



Telling Capitalist World-Ecology in the History of Commodities

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REVIEW ESSAY

Telling Capitalist World-Ecology in the History of Commodities

Beckert, Sven, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. London and New York, Zed, 2013. Print.

Weis, Tony, *The Ecological Footprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. Print.

Post-Cartesian research in the social sciences, research which hopes to overcome the separation between “people” and “nature” in favor of world-ecological views of human existence, has greatly enhanced our critique of capitalism. Much of history, and of historical theory, is made to tell a story which (as Jason W. Moore puts it) puts society in one box and nature in another. Post-Cartesian research, by contrast, tells the story of the “Capitalocene,” that era of natural history dominated by capitalism. Indeed the story of the Capitalocene is the story of the rich few and the appropriated working class, as well as the story of depletion and pollution caused by capitalist industry. The question for post-Cartesian theory is how the two stories are interconnected.

The old critique of capitalism, relying on a simplified version of the theory of surplus value, suggested a remedy in social democracy. If the main problem to be advertised about capitalism was that it made the rich richer and the masses poorer, a robust welfare state would make the system more just and equitable. Even though under social democracy there was still a contradictory capitalism in charge, living conditions for the working class in the core nations appear nonetheless to have improved between, say, 1933 and 1973. It was not until the 1960s, however, that increased public attention began to be paid to the costs to nature, both internal and external nature, which participation in capitalism incurred.

Marxist ecology (see specifically Foster’s (2000) book *Marx’s Ecology*) criticized capitalism’s relations to “external nature” through theories of “metabolic rift,” suggesting that capitalist metabolism was of a “different nature” to that of the rest of nature. But theories which separate capitalism from nature are of limited use in understanding why capitalism simplifies its environment and thus contributes to its own eventual “terminal crisis” (see Moore 2015). Post-Cartesian research is thus capable of revealing ecological (and thus also economic/social) crisis as the product of capitalism’s everyday workings, as it consumes everything in its lust for “cheap natures” (see Moore 2014). One way of strengthening post-Cartesian research is to write, and to engage, world-ecological

histories of commodities. It is easy to identify such works: they pick a commodity, for instance coal (see e.g. Freese's (2004) *Coal: A Human History*), and then look at its ecological/social interactions before and during the Capitalocene. Here I have chosen to review two examples of this nonfiction genre: Tony Weis' *The Ecological Hoofprint*, which examines meat, and Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*, which does the same for cotton.

In the post-Cartesian reckoning of history, capitalist innovation and capitalist development reorder nature while being themselves socio-ecological phenomena; they do not "escape nature" as advertised. A history of commodities would ideally reveal the interaction between commodity-creation-in-nature and ecological-process-on-industrial-Earth. Ultimately such a historical reckoning should hope to reveal the mystery of how capitalism depletes society/nature and show why twenty-first-century technology will not be able to save capitalism. The main item of scrutiny, with the history of commodities and with the post-Cartesian reckoning of history, is the capitalist system's constant need to expand.

Perhaps the "ur-text" of the socio-ecological "history of commodities" in this regard is Braudel's (1982) *The Structures of Everyday Life*, the first volume of his *Civilization and Capitalism* series. (Earlier books such as Aykroyd's (1967) *The Story of Sugar*, while telling a history of a commodity, are not directly about capitalism, much less about ecology. Mintz's (1986) *Sweetness and Power*, a book with usefully Marxist inspiration, discusses the historical production and consumption of sugar without significantly broaching the agroecology of sugar production.) There is a chapter in Braudel's long volume on the various grains, and the things which were done in order to boost harvests in order to supply the working classes of early capitalism with grains to eat, or (in moves often disastrous) to gain some sort of advantage in the grain trade through the monopolization of grain stocks. There is a similar chapter on meat.

Moore (2003) examines Braudel's opus in a piece in a fairly recent essay in *Organization and Environment*. Moore suggests a reading of Braudel which combines his scattered insights into "capitalism as an ecohistorical system" (445) and enriches them "through a reexamination of Marx's analysis of capitalism's socio-ecological contradictions." Through this interpretive process, Moore hopes that Braudelian history will produce "a conception of capitalism in which economy and ecology are increasingly unthinkable without each other" (447). Ultimately, exploring capitalism as such is our shortest route to an understanding of how eco-socialism, rather than social democracy, will be necessary to stabilize civilization.

