

Ecology and the Future of History

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself.

—Walter Benjamin¹

John Bellamy Foster

Nothing so clearly demonstrates the inherent limits of capitalist ideology as its innate denial of the future of history. The capitalist metaphysic, as Jean-Paul Sartre critically observed, is one of a “barred future”; there is “no exit” from the system and its burning house.² Even in the context of the present planetary emergency brought on by capital accumulation, Margaret Thatcher’s well-known mantra that “there is no alternative” to the regime of capital—a view she repeated so frequently that she was nicknamed with the acronym Tina—continues to exercise its frozen grip on society.³

The notion of bourgeois society as “absolutely the end of History,” intrinsic to liberal thought, found its most powerful concrete expression in the early



March for a Clean Energy Revolution Philadelphia (7/24/16). By [Becker1999](#) from Grove City, OH - [IMG_0918](#), [CC BY 2.0](#), [Link](#).

¹ ↪ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” in Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm* (London: Verso, 2016), 78.

² ↪ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Time in Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury,” in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Villery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1960), 230–32. Although writing about William Faulkner’s metaphysic of time here, Sartre was quite consciously, as István Mészáros has explained, addressing the fundamental question of the “decapitated” time of capitalism, a problem that was to pervade his work. István Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 59–61. On the metaphor of the “burning house,” see Bertolt Brecht, *Tales from the Calendar* (London: Methuen, 1961), 31–32.

³ ↪ Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium: Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 1.

nineteenth-century writings of G. W. F. Hegel.⁴ In recent years, credit for the questionable notion that capitalism marks the termination of the historical process has often been accorded to Francis Fukuyama, based on his 1992 book *The End*

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of History and the Last Man. In advancing the thesis of “a universal and directional history leading up to liberal democracy,” Fukuyama, who served as deputy director of policy planning and as deputy director of European political-military affairs in the U.S. State Department during the George H. W.

Bush administration, was merely repackaging long-standing claims of liberal ideology in the context of the demise of the Soviet Union, which he took as representing the final defeat of socialism and the ultimate victory of capitalism, closing off history in any meaningful sense. Humanity, according to this hegemonic view widely circulated in the 1990s, had reached its political-economic-ideological apex: there was no future beyond capitalism and liberalism.⁵

Yet, a mere quarter of century after the celebration of the end of history in the permanence of the liberal order, humanity is confronted with a chain of catastrophic threats extending beyond anything it has experienced in the long course of its

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development—all arising from the laws of motion of capitalism. In the present epochal crisis, there are multiple dire threats to the world as a whole and to “the wretched of the earth” in particular—from economic stagnation in the capitalist core, to the planetary ecological rift, to the epidemiological threat represented by COVID-19, to the renewed

imperialism directed at the Global South and the New Cold War with its growing threat of nuclear holocaust. All rational responses to this age of impending catastrophe point to the need for a global transformation aimed at surmounting capitalism’s laws of motion and promoting a world of sustainable human development, that is, socialism and ecology. As Karl Marx indicated in the nineteenth century, in those cases where capitalism leads to the ecological destruction of entire social formations and the extermination of the material basis of human existence, the choice left to working populations and their communities inevitably becomes one of “ruin or revolution.”⁶

Historically, revolutions have appeared globally in waves.⁷ The first stirrings of what can be conceived as a new revolutionary wave, different than the ones that came before but emanating primarily from the Global South, are now emerging in response to capitalism in the Anthropocene. This will likely expand rapidly with the decline of U.S. world hegemony, related to the rise of China. Twenty-first-century revolutionary praxis necessarily operates within a wider field combining the struggles for socialism and ecology. It represents a new materiality of hope, rooted in the movements of

⁴ ↪ W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), 103–4. The extent to which Hegel pointed to “the end of history” in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his philosophy as a whole is widely debated. Certainly, the cruder versions of this need to be rejected. See Terry Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 2–3. Yet, in *The Philosophy of History*, in *The Philosophy of Right*, and the *Philosophy of History* in his Berlin period late in his life, Hegel clearly identified bourgeois civil society and the Prussian state with the culmination of reason in history, thereby reconciling himself to his time. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 155–57; István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 269–81.

⁵ ↪ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 338. Fukuyama relied on the conservative interpretation of Hegel, emphasising the concept of the end of history, developed in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on “The Phenomenology of Spirit”* (New York: Basic, 1969).

⁶ ↪ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 142; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 64–77; John Bellamy Foster, “[Notes on Exterminism](#)” for the [Twenty-First-Century Ecology and Peace Movement](#) — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2022.

