the states and the parties thought these were issues that didn’t merit their attention.

(Luis Brito Garcia, Venezuelan author and activist, 2006)

Both these quotes in their own way point to something important, if not radical, that has recently changed in environmental governance; this change
is neoliberalism. The quotes obviously offer fundamentally different views on the character of the phenomenon and the role of politics and political struggle in both advancing and resisting the relationships between democracy, markets, the environment and the state. Yet both Taylor and García recognize the significance of so-called free market reforms, institutionalized and globalized (i.e. launched across international contexts and more widely adopted) over the course of recent decades. Moreover, each asserts the centrality of economy and ecology to governance, social change, and politics. We would agree.

In fact, while these quotes highlight and reinforce the controversial character of neoliberalism, the widely diverging viewpoints on what neoliberalism represents, and whether or not neoliberalism is viewed positively or negatively, they also convey something of the central objective of this collection: to critically examine the somewhat overlooked nexus between neoliberalism, on the one hand, and environmental governance, environmental change, and environmental politics, on the other. Our primary goal in this respect is analytical: we recognize that the dynamics and outcomes of the sea-change that these radical reforms represent are inherently complex and not entirely predictable. In that context, we seek to add to this contentious discussion by bringing into more intimate contact a collection of recent, rigorous, theoretically informed case studies. Each of these addresses in detail a range of reforms in environmental governance and the political and ecological outcomes they produce, but together we believe they tell a larger story. We also present commentaries in response to groups of substantively and thematically related cases, therefore, in order to provide coherent and current perspectives on what has been learned on the neoliberal journey so far, to highlight what we have yet to understand and explore.

As will become more evident in the collection and in the text to follow, we are by no means neutral on the questions examined here: rather, we believe that logic and the weight of the empirical evidence available so far strongly suggest that the so-called “neoliberalization” of environmental governance will produce predominantly environmentally undesirable and socially regressive political and economic outcomes. That said, the volume is quite intentionally aimed at moving past mere polemics in the debate over environmental neoliberalism and mapping out a picture of the world that has appeared in its wake.

Neoliberalism, geography, environment

In order to contextualize the case studies and commentaries to come, some discussion seems warranted regarding the focus of the collection, begging two questions: (1) what exactly do we mean by the terms “neoliberalism” and “neoliberalization”; and (2) what exactly are the connections between neoliberalism and environment? As we argue below, and as we hope the cases help to reinforce, these are not distinct questions. Indeed, we believe that environmental change and environmental politics are in substantial measure constitutive of the brief history of neoliberalism in important and yet largely overlooked ways, not least in the ways that attempts to “stretch” and “deepen” (Lysandrou 2005) the reach of commodity circulation rely on the re-working of environmental governance and on entrenching the commodification of nature, and vice versa.

But first, neoliberalism. It is a big word, in part because it is used to stitch together a wide variety of political, economic, environmental, and social projects and experiences, and in part because it is increasingly used in a pejorative sense as dismissive shorthand by critics. In the most general sense, the term refers to an economic and political philosophy that questions, and in some versions entirely rejects, government interventions in the market and people’s relationships to the economy, and eschews social and collective controls over the behavior and practices of firms, the movement of capital, and the regulation of socio-economic relationships. More dramatically, it is philosophy that describes itself in terms of “hard realism” but is often wrapped in a cloak of remarkably utopian promises, offering a world liberated to “unleash” the emancipatory power of markets and local decision-making.

This puts it in contradistinction not only with the concepts underpinning planned and socialist political economies but even with more Keynesian liberal politics and philosophies of the early and mid-twentieth century, which stressed controls, tinkering, and harnessing of markets within broader practices and goals of governance. As is becoming evident however, this (over-) simple definition of the phenomenon, while a useful starting place, detracts from many complex and contradictory elements, as recent discussions of neoliberalism’s many forms and practices suggest.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of critical literature on neoliberalism and neoliberalization, including an explosion in scholarship within geography. This includes early work on neoliberalism as post-Fordist regulation (Jessop 1994; Peck and Tickell 1995; Tickell and Peck 1995), neoliberal reforms at the urban scale (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Keil 2002; Swyngedouw et al. 2002), neoliberal reforms of labor markets (Peck 2002a, 2002b), the spatiality of neoliberal reforms (including scalar dimensions) (Peck and Tickell 2002), neoliberalism as development orthodoxy (Peet and Hartwick 1999; Peet and Watts 1993), and the nexus of neoliberalism and geopolitics (Harvey 2003; Sparke 2006). It also includes work at the relatively macro-scale of reforms to state-market relations as well as the micro-scale embodiment of the ways in which neoliberalism re-works citizenship and subjectivities (Mitchell 2003; Rankin 2001). And, most central to this volume, it includes the emergence of a distinct literature on the convergence of neoliberalism and nature, some of which is represented and re-worked here.

