

Uneven decommodification geographies: Exploring variation across the centre and periphery

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed significant variation in the scale and form of decommodification across the capitalist world economy. To explore these uneven decommodification geographies this article develops a new conceptual framework that combines a critical Polanyian reading of decommodification with Latin American insights into centre-periphery structures and relations. The decommodification of land and labour in Britain (centre) and Ecuador (periphery) are then analysed from this conceptual perspective. The comparative analysis reveals significant variation in the scale and form of decommodification between the two countries during the pandemic. However, some important similarities are also observed, especially in relation to the (de) commodification of land. Here, the article draws on the corporate food regime literature to better understand similarities and differences between Britain and Ecuador. By revealing the uneven and shifting terrain of decommodification, this article makes a novel contribution to wider debates about the capitalist conjuncture and the intensifying crises of neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords

Decommodification, Karl Polanyi, land, labour, food

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed important features of neoliberal capitalism and clues about its future (s). One notable factor is the significant variation in the scale and form of decommodification across the capitalist world economy. Whereas some governments massively expanded decommodification to limit the fallout from the dislocation of capitalist markets during the opening phases of the pandemic, others introduced far more limited measures. Decommodification outside the state has also been highly uneven, indicating the diverse decommodification architectures that exist in capitalist societies today.

In this article, I explore these uneven decommodification geographies through the lens of a conceptual framework that I have developed through critical engagement with the work of Karl Polanyi (Goodwin, 2018, 2022, 2024). From this perspective, decommodification is conceptualised as a

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gradational, dialectic process - commodification and decommodification are located on a spectrum, with the self-regulation of capitalist markets at one end and the absence of capitalist markets at the other. Decommodification thus limits capitalist market exposure, dependence, and domination to varying degrees. Yet it is a contradictory process as it can also support capitalist structures, relations, and processes. The simultaneous escalation of state decommodification and capital accumulation is thus perfectly possible from this conceptual perspective, as has been demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Oxfam, 2022). I argue that the relationship between decommodification, accumulation, and value is crucial for grasping the character of decommodification and its capacity to sustain or erode capitalism. Building on this, I claim decommodification takes multiple political and ideological forms and is not intrinsically progressive or emancipatory. The conceptual framework presented in this article therefore encourages a critical reading of decommodification, which highlights its progressive potential while also revealing its contradictions and limits.

My analysis centres on the (de) commodification of labour and land; ‘fictitious commodities’ that Polanyi (1944/2001) identifies as key sites of struggle and transformation in capitalist societies. Polanyi, as is well known, claims capitalism rests on the fiction that land and labour are commodities. ‘But labor and land are no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists’ (p. 75). Land, it is important to stress, has wider meaning for Polanyi – it ‘invests man’s life with stability; it is the site of his habitation; it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons’ (p. 187). Thus, the (de) commodification of land not only refers to elements of nature, like land and water, but the produce of land, especially food, and features of the built environment, like parks and housing (see, e.g. Polanyi, 1944/2001: 191). The (de) commodification of land and labour – or, more precisely, labour power – intersect in multiple ways. I draw on the corporate food regime literature to better understand these linkages and similarities and differences between Britain and Ecuador (see McMichael, 2005, 2009, 2023).

By focussing on land and labour, I am not suggesting that the (de) commodification of money, another fictitious commodity and also a key pillar of the corporate food regime, has not been important during the Covid-19 pandemic. Issues relating to the commodification of money, including money supply, interest rates, and public debt have been front and centre. However, space does not permit a full analysis of these issues alongside the commodification of land and labour. Nonetheless, I highlight connections between land, labour and money, reinforcing the value of Polanyi’s fictitious commodity concept and hinting at possible areas of future research and analysis.

To explain the global unevenness of decommodification I draw on insights from Latin American structuralist and dependency thinkers (e.g. Dos Santos, 1970; Furtado, 1970; Prebisch, 1949). In broad terms, these scholars see the capitalist world economy comprise a ‘core’ and ‘periphery’, with North America and Western Europe dominating the former and Latin America relegated to the latter.¹ Centre-periphery structures and relations, which are explained in greater depth below, have emerged through centuries of uneven colonial-capitalist development and remain in place today, albeit in different and evolving forms (e.g. Giraud, 2020; Katz, 2022; Loureiro et al., 2021). In arguing for the continued relevance of the centre-periphery concept, I am aware that it risks essentialising and homogenising diverse geographies and reproducing hierarchical binary categories (see Sud and Sanchez-Ancochea, 2022). However, I use the concept in the spirit of the Latin American scholars who originally devised and refashioned it, that is, to capture highly uneven capitalist geographies and explain and challenge persistent structural global inequalities (e.g. Kay, 1989; Kvangraven, 2021). In this sense, comparing decommodification across the centre and periphery is a political act (Bruff, 2021). For greater analytical clarity, I narrow my centre-periphery argument to Britain and Ecuador, presenting them as broadly representative of trends across Western Europe (centre) and Latin America (periphery) (see below). I make no claims about other regions, although I hope future research will look at similar dynamics elsewhere.

Marrying the decommodification and centre-periphery concepts, I argue that states in the core are more capable of controlling capitalism through decommodification than states in periphery. The corollary of this is that peripheral capitalism is more unstable, and this heightened instability and precarity creates more space for resistance, autonomy, and experimentation, on the one hand, and repression, authoritarianism and violence, on the other. Yet decades of neoliberal restructuring and periodic crises, especially the 2007–2008 financial crisis, have reduced the capacity of core capitalist states to control capitalism through decommodification and this is one reason why capitalism is entering a more volatile and dangerous stage (Streeck, 2016). The reasons for the longer-term erosion of state decommodification in the capitalist core are varied and complex but three broad interrelated factors have been particularly important. First, neoliberalisation and financialisation have increased the mobility and power of capital, which has widened income and wealth inequalities and limited the capacity of states to maintain and expand decommodification. Second, trade unions have been weakened through a combination of neoliberal restructuring and state repression, which has fragmented the collective voice of the working classes and weakened demands for decommodification, especially of labour but also land and money. Third, neoliberal capitalist subjectivities have further reduced demands for state decommodification and limited the capacity of people to think beyond capitalist markets.

New social movements and left political blocks and parties have emerged in the capitalist core to challenge these longer-term trends, including socialist, environmental, and anti-racist movements (Sandbrook, 2022). More recently, there has been a surge of labour organising and industrial action in some core countries as labour conditions have become more precarious and real wages have plunged. So far, however, this has not coalesced into broad-based progressive countermovements capable of challenging and transcending neoliberal capitalism. Rather, the heightened precarity caused by the reconfiguration of capitalism and the hollowing-out of decommodification have proved more favourable for reactionary political forces. In the absence of powerful left movements pushing for progressive decommodification and transformation, repression and authoritarianism have become more common in the core (Bruff, 2014), and new forms of fascism have also emerged (Robinson, 2019). While massive global inequalities remain, pronounced features of peripheral capitalism – precarity, instability, repression – are therefore becoming more prominent in the core. The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated these longer-term trends (Saad-Filho, 2021). Capitalist geographies are changing and critical attention to decommodification is necessary to understand this shifting terrain.

