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Capitalism in the Web of Life

Jason W. Moore

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Beyond Red and Green

Juliana Spahr

One of the more glorious moments in Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* is what he calls a "modest catalogue of early capitalism's transformations of land and labor, from the 1450s to the eve of the industrial revolution" (182). It is 27 points. It begins with the observation that it was a sort of environmental crisis, the sinking peat bogs, that freed up three-quarters of Holland's labor force to work outside of agriculture and led to the rise of the Dutch Republic. It lingers on the relationship between sugar and slavery, hopping from Madiera to São Tomé to Gulf of Guinea to Angola to the Congo. Moves back to the Dutch peat and its depletion and relates these to the clove trade as it next moves on to the relation between deforestation and shipbuilding and then the relation between shipbuilding and maritime protein and the relation of both these things to the search for furs and ends with the "Columbian exchange," that world-altering moment when diseases, animals, and crops moved between the Old and the New World (187). This is a very literal explanation of some parts of the "web of life" that define capitalism. How, as Moore argues in this book, "world-economies do not interact with world-ecologies; world-economies *are* world-ecologies" (197).

As evidence of how much this book is needed, an anecdote: I once attended a reading group on *Capitalism and Crisis*, and the person presenting on the environment and what role it might play in the much longed-for decline of capitalism said that there were Reds and there were Greens and she was always going to be a Red. As Moore mentions in an interview with Kamil Ahsan, he began his work to counter this standoff between the Reds and the Greens, or what he calls a "Green Arithmetic" (but really, Greens hardly deserve all the shame here): "When we've had an economic

or social crisis or any other kind of crisis, they all go into one box. Then we have an ecological crises — water or energy or the climate — that go into another box.”¹ As Moore realizes, Reds and Greens have a long history of pretending that they can ignore each other. And this willful avoidance has created a lot of misunderstandings. For years, the primary misunderstanding, one held by both Greens and Reds, was that Marx has little to nothing to say about the environment and its relationship to capitalism and that Marxism could talk about the law of value without noticing that value was somewhat determined by environmental factors, or what Moore calls “extra-human natures” (4). John Foster Bellamy in *Marx’s Ecology* provided a crucial correction to the first observation. Moore’s work relentlessly addresses the second.

Moore’s theoretical contribution, and it is major, is his insistence that value is determined by, and capitalism is dependent upon, what he calls the “Four Cheaps” (17). One of these is labor-power (which is where Marxist theory has tended to dwell). The others are food, energy, and raw materials. He argues that in order for accumulation to happen at least one of these Four Cheaps has to be cheap (and ideally more than one). His examples are wide-ranging and historical. He presents as an example the exceptional moment in which the Dutch Republic rose as a result of having “Cheap grain (from Poland), Cheap energy (from domestic peat), and Cheap timber (from Norway and the Baltic)” (92). He points to how the development of the assembly line relied on cheap steel, rubber, and oil. And he notices the centrality of agricultural revolutions to the making of capitalist centers. And this leads him to point again and again to how often environmental destruction leads to a new and amplified round of capitalist accumulation, as in the end of Dutch peat and the rising costs of wood let the British economy rise because they had cheap coal.

Moore is at his best in this book when he not only ranges across centuries but also ranges across numerous fields of thought, most notably laboring to overcome the divide between Marxist value theory and ecology noted above. *Capitalism in the Web of Life* has four sections — “From Dualism to Dialectics: History as if Nature Matters”; “Historical Capitalism, Historical Nature”; “Historical Nature and the Origins of Capital”; “The Rise and Demise of Cheap Nature” — and a conclusion. Inside these four sections are ten chapters. It is hard to summarize them. *Capitalism in the Web of Life* is dense and somewhat messy and non-developmental in its argumentation. The “modest catalogue” that I find so glorious, for instance, is buried in the middle of a vocabulary argument about how the term *anthropocene* should be replaced with *capitalocene*. Moore’s arguments for *capitalocene* are for sure correct: the term *anthropocene* risks focusing our attention on the human and how humans produce environmental consequences. And he argues in a sort of “not all humans” way that instead we should focus on the producer/product relation that constitutes capitalism. And then if we do this, we would shift from locating 1784 and the steam engine as a problem largely of particular technologies and instead recognize that the problem is the rise of capitalism as social relation “with its audacious strategies of global

conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization” after 1450 (172). This would allow us to escape a whole series of errors that haunt some aspects of Green Thought. Among them the idea that if we just shut down the steam engines and coal plants (or their contemporary equivalents) while leaving intact the inequalities and their “gendered and racialized cosmologies” upon which capitalism depends all will be well (172).

