



On the varying ontologies of capitalism: Embeddedness, dispossession, subsumption

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Abstract

This article offers a substantive understanding of the variegation of capitalism, in an attempt to move beyond the current impasse in the mainstream varieties-of-capitalism approach. Drawing on existing conceptualizations of capitalism-society relationships, as well as on Agamben's reconceptualization of the Foucauldian notion of 'dispositif', the article identifies the ontological 'dispositifs' of embeddedness, dispossession and subsumption, associating them with 'purely relational', 'sovereignty-based' and 'dualistic' ontologies of capitalism, respectively. The article argues that these dispositifs are instrumental in capitalism's process of subjectification, laying the foundations for a renewed belief in capitalism even under the most adverse conditions.

Keywords

Agamben, dispositifs, Harvey, Negri, ontologies, varieties of capitalism

I Introduction

Recent and ongoing politico-economic turbulences emanating from the financial crash of 2008–2009 have once again brought to the fore discussions about the nature of capitalism within the wider public sphere and within academia. As well as deepening existing sociospatial inequalities and creating new ones, economic crises have historically functioned as turning points in the evolution (the management, organization and restructuring) of capitalist economies and societies, opening the way for novel regimes of accumulation and politico-economic regulation. The crises of the late 19th century prepared the ground for the advent of a more rationalized mode of production, which subsequently materialized under the form of Fordism and the large corporation; the crisis of 1929 induced western political elites to abandon the free market doctrine inherited from classic liberalism, opting for a Keynesian

approach to politico-economic regulation; finally, the crisis of 1973 sparked the transition towards post-Fordist patterns of industrial organization, the recent round of globalization and the neoliberalization of capitalist societies driven by imperatives of economic-spatial competitiveness and market deregulation.

It is not yet clear whether the recent crisis and the related economic recession that has hit global markets will lead to a qualitatively novel or distinctive change in the structure and the regulation of capitalism in ways comparable to previous great crises. With no doubt, these events have shaken previous, far more optimistic,

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assumptions about western capitalism. The current politico-economic scenario, with its shattered certainties about the present and the future of the globalized world (and consequently of the European Union, US hegemony, neoliberalism and all related epiphenomena), has thus sparked renewed interest in substantive understandings of ‘capitalism itself’, that is to say, its nature and mode of being and its varying ways of relating to its outside environment.

Over the past three decades, contributions to the understanding of capitalism have come either from studies in comparative political economy dealing with the identification and analysis of national, regional and macro-regional models of capitalism, such as those commonly known under the rubric of the ‘varieties of capitalism approach’ (see Hall and Soskice, 2001; for a critical review, see Peck and Theodore, 2007), or from theoretical schools historically concerned with the critical theorization of capitalism, such as Marxists and the post-Marxists variously conceived (from socialist economists to advocates of poststructuralist political economy), but also neo-Schumpeterians and neo-Keynesians. In a context characterized by the triumphant ascent of globalization and the neoliberal project of accumulation and politico-economic regulation, discussions on the nature of capitalism have been confined, therefore, to well-demarcated domains within academic scholarship and public debates. A major consequence is that we arguably now lack understandings of capitalism – and related research programmes – that aim to transgress the boundaries of the existing schools of thought outlined above. Even the recent revival of critical political theory in the social sciences has engaged only peripherally with the theorization of capitalism, privileging the investigation of the dominant mode of regulation (neoliberalism). Yet, contemporary politico-economic events prompt

us to revive the understanding of ‘capitalism as a totality’, as Frederic Jameson has recently put it in reconsidering Marx’s legacy (Jameson, 2011). According to Jameson, under conditions of globalization this totality is constitutively multifaceted, while capitalist space is in relentless expansion. This premise leads him to call for a (post)dialectical thinking capable of incorporating incompatible modes of thought without reducing them to one-dimensionality (see also Jameson, 2009).

Jameson’s plural and postdialectical view of capitalism as a relentlessly expanding totality of social relations offers an inspiring departure point for this article, which aims to explore the variegated, at the same time mutually contradictory and interrelated, relational ontologies of contemporary capitalism and the ways in which the production of these ontologies creates conditions for adapting the governance of capitalism to different economic-spatial settings. As part of this investigation, the article looks at strands of research and thinking within the social sciences, paying special attention to human geography, which have been grappling with understanding current forms of the capitalist mode of production and accumulation from different viewpoints. In methodological and disciplinary terms, this implies engaging with the ‘theoretical pluralism’ advocated in a pragmatic vein by Trevor Barnes and Eric Sheppard in this journal (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010). In recent years, this pluralism has been increasingly identified as the distinctive trait of contemporary economic geographical and sociological scholarship in comparison with orthodox economics (Peck, 2005a, 2012).

Ontology is understood here in its literal sense as an inquiry into capitalism’s varying natures of being. As an incomplete social formation, capitalism acts as a constantly expanding and socializing entity, particularly under conditions of globalization, as Jameson maintains. This entails looking at the varying ways in which capitalism as a mode of production

and social formation mobilizes various ontological ‘dispositifs’, giving rise to different ‘foundational moments’ and processes of subjectification through the encounter with its outside environment. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: an introductory section setting out the main thesis is followed by three sections each dedicated to a critical presentation of the three ontologies of capitalism and related ‘dispositifs’, identified in this work; finally, the article concludes by reflecting on capitalism’s enduring power even under the most adverse economic conditions, through a rereading of Walter Benjamin’s fragment on ‘capitalism as religion’.