⁷ ↪ See L. S. Stavrianos, *Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age* (New York: William Morrow, 1981).

hundreds of millions, potentially billions, of people, seeking to transcend the oppressions of class, race, gender, environmental injustice, and imperialism emanating from the empire of capital. These struggles necessarily entail new revolutionary vernaculars arising in specific historical and cultural contexts, embodying environmental as well as

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economic realities. In this sense, there is not a single model of proletarian revolution. Rather, today's movements toward socialism and ecology encompass peasant and Indigenous struggles while converging in complex ways with the struggles of a still expanding industrial (and post-industrial) working class confronting a rapidly changing

environment engendered by capital's creative destruction.

In all such instances, it is the combined materiality of the economy and the environment that now determines the terrain of resistance and revolt. Struggles that begin from an ecological basis, the most inclusive expressions of the material conditions shaping people's lives, are as vital as economic struggles, and as crucial in the end in defining the class structure of society. Genuine revolutionary movements necessarily combine the two, shaping the nature and culture of social agency in our time. Today the catastrophes unleashed by capitalism embrace not only the economy but the entire environment of the planet, leading to the emergence everywhere of what can be called an environmental proletariat.

Capitalism as the Barrier to the Future of History

In the *Grundrisse*, written in 1857–58, Marx famously described capital as a “limitless drive” to accumulate that accepted no boundaries outside itself. Drawing on Hegel's dialectic of barriers and boundaries, in which barriers were understood as something to be surmounted, in contrast to boundaries, which represented actual limits, Marx declared:

Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it. Else it would cease to be capital—money as self-reproductive. If ever it perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would itself have declined from exchange value to use value, from the general [abstract] form of wealth to a specific, substantial mode of the same.... The quantitative boundary of the surplus value appears to it as a mere natural barrier, as a necessity which it constantly tries to violate and beyond which it constantly seeks to go....

Capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well [as] all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive toward all of this, and constantly revolutionises it, tearing down all barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of the forces of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces. But from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets ideally beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has really overcome it, and since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited.⁸

⁸ ↪ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 334–35, 409–10. See also G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 131–37; G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 136–37; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 284–86.

The constant positing of contradictions that are only ideally surmounted, but which nonetheless remain and accumulate over the course of capitalism, to the point that more potentially catastrophic crises emerge, has to do with the fact that capital's creative destruction revolutionises the world in ways limited by its own essential conditions of existence. The one boundary that is permanent, which can never be transgressed, from the standpoint of capital, is the social relation of class-based accumulation itself, and thus it is to this artificially imposed boundary that all the contradictions of the system can ultimately be traced. "The true barrier [boundary] to capitalist production," Marx wrote, "is capital itself."⁹

The concrete result of this central contradiction of the capitalist system is that all transformations carried out by capital as part of its process of creative destruction are necessarily associated with fetters on sustainable human development, in the form of alienated second-order mediations, leading to ever more contradictory and catastrophic results.¹⁰ The path to a world of sustainable human development is blocked at every point. It is this limit, determined by the very nature of the system, that now constitutes the fundamental basis of the planetary ecological and economic crisis engulfing the entire world, seemingly closing off the future as history.

The universalisation of the present in such a way as to portray as insurmountable the ruling ideas of society, which are at the same time both the ideas of the ruling class and the ideological bases of its rule, is common to all ruling classes, whether in the form of divine right of kings or the invisible hand of capital. Such universalisation, however, becomes more complex in those societies in which historical development is recognised. Here what is above all required is the denial of the future through the "decapitation" of history, as Sartre called it. This decapitation of history is evident in the ubiquitous attempts of both mainstream modernist and postmodernist ideology to deny the historical specificity and thus transitory character of capitalist social relations.¹¹

Just as any future beyond capitalism is denied, so is capitalism's genesis presented in the conventional wisdom as predetermined, a mere coming to be of forces that were always present and simply waiting to be set free. The result is the systemic denial of any coherent theory of the historical origins of capitalism, which would contradict its assumed innate character. As Marxian political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood observed, "Accounts of the origin of capitalism" are "fundamentally circular," assuming "the prior existence of capitalism in order to explain its

⁹ ↪ On the cumulative potential for catastrophe, or "the conservation of catastrophe" in the development of contemporary global society, see William H. McNeill, *The Global Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 143–49. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 358.

¹⁰ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, foreword to Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 16.

¹¹ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 59–61; Sartre, "Time in Faulkner," 230; Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre*, 59.

coming into being.... Capitalism seems always to be there, somewhere; and it only needs to be released from its chains—for instance from the fetters of feudalism—to be allowed to grow and mature.”¹²

The notion that capitalism is natural and universal, and thus somehow ever-present, only waiting for obstacles to be cleared so it can emerge in full bloom, can be traced back to the liberal possessive-individualist view of human nature, associated with thinkers from Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith, the latter stipulating, as the basis of his economic vision, an inherent tendency of human beings to “truck, barter, and exchange.”¹³ In this view, which remains dominant in present-day ideology, capitalism is simply bourgeois human nature, parading as human nature in general, writ large.

