

‘Monthly Review’ and the Environment

John Bellamy Foster and Batuhan Sarican

Batuhan Sarican: John, how did your relationship with nature begin? What do you remember about it from your childhood?

John Bellamy Foster: I grew up in the Pacific Northwest in the United States, which is famous for its forests and general environment. I was born in Seattle, but when I was between the ages of 1 and 5, we lived in a timber town, Raymond, Washington, where my father was a teacher. Some of the sawmills in Raymond, one owned by the Weyerhaeuser Corporation, made shingles from Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*). The sawdust from Western Red Cedar is a major known cause of asthma, containing a chemical called plicatic acid, though this was not widely recognised at the time. All three kids in my family had chronic asthma from a very young age, though there was no prior history of it in my family. I ended up with one of the most serious cases of asthma in the country.



Trail in Hoh rainforest (according to Flickr album), Olympic National Park, Washington, U.S. By [Olympic National Park - rainforest_trail_NPS_Photo](#), Public Domain, [Link](#).

When I was 5 years old, we moved to a suburb outside of Tacoma, Washington, called Fircrest (basically a planned community on the Levittown model). I became very conscious of the environment because when we went into Tacoma the smell of the pulp and paper mills was overpowering, and my mother was always concerned about how the pollution was affecting my asthma. The city also seemed to me to be congested (though not by today's standards). Thus, at an early age, I developed a dislike for pollution, congestion, and certain aspects of industrialization. The contrast between the relatively pristine natural environment in the Northwest and the pollution caused in those days mainly by the timber and wood processing industry and pulp and paper mills was stark.

Not long after we arrived in Fircrest, when I was 6, my younger sister, aged 3, had an asthma attack and was rushed to the hospital and died that night. I too had a massive asthma attack around two weeks later and nearly died, partly from the asthma and partly from the medicines the hospital prescribed. This was, in fact, to be a recurring event in my life. I got used to oxygen tents, intravenous feedings, long hospital stays, and huge doses of steroids, which doubled my weight.

Once home again from the hospital at age 6, I was not allowed to go outside, to run, or to go to school (I had to have a private tutor) on doctor's orders. Eventually, I was sent at age 7 to the national asthma home in Denver for more than two years, away from my parents. It was a former sanatorium and had the best asthma doctors in the country. All of this had a profound effect on me and gave me an environmental consciousness at a very early age.

Of course, hiking and camping in the Northwest, especially in the Olympic Rainforest, was part of my growing up as well in the following years. When the first Earth Day came in 1970, I was deeply involved in the various activities and the idea of a rational approach to the environment. But by then I lived in Olympia, Washington, which was less polluted. I thought that conditions in the Northwest were enviable relative to the rest of the country. My main focus then was on protesting the Vietnam War, where napalm was being dropped on children, rather than on the environment as such.

I only returned to the ecological question in a big way in the 1980s via Marxism and a systematic critique of capitalism's degradation of the environment. I was surprised in the early 1980s, during debates with a friend in Toronto while I was in graduate school at York University, to discover that Karl Marx was being described as antinature, something that was clearly wrong. When I returned to the Northwest to take up a position as a university professor in the mid-1980s, after eight years away, things had changed decisively. People were sitting in trees to block logging of old growth forest and the Columbia River had been designated as the most radioactive river in the world due to radioactive leakages from the Hanford nuclear plant. Everywhere there were concerns about the use of pesticides—Rachel Carson termed them biocides—particularly in relation to the forest industry. Meanwhile, climate change, the destruction of the ozone layer, and accelerated species extinction worldwide made it clear that the environmental problem was now planetary, and that it could only be understood in terms of the effects of capitalism as a global system. This led to a shift in my research in the late 1980s and the publication of *The Vulnerable Planet* in 1994.

BS: When did you start to be interested in socialism?

JB: From my earliest age, I was deeply enamoured with revolutions in a historical sense, well before I had a real grasp of socialism. I was, in a way, what is sometimes called in the United States a "red diaper baby," although not to the same degree as my wife, Carrie Ann Naumoff, who grew up in a Communist Party, union-organiser household in the industrial working class. My mother was English and had been involved in various Communist Party-affiliated organisations in Britain, mainly associated with the struggle to open up a Second Front in the Second World War. When she came over on a boat to the United States, she was warned by a German passenger to hide her political history, given the U.S. pursuit of reds in the McCarthy Era, which was then just starting. I did not know about her previous involvement in red politics in Britain until I was a teenager and was already myself engaged in antiwar protests, by which time she decided that I had determined my own political course and she could let me know about her history. My father was a socialist New Dealer and a supporter of Henry Wallace in his campaign for president. He believed it was important for me to read *The Communist Manifesto* and other related works when I was still in elementary school. I was surrounded by his library of books on socialism, peace, and the environment. Everything to do with revolution fascinated me beginning at

around age 6 or 7, although of course there was a certain Romanticism there. So, socialism came naturally to me. All our discussions in my family as I was growing up were very radical by U.S. standards. But I did not become consciously Marxist until I entered college. Near the end of the Vietnam War, when the antiwar movement had died, I wavered for a while in my despair between a defiant irrationalism (reading Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard) and a critical Marxism, which I had begun to study then at a much deeper level. Marxism of course won out. Faced with the U.S.-organised coup in Salvador Allende's Chile and the capitalist economic crisis of the early to mid-1970s, I decided to devote my life to the critique of the system.

