

The Ecological Rift in the Anthropocene

John Bellamy Foster, Fabio Querido, Maria Orlanda Pinassi and Michael Löwy

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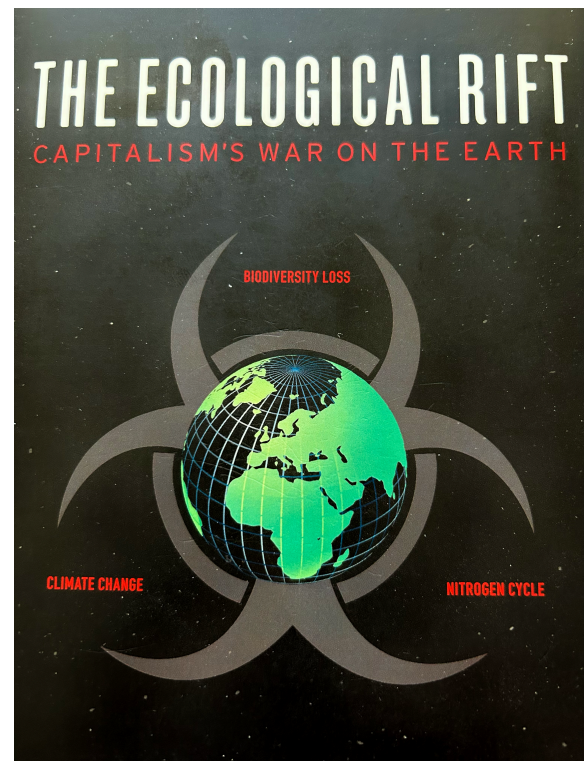
Löwy: To start, tell us a little about your childhood and youth. You were born in Seattle, right?

John Bellamy Foster: Yes, I was born in Seattle, Washington.

When I was one year old, my family moved to a lumber town, Raymond, Washington, where my father was a schoolteacher. In Raymond, there was a Western red cedar shingles plant, owned by Weyerhaeuser, which emitted plicatic acid, which is a well-known cause of asthma, in the dust from the plant. I developed chronic asthma, together with my two sisters. When I was five, we moved to Fircrest, Washington, a suburb outside of Tacoma. At the time, Tacoma was one of the most polluted cities in the United States, due to a smelter giving off toxic emissions and to pulp and paper mills. When I was six, my younger sister, age three, had a severe asthma attack and was rushed to the hospital and died that night. A couple of weeks later, I had a severe asthma attack, and I too was rushed to the hospital and nearly died. I was in the hospital for two weeks on that occasion, spending considerable time in an oxygen tent. I had to be fed intravenously through my foot and have my foot in the air.

Afterward, I was prescribed so many steroids that my weight doubled. Standing up I could not see my feet. I was not allowed to go outside or run and had to have a private tutor. When I was seven, I was sent away from my parents to the children's asthma home in Denver where I stayed for more than two years.

In the meantime, my father had a mental breakdown and was placed in a Veteran's Administration hospital where he was given electric shock treatment. My mother took up selling Avon cosmetics door to door in Tacoma to provide some income for the family. Her district was the poorest in Tacoma and she took me along sometimes because she said she wanted me to see how people could live with dignity and generosity while in utter poverty. We ourselves lived for years below the poverty line, with my father unemployed for large stretches or selling encyclopedias door to door. However,



my mother, who had experienced the Great Depression and wartime rationing in England, managed to keep things together.

When I was eleven, my father got a teaching post in special education in the small rural town of Rochester, Washington, and we moved to Olympia, Washington, a small, semirural city, but also the state capital. There my mother obtained a job as an administrative secretary with the state legislature. My father soon lost his teaching position. He tried selling real estate unsuccessfully for a few years and then became a medical adjudicator for the state government. Olympia was in many ways quite rural, particularly in the area we lived. It is on the Puget Sound and surrounded by forests. It was relatively unpolluted. I spent a good part of my youth outdoors, hiking and camping.

Both my parents had a high level of literary culture. They were both on the left. My mother had been associated with the British Communist Party-led movement to open the Second Front during the Second World War (she had been drafted into the military). When she came over to the United States after the war, she was warned by a German passenger to hide her political past due to the growth of McCarthyism. My father was a New Deal-style socialist and supporter of Henry Wallace. My upbringing was thus very left. My father introduced me to socialist classics, including *The Communist Manifesto*, and to radical history beginning in my elementary school years. He had an encyclopedic knowledge and a deep sense of history, political science, political economy, and philosophy. Even now, I marvel at what I learned just by reading things from his bookshelves when I was young.

FQ, MOP, and ML: Tell us a little about your youth involvement in the antiwar movement. What made you join the movement?

