Part V

Sustainability
12. Natural resources and constraints
Extraction is fundamental to the structure and history of the world-system. As early world-systems analysts explained, extraction provides the basic raw materials for production and consumption, and in the capitalist world-system these raw materials are transformed into commodities with exchange values. Declining terms of trade and persistent unequal exchange renders extractive peripheries underdeveloped and ecologically impoverished. Far from an ephemeral period in the evolution of human societies, extraction in the peripheral regions endures and is thus vital to consideration of possible world-system futures.

A growing literature in sociology, geography, and environmental history examines both historical and contemporary dynamics of resource extraction, beginning with questions of how materials of the earth are commodified (Castree 2003) and how such processes are shaped by the characteristics of the commodities and the socionatural formations in particular geographical regions (Nevins and Peluso 2008). In other words, studies of extraction examine both material processes of transforming matter and economic processes of transforming value. Moreover, scholars increasingly recognize the variability and contingency of extraction, as processes of dispossession, commodification, and accumulation (re)occur in various locations (Harvey 2003).

World-systems research makes several distinctive contributions to our understanding of extraction. First, it recognizes the specificity of commodity extraction, especially as corrective to ideologically modernist optimism about the automaticity of steps from raw materials exporter to developed manufacturing center. Whereas core processes may produce “generative effects” that propel cycles of hegemonic ascent, the extractive processes undergirding them produce “diseco-nomies of scale” (Bunker and Ciccantell 2005), “inattentively reshape[d] local ecosystems” (Bunker 1984; Friedmann 2000: 502).

However, second, the geographic locations of extractive economies do not necessarily coincide with the core and periphery of the world-system so much as with struggles over benefits of the world-economy (Arrighi 1994; Moore 2003). Extraction of oil and minerals from the periphery is common, yet even within the rising core of the United States, Appalachia was an early extractive periphery (Dunaway 1996) while in recent decades oil and coal extraction have continued to be critical. What distinguishes extractive locations are the ways socionatural configurations are disrupted and altered (Swyngedouw 1999).

Third, extractive sectors shape politics. Although some question the “resource curse” thesis for being over-generalized or reductionist (Rosser 2006), there is significant evidence that resources, especially oil, are associated with authoritarian politics (Ross 2001). Indonesia’s authoritarian New Order relied on extraction of multiple resources to support its accumulation strategies and longevity (Gellert 2010). Whether and how such strategies persist in a more democratized era is an
open question. Movements of resistance to the commodification and extraction of raw materials (Kaup 2008) provide insights into possible foundations for envisioning—and material obstacles to achieving—reconfigurations.

In the present conjuncture of global economic crisis, it is vital to examine extraction within an intertwined relationship with financialization of the world-economy, as well as in relationship to the neo-liberalization of nature (Bridge 2004; McCarthy and Prudham 2004) and attempted spatio-temporal “fixes” (Harvey 2003). Financialization affects the logic of extraction and resource management, for example, while reconfiguring socionature to create (shareholder) value and accumulation (Gunnoe and Gellert 2011). An unfulfilled agenda of research would integrate the heights of finance with materio-spatial analysis to investigate crises and their resolution (O’Hearn 2005). As Foster (2009) argues, the ecological rift of global capitalism is evident in multiple ecological crises, but the pressing question is whether extraction is pushing human society beyond hegemonic transition toward “epochal change” (Friedmann 2000: 504). Examining “non-Cartesian ontologies” (Moore 2011) of capitalism operating through the contingencies of human and nonhuman nature offer the political space to envision reconfigurations of socionatural relations.

References