As I said, Moore is right in his description of the problem. And I get his focus here: “how one periodizes history fundamentally shapes the interpretation of events, and one’s choice of significant relations” (173). But to be honest, I am never convinced that arguing vocabulary with academics is worth it. Those devoted to the term *anthropocene* are probably not going to put it down anytime soon (too many careers have already been made from it). Or another way to put it, if the power of this book is how it sweeps a bunch of fields together in order to point out something crucial about capitalism, the limitation of this book is that at moments it is overly attentive to specific debates and vocabulary fights. Too much of this book is a defense of the various idiosyncratic terms that Moore wants to use to describe pre-existing ideas. And sometimes it feels as if he is even renaming his own terms, so while “web of life” is in the title, there is also a long defense and justification for the term “*oikeios*,” which best I can figure out is the same thing as “web of life,” a replacement for a Cartesian mode of thinking that at other moments he calls “Nature/Society dualism” and “a way of naming the creative, historical, and dialectical relation between, and also always within, human and extra-human natures.” Moore in his defense argues that “we must ‘name the system’” (4). But at moments I found the renaming and rhetorical style unnecessarily obfuscatory.

Moore ends *Capitalism in the Web of Life* with this observation: “The class struggle of the twenty-first century will turn, in no small measure, upon how one answers the questions: What is food? What is nature? What is valuable?” (287). And this observation is the one that matters; the rest is for tenure committees. It comes in the last chapter where Moore traces the impact of Cheap Food on the twentieth century’s capitalism. His goal here, he explains, is not to tell the history of food pricing but to describe our current predicament. As he has pointed out again and again in the nine prior chapters, historically each new capitalist regime has been made possible by a new model of agriculture. And he notices something similar in the twentieth century: how the 1970s saw the cheapest food in world history as a result of the Green Revolution (oh, if there was ever a term I could rename, it would be that one). And as the price of food has a direct impact on the value of labor-power, this allowed the rate of exploitation to rise. This last chapter describes a series of limitations — inefficient energy needs, toxic agricultural practices, super weeds, climate change — that suggest the end of Cheap Food.

I am with Moore that the end of Cheap Food is going to limit capitalism’s ability to meet its relentless need to expand. However, reading *Capitalism in the Web of Life* has, rather than completing that argument, made the question even more open for me.

Not in a bad way but in an “I have my eyes opened some more” way. I mean capitalism seems unsustainable at every turn and has for a long time. And yet every single one of my prior predictions that it was at its end have been dramatically wrong. Often the way that it seems to sustain itself, intensify even, against all common sense is blamed on Keynesian-style interventions. And it’s a big and frequently tedious debate about how much longer that can go on. I’ve long thought crisis theory underestimates what Moore might call the impact that extra-human resource depletion will eventually have on capitalism’s endless need to expand. But reading Moore’s long-ranging histories it becomes obvious how often extra-human resource depletion stimulates capitalism. Out with the Dutch peat, in with the English coal. One could argue that the impact of climate change is going to be a special stimulus package too. But as with the Keynesian-style interventions, it is unclear how much longer that can go on in the face of things like climate change.

Nonetheless, Moore is fairly confident that the end of Cheap Food means that the crisis cannot be deferred. That Cheap Food is big enough that when it fails, everything fails with it. Then he suggests “the end of Cheap Food may well be the end of modernity, and the start of something better” (290). Maybe yes. Maybe no. There is no reason for anyone to be sure about the something better part. What comes after capitalism is, of course, a big open question that gets relentlessly debated and these debates often split along utopic and dystopic lines. Many have theorized — even a number of devoted anti-capitalists — the possibility of a massive die-off. Moore is more utopic. He claims that food politics offer a glimpse of the future. When he gets there, in the last four pages of the last chapter, he quotes Rebecca Solnit’s “The Revolution Has Already Occurred” from *The Nation*. This is the article in which Solnit claims that community gardens are a sort of revolution. The article is muddy. She claims it is an anarchist sort of one and a direct democracy sort of one. But not just muddy, also so delusional in pursuit of the mollifying emotions of hope that it claims that a revolt could happen one first-world community garden at a time. It is almost shocking to see it quoted at such length at the end of Moore’s book because it felt as if he had been working against this sort of understanding from the beginning. Any understanding of a world-economy as a world-ecology would have to at least consider that as community gardens are part of the web of life, they too are at risk from toxic soil, super weeds, and climate change. Another way to put this: whatever sort of hope Moore wants to throw in at the end for some reason, the prior two hundred and some pages suggest something more complicated, and it is that something that is worth listening to with care.

Notes

1. Jason W. Moore and Kamil Ahsan, “Capitalism in the Web of Life: an Interview with Jason W. Moore,” *Viewpoint Magazine* (28 September, 2015). <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/09/28/capitalism-in-the-web-of-life-an-interview-with-jason-moore/>