JBf: Objectively, I did not have a significant role in the antiwar movement, what little role I did have, though, was crucial to my own personal development. The Vietnam War was a constant source of conversation in my family while I was growing up. I was twelve when Lyndon Johnson built up the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to half a million or more. My parents were enraged, but there were few outlets for action at the time where we lived. In my junior high school days, my political focus was on antinuclear and anti-Vietnam War issues. I gave speeches on both in my public speaking class. My speech teacher was a Green Beret and wore his beret to class. He covered the walls in the classroom with blatant propaganda about the “Mau Mau” (Land and Freedom Army) Rebellion in Kenya. I had never before seen such a display in public school of colonialist/imperialist views. He was rational, however, in his own way, insisting that the greatest orator in the world was Fidel Castro. He asked us to write down something we believed in and then he told us afterward we had to give a speech arguing the opposite. I had put down world peace. I was enraged by his requirement, and so ended up doing a Jonathan Swift-style satire, complete with maps, on how the United States could devastate all the cities of the Soviet Union and kill off their population in a first strike, in the manner of the warmongering U.S. Air Force general Curtis LeMay. The speech was so deeply satirical as to make the reverse point, which elated the class. I also gave a talk—when we were able to argue directly on something we believed in—on how the United States militarily and politically could withdraw from Vietnam since these were often presented as insurmountable obstacles at the time, although my views then, looking back, were far too naïve.

In high school, I took part in debate when the national topic was “Should Congress Prohibit Unilateral U.S. Military Intervention in Foreign Countries?,” and I spent more than a year in a relentless study of the history of imperialism and U.S. military interventions, reading every book I could find. At the same time, I participated in the antiwar marches and rallies that were emerging. I took part in a hunger strike/fast of youth at the state Capitol in 1970, when we occupied the

rotunda and spent part of each day approaching state senators and representatives seeking to get them to change their positions to opposing the war, usually with little effect. I made frequent trips to Seattle, where the antiwar movement was strong and massive. In the overall movement at the time, I was struck by the Black Panther breakfast program, which I encountered in Seattle, and which seemed to address the very reality of the struggle in the United States against what we now call racial capitalism. All of this had a big effect on my personality and interests.

In the final period of the Vietnam War, during Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" of the war and continued bombing of the North, the antiwar movement died down (this was also after the killings at Jackson State and Kent State Universities) and I found myself both angry and despondent. I partly fell prey to the cynical, nihilistic mood associated with the prevailing sense of defeat in the movement. I started reading Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche out of a kind of nihilism and skepticism. At about the same time, though, I was returning to studies of Karl Marx on a higher level, and Marx won out. I was part of a Herbert Marcuse seminar at The Evergreen State College, which also included others, such as David McNally, who were to emerge as important Marxist thinkers in the United States and Canada. The tipping point for me, though, was the U.S.-directed coup in Chile, coupled with the economic crisis. Along with my close friend, Robert W. McChesney, and others, I helped organise the Northwest National Symposium on Chile. I wrote articles on the U.S. role in the coup for the college newspaper. I decided that from that point on, I would dedicate my life to opposing capitalism, quite apart from the question of whether humanity would win or lose. It was McChesney, when we were students together at The Evergreen State College, who stressed the need to focus on the Monthly Review and Monopoly Capital tradition, as part of a study of radical economics. A group of us went to see Paul Sweezy talk in Seattle and traveled to the meeting of the Union for Radical Political Economics at the University of Oregon.

FQ, MOP, and ML: Your doctoral thesis was on monopoly capitalism. It was done at York University in Toronto, right? Tell us a little about this.

JBf: When I entered graduate school at York University, my main interests were Marxian political economics and critical theory/Hegelian dialectics—I had studied the latter extensively, though mostly on my own. My strongest background was in economics/political economy, and most of my work continued to be in that area. In my second year of graduate studies, I took a yearlong course on Marx's Capital with Marxist political economist Robert Albritton. I already had a deep knowledge of radical economics/political economy in the tradition of Paul Baran and Sweezy's Monopoly Capital, but in my early years of graduate school I got intrigued by the new fundamentalist Marxian analysis of David Yaffe, Ben Fine, and Laurence Harris, coming out of the work of Paul Mattick and, to some extent, Roman Rosdolsky. I wrote a paper defending the tendency of the rate of profit to fall that was influenced by these thinkers, but as I was typing up the last page, I realised that it was wrong; that the analysis, though it drew its inspiration from part of Marx's work, lacked any real relevance in the late twentieth century, since it did not engage with monopoly capitalism. Conditions had changed due to the concentration and centralisation of capital, a tendency that Marx himself had highlighted. Since this realisation came the day the paper was due, I turned it in anyway, with some misgivings, in order to fulfil my requirements. Nevertheless, the contradictions of fundamentalist Marxian political economy, and its complete inability to deal with historical change and the modifications of the system with the rise of global monopolistic corporations, were suddenly evident to me, as if a bubble had burst.