Max Weber in the twentieth century was to expand on this fundamental liberal outlook by presenting capitalism as the “most fateful force in our modern life,” constituting the highest development of the formally rational, instrumentalist culture that was uniquely identified, in Weber’s Eurocentric perspective, with the West. “In Western civilisation, and in Western civilisation only,” he wrote, were to be found “cultural phenomena which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.”¹⁴

This naturalisation of fundamental capitalist relations of production is deeply embedded within neoclassical economics,

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where historical elements hardly enter at all. In the prevailing reductionist view in the dismal science, the same abstract factors of production associated with capital are seen as common to absolutely all societies. As Thorstein Veblen critically observed in 1908, “A gang of Aleutian Islanders slushing about in the wrack and surf with rakes and magical incantations for the capture of shell-fish are held, in point of taxonomic reality, to be

engaged on a feat of hedonistic equilibration in rent, wages, and interest.... All situations are, in point of economic theory, substantially alike.” Society is seen by conventional economists primarily in a positivistic mode in terms of invariant laws, of which the market in capitalism is the supreme expression. In this view, all historical laws associated with particular social systems as historically specific, emergent forms of organisation with their own properties, are deemed false. All developments are in effect predetermined by universal, innate, unchanging properties, with capitalist modernity implicitly representing the ultimate working out of these fundamental principles.¹⁵

¹² ↪ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), 4. Also Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 7. To recognise the validity and importance of Wood’s observation is not thereby to subscribe to the specific theory of the origins of capitalism that she advanced.

¹³ ↪ Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 4; C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 13. What is known as the Hobbesian possessive-individualist view of human nature, based on the famous quote from chapter 13 of *Leviathan* in which he wrote, with respect to “a time of Warre,” that “the life of man [is] solitary, poor, brutish and short,” is often taken out of context, representing a distortion of Hobbes’s views. Hobbes did not see this as a condition inherent in all human history, and indeed sought to combat it, but rather as particularly characteristic of the period of civil discord in which he lived. Thus, he wrote on the same page: “It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world.” Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89. Nevertheless, the “Hobbesian” view of human nature—where human government has dissolved—is commonly seen in bourgeois society as a representation of human nature in general. See István Mészáros, “Preface to *Beyond Leviathan*,” *Monthly Review* 69, no. 9 (February 2018): 48.

¹⁴ ↪ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1930), 13, 17.

¹⁵ ↪ Thorstein Veblen, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 193; Robert Skidelsky, “Economics and the Culture War,” *Project Syndicate*, July 20, 2020. Sociological theorist Jonathan Turner, a self-styled advocate of positivism, states: “The goal of positivism is to formulate and test laws that apply to all societies in all places and at all” On this basis he argues that “Marxists and others make a fundamental mistake in assuming that the laws of social organisation are time bound, such that the laws governing the operation of feudalism are somehow different than those directing capitalism.” In effect, thinkers such as Turner and most neoclassical economists not only dehistoricise but desocialise society, removing both human agency and social structure. Jonathan Turner, “Explaining the Social World: Historicism vs. Positivism,” *Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 453.

In line with this general loss of historical perspective, technology is often treated today as if it were innately capitalist, based on Joseph Schumpeter's famous notion of "creative destruction," which was derived from Marx's conception of capitalism as a revolutionary technological force. The effect of this in current discussions has been to reinforce the belief in the immutability of capitalism with widespread notions of technological determinism, designating all progress as somehow uniquely capitalist and predestined. In the face of climate change, it is generally assumed in the prevailing outlook that all solutions to the most pressing social problems are technological and all technologies that might conceivably address the dire challenges we face are compatible with capitalism.¹⁶

Central to the denial of historicity of both past and present, and related to prevailing notions of economic and technological determinism, is the almost complete identification of capitalism with modernity. As sociologist Peter L. Berger put it in his article "Capitalism and the Disorders of Modernity": "Capitalism is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, perhaps even the most modern phenomenon of all." The main alternative to capitalism in terms of modernity were Soviet-type economies, but with their demise, and the triumph of capitalism, there was seemingly no alternative to capitalism in the context of modernity. Indeed, many leftists, who themselves came to accept the end of history, began to see capitalism itself in terms of a postmodernity in which the future had been decapitated, emphasizing how capital and technological imperatives had annihilated all grand, meta-historical projects.¹⁷

