The Hope of Ecosocialism

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This interview of Foster by Jonas Elvander for *Flamman*(*The Flame*) addresses a wide variety of issues, including the roots of Marxian ecology, the nature of ecosocialism, the global ecological crisis, the question of green capitalism, the relation of ecosocialism to indigenous struggles, and the bases of ecological hope. It was conducted over a number of days in late July and early August 2018. It was translated into Swedish and published in an abridged form in *Flamman* on August 9. The complete interview appears here for the first time.

JE: You are known as one of the leading scholars in Marxist Environmental Studies. What does "Marxist ecology" mean?

JBF: Marxian ecology is ecology as it developed out of classical Marxism, building in particular on work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. It emphasizes the relation between the materialist conception of nature and the materialist conception of history. In its most influential version it relies heavily on the concept of "social metabolism" introduced by Marx as a way of defining how labor and production transform nature/natural conditions and thus the bases of human society itself. In the capitalist mode of production this social metabolism is alienated, generating ecological crises directly attributable to the commodity economy and capital accumulation.

The main virtue of Marxian ecology therefore is that it provides a materialist, critical, and dialectical approach emphasizing the interrelations of nature and society (understanding human society, like human beings themselves, as an emergent part of nature). It is closely connected to the development of ecology within natural science, where a materialist, emergent conception of nature, and metabolism as the basis of systems ecology are central. What Marxian ecology offers that is unique, however, is a way of conceptualizing the relation between capitalism and the environment, including the historical causes of contemporary ecological crisis.

JE: Why is Marxism a good lens through which to analyze the ongoing climate change?

JBF: Climate change, like our other planetary ecological crises (species extinction, ocean acidification, loss of fresh water, disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, etc.) is *a crisis not of nature but of society*. Natural science can explain many of the physical dimensions of the crisis but the solutions to the problem, particularly insofar as they are anthropogenic in origin, lie in society itself. Only Marxian ecology has a sophisticated, dialectical analysis of the historical dynamics, interdependencies, and complex contradictions arising from of capitalism's disruption of the planetary biogeochemical processes that constitute its external environment. At the bottom of these rifts in the metabolism of humanity and nature lies a system of capital accumulation without restraint and without end, rooted in class, which treats the planet itself as a mere "externality."

A pioneering analysis in the socioecological critique of climate change was Brett Clark and Richard York's 2005 article in "Carbon Metabolism: Global Capitalism, Climate Change, and the Biospheric Rift" in *Theory and Society*, reprinted in *The Ecological Rift*, which I coauthored with Clark, and York.

JE: You write about how capitalism is committing "robbery" against nature. Yet, you also criticize other ecosocialists who speak in the same vein for failing to understand the difference between appropriation and expropriation among other things. Can you explain how you see the relationship between capitalism and nature?

JBF: The notion of "The Robbery of Nature," which is the title of the introduction that Brett Clark and I wrote for the special July-August 2018 issue of *Monthly Review*, is a concept famously advanced by Karl Marx in *Capital*. In our introduction we sought to explain how this notion of the robbery of nature entered Marx's thought, particularly via the work of the German chemist Justus von Liebig, and how this was related to Marx's concept of metabolic rift.

In approaching such issues from a Marxian perspective, it is important to understand how today's ecological contradictions are associated with capitalism's accumulation tendencies, and in this respect Marx's critique of political economy is crucial. It is here that the distinction between appropriation and expropriation arises. In classical political theory—in the work of theorists as diverse as Locke, Hegel, and Marx—appropriation is the active term for property, and means the taking from and transforming of nature via human labor and production. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* thus starts with appropriation. Appropriation is the basis for all property forms. As Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, there can be no production at all without appropriation. The free appropriation of nature is an essential aspect of human existence. In a wider sense, it is basis of life itself.

However, under capitalism the appropriation of nature, i.e., the basic property form, is systematically alienated both with respect to labor and nature. Natural-material use values are treated as *free gifts to capital*. Here we run into the problem of the expropriation of nature, or appropriation without reciprocity, i.e. the robbery of nature. It is thus essential for human development, particularly at this stage of history, to ensure the continued reproduction of nature (natural conditions/processes) together with the reproduction of society—on sustainable and egalitarian bases. It follows that we cannot be against the appropriation of nature in any universal way—for example, saying as Raj Patel and Jason Moore do in their *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* that "appropriation is ongoing theft"/property is theft—without in effect treating the problem as the mere existence of human beings. What we have to address is the question of capitalism's robbery or expropriation of nature, which violates a basis condition of sustainability.