As a body, this scholarship explores various dimensions and arenas in which a range of diverse ideologies, discourses, and practices have been put
in place as policies and institutions, and in the process have re-worked previous relationships between the market (e.g. commodities to be bought or sold and institutions facilitating trade), the state (e.g. bureaucracies managing exchange, labor, and the environment), and civil society (e.g. organizations assembled for collective good or defense of interests). This has included considerable empirical work on the way neoliberalism often circulates as lofty and undefined ideals, panaceas absent any reference to context ("thin policies"), but with effects entirely concrete and drastic in the lived experiences of human and non-human alike ("hard outcomes") (Peck 2001).

All this work also has inspired, perhaps inevitably, concern that the concept may be too big or bloated to capture the diversity of projects labeled as neoliberal. And in charting the historic and geographic changes that mark neoliberal transitions, concern has also been raised that distinctions such as "rolling back" and "rolling out" neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002) are inadequate to convey the temporal and spatial evolution and adaptation of governance projects that, even if inspired by neoliberal orthodoxies, are transformed in the messiness of politics, lived experiences and actual geographies. While this diversity underpins the explicitly plural notion of "neoliberalizations," as well as efforts to theorize "hybrid" neoliberalisms (Larner 2003; McCarthy 2005; 2006; Barnett 2005) goes so far as to suggest that the word may now act as little more than a consolatory shibboleth for left-leaning academics, blinding them to the diverse experiences and pluralities of political struggles over governance.

There is a real danger here. No doubt, some invocations of "neoliberalism" act as little more than shallow, ahistorical and ageographical invocations of a poorly defined abstraction, perhaps ironically reinforcing the taken-for-granted character of free-market discourses and the typically idealist ways in which they are championed. We are acutely aware of this danger. How to capture important continuities and connections in diverse transformations going on around the world over a period of many years is no simple task, and any effort to do so requires observers to engage in some degree of abstraction, and to actively decide and disclose what in the particular cases they study is central rather than peripheral, necessary rather than contingent. Inevitably, the term becomes stretched as a result.

And yet something is going on worth naming. We insist on the analytical and political purchase of identifying, albeit reflexively, the pervasive "metalogies" of what we see around us, not least because we see a fairly common set of discourses, ideologies and practices that remain the most dominant development in social regulation in the post-Keynesian era. In our view, what is required is not to jettison the term, but rather to work the concept carefully through what Sparkes (2006) calls "context-contingent analyses." The chapters included here comprise such analyses, focused on both the diverse and common qualities of recent reforms and the politics and ecology of environmental change. That said, in a general sense, what do we mean when we say "neoliberalism"?

At the most general or over-arched, "big-picture" level, neoliberalism has been examined by David Harvey as a global project to restore, renew, and expand the conditions for capital accumulation and, in related fashion, to restore power to economic elites (or to establish it where it did not already exist) (Harvey 2005; see also Duménil and Lévy 2004). Harvey argues that neoliberalism is not only an abstract set of ideas about how to best to organize society to facilitate the production of wealth and allow for the maximization of freedom, as many proponents of neoliberalism would have it. Rather, he argues that neoliberalism is an intensely political project, one in which economic elites more or less intentionally seek to increase their wealth and income, but also their political and economic freedom and flexibility by rolling back the redistributive reforms of the mid-twentieth century (particularly those adopted in the aftermath of the global Great Depression of the 1930s), reforms often dubbed by an additional shorthand concept of Keynesianism. As evidence, Harvey and others point to the fact that central elements of the neoliberal era have featured the rollback of regulations on capital accumulation coupled with reductions in social safety net provisions and state-coordinated redistribution of wealth and income, with evident consequences in spiralling social inequality.

While we agree in substantial measure, it is also important to recognize that neoliberalism has an important intellectual, discursive, and ideological lineage which helps lend at least the appearance of coherence and consistency to what we admit (and seek to problematize in this volume) as disparate, context-contingent projects. Returning to and fusing ideas drawn from classical political as well as economic liberalism (hence the name), neoliberal discourses tend to emphasize at least the idea (often selectively invoked in practice) of so-called "laissez-faire" economic regulation, i.e. shifting and "rolling back" the state apparatus where it is seen to impinge upon capital investment, commodity production, and market exchange, typically via championing abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multinational) struggling under the oppressive weight of an overbearing state. Neoliberalism tends also to reinforce and celebrate strong private, individual, and exclusive property rights. Proponents tend to invoke specifically political notions of liberalism with emphasis on the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of individuals, again typically posed in relation to a monolithic state represented as singularly in opposition to the realization of individual freedom.²

