

At the systemic edge

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Abstract

The point of inquiry in this book is the systemic edge. The key dynamic at this edge is expulsion from the diverse systems in play—economic, social, biospheric. The systemic edge is the point where a condition takes on a format so extreme that it cannot be easily captured by the standard measures of governments and experts and becomes invisible, ungraspable. In this regard, that edge also becomes invisible to standard ways of seeing and making meaning. Each major domain has its own distinctive systemic edge—thus this edge is constituted differently for the economy than it is for the biosphere or the social realm. This edge is foundationally different from the geographic border in the interstate system. The core hypothesis is that we are seeing a proliferation of systemic edges originating partly in the decaying western-style political economy of the 20th century, the escalation of environmental destruction, and the rise of complex forms of knowledge that far too often produce elementary brutalities. It is in the spaces of the expelled where we find the sharper version of what might be happening inside the system in far milder modes and hence easily overlooked as signaling systemic decay. In this regard, I conceive of the systemic edge as signaling the existence of *conceptually* subterranean trends—trends we cannot easily make visible through our current categories of meaning. From there, the importance of positioning my inquiry at the systemic edge, where a condition takes on its extreme form and in that process also escapes our conventional measures and representations.

Keywords

Systemic edge, predatory formations, de-theorizing

Before all else, I want to thank the reviewers for taking the time and effort to write these great texts. And my thanks also go to the editor who thought it up and put it all together. I would also like to remind the reviewers and the readers that this is a short little book for a well-informed general audience. It does have an original thesis that organizes the argument and it brings in many materials that I have not covered in prior books. Nonetheless, much of what I do in *Expulsions* (2014) relies on detailed elaborations developed in my

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academic books—notably, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988), *The Global City* (1991), *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2008), and *A Sociology of Globalization* (2007). There, the reader can find my engagements and discussions of what are by now vast literatures about at least some of the key subjects addressed in *Expulsions*.

The point of inquiry in this book is the systemic edge. The key dynamic at this edge is expulsion from the diverse systems in play—economic, social, biospheric. This edge is foundationally different from the geographic border in the interstate system. The core hypothesis is that we are seeing a proliferation of systemic edges originating partly in the decaying western-style political economy of the 20th century, the escalation of environmental destruction, and the rise of complex forms of knowledge that far too often produce elementary brutalities. The expulsion logics I focus on are just a few of the many that might exist; they are, generally, more extreme than whatever expulsion logics existed, for instance, in the preceding Keynesian period. Further, these expulsion logics are also evident beyond the West, as I argue particularly in the long chapter on environmental destruction, “Dead Land Dead Water.”

The systemic edge is the point where a condition takes on a format so extreme that it cannot be easily captured by the standard measures of governments and experts and becomes invisible, ungraspable. In this regard, that edge also becomes invisible to standard ways of seeing and making meaning. Each major domain has its own distinctive systemic edge—thus this edge is constituted differently for the economy than it is for the biosphere or the social realm. Furthermore, the extreme character of conditions at the edge helps make visible what may also take place via more moderate larger trends inside the system—for instance, a bit less equality in the earnings distribution or the small symptoms of climate change we experience every now and then. In the spaces of the expelled, we find far sharper versions, from middle classes that have lost it all to dead land and dead water. In this regard, I conceive of the systemic edge as signaling the existence of *conceptually* subterranean trends—trends we cannot easily make visible through our current categories of meaning. From there, the importance of positioning my inquiry at the systemic edge, where a condition takes on its extreme form and in that process also escapes our conventional measures and representations.

One key issue raised by each Professors Turner, Güllalp, and Rubin is why I have not expanded my analysis to other parts of the world and to specific types of issues that should be part or, at the least, fit in my analysis.