Struggling against the robbery of nature means struggling against capitalist expropriation of nature, including its expropriation of human corporeal nature, the human body itself.

JE: That sounds a bit like Marx's debate with Proudhon.

JBF: Yes, Proudhon said in his *What Is Property?* that "property is theft." But for Marx this was too simple because all forms of society demand some form of property or appropriation (which is at bottom appropriation from external nature). The question is: Can we create, once again but at a much higher level, social/property relations that are less alienated (in terms of both labor and the human metabolism with nature, i.e., the labor process), more collective, more egalitarian, and more sustainable? Both the movement toward socialism and the movement toward ecology ultimately come down to this.

JE: Have there been other modes of production during the modern era that have not had a destructive relation to nature?

JBF: These are issues that I discussed in my 1995 book The Vulnerable Planet. It is true that all major modes of production that we consider modern, and indeed ancient and feudal modes of production as well, have had destructive relations to nature, during large parts if not all of their development. However, not all historical modes of production are destructive to the same degree/scale, or in the same way, so it is important to approach such questions with attention to historical specificity and systemic dynamics. What we call the "modern" era—from the "early modern" period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the height of "modernity" in the age of industrial capital, to what is sometimes called the period of "post-modernity"—has been dominated by the capitalist world economy. "Modernity" itself thus largely means capitalism. To be sure, the Soviet Union also had a destructive relation to the environment during much of its history. It is capitalism, though, that has been the dominant force in the world economic system, and which lies behind the 21st century planetary crisis.

Capitalism is a system of accumulation of capital based on class exploitation and propelled by competition. Each new stage reached in accumulation is simply the basis for the next stage. An $18 trillion economy this year requires an $18 trillion + economy next year. The logic is one of grow or die. This creates an absolutely avaricious relation to the environment (and towards life as a whole) for which there is no remedy within the system. The advance of this particular mode of production on a global scale is inseparable from what Frederick Engels called "social murder" or environmental exterminism. Such depredations are justified by the system as "externalities" or unintended

consequences outside the market, and supposedly outside social control. Capitalism is thus an extreme dissipative system in its relation to the Earth System as a whole. Ironically, it is this inexorable growth tendency, destructive of all that surrounds it, that has in the past led to capitalism being considered a progressive force in history, but which in the Anthropocene is being increasingly recognized as a retrogressive force on a planetary scale.

The wealth that the present system of production has generated on the backs of workers, the technology available, the waste, the alternative forms of social relations visible in the past and the present, all suggest that there are ways out of our current planetary crisis. It is worth remembering that the *Living Planet Report* of the World Wildlife Foundation has continually designated Cuba as the most sustainable country on Earth. It of course represents a different mode of production and signifies that there are real alternatives to the present order.

JE: For ecosocialists climate change is the visible manifestation of a natural boundary for capitalism. Marx often distinguishes between capitalists as individuals and capitalists as a class. The individual capitalist does not necessarily share the interest of his or her class in each instance. From this point of view, it makes sense for the individual capitalist to continue to accumulate by expropriating nature, and thus to push against the external boundary to capital that nature imposes, despite the disastrous consequences. But for capitalists as a class it must at some point become evident that it is their shared interest to preserve the natural environments and eco-systems. If this is the case, when will that point be? And what will the result be? Will capitalism transform itself into something, at least partly, different or will it compromise just enough in order to make the system survive, as it has so many times before?

JBF: I started focusing on the issue of planetary crisis in the late 1980s, and in 1994 wrote *The Vulnerable Planet* which addressed the historical ecological crises of capitalism, including climate change. In 2002 I wrote *Ecology Against Capitalism*. The opening sentence was: "The argument of this book is that the realms of ecology and capitalism are opposed to each other—not in every instance but in their interactions as a whole." Much of the argument in that book was devoted to explaining that in the decade since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro nothing substantive had been done to address climate change, and that the reason for this was the system of capital accumulation. It is now sixteen years further on, and still, despite endless global meetings and conferences, nothing really has been done to avert

disaster. We are accelerating toward dangerous climate change of a 2-4° increase in global average temperature, with catastrophic results that are barely imaginable. The reason for this failure to act at a time when survival of human civilization, the lives of hundreds of millions, even billions, of people, and perhaps (eventually) the human species itself are all threatened, has to do with the social impasse created by the existing relations of production.