It was in the following year, rather fortuitously, that I studied with the great U.S. revisionist historian Gabriel Kolko, who was one of the reasons I had decided to come to York. I ended up working with him on a one-on-one basis. Kolko had

just finished his *Main Currents in Modern American History*, where he relied heavily on the framework of Josef Steindl's *Maturity and Stagnation in the American Economy* from 1952, which had been released in an updated edition by Monthly Review Press in 1976. Kolko introduced me not only to Steindl's work, but also to the empirical data and debates on excess capacity in the U.S. economy. This suddenly gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation of Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* and got me to study the work of Michał Kalecki, which further transformed my understanding of the whole Kalecki-Steindl-Baran-Sweezy tradition. I wrote a long paper for Kolko in 1979–1980 entitled "The United States and Monopoly Capitalism: The Issue of Excess Capacity," and, on a whim, sent a copy to Sweezy, whose response in a letter, to my surprise, was that it was the best thing that he could recall having seen in the tradition of *Monopoly Capital* since the book's appearance. We then became friends and Sweezy assumed the role of my mentor, with constant communications going back and forth. I met him in Ottawa and then in frequent trips to New York. My first article for Monthly Review in September 1981 was "Is Monopoly Capitalism an Illusion?" Sweezy put me in touch with Polish sociologist and political economist Henryk Szlajfer and we coedited *The Faltering Economy: The Problem of Accumulation under Monopoly Capitalism* (1984). My dissertation, *The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism: An Elaboration of Marxian Political Economy* (1984), was an attempt to defend the monopoly capital tradition against the criticisms of fundamentalist Marxian political economy while showing how the differences between the two might be reconciled to create a stronger synthesis relevant to the present. It was published as a book in 1986 and then republished in 2014 with a new introduction to the new edition.

FQ, MOP, and ML: What was it like when you joined Monthly Review in 1989? How important is the magazine in your career?

JB: My identification with Monthly Review went back, as indicated, to the 1970s, influencing my overall outlook. I was very involved with the magazine beginning in the early 1980s, though not in any institutional way. What changed was that, in 1989, the editors of MR, who were both in their late seventies, decided that they needed to establish for the first time an informal editorial committee that could relieve them of some of the editorial burdens. I was therefore asked to be a member of the editorial committee. At the same time, they decided to add two individuals to the Monthly Review Foundation Board, and I was one of these. In the meantime, I had taken up a tenure-track position as a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon.

In terms of the importance of Monthly Review to my career it is difficult to say. With respect to my purely academic career, it might even be said to have been negative, if viewed directly. There are consequences for being associated with Marxism, especially if one chooses to go beyond the academy as such, taking on the role of a movement-based public intellectual. Being so identified makes it difficult to get hired as a professor. I was hired at the University of Oregon in the mid-1980s only as a result of a very unique situation involving the sudden death of a Marxist professor, Al Szymanski, who had attracted a considerable number of graduate students, compelling the department to replace him with another radical. The job description for the position for which I was hired was "Marxism, political economy, class analysis, and imperialism," hardly a standard position in the U.S. academy, and today completely unthinkable. When I went up for tenure, I managed to clear all the obstacles until it reached the highest administrative level, and then there was a move at the very top, at the level of the president, to turn down my tenure on the political grounds that I was a Marxist, even though that was the area in which I had been originally hired to teach. Only a revolt within the administration (with dire consequences for the career of the person who intervened on my behalf, threatening to go public) prevented me from being blocked from receiving tenure on political grounds. After that, though, I was kept at the lowest salary, given the heaviest course load, and marginalised for most of a decade. I had to teach ten courses a year for a number of years,

some of them voluntary and only partially remunerative, in order to get a little bit of additional income to support my family. Later, I came under attack at various points as one of the publicly designated most “dangerous professors” in the United States by virtue of my work in relation to *Monthly Review*. My situation in the academy eventually improved due to my work on the environment, which gained influence, and which was an area not seen as directly related to Marxism, and thus not censored in quite the same way.

Hence, my association with MR, though crucial in terms of the development of my own critical analysis, theory, and practice, was, at least according to the standard criteria, more directly detrimental than beneficial in terms of building an academic career. At the same time, it gave my work meaning, inspiration, background, and significance lacking in most left work in the academy. I was never simply or mainly an academic, but retained a foot outside, allowing for a much more coherent critical perspective, and a relation to radical social movements. To say all of this, though, is to define “career” in an entirely different way, that is, in socialist terms of theory and practice.

FQ, MOP, and ML: Was it at that same time, in the late 1980s, that you started working on issues related to ecology? How did this encounter with ecology happen?

JBf: In my childhood I had encountered ecology from both sides, having developed chronic asthma from industrial pollution (although the actual cause was not immediately clear), on the one hand, and having grown up in a semirural, heavily forested and mountainous region near the ocean, on the other. Environmental issues were therefore central to me from my earliest age, reinforced especially by my father, who had been in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. But as a youth, the Vietnam War and U.S. imperialism were overriding concerns. I participated in events at the time of the first Earth Day and the environmental moratorium introduced at that time, with which I strongly identified, but the environment of the Pacific Northwest seemed relatively good in those days. I felt that issues like pollution in the United States had to take a back seat as long as the Pentagon was dropping napalm on children in Vietnam.