Beckert's (2015) *Empire of Cotton* is part of a recent vogue in historical texts dealing with the history of capitalism, emphasizing specifically that the slaveholding society of the southern United States before the Civil War was indeed a capitalist society. It thus accompanies Levine's (2013) *The Fall of the House of Dixie*, Johnson's (2013) *River of Dark Dreams*, Levy's (2012) *Freaks of Fortune*, and Baptist's (2014) *The Half Has Never Been Told* as companions in this genre. *Empire of Cotton*, however, deals with an overall history of cotton; only the first part of the book is about slaveholding society.

Empire of Cotton makes the bold claim that "for about nine hundred years, from 1000 to 1900 CE, cotton was the world's most important manufacturing

industry.” This “history of capitalism in action” has two parts: war capitalism, in which the violence of Europe’s conquest of the world shaped the expansion of the capitalist cotton industry, and the period of the “new cotton imperialism” which came afterward. One would not find a lot of theory in Beckert, but the first part of his book is replete with facts about the history of cotton capitalism that would be invaluable to any post-Cartesian historical thinker.

First, it is important to note Beckert’s concept of “war capitalism” as a name for early, agricultural capitalist expansion. Beckert suggests that:

War capitalism relied on the capacity of rich and powerful Europeans to divide the world into an “inside” and an “outside.” The “inside” encompassed the laws, institutions, and customs of the mother country, where state-enforced order ruled. The “outside, by contrast, was characterized by imperial domination, the expropriation of vast territories, decimation of indigenous peoples, theft of their resources, enslavement, and the domination of vast tracts of land by private capitalists with little effective oversight by distant European states. (36)

A case can thus be made for cotton as an essential element of the early capitalist strategy of “cheap nature,” as a centerpiece of the post-Cartesian narrative of capitalist history. Cotton made both a cheap and a versatile raw material for human clothing and bedding, and, as such, Beckert tells us, “other industries would be made possible by the rise of cotton” such that “cotton was the vanguard” of the forward march of early capitalism.

And cheap labor? Beckert reveals the essential interdependence of cotton production, especially in the southeastern United States, and institutions of slavery.

Slavery allowed not only for the mobilization of very large numbers of workers on very short notice, but also for a regime of violent supervision and virtually ceaseless exploitation that matched the needs of a crop that was, in the cold language of economists, “effort intensive.”

This is also an understanding corroborated by Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told*: when it came time to harvest the cotton crop under the conditions of early nineteenth-century capitalism, slave labor was the cheapest labor.

In the early nineteenth century, moreover, the place to go for cheap raw materials was the American Deep South – with perfect conditions for cotton cultivation and a wide-open frontier in which operations could be expanded if soil fertility were to be compromised by the persistent cultivation of cotton. The South, moreover, had a symbiotic relationship with industrial England, which spun its cotton into usable items. Thus on the wings of slave capitalism there arose an industrial capitalism. The way Beckert tells it, the industrial capitalism and the slave capitalism saw each other as competitors, and eventually this dynamic led to the US Civil War, the destruction of slavery and its replacement with various forms of constrained labor, and the expansion of the cotton market to India and Brazil and wherever else might be made to produce cotton.

Beckert’s history, then, continues with a discussion of the “capitalist reorganization of the (global) countryside” (332), as the world-system expanded to encompass Earth. The second part of *Empire of Cotton*, about industrial

capitalism, is less world-ecologically impressive than the first part. In discussing the expansion of the cotton business into any area of Earth which will support a crop or an industry, and in discussing the ongoing subordination of cotton agriculture to cotton industry after the US Civil War, Beckert engages us less with extra-human details and more with the human details of the global expansion of cotton-growing, albeit with an emphasis on constrained labor reminiscent of the writings of Tom Brass. Post-Cartesian scholarship, then, will not find the second part as useful as the first part of the book.

Tony Weis's *The Ecological Hoofprint* is largely about capitalist histories of agriculture in its first chapter, and of meat in the second, which start from the beginnings of human agricultural practice. But some (but not most) of the material in Weis's book is the sort of reading you would find in websites sponsored by the Humane Society or by PETA, or in polemic works such as Foer's (2009) *Eating Animals*. Weis does indeed offer a brutal critique of the factory farming of animals. In this regard Weis's book is more in the tradition of Frances Moore Lappé's (1981) *Food First*, which suggests that if world-society were really interested in feeding the hungry it would stop using so many resources to produce so much meat.