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BS: In your article titled "Ecology and the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism" in the November 2008 issue of Monthly Review (MR), you say that "The human relation to nature lies at the heart of the transition to socialism." Can you explain that?

JBF: Socialism was defined by Marx and Frederick Engels in human-ecological terms. Hence, in classical historical materialism, nature/ecology and socialism were intrinsically related. Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was an environmental text as much as a socialist one. Marx saw the labor and production process as constituting the social metabolism between humanity and the universal metabolism of nature. He defined socialism in terms of the rational regulation of this social metabolism by the associated producers in such a way as to conserve human energy and to promote free human development. Humanity needed to relate to the earth in a sustainable way as *boni patres familias* (good heads of the household). Production, for Marx, was thus an ecological as well as economic relation, and socialism was a rational form of that metabolism in which the earth was sustained and "the free development of each [was] the condition for the free development of all."

BS: At this point, is it not a more correct approach to think that the ecological struggle is already a part of socialism, rather than talking about a separate field, ecosocialism?

JBF: This is a good question. Some theorists have tried to replace socialism with ecosocialism, which is a fallacy. Socialism itself is ecological. Ecosocialism properly is viewed not as something that is distinct from or beyond socialism, but as a particular tradition that more fully brings out the ecological aspects that properly belong to socialism itself, and without which it is in flagrant contradiction with itself. There can be no substantive equality without ecological sustainability, and no ecological sustainability without substantive equality.

BS: Let us talk about the "metabolic rift." Can you explain, in simple language to an ordinary person walking on the street, what the metabolic rift is and how it affects their life?

JBF: The basic idea of the metabolic rift is not very difficult. The human relation to nature, like that of all life, is a metabolic one, that is we appropriate energy and material resources from the environment as a basis for life, metabolise this in our bodies, and return the waste to the earth. In the case of human beings, as the self-mediating beings of nature, our relation to nature takes the form of a social metabolism exercised primarily through the labor and production process. However, with the development of capitalism, this social metabolism was alienated: humanity became more estranged from the earth, as evident in what Marx called the "original expropriation," or the removal of populations from

the land in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, and the expropriation of land, resources, and human bodies throughout the globe, forming the basis of industrial capitalism. Nature in this system is no longer seen as a relation to which we belong, but something to be conquered and treated as a "free gift" to capital.

Marx was deeply influenced by the work of the German agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig, who focused on the issue of nutrient cycling and the contradictions that had developed within industrial agriculture in this respect. With the concentration of populations in large industrial cities, food and fibre were sent hundreds and even thousands of miles to the new manufacturing centers. As a consequence, essential soil nutrients, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium ended up in the cities as waste and pollution and were not returned to the soil, the fertility of which was thus exhausted.

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(This process reached an additional stage later, as farm animals were removed from the soil and concentrated in feed lots.) Marx saw this as a "rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism" between humanity and nature, thus posing an ecological crisis. Guano from Peru and bones from the

Napoleonic battlefields and catacombs of Europe, were imported to restore the English soil. The mid-nineteenth century soil crisis led to the development of the global fertiliser industry, which eventually led to the planetary ecological rift associated with the disruption of the global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles. The issue of nutrient cycling and the concept of metabolism in this context became the basis of all ecosystems thinking and systems ecology. Today, climate scientists describe global warming as an "anthropogenic rift" in the Earth System metabolism.

BS: By the way, does this notion put forward by Marx not suggest that every socialist should also fight for ecology?

JBF: Yes, of course; and it works the other way too. Every ecologist should fight for socialism.

BS: Is it possible to say that Henry David Thoreau, who lived on the shores of Lake Walden for two years on his own and refused to pay taxes, survived the metabolic rift? To ask this another way, can we individually reverse the metabolic rift?

JBF: Thoreau could hear the train whistle from Walden Pond and was well aware that there was no real seclusion from the world of capital. He complained that the factory system was simply aimed at seeing that "the corporations may be

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enriched." There is no individual reversal of the metabolic rift. We can personally find some temporary refuge and solace. Still, as social beings concerned with humanity as a whole, we cannot close our eyes to the fate of the hundreds of millions and even billions of people whose lives will be detrimentally affected, in many cases their lives cut short, by

the planetary rift. Nor can we ignore the fate of younger generations and generations perhaps still to come, which raises questions of human survival. We have something to learn, of course, from Thoreau in terms of his civil disobedience, a legacy that he gave to us all, though we have perhaps too seldom availed ourselves of it.

