

BEYOND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: NEW LOGICS OF EXPULSION

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Background Notes

The Keynesian period brought with it an active expansion of logics that valued people -- not because of their humanity, but as workers and consumers. The current phase of advanced capitalism does not. In the last two decades there has been a sharp growth in the numbers of people that have been “expulsed.” I use the term “expulsed” to describe a diversity of conditions: the growing numbers of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of the middle classes in rich countries who are losing ground at an accelerating pace, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age and become able-bodied surplus populations warehoused in ghettos and slums. These and other instances of expulsion amount to far larger numbers than the newly “incorporated” middle classes of countries such as India and China.

My argument is that this overall massive expulsion is actually signaling a deeper systemic transformation, one documented in bits and pieces but by disparate disciplines, which makes it more difficult to see a systemic pattern. I want to understand whether these diverse trends and contents amount to an overarching dynamic that is taking us into a new phase of global capitalism.

Today, after twenty years of a particular type of advanced capitalism, we confront a human and economic landscape marked by a double helix dynamic. On the one hand a reconditioning of some parts of the economy towards growing organizational and technological complexity. On the other hand, a mix of conditions increasingly coded as the growth of a “surplus population.” (Elsewhere I add the growing expanse of territory that is “expulsed” through devastation – by poverty and disease, by diverse armed conflicts, and by governments rendered dysfunctional by acute corruption and a crippling international debt-regime, both leading to an extreme inability to address peoples’ needs.)

When complexity produces elementary brutalities.

We have developed complex capabilities that too often are used to produce elementary brutalities. Today, computer-based capacities have escalated complexity to new heights in a growing number of domains, from engineering and genetics to finance and corporate organization. Generally, our “culture” values complexity and the high levels of intelligence and knowledge it requires. In this context, the notion that complexity might produce elementary brutalities is (somewhat) counter-intuitive.

The logics organizing some of today’s major order-making systems in society and in the political economy are a good part of the explanation. The capacities furthering or merely enabling the developments of these systems are not inherently brutalizing. But specific organizing logics make them so. Thus, the complex economy of highly developed countries in the 1940s to 1970s period was governed by a rather simple organizing logic: incorporating people into the economy *as consumers*. This is simple but not necessarily brutalizing.

In contrast, a very recent trend is the sharp increase in the purchase of foreign land by governments and firms – to get at water, to grow food for rich societies, and to get at rare earths, now a key input for electronics and for green batteries. But in today’s international system a sovereign state (still) cannot simply go buy millions of hectares in another sovereign state. It often takes some complicated contractual and organizational innovations to execute these purchases. The result of these innovations is an organizing logic that is expelling millions of people, as land becomes increasingly more valuable than the people on it and than their consumption. This has echoes of the land enclosures in our early industrial era, when farmers were expelled from their land because raising sheep for wool had become more valuable. Finance is another sector that has reached enormous levels of complexity to execute some savage destruction. One example is the development of a particular type of sub-prime mortgage that requires a large number of complicated intermediate steps in order to function as an input into so-called asset-backed securities in the investment circuit; all that mattered was the contract representing an asset, not whether the household was capable of paying the mortgage, which worked to the disadvantage of the latter.

There is nothing inherently wrong in having machines replace more labour intensive forms of work, in selling land to foreign states, or in finance's capacity to make capital. But if these and many other innovations brutalize people and societies, then we cannot simply admire and praise the talent and intelligence that went into their making. There is much direct and indirect asserting that the complicated technologies and economics of our modern world produce ever more complex societies. The Keynesian years were thought to be a platform from which to jump to a higher level of society. The evidence examined in this book suggests otherwise.

Diverse expulsions.

(I will not address this in the lecture, beyond use as examples).

In vast stretches of our very modern world, we see shifts from the complex to the elementary. The cases that I am researching are very diverse. At one end I might mention the partial shift of land from the complex institutional framing of "national sovereign territory," to mere private property of a foreign government or global firm. The 30 million hectares bought since the end of 2006 in global south, often somewhat devastated nation-states, have shifted to the status of a commodity to be sold on the global market. At the other end, the shift from the complexity of people as citizens to surplus populations – in diverse modes, such as the displaced due to wars and conflicts over resources, or laboring bodies without rights or protections, or as bodies to be harvested for organs now in high demand in the global market.