



Capitalism, Exterminism and the Long Ecological Revolution

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Even the most stubborn climate skeptics found the events of 2017 difficult to cope with. It wasn't just a matter of turning up the air conditioner and switching the channel to Fox News: this time, the inconvenient truth came in the form of monstrous wildfires and tropical cyclones ruthlessly knocking down suburban ranch homes and master-planned housing developments.

Across the globe, climate change took on the frightening form of nation-destroying hurricanes in the Caribbean and U.S.-Mexico border region, record-breaking firestorms in California and the Iberian Peninsula, severe droughts in Africa and biblical floods in Africa and South Asia.

In the Global South, these disasters were exacerbated by underdevelopment, maldevelopment, poverty, corruption and gross inequality—social factors

inextricably rooted in imperialism. Each extreme weather event carried further social tragedies in tow as communities suffered displacement, hunger, worsened precarity and unrest. In many cases, multinational corporations quickly took advantage of the situation through “redeveloping” and recovery schemes enforced by local governments.

Human society is never alone in facing the shock of “natural” disasters: cataclysmic weather events also disrupt the wildlife, insects, microscopic viruses and bacteria colonies with which we share our habitat. This results in further chaos across the spectrum of environmental, urban and agricultural ecosystems – with incalculable results.

In October, scientists revealed that carbon dioxide or CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere had surged to their highest level in 800,000 years in 2016, offering further evidence that human activities play a decisive role in shaping the Earth’s geology and raising alarm over the possibility of an irreversible climate catastrophe.

Attempts by world leaders to enact modest restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions faced a high-profile setback in June when U.S. reality TV-star-turned-President Donald Trump withdrew from the Paris climate agreement, delivering on his past statements that climate change is a “very expensive” Chinese “hoax”; in other words, “bullshit.”

While G20 leaders reacted with sanctimonious outrage, last month 134 developing nations—including China, Iran, Brazil and India—called out wealthy countries for their hypocritical and deliberate failure to honor the accord’s commitments to fund low-emission, climate-resilient development.

So we’re all screwed, right? Given an absence of will by ruling elites to address climate change—as well as the need for poor nations to fulfill development goals—what hope is there? Can humankind reverse course before our beloved but contaminated planet decides to throw all life on Earth into the incinerator?

Joining us in conversation is author and sociology professor at the University of Oregon, John Bellamy Foster.

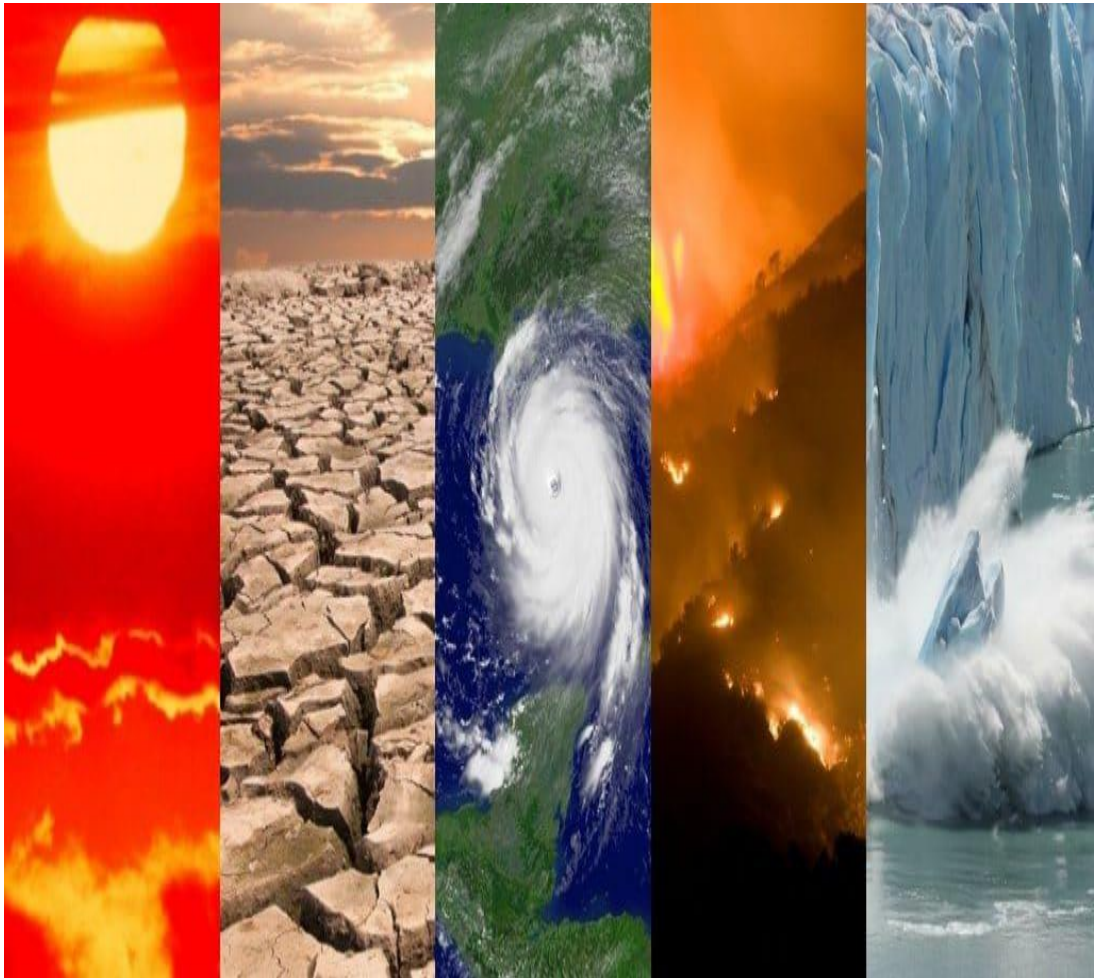
A longtime editor of venerable U.S. socialist journal *Monthly Review*, Foster has been a leading voice in advancing an ecological revolutionary socialism that highlights the fundamentally “green” nature of the “red” theoretical tradition of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

