

# A new sociology for new social movements

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*This paper was presented to the Scientific Council of Attac, Paris, September 18, 2014. It derives immediately from a talk of the same title given at the Forum of the International Sociological Association in Buenos Aires, August 1, 2012. Many of the ideas in this paper were developed in dialogue with graduate students in the sociology department at Berkeley – Marcel Paret, Adam Reich, Mike Levien, Julia Chuang, Herbert Docena, Andrew Jaeger, Zach Levenson, Gabe Hetland and Alex Barnard. They also originate in an imaginary conversation between Gramsci and Polanyi that has stretched over the last decade, conducted most recently with my friends and colleagues in South Africa – especially, Jackie Cock, Eddie Webster and Karl von Holdt.*

The propertyless masses especially are not served by a formal “equality before the law” and a “calculable” adjudication and administration, as demanded by “bourgeois” interests. Naturally in their eyes justice and administration should serve to compensate for their economic and social life-opportunities in the face of the propertied classes. Justice and administration can fulfil this function only if they assume an informal character to a far-reaching extent... Every sort of “popular justice” – which usually does not ask for reasons and norms – as well as every sort of intensive influence on the administration by so-called public opinion, crosses the rational course of justice and administration ... In this connection, that is, under conditions of mass democracy, public opinion is communal conduct born of “irrational sentiments.” Normally it is staged or directed by party leaders and the press.

Max Weber

Max Weber was only too clear that the rise of formal rationality, whether in the form of bureaucracy, the law, or mass democracy, does not compensate subject populations for their economic and social oppression. Rather, formal rationality that extends equal rights to all perpetuates the injustices they experience. The only way this might be challenged, says Weber, is through informal means, what he sometimes called “Kadi-justice,” but these informal means, whether they be public opinion or communal action, are manipulated and staged from above. Weber was very suspicious of what today we would call social movements which he saw as arising from an “incoherent mass” driven by “irrational sentiments.” His theory of collective action belongs to the first wave of social movement

theory that stretches from Durkheim and Weber to Smelser and Parsons for whom collective action was an irrational response to social change.

The second wave of social movement theory, drawing on Marxism, viewed social movements as rational in their pursuit of interests outside parliamentary politics, and they were successful insofar as they managed to develop resources, including an appropriate strategic framing, to achieve their goals. Here sociologists were in pursuit of a general theory of collective action – a theory true across time and space – that took the social, political and economic context as a background variable. It was only “new social movement” theory, associated with such writers as Alain Touraine, that considered the context – in his case postindustrial society or the programmed society – as defining the form of collective action.

Today, we need to move toward a third wave of social movement theory that centers a new context, namely “neoliberalism” – a nebulous concept that expresses the invasion of markets into all arenas of social and political life. In order to understand contemporary movements for social and economic justice it is necessary, therefore, to define “neoliberalism.” Here I will take Karl Polanyi’s (2001[1944]) *The Great Transformation* as my point of departure. But first let me explore the way marketization propels movements for social justice.

## **From Marketization to New Social Movements**

Social justice and democratization are especially pertinent themes in Latin America, which for so many years was ruled by military dictatorship. The transition to democracy, fought for bravely by so many has been a major and indisputable advance. But democracy has not fulfilled its promises, not least because the fall of political dictatorship was followed by another dictatorship, the dictatorship of the market through structural adjustment. In its wake came wave upon wave of injustice and inequality that have inspired Latin Americans, sociologists among them, to battle for a deeper democracy. We see this, for example, in the schemes of participatory budgeting in Brazil, in the piquetero movement and factory occupations in Argentina, in the ethnic democracy of Bolivia, in the student movement of Chile. There has been a relentless struggle to counter market fundamentalism with new forms of participatory democracy.

This Latin American history of the last 30 years is now being replayed across the world. Responding to the silent encroachment of markets, not least in the Arab world, where the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, sparked uprisings across the region in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain. Calling for “bread, freedom and social justice” these uprisings may have been revolutionary in their demands but they have not delivered the outcomes they sought. All eyes were fixed on Egypt, where national rebellion gave rise to a frail democracy that was then hijacked by the military. Difficult though it has been to overthrow dictatorships, the real problems only begin after their overthrow, problems that Latin America has been wrestling with for more than three decades.

