

Historical Nature versus Nature in General: Capitalism in the Web of Life

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REVIEW ESSAY

Historical Nature versus Nature in General: *Capitalism in the Web of Life*

Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital, by Jason W. Moore, London, Verso, 2015, 336 pp., £13.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781781689028, £11.99 (ebook), ISBN: 9781781689042, 336 pp., £60.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781781689011

“We cannot solve our problems,” pointed out Albert Einstein, “with the same thinking we used to create them.” When it comes to commentary surrounding the climate crisis, this truism of Einstein’s only comes into greater relief. As we fail to overcome the thinking that created the crisis in the first place and perpetuate climate crisis through quick fixes that treat symptoms rather than causes to save our treasured ideologies from criticism, our hubris accelerates the tragedy of our condition. This hubris appears in the final analysis in the tendency to identify global warming with human nature, an approach that necessarily sweeps under the rug the historically specific economic and social relations of production that gave rise to it, as well as the thinking that produced those relations. Thus let off the hook, the thinking that made global warming our patrimony to the future continues to dominate our destiny.

Enter *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Patently aware of the above issues, it reveals an awareness that informs its approach to tackling the origins of global warming and the social relations and historical process responsible. Author Jason W. Moore begins by examining the historical development of capitalist modes of production, first in Europe and then in the rest of the world as capitalism was exported and imposed globally through colonialism and imperialism. Moore uses the examination of this history as an opportunity to establish context for further exploration of the relationship between capitalist social and economic relations as the defining basis of production and distribution on the one hand, and the consequences of production carried out on this basis for the natural environment on the other. For reasons that will become apparent, this historical grounding immediately sets *Web of Life* apart from and superior to approaches that treat global warming as a product of the industrial revolution.

Moore rails against examining the nature of global warming on the basis of an unspoken, unacknowledged and uncritically accepted assumption that humanity and society exist prior to and outside of nature. Taking the opposite approach, he argues that society and nature are one and the same, part of a “double internality” of society-in-nature and nature-in-society that, he suggests, helps to explain the “metabolic rift” responsible for producing the irrational outcome of global

warming. This concept of the double internality is the basis for the eponymous web of life, that Moore in this instance gives the moniker of the *oikeios*—short-hand apparently for *oikeios topos*, a term coined by Greek botanist Theophrastus meaning “favourable place” (35). The favourable place in this instance is one in which society and nature are understood as a unitary whole; the *oikeios* is the “way of naming the creative, historical and dialectical relation in, between and also always within, human and extra human natures.”

The manifold projects and processes of humanity-in-nature—including imperialisms and anti-imperialism, class struggles from above and below, capital accumulation in its booms and crises—are always products of the *oikeios*, even as they create new relations of production and power within it. (35)

This concept of the *oikeios* is just one of the neologisms Moore introduces in the process of rising above the thinking that gave rise to global warming; for some readers, this may initially represent a challenge. Anyone who has ever tried to grapple with the first volume of *Capital*, for example, will recall the numerous new terms contained in it: *value form*, *surplus value*, *primitive accumulation* and *metabolism*. But just as in the case of *Capital*, we are finding out what it means to meaningfully innovate beyond the thinking that created the problem, and doing so demands names to identify new concepts. In this sense, the reader is treated to something not very common these days: bold thinking that makes a direct challenge to cognitive biases in favour of the known.

Given that this is the case, *Web of Life* as a work of ecological thought is not much far removed from *Capital* in terms of the ground it breaks and thus of its broader significance. Where the thinking that produced the problem of global warming and the prior assumptions woven into it are concerned, the neologisms, as it turns out, are vital to conceptualizing meaningful responses. Indeed, the great strength of *Web of Life* is its capacity to recognize these prior assumptions as such, and additionally to identify them as the binary thinking underpinning the historical origins of global warming. This is particularly significant if we consider global warming as a phenomenon whose onset can be attributed to blame-shifting and moral disengagement, especially where the latter offers the possibility of a situation where “moral self-censure can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct” (Bandura 1999). The value of this to a mode of production based on private appropriation of benefits and socialization of costs has been paramount. Binary thinking, as it turns out, made it possible to objectify and exploit the land, flora and fauna along with people as things whose value is defined purely in terms of their exploitability.