For cultural critic Leo Marx, "The pessimistic tenor of postmodernism follows from this inevitably diminished sense of human agency." Here the battle with capitalist modernity is reduced to a shadowy postmodern exercise in the cultural interstices of the system, rather than a genuine emancipatory project. This perspective thus becomes one of disenchantment and de-Enlightenment, a stance of perpetual, if somewhat detached and ironic, defeat. As Wood wrote, "In the final analysis, 'postmodernity' for postmodernist intellectuals seems to be not a historical moment but the human condition itself, from which there is no escape." In the words of cultural theorist Keti Chukhrov, "The capitalist undercurrent of these emancipatory and critical theories functions not as a program to exit from capitalism, but rather as the radicalisation of the impossibility of this exit."¹⁸

The cumulative effect of these various interconnected notions of capitalism as the end of history has been to enshrine capitalism as a permanent reality, more phenomenally real and of greater seeming importance to people's lives than the physical universe itself. Capitalism, in fact, is often presented not only as the end of history but as the end of natural history, based on the conquest of nature that is often presented as its greatest achievement. Even the advent of climate change has not quite shaken this hegemonic belief.¹⁹

¹⁶ ↪ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942), 81–86; John Bellamy Foster, "The Political Economy of Joseph Schumpeter," *Studies in Political Economy* 15 (1984): 5–42. See, for example, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016); Mark Sagoff, "Schumpeter's Revolution," Breakthrough Institute, August 28, 2014.

¹⁷ ↪ Peter L. Berger, "Capitalism and the Disorders of Modernity," *First Things*, January 1991; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero, 2009), 45. "I define postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii–xxiv.

¹⁸ ↪ Leo Marx, "The Ideology of 'Technology' and Postmodern Pessimism," in *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 257; Terry Eagleton, "Where Do Postmodernists Come From?," in *In Defense of History*, ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 17–25; Ellen Meiksins Wood, "What Is the 'Postmodern' Agenda?," in *In Defense of History*, ed. Wood and Foster, 10; Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: e-flux/University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 20.

¹⁹ ↪ See, for example, John Asafu-Adjaye et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (2015).

Indeed, the notion that capitalism constitutes the ultimate boundary to human existence is so embedded in today's dominant ideology that, as Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay wrote in *What We Leave Behind*, it gives rise to a cultural outlook in which there is an "inversion of what is real and not real," where "dying oceans and dioxin in every mother's breast milk" are considered less real than "industrial capitalism." Hence, we are constantly led to believe that "the end of the world is less to be feared than the end of industrial capitalism.... When most people in this culture ask, 'How can we stop global warming?' That's not really what they are asking. They're asking, 'How can we stop global warming without significantly changing this lifestyle that is causing global warming in the first place?' The answer is that you can't.

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A New Eco-Revolutionary Wave

Confronted with the received ideology of a "barred future," which denied the continuing role of revolution in human history, Sartre passionately declared, even "a barred future is still a future." This adamant refusal to accept capitalism as a boundary that could never be crossed drew its essential meaning not simply from an abstract conception of human agency, but also from the fact that we live, as he said, in "a time of incredible revolutions."²¹

The "incredible revolutions" emerging in our time are, as in previous historical eras, aimed at the ever wider social control of the means of production. Yet, unlike some previous class struggles and revolutionary movements, this is no longer conceived today mainly in narrow economic terms but also increasingly in ecological terms, reflecting the fact that it is the social metabolism between human beings and nature that constitutes the most ineluctable basis of human history. The agent of revolution is increasingly a working class that is not to be conceived in its usual sense as a purely economic force but as an environmental (and cultural) force: an environmental proletariat.

From a historical-materialist perspective this should hardly surprise us. Most of the major class struggles and revolutionary movements over the centuries of capitalist expansion have been animated in part by what could be called

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ecological imperatives—such as struggles over land, food, and environmental conditions—going beyond narrower political-economic objectives. The English Revolution and French Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively, involved intense struggles over land ownership, represented by the Diggers and the Levellers in the former, and the Great Peasant Revolt in the latter. E. P. Thompson concluded his great work *The Making of the*

English Working Class by indicating that no one else after William Blake (perhaps with the exception of William Morris) was fully at home in the dual cultures of resistance against "Acquisitive Man," both that of the Romantic criticism of

²⁰ ↪ Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay, *What We Leave Behind* (New York: Seven Stories, 2009), 443; Fredric Jameson, "The Future of the City," *New Left Review* 21 (second series) (May–June 2003): 76; Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

²¹ ↪ Sartre, "Time in Faulkner," 530–32; Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre*, 61.

utilitarianism rooted in struggles over the land, aesthetics, and the environment, and that of the industrial workers fighting capital. It was the separation of these two great movements, he suggested, that led in the end to a working-class struggle that gravitated toward a mere economic “resistance movement” rather than a “revolutionary challenge” to capitalism.²²

