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Confronting multiple global crises: a political economy approach for the twenty-first century

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to develop a political economy approach able to examine the multiple, global crises of our times, a crisis of global capitalism, a crisis of global labour relations, a crisis of global gender relations, a crisis of global race relations and a crisis of global ecology. Based on the philosophy of internal relations, I make three claims in this paper. First, we need a historical materialist approach to comprehend the historical specificity of capitalism. Second, we need an expanded conceptualization of capitalist accumulation, understanding that capitalist reproduction depends not only on the exploitation of wage labour in the sphere of production, but equally on different forms of expropriation in the sphere of social reproduction. Third, to reveal the internal relations between these different crises, we need to focus on class struggle in our analysis, defining both class struggle and labour movement broadly when doing so.

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Introduction

We are confronting several existential, overlapping crises (Gills, 2010 and 2020). The post-pandemic global political economy is characterized by rising unevenness and mounting inequality. While the one per cent richest people ‘have captured almost two-thirds of all new wealth’ since 2020 and especially food and energy corporations ‘more than doubled their profits in 2022’, ‘poverty has increased for the first time in 25 years’ (Oxfam, 2023, p. 7). As William Robinson points out, the global political economy is gripped by a crisis of overaccumulation, in which accumulated surplus value is increasingly unable to find profitable investment opportunities. Surplus capital and surplus labour can no longer be brought together in a profitable way (Robinson, 2022, pp. 16–17). This has intensified geo-political rivalries, resulting in trade wars such as those between the United States and China as well as war between Russia and Ukraine against the background of wider tensions between Russia and NATO/EU (Bieler & Morton, 2024a). Gaza and the genocide perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinians with the military support of the USA, UK, Germany and other Western countries presents ‘a Ghastly Window into the Crisis of Global Capitalism’ (Robinson and Nguyen, 2024). Moreover, we are facing a crisis of global labour relations, in which employment precarity has proliferated not only in the Global South but increasingly also the Global

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North. According to the ILO (2018), ‘two billion workers – representing 61.2 per cent of the world’s employed population – are in informal employment’. Simultaneously, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how unequal gender relations are not confined to the workplace but affect society at large. Melissa Johnston et al. (2023), for example, observe a ‘patriarchal reset’ in the Asia Pacific during the pandemic, marked by an increase in gender-based violence and a decline in domestic violence service provision as reported by women’s rights organizations, all within a setting of patriarchal institutions of global health governance. These crises, in turn, are internally related to a global crisis of race relations expressed in widespread mobilizations around the Black Lives Matter movement. Lastly, the global ecological crisis reflected in climate change, the overuse of finite resources and a catastrophic decline in biodiversity (Hickel, 2020, pp. 6–16) further deepens, and is deepened by, the other crises. Ultimately, these overlapping crises create a perfect storm, an explosive mix threatening civilization and the planet as a whole.

While the analysis of these multiple global crises themselves is beyond the scope of an article, the purpose here is to map out an innovative political economy approach, able to provide the theoretical tools necessary to analyse these multiple global crises. This approach is based on the philosophy of internal relations. Rather than positing logically independent factors existing side-by-side one another and being externally related, it is understood that the full meaning of a particular concept, a specific building block of reality can only be grasped by understanding it in its internal relations with other building blocks. The focus is, therefore, on internally related causes and conditions (Ollman, 1976, p. 48).

The philosophy of internal relations ... treats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what it is, so that a significant change in any of these relations registers as a qualitative change in the system of which it is a part. (Ollman, 2003, p. 5)

Instead of an empirical pluralism in which separate categories of capital, labour, gender, race and ecology are isolated from one another, emphasizing different categories as having greater relevance at different times, this will allow us to comprehend the different ways of how these various forms of exploitation and oppression are always closely interlinked. ‘The philosophy of internal relations holds that what others take to be a “thing” that may or may not undergo change and may or may not have relations with other things is itself both a “process” and a “relation”’ (Ollman, 2015, p. 10). Thus, capital is considered as a social relation in such a way that the internal ties between the relations of production, state-civil society, and conditions of class struggle can be realized.

Based on such a philosophy of internal relations, I will make three claims in this article. First, I will maintain that we need a historical materialist approach to comprehend the specificity of our current capitalist historical epoch including the roots underpinning capitalism’s relentless outward expansionary dynamic. Second, I will argue that we need to combine this historical materialist perspective with feminist, post-colonial as well as world-ecology insights to comprehend that capitalist accumulation not only depends on the exploitation of wage labour but also the expropriation of unpaid labour and ‘cheap natures’ in the spheres of social reproduction. Third, wherever there is exploitation, there is also resistance. Focusing on class struggle in moments of contestation reveals the internal relations between these different forms of exploitation and oppression, which ultimately underpin the various global crises. I will argue that both ‘class struggle’ as well as ‘labour movement’ must be understood in a broad sense to capture the wide range of resistance. In order to highlight these broader definitions and the ways of how different forms of oppression and exploitation are internally related, I will briefly discuss the (global) struggles against water commodification.