BS: We are in the first phase of an anthropogenic climate crisis. More and more people are accepting that this crisis is today's problem, not tomorrow's, thanks to climate anomalies (extreme heat and rain, heatwaves, deterioration of

hydrological balance, and so on). These anomalies seem to affect the most disadvantaged communities. How do you relate metabolic rift to socioeconomic inequalities?

JB: It would be wrong to think of this as the “first phase of an anthropogenic climate crisis.” We have known about this crisis for over half a century now and have done little to avert it. The reality is that we are fast approaching a 1.5°C

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increase in global average temperature and a 2°C increase is not far beyond that. In order to have a 50 percent chance of avoiding a 2°C increase we have to have to reduce global carbon emissions by around 5 percent year by year starting now, which would itself require a revolutionary transformation of our relations to the earth.

These climate guardrails are important, since they mark what climate scientists fear is the point of no return, where positive feedback effects will come into play, propelling climate change in a way that is out of our control and irreversible. In this sense, we are not in the first phase of the anthropogenic climate crisis, but rather we are approaching the decisive phase, which may well determine the fate of humanity. It is certainly correct that populations are becoming more and more aware of the full extent of the threat due to extreme weather events, but the powers that be, who are of course deeply knowledgeable about these trends, are doing everything to block the necessary social changes and the development of genuine consciousness of what is happening, since their priority is to do all they can to maintain and enhance their own power.

This in itself tells us that this is all about socioeconomic inequality. The world’s billionaires saw an increase in their wealth so far in 2023 alone by close to \$900 billion. Oxfam came out with a report last year indicating that the 125 richest billionaires, on average, were responsible for a million times the carbon emissions of the average person in the bottom 90 percent of income globally. Even as the ecological and economic crises threaten total crisis for humanity, the so-called masters of the universe, as they sometimes dub themselves, are feathering their own nests and blocking needed change. Of course, it is no secret who is most immediately vulnerable to climate change: the poor and the overexploited in every country, and especially those living on starvation wages and in severe environmental conditions in the Global South.

BS: Che Guevara had a saying; “The fundamental problem in the construction of socialism is not economic development, but human development.” What did Che mean here by “human development”? Can you evaluate it in the context of the environment-human relationship?

JB: Che was particularly concerned with the need for human development as both the basis of and the end goal of socialism. Socialism, he argued, required a new emancipated human being focused on social—even more than individual—needs and dedicated to the development of all. Human development is not an abstract concept. The United

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Nations produces an annual Human Development Report to counter the primary focus of mainstream development literature on mere economic development. Marx was perhaps the first to refer to a “hierarchy of needs,” in which basic needs of people, including food, water, shelter, clothing, child care, education,

transportation, means of communication, means of personal development, and opportunities for creative work, had to come before luxury products for the leisure class. Much of what is classified as wealth in a capitalist society is more accurately termed, as John Ruskin said, mere “illth.” It is precisely those areas that contribute most to human

development that are most neglected in a capitalist economy, as opposed to a socialist economy, say, in the case of Cuba.

BS: In a paper published recently in *Nature*, the authors show that seven out of eight planetary boundaries have already been crossed by humans. Do you think our global ecological struggle is weak? Are we not strong enough to overthrow capitalism, or are we not fighting enough?

JBf: The May 2023 article in *Nature* by Johan Rockström and colleagues, titled "[Safe and Just Earth System Boundaries](#)," is of utmost importance and shows how dangerous to humanity the present situation has become, especially when directly incorporating issues of social and ecological justice. This is a major advance on the original planetary boundaries conception in that it incorporates analysis of environmental justice boundaries affecting relations between older and younger generations, between present and future generations, and between countries, communities, and individuals. It is not surprising, then, that most of the safe and just Earth System boundaries have been crossed, reflecting our total crisis.

We now have the nine planetary boundaries model, determined by the conditions of survival of humanity on the planet, most of which have been crossed or are in the process of being crossed, including climate change, ozone depletion, ocean acidification, species extinction, the disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, loss of ground cover (including forests), loss of freshwater, aerosol loading, and novel entities (referring to synthetic chemicals, radionuclides, genetically modified organisms, and so on). The fact that all of these planetary boundaries if crossed represent deadly threats to humanity as a whole and to innumerable other species puts the significance of climate change (which is only one such planetary boundary) in its proper light. Each of these planetary boundaries means an Earth crisis in the making, and behind all of them is the system of capital accumulation and the expropriation of the entire earth.