The intellectual lineage of neoliberalism is complex and in some ways contradictory, but certainly draws on a specific fusion of post-World War II economic and political liberalism forcefully articulated by the likes of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Richard Epstein. In fact, arguably what marks neoliberal discourses and orthodoxies as a distinct body of social theory is a potent but polyvalent conflation of political and economic liberalism, one following from and arguably reducible to the promises of
political emancipation through economic growth, increasing prosperity, and market-mediated social relations. It is hardly coincidence that such a virulent and utopian articulation of ideas that link laissez-faire capitalism, liberal democracy, and individual freedoms would emerge and enjoy wide circulation—particularly in the US and the UK—during the Cold War period.

Still, many (including Harvey as noted above) link the actual institutionalization of neoliberalism to the period since the early 1970s, a period actually coinciding with declining profitability in leading capitalist economies (Harvey 1989; Arrighi 1994). It is primarily during this period that neoliberal practices were introduced as macro and micro-level reforms in response to a perceived crisis in so-called Keynesian social regulation, featuring an array of by now familiar devices:

- regressive reforms of state taxation and rollbacks in redistributive spending;
- privatization of services formerly provided by and through the state;
- reinforcement and extension of private, exclusive, and individuated property rights;
- liberalization of state regulations specifically governing trade and investment across international borders, though in uneven and contradictory ways that reflect not only the ideology of free trade, but also the political interests negotiating often highly selective and confusing blends of liberalization and protectionism;
- emphasis on state austerity and fiscal retrenchment with an associated defunding or outright cancellation of a wide array of social services, but again, in contradictory ways that are often combined with entrenchment of so-called supply side spending, e.g. development projects, programs to support economic innovation and competitiveness, and of course military investments;
- workfare, and other incentive-based schemes aimed at disciplining workers and civil servants (and at least nominally at increasing productivity and efficiency), accompanied by deregulation and re-regulation of labor markets;
- the reworking of state regulatory apparatuses in ways that tend to enhance private and corporate authority over economic, environmental, and social action;
- offloading and decentralization involving both the re-scaling of governance up and down from nation-states, as well as the recruitment of volunteer, civil society-based organizations to undertake many functions formerly provided by states.

These and other strategies characterize the institutionalization of neoliberalism proliferated via a spate of interconnected reforms of governance that have swept through most of the world, particularly since the 1980s.

Within this lineage, some argue that important systemic shifts have occurred, including a transition from so-called “rollback” reforms to subsequent, Third-way style “roll-out” (Peck and Tickell 2002). Others note distinctions between the pure market orthodoxy pursued by neoliberal advocates and the diverse, hybrid forms that these changes tend to comprise when filtered through the complex apparatus of social and political life (Jessop 2002). Such distinctions recognize diversity in the ways that neoliberal ideas take hold and respond to different contexts, evident, for instance, in important differences between reforms in rich countries as opposed to variants formulated as development policy in the era of the debt crises and propagated in poor countries via the vehicle of structural adjustment plans (SAPs). While the diversity evident in these different kinds of changes does indeed pose challenges for agreeing on any singularity called neoliberalism, it is at the same time the almost taken-for-granted character of the list of strategies listed above— their truth-like obviousness and familiarity—that testifies to the deep hold of certain repeated tropes on the contemporary political imagination as the only common-sense or natural (and naturalized) ways that realistic people can think or imagine policy prescriptions. Neoliberalism is in this sense a predominant set of beliefs about the world.

Yet it bears stressing that neoliberalism has come to occupy this dominant ideological position not primarily through any “inherent” power of the ideas themselves, but rather through political mechanisms and institutions that propel them to travel and become entrenched. Organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (along with their financial backers) have for some time insisted that countries borrowing money from them adopt strongly neoliberal policies, not least using SAPs as instruments. Ideas also travel through networks and gatherings of powerful professionals and agenda setters, e.g. the World Economic Forum (an annual gathering of economic and political elites in Davos, Switzerland). Successive rounds of elite level, generally non-accountable and non-transparent negotiations over trade liberalization, via the GATT and the WTO, as well as in regional trading blocks such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have also established important precedents for the neoliberalization of trade and investment, including by dramatically enhancing the rights and powers of private investors (Clarkson 2003; McCarthy 2004).