I started thinking about ecological issues again when I was in graduate school in Toronto, in discussions with a friend of mine who claimed that not only some Marxists but also Marx himself could be considered anti-ecological. I could not understand that, since my reading of Marx was entirely different. In the environmental movement in the 1970s, many of the leading figures, like Barry Commoner, had been influenced by Marx’s ecological ideas. The monopoly capital tradition itself had been consistent in its opposition to economic and ecological waste. In fact, Harry Magdoff and Sweezy had first come out explicitly in favor of what we now call degrowth, that is, opposition to endless economic growth on environmental and social grounds, in MR as early as May 1974. This had influenced the development of neo-Marxist analysis within environmental sociology in the United States beginning in the mid-1970s and early ’80s, evident in the work of environmental theorists such as Charles H. Anderson, who raised the issue of ecological survival, and Allan Schnaiberg, who introduced the concept of the treadmill of production. In the 1980s and ’90s, however, a tradition of what has come to be called first-stage ecosocialism arose within the New Left, which blamed Marx’s alleged failure to address the environment for the weaknesses of socialist environmentalism, and which sought to merge Marxist political economy with mainstream Green theory, with its neo-Malthusian tendencies.

All of this was not entirely clear to me in the beginning, and I was still primarily focused on political economy. But when I took a position at the University of Oregon, I found that the ecological problem in the Pacific Northwest was much more severe than when I had left for Toronto about a decade before. The Columbia River was the most radioactive river on Earth; people were sitting in trees to protect old growth forests from being cut down; local groups were organising

against the widespread use of pesticides, including aerial spraying; and global crises had emerged with respect to species extinction, depletion of the ozone layer, and climate change. As a result, I turned to the environmental problem, recognising that these developments were all rooted in the political economy of capitalism and that a Marxist analysis needed to be developed. My first book on ecology, *The Vulnerable Planet* (1994), had many of the characteristics of first-stage ecosocialism. But, within a few years, I concluded that the ecological critique emanating from classical historical materialism, particularly the work of Marx himself, was theoretically/methodologically far beyond anything else, and my work began to focus on that foundational basis and how it could inform today's struggles.

FQ, MOP, and ML: In *Marx's Ecology*, you defend the existence of an ecological dimension to Marx's materialist thought, based on the notion of metabolic rift. How relevant today is this concept of Marx's? How did a network of authors sharing this theme come about?

JB: The retrieval and elaboration of Marx's metabolic rift analysis was developed first in my article "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift," published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in September 1999. *Marx's Ecology* was published a year later. Although *Marx's Ecology* was to be influential primarily due to its chapter on the metabolic rift, it was actually written to deal with a wider question: How did Marx develop such a penetrating ecological analysis in the first place; that is, what were the real foundations of Marx's ecological analysis? It could not be attributed simply to the influence of the agricultural chemistry of Justus von Liebig, who, while exploring some aspects of the problem in terms of the rupture in the soil nutrient cycle, and even employing the concept of metabolism, lacked the integration of socioeconomic and ecological aspects of the problem to be found in Marx.

I decided therefore that the answer to the question of the origins of Marx's ecological thought was to be sought in the development of his materialism, which could not be seen simply in economic terms, as had become customary in Western Marxism. This took me back to his doctoral thesis on Epicurus, the ancient materialist philosopher, and then I traced the materialist thread as it evolved in Marx's analysis. This, then, formed the basis for *Marx's Ecology*.

The metabolic rift itself was explained in terms of the break in the soil nutrient cycle, and thus the soil metabolism, brought on by the shipment of food and fibre hundreds and thousands of miles to the new industrial cities of capitalism where the population increasingly resided. The soil nutrients in the food and fibre polluted the cities rather than returning to the soil. This led to what Marx in *Capital* called the "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism." Marx's ecological analysis, in fact, relied on three concepts: the universal metabolism of nature, the social metabolism, and the metabolic rift. The social metabolism was the labor and production process itself looked at from the standpoint of its natural-reproductive aspects. The alienated social metabolism of capitalism came into direct conflict with the universal metabolism of nature, giving rise to a metabolic rift.

This analysis is relevant today because systems ecology in general was constructed on these foundations of metabolic relationships, including ecosystem theory, the notion of biosphere, and the current concept of the Earth System. Today, in the analysis of the planetary ecological crisis, scientists talk about the "anthropogenic rift" in the biophysical cycles of the planet and the disruption of the Earth System metabolism. What makes Marx's treatment especially significant in this context, though, is that it sees the political economy of capital accumulation and the metabolic rift in the human-social relation to the environment as a single issue, two sides of the same coin.

With respect to how the network of scholars working on the metabolic rift came about, I think there were a number of crucial moments. First, the core analysis arose when I was working closely with Paul Burkett, the author of *Marx and Nature*. We more or less decided on a division of labor where he would focus on the ecological value-form analysis in Marx's theory and I would address the history, natural science, and materialist philosophy. Hence, *Marx and Nature* and "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift" were both published in 1999, and *Marx's Ecology* in 2000, all contributing to a single coordinated project. Fred Magdoff, an ecologist (soil scientist) and political economist closely associated with *Monthly Review*, also played a singular formative role in the development of these ideas at the time.

The second moment was the arrival of both Brett Clark and Richard York at the University of Oregon. Clark had arrived at the university as a graduate student while I was still working on *Marx's Ecology*, and was from that point on a major collaborator. York was hired as a professor in sociology specialising on the environment soon after *Marx's Ecology* was published, bringing his talents in theory, methodology, and statistics. He was the first author of an important article, "Footprints on the Earth" in the *American Sociological Review* in 2003, that operationalised the metabolic rift concept. Clark and York were to combine their efforts to apply the metabolic rift theory to climate change in a new analysis of the carbon metabolism introduced in 2005 in an article for the journal *Theory and Society*. This was incorporated into the book that the three of us did together on *The Ecological Rift* in 2010.