Let me start by responding to the more situated and dialogical comments of Professors Turner and Rubin. I have long opted for a focus on particular histories and geographies, to some extent linked to where I have lived and studied and whose languages I have spoken since I was a child—Latin America, Europe, and the United States. Both Turner and Rubin mention other histories and geographies that should be part of *Expulsions* because they fit or they contest my arguments. I see their calls as productive. And yet, having lived the differences, often so difficult to grasp in writing, between Latin America and Europe, and between both of these and the United States, I must acknowledge that I am uncomfortable entering histories that are twice removed from my experiences. This is particularly so given the complexities of some of the subjects invoked by Turner and Rubin—post-colonial histories of parts of Africa and Asia, racisms and colonialisms constituted across diverse times and spaces, and so much more. This is, I am sure, my

shortcoming. I have read much about these subjects and know many of the scholars working on these subjects, and this has persuaded me that I am not quite ready to produce my own understanding about these histories and geographies.

I have rather opted for decoding some of the circuits originating in the “West” that have historically cut across these diverse histories and geographies through war, trade, slavery, annihilation of indigenous cultures, and more (see *Territory*, 2008: chaps. 2 and 3). And I have studied and conceptualized especially today’s versions of such transversal circuits.

Among the latter, I have established conceptually and empirically the post-1980s active making of distinct geographies of power/privilege/extraction that cut across the traditional divides of the modern interstate system (North and South, East and West). These transversal geographies of privilege and power can comfortably coexist with many of the traditional divides that continue to operate, notably the lack of healthcare and easy access to food and water in the Global South, and the ongoing existence of a strong Communist government structure in some of the East.

I make quite a bit of the fact that these new transversal geographies can coexist with older divides. The elites of Nigeria are more at home and more oriented toward the elites of London and Mumbai than they are with the poor and exploited in their own “hinterland.” In this sense, also, these new geographies have the effect of disassembling societies and cultures, as well as their territories and their national states (see *Territory*, 2008: chaps. 5, 7, and 8; *Expulsions*, 2014: chaps. 1, 2, and 3). These geographies incorporate particular sectors (leading cities, corporate elites, the executive branch of the state, including its central bank, major public-owned corporations, and more). And they expel the rest. Thus, a country with vast stretches of impoverished localities that lack all the basics, from healthcare to education, may nonetheless put its limited resources in developing its key city so that it can be a hub in one of these global geographies of centrality. There are many examples, some familiar, such as Abuja in Nigeria, and some just emerging, such as Luanda in Angola. The so-called rich countries did more or less the same in the 1980s, eventually cutting social services and country-wide infrastructure upgrading, while promoting the glamorizing of their key cities. I develop this in *Cities in a World Economy* (2012) and in the two editions of *The Global City* (1991, 2001). I have also found that the rhetoricizing of these emergent transversal geographies has been a powerful tool for mobilizing, persuading, and justifying this cross-border corporate project, a subject I address in *Expulsions*.

I need detailed knowledge, knowledge about the innards of a condition or a politics or a subjectivity if I am to write about it. If I cannot get at the innards, I prefer reading rather than writing about it. This is why then, I am so grateful to the observations by each, Turner and Rubin. They begin to make tissue that connects my arguments to those histories and geographies I have not focused on.

I want to thank Professor Güalp for his detailed examination of the production side of capitalism and the specific set of literatures he invokes. I am familiar with that material and have, of course, done this type of work, although with another framing, in earlier books, particularly *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988) and a series of detailed articles. But I am afraid I find that Prof. Güalp situates his analysis in a policy framing that is not really my central concern in *Expulsions*.

One of my core arguments in this book is the need to go back to “ground level” as a way of de-theorizing, or destabilizing master categories and powerful explanations, in order to re-theorize. We cannot do without theory if we are to go beyond the empirics of complex configurations and processes. Nor am I arguing that one person by herself can do that re-theorizing. Rather, my image is one of unstable meanings which generate a need for collectivizing the task of grappling with emergent conditions, with transversalities that exit our master categories, and with dynamics that erase contents (on this last, see, for example, my chapter “Dead Land Dead Water” in *Expulsions*).