Comparing (de) commodification in Britain and Ecuador provides important insight into these evolving issues. These two countries have been selected as illustrative examples of broader patterns across Western Europe (centre) and Latin America (periphery) for several reasons. First, both have been governed by elite-dominated right-wing administrations during the pandemic. Hence, there are some similarities in the class composition and ideological persuasion of the ruling political parties. Second, Britain and Ecuador have experienced long periods of neoliberal austerity, which weakened state decommodification prior to the pandemic and influenced the scale and form of (de) commodification during the crisis. Third, both countries experienced especially deep recessions during the opening phases of the pandemic, with GDP falling 11% in Britain and 8% in Ecuador in 2020 (World Bank), suggesting similar degrees of macroeconomic dislocation, albeit amid different structural conditions. Fourth, I have lived and researched in Britain and Ecuador and thus feel better qualified to compare them than two other core and periphery countries. Thus, a combination of analytical and pragmatic factors underpins the case selection. My analysis draws on a range of sources, including legislation, government reports, newspaper coverage, social media, academic literature and my own experience of living in Britain and Ecuador. The analytical focus of this article is the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, when decommodification was most intense; however, I cover events, policies, and processes through to mid-2023, when this article was completed.

The diversity of decommodification architectures across Western Europe and Latin America cautions against making sweeping generalisations based on these two cases. In broad terms, Britain and Ecuador have been towards the lower end of the spectrum in terms of state decommodification during the pandemic, especially Ecuador, which lagged most other Latin American countries, partly because of its dollarized economy, which made it particularly exposed to the dislocation of world markets. Hence, comparing other countries from Western Europe and Latin America might reveal bigger or smaller differences. Nonetheless, the variation in state decommodification between Britain and Ecuador is broadly representative of wider patterns between the two regions. The unevenness of the decommodification of labour power has been particularly stark. Take two headline programmes in France and Colombia (Gentilini et al., 2022). In the former, the right-wing Macron government expanded the *Chômage Partiel* programme, which involved the state covering 70%–100% of the wages of employees up to 4.5 times the minimum monthly wage for several months. In the latter, the right-wing Duque government implemented a similar but much more circumscribed scheme – *Programa de Apoyo al Empleo Formal* – which set out to pay out 40%–50% of the minimum monthly salary per worker up to four times. The extent to which the incomes of the workers who benefitted from these programmes were momentarily subsidised or covered by the state thus varied enormously. In addition to limiting unemployment and providing workers with some stability during the pandemic, these programmes also supported the profits of capitalist firms and underpinned capital accumulation, which, as noted above, is a common feature of decommodification when delivered through the state. In both countries, the governments introduced a raft of other decommodification measures, which tended to follow a similar pattern, that is, far more generous and extensive in France than Colombia, reflecting the position the countries occupy in the centre and periphery of the capitalist world economy.

The rest of this article is dedicated to explaining these uneven decommodification geographies, focussing on Britain (centre) and Ecuador (periphery). The next section links a critical Polanyian reading of decommodification to the centre-periphery concept to create a new conceptual framework. The article then analyses the (de) commodification of labour and land in Britain and Ecuador during the Covid-19 pandemic from this perspective. In these sections, I also seek to show how the (de) commodification of labour and land overlap and intersect with the (de) commodification of money. I make no attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of these extremely complex processes; such a task is well beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I seek to illustrate the value of my reading of decommodification and encourage more fine-grained historical and conjunctural analysis in future work. The article concludes by summarising the main arguments and connecting them to broader debates about the current capitalist conjuncture.

The framework that I develop in this article pushes Polanyian concepts, theories, and approaches in new directions and makes a novel contribution to debates about centre-periphery structures and relations. The article also contributes to wider debates about the current capitalist conjuncture, including the shifting character of capitalist states and the dynamics of neoliberal capitalist crises.

Conceptualising uneven decommodification geographies

When viewed from a Polanyian perspective, decommodification is rooted in the commodification of fictitious commodities – land, labour and money. Monetary and financial institutions were central to Polanyi's analysis of liberal capitalism, but he singled out land and labour for particular attention because of their centrality to human life (Polanyi, 1944/2001; see also Polanyi, 1947/1968). Fictitious commodification suggests capitalism not only threatens to destroy the social fabric of life through the commodification of labour but the environmental basis for human existence through the commodification of land. The commodification of money supports these tendencies and overlaps with the commodification of land and labour in multiple dimensions. Decommodification is required to prevent fictitious commodification leading to a 'stark utopia' of social and environmental annihilation (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 3). However, it is a contradictory process that creates its own risks and tensions.

Decommodification as contradictory process

Polanyi (1944/2001) stressed that checking the destructive tendencies of fictitious commodification while remaining within a capitalist framework is a complicated and contradictory process. While the ‘countermovement’ – a broad cross-class response to capitalist market expansion in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – partially decommodified fictitious commodities and generally improved socioeconomic conditions, it was ultimately incompatible with liberal institutions and contributed to the collapse of classical liberal capitalism in the 1930s. This highlights one of the contradictions of decommodification. On the one hand, it has the capacity to make capitalism less socially and environmentally destructive and thus provides states with tools to manage capitalism. On the other hand, it imbues capitalism with strains and tensions that generate political crises. The degree of control decommodification affords capitalist states is thus always partial, contested, and unstable (Sandbrook, 2022).

Vail (2010, 2022) provides some useful insights into this process. He stresses the diversity and unevenness of decommodification, claiming that this presents ‘an implicit rebuke to the universalistic pretensions of market fundamentalism’ (Vail, 2010: 314). Unlike commodification, which is rooted in a singular logic of competition, profit maximisation, capital accumulation and private property, decommodification is based on a plurality of logics and relations, reflecting the diverse ways commodification is contested and the multitude of non-market relations and institutions that exist in capitalist societies. To capture this diversity, he proposes an expanded framework that goes beyond Polanyi’s original trilogy of fictitious commodities to include a highly diverse range of initiatives, including open-source software, fair trade, and community art projects (2010: 338; see also Vail, 2022). The common thread that connects them, he argues, is that they each reduce ‘the scope and influence of the market in everyday life’ (2010: 313). The framework that I propose below is also expansive; however, it remains grounded in the commodification of land, labour, and money to retain greater analytical focus. It also places more emphasis on the limits and contradictions of decommodification, including the fact that it can support capitalist structures, relations, and processes. Hence, while I seek to show the progressive potential of decommodification, my reading is less sanguine than Vail’s.

One reason why decommodification is so heterogenous and uneven is that it occurs outside as well as through the state. This point was not entirely overlooked by welfare state theorists, whose work set the tone for much early decommodification analysis. Offe (1996: 265), for example, argues that ‘areas of social life that have been decommodified by welfare state interventions can be developed, through political struggle, into relatively autonomous sub-systems of life oriented to the production and distribution of use values’ (see also Keane, 1984: 18; Esping-Andersen, 1990). In doing so, he points to the open-endedness of state decommodification, suggesting it can travel in different directions to ones envisaged by the politicians and bureaucrats who design and implement it (Goodwin, 2022). Yet welfare state theorists still see decommodification radiating out from the state, which is not always the case. For example, Vitale and Sivini (2017) show how alternative food networks in Italy support land decommodification by connecting farmers to consumers and developing relations of respect, solidarity, and reciprocity. In doing so, the networks have revalorised the labour of the farmers and opened horizons beyond capitalist markets (see also Goodwin, 2017, 2021). In this case, decommodification is not outside the purview of the state; however, initiatives such as these demonstrate that the state is not the only organisational form capable of delivering decommodification, which contributes to the geographical diversity of the process.