To this end, Moore points to the existence of a “Society versus Nature” binary, or what he terms a “Cartesian binary” (after the mind–body dualism proposed by Descartes). It is this Cartesian binary of Society versus Nature, Moore argues, that can be seen at work throughout the prehistory of capitalism, the enabling device at the core of the self-serving ideologies that European elites used to rationalize their colonial and imperial policies. The mythologies based on this Society/Nature binary, he contends, constructed a false division between the European Self and the colonized Other against whom a double standard could be

invoked—one that glorified theft of continents, but criminalized the theft of food and blankets by the hungry and starving. This double standard was the same one that enabled Europeans to ideologically reconstruct their usurpation of colonial territories as a service to those being usurped: painting their indigenous victims as primitives and savages provided Europeans with a pretext to do them the dubious favour of bringing them what they congratulated themselves was civilization.

Though Moore does not mention it specifically, a challenge to this binary is also evident in the work of feminist Silvia Federici, whose study of the European witch hunts as midwife of the industrial revolution draws practically identical conclusions, in so doing providing another very relevant piece of research for *Web of Life* to dovetail with in quite spectacular fashion (Federici 2005). Naomi Klein has also recently made similar observations in her Edward Saïd Memorial Lecture, where she connects on the one hand the process of “Othering” Saïd wrote about as an ideological tool of oppression and blame-shifting in the context of colonialism and imperialism, and on the other the willingness of those responsible for global warming to palm off responsibility for addressing the problem onto future generations (Klein 2016). Further developments such as these notwithstanding, the Society/Nature binary, Moore argues, is also the basis for what he calls the “double internality” of productive life (“society-in-nature” and “nature-in-society”) as it exists in reality. This he juxtaposes with the idea of society alienated from its surroundings as a divisible entity existing prior to nature.

The notion that social relations (humans without nature) can be analysed separately from ecological relations (nature without humans) is the ontological counterpoint to the real and concrete separation of the direct producers from the means of production. From this perspective, revolutions in ideas of nature and their allied scientific practices are closely bound to great waves of primitive accumulation, from early modernity’s Scientific Revolutions to neo-liberalism’s genomic revolutions. (19)

Thus, the assumption that human society exists prior to nature, Moore argues, accommodates all the objectification, measurement and quantification of the alienated Other that from a historical point of view has enabled the wholesale exploitation of natural resources without the least regard for the consequences, as if the world were an infinite resource and infinite garbage dump. It is precisely the capacity to objectify, measure and quantify the web of life in its innumerable manifestations enabled by the Society/Nature binary, this argument suggests, that has formed the foundation for the above-mentioned impulse, typical of the sociopath who only sees the world relative to themselves and others as extensions of their will, to reduce women, workers and the flora and fauna as well as the Earth itself to the level of objects valued for their exploitability.

Graham Sharp has criticized Moore on the grounds that he “seems to be arguing that the Green Left ... is suffering from this dualism,” arguing instead that “in the last 20 years or so most progressive green-minded people, certainly in this country, feel that humans are very much part of nature” (Watson et al. 2016, 105). This response, however, in addition to relying on subjective impressions for substantiation, seems to miss Moore’s point, which is the same

as has been made by feminist analyses of the intersectional relationship between gender binaries and various forms of patriarchal and class oppression. The issue is systemic analysis. The roundtable from which this criticism arose has also expressed other concerns about the double internality, not least of which being the objection that people need nature whereas nature does not need humans (Watson et al. 2016). As an attempt at meaningful critique this turns on the same dualism Moore is critiquing in the first place, belying at the same moment claims from Sharp that “progressive green-minded people, certainly in this country, feel that humans are very much part of nature.” If nature doesn’t need humans, and humans are part of nature, does that mean that, as humans, we don’t need ourselves? It also fails to account for the question of the thinking that produced the problem; one inclined to question dualisms might conclude that the rest of nature needs us to give a shit about not reproducing what we are trying to overcome.

Opting for a consistent approach, Moore rejects the mythology attached to the Industrial Revolution as the starting point for the social and environmental consequences of capitalist social relations, deferring instead to research from luminaries like Immanuel Wallerstein and Robert Brenner indicating that, rather than being the beginning of a process, the Industrial Revolution was the end of one. The process in question in this instance was that of “primitive accumulation” that led to the domination of the capitalist mode of production per se (while, as Federici has noted, closing off alternative paths of development through persecution of dissenters through such means as the European Witch Hunts, which ran for three centuries and primarily targeted women from amongst the subject classes as a form of divide and conquer).