In Weis's account, pre-industrial agriculture reshaped ecosystems in important ways, but in ways not half as dramatic as those of industrial agriculture. So, as the introduction to this book indicates, Weis's book is about a "livestock revolution" in which "In a mere half-century, from 1961 to 2010, the global population of slaughtered animals leapt from roughly 8 to 64 billion, which will double again to 120 billion by 2050 if current rates of growth continue" (2). Weis, a compelling presenter (I saw him at the "Planetary Natures" conference in July of 2015 in Binghamton, New York), lays out factual panorama after factual panorama to display to readers (and indeed to listeners) the full ecological impact in this revolution in meat production as foregrounded against the forward march of the capitalist system. I suppose an ancestor to *Ecological Hoofprint* would be Rifkin's (1993) *Beyond Beef*, but *The Ecological Hoofprint* is much more comprehensive and less "scattershot" (the epithet applied to the Rifkin book by a *Los Angeles Times* reviewer).

The fundamental world-ecological idea of Weis's book is laid out in Chapter 1:

The ecological *footprint* presents a call to understand consumption in terms of the bundles of land, water, resources, pollution, and GHG emissions embedded in production, and in turn the tremendous environmental dimensions of economic inequalities. The ecological *hoofprint* seeks to connect and extend some of these basic concerns to a different and much bigger "population bomb" than what environmentalists have long been focused upon: that which is occurring within systems of industrial livestock production. While extensive rangelands are heavily implicated in major global environmental problems such as tropical deforestation and desertification, the soaring global production and consumption of animal flesh and derivatives are primarily rooted in intensive production, which commands roughly one third of all cultivated land in the world. (51)

Weis, who is quite conscious of Moore's world-ecological writings, discusses the "industrial-grain-oilseed-livestock complex as a system in motion," (91) occupying more and more land for the sake of the production of commodity meats through the aggregation of "staggering number(s) of individual beings trapped in conditions akin to living hell," (90) as Weis says of poultry production. Iron laws of capitalism (elaborated on page 93) are shown to result in the radical simplification of ecosystems (leading, in detail, to the vast simplification of large animal ecosystems as large numbers of wild animals are depleted, as well as vast and immediate increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide, increased stress upon water systems, and overall increases in environmental pollution (page 130 contains a summary diagram of all of this).

Moreover, the increased concentration of industrial animal farming in vast, cramped spaces owned by huge, profit-motivated conglomerates has led to stressful working conditions for the working-class members who must maintain animal factories, as well as creating lives of endless suffering as experienced by exploding numbers of animals, especially poultry (130). On top of this, a general threat to public health is established in the accumulation of various toxicities produced by the farms themselves, as well as by the diseases incidentally generated by the housing of large numbers of animals in cramped spaces and combatted by large quantities of decreasingly effective antibiotics. (138).


Often books of this sort can become huge litanies. Weis, however, is interested in showing the connection to the expansion of capitalist production in all instances and in showing that "the enormity of the ecological hoofprint cannot be engineered away" (146). Moreover, Weis argues against the idea that the meatification of diets is necessary for nutritional reasons, pointing to the "product of roughly one-third of the earth's arable land" which "is being funneled down a net nutritional drain, and that this wastage is wired into the logic of the system, as the capacity of industrial livestock production to profitably absorb grain and oilseed surpluses has enabled their continuing expansion" (148).

At the end of this book, Weis feels obliged to promote a "biospheric humility" (155) as an alternative to "the violence of capitalism as world-ecology, a totalizing way of organizing nature" (154). But he could have continued further, in an inquiry of what it would take to reorganize both human and extra-human nature along the lines of biospheric humility beyond, for instance, a world-society which ate less meat, a vast decrease in global livestock populations (150), and a return to low-input mixed small farms. Perhaps a sort of non-dualistic post-capitalism would be the result of such an inquiry. Toward the end of his book, Weis nonetheless investigates the possibilities of "de-meatification" (150); while refusing to recommend dietary rules for the human race, he suggests that we understand, as Frances Moore Lappé did, that "what we eat ... ties us to the economic, political, and ecological order of our whole planet" (154). A world-ecological history of meat, in this regard, makes an excellent prefatory step, and Weis certainly accomplishes the task of presenting that.

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