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The new safe and just Earth System Boundaries are meant to add a new dimension to this, seeing the whole problem in terms of a combination of environmental and social limits, with an inner circle constituting "a safe and just corridor" for humanity. It emphasises that the social constraints for a safe and just environment are more stringent than the biophysical planetary boundaries themselves, and that a massive social transformation is now necessary. However, the problem with this conception is that it ignores the reality of capitalism, which is present in between every line of the study, but is never mentioned.

In answer to your specific question, the population of the earth is of course strong enough to overthrow capitalism, and yes, we are not yet fighting enough. Hundreds of millions of people around the world, however, are already entering the fight in one way or another, and their efforts will certainly be magnified, and extended to billions of people. Whether this will occur in time and on the scale and with the levels of organization needed we do not know. We therefore do not know what the outcome will be. But we do know that this will be the greatest struggle in all of human history. The very fact that the future is not determined, as the Marxist ecologist Richard Levins once said, is "a call to the exercise of freedom."

BS: Is it possible to organise (or make real) the global ecological revolution without eliminating market forces?

JB: This is a difficult question to answer because a full answer would have to address what market forces are, which is an area permeated by myth. The question can more usefully be put the other way around: Can an ecological revolution be carried out without economic and ecological planning, and what would be the role of markets in these circumstances? The July–August 2023 special issue of Monthly Review, the longest special issue we have published, is entitled “Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development.” It explains that ecological sustainability—which requires a broad array of degrowth solutions aimed specifically at the richest countries and the wealthiest sectors of the world economy, while improving the real standard of living for most of the world’s population—cannot be achieved without economic and ecological planning of some kind. The myth of the self-regulating market system is exactly that, a myth. It becomes a justification for letting all outcomes arise *ex post* rather than *ex ante*, that is excluding all substantive planning, so that the capitalist class and corporations basically can mediate all developments and manipulate them to their own end under the guise of neutral “market forces.” We have seen what this has done to the planetary environment over the last half century.

It would be suicidal to leave the future of humanity up to so-called market forces, that is, global capital, which has only one aim: the endless accumulation of capital at the top of society, which has its counterpart in “Après moi, le déluge!”

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Without planning controlled by the associated producers there is no way of preventing the runaway train of capitalism from taking us over the cliff. Planning, of course, does not mean the elimination of markets. It does mean that the

economy would not be controlled by “markets.” The truth is that the dominance of “market forces” today simply means that monopoly-finance capital is left in charge: the very force that has both brought us to the brink of planetary ecological collapse and that is preventing us from doing anything about it.

BS: Some say that the 1.5°C target is about to be reached (too late to prevent it); others think that we still have time (we have to fight) for this. What do you think about this? Our need is hope and struggle, rather than pessimism brought on by apocalypticism, is it not? How should we react to the climate crisis, the biggest anthropogenic problem we face?

JB: There is a lot of popular confusion about the 1.5°C boundary. The World Meteorological Organization has indicated that we will reach a 1.5°C increase in global average temperature at least momentarily sometime in the next

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seven years. The most optimistic scenario of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its latest report is based on the world not reaching a 1.5°C increase until 2040. Even in this most optimistic IPCC scenario, the world would go on to exceed 1.5°C by a tenth of a degree after 2040 and would not get back down below 1.5°C again, via some form of negative emissions (drawing carbon from the

atmosphere), until the end of the century.

It is still possible to achieve this—but it would require revolutionary-scale change beyond anything we have ever seen. Pessimism and optimism are irrelevant in this situation. It is about building a global movement based in the global working class and the “wretched of the earth” more generally and entering into the fight for a world of substantive

equality and ecological sustainability. It is about the youth of today and future generations. You either choose a path of resigning humanity to its so-called fate, pointing at present to a planetary holocaust, or you resist. We have to release the safety valve to stop the runaway train (a metaphor Engels used) before we reach the tipping points that will irreversibly destabilise the Earth System. Already, we are in a situation where sea levels are rising and, no matter what we do, that cannot be reversed in a century, or even two, but we can still affect the speed and extent of the rise.

BS: Governments must be one of the biggest obstacles to combining ecological and social struggle. For example, in Turkey, where I live, the AKP (Justice and Development Party), which has been in power for more than twenty years, is plundering the environment; it offers nature to companies in different sectors, especially construction and mining. Whoever fights against it is declared "terrorist" and sometimes even imprisoned. How should we fight? What would you like to say?

JB: The real problem at this level is not so much governments alone, but the whole state. Government is that part of the capitalist state that is theoretically most directly responsible to the population and subject to change, usually seen as the executive and legislative branches. Other parts of the state include the judiciary, police, prisons, the state bureaucracy, the military, intelligence services, central banking (which is now controlled by the major financial institutions, backed by the power of the state), regional and local governments, public education, and so on. Closely aligned with the state generally is the ideological and state apparatus, primarily the corporate media system. There are thousands of strings attaching the government to capital at every stage of the political process before and after politicians take office, and he who pays the piper calls the tune. Right now, what has hitherto been the dominant state form in the advanced capitalist world, liberal democracy, is caught up in the structural crisis, and the capitalist state is shifting from neoliberal austerity to neofascist ascendancy. If an anticapitalist, or even reformist, government is elected (as, for example, in parts of Latin America today) it is usually faced with hostility from other entrenched parts of the capitalist state, as well as being assaulted from without by capital, which has enormous autonomous power not dependent directly on the state. Capitalist governments are sharply restricted in the degree to which they can regulate or interfere with capital, but are granted enormous coercive powers (especially in state emergencies) to repress the population.