Prof. Güllalp writes that I use primitive accumulation as the central category in this book. I do not. It is one category I use to focus on how capitalism regularly destroys its own innards in the name of a new dominant logic, an argument I develop in much detail in a long article titled “A Savage Sorting,” where I also refer in detail to David Harvey’s work on accumulation by dispossession. If this little book has a central category besides expulsions, it has to do with the emergence of predatory *formations*. I conceptualize these as going well beyond the power of elites: they involve pieces of law and accounting, technical capacities, the willingness of the executive branch of government to see with the eye of global corporations, and such. These predatory formations break through the edges of established notions about the economy, government, and policy. I develop this in greater detail in *Territory* (See 2008: chap. 4, pp. 168–204; chap. 5, pp. 242–263; chaps 8 and 9, pp. 415–424).

All three discussants mention literatures that could have been part of this book. They are right. Most self-evident perhaps is Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession. I have cited the pertinent works elsewhere—in “A Savage Sorting” (2010) and in *Territory* (2008). In this short book, I chose to cite only one of Harvey’s texts, the one I think is his best, *The Limits of Capital* (2006), and is also the one most pertinent for my argument in *Expulsions*. (I should add that Harvard University Press conceived of this as a book for a larger audience and asked me to eliminate many of the academic citations I had. In such a book, especially if short, there simply is no room for a serious engagement with Harvey and several other authors mentioned by the three reviewers. I have done so, however, in my more academic books and articles. Indeed, I sometimes get complaints from readers about the vast numbers of authors I cite, authors who often cover subjects that go well beyond the narrow definition of whatever subject I am addressing, and the significant share of citations that refer to foreign language authors.)

On a separate point, Turner is correct in wanting more information on the character of the data. Again, this little book was not meant to have extensive discussions about data and sources. I do give sources for all the data, and mostly, these are data with which I have worked, and in some cases have developed in some detail in books and articles. I would not use data known to be dubious, except if that is the purpose: to show how dubious some data are. An example is that of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) being able to declare in January 2013 that Greece was back on track, something they could only assert by not counting a large number of those who have dropped out of the labor force, lost everything, committed suicide.

Let me address some of the comments of the reviewers that I found particularly important because they expand the terrain where “expulsions” can take place and

therewith get at the pulse of my project in this little book. Turner asks why I do not include other theories focused on how capitalism incorporates the world, such as Hardt and Negri, Wallerstein, and others. Turner writes about the echoes to the classic debates among Marxist development theories we find in world system theories (Wallerstein, 1979), and various dependency theories (Frank, 1980) and centre-periphery theories (Amin, 1976) ...” Let me assure the reader that I have addressed these types of questions and disagreements in earlier work, particularly in the *Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988), *A Sociology of Globalization* (2007), and in specialized articles. Turner also invokes Bauman, Balibar, Wacquant, and Agier who focus on the exclusion of entire populations from the global economy. Indeed, a longer and more scholarly version of *Expulsions* would have to engage these books and the central issues they raise.

At the same time, my effort was to signal a diversity of what I conceptualize as “systemic edges,” rather than an in-depth examination of a few such cases. And my effort was, in fact, to find resonances between types of expulsions, such as those described, for example, by Wacquant (prisons) and by Agier (refugee camps), usually examined separately and by very different types of experts. I make a strong point about the need for bringing very diverse conditions in conversation with each other. I do so in the Introduction to signal a generic aspect of my effort in this book. And I do so in each of the chapters. It is a mode of researching that insists on de-theorizing in order to detect features that take on very diverse contents and formats in each condition: e.g., prisons and refugee camps typically placed in radically different, unconnected, conceptual spaces. For instance, I insist on prioritizing the enormous capacity for environmental destruction of both Russia’s Norilsk nickel producing complex, the largest in the world, and the vast gold mining operations in Montana, regardless of the fact that one belongs to a communist history and the other to a capitalist one. In short, I argue that the capacity to destroy air, water, and land overrides the master categories of the interstate system. To put it briefly, the above juxtapositions are one core element that responds to some of the questions raised by Rubin and Turner, even if they are not necessarily the contents that these authors might have had in mind.