Another early student at the University of Oregon in environmental sociology was Jason W. Moore, who worked closely with me starting as an undergraduate, when my main focus was *The Vulnerable Planet*, and later taking my key graduate course in environmental sociology in the context of the metabolic rift discussions. Moore made his specialty, in the first phase of his thought, the relation between world-systems theory and the metabolic rift, though his later *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015) rejected the concept as dualist.

Other University of Oregon students in this period included Hannah Holleman, who was to write *Dust Bowls of Empire* (2018), and Stefano Longo and Rebecca Clausen, who, together with Clark, wrote *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* (2015). Mauricio Betancourt has done stunning work on Cuba, agroecology, and the metabolic rift, comparing Cuba's achievements in this respect to the rest of Latin America.

The third moment consisted of major new contributions not emanating from the University of Oregon—as in the case of Del Weston's *Political Economy of Global Warming* (2014), Ian Angus's *Facing the Anthropocene* (2016), Andreas Malm's closely related work on *Fossil Capital* (2016), Kohei Saito's *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* (2017), and Brian Napoletano's analysis of Henri Lefebvre and the metabolic rift—part of a continuing collaborative project with me, Clark, and Pedro Urquijo. Rob Wallace in *Dead Epidemiologists* (2020) and Sean Creaven in *Contagion Capitalism* (2024) have applied the concept to COVID-19 and other pandemics. Eamonn Slater has done work on Irish metabolic rifts. Michael Friedman has explored the relation of the metabolic rift to the microbiome. Carles Soriano, volcanologist and geologist, connected the metabolic rift to the Geological Time Scale in his introduction of the notion of the Capitalian Age. In many ways, the concept has developed to such an extent globally, both in theory and in the practice of environmental movements, that it is now difficult to track. For example, major new work has appeared in China on ecological Marxism engaging with these ideas.

FQ, MOP, and ML: Today, the ecological problem has become a fundamental issue in public debate. There are, however, attempts to propose a "market ecology," as if it were possible to face the ecological crisis without questioning the very pillars of current capitalist society. How do you see this process?

JBf: There are, of course, numerous forms of denialism that are intended to defend the capitalist system in this context and pull the wool over the eyes of the population. A good way of thinking of this is Naomi Klein's chapter "The Right Is Right" in her *This Changes Everything*. Klein was very clear that if you scrape away the surface of right-wing denial of climate change, what you find is a fairly realistic recognition (and fear) on their part that to solve the problem requires the transcendence of the current political-economic regime of capitalism, which is why they are so committed to denying climate change altogether. Yet, Klein's argument was not directed so much at the right-wing denialists as at the mainstream liberal tradition, which she suggested was even more dangerously immersed in its own naïve form of denialism. Although formally acknowledging the reality of climate change, the mainstream liberal tradition advocated a utopian reformism under the delusion that the whole problem could be solved by the capitalist market and growth-oriented technology with a little help from the state. That is, the "solution" was to come from the very forces, in the capitalist mode, that had created the carbon rift in the first place. Most such analyses, moreover, isolate the various ecological crises from each other, and do not focus on the crossing of multiple planetary boundaries at the same time. Metabolic rift theory cuts through these illusions, and focuses on the interrelationship between capital accumulation and ecological crisis.

FQ, MOP, and ML: In your 2022 book, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene*, the alternative outlined in the subtitle is between "ecological ruin" or "ecological revolution." What would this "ecological revolution" be?

JBf: In dealing with the soil crisis in nineteenth-century colonial Ireland, Marx spoke of "ruin or revolution." The notion of ecological ruin or ecological revolution is the application of this perspective derived from metabolic rift theory to our own period of planetary peril. The habitability crisis of humanity due to the anthropogenic rift in the Earth System metabolism, which is endangering the lives of all people on the planet on a rapidly increasing scale, is a product of the system of capital accumulation. The ecological revolution that is necessary to counter the ecological ruin facing humanity as a whole must reverse this by immediately going against the logic of capital and eventually transcending the capital system. It therefore requires a social revolution, but of a wider form than in the past, one which necessarily engages with both the social and ecological aspects of production. As István Mészáros argued, drawing on Marx's *Grundrisse*, it is necessary to address the entire realm of social-metabolic reproduction, accounting for the first time for the full dimensions of revolutionary change. This means redefining the idea of the transition to socialism in the twenty-first century, which needs to focus on communal exchange, the structure of human needs, and the social relation to nature as well as production as such. I am very impressed by the Venezuelan communes, which constitute one model for such a shift in social relations.

FQ, MOP, and ML: How did the process of transforming *Monthly Review* into the main eco-Marxist magazine in the United States happen?