As the capitalist state moves toward fascism (or neofascism), it of course loses legitimacy and relies increasingly on straightforward coercion, censorship, and propaganda. Designating more and more forms of protest as "terrorism," which is happening in the United States as well, is an indication of this shift. It is hard to say what form, in terms of strategy and tactics, that the resistance in any particular nation-state or region should take, since conditions vary enormously across the globe. However, without an organised movement for socialism (and ecology) on an absolutely massive and revolutionary scale, the needed changes are not possible. This seems to be an incontrovertible truth of our age, which has moved in the direction of outright robbery of populations everywhere. This is most acute, of course, in those countries that are subject directly to imperialism, but we are also facing a planetary holocaust that will affect populations everywhere.

I think that the single most meaningful theory and critique of the state to be developed in our time is to be found in István Mészáros's works *Beyond Capital* and *Beyond Leviathan*. Mészáros's analysis, which influenced Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, resurrects the classical Marxist notion of the withering away of the state in the form of the creation of a communal state. Here, a part of the popular base is beginning to be organised in all of its

relations—economically, politically, ecologically, and culturally—around communal exchange within local communities. In Venezuela, the Bolivarian state has supported this autonomous popular base and draws much of its own power from it, and, in this sense, is no longer alienated from the population (although there are all sorts of contradictions). There is, however, no one path to socialism, as conditions vary enormously, as well as revolutionary vernaculars and the paths of struggle.

On your very insightful point that the state “offers nature to companies,” this is part of the financialization of nature. It expresses the new global strategy of capital in relation to the planetary ecological crisis, on which I have written a number of articles recently and that is dealt with in my new book, *The Dialectics of Ecology*.

BS: I re-read MR's article “Organising Ecological Revolution” in the October 2005 issue. Why is the “New Sustainability Paradigm” scenario, one of the two major transition scenarios proposed by the Global Scenario Group, insufficient? What do we mean by “ecocommunalism,” the other scenario you find more effective?

JB: The Global Scenario Group introduced what is known as the Great Transition Initiative, which is still an ongoing process, mostly representing a global social-liberal outlook. It proposed two possible forms of Great Transition. One was a non-revolutionary elite utopian project called the New Sustainability Program that was to be initiated through the joint action primarily of the United Nations, the World Bank, and nongovernmental organisations. A wider popular base was mentioned as well but was entirely ancillary. The rational part of the New Sustainability Program was the adoption of a steady-state economy, as envisioned in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill in his social democratic phase and promoted in our time by the late Herman Daly. The problem with this model is that it assumed the shift away from economic growth and capital accumulation without at the same time altering the fundamental political-economic structures of capitalism. In today's terms, this could be described as a strategy of degrowth capitalism. I wrote an article on this strategy in which I described this as an “impossibility theorem,” that is, it is impossible to separate capitalism and its class and institutional structure from the drive to capital accumulation. As Marx said, in this system it is “Accumulate, Accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” The idea that the World Bank would promote a steady-state or degrowth economy, or that this could in any way be institutionalised within capitalism, is an antirealist view. Daly, who worked for a while for the World Bank, recognised the contradiction.

The ecocommunalism paradigm is different in that it was described by the Global Scenario Group as a kind of socialist degrowth economy, breaking fundamentally with the system of capital accumulation. The nineteenth-century thinker who was seen as most closely identified with this paradigm was the great artist, craftsman, poet, and socialist, William

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Morris, who in his later years was the main force behind the Socialist League to which figures like Eleanor Marx and Engels were attached. Morris was both an ecological Marxist and adamantly anti-imperialist. He argued that England could cut its coal consumption in half if it eliminated the waste and exploitation associated with capitalism. Three

chapters of my book *The Return of Nature* are devoted to Morris's ideas. He is the closest thing we have in the nineteenth century to a thinker who can be characterised as a “degrowth communist,” the term that Kohei Saito has recently popularised.

Degrowth communism, or planned degrowth, is about eliminating overaccumulation, waste, economic irrationality, class differentials, and the treadmill of production while improving the quality of life for populations elsewhere. It specifically targets the capitalist class and the wealthy, imperialist states, demanding an end to net capital formation in the wealthy economies. Underdeveloped countries and poorer sectors of the world economy would still require further economic growth consistent with human needs. There would need to be a convergence of energy and resource use occurring globally at a level that is sustainable for all at the planetary level, with the downward adjustment occurring in countries with high per capita ecological footprints. As the Global Scenario Group, however, recognised, the ecocommunalism paradigm would require a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, which, of course, is why they did not explicitly discuss it.