And while this traveling and stretching of policies and projects helps consolidate neoliberalism as the dominant post-Keynesian mode of regulation, it also leads to important particularities whose geographies matter. This is in part due to the ways in which neoliberal reforms have arisen out of and in response to highly particular crises in governance (Jessop 2002). In Chile, the authoritarian brutality of the Pinochet coup and subsequent regime change swept away an incipient state socialism, providing the impetus and the muscle behind sweeping changes championed by the so-called “Chicago Boys” (high-level Chilean economic advisors), educated in neoliberal orthodoxy at
the University of Chicago (Schurman 1996; Valdes 1995). In mid-1970s New York City, the city's financial ruin provided opportunities for crisis-propelled, highly revanchist reforms to be introduced (not least by a class of leveraged financial elites) in the name of rescuing the city from financial ruin (Harvey 1985, 2005; Smith 1996). That the particularities of rules and laws should vary in these two cases, along with the institutions, stories, motivations, responses, and effects of these reforms, should in no way be surprising, given the deeply contextual conditions of their invention and implementation.

In the wake of the elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, neoliberal reforms were propelled in the context of persistent economic recession, inflationary pressures that undermined both consumption and investment, and a perceived threat that the national economies of the USA and the UK were losing their competitive advantages vis-à-vis Japan and other newly industrializing nations. In these instances, national economic competitiveness was mobilized as a discourse tethered to the fate of individual citizens in ways that enlisted broad support, and disciplined citizens for the sacrifices necessary to restore profitability and growth (Hall 1988). The immediacy of this crisis-driven reform was famously summed up by Margaret Thatcher when she declared in the UK context that "There is no alternative," which has since become pejoratively invoked as the coercive catch-phrase reflecting the commonsensical and hegemonic power of neoliberal discourses.

Crisis-inspired reform is also evident in the threatened bankruptcy of Mexico's national economy in 1982, the first in a series of so-called debt crises that swept through largely post-colonial economies of the global south during the 1980s and 1990s. Acute financial pressure on heavily indebted nations created the leverage for multilateral lenders and private banks to propagate neoliberal development orthodoxy as the so-called "Washington consensus," accelerated by dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Escobar 1995). These disparate cases, tethered together by common threads, speak to the ways in which the highly idealist, utopian promises of neoliberal discourse become territorialized in specific places at specific times.

Yet, if disparity in experience is evident in even the earliest neoliberal experiments, projects, and ideas, and if this diversity has only become more evident by a growing literature on geographically diverse contexts, does this warrant dismissal of the term? Has "neoliberalism" become merely a consolatory bookmark for leftist critics (comparable to "secular humanism" on the right) rather than a name for something tangibly evident and worth worrying about? We obviously argue no, as do activists around the world who recognize and seek to name something they viscerally recognize. A singular neoliberalism can only be sustained at the cost of acknowledging that it "averages out" important differences between disparate political economic and ecological projects and experiences. But this is in part a consequence of the fact that what is invoked as "neoliberalism" is far more than mere sloganeering and that the stakes in naming and recognizing it are high.

Does this mean scholars should blindly follow the political slogans of social movements invoking neoliberalism as their bête noire? Hardly, but it does mean we should take these invocations seriously, and in the interests of aligning ourselves with but also advancing (not merely following) these movements, we ought to reflexively consider the particular valences of neoliberalism in the context of specific projects, evaluate how the cases we examine illuminate and help us to understand both difference and continuity, and reflect on the changing character of reforms, themselves arising out of political struggle (not merely in abstraction). When the time comes to jettison the term because it can no longer meaningfully characterize developments in the world around us, and just as importantly, because the term no longer does adequate political and intellectual work (a time that will surely come), this will happen through the complex interplay of politics and scholarship, not through wordplay. In the meantime, we are left with the challenge, as Castree (2005; 2006 and in this volume) rightly observes, to make sure we are reading one another's work carefully in looking for ways to make commensurable the lessons we learn from diverse studies. We must embrace the challenges to this commensurability that arise from the way in which the politics, the discourses, and the material circumstances of our respective neoliberalizations are related but different. But the burden falls on us as scholars (and activists) to seek out these connections and common problems, make them plain and compelling to a broader public, and subvert the sense of inevitability that surrounds them.

These are central goals of this volume. The contribution of cases is therefore meant to portray diverse struggles and misadventures of neoliberalizations, but also to point the way towards common experience. The collection reflects our commitment, shared by the contributors, that engagement with concrete political ecological circumstances is vital to critique, and that far from militant particularisms, these cases are the starting point for moving past neoliberalism's taken-for-granted quality. We want the cases to be read against one another, and we sincerely hope that readers, abetted by the commentators, will find ways to make them commensurable.