JBf: *Monthly Review* always had a deep concern with environmental issues. For decades in the 1950s and '60s, Scott Nearing, one of the leading socialist environmentalists in the United States, associated with the back to the land movement, had a monthly column in the magazine. When Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published, Nearing wrote a very strong, positive, far-reaching review. MR's approach to the environment for many years was inspired by the work of Commoner. The whole monopoly capital tradition was immensely critical from the beginning of economic and ecological waste. As I have already indicated, beginning a half-century ago, Magdoff and Sweezy insisted that the endless growth dynamic of capitalism rooted in the accumulation process needed to be reversed. In terms of what was necessary economically and ecologically—though not with respect to the process of change or its social-revolutionary

aspects—MR's view was similar in some ways to that of Herman Daly, with whom I was eventually to be on very friendly terms. Daly's writings on a steady-state economy were deeply influenced by Marx, though he was himself far from being a Marxist.

The early work in MR in this respect in the 1970s, as noted, helped launch Marxist contributions to environmental sociology. A key aspect of MR in this regard was its close connection to natural science, and especially to figures like Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, as well as David Himmelstein and Steffie Woolhandler. In July–August 1986, a special issue of the magazine was published entitled *Science, Technology and Capitalism*, which included all of these authors as well as others such as Steven Rose and Nancy Krieger. The dominant emphasis was on ecological issues, and it represented something of a turning point for the magazine. In 1989, Sweezy published his two key articles, "Capitalism and the Environment" and "Socialism and Ecology," in MR. A few years later, I published *The Vulnerable Planet* with Monthly Review Press.

But MR remained throughout the twentieth century predominantly a political-economic publication, and the environment, though recognised as essential, was for years outside of the central purview of the magazine. When I became coeditor in 2000, my first task was to strengthen the economic critique and the critique of imperialism, both of which had become somewhat dormant as Magdoff and Sweezy aged and were not able to contribute as before. Since the United States was declaring a "War on Terrorism" without limits, while financialization was growing apace, our focus in the opening years of this century was largely on imperialism and the developing economic malaise.

There were also at that time other venues in Marxist ecology in the United States that were vital in terms of the development of ecosocialism, which made it unnecessary for MR to devote itself centrally to the topic. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (CNS) was founded in 1988 by James O'Connor. I was on the editorial board, along with Burkett, Moore, Victor Wallis, and others associated with MR. I was, however, removed from the board without notice in 1998, since the work I was then doing on Marx and ecology was seen as in opposition to what was the main direction of CNS. When Marx's Ecology was published, five pieces were printed in CNS, all by editorial board members (and future editorial board members), strongly condemning the book and the entire approach. Burkett and Moore both wrote responses to these attacks and then resigned from the editorial board on principle.

Meanwhile, in 1996, John Jermier and I had started the academic journal *Organization and Environment* published by Sage, aimed at bringing together the radical *Organization and Natural Environment* (ONE) section of the Academy of Management and the Environmental Sociology section of the American Sociological Association, constituting the two main institutional bases of the journal. *Organization and Environment* was very successful, particularly in boosting the professional status of Marxist environmental sociology, bringing out an amazing set of innovative articles. It nurtured a lot of younger scholars. I stepped down as coeditor of *Organization and Environment* not long after becoming coeditor of MR in 2000, and York eventually replaced me as coeditor with Jermier. After a few years, Sage, which owned the journal, decided to give it to an establishment European-based business/management group, despite wide opposition among environmental sociologists in the United States.

As a result of all of these developments, there was a tendency to turn to MR more and more as an outlet for ecosocialism, and particularly for the emerging second-stage ecosocialism, which drew its foundations from classical historical materialism. At the same time, with the planetary crisis accelerating, ever greater attention to the environment was necessary, to such an extent that it partially displaced MR's traditional focus on economic crises. An important

development was the founding and editing of the website Climate and Capitalism by Angus, which is independent of—but closely associated with—MR.

FQ, MOP, and ML: Some episodes in recent Brazilian history, such as the dismantling of social-neoliberal policy and the “neo-developmental” project of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (the Workers’ Party) and Lula, the rise of right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro, the reprimarisation of the economy, and the deepening environmental degradation of all our biomes, seem to confirm the colonial place that Brazil occupies in the current international division of labor and its role as a supplier of commodities linked to agribusiness and mineral extraction. How could your theorisation about ecological imperialism help us think about this issue?

JB: Theorisation of ecological imperialism has always been difficult, since everything with respect to exchange is rendered in terms of labor, price, and money, which are the bases of commensurability in economic terms, but that leaves out natural-material use values. Although ecological imperialism has always existed, as was quite clearly evoked in Eduardo Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America*, the problem has been to develop a systematic analysis, since one is dealing with incommensurables. The overall nature of the problem, though, is clear. Just as economic imperialism is, as Marx explained, a case of one country getting more labor for less in the exchange process, so ecological imperialism is a case of one country getting more nature/resources/energy for less.

