

The Ecological Revolution – Making Peace with the Planet

John Bellamy Foster

Monthly Review Press, New York, 2009, 288 pp, ISBN: 978-1-58367-179-5

review by GRAIN

This book, written by the editor of *Monthly Review*, is in essence a collection of articles, all of which (except for the introduction) have already been published. Such a format is often annoying, as it makes it difficult for the author to develop a carefully crafted central argument that gains force through the length of the book. In this case, however, the format works well, apart from a tendency to repetition, and the occasional article (such as the one on peak oil) that adds little to what is already well known. What makes the book powerful and fascinating is the strength of his central message, which Foster presents succinctly in the introduction:

Capitalism as a world economy, divided into classes and driven by competition, embodies a logic that accepts no boundaries on its own expansion and its exploitation of its environment. The earth as a planet, in contrast, is by definition limited. This is an absolute contradiction from which there is no earthly escape.

Foster provides a strong theoretical framework for many of the arguments made in this issue of *Seedling*. Time and again *Seedling's* writers point to the tendency of big corporations to squeeze out extra profits by destroying ecosystems whose biodiversity and capacity to absorb greenhouse gas emissions are urgently needed if life on this planet is to survive in anything like its present form. The short-sightedness of such actions beggars belief. In a cogently argued section, Foster points to one of the factors that accounts for this: with the exploitation of natural resources, there is no equivalent to the business cycle in the economy, so no internal (or external) mechanism which causes the system to re-organise. Just as happened with the inhabitants of Easter Island, unrestrained capitalism will go on destroying natural resources until the last tree has been felled.

Foster makes it absolutely clear that in his view capitalism cannot, by its very nature, resolve the deepening climate crisis. There is no possible technological fix, he says. This is perhaps the most important message of the book, for many

active environmentalists still hope against hope that all we need to do to solve the ecological crisis is to make capitalism “sustainable”, that is, to make technology clean, while allowing capitalism to continue expanding unabated. Foster points out that the classical political economists, from David Ricardo to John Stuart Mill, writing in the 19th century, were well aware that capitalist accumulation could not continue indefinitely, largely because land and other natural resources would run out.

Foster draws attention particularly to the British economist William Stanley Jevons, who, writing in the mid-19th century, elaborated what has become known as Jevon's Paradox. Jevons looked at the improvements that were being made in the use of coal to generate energy for the booming English industrial revolution, and concluded: “It is a whole confusion of ideas to suppose that the economical use of fuel is equivalent to a diminished consumption. The very contrary is the truth.” In fact, it is not difficult to understand what lies behind the paradox: more efficient use of a resources allows, in the first instance, greater profits, which encourages greater investment in that activity and thus greater overall production and greater use of that resource; and so on and so on.

So is there a way out of the crisis? Foster, also author of *Marx's Ecology*, quotes a passage from volume 1 of *Capital* that is particularly relevant to the issues covered in this *Seedling*:

All progress in capitalist agriculture is progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.... Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social progress of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the workers.

This systematic robbing of the land of its natural fertility leads to what Marx calls in

volume 3 of *Capital* a “metabolic rift”:

Large landed property reduces the agricultural population to an ever decreasing minimum and confronts it with an ever growing industrial population crammed together in large towns; in this way it produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism. A metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself. The result of this is a squandering of the vitality of the soil, which is carried by trade far beyond the bounds of a single country.

Foster believes that the only answer to capitalism's ecology of destruction is to revolutionise our productive relations in ways that allow for a metabolic restoration. But this, he says, will require a break with capitalism's own system of “socio-metabolic reproduction” – that is, the logic of profit. Foster points out that today we face a global ecological crisis: every major ecosystem on earth is in decline. “The planetary ecological crisis is increasingly all-encompassing, a product of the destructive uncontrollability of a rapidly globalising capitalist economy, which knows no law other than its own drive to exponential expansion.” Any attempt to solve one of these problems (for example, climate change) without addressing the others, he says, is likely to fail, since these ecological crises, though distinct in various ways, typically share common causes.