Yet, it would be wrong to see this separation as ever being absolute. If the Romantics started with the struggle over the land and nature, they nevertheless, through radical figures like Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Ruskin, and Morris, provided devastating critiques of bourgeois political economy, often overlapping with the working-class struggle. The English proletariat in the nineteenth century fought an environmental struggle that was heightened by capitalism’s total separation of the workers from the land and the annihilation of a liveable environment for those labouring in the industrial cities. Frederick Engels’s account of “social murder” in Manchester and other English factory towns in 1844 focused especially on the environmental conditions of the working class.²³ Marx, partly inspired by Engels, wrote in 1844:

Even the need for fresh air ceases to be a need for the worker. Man reverts once more to living in a cave, but the cave is now polluted by the mephitic and pestilential breath of civilisation. Moreover, the worker has no more than a precarious right to live in it, for it is for him an alien power that can be daily withdrawn and from which, should he fail to pay, he can be evicted at any time. He actually has to pay for this mortuary. A dwelling in the light, which Prometheus describes in Aeschylus as one of the great gifts through which he transformed savages into men, ceases to exist for the worker. Light, air, etc.—the simplest animal cleanliness—ceases to be a need for man. Dirt—this pollution and putrefaction of man, the sewage (this word is to be understood in its literal sense) of civilisation—becomes an element of life for him. Universal neglect, putrefied nature, becomes an element of life for him.²⁴

The proletariat was conceived by Marx as stripped of all direct connections to the means of production, notably the land

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and natural resources (as well as tools, factories, machinery), on which all human existence depended. It was thereby forced into struggles over capitalism’s one-sided destruction of the conditions of life and the environment, and compelled ultimately to enter into a battle over the entirety of the human social metabolism with nature. “The living conditions of the proletariat,” Marx and Engels wrote in *The Holy Family*, “represent

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²² ↪ See Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin, 1972); Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 131–51; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 832.

²³ ↪ On Shelley’s critique, see Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 136–208. On Ruskin and Morris see John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 75–80, 91–106, 137–63. See also Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 390, 394; Foster, *The Return of Nature*, 184, 196.

²⁴ ↪ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1970), 359–60.

²⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 36–37. Translation modified according to Paul M. Sweezy, *Modern Capitalism and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 149.

The question of materialism for classical historical materialism was therefore both about what Marx called “the universal metabolism of nature” and about the mode of production (or social metabolism) in a given historical case—the latter viewed as an emergent form of nature with its own properties. In this way, the materialist conception of nature developed by natural science and the materialist conception of history of scientific socialism were seen as dialectically connected. In Marx’s analysis, the labor-and-production process was itself defined as the “social metabolism” of humanity and nature. Production was thus both a social relation between human beings and a social-ecological relation between human beings and nature. If economic crises under capitalism were breaks in the accumulation of capital, ecological crises took the form of ruptures in the social metabolism, such that “the eternal natural condition[s]” of this metabolism were undermined—as explained in Marx’s famous theory of the metabolic rift.²⁶

In such a perspective, militant class struggles and revolutionary movements were engendered by contradictions that arose in the social metabolism of humanity and nature in both of its material aspects: political-economic and natural-environmental. Revolutionary movements did not simply emerge because of fetters on the expansion of production—what could be seen as more economic causes—but also as a result of the destruction of people’s actual living conditions and of the natural conditions of production of themselves. If in the former case, the potential of human development was undermined, in the latter, at least in the more dire instances, as in Ireland, in the mid-nineteenth century, it became a case of “ruin or revolution.”²⁷

It is this complex understanding of the struggle for the land/nature/environment, which was crucial to classical historical

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materialism, that explains why Marx and Engels, while emphasising the role of the proletariat as the leading revolutionary force in developed capitalist economies, never denied either the past or present significance of peasant revolts in the struggle against bourgeois society—an approach that also extended to their growing support from the late 1850s on for all Indigenous struggles against colonialism. Thus, classical historical materialism, as distinct from some socialist tendencies, never portrayed the

peasantry as simply a reactionary class. The very issue of proletarianisation in the age of “so-called primitive accumulation” (or the age of original expropriation) was connected to the enclosure of the commons and the overthrow of the customary rights of the workers. For Marx, this could not be explained in terms of some kind of economic determinism or the superior productivity of capitalism, but rather was a product of “the opportunity that makes the thief.” The populace was fully justified in defending their rights to the commons, that is, their communal property rights. Indeed, the proletarian struggle itself pointed ultimately toward what Marx called “the negation of the negation,” the expropriation of the “expropriators.”²⁸

In the classical historical-materialist view, few things were more important than the abolition of the big land monopolies that divorced the majority of humankind from a direct relation to nature, the land as a means of production, and a communal relation to the earth. Marx delighted in quoting Herbert Spencer’s chapter from his *Social Statics* (1851) on

²⁶ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 637; John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 141–77.

²⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question, 142; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 153.

²⁸ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 904–5; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 929–30; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, “Marx and the Commons,” *Social Research* 88, no. 1 (2021): 1–30.

“The Right to the Use of the Earth,” where Spencer stated: “Equity...does not permit property in land, or the rest would live on the earth in sufferance only.... It is impossible to discover any mode in which land can become private property.... A claim to the exclusive possession of the soil involves land-owning despotism.” Land, Spencer declared, and Marx underscored, properly belongs to “the great corporate body—society.” Human beings were “co-heirs” to the earth.²⁹

The recognition that struggles over the land and peasant wars were integral to resistance to capitalism can be seen in Marx’s statement, in an 1856 letter to Engels, that “the whole thing in Germany will depend on whether it is possible to back the proletarian revolution by some second edition of the Peasants War”—that is, through a struggle in which the urban proletariat and the rural peasantry (agricultural labourers) were both engaged, constituting a battle for both the cities and the land. In this Marx was building on the implications of Engels’s 1850 *The Peasant War in Germany*. In the context of the rise of revolutionary movements in Russia in the 1870s and ’80s, Marx at the end of his life placed heavy emphasis on the archaic Russian commune and sided with the revolutionary Russian populists in seeing the peasantry, who were concerned above all with defending their customary collective relations to the land, as playing a crucial role in the coming Russian Revolution.³⁰

It is this same perspective, focusing on the need of all direct producers throughout the globe for collective control of

Marx pointed directly to the devastating effects of Western ecological imperialism [that] anticipated the numerous peasant and proletarian wars of the twentieth century, most of these Marxist-inspired revolutions, including those of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba—arose in the context of resistance to imperialism and involved intense struggles over the land and environment.

their own means of production, thus opposing the expropriation of lands and bodies, that led to Marx and Engels’s strong attacks, beginning in the late 1850s, on colonialism, along with their defence of the revolts of Indigenous peoples throughout the world. In particular, they supported Indigenous revolts against expropriation and extermination in Ireland, India, China, Algeria, South Africa, and the Americas. With respect to the East Indies, Marx wrote: “Everyone but Sir Henry Maine and others of

his ilk realises that the suppression of communal landownership out there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards.” Likewise criticising the destruction by the British of the irrigation system of India and the famines leading to the deaths of millions of people, Marx pointed directly to the devastating effects of Western ecological imperialism. Such a viewpoint anticipated the numerous peasant and proletarian-led peasant wars of the twentieth century, most of these Marxist-inspired revolutions, including those of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba—all of which arose in the context of resistance to imperialism and involved intense struggles over the land and environment.³¹

In general, Third World liberation movements have been aimed at both the environment and economy and have been struggles in which peasants and Indigenous peoples have played central roles, together with nascent proletarian and

²⁹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Dispatches for the New York Tribune* (London: Penguin, 2007), 128–29; Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1865), 13–44; Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, 159–60.

³⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, 41; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 356; Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 97–126, 138–39.

³¹ ↪ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, “Marx and the Indigenous,” *Monthly Review* 71, no. 9 (February 2020): 1–19; Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, 64–77. In relation to the Americas, Marx took into account not only Indigenous struggles, but also slave revolts. See John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, “Marx and Slavery,” *Monthly Review* 72, no. 3 (July–August 2020): 96–117. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 356; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 917; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) IV/18 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 670–74, 731; Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

petty bourgeois forces. Often these wars of resistance and revolution have been waged by alliances between a proletariat and peasantry jointly resisting imperialism, fighting for peace, bread, and land. For the great African Marxist liberation fighter Amílcar Cabral, the basis of revolutionary action in a colonial encounter required a “return to the source” of Indigenous culture associated with a given population’s historical relations to its material environment.³²

If capitalism begins with the extensive, external expropriation of lands and bodies, it then uses this as the basis from

In this dual process of expropriation and exploitation capitalist private property exhausts the environmental conditions of production and life, seeking to externalise this destruction onto the wider social and ecological realms on a global basis.

which it constructs a system of intensive, internal exploitation of human labor. In this dual process of expropriation and exploitation capitalist private property exhausts the environmental conditions of production and life, seeking to externalise this destruction onto the wider social and ecological realms on a global basis. It follows

that as capitalism proceeds with its accumulation on an increasingly global basis, its destruction simply knows no barriers, extending to the world environment as a whole. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels captured this increasingly one-sided, yet all-encompassing destructive character of capitalist production:

In the development of productive forces there comes a stage when productive forces and means of intercourse are brought into being which, under the existing relations, only cause mischief, and are no longer productive but destructive forces.... These productive forces receive under the system of private property a one-sided development only, and for the majority they become destructive forces; moreover a great many of these forces can find no application at all within the system of private property.... [Labor and production] now diverge to such an extent that material life appears as the end, and what produces this material life, labor...as the means. Thus things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their own existence.³³