His most recent works include the book *Marx and the Earth* (2016) and a scathing rebuttal of U.S. Democratic socialist magazine *Jacobin*, whose

authors he charged with jumping on the “ecomodernist bandwagon” and embracing reformist technocratic “solutions” to the planetary crisis rather than system change: “the reconstitution of society at large on a more egalitarian and sustainable basis.”

2017 was a major year in terms of weather events on a cataclysmic scale, from the Caribbean to the U.S. South and most recently, California. What does 2017’s climate tell us about the state of relations between ecology and society?

JBF: Science is demonstrating that today’s extreme weather events, which are occurring with increasing frequency, can be attributed more and more to climate change as the major driver. The proverbial “100-year flood” is now occurring every few years.



2017 will likely go down as the third warmest year in the 138-year climate record. | Photo: NOAA.

The Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society recently confirmed that of 27 extreme weather events around the world in 2016, anthropogenic climate change was a significant driver of 21. The likelihood of such events occurring on a century-long time basis is compared against a model of a world in which anthropogenic climate emissions don't exist. On this basis, climate change is seen as engendering such dire meteorological events, in 2016, as usually high temperatures across Asia and the Arctic; coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef; widespread drought in Africa; wildfires along the Pacific Coast of North America; and the warm, destructive "blob" in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Alaska. There can be little doubt that the cataclysmic hurricanes that struck the Caribbean and U.S. South in 2017 – due to their size and frequency, as well as rising ocean temperatures and sea levels, which increase their destructiveness – were to a large extent products of climate change.

All of this tells us that the state of relations between ecology (or what Karl Marx called the "universal metabolism of nature") and society is one of growing peril for humanity and innumerable other species. We are now rapidly approaching under "business as usual" what climatologists refer to as a phase change, pointing to irreversible global warming. The trillionth metric ton of carbon, which stands for an increase in average global temperature of around 2°C, marking the breaking of the planetary carbon budget, is now less than 20 years away, according to current trends.



"Climate change, it should be remembered, is only one of the major planetary boundaries now being crossed." | Photos: Reuters.

At that point, human-generated carbon emissions will most likely have altered the climate beyond humanity's power to reverse. We will not be able to get back to the Holocene conditions of the last 12,000 years that were uniquely

conducive to the development of human civilization. All sorts of feedback mechanisms will threaten to accelerate climate change still further, propelling the world toward 4°C, a point at which there is reason to believe that industrial

civilization as we know it will be impossible. The repercussions of this cataclysmic process in terms of deaths worldwide is incalculable.