The nature of neoliberalism and the neoliberalization of nature

This brings us to the second of our introductory questions, concerning the specifically environmental dimensions of neoliberalism. This volume is born out of our diverse experiences, shared with many of the contributors, in trying to explore not only the environmental impacts of neoliberal reforms (as important as they are), but also to consider the ways in which environmental governance, and environmentalism as a set of political movements, coincide, collide, articulate, and even constitute the emergence of neoliberalism.
In this sense, we view the relationship between neoliberal reform, on one hand, and environmental politics, governance, and change, on the other, as more than coincident. Rather we suggest that they are inherent in the consistent imperative that runs through the history of neoliberalization: to expand opportunities for capital investment and accumulation by reworking state-market-civil society relations to allow for the stretching and deepening of commodity production, circulation and exchange. When this is combined with a stress on individual rights and freedoms, especially private property rights, there is a necessary re-working of the way human society and non-human systems and beings relate. Indeed, this is hardly new or surprising, inasmuch as traditional liberalism in its various guises was in part a product of, and propelling force for, historic efforts in the re-working of socio-nature (McCarthy and Prudham 2004).

Consider, for instance, the way biophysical nature in the present day (including the human body) is an important frontier for the expansion and deepening of commodification. As Kloppenburg (2004) and Wright (1994) each show in their own way, this dynamic is central to the history of biotechnology, initially centered in the US and the UK, and increasingly expanding to the global scale. Genes, genetically modified organisms and other products of the new biotechnology have been explicitly targeted since at least the early 1970s in both the US and the UK as important arenas for the expansion of capital accumulation in agriculture and health sciences, not to mention other spheres.

Yet this “new” frontier is arguably only a continuation of a more deeply historical process. John Locke’s moral defense of individual property and his early articulation of laissez-faire logics were both fabricated in, and justified by, the crucible of enclosure, that process in which complex assemblages of communal rights to nature were terminated in England and elsewhere in favor of private ownership (Locke [1690] 1952 [#22389]). In this way, neoliberalism and liberalism are both products of, and drivers toward, reconstructions of socio-natural systems. In both cases, moreover, transition is neither inevitable or smooth, requiring as it does coercions, political contests, physical confrontations, and deliberate manipulations of institutions, including in science policy, state-industry-university relations, and property rights.

All of this has culminated in expanded and highly contested opportunities for capitalist profit-making in the production of life, moreover. It has also become an increasingly global project, as biotech firms (typically championed by the US government) press for adoption of strong, individuated, exclusive private property rights over life forms (Mcafee 2003). Our point here is that this history is hardly a mere manifestation of pre-conceived neoliberal ideas, but rather it is among the earliest examples of the instantiation of neoliberalism born out of a crisis of profitability, solved ostensibly by recourse to changes in our relationship to the more-than-human world. Parallels may be found in the ways in which the restructuring of socio-natural relations are often central to the specifics of Structural Adjustment Plans as they target the liberalization of investment and trade restrictions in nature-centered sectors such as agriculture and forestry, rolling back the state regulatory apparatus, and mandating the privatization of water utilities and service provisioning (Clapp 2000; Kincaid 2001). As these sectors and ecologies are transformed by previous generations of economic activity, they provide opportunities for new markets and systems of extraction, which in turn lead to new environmental outcomes. Neoliberal reform is both a cause of environmental change and a product of changes in the way we interact with the environment.

At the same time, neoliberalization and environmentalism (as a movement and a practice of governance) also share a complex and conjoined lineage in the past few decades. As two of us have argued elsewhere (McCarthy and Prudham 2004), environmentalism paradoxically points to the politically contested character of neoliberalism but also to the pervasive, taken-for-granted and apolitical appearance of neoliberal discourses and practices. In the early years of the Reagan era, for example, important initiatives aimed at scaling back environmental regulatory safeguards and standards became focal to the institutionalization of American neoliberalism (Dryzek 1996; Vig and Kraft 1984). Yet these also became focal points for resistance, as environmental social movements across the country organized against regulatory rollbacks. This speaks to the salience and power of environmentalism in America, and elsewhere, and to one of the more apparent roadblocks to the grand ambitions of neoliberal reformers. Yet, the assault on standards, funding for environmental programs and remediation, and attempts to remove restrictions on capital’s access to nature has remained a focal point in American neoliberalism right up to the present day, taking several forms. This includes non-action such as the current Bush administration’s stonewalling on climate change. It also includes more overt rollbacks of the sort that helped structure Hurricane Katrina’s disastrous implications for New Orleans, retreats whose organized irresponsibility was revealed in terms of highly racialized urban social polarities and environmental injustice only in the aftermath of the disaster.³

But if environmental change and environmental politics have become arenas for debating the limits, costs, and consequences of neoliberalizations, they have provided equal evidence of the power of neoliberal orthodoxies to circulate through and hybridize with environmentalism, comprising part of what makes neoliberalizations complex and variegated. This is evident, for example, in the internal debate among powerful environmental groups over the role of market-based incentives and mechanisms in environmental governance. Mechanisms institutionalized via the Kyoto Protocol, pushed and negotiated in substantial measure by NGOs, helped construct and produce a global community of participation in tradeable, commodity-like carbon permits and offsets. This follows important alliances forged in the United States around Clean Air Act tradeable permit schemes aimed at reducing a variety of pollutants at the urban scale, and points to the capacity of environmental organizations not only to resist, but also to adapt to and
help spread neoliberal-inspired approaches to governance. So too it includes rollouts into environmental policy, where market mechanisms are introduced into environmental regulation, e.g. in contemporary schemes targeting wetland banking in the United States (see Robertson 2004 and this volume).