In part inspired by these movements, the indignados of Southern Europe have stood up to the regimes of austerity, imposed by ruling parties aided and abetted by regional and international financial agencies. In 2011 and 2012 we witnessed a wave of remarkable protests that might be allied to trade unions in Portugal, to more anarchist politics in Spain, to Grillo populism in Italy to a massive General Strike in Greece but also the neo-fascist Golden Dawn – different responses to

economic insecurity, unemployment, debt, and dispossession.

The Occupy Movement made this explicit. Lodged in public spaces it targeted the 1% that runs the world economy. The movement started in Zuccotti Park, targeting Wall Street, the home of finance capital, and spread across the US, travelled to Europe, Latin America and Asia. In India, for example, peasants fought against their dispossession by collusive arrangements between finance capital and the Indian state to form of Special Economic Zones, many of which now lie moribund. In China today the engine of growth is no longer the flood of cheap migrant labor to the towns but land appropriation and real estate speculation for the urbanization of rural areas. Again protests, perhaps less known, are spreading across rural China even if so far they have not been very effective in arresting the formation of a rentier class. Similar struggles are familiar in Latin America, where the expansion of international mining has not only displaced populations but also polluted water and air.

Finally, we must pay attention to the student movement, most spectacularly emanating from Chile, that has been struggling against the marketization of education at all levels. Here, in this most unequal of societies, students are the vanguard of a society throttled by accumulating private debt. We see similar struggles in England, where students have faced soaring fees, but also spreading across Europe as financialization and regulation begin to corrode what were once strongholds of public education. We are here assembled in Argentina, the heartland of the public university, the legacy of Cordoba Revolution of 1918 which opened public education to all : open admissions, no fees and democratic election of administrators. It still holds today, if not elsewhere, in Latin America where student movements are strong but, often, at the cost of the degradation of higher education.

Do these and other social movements have anything in common that would justify talking about them as an expression of a particular historical epoch ? Or should they be considered in isolation, reflective only of local or national rather than global contexts ? In this paper I try to link them to the rise of marketization, an uneven process that spans the globe, but first can we detect any convergent set of repertoires that allow us to talk of a singular wave of protest.

## **Common Political Repertoires**

These new social movements may be responses to social injustice stemming from different forms and dimensions of marketization, but they gain expression and consciousness in the political arena. Their pursuit of political goals, however, is marked by their economic origins. Let us consider some of the features they share.

First, they have in common what differentiates them. They all have a national specificity, whether it be a struggle against dictatorship, against austerity or against the privatization of education. They are framed by national political terrains, which exhibit regional patterns – Southern Europe, Middle East, Latin America, South-East Asia, etc. Yet, at the same time, these movements are also globally connected whether through social media or traveling ambassadors. Movements have become an inspiration to each other even if their frame of reference is usually national.

Second, they derive from a common inspiration, the idea that electoral democracy has been hijacked by capitalism, or more specifically finance capital. Governments are beholden to finance capital which effectively paralyzes electoral democracy – capitalist in content and democratic in form. In Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) terms there is a separation of power and politics, so that power is

concentrated in the hands of the capital-state nexus, while electoral politics is reduced to an ineffectual ritual.

Third, the movements reject formal democracy to adopt direct democracy, sometimes called prefigurative politics that involve horizontal connections as much as vertical struggles. The General Assemblies of participatory democracy have been the cellular foundation of many of these movements. The challenge, then, is to bring unity and broader vision to these autonomous, and often separatist struggles. They have had varying success in connecting themselves to wider publics in more than ephemeral moments.

Fourth, while much has been made of virtual connections, these make concrete real space more rather than less necessary. To be effective virtual communications requires its complement – the assembly points of public space, Zuccotti Park in New York, Catalunya Square in Barcelona, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Taksim Square in Ankara, etc. These assembly points were crucial to establish dense and creative communities, and the planning of new and novel actions. Social media becomes an auxiliary if essential tool of communication.