Climate change, it should be remembered, is only one of the major planetary boundaries now being crossed. Others include loss of biological diversity (the Sixth Extinction), ocean acidification, deforestation, disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, growing shortages of freshwater, and the toxic contamination of the environment. All of this, of course, has a common denominator in the rapacious system of capital accumulation.

With regard to the United States, first we saw Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and, recently, we saw Washington pull climate change from its National Security doctrine as a threat. What does this augur in terms of the willingness of global elites and capitalist rulers to sacrifice their short-term economic advantage with the ecological necessity of preventing further planetary havoc?

JBF: The Paris climate agreement was itself far too weak an accord to combat climate change at the level and with the speed necessary. True, it included a historical declaration of the need to keep the increase in average global temperature, if possible, down to 1.5°C, which at this point would require some form of negative emissions (sucking carbon out of the atmosphere), but the actual agreement and the voluntary pledges of nations belied this objective.



Recent studies suggest the Arctic Ocean has become the Northern Hemisphere’s “dead end” for floating plastic. | Photo: Reuters.

With the Trump administration now declaring that it will take the United States out of the Paris Agreement and doing everything it can to undermine previous climate strategies – though it should be noted that the new

national security stance explicitly allows the U.S. military to prepare for the effects of climate change on its own bases – the situation has become truly grim. This doesn’t have to do primarily with climate denialism, as such. Rather, it has always been about the perpetuation of the system of capital accumulation, and in particular the

fossil fuel regime, versus attempts to protect the planet as a place of habitation for humanity.

It now seems clear that key sections of the ruling class in the United States (in alignment with capitalist classes worldwide) have decided to close the small window in which humanity is still able to arrest climate change. As difficult as this is to comprehend, much less acknowledge, the exterminist logic of today's monopoly-finance capital is now actively preempting all attempts to protect humanity and a livable planetary environment. David Harvey's reference to "the madness of economic reason" fits well here.

Which way forward? How can we fight for a better future in the year(s) ahead, and what sort of short-term, medium- and long-term solutions are desirable?

JBF: We need to see the solution to the problems that confront us today as part of a long ecological revolution, lasting for decades and even centuries, aimed at the creation of society of substantive equality and ecological sustainability. Yet, given the cataclysmic ecological and social threats facing society, this movement needs to be revolutionary from the outset, in the immediate months and years ahead, in the sense of actively opposing the logic of capital, and seeking to develop what István Mészáros called a new communal system of social metabolic reproduction to replace the present one. This has to occur on a cellular basis, i.e. in human households and communities, in our most basic human relations and in our social interchange, as well as in the state and the economy. It requires new forms of social reproduction. The first priority has to be the principle of putting people and the planet before profits.



An oil refinery near Los Angeles, California, where numerous health and safety concerns were voiced by locals, 90 percent of whom are people of color. | Photo: Reuters.

There is no lack of genuine social and ecological solutions to the problem of climate change. There are hundreds, even thousands, of things we can do, quickly and effectively—and indeed the whole problem simply

stems from the organization of our system of production, which includes vast waste, untold destruction, gross inequalities, and substantive irrationalities—all of which now objectively call for an alternative system of socioeconomic planning under the control of the direct producers. It is possible to move toward more ecological forms of production and consumption while also enormously increasing the welfare of the

population, but to do so means going against capitalism's system of creative destruction, now best seen as planetary exterminism.

And what would you suggest for the peoples of the Global South who require the benefits of industrial development and the need to retain their independence from the imperialism?

JBF: Imperialism is at the root of most of the world's problems. It accounts for the most severe forms of exploitation in the world today, the lack of freedom of peoples to make necessary changes, vast inequalities in power, and the dangers of world war and global ecological exterminism. It serves to divide working classes between North and South. Climate change, for example, threatens the poor and Global South more than the wealthy and the Global North, but action to mitigate climate change is the responsibility first and foremost of those nations at the center of the imperialist world system. The reasons are clear. Most carbon historically added to the atmosphere was put there by the handful of nations at the core of the industrial system. Those nations still have the largest per capita emissions by far. They also have the levels of economic development, technology, and wealth per capita that would allow them to institute the sharp, double-digit emission reductions that are now necessary at the core of the system with the least damage to their populations.