Turner and Rubin both raise issues about the absence in my book of key dimensions of our modernity—notably, postcoloniality and racisms. These are complex subjects, and I indeed do not address them. While I tend to keep a respectful distance from such subjects, I have developed some of this at length in *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2008) and in *A Sociology of Globalization* (2007); perhaps an indirect answer can be found in “The Global Street: Making the Political” (2011).

There is much more that is deeply pertinent in Turner’s comments, but I want to take up one particular statement: “In other words, the spaces of the expelled are not the same as other spaces but neither are they simply non-spaces.” Indeed, the spaces of the expelled in this particular period are marked by increasingly diverse groups, places, projects, and histories. And this then, also, encompasses his observation that visibility/invisibility can vary sharply depending on the who and the what, and so can the desirability of visibility.

Rubin adds to some of these issues the importance of the Global South, of those who are marked to become the expelled, of the contemporary production of surplus populations. These are all extremely important issues. My emphasis is very much on the *making* of these expulsions, and less on the long histories that produce and pre-mark the expelled.

Rubin's is a complex subject and I found it was not possible to develop it in such a little book. I have done some of this in *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988) and in *Globalization and its Discontents* (1998). But Rubin makes it clear to me that this should become part of my future work on the subject.

Where I would perhaps disagree with Rubin is in his notion that the expelled are pre-determined because they are targeted. They are in some sense of course: the minoritized are more likely to be the more vulnerable. But targeting is not the way I would put it. I think the vast destructive processes I describe are often complex assemblages of aims and instruments (legal, technical, and so on), by-products of the pursuit of what powerful actors are after. The expulsions of people from reasonable lives can be a secondary effect, even if the minoritized are more likely to be more vulnerable and re-marked. I see much of this as beyond targeting. Expulsion is even more brutal than targeting: these men and women and children do not count at all, they are not in the picture. Targeting might set in if they resist before being expelled, but a lot of the destruction is rapid and total.

I should note that the language of surplus populations is one I avoid. My emphasis, as I read Rubin's to be as well, is to speak of the *making* of such populations. And I agree with his observation that the mobilities of these populations are simultaneously a process of racialization and othering "layered on top of previously established racial logics." I focus on these types of layerings in several of my earlier books, notably *Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988), *Guests and Aliens* (1999), and *Globalization and its Discontents* (1998). And, again, I much appreciate Rubin's observation:

... We are witnessing children being expelled from the possibility of adulthood. They are expelled from the right to have rights before ever existing as citizens, as we understand them ... facilitates thinking about the most vulnerable victims of global processes, and how their fate is contingent on the growing contradictions between national sovereign spaces in a world of globalized capital, and a privileged class of globalized people.

Part of my answer to some of these issues concerns a key feature of the already mentioned new specialized geographies that cut across the old divides of North and South, East and West. In the past, the British Empire wanted the whole of Africa, and Spain wanted the whole of Latin America, and so on. Today's powers want only specific components, and once done, they exit. These are mobile geographies that leave behind land and sites destroyed by their use, which then, in their extreme condition, are in fact expelled from these geographies of privilege: expelled to the zone of dead land and dead water. Making much of the traditional middle classes useless is another instance; I appreciated Turner's recognition that I am not only focused on the lumpen, the refugees, and others who become "human waste." These are, then, increasingly particularized expulsions of people, places, and the biosphere.