This example shows, as Vitale and Sivini (2017) insist, that decommodification is connected to production as well as exchange. Recognising this raises a series of questions that allow for a deeper analysis of decommodification. How, for example, does decommodification configure social relations at various moments of the production and exchange process? What space does decommodification create for the production of use over exchange values? How does decommodification support or limit capital accumulation?

The conceptual framework that I have developed, which is derived from a critical Polanyian reading of decommodification, provides some tentative answers to these questions (Goodwin, 2018, 2022, 2024). Viewed from this perspective, decommodification is understood as a gradational process – commodification and decommodification are located on a spectrum, with self-regulation of capitalist markets at one end and the absence of capitalist markets at the other. These two connected processes, which occur concurrently and centre on fictitious commodification, move in opposite directions along this continuum. Commodification and decommodification are therefore understood as dialectically related rather than distinct processes. Decommodification takes multiple political and ideological forms and occurs through and outside the state.

I have posited three categories to support the empirical analysis of decommodification: (i) *intervening*, (ii) *limiting*, (iii) *preventing-reversing* (see also Horowitz, 2023). The first – *intervening* – involves directly intervening in capitalist markets to regulate fictitious commodification; examples include minimum wages, fixed exchange rates, rent controls, and agriculture tariffs. The second – *limiting* – relates to supplementary mechanisms that reduce exposure to fictitious commodification and potentially create space for alternatives; examples include housing benefits, pensions, food banks, and basic income. The third – *preventing-reversing* – involves defending, maintaining, and creating mechanisms that avert, subvert or reverse fictitious commodification; examples include public parks, squatting, community water systems, worker cooperatives and peasant farming.

Operating at different positions along the (de) commodification spectrum, these measures reduce capitalist market exposure, dependence, and domination to varying degrees. Consider three different forms of housing decommodification. Rent controls (*intervening*) protect tenants from escalating rents, bring greater stability, and reconfigure power relations between landlords and tenants. Housing benefits (*limiting*) provide tenants with the money to pay some or all their rent. However, they give them little or no protection against changing market conditions and oil the wheels of the private rental market (see below). Meanwhile, squatting (*preventing-reversing*) bypasses the housing market altogether and subverts rather than supports capitalist structures, relations, and processes. These examples show that while decommodification can restrict or transcend capitalist markets, it can also legitimise and sustain them (Goodwin, 2018, 2022, 2024; Dale, 2016; Hall, 2023). Hence, decommodification is a contradictory process that can support as well as limit commodification.

The *preventing-reversing* category, as the squatting example indicates, has the most radical potential. It is in this domain that decommodification has the greatest potential to support ‘the idea that use values and not the perpetual search for augmenting exchange values should become the basic driver of economic activity’ (Harvey, 2015: 85; see also Hermann, 2021). Such a shift could materialise through the gradual expansion of decommodification and the steady erosion of capitalism over time (Wright, 2019; see also Burawoy, 2020; Dinerstein and Pitts, 2021). However, as Polanyi (1944/2001) suggests, ramping up decommodification within capitalism is a crisis-prone process, which can lead in progressive as well as regressive directions (see also Goodwin, 2022; Sandbrook, 2022). To forge political strategies and practices that lead to progressive transformations it is essential to consider the relationship between decommodification, production, and value. For instance, a community water system might be based on non-market relations and practices, but the water delivered through the system might support capitalist agriculture. Such a system is only likely to have transformative potential if it supports forms of agriculture that break with production for exchange value and profit maximisation in capitalist markets, which, in turn, is likely to require structural changes to property relations and a supporting cast of decommodification measures, such as trade protection and state subsidies. This suggests that if decommodification is to contribute to progressive transformations that push beyond neoliberal capitalism, it must be part of a broader political-economic process that also involves the ‘conquest of production’ (Benanav, 2020: 79; see also Burawoy, 2020; Hickel, 2023).

Working through these linkages reinforces the importance of analysing decommodification in the context of evolving structures and relations of production and specifying the macro-historical conditions in which decommodification takes place (Goodwin, 2022; see also Cangiani, 2011). Labour, for

instance, takes on new meaning in post-industrial financialised societies in the capitalist core that are replete with ‘bullshit jobs’, that is, jobs that the workers themselves find pointless and unfulfilling (Graeber, 2019). In this context, the decommodification of labour power might emerge as a form of protection against soul-destroying, bullshit work, providing a platform for people to find meaning and fulfilment through their labour. A group of friends might, for instance, decide to form a cooperative to avoid the drudgery and precarity of much neoliberal work. Equally, however, decommodification might be used by states to force recalcitrant workers into monotonous, meaningless jobs. Welfare regimes have been restructured during neoliberal capitalism to perform this function in many cases (Bruff, 2014; Peck, 2001).

These examples illustrate the importance of considering the diverse lived experiences of decommodification. Such analysis can provide further insight into the politics of decommodification and the geographical unevenness of the process. A couple of examples illustrate this point. While a 25-year-old worker momentarily between meaningful jobs might greatly appreciate unemployment benefits, a 60-year-old worker with few prospects of finding fulfilling employment might experience the conditions attached to benefits as a form of humiliation and coercion. Racism makes it even more important to consider the lived experience of decommodification. Public parks, for instance, might be a site of peace and tranquillity for a retired white couple but a place of alienation and hostility for a group of black teenagers who have felt the full force of racist policing (see, e.g. Hoover and Lim, 2021). Colonialism brings further challenges as contested processes of nation-building and citizenship complicate decommodification, especially when delivered through the state. National parks, for example, might remove land from the market and create new decommodified spaces for some groups and classes, but they might also displace indigenous peoples from their land and erode their cultures and livelihoods. Such cases might amount to *decommodification by dispossession* (Goodwin, 2024), paraphrasing and twisting Harvey (2003). Exploring the lived experience and politics of decommodification therefore requires a wide social and historical lens as well as a sensitivity to context and difference.

Decommodification across the centre and periphery

Focused on explaining macro-institutional change in historical perspective (Cangiani, 2011), Polanyi paid little attention to the lived experience of decommodification. He did, nonetheless, hint at the importance of colonialism to the process. In *The Great Transformation*, he suggests that countries under Western colonial rule lacked sufficient democratic representation and political power to contain or resist commodification through the state (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 192; see also, Goodwin, 2024). The efforts of colonial powers to liquidate or weaken non-market social institutions to expand capitalism compounded the lack of state protection (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 171–172). Thus, Western colonialism restricted state and non-state forms of decommodification while simultaneously expanding market institutions and relations, leaving colonised peoples highly exposed to capitalist market forces. Polanyi therefore suggests that global uneven decommodification geographies have their roots in historical processes of capitalist-colonial development (Goodwin, 2024; see also Bhambra, 2021).

The centre-periphery concept, foundational to Latin American structuralist and dependency thinkers (Fajardo, 2022; Kay, 1989), helps push this insight further. The concept is rooted in the pioneering work of Prebisch (1949/1986) who argued that the capitalist world economy bifurcated into a ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ in the wake of the industrial revolution in Europe. Whereas core capitalist countries, like Britain, experienced broad-based industrial development, peripheral nations, like Ecuador, developed dualist economic structures, with small high-productivity primary export zones operating alongside sprawling low-productivity traditional agrarian economies.