II Reconstructing the ontological configurations of capitalism

Over the last 30 years, different strands of thought have analysed the qualitative properties of contemporary capitalism, its differing modes of being and ways of relating to its outside environment: namely society, living entities and the biophysical environment. In this article, I identify three distinct ‘ontologies of capitalism’ emerging from intellectual strands that have rarely communicated with each other, namely neo-institutionalism, neo-Marxism and post-Marxism, seeking to confront them in both a dialectical and pluralistic fashion. Each of these ‘ontologies’ mobilizes what is defined as a specific ‘ontological dispositif’ that allows the process of capitalist accumulation and development to operate and thus to come into being. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2009) has recently proposed a ‘theological genealogy’ of the concept of dispositif (or ‘apparatus’ in English translations) originally advanced by Michel Foucault. Foucault used the term ‘dispositif’ to refer to the heterogeneous set of institutional, cultural and juridical elements (discourses, scientific statements, laws, prisons, police measures, architectural artifacts, etc.) strategically inscribed in any power relation and

acting as a network within a context of disciplinary society (see also Revel, 2009). Agamben’s theological genealogy interrogates Foucault’s original intuition of the process of ‘subjectification’ associated with the use of ‘dispositifs’:

I wish to propose to you nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of being into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured. On one side, then, to return to the terminology of the theologians, lies the ontology of creatures, and on the other side the *oikonomia* [understood as ‘management’] of apparatuses that seek to govern and guide them toward the good. (Agamben, 2009: 13)

Agamben concludes that ‘apparatus’:

designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject. (Agamben, 2009: 11)

In the perspective adopted here, an ontological dispositif refers to the complex set of sociocultural and institutional relations associated with specific economic-spatial settings and sociopolitical conditions, which allow the process of capitalist accumulation to come into being and expand further.

The first of these ontologies is centred on the dispositif of ‘embeddedness’. Deriving original inspiration from Karl Polanyi’s thesis about the disembedding power of free-market capitalism to separate the ‘economy’ from ‘society’, since the mid-1980s contemporary scholars investigating the structuring and functioning of post-Fordist economies have built on the assumption that firms and other economic organizations tend to be increasingly embedded in social networks and interpersonal relationships. The notion of embeddedness has inspired a

tremendously rich and influential body of research on contemporary capitalist economies, especially within the framework of neo-institutionalist and evolutionary approaches to the study of the post-Fordist transition in the 1980s and 1990s. This article associates embeddedness with the ‘purely relational’ quality of contemporary capitalism: its presumed ability to relate horizontally to existing social processes and economic formations.

The second of these ontologies is centred on the dispositif of ‘dispossession’. This term is associated primarily with David Harvey’s conceptualization of the neoliberal project of capitalist accumulation elaborated over the past decade. Other authors of Marxist inspiration, such as Daniel Bensaid and John Holloway, have also used this concept or closely related conceptualizations such as those based on the classic notion of ‘enclosure’ as a distinctive and recurrent feature of capitalism over the long term. Within the critical social sciences, the concept of dispossession has inspired studies investigating the violence of capitalist accumulation in neoliberal times. I will argue that the category of dispossession is evocative of a sovereignty-based ontology associated with capitalism, which allows this mode of production to act as a sovereign and colonizing force within the existing politico-economic order at multiple geographical scales. While the previous dispositif (embeddedness) illuminates the purely relational quality of capitalism (relation as a form of exchange and dialogue among ostensibly equal subjects), dispossession reveals a vertical relationality: namely, relation within an explicit dynamic of domination: capitalism’s capacity to impose its rule over the world through the expropriation of common resources and the exercise of formalized or implicit violence.

The third ontology discussed in this article mobilizes the dispositif of ‘subsumption’. A term originally used by Karl Marx, who famously distinguished between the formal and the real subsumption of labour under capital, the use of this

notion has been revived by Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Christian Marazzi and other post-Marxist theorists of immaterial, cognitive capitalism and the general intellect. Reinterpreting Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in light of their understanding of knowledge-based capitalism, these authors see the dynamic of contemporary capitalism as driven by the real subsumption of ‘life itself’ within the existing mode of production. In this perspective, capitalism is understood as relying on a dualistic ontology, based on positions of autonomy and alterity, which nurtures its processes of invention and emphasizes the importance of the capital-life relation. In this sense, capitalism also relies on a relational ontology, which is, however, founded on an inversion of the being between autonomous subjects (constituent power and the constituted power, as we shall see).

The confrontation between and the juxtaposition of these three ontological dispositifs is intended to help us discern the ontological map of contemporary capitalism, understood as a multifaceted totality in a context of hegemonic yet variegated neoliberal globalization (Brenner et al., 2010). I argue that these categories shed light on fundamental qualities of capitalism: namely the multiple ways in which capital engages with what lies outside its own sphere of existence and influence (‘its outside environment’) in order to reinforce its hegemonic rule in the contemporary world. As mentioned, capitalism is a constitutively incomplete social formation (see Jessop, 2000) whose reproduction and expansion depends on changing ontological configurations adapting to different political and socio-economic conditions. The proposed categorization of the varying ontologies of capitalism allows us to offer a comparative understanding of how capitalism has been theorized by different strands of research as well as of the actually existing varieties of contemporary capitalism.