Finally and fifth, the occupation of public spaces has made the social movements vulnerable to a severe repressive backlash from police, often, but not always, backed up by the military. This repression is consistent with the destruction of the public more generally and the valorization of the private, but it has prompted a continuing cat and mouse game between movements and police. These movements will not go away. They are a form of “liquid protest” that disappears here only to reappear elsewhere. We have to look at them as part of a connected global movement, connected by social media that provide the vehicle for continual reorganization and flexibility. Fear of coercion has been replaced by despair and anger.

The conjecture of this paper is that these social movements can, indeed, be understood in terms of a differentiated response to marketization that has become a feature of our era. We need, in other words, a new sociology of movements that attends not only to the political repertoires they deploy but also to the pressures of marketization to which they are a response. Second, such a sociology should advance a unifying vision *for* these movements, a vision they so badly need that knits them together in a common project. Finally, third, as a result of the very marketization we study, sociology now finds itself subject to pressures of commodification. We have to drop the pretense that we are outside society, and explicitly recognize that we are part of the world we study and have no alternative but to take sides. If we don't sociology will become irrelevant and disappear. Marketization is undermining the conditions of our own existence just as it is destroying society, and we need to connect the two before it is too late — *sociology becomes a social movement*. We take up each of these challenges in turn.

## **A New Sociology of Social Movements**

Just as Charles Tilly (1978) said the world is teeming with grievances, so now we can see the world is teeming with social movements. The problem is not their existence but their persistence which can be understood only by exploring their origins and their context. We need to turn to the society from which they emanate ; we need to (re)turn to theories of collective action that see them as rooted in the wider society. Alain Touraine and his collaborators insisted on rooting “new social movements” of the 1960s and 1970s in post-industrial society, giving movements the possibility of

fabricating their own worlds. These were movements that transcended the pursuit of material interests characteristic of the old social movements (specifically the labor movement). The “new” social movements of today, however, have to grapple not with post-industrialism but with the devastation of society wrought by market fundamentalism, which affects the whole planet and not just particular societies although their expression is usually inflected through a national sieve. To understand the connection between today’s social movements and unregulated marketization I propose to turn to Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*.

Written in 1944, explaining the continued existence of capitalism but without denying its problematic character, *The Great Transformation* can be considered a revision of *The Communist Manifesto* written a century earlier. Polanyi argues that the experience of commodification is more profound and immediate than the experience of exploitation, which as Marx himself argued was hidden from those who were supposed to rebel against it. In effect Polanyi takes Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, namely that market exchange obscures its ties to production, more seriously than Marx who thinks such illusions will dissolve in class struggle. For Polanyi, the source of resistance lies with the market rather than production. The expansion of the unregulated market threatens to destroy society which reacts in self-defense, what he calls the counter-movement against the market.

One of the virtues of Polanyi’s theory, like Marx’s, is that it links the micro-experience of people to the world systemic movements of capitalism through a series of mediating levels. The lynchpin of the connection lies in the idea of the fictitious commodity – a factor of production which when subject to unregulated exchange loses its use value. For Polanyi labor is but one such fictitious commodity, the others are land and money. Today these factors of production are subject to an unprecedented commodification that even Polanyi never anticipated.

When labor is subject to unregulated exchange, i.e. when it is commodified, when it is hired and fired at will with no protection, when the wage falls below the cost of the reproduction of labor power and when the laborer cannot develop the tacit skills necessary for any production, so the use value of labor also falls.

For the alleged commodity “labor power” cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of a man’s labor power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity “man” attached to that tag. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure ; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation. (Polanyi, 2001 [1944] : 76)

The issue, therefore, is not exploitation but commodification. Indeed, as Guy Standing (2011) has eloquently demonstrated the problem today is the disappearance of guaranteed exploitation, and in its place the rise of precarity, not just within the proletariat but climbing up the skill hierarchy. Precarity is part of the lived experience behind all contemporary movements – from the Arab Uprisings to the Indignados, from the Occupy Movement to Student movements.

One of the conditions for the commodification of labor power is dispossession from access to alternative means of subsistence, that is to the elimination of all social supports – including minimum wage legislation, unemployment compensation, and pensions but also access to land. Just as the separation of labor from land provides for the commodification of labor so it also provides for the commodification of land, which according to Polanyi also threatens the viability of the human species. “Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed” (Polanyi, 2001 [1944] : 76).