A couple of elements of Prebisch’s formulation of the centre-periphery concept are important for understanding uneven decommodification geographies. First, it contends that there is no natural tendency for incomes between capitalist nations to converge over time, pointing to enduring structural

inequalities and unequal power relations in the capitalist world economy. Second, the state is identified as a pivotal actor in the process of capitalist development in the periphery, with state agencies required to plan and stimulate industrialisation and construct, expand and regulate markets. Third, the concept contends that the macroeconomic structures of peripheral societies, especially specialisation in the production and export of oil, minerals, fishing, and agriculture, makes peripheral capitalism more volatile and unstable, suggesting capitalist states face greater challenges controlling capitalism in the periphery (Fischer, 2015). Fourth, labour markets are identified as a key distinguishing factor between core and peripheral capitalism, with trade unions more capable of protecting wages and conditions in the former and a steady flow of surplus rural labour placing extra downward pressure on wages and conditions in the latter.

Viewed through a Polanyian lens, the centre-periphery concept suggests fictitious commodification takes different forms in the periphery, with peripheral macroeconomic structures and conditions (i) generating distinct land and labour uses and relations, (ii) limiting the capacity of organised labour to secure the decommodification of labour power through and outside the state and (iii) creating more challenging conditions for states to manage capitalism. Taken together, this suggests a decommodification paradox. On the one hand, socioeconomic conditions are more volatile and precarious in the periphery, implying a greater need for decommodification. On the other hand, macroeconomic structures and conditions make it even harder for peripheral states to deliver and maintain decommodification, which, in turn, generates more economic and political instability. One consequence of this paradox is that non-state decommodification is more vital in peripheral capitalist societies and this contributes to the geographic unevenness of decommodification both within and between countries.

Dependency thinkers who critiqued, refashioned, and extended the centre-periphery concept provide further insights into this process (e.g. Dos Santos, 1970; Furtado, 1973/2021; Marini, 1972). No single reformulation of the concept emerged through this intellectual process and some dependency thinkers used alternative terminology to capture unequal global structures and relations (see Fajardo, 2022; Kay, 1989). Combined, however, insights from these scholars, who drew on and contributed to Marxist theory, shine further light on uneven decommodification geographies.

Firstly, dependency thinkers encouraged a far more critical reading of the state, arguing that Latin American governments and bureaucracies primarily acted in the interests of domestic and international capitalists, underlining the importance of capitalist class power, something that was downplayed by Prebisch (Kay, 1989) and also by Polanyi (Burawoy, 2019). Subjecting multinational corporations to greater critical scrutiny, dependency scholars also stressed the unequal power relations embedded in global production relations and processes. Multinational corporations, especially from the US, began to dominate protected Latin American markets in the 1960s and 1970s, exerting considerable influence over domestic laws and policies and sending the bulk of profits back to the capitalist core (Furtado, 1973/2021). Lacking financial systems of the scale and sophistication required to fund structural transformation, most Latin American states were also heavily reliant on international financial markets and foreign banks for lending, which created more opportunities for capital accumulation in North America and Western Europe. The plunder of land and the exploitation of labour by multinational corporations continued apace in the 1960s and 1970s and this was increasingly seen as a central feature of capital accumulation in the core (Frank, 1969; Marini, 1972). The consumption patterns and capitalist lifestyles of core capitalist countries, especially the US, also became more entrenched in Latin America; hence, dependency was not only a political-economic relation but also a social and cultural process (Furtado, 1973/2021; Loureiro et al., 2021). The upshot of dependency in the late twentieth century was that instead of Latin American societies transcending centre-periphery structures and relations through a process of state-directed capitalist development, as Prebisch had hoped, they became increasingly reliant on the capitalist core and stuck in a persistent trap of crisis and underdevelopment.

There is much debate about whether centre-periphery structures and relations continue to undergird global capitalism today (see, e.g. Fischer, 2015; Kvangraven, 2021). The ability of a handful of nations – for example, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore – to ‘escape the periphery’ shows that a country’s

destiny is not totally determined by centre-periphery structures and relations (Wade, 2018). Yet many of the political-economic factors structuralist and dependency thinkers identified in the late twentieth century remain at play in Latin America today (see, e.g. Giraud, 2020; Santos, 2023; Torres and Ahumada, 2022). Despite the growth of the service and finance sectors, most Latin American countries, especially in South America, remain heavily dependent on the export of oil, minerals, and agriculture, which generates considerable economic and political instability and causes enormous socioenvironmental damage (Svampa, 2015). Meanwhile, new forms of dependency have emerged in the context of climate change and environmental crisis (Feliz and Melon 2023). The informal sector, which varies in size and composition across Latin America, has expanded during neoliberal capitalism, creating room for some creativity and autonomy but also generating considerable precarity and poverty (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2022; Millar, 2014). Informality places some constraints on the fiscal capacity of Latin American states; however, the ability of domestic elites and multinational corporations to limit and avoid taxation is a far more decisive factor, which, in turn, restricts the possibilities of reducing massive income and wealth inequalities (Sánchez-Ancochea, 2020). The limited fiscal capacity of Latin American states makes them particularly reliant on external funding from overseas banks, international financial markets, multilateral organisations, and, more recently, Chinese state agencies. Hence, despite significant changes over the last 70 years, Latin American societies continue to exhibit the macro characteristics of peripheral capitalism, which has a considerable bearing on decommodification processes, as the next section will illustrate.

Uneven decommodification geographies: Britain (centre) and Ecuador (periphery) in comparative perspective

In this section, I will trace the (de) commodification of land and labour in Britain and Ecuador during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the conceptual framework outlined above. The analytical focus is the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, when decommodification was most intense; however, this section covers events, policies and processes through to mid-2023, when this article was finalised. No attempt is made to offer a fine-grained analysis of these diverse and complex processes. Rather, I seek to show general tendencies in the two countries, with the aim of pointing towards broader patterns across the Western Europe (centre) and Latin America (periphery) and suggesting new lines of inquiry into the causes and consequences of global uneven decommodification geographies.

(De) commodifying labour during the Covid-19 pandemic

Labour commodification experienced massive disruption during the opening wave of the pandemic. In Britain, the right-wing Johnson government, which was elected to office in December 2019, issued a public health order for people to stay at home and social distance on 23 March 2020, weeks after the virus started to spread widely across the country (Jones and Hameiri, 2022). Following the mass closure of workplaces, much office work in the public and private sector was reorganised to enable people to work from home, while online platforms expanded to support the consumption of goods and the delivery of services, accelerating existing trends (Leyshon, 2023). To avoid economic collapse and popular revolt, the Johnson government introduced a series of measures to support workers and businesses, which momentarily increased labour decommodification to unprecedented levels. Delivered via the tax system, the headline programme, the so-called Furlough Scheme, paid workers between 60% and 80% of their monthly salary up to £2500 for several months (Sawyer, 2021). In total, the scheme covered nearly 12 million jobs and cost the government approximately £70 billion (Francis-Devine et al., 2021). In addition, the coverage of existing decommodifying institutions massively expanded. The number of people enrolled on Universal Credit, the headline Tory

welfare programme, doubled from 3 to 6 million in the opening months of the lockdown and remained above 5.5 million into 2023 (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2023). The scheme, a *limiting* form of decommodification, is designed to provide recipients with the equivalent of a minimum income and thus provides the bare minimum of support. Universal Credit payments were temporarily increased by £20 a week during the opening phases of the pandemic. Various other short-term measures were introduced to limit the fallout from the dislocation of labour markets, including the extension of sick pay (Gentilini et al., 2022). The headline minimum wage for workers above the age of 23, euphemistically called the National Living Wage, increased 2.1% in 2021 and 6.6% in 2022 to £9.50 per hour; however, this latest increase was swallowed up by inflation, which rose above 10% in the second half of 2022 and into early 2023, implying sharp real wage declines for minimum wage earners.