Moreover, from this pluralistically ontological perspective, the understanding of the variegation of capitalism seeks to avoid the temptation of geographical-institutional determinism, which

Table 1. Politico-economic geographies of capitalism: a pluralistically ontological perspective.

Theoretical sources	Ontological dispositif	Ontology	Relation to outside environment	Ideal type of capitalism	Spaces of capitalism
new economic sociology and geography (Granovetter et al.), neo-institutionalism	embeddedness	purely relational	horizontal (exchange, dialogue, negotiation)	clusters of endogenous firms (post-Fordism)	emerging and previously semi-peripheral economies
neo-Marxists (Harvey et al.)	dispossession	sovereignty-based	vertical (domination, violence, expropriation)	rent-centred economic development (new imperialism)	newly commodified urban and regional environments
post-Marxists (Negri et al.) and poststructuralists (Thrift et al.)	subsumption	dualistic	inversion (autonomy, alterity, appropriation)	knowledge-based economies (immaterial capitalism)	advanced capitalist societies

has informed mainstream research on the varieties of capitalism in previous years. Within this literature, capitalism has been analysed with regard to its differentiation along institutional and geographical lines, highlighting diverse institutionalizations of capitalism across different spatial contexts (see, for instance, Amable, 2003; Hall and Soskice, 2001). However, while theoretically sophisticated and sustained by robust empirical evidence, this literature has been based on a somewhat self-evident proposition: capitalism is varied because capitalist economies and societies rely on spatiotemporally differentiated institutions. While acknowledging the geographically differentiated pathways towards capitalist development, this conceptual framework does not help us understand capitalism's different but also co-existing modes of being and relating in the contemporary globalizing world. This article seeks to address this problem, by providing a first contribution to the ontological reconstruction of the politico-economic geographies of capitalism. Table 1 anticipates and schematizes the substantive interpretation of capitalism offered here, based on the

identification of three different ontologies which will be analysed in greater detail in the later sections. This tripartite ontological configuration of capitalism does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the most influential ways in which capitalism's relationships with its outside environment have been theorized within the social sciences, with special reference to economic geography. Each ontological configuration is associated with specific 'ideal types' and 'spaces of capitalism' how merely for illustrative purposes, thus having no pretensions to make sense of the tremendous varieties of actually existing capitalism.

III Embeddedness: the purely relational ontology of capitalism

In disciplinary terms, the concept of embeddedness is intimately associated with the rise of the New Economic Sociology in the 1980s and its attempt at disrupting the rationalist, utilitarian and undersocialized anthropology of *homo oeconomicus*, upon which orthodox, neoclassical economics has been historically based. In

The Great Transformation, Karl Polanyi (1944) famously argued that the distinctive feature of pre-market economies lies in the anchorage to social relationships, and that the transition to a market-based economic rationality led to the eradication of societal embeddedness. The rediscovery and rereading of Polanyi's concept of embeddedness has been the point of departure for an intellectual movement in economic sociology that has exerted great influence on a variety of neighbouring disciplines and research areas, such as economic geography and interdisciplinary regional development scholarship, as well as influential theoretical approaches within the socio-economic sciences, such as evolutionary economics and neo-institutionalism.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter, in one of the most cited articles in contemporary social sciences, provided a path-breaking contribution to this rich body of literature, revisiting Polanyi's concept of embeddedness in order to re-evaluate the economy-society relationship and putting an end to the incommunicability between sociology and economics (Granovetter, 1985). The concept of embeddedness is closely related to other key concepts within contemporary theorizations of economic development, such as social capital and civicness, which share an emphasis on the sociocultural (i.e. institutional) bases of contemporary capitalism in a path-dependent perspective (see Robert Putnam's famous 1993 study on the civic traditions of Italian region). As anticipated, this view of the capitalist economy as a socially embedded phenomenon found fertile ground in economic geographical studies in the early 1990s, filling the void left by the declining attractiveness of conventional Marxism, but also of quantitative regional science. Emerging intellectual leaders in the discipline at that time, such as Michael Storper and Ash Amin, joined established ones, such as Peter Dicken, Nigel Thrift and Allen Scott, at the forefront of the 'institutionalist turn' that was later recognized as a crucial point of departure for the shaping

of a relational economic geography (Boggs and Rantisi, 2003). In this context, crucial domains of economic geographical inquiry, such as the firm and the region, as well as more specialized fields that were attracting renewed interest in the discipline and beyond, such as the social regulation of labour markets and the burgeoning phenomenon of ethnic entrepreneurship, were theorized as organizations and processes embedded in spatially proximate sociocultural relations and mostly localized institutional settings (Grabher, 1993; Kloostermann et al., 1999; Peck, 1996).