Comprehending the historical specificity of capitalism

In their analysis of international developments, both realist and liberal approaches take the separate appearance of the political and economic, the state and market as their natural starting point rather than enquiring why the two appear separate in the first place. ‘Marx refers to mistaking appearance for essence as “fetishism”’ (Ollman, 2003, p. 80). As a result, they are treated as ahistoric facts, making it impossible to understand the historical specificity of capitalism (Bieler & Morton, 2018, pp. 6–10). For example, mainstream, positivist International Political Economy theories are at a loss, when it comes to the challenge of comprehending and addressing the multiple crises confronting us at this historical moment. On one hand, according to realists such as John Mearsheimer (2019, p. 8), ‘the post–Cold War liberal international order was doomed to collapse’, as state rivalry within an anarchic system asserts itself again with nationalism raising its head. Liberals, by contrast, refer to the ongoing importance of liberal institutionalist principles for the organization of global order (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 8). Ultimately, however, this focus on state rivalry and co-operation as well as the functioning or non-functioning of international institutions and norms analyses at best the appearances of these multiple crises. These approaches overlook, how the international system itself has been gendered and raced and is, therefore, characterized by deep, structural inequalities. But it is not only the international system, which is gendered and raced, the very theories employed to analyse it are equally gendered (Tickner, 1988) and raced. As ‘racism informs the major paradigms of IR theory such as realism and liberalism’ (Henderson, 2013, p. 78), it should come as no surprise that these theories overlook racial inequalities underpinning their object of study. Unsurprisingly, they overlook how the very system they take as their starting point of analysis is itself an expression of structurally embedded patriarchal and racist forms of oppression. Realists and liberals can speculate on whether states may co-operate over climate change or not, but they cannot assess the underpinning dynamics, the internal relations of these crises, the way these crises co-constitute and re-enforce each other. Undoubtedly, the war in Ukraine will result in a flourishing of realist and liberal scholarship exploring why the economic links between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and Europe more widely have not prevented the outbreak of war. Articles will be written about the liberal concept of ‘complex interdependence’ (Keohane & Nye, 1977), being confronted with the realist notion of ‘weaponized interdependence’ (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Both sides will find plenty of evidence to sustain their arguments. Nevertheless, they are unable to comprehend how this inter-state conflict is only an expression of much deeper crises and the exhaustion of a capitalist accumulation system based on fossil fuels in times of climate emergency.

Two special journal issues, the *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 28/2 (2021) and *New Political Economy*, Vol. 26/2 (2021), have been dedicated to the discussion of ‘blind spots’ in (International) Political Economy. And yet, while emphasizing the importance of race and colonialism, gender and social reproduction amongst other factors, by completely ignoring historical materialist approaches, their analyses succumb to the same ahistoric problems as mainstream approaches, they are criticizing. Individual factors are separated out and only externally related. Dynamics within global capitalism are analysed, but (global) capitalism as a historically specific social totality is not understood (Best et al., 2021; LeBaron et al., 2021). The contribution by Elizabeth Prügl (2021) is a noticeable exception here. In her analysis of the care sector and the home-based worker, she disrupts gendered dichotomies such as production – reproduction, highlighting the internal relations between spheres, which appear to be separate. It is these internal relations I will emphasize, when going beyond Prügl’s focus on gender in conceptualizing the connections

between gender, race and class below. In turn, a group of Critical Political Economy (CPE) scholars focuses on capitalist totality and emphasizes the importance of an emancipatory and transformative agenda along critical rather than problem-solving theoretical lines (Wigger, 2022, p. 190). The assertion that ‘a properly understood CPE has its foundations in Marx’ (Jäger, 2022, p. 52) is, however, often overlooked. Instead, CPE is referred to as a combination of different sets of approaches, with a Marxist strand identified next to a feminist, a post-colonial-turned-racial capitalism as well as a post-structuralist strand (Babic & Sharma, 2023, p. 762). Unsurprisingly, CPE analyses are then also in danger of separating out the economic from the political and, thus, becoming ahistoric. They can focus on analysing the crisis of the liberal international order within global capitalism, but they cannot penetrate the structurally much deeper, multiple overlapping crises of the capitalist totality (e.g. Babic, 2020).

Of course, the economic and the political appear to be separate in today’s political economy. And yet, this has not always been the case. During feudalism in Europe, for example, the economic and the political overlapped with the political overlord directly organizing the economic exploitation of peasants. Hence, in order to comprehend the historical specificity of our particular capitalist period the real question to ask is why is it that the economic and the political appear to be separate? And here, Karl Marx makes one of his major contributions by encouraging us to go beyond mere appearances, fetishized developments and look at the underlying way of how production within our capitalist historical period is organized. Thus, in order to understand the historical specificity of our epoch, we need to investigate the ‘hidden abode of production’ (Marx, 1867/1990, pp. 279–280). Following the work of Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, historically capitalism emerged in England from the fifteenth century onwards, when in the process of enclosures peasants were separated from the land, the means of their self-reproduction, and therefore had to look for paid wage labour to ensure their survival. Within this new set of social property relations, i.e. a ‘tri-partite capitalist hierarchy’ between commercial landlord/capitalist tenant/wage labourer (Brenner, 1985, p. 298), agricultural workers were indirectly, economically forced to sell their labour power. Workers in capitalism are nominally ‘free’ labour and not politically compelled to carry out a certain type of work but are ultimately economically left without any alternative but to seek paid employment (Wood, 1995, pp. 29, 34). This is specific about the capitalist historical period and this is why the state and market appear to be separate, while they are ultimately only two different forms of the same underlying configuration of the social relations of production.