The economic argument could be easily expanded so as to include the conditions of safety and security attached to the integrity of the soil and its resources – such as the vigor and stamina of the population, the abundance of food supplies, the amount and character of defence materials, even the climate of the country which might suffer from the denudation of forests, from erosions and dust bowls, all of which, ultimately, depend upon the factor land, yet none of which respond to the supply-and-demand mechanism of the market. (Polanyi, 2001 [1944] : 193)

These prescient comments point to the inability of markets to defend the integrity of nature that accords well with recent arguments that climate change represents one of the biggest market failures of our time. When it comes to the plunder of nature, the destructiveness of markets has led to a host of struggles, especially in the Global South, from landless movements in Latin America to popular insurgency against Special Economic Zones in India, protests against land speculation and expropriation in China. Throughout the world the mining of natural resources has generated militant opposition from communities whose livelihoods are threatened. It takes place within cities, too, against such processes as gentrification and the attempt to build global cities, both of which involve the expulsion of the marginal from their homes. We have to extend the commodification of land to the commodification of nature more broadly, the commodification of water that generated waters wars in countries as far apart as South Africa and Bolivia, protest against market solutions to climate change, so-called carbon trading, and most recently against fossil fuel extraction through fracking.

Polanyi regarded money as a third fictitious commodity. For Polanyi money is what makes market exchange possible, but when it itself becomes the object of exchange, when the attempt is to make money from money then its use value as a medium of exchange is undermined. “Finally, the market administration of purchasing power would periodically liquidate business enterprise, for shortages and surfeits of money would prove as disastrous to business as floods and droughts in primitive society” (Polanyi, 2001 [1944], p.76). Polanyi was especially concerned that fixed exchange rates between currencies organized through the gold standard would create economic rigidities within national economies while going off the gold standard would create chaos and radical uncertainty. Today, we see how finance capital again becomes a prominent source of profit, making money from money, whether it be through micro-finance, whether it be loans to nation states, whether it be student loans or mortgages or credit cards. The extraordinary expansion of debt eventually and inevitably brings about bubbles and just as inevitably their popping. The creation of debt only further intensifies insecurity and immiseration, feeding the protest of the 99% across the globe.

There is a fourth fictitious commodity – knowledge – that Polanyi did not consider. The theorists of postindustrial society, preeminently Daniel Bell (1976), recognized knowledge as an ever-more-important factor of production giving pride and place to the university as its center of production.

But Bell did not anticipate the way the production and dissemination of knowledge would be commodified, leading the university to sell its knowledge to the highest bidders, biasing research toward private rather than public interests, cultivating students as customers who pay ever-increasing fees for instrumental forms of knowledge. The university reorganizes itself as a corporation that maximizes profit not only through increasing revenues, but cheapening and degrading its manpower by reducing tenured faculty, increasing the employment of low-paid adjunct faculty (which the university itself produces), outsourcing services, all the while expanding its managerial and administrative ranks. The protests emanating from the university, from Chile to Quebec – be they from students or faculty – center on its privatization and the distortion of the production and dissemination brought on by commodification.

Contemporary social movements, therefore, can be understood through the lens of these four fictitious commodities – through the creation of the fictitious commodity through different forms of *dispossession*, through the reduction of the fictitious commodity to an *object of exchange* than annihilates its commonly understood purpose, and through the new forms of *inequality* commodification produces. Any given movement may organize itself in the political realm, but its driving force lies in the experience of the articulation of these different commodifications. There is no one-to-one relation between social movement and a given fictitious commodity, but each movement is the product of the relation among fictitious commodification. For the last 40 years we have been experiencing the intensified commodification extended ever more deeply into human life. The wave of protests that have arisen to challenge this round of marketization, however, do not yet add up to a Polanyian counter-movement that would contain or reverse marketization. For that, there needs to be a far greater self-consciousness and vision among the participants, calling for a sociology for social movements.