In contrast to the initial emphasis on the localized character of economic action and socio-spatial entities, subsequent literature in the 2000s paid particular attention to the relationality of economic phenomena taking shape through spatially stretched, networked relations, such as global production networks and value chains in economic geography (see Hess and Yeung, 2006) and mobile urban policies of economic regeneration and spatial competitiveness in urban studies (McCann and Ward, 2010). From this perspective, spatial entities par excellence in economic geographical studies – such as the region – have been reconceptualized in terms of unbounded spatialities (Amin, 2004). In a comprehensive review considering the use of this concept in economic geography and beyond, Martin Hess argued that the more recent generation of scholarship focusing on economic actors embedded in multiple and translocal networks and linkages has shed light on a third type of embeddedness – 'network embeddedness' – in addition to the conventional, 'overterritorialized' interpretation of the concept understood as societal and territorial embeddedness that became popular in regional development scholarship in the 1990s (Hess, 2004). This changing attitude towards the use of the embeddedness concept testifies to a broader epistemological shift in human geography and critical spatial sciences that has redefined relational ontologies of space, putting

emphasis on connections, fluidity and mobile networks in contrast to previously dominant relational thinking centred on the conventional understanding of geographical scale as a nested hierarchy of bounded spaces (Marston et al., 2005). Therefore, even though networks were already central to Granovetter's original conceptualization of embeddedness (Smelser and Swedberg, 1994), in more recent years post-structuralist geographical thinking has provided a decisive contribution to the understanding of the networked structure of contemporary capitalism, seeking to bring back power into relational thinking in contrast to prevailing representations of capitalism as based on horizontal relations of mutual trust, cooperation and associativity (Peck, 2005a; Yeung, 2005).

According to critics, despite efforts to reconceptualize embeddedness in light of the network-based (rather than place-based) relational turn through the notion of 'network embeddedness', the scenario of 'global interconnectedness' characterizing the world economy should have instead given rise to a deeper epistemological shift, undermining the central role played by embeddedness as a key concept in geographical and sociological analyses of capitalism, while opening the way to a 'practice-centred turn' in the discipline, by which either territorialized or deterritorialized practices become more important than the institutional settings (the firm, the region, the labour market, the local community) that were central to studies using the concept of embeddedness (Jones, 2008). This argument has been developed by making reference to how business activities are conducted within transnational firms, where spatial proximity and thus socio-territorial embeddedness are no longer decisive factors of economic competitiveness, while distanced practices of networking are considered far more crucial factors of economic success (Jones, 2008). This critical position finds origin and justification in the previously mentioned 'overterritorialized' vision of

embeddedness that became prevalent in the geographical and regional development literatures during the 1990s. One could wonder, however, whether this position that downplays spatial proximity and face-to-face interaction in economic development is applicable not only to deterritorialized transnational companies, but also, for instance, to the diffused entrepreneurship of 'molecular capitalism' in the Italian North, beyond the confines of the previously recognized 'Third Italy' (Bonomi, 1997), or to the myriad endogenous firms that have been protagonists of the booming economy in China during the last decades. Take the case of China: conventional representations and analyses of China's booming economy have concentrated on the measurement of Foreign Direct Investment and the role of central places like Shanghai in terms of their contribution to national competitiveness, but in doing so they have overlooked the importance of endogenous growth in peripheral regions to the global ascent of Chinese capitalism (Huang, 2008). In these contexts, the pursuit of distanced relations in the form of 'long-range networks and connections' within the world economy co-exists with the firm's capacity to embed itself in 'short-range networks' of collaboration at the regional level (Bonomi, 1997). Put differently, while transnational firms may not need to be embedded in specific socioterritorial settings, the vast majority of capitalist enterprises (the endogenous firms) mobilize a wide array of relational assets functioning as a social and territorial anchorage allowing them to compete in global markets more efficiently (Bonomi and Rullani, 2005). Therefore, while 'practice-oriented' approaches have the ability to illuminate the everyday and microsocio dimensions of economic agency and related constellations of power relationships (Jones and Murphy, 2011), this should not lead to a dismissal of the concept of embeddedness and more generally of the attention that has to be paid to the place-based relational assets and institutions associated with regional

pathways of capitalist accumulation and development.

In conclusion, while the neo-institutionalist literature on economic development in the 1990s has been criticized for falling prey to a form of ‘institutional-territorial fetishism’, which replaced the previous ‘spatial fetishism’ of rationalist spatial science, and to an obsession with the local-regional scale, recent years have witnessed a shift within the poststructuralist geographical literature towards a form of ‘network fetishism’ and an equally pernicious one-sided focus on the global level of economic agency and deterritorialized firms, for which place-based qualities and peculiarities are no longer supposed to matter (cf. Jonas, 2006). Rather, even beyond any specific dualism between transnational firms and localized and endogenous ‘molecular capitalism’, the general evolution of capitalism is marked by simultaneous movements of deterritorialization, which associate economic regeneration with the dissipation of energies, flows and connectivities, and reterritorialization, which are aimed at the maintenance of established socio-relations and economic-spatial order. In short, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 259) famously put it, ‘capitalism is continually reterritorializing with one hand what it was deterritorializing with the other’. Movements of territorialization and reterritorialization, therefore, still require the adoption of a theoretical and analytical lens using concepts such as embeddedness that allow us to look at the fixity (and not just the motion) of relational assets and institutions on which capitalist processes of accumulation are founded (Brenner, 1998).