Turner asks about details regarding my notion that powerful actors are just one element (along with technical, legal, and other capacities) of the predatory formations I see as critical to the current period. Each of the chapters in *Expulsions* examines *how* diverse assemblages (with their different mixes of elements) work. I address the character of the deeper systemics of these diverse assemblages through the thick empirical realities examined in each of the chapters. But I do not fully theorize these assemblages, partly

because this little book is volume 1 of a two-book project (see *Ungoverned Territories*, forthcoming with Harvard University Press). I say partly, because Turner's question helps me see additional dimensions which I will now make a point of addressing in the second book.

One element here is my emphasis on the fact that remarkable new tools at the disposal of powerful individuals and firms actually begin to constitute formations where these users are just one element, rather than masters of the domain, so to speak. Additional elements include, among others, advanced mathematics and communications, machines that can literally move mountains, global freedoms of movement and maneuver for top level executives that allow them to ignore or intimidate national governments and their laws, and increasingly international institutions (global firms, the IMF, etc.) that force compliance with their agenda. And then there are Western governments, central bankers, the IMF, and kindred international institutions, all now pushing the need to reduce excess government debt, excess social welfare programs, excess regulation, all geared towards reducing social services and assistance to the disadvantaged.

This is the language of today's key order-making institutions in the West and increasingly elsewhere. One effect and aim is the de facto project of shrinking the space of a country's economy, although not the economic profitability of the corporate sector. It entails the expulsion of growing numbers of sectors and types of workers who are no longer valued. In its simple brutality, the transformation of Greece illustrates this well: the massive and rapid expulsion of small, modest-profit making firms and of the modest and not-so-modest middle classes from jobs, social and medical services, and increasingly their homes. This sort of process is taking place in many countries, from the familiar case of Spain and Portugal to the less recognized case of Germany and the Netherlands. Even countries with growing employment, such as the United States, have in fact shrunk the space of their economies, as is evident when we include the sharp rise in the numbers of the long-term unemployed, of the incarcerated, and of the small modest firms that are dead.

We must not forget the earlier periods of regions that now seem hopeless, whose better times have been forgotten by many observers as if their hopelessness were an intrinsic constitutive element of their cultures. Beneath today's wars and dismembered societies in much of sub-Saharan Africa lies an earlier period of mass manufacturing, growth of the middle classes, of thriving market towns and capital cities, governments developing infrastructures and health and school systems. Before it broke down, Somalia was a fairly prosperous society, a fairly well run country even if autocratic, with a well-educated middle class. Or consider Russia, where today's huge numbers of homeless people, of the abandoned elderly, and the growing numbers of the very poor without access to social services, are also a new development. Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had welfare states that took care of their citizens.

One effort in *Expulsions* along these lines was to make visible the crossing into the space of the expelled—to capture the visible site or moment of expulsion, before we forget. The villagers and small farmers evicted from their land due to the development of palm plantations soon disappear in the vast slums of megacities where they materialize as slum dwellers—completing the erasure of their past as small farmers with knowledge about plants and crops and weather. Government employees in Greece cut out of their

jobs in the name of European Union (EU) demands to cut the debt become part of the mass of unemployed, soon not recognized as erstwhile government employees. Stretches of dead land, poisoned by toxic emissions from factories or mines, are expelled from working land, best forgotten.

The organizing hypothesis is that beneath the specifics of each of the major domains examined in this book lie emergent systemic trends. No matter their enormously diverse visual and social orders, from the empowerment of the global corporation to the enfeeblement of local democracy, they are shaped by a few very basic dynamics of liberated profit-seeking and indifference to the environment. This then also means that empirical research and conceptual recoding must happen together—they need each other. Empirically a phenomenon may look “African” or “American,” but are these geographical markers of an earlier era still helpful in understanding the character of our epoch? My argument is not that the destructive forces I discuss are all interconnected. My argument is rather that these destructive forces cut across our recognized boundaries—that is, the terms and categories we use to think about the economy, the polity, the diversity of nation-states, and ideologies from communism to capitalism. But they do so in ways that are invisible to our conceptual eye. In that sense, then, I describe them as *conceptually* subterranean.

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