It was, in fact, the perception of the “negative, i.e., destructive side” of capitalist production that Marx sought to capture in his theory of the metabolic rift. His analysis here focused initially on the rift in the soil metabolism associated with the export of soil nutrients with the food and fibre sent to the new densely populated urban areas. This contributed to the pollution of cities together with the loss of soil fertility in rural areas. Similar rifts or ruptures in the social metabolism between humanity and nature, Marx recognised, were common to capitalism’s entire expropriation of nature, and materialised in innumerable ways, not least of all, as he pointed out, in periodic epidemics.³⁴

Engels’s Condition of the Working Class in England, which provided the original materialist understanding of the proletariat that was to be the basis of historical materialism, was concerned with the growth of the industrial working class in the new manufacturing towns and introduced the concept of the industrial reserve army of the unemployed. But most of Engels’s analysis in the book was devoted to the social epidemiology of working-class life and the etiology of disease. The combination of the critique of political economy with the critique of environmental and epidemiological conditions and their relation to the reproduction of the labouring class under capitalism helps us to understand the enormous radicalism of that time just a couple of years after the 1842 General Strike or Plug Plot Riots, in which factory

³² ↪ I. Lenin, “For Bread and Peace,” *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 386–87; Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 41–50, 62–63.

³³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 52–53, 73, 87.

³⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 348–49, 638. See also Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 357.

Today, faced with a planetary ecological crisis, environmental hazards are everywhere. These destructive influences are now part of our daily lives: from heat waves to megastorms to rising sea levels to COVID-19 and other pandemics.

workers were struggling simultaneously against the economic and environmental degradations created by capitalism. The movements for economic justice in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century were accompanied by struggles for environmental justice. Socialists, and particularly Marxists, in the early twentieth century were to pioneer the

development of an ecological critique side by side and dialectically interconnected with historical materialism's economic critique.³⁵

Today, faced with a planetary ecological crisis, environmental hazards are everywhere, extending from climate change to ocean acidification, to the sixth extinction, to the disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, to deforestation and loss of ground cover, to desertification, to ubiquitous pollution by synthetic chemical and radioactive wastes, to pandemics, to the destruction of the soil metabolism. These destructive influences are now part of our daily lives: from heat waves to megastorms to rising sea levels to COVID-19 and other pandemics.

Marx's original notion (based primarily on the work of the great German chemist Justus von Liebig) of the degradation of the soil through the loss of soil nutrients has now given way to concerns about the loss of soil organic matter or soil carbon, a factor contributing to climate change.³⁶ Everywhere we are confronted with the reality that capitalism has now generated the Anthropocene Epoch in geological time (and what has been referred to as the first geological age of the

All material struggles are now environmental-class as well as economic-class struggles, with the separation between the two fading.

Anthropocene, the Capitalinian Age).³⁷ The human economy is now the main driver of Earth System change, disrupting planetary boundaries to the point that changes that previously would have only taken place over millions of years are now occurring in

decades. All material struggles are now environmental-class as well as economic-class struggles, with the separation between the two fading. More and more it is becoming clear to humanity as a whole that the needed revolutionary break with the system is not simply a question of removing capitalism's fetters on human advance, but, beyond that, and more importantly, countering its systemic destruction of the earth as a place of human habitation (and the habitat of innumerable other species)—a question of ruin or revolution.

The Emerging Environmental Proletariat

The objective consequence of the changing social and ecological environment, the product of uncontrolled capitalist globalisation and accumulation, arising from forces at the center of the system, is inevitably to create a more globally interconnected revolutionary struggle: a new eco-revolutionary wave emanating primarily from the Global South, but with rapidly developing transnational alliances, reflecting the undermining of the material conditions for the "chain of human generations" throughout the planet. In this emerging global conflict, economic struggles are only meaningful if they are also environmental struggles, while environmental movements must equally be economic ones. Ultimately it requires, as Cabral stated, a return to the source, drawing vital insights from historic customary-communal-collective cultures, which have to be reinvented, their principles enlarged, under the conditions imposed by capitalism in the

³⁵ ↪ See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 295–583; Foster, *The Return of Nature*, 172–215. This can be seen, for example, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the work of figures such as Florence Kelley, J. B. S. Haldane, W. E. B. Du Bois, Norman Bethune, and Salvador Allende. See Foster, *The Return of Nature*, 210–15, 396–97; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Capitalism and the Ecology of Disease," *Monthly Review* 73, no. 2 (2021): 13–18.

³⁶ ↪ Fred Magdoff, "Repairing the Soil Carbon Rift," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 11 (April 2021): 1–13.