Before being forced unceremoniously from office by his own government in September 2022, Johnson introduced legislation that permitted firms to hire agency staff to replace striking workers, the latest in a long series of Tory anti-trade union measures (Daniels, 2023). His government also implemented repressive measures to contain popular protests and social movements (Newton, 2021). Liz Truss, who replaced Johnson only to be removed 49 days later after her government's budget was savaged by international financial markets and institutions, and Rishi Sunak, who replaced Truss in October 2022 and remains in office at the time of writing, continued along this authoritarian path, accelerating a longer-term trend during neoliberal capitalism (Bruff, 2014).

The initial headline public health response to Covid-19 was similar in Ecuador: people were ordered to stay at home and social distance from the 17 March 2020. However, the form and scale of labour decommodification delivered through the state was vastly different. The headline measure introduced by Lenín Moreno, who was elected in 2017 to continue the left-leaning political project of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) but replaced it with a neoliberal austerity programme instead, involved disbursing means-tested cash transfers to low-income families (Gentilini et al., 2022). The existing conditional cash transfer scheme – *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (Human Development Grant) – which at the time distributed monthly payments of \$50 to low-income families – expanded, with the number of people integrated into the programme increasing (Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social (MIES), 2021, 2022). A new programme – *Bono de Protección Familiar* (Family Protection Grant) – distributed two cash transfers of \$60 in the first two phases in 2020 and a one-off payment of \$120 in the next two phases in 2021 (the minimum wage was then \$400 per month). In total, these new schemes are estimated to have reached around 1.5 million people and cost approximately \$140 million (MIES, 2021, 2022). More targeted means-tested cash transfers were also implemented, including one-off transfers of \$240 to around 8000 low-income families with young children (Gentilini et al., 2022). The social security system – *Instituto Ecuatoriano de Seguridad Social* (Ecuadorian Social Security Institute) – provided some protection for enrolled workers. Short contribution holidays were implemented, and the disbursement of unemployment benefits was accelerated (Jara et al., 2022). However, the IESS, a *limiting* form of decommodification, excludes millions of workers, especially in the informal sector, leaving many without any protection. Moreno pledged to provide a one-off payment of \$500 to 550,000 workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic, but he failed to deliver on this promise before leaving office in early 2021 and the country shortly afterwards (El Comercio, 27/01/21).

Indeed, rather than provide extra support to workers, the Moreno government moved in the opposite direction and gave greater power to capital. Legislation introduced in June 2020 – the so-called *Ley de Apoyo Humanitario* (Humanitarian Support Law) – gave firms the power to alter the employment conditions of their workers, including reducing their hours and wages (Rayner, 2021; Registro Oficial (RO), 2020). New flexible short-term labour contracts were also introduced. Deepening labour commodification during the pandemic, the reforms sought to protect the profits of capitalist enterprises and force workers to bear the brunt of the crisis.

The government's decision to use the pandemic to liberalise labour markets was connected to the \$6.5 billion loan it secured from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2020). The government agreed to introduce a series of reforms in exchange for the loan, including liberalising labour markets, reducing state subsidies, and slashing public spending. Credit lines from the World Bank pushed in the same direction (World Bank, 2021). To satisfy the IMF, Moreno announced a multi-billion reduction of public expenditure in May 2020, which included a \$980 million cut in public sector wages (ILO, 2023b). Loans with the IMF and World Bank came with the implicit obligation to guarantee the repayment of public debt to international investors and Moreno duly responded by prioritising debt servicing over public spending, including a controversial \$324-million repayment in March 2020 when a devastating early wave of Covid-19 left bodies piled in the streets of Guayaquil (Rayner, 2021).

Guillermo Lasso, who replaced Moreno as president after narrowly winning the second round of the presidential elections in April 2021, agreed to comply with the commodifying conditions attached to the IMF loan and continued along the path of neoliberal austerity. Accordingly, his government insisted that it did not have the resources to honour Moreno's pledge to provide one-off payments to workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic (El Comercio, 17/08/21). Lasso followed Moreno in providing a bare minimum of labour decommodification. His government increased the monthly minimum wage from \$400 to \$425 in January 2022, which provided some support to formal sector workers, and raised the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* from \$50 to \$55 in response a powerful indigenuous mobilisation in June 2022 (see below).

The highly circumscribed forms of labour decommodification delivered through the state made the informal sector an even more important site of survival and experimentation during the pandemic. In the absence of meaningful state support, informal workers, who are the majority in Ecuador, were left with little option but to continue working despite the public health risks (El Comercio, 16/08/20; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC), 2023). During the opening phase of the pandemic, many informal workers returned to rural communities for shelter, indicating the important role small-scale agriculture played in softening the blow of the crisis in Ecuador, even if structural inequalities set definite limits on the absorption of additional labour (Goodwin, 2021; McBurney et al., 2021; see below).

Centre-periphery histories and structures

State responses to the disruption to labour commodification during the Covid-19 pandemic have therefore taken very different forms in Britain and Ecuador. The British state response occurred in the context of a welfare regime that has its roots in the progressive countermovement that emerged during classical liberal capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Polanyi, 1944/2001), a countermovement that was greatly facilitated by the position Britain occupied at the centre of the capitalist world economy and at the head of a vast empire (Goodwin, 2024; see also Bhambra, 2021). Working class organisation and socialist activism provided the foundation for the post-1945 expansion of the welfare state, which has since been hollowed-out through decades of neoliberal restructuring, especially by Conservative governments but also Labour administrations. The reconfiguration of the welfare state has supported efforts to construct neoliberal subjects through diverse forms of state intervention and propaganda (Da Costa Vieira, 2023). This has happened alongside the decline of manufacturing, the acceleration of financialisation, and the expansion of low-wage, precarious employment (Dinerstein and Pitts, 2021). The 2007–2008 financial crisis created the conditions for a new assault on the welfare system under the guise of neoliberal austerity (Barford and Grey, 2022). Since 2010, Conservative governments have made benefits more meagre, vindictive and demoralising, which has deepened inequalities and caused mass human suffering (Walsh et al., 2022). As part of this process, the welfare regime has become more explicitly orientated towards compelling people to work and allocating workers to undesirable jobs, especially women (Hoynes et al., 2023). The

reconfiguration of the welfare regime has thus had uneven effects, indicating the importance of considering the lived experience of decommodification and how it varies across social groups and classes. Neoliberal restructuring of welfare has also fuelled the housing market, with housing benefits distributed through Universal Credit being channelled through beneficiaries to private landlords, following the mass sell-off of decommodified social housing from the 1980s (Cooper et al., 2020; see also Christophers, 2018). The decommodification of labour power through the welfare regime thus supports the commodification of land through the housing market, indicating how decommodification in one sphere might support commodification in another (Goodwin, 2022).