This historical specificity of how production is organized in capitalism, resulting in a separation of the economic and the political, has a number of structuring consequences (Bieler & Morton, 2018, pp. 38–41). Because the capitalist social relations of production are organized around wage labour and the private ownership or control of the means of production, it is not only workers who compete for jobs with each other. Corporations too are in constant competition with each other over market share. Unless they retain or even better increase their share, they are in danger of either being taken over by rivals or go under, having to declare bankruptcy. It is this relentless pressure, which instils such a high degree of competitiveness within capitalism. For whenever one capitalist moves ahead and thanks to new technology conquers market share, others have to follow suit to regain their share or even move ahead in the race themselves. Nonetheless, it also implies that capitalism is ultimately crisis prone. The more constant capital, e.g. technology, is drawn upon and the fewer variable capital, i.e. workers, are employed the more capitalist production is exposed to the tendency of a falling rate of profit (Carchedi & Roberts, 2023, pp. 2–4). This in turn intensifies competition further, promoting ‘overproduction, speculation and crises, and leads to the existence of excess capital alongside a surplus population’ (Marx, 1894/1981, p.

350). Thus, a crisis of overproduction ultimately results in a crisis of overaccumulation, in which excess capital and surplus labour power can no longer be usefully combined. There is too much capital, unable to find new profitable investment opportunities. 'Competition now becomes a struggle of enemy brothers. The opposition between the interest of each individual capitalist and that of the capitalist class as a whole now comes into its own' (Marx, 1894/1981, p. 362). Of course, Marx was aware that capital had several strategies at its disposal of how to respond to crisis. They can attempt to exploit their existing workforce more severely or engage in a process of creative destruction of some of the means of production in order to avoid overproduction. Most importantly perhaps, there is a constant, relentless structural pressure towards outward expansion in the search of new markets and cheaper labour. Through processes along uneven and combined development more and more space is being integrated or re-integrated into the capitalist mode of production.

The social property relations approach is not the only Marxist conceptualization of the emergence of capitalism. By contrast, the world-systems approach, for example, focuses on the 'long sixteenth century' in which production became organized for sales in a world market. Thus, the emergence of capitalism is linked to an expanding world market as 'a capitalist mode is one in which production is for exchange; that is, it is determined by its profitability on a market' (Wallerstein, 1979, p. 159). Nevertheless, what world-systems theory cannot account for due to its focus on the market rather than production is the structural origin of capitalism's systemic compulsion to constant outward expansion. For example, the feminist Marxist Silvia Federici wonders 'how can we account for the fact that after five hundred years of relentless exploitation of workers across the planet, the capitalist class in its different embodiments still needs to pauperize multitudes of people worldwide?' (Federici, 2019, p. 19). She has no answer. The social property relations approach, by contrast, with its focus on social production relations has no difficulty in accounting for the structuring pressures of constant outward expansion to overcome economic crisis.

The way capitalist production is organized around the private ownership of the means of production and wage labour, however, does not only generate structuring conditions. It also has implications for agency in that capital and labour are engendered as key collective agents confronting each other. Understanding capital and labour as a social relation due to the way they are related in the production process, it becomes clear that there is constant class struggle between the two over exploitation in the workplace. While capital wants to ensure as low wages as possible, labour will inevitably want to see higher wages and better working conditions. And it is within the moments of this class struggle that the internal relations between the structuring conditions of the capitalist social relations of production and class agency are being revealed (Bieler & Morton, 2018, pp. 49–50). Importantly, labour is often fragmented rather than acting as a homogenous force in these moments of class struggle. Employers may fuel divisions between home and migrant workers, between men and women in order to put downward pressure on wages and weaken labour (Harvey, 1982/2006, p. 383). And it is not only capital, which attempts to divide the working class. Historically, trade unions have been key agents in excluding women from the labour market during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, referred to by Maria Mies as the period of the housewifization of women (Mies, 1986/2014, p. 106). Trade unions too have on occasion employed a discourse of gender or immigration to protect their white male membership on secure, permanent contracts (Ledwith, 2006, pp. 98–99; Salleh, 2017, p. 97). As Diane Elson asserts, labour markets have become 'markets structured by practices, perceptions, norms and networks which are "bearers of gender"' (Elson, 1999, p. 611), underpinning the fragmentation of labour. For example, labour markets are organized in a way, which attributes secondary importance to the reproductive economy, the care

sector. Hence, women who are more likely to work in that sector experience lower pay and less good working conditions. Moreover, labour markets are often based on the assumption that women are the secondary earners in a family, who can fall back on the earnings of a male partner, brother or father in times of need. Unsurprisingly, women's terms and conditions of employment are often inferior as a result (Elson, 1999, pp. 616, 624) or their employment is not the most suitable for them and the wider economy (Walby & Olsen, 2002, p. 8). Equally, by extension it can be argued that labour markets are bearers of race, as white workers have often sustained 'white supremacy' in alliance with capital and, thus, participated in maintaining racist forms of oppression (Issar, 2021a, p. 63; Issar, 2021b, p. 39).