However, even though a critical scrutiny of capitalism as a persistently territorialized phenomenon supports the concept of embeddedness and warns against the perils of ‘network fetishism’, capitalism’s movements of reterritorialization cannot in all circumstances be enacted through the mediation of invisible power relationships or of collaborative dynamics of

mutual trust and cooperation, as maintained by critics and advocates of the embeddedness concept and ‘purely’ relational thinking, respectively, as we have seen. Rather, capitalism’s territorialization and reterritorialization can be pursued by making recourse to the exercise of sovereign power, as the critical literature on ‘accumulation by dispossession’ shows us.

IV Dispossession: the sovereignty-based ontology of capitalism

In his book dedicated to the critical scrutiny of what he calls the ‘new imperialism’, David Harvey draws on Marx’s theory of ‘primitive accumulation’ to provide a theoretically informed and politically situated explanation for the contemporary dynamics of capitalism in times of neoliberal globalization. In Marx’s *Capital* (see Harvey, 2010a) as well as in other classical Marxist texts, such as Lenin’s *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) and Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Accumulation of Capital* (2003 [1913]), the concept of primitive accumulation is related to the historical emergence and ascent of capitalism as a mode of production and social reproduction. In this classical view, ‘primitive accumulation’ was achieved through the forcible separation of workers from the means of production and the capitalist expropriation of land and common resources, which in turn created a proletariat with nothing to sell but its own labour to survive. These were the distinctive features of the historical pathway that led to the ‘invention of capitalism’ between the 18th and the 19th centuries in the pioneering countries of the Industrial Revolution (Perelman, 2000). As industrialization spread geographically, primitive capital accumulation started relying heavily on state subsidies and government orders, as Luxemburg (2003 [1913]: 250) originally pointed out with reference to late 19th-century Russia.

The concept of primitive accumulation has thus been customarily associated with the historical rise of capitalism, on the one hand, and

with its geographical expansion to hitherto non-capitalist environments such as the colonial lands at the time of Marx (for instance, through the enslavement and so-called 'trade' of African people to the colonial plantations). Marx himself was apparently hesitant to recognize primitive capital accumulation as a constantly evolving phenomenon, going beyond the specific spatiotemporalities conventionally identified with the early stages of the accumulation process and the expansion of capitalist social relations in non-capitalist regions (Perelman, 2000 – although see Bonefeld, 2000, and de Angelis, 2001, for an alternative reading). Harvey's theoretical endeavour, therefore, has been to throw light on the continuing relevance of this concept, using it to uncover the contemporary dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. Harvey's work thus marks a turning point in how critical geographers and other social scientists have understood the notion of primitive accumulation. In his analysis of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, Harvey contends that capitalism's process of expansion in times of globalization revives longstanding dynamics of primitive accumulation, including those originally described by Marx:

the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation. (Harvey, 2005: 145)

Over the last 30 years, with the advent of neoliberalism, these dynamics appear to have taken

place simultaneously in the Global North and the Global South, making the contemporary world increasingly globalized in newly integrated ways (Glassman, 2006), including the displacement of peasant populations in emerging capitalist countries such as India and Mexico and the strengthening of intellectual property rights and the privatization of public services (housing, telecommunications, education) in the western capitalist countries (Harvey, 2005).

Harvey's reappraisal of the contemporary relevance of the Marxian theory of 'primitive accumulation' and the related notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' has inspired a wide range of studies dealing with contemporary global capitalism in a variety of geographical settings. Exploring the economic logics of primitive accumulation, this notion has been typically applied to the rural regions of contemporary industrializing countries such as China, referring to the ways in which a new wage-labour force has been created (Webber, 2008). Processes of dispossession, however, have not occurred without protests and opposition from the grassroots (Glassman, 2006; Hart, 2006). Transgressing conventional South–North dichotomies, as well as temporal dualisms between the past and the present, anthropologist Tania Murray Li has offered an illuminating analysis of how the dialectical management of possession and dispossession has regulated the conflicting relationships between indigenous and capitalist forces in colonial as well as contemporary periods in a variety of locales in Asia, Africa and the United States alike (Murray Li, 2010). In such different spatiotemporal settings, Murray Li argues that capitalism appears as 'an external force' against which indigenous people mobilize. In these processes of transformation of previously non-capitalist environments such as the rural areas of industrializing countries and regions, accumulation by dispossession reveals the colonizing logics underlying the expansion of capitalism across the globe; a characteristic

that was already present in Rosa Luxembour­g's work, which emphasized how capital resorts to military and political violence in order to reinforce the process of primitive accumulation (de Angelis, 2001). To make sense of this dynamic of colonization as an 'inner dialectic of capitalism', Harvey therefore mobilizes the category of 'new imperialism', drawing inspiration from Luxembour­g's work.