The British welfare system shows that state decommodification can kill two capitalist birds with one stone, acting as a disciplining mechanism, on the one hand, and a driver of commodification and accumulation, on the other. Yet it still offers vital support for low-wage, unemployed and retired workers and people living with disabilities, ensuring they are not totally exposed to capitalist markets and providing them with a modicum of security and stability. Hence, even after more than a decade of brutal neoliberal austerity, the British state still provides a degree of labour decommodification that is unimaginable in peripheral capitalist societies, like Ecuador. The political subjectivities, relations and institutions that have emerged in Britain through historical struggles linked to fictitious commodification and market domination partly explain this. Johnson was beholden to this historical process at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and compelled to momentarily ramp-up labour decommodification to minimise the social and political fallout from the crisis. Nonetheless, the temporary measures that his government introduced and the massification of existing welfare programmes – *intervening* and *limiting* forms of decommodification – were also clearly aimed at minimising disruption to processes of commodification and accumulation. Underpinned by its colonial history and privileged position at the centre of the capitalist world economy, the British state was endowed with the fiscal and bureaucratic capacity to massively expand decommodification during the opening phases of the pandemic, which helped keep the wheels of capitalism turning, while shielding millions of people from an unprecedented socioeconomic crisis.

By contrast, the peripheral position that Ecuador occupies in the capitalist world economy has restricted the historical development of a welfare regime, and state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have taken place amid a highly truncated system that provides some protection for workers in the formal sector through the IESS but excludes most informal and agricultural workers, who are the majority. Ecuador's macroeconomic structure has been dominated by primary production since the country was incorporated into the capitalist system under Spanish colonial rule, with the economy becoming increasingly geared to world markets from the early nineteenth century when the country became a republic (Acosta, 2006; Bértola and Ocampo, 2012). Since independence, Ecuador has experienced a series of economic booms and busts, from cacao in the late nineteenth century to oil in the early twenty-first century and has remained heavily reliant on overseas funding to support the balance of payments and public spending (Acosta, 2009). Efforts to transcend this macroeconomic structure in the post-1945 period, which were aided by the centre-periphery analysis of Latin American structuralists (Fajardo, 2022), were reversed in the 1980s and 1990s during neoliberal reform (Acosta, 2006; Bértola and Ocampo, 2012). Neoliberal restructuring, enforced through IMF and World Bank loans, weakened the industrial, agricultural and public sectors, expanded informality and precarity, and reduced IESS coverage.

During this period, Ecuador went further than other Latin American countries (excluding El Salvador) by abandoning its own currency, the sucre, and adopting the US dollar. The move, which was enthusiastically supported by the IMF, followed a deep recession in the late 1990s, which was caused by rapid economic and financial liberalisation (Acosta, 2006). Dollarisation stripped the Banco Central del Ecuador of its capacity to print money and regulate the exchange rate, and thus reduced the decommodification of money through the central banking system (see Polanyi, 1944/2001). This had important implications for labour as workers were expected to ease economic

adjustments through flexible contracts and labour relations. The state's heightened dependence on external financing after dollarisation also tightened fiscal constraints and increased reliance on international financial markets and multilateral organisations, which set limits on decommodification through the state. Obtaining foreign exchange became a more pressing concern, giving exporters even more political power. Dollarisation thus accentuated important features of peripheral capitalism, making Ecuador even more dependent on the core.

Rafael Correa, one of several left-leaning presidents elected in Latin America in the early twenty-first century (Garcia Fernandez, 2021), retained dollarisation but made some efforts to increase the decommodification of labour power during his decade in office (2007–2017). Under Correa, IESS enrolment was expanded, the minimum wage was reactivated, leading to substantial real-wage increases for formal sector workers, and unemployment insurance was extended to include previous IESS members (Jara et al., 2022). In addition, the Correa government strengthened the cash transfer programme – *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* – which was first introduced in the late 1990s, following the general trend in Latin America (Lavinias, 2013). While the scheme increased in both reach and generosity under Correa, it remained primarily aimed at supporting survival in a peripheral capitalist society. Monthly payments increased from \$15 to \$50 during Correa's presidency, but this remained well below the monthly *minimum wage*.

Cash transfers bring the contradictions of state decommodification sharply into focus. On the one hand, the distribution of cash through the state reduces reliance on income generated in capitalist markets and therefore offers a degree of decommodification. On the other hand, the payments promote social reproduction through markets which, in turn, supports more commodification and accumulation. The commodifying capacity of cash transfers is significantly strengthened by the size of the cash transfers, which is set at sufficiently low levels to ensure recipients are still compelled to participate in capitalist markets. Thus, one of the fundamental drivers of labour commodification – survival – remains firmly intact and most recipients of cash transfers remain tightly enmeshed in capitalist markets. However, by softening the blow of participation in capitalist markets and strengthening ties with the state, cash transfers reduce the possibility of broad-based countermovements emerging and thus provide states with a powerful tool to manage the dislocation generated through fictitious commodification.

While some notable advances were made during Correa's presidency, the general expansion of decommodification pushed in a similar direction as cash transfers, with most efforts falling into the *intervening* and *limiting* categories, and few attempts to radicalise labour decommodification through *preventing-reversing* initiatives (e.g. worker cooperatives, peasant agriculture) (see also Garcia Fernandez, 2021). The failure of the Correa government to implement more ambitious and radical forms of decommodification set clear limits on his political project – the so-called *revolución ciudadana* (citizen's revolution). Meanwhile, heavy reliance on oil and mining revenues generated significant political economic instability, echoing structuralist and dependency critiques of primary export production and centre-periphery structures and relations (e.g. Torres and Ahumada, 2022).

The Moreno and Lasso responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have occurred against this historical backdrop. Political subjectivities and relations shifted during Correa's presidency as a growing sector of the population benefitted from public spending and state decommodification. Yet the authoritarianism and centralism of the Correa government ruptured relations with social movements and limited the broader appeal of the *revolución ciudadana* (Conaghan, 2015). The highly segmented form of citizenship that has emerged in Ecuador through centuries of capitalist-colonial development thus remained largely intact (Benavides, 2004). Moreno and Lasso ruthlessly exploited the weak expectations about state support that emerged through these historical processes (Rayner, 2021). Both could have provided much more generous and universal support; their political decision to offer such devastatingly limited decommodification was rooted in an ideological commitment to cutting public spending, slashing market regulation, and protecting the interests of domestic elites and international

investors, echoing dependency critiques of peripheral capitalist states. Yet their responses were also shaped by Ecuador's historic role as a primary exporter and the subordinate position it occupies in the capitalist world economy, which is accentuated by dollarisation. This indicates the centrality of centre-periphery structures and relations to uneven decommodification geographies. The (de) commodification of land in Britain and Ecuador during the pandemic provides further evidence of this.

(De) commodifying land during the Covid-19 pandemic

While the (de) commodification of labour took very different forms in Britain and Ecuador during the Covid-19 pandemic, the (de) commodification of land exhibited some important similarities. The most striking was the effort of governments in the two countries to maintain the 'corporate food regime' (McMichael, 2005; see also Jakobsen, 2021). A defining feature of neoliberal capitalism, the corporate food regime is structured to support the accumulation of capital through the delivery of cheap food, especially in the capitalist core. The regime is underpinned by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which institutionalises agricultural liberalisation through trade rules and agreements, and is supported by a cast of national and international agencies, including the IMF and World Bank, which promote and enforce liberalisation, especially in the periphery (Holt Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; McMichael, 2023). Deepening land commodification in multiple domains, including land, food, seeds, and water, the regime centres on supplying food through capitalist markets at prices that are 'strikingly divorced from cost' (McMichael, 2005: 271). In doing so, it squeezes and crushes small-scale farmers in the periphery who do not enjoy the subsidies that farmers receive in the core and have to compete in capitalist markets dominated by agro-industrial firms and giant food retailers – or 'food empires' (van der Ploeg, 2020). The displacement of small-scale agriculture contributes to the global pool of surplus and reserve labour while the artificially cheap food produced and distributed through the regime lowers wages and supports profits, particularly in the capitalist core (see Jakobsen, 2021). Hence, the regime has important implications for the commodification of labour as well as land. The commodification of money is also crucial. World food prices have become increasingly linked to the vagaries of international financial markets, while agriculture has become more deeply embedded in financial structures and relations (McMichael, 2009; see also van der Ploeg, 2020). The corporate food regime therefore rests on the full complement of fictitious commodities, which, despite its durability during neoliberal capitalism, makes it prone to crisis and transformation.