That these measures tend to entrench a utilitarian and fetishistic disposition toward the biophysical world does not seem to trouble those groups willing to pursue clean-up and preservation at any cost.

In similar fashion, groups such as the Nature Conservancy have sought to incorporate the privatization of nature as a tool, and enlist its proponents as allies, by recruiting income to buy up tracts of land thought valuable for the preservation of biodiversity and rare habitats. If these measures are not exactly aimed at expanding opportunities for capital accumulation, they still pose interesting and largely unexamined ways of locking up surplus capital (often highly sheltered from taxation) in the form of socio-natural fixes, while doing nothing to subvert the hegemony of highly individualistic and exclusive property rights over nature. Internationally, parallels may be drawn in the highly utilitarian, option value constructions that surround efforts to encapsulate and protect biodiversity, in ways that can be highly elitist, exclusionary, and neo-colonial. Effects to enclose, and render exchangeable, hunting rights for the ibex in northern Pakistan in the name of conservation represent a particularly blatant and galling example (MacDonald 2005).

Linking the question of nature to neoliberalizations is, for these reasons, more than just a matter of analyzing economic policy impacts on the environment. Rather, it both promises to disclose important ways that specific, potentially pernicious ideologies and policies are in part compelled and constituted through our changing relationship to nature, and to point to environmental politics and environmental governance as key arenas for extending and hybridizing political and economic projects.

We also argue that engaging with environmental neoliberalism is a critical strategy for understanding these changes and outcomes as context-specific and constituted both by discourses and material conditions and processes. This reflects learning over the past few years in the area of political ecology, a signature field of interdisciplinary scholarship. If the question of environmental change and its politics is central in this field, so too is the idea that understanding environmental change requires analysis across scales, from the highly local ways people make and represent ecological processes to the ways in which their experiences and understandings are nested in complex networks of interacting biophysical, institutional and discursive processes (Robbins and Fraser 2003; Turner 1993). Many of the contributors to this volume have been informed by the emergence of political ecology, and this is no accident. The theoretical and methodological commitments to grounded engagement with actual places, people, and ecologies in political ecology provide a powerful way to check the idealist tendencies of neoliberal discourses and ideologies.

So too, political ecology forces an appreciation of the way such discourses and ideals must be negotiated in relation both to socially constructed knowledge of the biophysical world (e.g. local agro-ecological knowledge) as well as the irreducibly material character of that world (e.g. local rates of soil erosion). Because of this, neoliberalizations of resource and environmental management must be negotiated and concretized in relation to biophysical processes, as well as human uses and understandings of these processes, making for complex outcomes. The attempted development of individual, transferable quotas in fisheries, where the resource in question is fugitive, unpredictable and has complex biotic and abiotic feedbacks, is a prime example (see Mansfield 2004 and this volume).

Finally, political ecology opens the door on understanding how technical discourses of environmental conditions or change (e.g. deforestation or desertification) are enrolled in political and economic momentum for enclosure, control, and reconfiguration of socio-nature. This raises difficult questions concerning the relationship between science, power, economy, and society. Such questions are better faced head-on, however, rather than avoided by relegating environmental science to a realm somehow separate or isolated from economics or politics (Robbins 2004; Heynen et al. 2006).

The world is not an isotropic plane, as geographers ought to know well, and the uneven geography of socio-nature is one of the reasons why not. But we maintain that appreciating the inherently context-contingent and material-discursive character of neoliberalizing nature is not just about doing good political ecology. Rather, this is an important arena in which the utopian idealism of neoliberal discourses and ideologies may be evaluated against concrete experiences and outcomes. In this sense, experiences with neoliberal environments in our view go a long way toward challenging and disclosing the (false) promises of neoliberalism more generally.