## A New Sociology for Social Movements

Touraine's (1988) theory of social movements was also a theory for social movements. At the center of his recast sociological theory were social movements, making history themselves, what he called historicity. The sociologist was no longer outside society, studying its inherent laws of change, but inside society heightening the self-consciousness of movements in the fashioning of history. This reflected a period – post-industrialism – in which there was confidence in human agency to direct history whether via the state or civil society. There was an underlying optimism that the galloping wild horse of capitalism could somehow be tamed and directed to human ends. That has all disappeared. We are now living in an era in which markets run amok, devastating all that stands in their way. A sociology for social movements must begin by understanding this period of unconstrained marketization.

We need, therefore, to situate Polanyi's fictitious commodities within a wider framework of the history of capitalism. The essence of *The Great Transformation* lies in an argument about the dangers of the expansion of the market, namely that it leads to a reaction from society that can be of a progressive character (social democracy, New Deal) but also of a reactionary character – fascism and Stalinism. Thus, Polanyi's history has one long expansion of the market, starting at the end of the 18th century, destroying society along the way, leading to a defense of society, secured through a counter-movement directed by states that regulate the market, arising in response to the economic crisis of the 1930s – states that include regimes of social democracy and New Deal as well as fascism and Stalinism. He couldn't imagine humanity would dare to risk another round of market fundamentalism. Yet, that is just what happened, starting in the middle 1970s, developing on a global scale, leaving few spaces of the planet unaffected. The rising concern with globalization



expresses the global reach of markets.

But it is important to understand that this is not the first wave of marketization. Indeed, examining Polanyi's own history suggests it is not the second but the third wave. Where he saw a singular wave spreading over a century and a half, we can now discern two – one that advanced through the first half of the 19th century and was turned back by the labor movement in the second half, and a second wave that advanced after WWI and was reversed by state regulation in the 1930s extending into the 1970s, which in turn inaugurated a third wave of marketization that has yet to be contained. These waves of marketization become deeper over time as their scale increases, but they also involve different combinations of the fictitious commodities. The counter-movement to first-wave marketization in the 19th century was dominated by the struggle to decommodify labor. In England (about which Polanyi writes) this assumed the form of the factory movement, cooperatives, Owenism, trade union formation and the Labour Party. The local struggles, spread, melded together and compelled changes in state policy.

### Three Waves of marketization and their Counter-Movements



The success of labor led to a crisis of capitalism, resolved through imperialist strategies and World War I which was followed by an offensive from capital, leading to the *recommodification* of labor. The assault of the market spread to the loosening of constraints on international trade through currencies pegged to the gold standard that, in turn, led to uncontrollable inflation and the renewal of class struggles. The upshot was a variety of regimes that sought to regulate markets through the extension of social rights as well as labor rights.

These regimes whether social democratic, fascist, or Soviet lasted until the middle 1970s at which time they faced a renewed and mounting assault from capital not only against the protections labor had won for itself but also against state regulation of finance, marked by the end of Bretton Woods. Indeed, we can see how the offensive against labor across the planet, but especially in the North, led to a crisis of overproduction that did not lead to a renewed Keynesian politics but to the financialization of the economy via the creation of new moneys that could be extended to individuals in the form of credit (credit cards, student loans, and above all sub-prime mortgages), but also to enterprises and countries generating unprecedented levels of debt. The bubble burst when the debtors – whether individuals, enterprises or countries – could no longer deliver on their interest payments. There were few limits to what finance capital could commodify – from minerals to water, from land to air – creating the environmental catastrophe that the planet now faces. The solution to



create new markets in the rights to pollute and destroy the atmosphere – the so-called carbon markets – has not proven to be a solution but a way of making money from the deepening the ecological crisis.

Third-wave marketization has gone far deeper than second-wave marketization in the commodification of labor, nature and money. Moreover, to turn something into a commodity, requires first that it be disembedded from its social and political moorings. Labor had to be dispossessed from its supports in the state, peasants have had to be dispossessed from access to their land, people had to be dispossessed of access to their own body (so that their organs can be sold). This dispossession requires, in short, the escalation of violence perpetrated by states on behalf of capital, and direct deployment of violence by capital. Violence is at the heart of third-wave marketization in a way that Polanyi never anticipated.