There have been indications of this during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially after food prices started to increase rapidly in 2022 (Newton, 2022). Nonetheless, states and firms have worked hard to protect it. This was the case in Britain and Ecuador, where governments gave the regime considerable support. One important macro-institutional commonality was the commitment to agricultural liberalisation. In neither country, were tariffs nor quotas introduced to support domestic farmers (*intervening* forms of decommodification). The chief beneficiaries of this in Britain were the supermarkets that dominate national and global food supply chains. Supermarkets also benefitted in Ecuador; however, the main winners were domestic and multinational capitalist firms that account for a significant proportion of the country's exports, reflecting its peripheral position in the capitalist world economy. Decommodifying measures introduced by central governments in Britain and Ecuador provided more direct support to these actors.

In Britain, the Johnson government relaxed competition law early in the pandemic to enable supermarkets like Tesco and Asda to work together to 'feed the nation' (GOV, 2020a, 2020b). Extra state support came in the form of designating supermarket employees 'key workers' so they could continue working during lockdowns and easing restrictions on driver hours to support home deliveries, which surged. This enabled British supermarkets to strengthen their grip on the rapidly expanding online market and generate huge profits (Oxfam, 2021; see also Leyshon, 2023). The main step the Johnson

government took to protect and expand the decommodification of food during the pandemic was to reconfigure and temporarily extend means-tested school meal schemes, *limiting* forms of decommodification, which reach nearly one and half million children (GOV, 31/03/20). New measures included distributing weekly £15 food vouchers while schools were closed due to the pandemic and extending the school meal programme to school holidays. The decision to extend the programme came after charities and activists, especially the footballer Marcus Rashford, shamed the Johnson government into providing more support (The Guardian, 08/11/20). Only redeemable at a select group of supermarkets, like Sainsbury's, the vouchers supported the corporate food regime, providing further evidence of decommodification's capacity to support capital accumulation, especially when delivered through the state.

These highly circumscribed measures provided some relief to children and families and reduced dependence on income derived through labour commodification. Yet they did little to address the wider food crisis that has engulfed Britain since the Conservatives embarked on neoliberal austerity in 2010. The main mechanism that has emerged to address this crisis lies largely outside the state – food banks (Newton, 2022). From small pop-ups to large non-governmental organisations, food banks have proliferated during the pandemic, providing free or subsidised food to the millions of people who do not have the income to purchase sufficient food in capitalist markets. On a basic level, they can be seen as an expression of the 'reality of society' (Polanyi 1944/2001) and the tendency for people to mobilise to alleviate suffering when governments fail to ease the dislocation and inequality generated through capitalist markets. The Trussell Trust, the country's largest food bank network, distributed nearly 3 million emergency food parcels between April 2022 and March 2023, 37% more than in the previous year, as rising inflation and falling real wages intensified the UK food crisis (Trussell Trust, 2023; see also Brewer et al., 2023). This suggests that rather than being a temporary solution to the social devastation of Tory austerity, food banks have become an institutionalised non-state form of food decommodification in neoliberal Britain.

Largely a *limiting* form of decommodification, food banks shield individuals and families from the full force of capitalist markets, including labour markets, without seriously challenging them. Supermarkets, like Tesco, donate to food banks and organise the collection and distribution of food through food bank networks. This process, as Lindenbaum (2016) notes in the US, provides large food retailers with a useful mechanism to redistribute surplus food and create space for fresh supplies. Hence, food banks provide ample opportunities for powerful food producers and retailers to strengthen their operations and legitimacy. As such, they leave the highly exploitative productive structure that underpins the corporate food regime firmly intact (Holt Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011).

In addition to highlighting the links between decommodification, production and accumulation, food banks reinforce the need to consider the lived experience of decommodification. For instance, many people who use food banks feel a sense of stigma and shame (Garthwaite, 2016). Yet, as food banks become more widespread and entrenched, emotions, relations and subjectivities might shift, which could reconfigure food politics and inspire more radical forms of decommodification (Lindenbaum, 2016). Food banks also highlight the importance of exploring the linkages between fictitious commodities, with inadequate labour decommodification through the state reflected in the expansion of food decommodification outside the state.

In Ecuador, the Moreno government also increased food decommodification through the state; however, as was the case in Britain, it only implemented limited, short-term measures and worked hard to support and expand the corporate food regime. Half a million basic food parcels were delivered to schools and households during the opening phases of the pandemic (MIES, 2021, 2022). Yet these parcels comprised industrialised food and drink supplied by national and multinational corporations and thus supported large-scale capitalist firms over small-scale agriculture (Lyall et al., 2021). The Moreno government also exempted supermarkets, like Supermaxi and Tía, from some public

health restrictions, which enabled them to increase sales during the pandemic and expand their growing presence in towns and cities (Lyall et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, at the same time, the pandemic was a period of creativity and experimentation for alternative food networks, including agroecological producers and distributors, which only account for a small proportion of total food sales but have proliferated in recent years (Lyall et al., 2021; see also April-Lalonde et al., 2020). Utilising platform technologies and creative strategies, several agroecological networks expanded rapidly during the opening months of pandemic (March–May 2020), before registering more limited growth as competition increased and support from local governments receded. Farmer markets spread in some cities, suggesting the longer-term expansion of decommodified food in public spaces (Lyall et al., 2021). Food has been distributed through other decommodified channels outside of the state during the pandemic, including solidarity networks, family and community institutions, and *ollas comunitarias* (community kitchens) (El Comercio, 16/10/20).

These were crucial during the indigenous anti-government mobilisation in June 2022, when multiple forms of land and labour decommodification helped sustain a protest that lasted for 18 days and brought much of the country to a standstill (Mozo and Goodwin 2022). The process was underpinned by decommodified forms of small-scale agriculture which combine subsistence and market production and shield Andean indigenous families and communities from the full force of capitalist markets (Bretón et al., 2023). Food produced through small-scale farming was channelled to protestors through *ollas comunitarias*, with the distribution and cooking of food supported by the collective labour practice, the *minga*. Donations from supporters of the protest augmented decommodified food supplies. Among other things, the indigenous protest indicates the importance of the decommodification-production nexus, with plural forms of small-scale agriculture not solely geared towards markets supporting a mobilisation that attempted to push beyond neoliberal capitalism (see McMichael, 2023).