Nevertheless, while a historical materialist approach allows us to understand the historical specificity of our capitalist epoch and facilitates an identification of the key structuring conditions and social class agency, there is the danger of an undue narrow focus on struggles at the workplace, where wage labour produces surplus value underpinning capitalist profits with workers identified as the key agents. Carchedi and Roberts (2023) apply well Marx's theory of value in their analysis of the crisis of global capitalism including a focus on global warming and climate change. There is, however, no recognition of closely related forms of racist and patriarchal forms of oppression outside the workplace. Ben Selwyn is right, when he argues that 'the formation and management of the contested capital-labour relation by states and capital and labouring-class struggles are constitutive of global systemic change over the *longue durée*' (Selwyn, 2015, p. 523). On its own, however, such a focus on the capital-labour relation is not enough. Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002, p. 279) is correct, when she asserts that capital would use gender and race to divide workers. She is wrong, however, when she claims that capitalism is structurally indifferent to patriarchy and racism (Bieler & Morton, 2021, pp. 1758–1761). In the next section, I will discuss how capitalist accumulation does not only depend on the exploitation of wage labour but equally on expropriation in the sphere of social reproduction organized around patriarchal and racist forms of oppression and reflected in the relentless search for 'cheap natures'. Race and gender are not only mechanisms of 'boundary drawing', segmenting the workforce. They are also much deeper structural mechanisms underpinning capitalist accumulation (Nowak, 2024, p. 5).

Expanded understanding of capitalist accumulation

To develop an expanded understanding of capitalist accumulation is nothing new as such. For some time, critical political economy scholars have pointed to the importance of incorporating different dimensions of exploitation and expropriation into an integrated analysis. Brand and Wissen (2021, pp. 39–40), for example, highlight in their assessment of 'the imperial mode of living', how the style of living in the capitalist core can only be sustained by externalizing the related social and ecological costs to developing countries in the periphery. Nevertheless, although they mention the importance of paying special attention to patriarchal and racist forms of oppression and the ways they structure the imperial mode of living (e.g. Brand & Wissen, 2021, p. 48), these dynamics are hardly explored. Their main focus is on ecological destruction. In turn, Nancy Fraser has worked on both the way racial expropriation overlaps with capitalist exploitation (e.g. Fraser, 2016 and Fraser, 2018) as well as how capitalist exploitation is combined with the expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction (e.g. Fraser, 2017; see also Fraser, 2022). Nevertheless, her conceptualization of several 'hidden abodes' in addition to Marx's 'hidden abode of production', in which she identifies crisis tendencies between the economy and its hidden background conditions (Fraser, 2014, p. 71), also separates out different background conditions from the capitalist economy, inevitably focusing

on their external relations as a result. In another example, Maria Mies and colleagues bring together the different dimensions of exploitation and expropriation through the image of an iceberg. Here, capitalist wage labour only constitutes the tip of the iceberg, visible above the water. The vast part of exploitation, however, including women's unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction, subsistence agriculture, the colonial and post-colonial expropriation of non-white peoples as well as the extraction of natural resources are hidden underneath the surface, making up most of capitalist accumulation (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999, pp. 31–32; Mies, 2007, p. 271). There are, however, several problems with this image. First, Mies' (2007, p. 270) distinction between formal labour, visible above the surface, and informal labour below is problematic. Wage labour is the source of surplus value and, thus, capitalist profit, regardless of whether there is a formal contract or not. Second, it is difficult to establish quantitatively the distribution of importance of wage labour vis-à-vis other forms of expropriation and thus, questionable, whether wage labour is actually just a minor part of capitalist accumulation. More importantly, however, the importance of wage labour is not so much the extent to which it sustains capitalist profits. The real importance of wage labour is qualitative in the way that wage labour is one part of the capitalist social relations of production with the private ownership or control of the means of production constituting the other, resulting in this relentless outward expansionary dynamic. In short, why capitalism is characterized by this relentless outward dynamic is not captured in the iceberg image. Hence, by drawing on a philosophy of internal relations, the contribution of this paper in the following is an approach, which considers capitalist exploitation and patriarchal and racist forms of oppression as always closely interrelated, unable to be separated out from each other. The expansionary outward dynamic of capitalism, resulting from the particular way production is organized, ensures that these various forms of oppression are closely knitted together.

Feminist historical materialists and here especially Social Reproduction Theorists have for some time pointed out the danger of overlooking the other dimensions necessary for successful capitalist accumulation, putting forward 'an argument about the internal relation between reproductive and productive labour' (Ferguson, 2016, p. 49). What ensures, for example, that workers can present themselves ready for a day's work at the workplace? A significant amount of work has to go into their social reproduction outside the workplace and inside the sphere of social reproduction. Someone has to cook meals, wash clothes and provide rest. Someone has to bring up children and look after the elderly. It is this kind of unpaid work, while being performed outside the workplace, which is nonetheless absolutely essential for capitalism's own reproduction. Historically, both Maria Mies (1986/2014, p. 81) and Silvia Federici (1998/2004, p. 101) highlight the way of how the emergence of capitalism was closely interrelated with patriarchal oppression, especially enforced during the mediaeval witch hunts. Mies, thereby, understands 'patriarchal civilization as a system, of which capitalism constitutes the most recent and most universal manifestation' (Mies, 1986/2014, p. 13). Patriarchy existed before the emergence of capitalism, but by emerging within a system characterized by patriarchal forms of oppression, from the very beginning patriarchy has been part and parcel of capitalist exploitation and has also been re-shaped by it over time. Today too, the biological reproduction of future workers as well as the preparation of workers for their daily tasks at work are both tasks disproportionally undertaken by women and, therefore, highlight the ways in which the exploitation of wage labour is internally related to forms of patriarchal oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 73). In short, 'while they are distinct and separate and have specific characteristics, production and reproduction are necessarily combined as concrete moments of an articulated totality' (Arruzza, 2014, p. 15). While the explanation of the oppression and exploitation of women across historical epochs is beyond the scope of this article, this allows us to understand capitalist patriarchy.