Observations of this kind also dovetail with valuable new research from Perelman (2000) exploring the role of primitive accumulation in the imposition of capitalist relations of production. “To locate the origins of the modern world with the rise of capitalist civilization after 1450, with its audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification and relentless rationalization,” Moore writes,

is to prioritize the relations of power, capital and nature that rendered fossil capitalism so deadly in the first place. Shut down a coal plant, and you can slow global warming for a day; shut down the relations that made the coal plant, and you can stop it for good. (174)

Part of this project, he argues, involves looking at the historical origins of capitalism in a way that treats coming to terms with the climate crisis as a historically specific project; in this Moore reveals not only the shortcomings of traditional liberal approaches to environmental politics, but also some of the particular shortcomings of traditional socialist politics. This is particularly true when Moore elaborates what he describes as the regime of “Cheap Natures” (Cheap Food, Cheap Labour-Power, Cheap Energy and Cheap Raw Materials) as necessary components of this process of primitive accumulation, highlighting the fact that “capitalism depends on a repertoire of strategies for appropriating the unpaid work/energy of humans and the rest of nature outside of the commodity system.” This is to say that “the law of value represents a determination of

socially-necessary labor-time, which occurs simultaneously through organizational and technical innovation and through strategies of appropriating the unpaid work/energy of ‘women, nature and colonies’” (54).

Absent massive streams of unpaid work/energy from the rest of nature—including that delivered by women—the costs of production would rise, and accumulation would slow. Every act of exploitation (of commodified labour power) therefore depends on an even greater act of appropriation (of unpaid work/energy. Wage workers are exploited, everyone else, human and extra-human, is appropriated. (54)

The strengths of this approach are immediately obvious; in drawing parallels between the unpaid work of women and the unpaid work of nature in turning long-dead remains from the days of the dinosaurs into black heroin for the helpless junkies of the fossil fuel industry, Moore’s concept of Cheap Natures unites historical critiques of capitalism—encompassing centuries of primitive accumulation as it was manifested in the enclosure movement, the exploitation and appropriation of raw materials and slaves from colonies in the Americas, Asia and Africa, and the imposition of patriarchy through the social engineering function of the witch hunts (Perelman 2000; Federici 2005)—with eco-feminist critiques of the intersectionality of appropriations, helping tie both into the broader critique of the empire of capital. Moore’s commentary on the significance of capitalist appropriation of unpaid labour, in addition to demonstrating the shortcomings of workerist preoccupation with the labour theory of value as the sole means of exploitation and profit, establishes an entirely new tier of theory that accounts for paid and unpaid labour in the social reproduction of capital.

Such insights are invaluable as a first line of intellectual self-defense from a vantage point cognizant of and conversant in Einstein’s truism and problems and solutions. Conditioned by a society constructed on the thinking that created the problem, we find ourselves interwoven into the fabric of the web of life, our very subjectivity part of the society-in-nature dialectic that impacts on the world while being impacted on it in turn. In observing the problem, we “influence” it by bringing in our ideological baggage, confusing our role in reflecting or directing events and conditions pertaining to the thinking associated with the climate crisis as convenience and necessity dictate. We are the cause and cure of the same problem. That this is a defining characteristic of the problem, and not a minor part of what needs to be overcome to be able to effectively deal with the climate crisis, are givens. That it is also a part to one degree or another of responses that fail to adequately define the problem and thus fall prey to the great shortcoming of assuming to have the answers without knowing what the question is.

Traditional liberal environmental politics that treat “the environment” as part of a shopping list of sexy causes that exist in isolation from one another have nothing to say on this count. Neither do they have anything to say about the intersectionality of relationships responsible for the great variety of morbid symptoms associated with the crisis Gramsci identified as arising from the fact that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” They cannot account for the drive to

exploit dirtier forms of fuel and resort to more violent and authoritarian means of gaining access to dwindling resources tendency born of the general tendency of the general rate of profit to fall, as the free lunches in the form of Cheap Natures capitalism has always relied on for its development dwindle and the natural environment becomes increasingly toxic with pollution. “All limits,” as Moore points out, “are historically constituted through the *oikeios*” (162).


In serving to highlight factors such as this, *Web of Life* takes the vastly more difficult option of treating the historically specific productive relations associated with the rise of capitalism, in all its colonialist, imperialist and now corporatist and neoliberal splendor, rejecting as shallow and misanthropic the approach that locates the source of the environmental crisis in human nature, in the *anthropos*. By establishing the alternative framework embodied in the unifying *oikeios*, the eponymous web of life, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* possible to recognize global warming as a problem of social relations built on a historically specific ideological superstructure, and in so doing also to rise above the thinking upon which such relations are based (“Capitalism’s great problem is *historical* nature, not ‘nature in general’”) (151). Armed with such an understanding, one can envisage both a reality outside of it and a future beyond it—one of new, saner, more just and more meaningful ways of thinking and acting.

For all who look to such a future, and who care about the fate of the planet, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* makes for a vastly more challenging work than they will be accustomed to. In managing to avoid the trap of reproducing the thinking that created the problem, however, it also makes for an infinitely more insightful and rewarding one.

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