'Accumulation by dispossession' has been mostly applied to the study of land markets in rural regions, but also with reference to urban dynamics of capitalist development and socio-spatial restructuring. Processes of gentrification and inflating ground rents in urban environments have been interpreted along Marxist lines, drawing on Harvey's rethinking of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation in a context of entrepreneurialized governance, and also on his more general theorization of capitalism's restructuring of the built environment being driven by fluctuating cycles of overaccumulation and devalorization (López-Morales, 2010). These theoretical endeavours advocate production-based explanations of gentrification, following in the wake of Neil Smith's now-classic work on urban revanchism (Smith, 1996), while challenging softer understandings of gentrification centred on consumer choice and cultural factors such as the changing lifestyles of the urban creative class (Slater, 2006). Even without explicit reference to Marxist theories of primitive accumulation, the term 'dispossession' is inherently associated with the displacement of long-term and low-income residents in capitalist cities as a consequence of eviction ordinances or invisible market mechanisms. Given the close literary relationship between dispossession and repossession (or 'foreclosure' in American English), the notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' has become intimately associated with the recent global economic crisis, due to its origins and continued reverberations in subprime mortgage markets of financialized capitalism (Strauss, 2009). The

crisis has notoriously led to an explosion in dispossession-through-repossession in those countries most affected by the bursting of the real-estate bubble such as the USA, Ireland and Spain. In the eyes of critical urban scholars, the specific features of the recent economic crisis have effectively realized Harvey's longstanding interpretation of the capitalism-urbanization strategic nexus based on finance (the second circuit of capital) as a contra-cyclical regulator of economic development (Buckley, 2012; Hernandez, 2009; see also Chapter 2 in Harvey, 2012). In the context of the crisis, 'dispossession' can be seen as the capitalists' defensive response (the displacement of insolvent residents ordered by banks and property owners) to the crisis generated by the contradictory and self-destructive effects of financialized capitalism. In this sense, the concept is being used not only with reference to dynamics of capitalist expansion, as in Harvey's original theorization, but also to capital's strategies of survival and self-defence in a phase of economic downturn. Harvey himself has used this notion in his recent book on the crises of capitalism, where, looking back at the previous crisis in East and South Asia in 1997–1998, he argues that:

the asset losses many have experienced during the recent crisis can be viewed as a form of dispossession that can be turned into further accumulation as speculators buy up the assets cheaply today with an eye to selling them at a profit when the market improves. (Harvey, 2010b: 49)

Along with the real-estate market and the contradictory effects associated with the so-called 'financialization of home' through predatory mechanisms of lending in neoliberal societies (Aalbers, 2008), the privatization of public services and natural resources – such as water, gas, oil and other materials – is the other most common way in which the phenomenon of 'accumulation by dispossession' takes shape, both in cities and regions of the South (particularly as

regards natural resources) and those of the capitalist North (as regards the provision of public services) (Hodkinson, 2012; Loftus, 2006; Spronk and Webber, 2007). The expropriation of common wealth such as natural resources or state services can also be thought through the classic metaphor of 'enclosure'. In this vein, contemporary Marxist authors such as Daniel Bensaïd (2007) and John Holloway (2010) have conceptualized the evolution of capitalism as a 'movement of enclosing': 'capitalism, ever since its beginning, has been a movement of enclosure, a movement of converting that which is enjoyed in common into private property' (Holloway, 2010: 29). In this context, neoliberalism, or the 'neo-liberal phase of capitalism' as Holloway defines it in more conventional Marxist terms, has witnessed an 'acceleration of this process of enclosure and has engendered a huge number of struggles to defend or extend that which is held in common' (p. 29; see also Vasudevan et al., 2008).

Accumulation by dispossession is thus pursued through expropriation and enclosure (of land, built environment, public services, natural resources, etc.), presupposing capitalism's exercise of sovereign power over its outside environment. In this sense, capitalism deploys a sovereignty-based ontology predicated on acts of domination to enable the process of accumulation. Sovereignty-based ontologies have gained wide currency in contemporary political philosophy, particularly thanks to the influential work of Giorgio Agamben, who has creatively reformulated Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty as a 'state of exception' (see Agamben, 1998, 2005). His work shows how sovereignty – understood as the sovereign's capacity to decide in neo-Schmittian terms – co-exists with relational technologies of government centred on the production of extra-legal norms and procedures, as the neo-Foucauldian literature on governmentality has documented in recent years. Under neoliberal capitalism more specifically, the co-existence of sovereignty-based

and relational forms of power can follow two different paths. The first path can be based on a 'sequential' dynamic: the sovereign order created by the state or other legitimate governing entities functions as a prerequisite for the deployment of a more diffused neoliberal governmentality. Through the enactment of political decisions in the form, for instance, of legislation concerning the (de)regulation of labour and housing markets or the privatization of public services, which coincide with neoliberalism's 'primitive accumulation stage' in conventionally Marxist terms, the neoliberal project of accumulation finds a terrain for developing and expanding further at the societal level. The second path can take the form of hybridization: as shown by anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006), the sovereign exception in a neoliberal context combines the pursuit of governing 'technologies of subjectivity', aimed at fostering a sense of citizenship as a self-governing condition, with those of 'subjection', aimed at disciplining citizens and actors through mandatory rules, such as those allowing the described processes and dynamics of primitive accumulation being pursued through the dispossession of common resources and public services.

Even though they are infused with relational understanding of government, through an emphasis on extra-legal norms and procedures in a context of diffused governance, sovereignty-based ontologies are criticized for being prey to a unidimensional view of the contemporary socio-economic and political reality. In particular, Antonio Negri argues that:

what is at stake is the modern conception of sovereignty as an assertion of the One within the sphere of political rule and the organization of society. The figure of Leviathan is no longer adequate to make sense of the unitary function (this unity being defined along either contractual or institutional bases) with respect to social disorder and the multitude of subjects. (Negri, 2011; my translation from Italian)

To escape the unidimensional understanding of the reality (and thus of capitalism), Negri and other scholars have proposed an interpretation of capitalism based on a dualistic ontology.