BS: Speaking of sustainability, I think that this notion has been emptied and used as a cover (greenwashing) by capitalism. You also associate real sustainability with socialism. Is it not best seen that way?

JB: A lot of terms that are essential, and without which we can hardly begin to address social problems, have been appropriated and distorted by the system of class power, and thus are contested today. This includes terms such as democracy, freedom, equality, socialism, sustainability, and so on. We cannot abandon the real, substantive, critical meanings of these terms that are crucial to human emancipation and development simply because they have been twisted, distorted, watered down, and effectively negated by the ruling ideological system. In the United States, today democracy is identified with the market, in contrast to its original meaning, which was rule by the poor, the demos. Under these circumstances, we have to fight for the organic meanings of these categories as they arose out of past struggles. It is necessary to wage the battle over cultural hegemony as part of what Antonio Gramsci called "the philosophy of praxis." It would be self-defeating to abandon the notion of sustainability and allow it to be corrupted into meaning the sustainability of capitalism, the very opposite of its original meaning. Our conception is the necessary sustainability of the human relation to the earth, which cannot be accomplished except in a society of substantive equality.

BS: Let us end the conversation by talking about Monthly Review. Publishing a socialist magazine since 1949 in a country like the United States, which is the center of capitalism, and continuing its publication life "independently" even during periods of "witch hunt," requires great acumen and willpower. I think it is a great success that the magazine has persisted into our own time. When did you become the editor of the magazine? How did your paths cross?

JB: I was an avid reader of Monthly Review, as were many of my friends from the early 1970s. I was aware of MR early on, utilising it as a source in high school debate, when we were debating the Vietnam War. But it was my friend and roommate at The Evergreen State College, Robert W. McChesney, who got me to focus on MR as a unified standpoint. We were studying economics, including radical economics at the time. This was during the last stages of the Vietnam War, the coup in Chile, and the early to mid-1970s economic crisis. Monthly Review was at the center of all of this, especially for those interested in radical political economy. The most important work on the Marxist left in the United States at the time was Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*. A group of us went up to Seattle when Sweezy, returning from China, was giving a guest lecture to a mass audience at the University of Washington. We read everything in Monthly Review and from Monthly Review Press. We traveled down to Eugene, Oregon, where the Union of Radical Political Economists was meeting, which was also at the time closely connected to Monthly Review.

In 1976, I went off to graduate school at York University in Toronto and became enamoured for a couple of years with fundamentalist Marxist political economy. I wrote a paper defending the theory of the falling rate of profit, and then, as I

finished the final page of my argument, I decided that it was not actually applicable to our present situation. I then studied under the leading revisionist U.S. historian Gabriel Kolko, who introduced me to data on capacity utilisation, and the work of the Austrian Marxist economist Josef Steindl. This took me to the work of the Polish Marxist Michał Kalecki and then back via Kalecki and Steindl to Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*. I wrote a long manuscript on "The United States and Monopoly Capitalism: The Issue of Excess Capacity" and sent it to Sweezy in 1979 or 1980, which impressed him, and we became close friends.

In 1989, I became a member of the board of the Monthly Review Foundation and a member of the editorial committee for the magazine. The magazine went through various difficulties in the 1990s due to the fact the editors were in their eighties and slowing down. Ellen Meiksins Wood, with whom I had studied at York, stepped in for a number of years as coeditor with Harry Magdoff and Sweezy. In 2000, McChesney and I joined Magdoff and Sweezy as coeditors. With the deaths of Sweezy and Magdoff in 2004 and 2006, respectively, and McChesney's resignation as coeditor in 2004 due to other political and intellectual responsibilities (he remained on the board of the Monthly Review Foundation), I ended up as the sole editor. Today we operate largely on a collective basis. Brett Clark is associate editor, Jamil Jonna is associate editor for communications and technology, and Sarah Kramer is assistant editor, while we have a strong, very talented editorial committee for the magazine, which includes John Mage, Hannah Holleman, and Intan Suwandi, with the support of Fred Magdoff and Victor Wallis.

BS: As a socialist magazine editor, what difficulties have you faced and are you facing now?