The different impact of austerity policies is a good contemporary example for the internal relations between exploitation in the workplace and patriarchal oppression and the way capitalism, constantly driven by expansionary outward dynamics, is pushing towards increased expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction. 'Despite the availability of time-use data in the majority of European countries, the design of austerity policies these countries have adopted since 2010 has paid no attention to their impact on unpaid work' (Elson, 2017, p. 55). Unsurprisingly, it has been women, who bore the brunt of austerity policies in the wake of the global financial and Eurozone crises from 2007, 2008 onwards (Hojić & True, 2016, p. 8; Pearson & Elson, 2015, p. 9). Considering that about two-thirds of employees in the public sector are women (Pearson & Elson, 2015, p. 16), job cuts in this area have inevitably affected women more. Moreover, as it is predominantly women who work in social reproduction as paid care workers and/or as unpaid carers outside the workplace (Pearson & Elson, 2015, p. 10) or are more likely to be lone parents, any cuts to benefits and public services affect them disproportionately. Finally, women are more likely to be subjected to domestic violence. When specialized local services are abandoned and women refuge centres are closed, women are therefore the first to suffer (Cooper & Whyte, 2017, p. 14; True, 2016, p. 53). Importantly, the focus on austerity and its negative impact on women, by extension, brings a focus on racist forms of oppression into play considering that minority women are more likely to be employed in the public sector or sub-contracted to the state by private companies as care workers, cleaners or caterers (Emejulu & Bassel, 2015, p. 88). 'As Black, People of Colour and anti-racist gender scholars and feminists have argued, gender and gender relations are always racialized' (Rodríguez et al., 2018, p. 140) and austerity is no exception here. In the UK especially after 2010 and the new Conservative-led government, migrant families were racialized as underserving of welfare services. Their 'outsider status means that they are positioned as not deserving access to welfare and other resources of the nation-state to reproduce their families' (Erel, 2018, p. 176). If austerity impacts heavily on women in general, then ethnic minority women are even more affected as they had already been disadvantaged.

Hence, we need to consider how capitalist accumulation also depends on racist forms of oppression. Here, I draw on Walter Rodney's work on the dialectical relationship between European development and African underdevelopment co-producing each other to understand how racist forms of oppression became internally related to capitalist exploitation from the very beginning (Rodney, 1972/2018, p. 86). It was European countries, which initiated the Atlantic slave trade and the slave plantations in the Americas. 'Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and for most of the nineteenth century, the exploitation of Africa and African labour continued to be a source for the accumulation of capital to be reinvested in Western Europe' (Rodney, 1972/2018, p. 97). Indeed, historically agricultural capitalism in Britain, which had emerged from the fifteenth century onwards during the period of enclosures, had run into its limits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was the proceeds from the Atlantic slave trade as well as the material input from the cotton and sugar slave plantations in the Americas, which guaranteed capitalist expansion and financed the industrial revolution (Anievas & Nişancıoğlu, 2015, p. 165). White racism became an integral part of capitalism. 'Oppression of African people on purely racial grounds accompanied, strengthened, and became indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons' (Rodney, 1972/2018, p. 103). In other words, capitalist exploitation and racist oppression became closely internally related, structurally underpinning global capitalism to this day. Moreover, to have space for plantations in the first place, land was expropriated from Indigenous people. In the settler colonialism of North America, for example, Indigenous people were not 'used' as labour. They were simply pushed aside,

extinguished (Whyte, 2017, p. 159). Slave labour and the extinction of Indigenous peoples were closely interlinked, when it came to the dramatic expansion in cotton production during the nineteenth century in the Southern part of the USA, part of a global capitalist expansion in the textile industry (Beckert, 2014, pp. 220–224). The violent displacement of Indigenous peoples and the Western expansion of the USA went hand in hand with a drastic increase in black slave labour in the American South (Issar, 2021b, p. 33).

Nevertheless, this is not only a historical phenomenon. Racist forms of oppression continue to co-constitute capitalist accumulation today. ‘By locating [contemporary] neoliberal forms of expropriation within the longer history and ongoing reality of racial/colonial primitive accumulation’, writes Siddhant Issar, ‘I surface why Black and Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by the violence of neoliberalism’ (Issar, 2021b, p. 24). Whether it is the way in which global cities are gentrified today (Danewid, 2020) or how labour markets are regulated (Ashiagbor, 2021) or welfare states in the Global North are organized (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2018), racist practices and colonial forms of oppression continue to shape these capitalist social relations across the spheres of production as well as social reproduction. Similarly to patriarchal forms of oppression, racism pre-existed capitalism. However, ‘it is only with the division between those who produce wealth and those who direct its production that these differences become the basis for the distinctive forms of oppression associated with racism and patriarchy’ (Ollman, 2003, p. 93). In sum, racial capitalism is not only a historical phenomenon, but racist oppression has always been part and parcel of capitalist accumulation. The way racism was part of the emergence of capitalism implies today that the latter is structurally dependent on the former (Bieler & Morton, 2024b; Issar, 2021a, pp. 60–61).

Third, capitalist accumulation also depends on the expropriation of cheap natures. John Bellamy Foster argues that capitalism emerged in the fifteenth century not only based on the enclosures and the expropriation of the peasants from their land and the commons. The emergence of capitalism is also characterized by a ‘metabolic rift’, the separation of human beings from nature (Foster, 2000, p. 9, 141–142).