³⁷ ↪ John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, "[The Capitalinian: The First Geological Age of the Anthropocene](#)," — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2021.

The best way to understand these multiple challenges is in terms of the objectively conditioned role of an emerging environmental proletariat, engaged with promoting a new, more unified social materiality aimed at a world of sustainable human development. All conscious action has the future as its object, which cannot realistically be conceived today apart from ecological revolution.

revolution.³⁸

The prospect of a new eco-revolutionary wave is foreshadowed by various movements and struggles throughout the world, including (1) the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil; (2) the international peasants alliance La Via Campesina; (3) Venezuela's nascent, if besieged, communal state; (4) Cuba's revolutionary ecology and epidemiology; (5) the natural-resource nationalist, anti-extractivist, and postcolonial movements in Africa; (6) the Farmer's Revolt in

Everywhere, these radical movements, occurring at multiple levels, are finding ways to unite with more traditional workers' struggles and call for a New International of workers and peoples.

India; (7) China's goal of a socialist-based ecological civilisation; (8) the student-led climate strikes in Europe; (9) the Green New Deal, Red New Deal, just transition, environmental justice, and Black Lives Matter struggles in the United States and Canada; and (10) the revival on every inhabited continent of Indigenous environmental struggles.³⁹ Everywhere, these radical movements, occurring at multiple levels, are finding ways to unite with more traditional workers' struggles and call for a New International of workers and peoples.⁴⁰

Almost unlooked for, Indigenous resistance around the world has come to play a leading role in the development of what could be called a broad-based environmental-proletarian revolt. In his book, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019), Nick Estes writes:

*Indigenous peoples must lead the way. Our history and long traditions of Indigenous resistance provide possibilities for futures premised on justice. After all, Indigenous resistance is animated by our ancestors' refusal to be forgotten, and it is our resolute refusal to forget our ancestors and our history that animates our vision for liberation. Indigenous revolutionaries are the ancestors from the before and before and the already forthcoming. There is a capaciousness to Indigenous kinship that goes beyond the human.... Whereas past revolutionary struggles have strived for the emancipation of labor from capital, we are challenged not just to imagine, but to demand the emancipation of the earth from capital. For the earth to live, capitalism must die.*⁴¹

³⁸ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 754. Mészáros writes: "In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács analyzes 'possible consciousness' as the consciousness of a historically progressive class which has a future ahead of it and therefore has the possibility of objective totalisation." Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre*, 59. See also Sartre, "Time in Faulkner," 231.

³⁹ ↪ On these various movements and struggles, see Michael Löwy, "The Socio-Religious Origins of Brazil's Rural Landless Workers Movement," *Monthly Review* 53, no. 2 (June 2001): 32–40; Hannah Wittman, "Reworking the Metabolic Rift: La Via Campesina, Agrarian Citizenship, and Food Sovereignty," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2009): 805–26; John Bellamy Foster, "Chávez and the Communal State," *Monthly Review* 66, no. 11 (April 2015): 1–17; "Resource Sovereignty: The Agenda for Africa's Exit from the State Plunder," *Tricontinental*, May 7, 2019; Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations* (New York: New Press, 2008); "The Farmer's Revolt in India," *Tricontinental*, June 14, 2021; John B. Cobb, Jr., in conversation with Andre Vltchek, *China and Ecological Civilization* (Jakarta: Badak Merah, 2019); Andre Vltchek, "Determined March Towards Ecological Civilization," *Investig'Action*, May 12, 2018.

⁴⁰ ↪ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 199–217; Samir Amin and Firoze Manji, "[Toward the Formation of a Transnational Alliance of Working Oppressed Peoples](#)," — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2022.

⁴¹ ↪ Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 256–57. See also *Investig'Action*.

In the dire conditions of the Anthropocene Epoch, there is no answer for the human world that does not address the

The planetary revolt of humanity in the twenty-first century will prove “irresistible and irreversible,” and thus succeed against all odds, only if it takes the form of a more unified, revolutionary human subject, emanating from “the wretched of the earth,” an environmental proletariat.

triple threats of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. In this sense, history, rather than having come to an end, as claimed by the received ideology, is today entering its most decisive phase. Hundreds of millions of people have now entered actively into the struggle for a world of substantive equality and ecological sustainability, constituting the fundamental meaning of socialism and the future of history

in our time. Yet, the planetary revolt of humanity in the twenty-first century will prove “irresistible and irreversible,” and thus succeed against all odds, only if it takes the form of a more unified, revolutionary human subject, emanating from “the wretched of the earth,” an environmental proletariat.⁴² It is time to exit the burning house.

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⁴² ↩ On “irresistible and irreversible” revolts, see Vijay Prashad, *Washington Bullets* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 51.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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