Organization of this volume

All this goes some way toward arguing for the reality of something called neoliberalism, its relationship to nature, and the character of critical study required to dissect it. Even so, the diverse components of the larger whole can be understood on their own terms. As a result, the collection is organized into four parts, each of which addresses one such thematic component, includes multiple case studies, and provides unifying commentaries. These sections are, in order from first to last, “Enclosure and Privatization,” “Commodification and Marketization,” “Devolution and Neoliberal Governmentalities,” and “Resistance.” This grouping of the essays is intended to accentuate what we see as four key underlying themes in the collection. It is not meant to suggest an exclusive division of substantive and conceptual labor, and indeed, much commonality exists across chapters grouped in different sections. Similarly, while the commentaries specifically respond to the chapter groupings, there are important cross-cutting themes.
Part I, "Enclosure and privatization," is a collection of chapters dealing broadly with the re-working of property relations governing access to and control of nature under neoliberal reforms. These reforms are generally in the direction of greater individuation, exclusivity, private control, and (in many instances) marketization, typically legitimated and represented in terms of enhancing individual freedoms, economic efficiency, and environmental quality. Paul Robbins and April Lugtenbuhl in Chapter 1 examine the quixotic and politically and ecologically uneven development of private hunting rights over wildlife in the American West. In Chapter 2, James McCarthy interrogates the ways in which environmental quality and ecological functions (which he theorizes as conditions of capitalist production) become focal in dramatic shifts in political and property rights as administrative jurisdiction shifts from national to supranational, and from public to private, in the ongoing institutionalization of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Erik Swyngedouw in Chapter 3 examines the question of accumulation by dispossession head-on and in contrast to "normal" capitalism, arguing on the basis of his wide ranging summary of the privatization of water rights that these schemes must indeed be seen as polyvalent dispossession.

Becoming in Chapter 4 situates the development of neoliberal-inspired property reforms over fishing rights against a backdrop of a longstanding struggle over a socially negotiated construction of the commons question in fisheries, i.e. the persistence and persistent problematization of open access (conflicted with communally held) fishing rights in the face of various schemes to "enclose the ocean." The last chapter in this section by Gavin Bridge concerns the creation of private gold mining rights in Guyana. Bridge argues with Mansfield in locating recent privatization schemes against a longer historical political economy and ecology of enclosing mining rights, even as neoliberal schemes directly deepen the hold of exclusively private rights of access in the mining sector. In their commentaries, both Nancy Lee Peluso and Jim Glassman interpret the chapters in this part in light of current debates regarding contemporary primitive accumulation, highlighting the empirical variety of its environmental manifestations and their potential to create barriers to neoliberal projects. Peluso focuses on the enduring importance of states and nations to neoliberalism, emphasizing that all the cases on offer here require state re-regulation rather than de-regulation; her central question is why states and their citizens accede to such such transformations and reterritorializations. Glassman offers, indirectly, at least one possible answer to Peluso's question, advocating the view that neoliberalism ought to be understood largely as a class project of the most powerful and mobile capitalists, who have dramatically increased their ability to move their assets relatively freely among states and territories.

Part II, "Commodification and marketization," brings chapters together that collectively illustrate the political economic processes through which the environment broadly, and particular ecosystems more specifically, are reduced to commodities through pricing mechanisms that open them up to free-market profiteering and often time destruction. The chapters in this part show how revolutions in law, policy, and markets are accelerating the ongoing commodification of natural things, laying bare the structurally-driven and environmentally-destructive tendencies of capitalism. First, in Chapter 8, Karen Bakker asks questions about market environmentalism in the water supply in England and Wales, including what have been the impacts of re-regulation of water, what is the analytical utility of the term "neoliberalism" in describing these changes, and can the project of water supply privatization and re-regulation be categorized as a success, and on what grounds? Next, in Chapter 9, Morgan M. Robertson discusses wetland mitigation banking and problems in environmental governance related to how banking complicates "smooth" neoliberal discourse about the process of commodifying ecosystem services. Gail Holland in Chapter 10 discusses agricultural trade liberalization both via the language of EU agricultural trade advocates and as it has played out in the south Florida landscape for the sake of illustrating how ideas of landscape, livelihood and agro-ecology, encompassed by the term "multifunctionality," have been used in defense of domestic agricultural supports. Douglas Young and Roger Kel close Part II with a chapter that shows how growth in the Greater Toronto Area has had a significant impact on, and articulation with, water and how the process of privatization at the core of this growth has exploded as a result of a less regulated and market-driven global economy. The commentary by Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, researchers who have made significant contributions to theoretical understandings of neoliberalizations in other domains, situates the chapters and the volume as a whole on a wider canvas of attempts to theorize neoliberalism writ large, clearly delimiting many of the key issues. Reinforcing one of the guiding principles of this volume, they reiterate the necessity of concrete research on what they term "actually existing neoliberalisms."