For Marx, the metabolic rift – the alienated mediation between humanity and nature – was a product of the “robbing” or expropriation of the soil, and thus of nature, thereby hindering “the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil”. (Foster, 2018, p. 126)

Of course, in practice nature is immanent of everything human beings do (Moore, 2015, p. 178). The appearance of a separation due to the ‘metabolic rift’, however, underpins a very different, specific way of how nature is perceived within capitalism. There is a focus on the external relations between humans and nature, while the internal relations between the two, the ways they make up social totality is overlooked.¹ As a result, nature could become part of capitalism’s expansionary dynamic, opening it up to relentless human exploitation. In fact, as Jason Moore points out, ‘capital must not only ceaselessly accumulate and revolutionize commodity production; it must ceaselessly search for, and find ways to produce, Cheap Natures: a rising stream of low-cost food, labor-power, energy, and raw materials’ (Moore, 2015, p. 53). In more concrete terms, Moore highlights the cheap natures underpinning the initial growth dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. ‘The neoliberal “boom” that commenced after 1983 was accompanied – or preceded – by a significant cyclical decline in food, energy, and resource prices. Commodity prices for food declined 39 percent – and metals by half – between 1975 and 1989’ (Moore, 2015, p. 236). By 2003, however, this new frontier had become exhausted and neoliberal capitalism entered deep crisis, enhanced but not caused by the 2008 global financial crisis (Moore, 2015, pp. 226, 267–269).

Importantly, similarly to the expropriation of unpaid work along gendered and racialized lines, the key driving dynamic underpinning relentless capitalist outward expansion in the search for ‘cheap natures’ is rooted in the way commodity production is organized around the private ownership or control of the means of production and wage labour. As corporations are in constant competition with each other for market shares, a pursuit of growth for its own sake underpins capitalism’s relentless drive towards outward expansion into nature (Hickel, 2020, p. 87). In turn, however, this relentless expansion into cheap natures is internally related with forms of oppression along racial and gender lines. In a way, climate change today can be understood as a continuation of the racist colonial plunder during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the industrialized countries of the Global North have historically contributed 92 per cent of green house gas emissions, it is now countries in the Global South, which face the most drastic consequences. ‘According to data from the Climate Vulnerability Monitor, the South bears 82 per cent; of the total costs of climate breakdown, which in 2010 added up to \$571 billion in losses due to drought, floods, landslides, storms and wildfires’ (Hickel, 2020, p. 114).

If we accept that capitalist accumulation depends on exploitation of wage labour as well as other forms of oppression and that these various forms of oppression are always closely interrelated, then we also need to re-consider our understanding of class struggle and the various organizations involved.

Unravelling class struggles

Different literatures have identified a fragmentation of opposition groups since the late 1960s. During the events of May 1968 in France, when student occupations, demonstrations, civil unrest and strikes brought the country to a halt, some argued that workers were replaced by students and the middle classes as key agents. Trade unions, the institutional expression of workers, were declared old social movements, with new social movements organizing around non-workplace issues such as the environment, peace and different identities. Ronald Inglehart (1977) identified a ‘silent revolution’ in which, against the background of increasing economic wealth, industrial countries experienced a shift from materialist to post-materialist values. Alberto Melucci (1985, p. 789), in turn, rooted these developments in deep structural changes underpinning modern societies, while Alain Touraine (1985, p. 781) argued that ‘postindustrial society must be defined in a more global and radical way today, as a new culture and a field for new social conflicts and movements’. Within Marxist literature too, a fragmentation of opposition has been identified. David Harvey argues that an increasing focus on identity issues around gender and race has made it difficult to fight for social justice and against capitalist exploitation. Environmental groups, moreover, are often unable to connect their particularistic struggles to a more coherent strategy against capital (Harvey, 1996, p. 400). With a united business class confronted by a fragmented opposition, a successful challenge of capitalism has become increasingly illusory. Hence, he urges us to return to a politics of class struggle, prioritizing the role of the working class in moments of contestation and develop a universal conception of social justice. A ‘pursuit of working-class politics might protect, rather than oppress and marginalize, interests based on gender and race even if that working-class politics makes no explicit acknowledgement of the importance of race and gender’ (Harvey, 1996, p. 358).

By contrast, the third contribution of this paper is to move beyond these fragmentations and acknowledge the internal relations between these struggles and actors. Drawing on the expanded nature of accumulation, as developed in the previous section, these separations can be unmasked

as rather artificial. If it is the case that capitalist accumulation depends on both paid wage labour in the workplace and unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction, then resistance in both spheres directly challenges the very system of capitalist reproduction. It does not, therefore, make sense pace Harvey to oppose 'the supposed universality of class to the supposed particularism of social movements' (Young, 1998, p. 38). As workers rely on both income from waged labour as well as access to a range of different services for their social reproduction including access to affordable health care, education and water, struggles over these services are also moments of class struggle (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 92). Struggles against the privatization of a hospital or medical services, as communities fight to retain access to essential services outside the workplace, are as much moments of class struggle as are struggles for better wages and working conditions. The internal relations between struggles in the sphere of production and the sphere of social reproduction are revealed in the underlying logic of relentless capitalist expansion. In its search for profitable investment opportunities on an ever-expanding scale, capitalism puts downward pressure on wages and working conditions in the workplace as much as it constantly attempts to decommodify areas so far outside the reach of capitalist surplus value creation. Cutting salaries has the same origin as has the attempt to privatize and thus commodify services. Resisting both dynamics in the workplace and the sphere of social reproduction contests capitalist accumulation.