Foster has no blueprint for the future, but he is emphatic that to avert ecological catastrophe capitalism must be overthrown or severely restrained. He states his position clearly in the opening sentence of the preface: “We have reached a turning point in the human relation to the earth: all hope for the future of this relationship is now either revolutionary or it is false.” And again later in the book: “socialism is ecological, ecologism is socialist, or neither can truly exist.” He suggests indirectly that the most powerful movements for revolutionary change will emerge in the global South – and, indeed, are already beginning to do so. Beyond that, he is unwilling to elaborate.



Food rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice

Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel

Pambazuka Press, Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford, 2009

review by GRAIN

In this book, two leading critics of the world food system analyse the food crisis, seeing it rooted in an industrial economy that generates huge profits for a few while disregarding the needs of the many. It is important, they say, that control over our food systems be wrested away from unregulated global markets, speculators and monopolies and handed back to family farmers, rural women and communities around the world who have resisted the destruction of their native

seeds and worked hard to diversify their crops, protect their soils, conserve their water and soil, and run community-based food systems.

The authors then provide information for those who want to help in the struggle to regain control over our food systems. Drawing on examples from Latin America, Africa, and Europe, they draw a picture of numerous inspiring grassroots movements that are gradually beginning to coalesce at a regional and international

level. It is becoming a race against time: "Unless we transform our food systems to make them more equitable, democratic and sustainable, they will not be able to withstand the waves of environmental and financial shocks rocking the planet. Our food systems will break down and food will routinely be both expensive and in short supply, putting it increasingly out of the reach of the world's poor, leading to more food riots, political and environmental instability, and suffering."

Let them eat junk! – how capitalism creates hunger and obesity

Robert Albritton

Pluto Press, London and New York, 2009

review by GRAIN

Over the last few years there has been a flurry of books about junk food and the junk farming and food processing systems that produce it. What makes this book different is the Marxist framework in which the analysis is couched. Albritton argues that capitalism is intrinsically incompatible with environmentally sound farming practice and the production of nutritious food. In a book chock-a-block with facts, Albritton takes a broad look at the food industry, from the expansion of industrial farming in the developing world to conditions for the workers in food processing factories

to the impact of junk food on the people who eat it.

Although the book contains a great deal of useful information, it disappoints. Albritton is not an elegant writer, and he has the annoying habit of summarising what he is about to say, saying it and then summarising what he has just said. Moreover, his analysis is often crude and simplistic. But despite its imitations, the book is a compelling indictment of current food production, which is ruining our health and destroying the environment. Like many others, Albritton is not very

clear as to what can be done to stop the powerful food industry from propelling the world towards destruction. Referring briefly at the end of the book to "large and significant movements for change based in the global South", such as Via Campesina, he hopes that revolutionary change will come: "As the failures of our capitalist economy become ever more obvious to more people, chances are that the rivulets of transformation that exist now will flow together into powerful rivers of change and then into an international upsurge."



GRAIN's latest publication

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"CGIAR joins global farmland grab" – Against the grain, September 2009

The international agricultural research establishment has got caught up in the current scramble for land being waged by a number of governments and corporate investors to secure food supplies abroad. GRAIN has identified over 100 such deals, most of them triggered late last year by the food

and financial crises. In the middle of this year the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) estimated that 15–20 million hectares, mostly in Africa and Asia, had recently been leased, bought up or were under negotiation to produce food for foreign shores. The World Bank has plunged into a major

study on the issue, to be finalised by the end of 2009. Land grabbing has even become a feature of most official food security policy discussions at the highest political levels this year, including the G8, the African Union and the UN General Assembly.

For the full text, go to: <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=52>

GRAIN maintains a resource page on land grabbing, with links to documents, websites, various initiatives and other materials:

<http://www.grain.org/landgrab/>

Daily news about the land grabbing trend and people's resistance to it are available at

<http://www.farmlandgrab.org>. The site provides a weekly email service that you can subscribe to.