Moreover, Polanyi did not and could not have anticipated a fourth fictitious commodity – knowledge. Today what used to be a public good – knowledge produced, for example, in the university was available to all – is fast becoming a private good. The production and dissemination of knowledge in the university has been commodified as a result of the forcible withdrawal of public funding. With important exceptions in such countries as Brazil, India and China, the university has had to become self-financing by selling the knowledge it produces to industry (the growth of the collaboration of bio-medical sciences and pharmaceuticals), by seeking funds from donors and alumni, and above all by an exponential increase in student fees. The major universities around the world are sacrificing their accountability to local and national interests as they are subject to world ranking systems that force them to follow the standards of the richest universities in the US. This program of rationalization brands the university as worthy or not of investment, working hand in glove with the commodification of the production and dissemination of knowledge which, in turn, generates new strategies for the commodification of labor, nature and finance.

The question now is whether the expansion of the market will generate its own counter-movement. It certainly generates multiple reactive movements, but when and how they will add up to a counter-movement is an entirely different matter. For that we need to develop a sociology that establishes their inter-connection – a sociology built on the relation between capitalist accumulation and market expansion. What I have offered here are the building blocks of such a theory – the specificity of third-wave marketization as the underlying cause of social movements, and third-wave marketization understood as the articulation of four fictitious commodities – labor, nature, finance and knowledge.

## **Sociology as Social Movement**

In underlining the fourth fictitious commodity – knowledge – I am pointing to the transformation of the conditions of production of knowledge. What relative autonomy the university possesses is rapidly evaporating in the face of its commercialization. We in the academy can no longer pretend to stand outside society, making it an external object of examination. Academics are irrevocably inside society and we, therefore, have to decide on whose side we are. Those disciplines that are best able to exploit market opportunities are the ones to benefit – the bio-medical sciences, engineering, law and business schools – and they become the more powerful influences within the university at the potential cost of the social sciences and humanities.

The social sciences, however, do not form a homogeneous block. Ironically, economics has created

the ideological justification of market fundamentalism – the very force that is destroying the university as an arena for the independent pursuit of knowledge. Political science, concerned with political order, now aspires to be an extension of economics, reflecting the increasingly collusive relation between markets (and especially finance capital) and nation states. Of course, there are dissidents within both fields, and they play an important role, but the dominant tendency is the endorsement of market fundamentalism through the embrace of utilitarianism. Sociology, too, has not escaped efforts to turn it into a branch of economics, but the anti-utilitarian tradition within sociology from Marx, Weber and Durkheim all the way to Parsons, Bourdieu, feminism, and postcolonial theory are so well entrenched that economic models have made few inroads.

Nor is this surprising as sociology was born with civil society, an arena of institutions, organizations and movements that are neither part of the state nor of the economy. But we should be careful not to romanticize civil society as some coherent, solidary whole as though it were free of exclusions, dominations, and fragmentations. It is Janus faced – it can aid the expansion of the market and state, but it can also obstruct or, at least, contain their expansion. This is where sociology is situated – its distinctive standpoint is civil society – examining the economy and state from the perspective of their consequences for civil society as well the ways in which civil society supports the economy and the state. Like civil society sociology looks two ways. On the one side it examines the social conditions of the existence of markets and states. On the other side, along with such neighboring disciplines as anthropology and geography, it can also take a critical stand against the unregulated expansion of the state-market nexus.

In the context of the rationalization and commercialization of the university, sociology is the one discipline whose standpoint, viz. civil society, behooves it to cultivate a community of critical discourse about the very nature of the modern university, but also conduct a conversation with publics beyond the university, making it accountable to those publics without losing its commitment to its scientific research programs. As the membrane separating the university from society becomes ever thinner, failure to counter-balance the commercialization of the university will end with the destruction of the university as we know it. It is in this sense that we must think of sociology as a social movement as well as scientific discipline, calling for a critical engagement with the world around. To sustain this dual and contradictory role the discipline must develop its own mechanisms for internal dialogue, mechanism that appear at the local level within the university, at a national level but most importantly at a global level. Building such a global sociology requires the development of a global infrastructure that fosters dialogue and outreach, that produces a third-wave sociology to meet the theoretical and practical challenges of third-wave marketization, and to halt the Third World War that is being waged on communities across the planet.

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