Similarly, struggles for racial justice such as the Black Lives Matter movement cannot simply be relegated to a struggle over identity. Analysing key documents of the Black Lives Matter movement, Issar shows how the movement 'reveals racialized continuities in the American capitalist economy, particularly the simultaneous hyper-exploitation and marginalization of Black populations' (Issar, 2021a, p. 57). If capitalism is always racial capitalism then struggles for racial justice are inevitably a contestation of capitalist accumulation and thus a moment of class struggle. Finally, resistance against environmental destruction too contests capitalist accumulation and is therefore an instance of class struggle. 'Struggles over the environment, over desires and ways of living, and over care and reproduction are fundamentally about modes of production, and therefore relevant to struggles over conditions of labour' (Kallis et al., 2020, p. 99). In sum, as Ferguson reminds us,

if social relations are internally related, a change in one alters all others. Thus, there is no compelling reason to prioritise so-called economic or workplace-based struggles in the fight for a better society. Any struggle within the realm of social reproduction – be it anti-racist, feminist, anti-colonial, or be it over education, healthcare, transportation – that promotes human need over capital's interests can chip away at the capitalist social formation. (Ferguson, 2016, p. 57)

In a second step, we need to develop a broader definition of 'working class'. If class, race, gender and human-nature relations are internally related, then 'a host of social relations needs to be considered in the study of any working class as a concrete historical formation' (Camfield, 2004/2005, pp. 425–426). If all struggles are important, then we cannot simply focus on wage labour as the only working-class agent. 'The working class, for the revolutionary Marxist, must be perceived as everyone in the producing class who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society – irrespective of whether that labour has been paid for by capital or remained unpaid' (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 89; see also Camfield, 2002, p. 44). And if this is the case, then the final step is to accept the importance of broad alliances of organizations, which represent these forces in the spheres of production and social reproduction and are engaged in these moments of class struggle. For example, violence against women occurs at the workplace in the form of sexual harassment, but it is equally reflected within wider society and domestic violence. Hence, 'unions fighting for women's human rights in the workplace need to make common cause with feminist groups fighting

for women's human rights in society as a whole' (Hensman, 2011, pp. 241–242). In general, it is therefore broad alliances of trade unions, feminist groups, environmental and development organizations, social movements, citizens' committees and others, which are crucial for successful struggles against capitalist exploitation. Such alliances are never automatic but may form in moments of joint struggles. It is in these moments of class struggle that shared understandings of social justice may emerge even if people come from different positions (Young, 1998, p. 41). It is in analysing these moments of class struggle that we can reveal the internal relations between the various forms of exploitation and expropriation. Importantly, 'class struggle' here is not defined in a way privileging 'class' over 'gender' and 'race', but as referring to all those struggles contesting capitalist accumulation and including all those actors involved in these struggles. In the following, I will briefly discuss the case of (global) water struggles as one example in this respect.

Struggles against the commodification of water are one of those occasions, when the internal relations between the various capitalist dynamics as well as our current multiple global crises are revealed. First, water struggles exemplify how capitalist accumulation involves the spheres of production as well as social reproduction. While water privatization impacts negatively on workers in the industry often through job losses and deteriorating working conditions, it equally negatively impacts on every human being in the sphere of social reproduction through higher prices (Bieler, 2021, p. 28). Moreover, water is clearly a gender issue,

as women and girls are burdened with providing water for their families worldwide. They spend hundreds of hours a week fetching precious water, undertaking care work or domestic labour that involves water, which is important for the household's survival and flourishing. (Sultana, 2018, p. 485; see also Elson, 2017, p. 56)

Finally, when water resources are stretched, it is often ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities, which are confronted with poor environmental conditions and a lack of access to essential services. For example, in the city of Detroit, poor black communities have been disproportionately affected by water price hikes and related disconnections (Clark, 2020, p. 183).

Second, while all water struggles have a local focus, they are nonetheless part of a global phenomenon. Thus, the successful resistance against water privatization in the so-called water war in Cochabamba/Bolivia in 2000 became a global wake-up call and, for example, had an impact on the struggles against water privatization in Europe during the 2010s, looming especially large in the background of Italian struggles over the referendum on water privatization in June 2011, when more than 57 per cent of the Italian electorate participated with more than 95 per cent voting against privatization (Bieler, 2021, p. 62). This was followed by the European Citizens' Initiative 'Water and Sanitation are a human right' in 2012 and 2013, when almost 1.9 million signatures were collected across the EU in favour of the EU officially declaring water to be a human right. Equally important, successful struggles against water privatization took place in the Greek cities of Athens and Thessaloniki especially in 2014 and against the introduction of water charges in the Republic of Ireland between 2014 and 2016. One of the key reasons for these successful struggles in Europe was the broad alliances underpinning them (Bieler, 2021, pp. 156–157), reflecting the importance of a broad definition of labour movements. Trade unions were a key part, because they know that privatization of public services such as water implies potential job losses and lower working conditions and salaries. After all, the key objective of private companies is to make as much profit as possible. Environmental groups too participated in the campaigns. They realized that wherever the profit motive rules, nature is the first to suffer. Here we can see the internal relations between exploitation in the workplace and capitalism's search for cheap natures,