JB: The difficulties are endless, but of course the biggest one is that we exist in a political and social environment in the United States in which what is commonly called the "left" is in fact liberal, social liberal, or social democratic and largely supportive of capitalism and imperialism while being anti-Marxist, even if influenced in some respects by Marxism. Leo Huberman and Sweezy, the founding editors of MR, were both dragged before McCarthyite inquisitors during the 1950s, as was Magdoff, who was to become coeditor of MR after Huberman's death in 1968. The Sweezy

From the beginning, MR has thus adopted a philosophy of "Better Smaller But Better," a slogan that Baran adapted from V. I. Lenin. We emphasise clarity and refuse to water down our ideas in order to gain respectability within the system, since to take that path would be to abolish the very reason for our existence.

case on academic freedom went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the court decided in his favor in one of the decisions that signalled the end of McCarthyism. From the beginning, MR has thus adopted a philosophy of "Better Smaller But Better," a slogan that Baran adapted from V. I. Lenin. We emphasise clarity and refuse to water down our ideas in order to gain respectability within the system (with, of course, considerable costs in our acceptance within U.S.

society), since to take that path would be to abolish the very reason for our existence. We emphasise the longer view and an anti-imperialist perspective. It is also important to us that MR is subtitled "An Independent Socialist Magazine." We do our best to avoid the sectarianism that has so often divided socialists, and to represent a big tent for the anti-imperialist, socialist left. The range of issues that we attempt to cover in the magazine is enormous, and while I think our approach is generally excellent, we have been more successful in some areas than others. Lately, we have tried to address areas such as racial capitalism and social reproduction theory, devoting special issues to both. These are areas that have deep roots in the MR tradition, but which we have not always been able to address on the level that we would like.

BS: How many readers and subscribers do you have per month?

JB: There are over four thousand print subscribers to the magazine, while our monthly readership of the magazine alone, once online readers are added, is more than three times that, making it well in excess of twelve thousand. But, in fact, this is only the tip of the iceberg, because our articles are reproduced on many different websites globally, and there are almost immediate translations into other languages all over the world, making it all difficult to track. For example, most of what I write for the magazine is now translated almost immediately into Chinese, with our articles also regularly translated into Spanish, Turkish, Korean, and many other languages. MR thus has a world audience. Moreover, this does not include our additional readership on MR Online, where we post materials daily separate from the magazine. Of course, we also have a very large readership through Monthly Review Press, our book publishing arm.

BS: You have also switched to digital with the name MR Online. Articles are published here for free. How does the magazine generate income to sustain itself while remaining independent?

JB: We deliberately keep the subscription price of the magazine low by today's standards. Further, both articles from Monthly Review proper, that is, the magazine, and those featured on MR Online separate from the magazine, are outside paywalls, available to everyone. Monthly Review thus does not adhere in the least to a normal business model. It is not therefore something that could be easily replicated. We survive because of the loyalty of our print subscribers, many of whom are also MR associates and sustainers. We make the contents of the magazine available to everyone via the Internet in order to provide access to those who cannot afford to pay, and to those in the Global South and elsewhere who would not otherwise have ready access. Most of our older twentieth-century articles are available only to subscribers, who have access to the full archives. To get the magazine itself in its original print form or as a PDF, as opposed to the online-digital format, one has to purchase it either directly or through a subscription or have access through libraries.

We try to make the print magazine something that people will want to hold, read, study, and retain. MR is designed to be read in that way. Some of our subscribers line their bookshelves with the magazine, which is book size. The articles in MR consist of analyses that are made to last, and to be as meaningful twenty-five or even fifty years later as they were when they were first published, allowing for changing historical conditions. Rather than shortening articles and trying to compete with Internet blogs, we have concentrated on providing more in-depth research, information, and critical analysis that people desperately need. Of crucial importance is the fact that Monthly Review has a continuity over its nearly seventy-five years of existence and an emphasis on clarity even with respect to complex subjects that makes it quite unique. So far MR readers have been steadfast in supporting us by continuing to subscribe to the print magazine. It is their commitment to what we do that is our main asset, and the way we survive; that and the enormous efforts of a handful of people who constitute our inner core. Of course, the magazine is not the only part of our operation, which also includes Monthly Review Press. The magazine and the press have a symbiotic relationship, each reinforcing the other. We also, as indicated, have MR Online, which brings us many new, especially younger, readers. Rebecca Manski at Monthly Review Press has added a video component, mainly involving authors discussing their works, which is posted on the Monthly Review Press page of our website.

BS: Are you considering the transition from print to fully digital?

JB: No, that would be a backward step for us. The print edition of the magazine is the heart of MR. We are a publication, increasingly rare and now more often found in elite publications, that is both fully print and fully digital. As a solely digital magazine, we would most likely not survive.

BS: How has the inclusion of ecological issues in the publication program changed proportionally since Monthly Review was founded?

JB: Monthly Review has always been concerned with natural science and the human relation to the environment.

Albert Einstein wrote his "Why Socialism?" for volume 1, number 1 of MR in 1949. Philip Morrison, a physicist in the Manhattan Project, wrote a column for MR for many years... Shortly after the famous Limits to Growth Study was published in 1972, the MR editors argued that economic growth would need to be limited.