The poorest countries still need economic development and cannot be expected to carry the major burden of planetary energy conversion, nor in the case of Fourth World nations would their efforts in that respect have much effect, yet all nations need to move rapidly toward sustainable patterns of development in what must be a planetary readjustment. What is needed is a kind of contraction and convergence of carbon dioxide emissions, which must approach zero by 2050, but with the requirement that rich countries reduce their emissions drastically first, thereby taking on the primary burden for mitigating climate change. Needless to say, other big emitters in the Global South, with much lower per capita emissions but large aggregate emissions, such as China and India, need to be on board too if the world is to reach zero net carbon emissions by mid-century.

The critique of extractivism is important in the sense that fossil fuels need to be kept in the ground. There is also the question of the rights of Indigenous peoples. These, then, are complex issues, but one cannot simply ignore the international division of labor instituted by imperialism, or the realities of international hierarchies that persist in the present. Some Northern NGOs primarily blame poor countries such as Bolivia for their extractivism, even in

those cases where the societies are carrying out social and ecological changes that point in more positive directions. Meanwhile, the fact that such extractivism has its impetus at the center of the system, where the main rewards of the expropriation of nature worldwide are concentrated, is all too often played down.



A view of Guiwan, Samar, one of the areas in the Philippines battered by Super Typhoon Yolanda or Haiyan. | Photo: Reuters.

The Philippines has suffered in extraordinary ways from extreme weather events stemming from climate change. What we are seeing there now is an immense tragedy, rooted ultimately in a century of underdevelopment resulting from its status as a U.S. colony and then neocolony. Rapacious extractivism is being carried out in the name of development, but actually feeding into what Andre Gunder Frank called “lumpenddevelopment.” Today the country is characterized by the growth of an extractivist fascism under Rodrigo Duterte, with the close cooperation of Washington.

The only real alternative for countries in the Global South is delinking as much as possible from the imperialist system and relinking in South-South systems of cooperation. Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba and ALBA are partial models of this. At the very end of his life, Hugo Chavez was seeking to extend the ALBA model to the global sphere, and was preparing to call for a New International building on cooperation between nations in the global South and working classes everywhere. This constituted a real response to the world’s problems.



Vivero Organiponico is a 10-hectare (24-acre) urban farm within Alamar, a neighborhood of Havana. | Photo: Center for a Livable Future.

Confronted with the effects of climate change, ecological socialism – with its emphasis on communal relations and adaptation to the environment – is far superior to neoliberalism’s empty insistence on “resilience.” Look at how Cuba has

responded to hurricanes, as compared to the grim tragedy foisted on the people of Puerto Rico, a U.S. colony.

On a global scale, what signs of hope have you seen or do you see now in terms of the fight for ecological sustainability and the liberation of working peoples?

JBF: Today we are once again seeing what Marx once called, with reference to the centuries-long decline of feudalism, an “Age of Dissolution.” In such times, the potential for constructive, revolutionary action opens up. Tens of millions – perhaps hundreds of millions – of people worldwide are now resisting and refusing to cooperate with the capitalist system in various, if still limited, ways. This could expand to billions of people, with the resistance becoming much fiercer and all-encompassing.

Fidel Castro once said that people are like volcanoes: you never know when they will erupt under material pressure. In recent decades, the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela has done the most to show people what is possible even under conditions of counterrevolution supported from abroad. We should also look for inspiration to Cuba, particularly its history since the Special Period.

I believe that we can see the emergence around the globe of what can be called an environmental proletariat. This refers in many ways back to the classical proletariat, which was revolutionary in its day insofar as it struggled not just over working conditions and jobs but over community, health, and the environment – all of which were at issue during the Industrial Revolution. Nowadays there is no concealing the effects of the economic and ecological crises at the base of society, where they mutually define the material conditions and everyday life of the great majority.



Jane Kairuthi Kathurima cuts kale from her sack farm in central Kenya's Nturukuma region. | Photo: Reuters.

Many of the struggles led by women over social reproduction involve a deepening of the fight against the system, encompassing households, community and the

environment—the background conditions of the capitalist regime—rather than simply the state and the economy.

It is this sense of a deepening material crisis, encompassing not only the economy but also the planetary environment, and having its roots in the unsustainable expropriation of the conditions of reproduction of both nature and humanity, that is creating on a global basis a new revolutionary situation, that of the Revolutionary Anthropocene.

Hope in such times is always strongest because it feeds on humanity's real capacity for change in its basic relations.

Source:

mronline.org/2017/12/24/capitalism-extermism-and-the-long-ecological-revolution