More generally, despite the relentless pressures of the corporate food regime and longer-term structural inequalities, small-scale agriculture cushioned the fallout from the pandemic, including for informal workers in towns and cities who returned to rural communities to seek shelter, especially in the Andes (Goodwin, 2021; McBurney et al., 2021). Communal land, claimed or protected through historical land struggles, supported this process in some cases. Community water systems, which are underpinned by the *minga*, provided crucial support for small-scale farming in the Andes and also supplied water to households in rural and peri-urban areas throughout the pandemic (Goodwin, 2021). Hence, *preventing-reversing* forms of decommodification have been pivotal in Ecuador, indicative of the more prominent role they play in peripheral societies, making them important sites of creativity and inspiration.

In Britain, land use and ownership limited the role of small-scale agriculture, but allotments and community gardens created a platform to produce and circulate food outside of capitalist markets (The Guardian, 10/08/20; see also, Crouch, 1989). Public parks, many of which occupy land that was decommodified through historical urban land struggles, took on renewed importance in the context of lockdowns and social distancing and provided vital spaces for social interaction. Indeed, public health rules, which prohibited large gatherings, unwittingly deepened the decommodification of public parks as concerts and festivals were banned, temporarily limiting the partial commodification of public spaces (Goodwin, 2022). The relaxation of public health restrictions, however, triggered a surge of events in 2022 as cash-strapped local governments rented out sections of parks to the highest bidders, indicating how austerity has reconfigured (de) commodification dynamics (The Guardian, 24/08/22; see also Smith et al., 2023).

The benefits of public parks have also been widely felt in Ecuador during the lockdown, even if their use and maintenance have also been negatively impacted by neoliberal austerity (El Comercio, 24/04/22). Tensions have also emerged over competing uses and meanings of these spaces. In Quito, for instance, sections of the sprawling Parque Metropolitano Guanguiltagua, which occupies land expropriated by the state in the late twentieth century, have been occupied and cultivated by members

of a neighbouring indigenous community, who have attempted to exert their collective rights to the land (El Comercio, 29/08/22). This shows, among other things, that alternative forms of land decommodification can clash, with disputes emerging in this case over communal versus public land ownership, indicating the complexities of organising mass progressive movements around a singular vision of decommodification, especially in countries with deep class divisions, sharp racial inequalities, and long colonial histories (Sandbrook, 2011). Political projects that respect plurality and autonomy become even more important in these contexts (Escobar, 2020).

Conclusion: Decommodification, crisis, and transformation

Decommodification in Britain and Ecuador varied in scale and form during the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting the core and peripheral positions the two countries occupy in the capitalist world economy. Differences in the decommodification of labour power were the starkest, with the headline programme in Britain involving the state covering 60-80% of the wages of millions of workers up to £2500 for several months, and the main scheme in Ecuador seeing the state distributing cash transfers of between \$60 and \$120 to one and half million low-income families on a couple of occasions. The former cost approximately £70 billion, while the latter cost around \$140 million. Land decommodification, by contrast, exhibited some important similarities as governments in both countries worked hard to support the corporate food regime and the powerful capitalist interests that it serves. The flipside of this is that non-state forms of land decommodification were crucial in both countries, especially in relation to food, which was circulated through a diverse range of non-market channels. One significant difference in relation to land was that in Ecuador small-scale agriculture provided shelter to farmers and informal workers, softening the blow of the dislocation in capitalist markets and also supporting indigenous resistance. Communal land, collective labour practices and community water systems were also vital.

The conceptual framework that I have elaborated in this article provides new insights into these uneven decommodification geographies. New and existing forms of decommodification delivered through the state in Britain and Ecuador have largely fallen into the *intervening* and *limiting* categories and worked with rather than against capitalist markets. Thus, while these measures reduced socio-economic dislocation and alleviated suffering, especially in Britain, they also supported long-run processes of commodification and accumulation and protected existing structures and relations of production. *Preventing-reversing* forms of decommodification have been restricted to measures that are not directly connected to the productive structure, like public parks. No efforts have been made through the state to use decommodification to reorient production away from the augmentation of exchange value. Situating decommodification in Britain and Ecuador within centre-periphery structures and relations suggests variation between the two countries is rooted in the unequal global structures and relations that have emerged through the historical development of capitalism. The structural conditions of peripheral capitalism limit and complicate decommodification through the state and, as a result, non-state forms of decommodification are more prevalent and vital in the periphery.

Core capitalist states are therefore better able to manage capitalism through decommodification. Yet, returning to the argument set out in the introduction, their decommodifying capacity has declined during neoliberal capitalism and this partly explains why capitalism is entering a more volatile and dangerous phase. Events in Britain in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic provide evidence of this. Once capitalist market dislocation eased, the Johnson government enthusiastically removed emergency measures introduced during the pandemic and returned to the longer-term trend of limiting and eroding decommodification. The efforts of the short-lived Truss administration to accelerate this through a turbocharged programme of economic liberalisation and tax cuts were thwarted by international financial markets and institutions, which feared the deterioration of public finances and escalation of public debt (The Guardian, 15/10/22). Desperate to avoid the wrath of financial markets and institutions, the Sunak government has dutifully reverted to neoliberal austerity, which promises the

steady attrition of decommodification alongside the further erosion of democratic freedoms, like the right to protest (The Guardian, 24/06/23). Under Keir Starmer, the Labour Party has signalled its support for neoliberal austerity and anti-democratic legislation and practices (Jacobin, 28/05/23). Hence, a post-pandemic political consensus has emerged among Britain's main political parties which is rooted in highly circumscribed forms of decommodification coupled with increased authoritarianism (see Bruff, 2014). The increasingly precarious conditions that have been generated through decades of neoliberal restructuring and have worsened during the pandemic therefore look set to continue in Britain, providing opportunities for reactionary and progressive forces to build political projects that push for more radical political change. This suggests that while centre-periphery structures and relations remain firmly intact, prominent elements of peripheral capitalism – for example, precarity, instability, authoritarianism – are becoming more pronounced in the core.

These features of peripheral capitalism have been plain to see in Ecuador in the wake of the pandemic. Indigenous protests against the commodifying policies and discourses of the Lasso government in June 2022 (Bretón et al., 2023), which were met with significant state repression, paved the way for the removal of the president from office and the holding of new elections in August 2023. The elections are unlikely to result in the establishment of a government that is seriously interested in weaving together diverse forms of decommodification to build a broad and plural progressive political movement. Yet the country remains a vibrant site of experimentation and creativity in the face of neoliberal capitalism, especially outside the state. As precarity deepens in the core, this is another notable feature of peripheral capitalism that might become more pronounced in the centre.

Understanding these evolving uneven decommodification geographies is particularly important as neoliberal capitalism appears to be moving from its 'zombie' (Peck, 2010) to 'moribund' form. Initial responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, including the decommodification measures discussed in this article, suggest the unravelling of neoliberal capitalism will take a long time to play out (Babic, 2020; see also Alami et al., 2023; Saad-Filho, 2021; Streeck, 2016). Echoing Polanyi's analysis in *The Great Transformation*, the twenty-first century might well follow a 'conservative twenties, revolutionary thirties' trajectory, as desperate attempts to maintain the neoliberal capitalist order eventually give way to political-economic transformation on a global scale.

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Note

1. A couple of initial clarifications: First, space does not allow for a discussion of debates about the centre-periphery concept, including alternative terms, formulations, and scales. Second, I use the terms ‘core’ and ‘centre’ interchangeably to avoid repetition. Third, I only draw on scholars from the Latin American structuralist and dependency schools and therefore exclude a wide range of thinkers who have worked in a similar tradition in different settings, like Africa and the Caribbean. See Kay (1989), Fischer (2015) and Kvangraven (2021).

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