There are three ways we have approached this in metabolic rift theory. Following Marx (and also Galeano) we took the guano trade, which was directly tied to the rift in the soil metabolism in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, as a historical case study on how ecological imperialism works. There is an enormous amount of information on this trade and how it affected both accumulation and the soil in Europe, as well as dependency and debt in Peru (given that the Chincha Islands were the most important source of guano). Clark and I have done a number of studies on this over the years. It was also tied into racism, since the workers on the Chincha Islands digging the guano were mostly Chinese indentured labourers, or what British colonialism designated as “coolies,” a form of slave labor, even though these were formally indentured workers. According to the *Times* of London in the late nineteenth century, there was no record of a single guano digger on the Chinca Islands ever surviving; that is, a hundred percent of the workers seem to have died on the job. The most recent work in the metabolic rift tradition on the nineteenth-century guano trade is a dissertation done at the University of Oregon by Betancourt, which I believe is slated to be published by Routledge in a book series on Marxism edited by Marcello Musto. Betancourt examined archives in France, England, and Peru, and was able to uncover the complex relations of ecological imperialism in this context. What still has to be done, in this respect—though his work comes closest—is a determination of what the net ecological loss was to Peru and the net ecological gain to England, and how this promoted accumulation in the latter and dependency in the former. The guano trade shifted into the nitrates trade and the War of the Pacific in Latin America and other developments, figuring centrally in Andre Gunder Frank’s study *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. Historically, this is a rich mine for understanding the logic of ecological imperialism.

Another approach to ecological imperialism is one directed at measuring the actual ecological losses at every level. The key work in this respect was done by Howard Odum, the pioneering systems ecologist, who constructed a theory of ecological imperialism capable of getting at the historical transfers of embodied energy or emergy (spelled with an m). Odum’s approach also drew on Marxian political economy. In the great battle in the key journal *Ecological Economics*, however, Odum and other natural scientists were driven out by Robert Constanza, then editor of the journal, who instead adopted the approach of simply valuing nature in price terms, developing the framework that is now the basis of

the whole financialization of nature pursued currently by international capital. Odum's analysis was logically and empirically tight, but required funding to carry out the statistical studies, since it depended on raw data, and it was clearly frozen out of governmental and private support. There are small groups still working at developing this approach. Holleman and I wrote an article on ecological imperialism and the synthesis of Marx and Odum in this area for *The Journal of Peasant Studies* in 2014. Essentially, the Odum approach allows us to understand theoretically how ecological imperialism relies on the expropriation of the "free environment," with the poorer nations with abundant natural resources being systematically robbed in the exchange process. It has the potential of showing the full dimensions of the problem. This is another basis from which to critique the capitalist notion of comparative advantage in trade, which has been used for centuries to justify unequal trade.

A third approach lies in the critique of colonial/imperial extractivism as in the work of Uruguayan theorist Eduardo Gudynas. Here the issue is the development of a mode of expropriation in colonial/imperial economies that is directly at odds with forms of sustainable human development. I have written on this in my book *The Dialectics of Ecology*.

Brazil's economy, despite its progress in industrialisation at various points, is preeminently an extractivist economy that is exploited by foreign capital and agribusiness in a neocolonial, neo-imperial context. In 2019, the share of primary commodities in Brazilian merchandise export trade was 67 percent. Brazil is a major target for the financialization of nature, a phenomenon that has grown by leaps and bounds over the last decade or so, partly under the cover of so-called capitalist environmentalism. Brazil's future—its role in the future of planetary ecology, since the Amazon is crucial—lies in becoming a more autocentric economy, where the natural domain is not simply robbed at the behest of foreign countries, and where processes of sustainable human development can be pursued. But this requires a strong movement toward socialism. For me, one of the major sources of inspiration has been the Landless Workers' Movement (MST).

As for fascism, it is growing everywhere right now due to the economic stagnation of the core capitalist countries and the weakening of the imperialist world system led by the United States. Under these circumstances, the already compromised structures of "liberal democracy" are shifting from neoliberalism (attached to financialization) to neofascism. Today there is even a neoliberal-neofascist alliance, which is partially disguised by a kind of battle of brothers. Neofascism takes different forms in the Global North, as opposed to the Global South, where, as Marx said, capital operates more nakedly in a colonial/imperial context. Bolsonaro was supported by a whole imperialist system that had its sights on the open veins of Brazil.

There are distinct differences, as Samir Amin explained, between fascist movements in the Global North and South. But what is clear is that they always involve big capital mobilising the petty bourgeoisie/lower-middle class on the basis of reactionary and dangerous ideologies normally entrenched in that sector of society. Most approaches to fascism on the left today are rooted purely in ideological analysis, derived not from Marxism but from liberalism, and approach the question as if fascism fell from the sky. However, the first critiques of classical fascism, which were at one time preeminent, came out of Marxism, and it was understood as primarily a class phenomenon. Only by viewing it in this way, I believe, can one effectively combat it. I wrote about some of this in my book *Trump in the White House* (2017).

FQ, MOP, and ML: The socio-metabolic system of capital has sought to exert enormous control over vulnerable populations—the Indigenous, quilombolas, landless people, and precarious workers in the countryside and cities. The metabolic rupture of potential revolutionary subjects seems to be complete. How do you see a possible way out of this process?

JBf: Marx famously wrote in *Capital* shortly after the U.S. Civil War that “Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.” The racial division of labor, Marx argued, would have to be eliminated if labor hoped to advance. If capital sought an accumulation strategy aimed at dividing the working class and marginalised communities through the creation of internal hierarchies and divisions that set them against each other on racist, nationalist, sexist, and other grounds, the role of the movement toward socialism was to create unity among the oppressed by always preferentially backing the causes of those most oppressed. There is in truth no other way, and any deviation from this principle can prove fatal. Exclusion of sections of the population and a policy of divide and conquer are the means that capital has utilised to expand its power; inclusion on the basis of a society of equals is the means of struggle of those who resist the power of capital.