V Subsumption: the dualistic ontology of capitalism

While the theory of dispossession as the driving force – or the ontological *dispositif*, as has been defined here – of the neoliberal project of capitalist accumulation maintains that previously non-capitalist environments are commodified and appropriated within the circuits of capital accumulation, radical scholars led by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that in a context of post-Fordism and postmodernity the process of accumulation relies on the ‘real subsumption of life itself’ within the capitalist domain (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 272). Drawing on Marx’s distinction between the ‘formal’ and the ‘real’ subsumption of labour under capital in the first volume of *Capital*, these authors have argued that the real subsumption of life itself is transforming the very nature of capitalism through the incorporation of knowledges, emotions, affects and linguistic qualities within the capitalist process of production and socialization (Lazzarato, 2003; Marazzi, 2011; Virno, 2002). This transformation has occurred through the informatization of production and the valorization of what proponents of so-called ‘radical Italian thought’ – of which Antonio Negri is the leading figure – have defined as ‘the general intellect’ (Virno and Hardt, 1996). This term has been borrowed from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, most notably from this highly cited passage:

the development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree

the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process. (Marx, 1973 [1857–1858]: 706)

According to Hardt and Negri, the origins of this process of ‘real subsumption’ lie in the rejection of Taylorist work and the disciplinary regime of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism engendered by the rise of new social movements in the 1970s and the 1980s during the post-Fordist transition. At this stage of the process of economic transformation eventually leading to contemporary global capitalism, on the one hand, ‘capitalist relations were expanding to subsume all aspects of social production and reproduction’ (the commodification and expropriation process analysed by critics of neoliberal capitalism), while, on the other hand, ‘cultural relations were redefining production processes and economic structures of value’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 275). This process of cultural change has been triggered by social actors and subjectivities (e.g. youth refusing to work in the Fordist factories, women claiming their right to a dignified life outside the family, new ecological movements experimenting with sustainable forms of living and dwelling) and has been subsequently internalized by cognitive capitalism. According to this view, capitalism did not invent anything *ex nihilo*, but drew on pre-existing and largely external processes of invention associated with the contestation of the disciplinary system of Keynesian-Fordist capitalism and engaged with the autonomous production of what they label ‘common forms of wealth’, such as knowledges and affective relations. In order to expand and regenerate itself, capitalism has striven to accomplish ‘a negative mirroring and an inversion of the new quality of labor power’, namely the ‘new immaterial, cooperative, communicative, and affective composition of labor power’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 276). This process has taken the form of an

internalization of capital's outside environment: the insurgent cultural forces contesting the disciplinary Fordist-Keynesian regime in previous years have been incorporated into the emerging capitalist forces and organizational paradigms.

Unlike the previous ontological dispositifs of embeddedness and dispossession, Hardt and Negri's understanding of contemporary capitalism centred on the thesis of the real subsumption of life itself has received more limited attention within the academic social sciences, including human geography, except for the work of Nigel Thrift and other scholars committed to studying what they define as capitalism's cultural turn. In fact, even though the respective philosophical approaches and the political implications of their analyses may differ substantially (apart from their divergent views on the contemporary relevance of Marxism, Thrift's understanding of life relies on Bergsonian philosophy – see Thrift, 1996 – while Negri rejects any form of vitalism), there are important affinities and convergences between Hardt and Negri's theorization of capitalism and that of Thrift and the other scholars who have placed at the centre of their agenda the study of affects, emotions and invention, particularly in relation to the rise of the so-called 'cultural economy' (Anderson, 2012; Thrift, 2005). Referring to the work of leading exponents of general intellect theory like Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato, as well as Negri himself, but at the same time keeping distance from their Marxist framework, Thrift has investigated the narrative-aesthetic forms and technical procedures of what he calls 'vitalist capitalism', in which, he argues, the extraction of value is 'no longer restricted to labour at work but it encompasses life' (Thrift, 2006: 295). The shift to this form of 'vitalist capitalism' leads to the blurring of conventional production/consumption dichotomies, most notably by getting consumers emotionally involved in the process of invention which triggers the constant evolution and transformation

of capitalism through a variety of biotechnical devices such as architectural design and commodity branding and marketing (Thrift, 2006; on the power of branding in disrupting the production/consumption dualism, see also Kornberger, 2010). In Thrift's view, capitalist accumulation and the related extraction of surplus value – to put it in Marxian terms – occur outside the capitalist firm and within the circuits of what he calls the 'cultural economy' widely understood, involving a variety of biotechnical sources of invention. What Thrift calls 'capitalist commodification' of the 'whole intellect' in several respects coincides with what Hardt and Negri and others name 'real subsumption of life itself', referring to a process of 'internalization', or incorporation, of forms of life standing outside capital.