Albert Einstein wrote his "Why Socialism?" for volume 1, number 1 of MR in 1949. Philip Morrison, a physicist in the Manhattan Project, wrote a column for MR for many years, as did Scott Nearing, one of the great social environmental thinkers in the United States. Nearing celebrated Rachel Carson's Silent Spring in the magazine when her book was published.

Shortly after the famous Limits to Growth Study was published in 1972, the MR editors argued that economic growth would need to be limited. The environmental theme became more prominent in the magazine naturally as the ecological crisis worsened. A key turning point for MR was the publication in July–August 1986 of a special issue on "Science, Technology, and Capitalism," guest edited by David Himmelstein and Steffie Woolhandler, with contributions by Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Nancy Krieger, Vicente Navarro, and others. Levins and Lewontin—who published *The Dialectical Biologist* in 1985—became very close to MR from that point on, writing numerous articles for the magazine. Monthly Review Press, through the hard work of Clark and Martin Paddio, published their book *Biology Under the Influence* in 2007. I became friends with Lewontin, who once said to me, "MR is all we've got," which I thought was the nicest compliment the magazine had ever received.

Sweezy was very concerned with the environment, which one can see in his analysis throughout the 1960s and '70s, as was also true of Harry Magdoff. Monthly Review strongly influenced the development of neo-Marxian environmental sociology in the United States, marked especially by Charles Anderson's *The Sociology of Survival* in 1976 and Allan Schnaiberg's *The Environment* in 1980. Sweezy was a close friend

In this century, the ecological problem has loomed larger and larger and has thus come to be one of the dominant themes in the magazine, along with issues of Marxian ecology from a theoretical standpoint.

of the editor of *Scientific American* Gerard Piel, and they frequently discussed environmental issues. Piel wrote a book, *Only One World*, in 1992, which had a big effect on me when I was writing *The Vulnerable Planet*. Sweezy wrote two major articles on the planetary ecological problem in 1989: "Capitalism and the Environment" (with Harry Magdoff) and "Socialism and Ecology."

In this century, the ecological problem has loomed larger and larger and has thus come to be one of the dominant themes in the magazine, along with issues of Marxian ecology from a theoretical standpoint. This has somewhat displaced the former dominant role of economic crisis analysis in the magazine, though we continue to publish important work in that area. MR has always been a political-economic publication concerned centrally with imperialism, so the critique of the ecological crisis in the magazine has these intellectual pillars supporting it. More and more, political-economic and ecological contradictions are seen as together constituting the structural crisis of capital that is now threatening the very existence of humanity, and which is inextricably related to the imperialist system.

A big part of our success with respect to addressing the ecological crisis has been due to Michael Yates, director of Monthly Review Press. Yates is an enormously talented economist, whose work has mainly been directed at issues of the working class, labor, and unions. In his most recent 2022 book, *Work Work Work: Labor, Alienation, and Class Struggle*, he incorporated a strong ecological element emphasizing the interconnections between exploitation of labor and the expropriation of nature. It is due to a considerable degree to Yates's work as an editor (as well as the efforts of Paddio) that Monthly Review Press has recently published three books that received the prestigious Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize, with two of these, Saito's *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* and my *The Return of Nature*, focusing on Marxian ecology. Fred Magdoff is a soil scientist and also writes on political economy, and in these capacities has strengthened our ecological analysis, particularly with respect to the critique of agribusiness.

BS: Finally, what does John Bellamy Foster like to do in his spare time from magazine work?

JB: Aside from the magazine, I am still teaching a couple of courses a year at the university and working with graduate students in different departments, which takes a lot of time. I also have my own research and writing relatively independent from MR. I like to travel, usually combining this with talks on socialism and ecology in support of movements around the world, though lately I have not been traveling much. I do a lot of talks over the Internet. I read a great deal of fiction. Beyond that, life is devoted to family and friends, and to community and nature. Much of our time is spent outdoors at home, taking long walks every day, and making trips to the ocean and the mountains when we can. As Paul Lafargue said, beyond all the necessary and creative work, we have *The Right to Be Lazy*.

Related links:

- [The Jus Semper Global Alliance](#)
- [Monthly Review](#)
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- John Bellamy Foster: ["Nature as a Mode of Accumulation: Capitalism and the Financialization of the Earth"](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marx, Value and Nature](#)
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- John Bellamy Foster: [The Long Ecological Revolution](#)
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- John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman and Brett Clark: ["Imperialism in the Anthropocene"](#)
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- John Bellamy Foster and Jia Keqing (interview): [Ecological Marxism](#)
- Johan Rockström et al.: [Safe and Just Earth System Boundaries](#)

- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **About the authors:** **John Bellamy Foster** is editor of Monthly Review and professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Oregon. **Batuhan Sarican** is editorial director of Gastro Eko, a news website based in Turkey focused on food and ecology. This is a slightly revised version of an interview published on Gastro Eko on September 23, 2023, gastroeko.com.
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