of which water is one of the key examples. Further important members of the alliance were local citizens' committees such as the Berliner Wassertisch or local committees in the Italian cities Arezzo, Turin and Naples. They were especially concerned about the drastic price increases of often 100 per cent and more as soon as their services had become part-privatized. Feminist groups also participated in the various campaigns and female activists were especially engaged in local community groups across Ireland (Bieler, 2021, pp. 149–150; Moore, 2023, p. 168), thereby revealing the internal relations between exploitation in the workplace and patriarchal oppression. The huge demonstrations in Dublin, Ireland were addressed by activists from the Detroit Water Brigade, indicating the global dimensions of water struggles. Finally, development groups with an eye on the global situation and especially development in the Global South heavily supported the broad alliance. Their main concern was that the EU pushed for water as a human right also in its external relations with countries from around the world. In sum, these water struggles in Europe during the 2010s clearly revealed the internal relations between capitalism's exploitation of wage labour and the expanded dynamics of expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction in line with patriarchal forms of oppression and a constant search for new 'cheap natures'. Struggles by Indigenous people against land expropriation and related water extractivism across the world further highlight internal relations with racist forms of oppression. In the south of Chile, for example, the Mapuche have resisted the ever-expanding forestry industry and its relentless need for more ground water (Schmalz et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2022). At Standing Rock in North Dakota, the Oceti Sakowin and other Indigenous and non-Indigenous water protectors resisted the construction of an oil pipeline across sacred burial ground and underneath the Missouri River, their source of water (Estes, 2019, p. 47).

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that based on the philosophy of internal relations, we need to proceed along three steps when developing a political economy approach to analyse the current moment of multiple, overlapping global crises. First, we need to pursue a historical materialist approach in order to comprehend the historical specificity of our capitalist epoch as well as the structuring conditions underpinning capitalism's relentless outward expansionary dynamics. Drawing on the social property relations approach is crucial here, as its focus on the way production is organized around wage labour and the private ownership or control of the means of production allows us to comprehend the internal relations between the political and the economic as well as between the capitalist structuring conditions and class agency. Second, building on and going beyond the social property relations approach, I argued that capitalist accumulation needs to be comprehended as depending not only on exploitation of wage labour in the workplace, but equally on expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction as well as cheap natures. A focus on the internal relations and the way capitalism is always patriarchal capitalism and racial capitalism is significant in this respect. Third, the way we can analyse these internal relations of how the various global crises co-constitute each other is by focusing on moments of class struggle. Importantly, we should not understand race, gender, sexuality, class as distinct, separate parts. 'Rather, they are concrete relations comprising a wider sociality, integral to the very existence and operation of capitalism and class' (Ferguson et al., 2016, p. 32). Hence, it makes no sense to argue that in one particular situation race is the dominant factor, while it may be gender in another. These different forms of oppression are always part of the wider social totality of capitalist

accumulation. ‘They mediate each other and in so doing constitute each other’ (McNally, 2017, pp. 104–105). They are not ontologically separate. In short, it is in moments of class struggle that we can grasp the internal relations across the spheres of production and social reproduction. It is in these struggles that the internal relations between the various global crises come to the fore. Importantly, focusing on class struggle does not privilege ‘class’, but refers to all struggles contesting capitalist accumulation across the spheres of production and social reproduction. In sum, the purpose of this article is not to establish the primary importance of class and the social relations of production over other forms of oppression. Rather, this article developed an approach, which can account dialectically for the internal relations between these various dynamics within the overall social totality of (global) capitalism.

Interestingly, water struggles have resulted in seeds of potential transformation beyond capitalism. It was the key contribution of the Italian water movement to put forward the commons as an alternative to both private ownership focusing on profit maximization as well as public ownership, based on the management by technocrats. The commons are something which is jointly owned, jointly managed, jointly enjoyed and jointly preserved for future generations. The commons combine a different, collective form of ownership with more participatory democratic governance mechanisms. It is this combination of a new understanding of how to manage the economy with a new understanding of democracy and the way of how these two dimensions are closely internally related, which brings with it a potentially transformative dimension beyond capitalism (Bieler, 2021, pp. 163–164). Nevertheless, class struggle does not automatically result in progressive ways out of crises. Capitalism continues to expand accumulation, for example, through processes of financialization affecting also water (Bieler & Moore, 2023, p. 5). Moreover, rather than progressive ways forward, authoritarian, reactionary futures are equally possible. There has been a shift towards right-wing extremism and related electoral success for right-wing parties such as the Front Nationale in France, Brothers of Italy, the UK Independence Party or the German Alternative für Deutschland. This does not necessarily imply a critical position on neoliberal economics but may actually be a way of providing space for venting anger and frustration often around anti-migration and xenophobic rhetoric (Davidson & Saull, 2017, p. 717; Worth, 2019, p. 183). In other words, the far-right functions as a system-maintaining force. It may re-define the way the economy operates and is governed, and as a result, potentially even strengthen neoliberalism (Worth, 2019, pp. 189–190). Hence, the task of a political economy approach for the twenty-first century is to reveal the internal relations between exploitation and expropriation through a focus on related class struggles by broad alliances across the spheres of production and social reproduction. It, thereby, provides the basis for potentially contributing to the development of progressive alternatives.

Note

1. The way Moore and Foster conceptualize the relations between humans and nature are often regarded as contradictory. While it is correct that there are differences, I understand their work as complementary when it comes to understanding expansionary capitalist dynamics.

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