While the empirical application of both Hardt and Negri's and Thrift's approaches to the understanding of capitalism has been more limited, these strands of thinking are essential points of departure and theoretical positioning for understanding the complex relations between capitalism and a variety of biophysical processes touching upon crucial and highly contentious issues not only within geographical research but also within the wider public: most notably, the environmentalization of urban capitalist development (Davis, 2010; Rossi and Vanolo, 2012) and the strategic value attributed to common resources such as renewable energies and food (the so-called 'commons') which increasingly appear to be dynamic processes constantly reanimating the capital-life relation (Le Heron, 2009; Patel, 2010). Moreover, drawing on this particular understanding of capitalism enables the theme of creative urbanism – widely debated in contemporary urban and regional scholarship over the last decade – to be critically addressed in a qualitatively different way to that commonly embraced by critics of urban neoliberalism. These latter (most incisively Peck, 2005b) have critiqued policies of creative urbanism inspired by Richard Florida's

work for generating and reproducing sociospatial inequalities, particularly in the housing market through gentrification dynamics and related phenomena of sociospatial selectiveness. Such critical interpretations thus look at capitalism as organizing the urban environment for profit-maximizing purposes, prioritizing private property over the common good and making culture and creativity instrumental in this project of accumulation (Tretter, 2009).

A related but distinct notion of the common good lies at the heart of the latest work of Hardt and Negri, evocatively entitled *Commonwealth* (2009). Hardt and Negri recognize the relevance of the thesis of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ put forward by Harvey and other critics of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, they regard it as ‘relatively inert’ as it refers merely to capital’s expropriation of existing wealth such as natural resources and public services, while failing to illuminate the capitalist appropriation of ‘living labour’, so crucial to the reproduction of contemporary capitalism: that is, knowledges, information, images, affects and social relationships (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 137–142). In their view, the significance of urban creativity in understanding the capitalism-urbanization nexus should not be downplayed and treated as a merely rhetorical device in support of neoliberal policies. The contemporary city is to be regarded rather as ‘a living dynamic of cultural practices, intellectual circuits, affective networks and social institutions’ and therefore a primary source of ‘biopolitical production’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 154). This ‘living dynamic’ transcends the narrow confines of Florida’s creative class, taking the form of a broader production of ‘living labour’ which is incorporated (i.e. subsumed) in the economy of contemporary capitalist cities under conditions of precarious employment and inadequate social protection (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The production of ‘living labour’ is thus a highly conflictual phenomenon, especially in a context of deep economic crisis and related austerity

policies directly or indirectly hitting cultural economies, as showed by the struggles of increasingly impoverished ‘immaterial workers’ across Europe. Over the last few years, workers in Spanish cities employed in the knowledge and creative economy have made a decisive contribution to the protest movement commonly known as the ‘Indignados’, while in Italy artists and ‘immaterial workers’ have taken the lead in social movements occupying landmark buildings in Rome, Milan, Naples and Palermo since the summer of 2011. Therefore, a critical and transformative understanding of capitalism should reconsider the pivotal role of cities as sites of biopolitical production, trying to offer an alternative to the process of capitalist commodification which has so far found in Florida’s analytical-narrative framework a contested but still powerful intellectual and governmental technology.

VI Conclusion

This article has attempted to move beyond the current impasse in scholarship addressing the so-called varieties of capitalism, seeking to overcome the geographical-institutionalist determinism of its conceptual framework, while offering a pluralistically substantive interpretation of ‘capitalism itself’. In doing so, it has retained focus on capitalism’s totality and at the same time it has called attention to capitalism’s different natures of being and ways of relating to its outside environment in a context of hegemonic but persistently variegated neoliberalization and globalization.

The three ontological configurations described here shed light on the varying ways in which capitalism’s relationships with its outside environment have been understood in contemporary social sciences, with special reference to economic geography. The identification of different ontological ‘dispositifs’ – embeddedness, dispossession,

subsumption – allows us to understand how diversified and dialectical processes of capitalism's subjectification prepare the ground for an activity of governance adapting to changing economic conditions and productive settings, such as post-Fordist clusters of endogenous firms, newly commodified urban and regional environments, and knowledge-based and creative economies (see Table 1). In this sense, the perspective adopted here is not intended to avoid dealing with issues relating to the governance of capitalism, which have been at the heart of studies on the varieties of capitalism conducted from a comparative political-economy perspective. Rather, the pluralistically substantive interpretation of 'capitalism itself' aims to repoliticize discussions about the variegation of capitalism (and neoliberalism), inviting us to question capitalism's different processes of subjectification associated with its relentless expansion and socialization, and to continue interrogating the evolving relationships between the particular and the universal in contemporary capitalist globalization (Butler et al., 2000).

Moreover, the proposed substantive understanding of the varieties of capitalism is intended to provide an explanation for capitalism's enduring power even in a context of deep economic crisis and recession such as the one that has followed the credit crunch of 2008–2009. As Walter Benjamin (1996 [1925]) revealingly pointed out in his fragment on 'capitalism as religion', capitalism is to be viewed as an 'essentially religious phenomenon', not in the Weberian sense as a 'religiously conditioned structure', but as a 'purely cultic religion'. This means that – in the absence of dogma (like in ordinary religions), as Benjamin notes – capitalism is in constant search of a foundational moment through its encounter with society and the wider outside environment. The mobilization of ontological 'dispositifs', in the sense outlined in Agamben's 'theological genealogy' of the original Foucauldian notion, triggers

processes of capitalism's subjectification and resubjectification through expansion and socialization, thus laying the foundations for a renewed belief in capitalism as a force capable of guiding human societies toward the alleged common good even under the most adverse politico-economic conditions.

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