My view is that it was always a mistake to see the proletariat exclusively in narrow economic or industrial terms. In fact, Marx and Frederick Engels’s view of the proletariat was much broader, taking into account the whole environment of the working class, as reflected in Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England*. Objectively, conditions are moving back toward a broader materialist basis and a wider concept of the proletariat. Here the proletariat or working class is no longer confined to the limited economic terms in which we have come to see it, but finds its objective basis also in conditions of urban growth, housing, pollution, waste, food quality and availability, land and property rights, agriculture, mining, community health, the social reproduction of the family, household labor, subsistence production, and so on. It is mainly the all-pervasive environmental crisis that is pushing us in this direction, as can be seen most clearly in the context of the Global South. This conforms to the way Marx and Engels saw working-class conditions and struggles as a battle first and foremost against what Engels called “social murder.”

Insofar as it is revolutionary, the working class has always taken the wider form of an environmental proletariat. Viewing things in this way—where, for example, both “land and bread,” that is, both means of production (including the earth itself) and human sustenance, are crucial—tends to dissolve many of the distinctions between proletarian workers, peasants, and the Indigenous. More and more we are entering what will be a common struggle as the crossing of planetary boundaries places us in similar conditions of ruin or revolution. Not only are these objective conditions forging the basis of greater unity among “the wretched of the earth” (although there are, of course, all sorts of contradictions and countertendencies) but the division between world exterminist capital and the world environmental proletariat will become more apparent as survival becomes a predominant concern for the great majority. Sustainable human development will inevitably become the battle cry of the oppressed, particularly among the young.

FQ, MOP, and ML: What is your message to the ecological left in Brazil?

JBf: There are two main ecological strategies that have emerged on the left worldwide. One of these is planned degrowth, which mainly relates to the financially wealthy imperial countries that are overdeveloped in ecological terms and need to degrow significantly if humanity is to survive. At present, if the whole world were to have the per capita ecological consumption of the United States, we would need three or four planet Earths. It is important to understand that degrowth as such is mainly an issue in a direct sense for the Global North. Worldwide, what is needed is a process of contraction and convergence where the richest, most exorbitant, most economically and ecologically wasteful countries reverse their current path of environmental degradation, while many of the poorest countries, which still need economic development, are able to pursue this but in more sustainable forms than in the past. This can be seen quite clearly in terms of energy use, where a country like the United States uses sixty times as much energy per capita as Nepal. Brazil is in the middle in this context, with a consumption of primary energy per capita that is in the same range

as Italy, which is near what is seen as the global equilibrium. Brazil needs, of course, a contraction and conversion of its own, decreasing the enormous class differences in energy use. Most important is the protection of the Amazon and Brazil's overall environment both for the domestic population and all of humanity. This means establishing serious conservation, though on socialist, that is, people-oriented, terms, and thus fighting rampant extractivism. For me, a constant source of inspiration, as I have indicated, has been the MST in Brazil.

The other strategy developing on the left is marked by China's promotion of ecological civilisation (a notion that originated with Soviet environmentalists in the 1980s). This is a complicated issue because in China itself it has taken a form of ecological modernisation, given China's position as a middle-level transitional economy and Beijing's heavy emphasis on expansive development. China's economic trajectory of rapid economic growth and resource use on a constantly expanding scale obviously cannot be maintained for long in this century. There is also the issue of China's continued reliance on coal-fired plants. But Beijing currently seems to take ecological civilisation seriously as a measure of the transformation of social and environmental relations associated with the development of complete socialism. There is room for skepticism here, and there are all sorts of internal, including class, contradictions, but their remarkable achievements in manifold environmental areas are too great to be ignored, and provide a real basis for hope, since they go against the main tendency of capital.

These achievements have only been possible because China is a postrevolutionary society, which, although partly capitalist in its means, is seeking another, socialist path. The impetus for environmental change has been coming from massive movements from below as well as from the top of the Communist Party of China. The question is, then, could Brazil, led by ecosocialists, construct its own version of a revolutionary new ecological civilisation, transcending capitalism, altering current social-metabolic relations? This means a whole different kind of struggle, and a different revolutionary vernacular, than we have seen hitherto.

Is this utopian? It is not, I believe, if we see the problem today as one of ecosocialism or exterminism. Ecological civilisation, like planned degrowth, is clearly something that is incompatible with capitalism, and in this sense it can be seen as representing a possible ecological path forward for humanity, one closed off to the capitalist system.

Whatever solutions there are to the present planetary crisis must, in historical-materialist terms, arise from concrete social formations, on the basis of which the new revolutionary transformations will take place. What is common to all such strategies is a focus on a path to sustainable human development in which capital accumulation is no longer the determinant force in society. The very definition of socialism in the twenty-first century is that of a society of ecological sustainability and substantive equality. Here too we find the conditions for the maximisation of freedom in general.



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