In Part III, the substantive focus shifts to "Devolution and neoliberal governmentalities," where various experiments in shifting responsibility, accountability, and management abandon or reconfigure state controls over nature. These cases show the extremely complex outcomes that can ensue in devolution, showing the "state" from very different points of view. As Heynen and Perkins in Chapter 15 set their viewpoint from the position of minority communities to show the structured nature of local state planting and neglect of urban forests in Milwaukee, Holfeld's account of Superfund in Chapter 16 is narrated from within the EPA itself, showing the uneven relation of governmentality from within a real entity we typically understand as "government." So too, as only case study research can show, things often turn out differently in the process of devolution than one might expect. While Prudham's grim exploration of water quality crisis in Walkerton, Ontario, in Chapter 13 shows the very real and material negative outcomes of governmental experiments, in Chapter 14 Blomley's urban
neoliberalizations. There is no singular neoliberalism evident here. Complex, contingent, and contextual political and cultural influences, together with diverse material ecologies and economies comprise very different settings for reforms in ways that shape and constrain their direction. Nor do the authors conceptualize neoliberalism in a uniform manner, a problem endemic to a collection such as this, all the more so since the research was not undertaken collectively. Ultimately, then, not all the authors arrive at the same normative conclusions. Robertson, for instance, finds little to celebrate in the development of exchangeable wetlands, while Bakker is open to the notion that privatization of water might not be inevitably anathema to improved quality.

At the same time, however, there are common threads in both approaches and conclusions. First, on balance, the cases cast serious doubt on utopian predictions such as those of CATO's Jerry Taylor, promising a bright world of green capitalism to be achieved via neoliberal reform. The evidence in these chapters shows reason for concern, and the reviews are at best mixed, pointing to the need to consider carefully the specific character of both governance reforms and social and environmental outcomes in geographical context. In worst case scenarios, the results of ill-conceived market-based reforms have proven disastrous either socially, ecologically, or both. Where neoliberal reform has provided social and ecological opportunity, it has often done so in spite of, and not as a result of, enclosure, commodification, and devolution.

Significantly, however, while most if not all of the contributors here are skeptical about the general thrust of environmental neoliberalism, and though their specific conclusions are diverse, they also share a common cognizance of the need to move beyond polemics and to identify political openings. This means carefully considering the opportunities and limits of non-governmental organizations as many step into the breach left by downsized or hollowed-out states, including the ways in which resource users assert and constitute themselves communally in the midst and in spite of efforts to individuate and privatize (St. Martin 2005, and this volume). So too, it means examining the mix of regulatory measures and oversight that accompanies (or fails to accompany) privatization and administrative offloading (Prudham 2004; Rees 1998; Smith 2004).

More generally, it means using common case experiences to point the way to alternatives and opportunities. By showing the emergence and implementation of neoliberal reform as an ideology, with a history and a purpose, we assert that it is possible to subvert its taken-for-granted political status. Many of us (with some dismay!) have witnessed the emergence of this status in our teaching, as students interpret Hardin's parable of already individuated and selfish herdsmen contending for access to a pasture with fixed carrying capacity as an accurate, ahistorical and ageographical rendition of political ecological reality, a simple truth. We are keen to disrupt this truth-like status, but to avoid making it worse with totalizing or monolithic narratives.
in the ways in which we represent neoliberalism. The theoretically informed but empirically oriented character of these cases is no accident, but is instead meant to help authors and readers alike work through specifics, to pose questions about pre-given notions, and to consider alternatives both foreclosed and yet to be explored. The stakes are high and rigorous research and theory remain central tools for imagining, asserting, and implementing progressive and sustainable futures. We hope this collection contributes to this effort by bringing diverse experiences together.

Notes

1 We use the term “neoliberalization” frequently, drawing most directly on discussions by Peck (2001) and Peck and Tickell (2002), to capture something of the diversity of different neoliberal-inspired projects in governance reform, not least in the diversity of ways that neoliberal tropes are territorialized. As Peck and Tickell (2002) write: “we propose a processual conception of neoliberalization as both an ‘out there’ and an ‘in here’ phenomenon whose effects are necessarily variegated and uneven, but the incidence and diffusion of which may provide clues to a pervasive ‘metalogic.’” Whether this gets around the tricky ontological but also important political question as to whether the singularity of “neoliberalism” obscures more than it discloses is a subject we discuss at more length below.

2 That states can also be a source of emancipation, including at individual levels is typically unexplored terrain in neoliberal discourses, even though state sanction of individual property rights is one manner in which individual freedoms are pursued through not in opposition to states. Similar logic might be applied to state governed liberal notions of citizenship that act in important ways to shape and constrain individual opportunities.

3 Peck (2006) also notes that the debate over Hurricane Katrina is indicative of the ways in which highly idealized, utopian representations of market outcomes are invoked in relation to real world political ecologies like this one in order to argue somewhat perversely—that failures originate in not going far enough with laissez-faire reforms.

References