Capitalism, as I have indicated, is a system that is geared to the maximum economic growth without regard to the larger environmental consequences, and that is oblivious (in its internal logic) to the accelerating entropic degradation, making it an extreme dissipative system in environmental terms. All of this based on class exploitation (which ultimately, as Marx and Engels argued, has its "cell" form in gender exploitation). Faced with what science tells us is the road to total destruction, the system nonetheless continues to accelerate down that road, simply because capital accumulation is the driving force, the *modus operandi*, of the entire system. Seriously addressing planetary boundaries would mean going against the structure of the entire mode of production in which we live.

Of course, capitalism is capable of reforms in some areas—until these reforms seriously threaten the accumulation process itself. At that point they are brought to an end more or less abruptly. The problem is that mitigating climate change at this point would require reductions in global carbon emissions by 6 percent a year while sucking an additional 150 gigatons of carbon out of the atmosphere by means of negative emissions. Intervention on this scale would require not only the rapid elimination of fossil fuels/fossil capital (zero net carbon emissions by 2050), but also far-reaching changes in the organization of social production that would threaten the entire accumulation system. As a result, neither individual capitalists, nor corporations, nor the capitalist state, have made significant moves in the more than a third of a century that the climate crisis has been upon us, with the result that time is rapidly running out in which to take actions on the scale required and the whole problem is accelerating—and may soon be irreversible in terms of returning to Holocene conditions. Given present trends, the carbon budget will be broken, i.e., the trillionth metric ton of carbon will be emitted, in less than eighteen years—and likely even before that—if an ecological revolution does not intervene to stop it.

Given that we live in a capitalist society what we must look for is not capitalist reforms as such, i.e., reforms engendered by the system, but rather a vast eco-revolutionary movement going *against the logic of the system,* pushing

those measures needed for the sustainability of the Earth System as a home for humanity, in the context of the promotion of a world of substantive equality. Such a revolt will necessarily begin *within* capitalism. But as Bertolt Brecht once said, sooner rather than later it will be necessary to leave "the burning house."

JE: The sane, non-climate skeptic on the right would argue that the solution is innovation in green technology, developed through the interplay of market forces. We therefore need *more* capitalism, not less. Why could "green capitalism" not work?

JBF: I would question the "sanity" of such views, which constitute simply another form of denialism. We are not talking about some minor difficulty, but rather the sustainability of the human relation to the Earth system. The main reason proponents of this approach offer purely technological "solutions" to climate change, rather than addressing the social and ecological relations of production, i.e., our alienated social metabolism with nature, is simply in order to protect the existing system as their first priority.

It is true we need to implement "new" technologies like solar and wind power as part of a solution. But such measures will not allow us to continue the accumulation system as before since we are still faced with a "closing circle" represented by natural boundaries. Some argue that we should promote geoengineering technologies as a solution, particularly BECCS (bioenergy with carbon capture and storage), seen as a negative emissions technology allowing us to pull carbon from the atmosphere. But current proposals to remove up to a trillion tons of carbon from the atmosphere would require a total land mass for bioenergy production (to power electrical plants) equal to *two Indias*, plus as much water as all of current agriculture demands, and costing some $500 trillion (as a median estimate). All of this would be on top of our existing energy infrastructure—and would be necessary only because the capitalist system was unable to reduce carbon emissions.

It is wrong to assume that capitalism is infinitely innovative in terms of technology or that most of this technology is benign. Remember it is our existing technologies that have to a considerable extent generated the ecological crisis in the first place. Most of our major technological innovations—nuclear development, jet aircraft, computers, the Internet, drones, etc.—have come initially from the state sector. If technological gains are made in efficiency this is always governed by the principle "Accumulate, Accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets." That is, the underlying logic in

which such efficiency gains are introduced is not one of conservation but of the expansion of the economy as a whole leading to more use of energy, more economic waste, etc. This is the basis of the famous "Jevons Paradox" (where, as William Stanley Jevons noted in the nineteenth century, every improvement in energy efficiency of steam engines increased the consumption of coal by expanding the numbers and scale of steam engines). Conservation is anathema to such a system. Green capitalism is a *contradictio in adjecto*.

JE: In carbon emissions trading and climate compensatory consumption, we can see how the slow catastrophe itself (and the anxiety it creates) is being turned into a value-creating market. But there is also some discussion about "steady-state economy" these days, according to which human civilization needs to curb its expansion in order to reach a state of balance in relation to the planet. With this follows a host of questions (economical, demographical, redistributive, etc.) that needs political answers, but none of which necessarily challenge the fundamental tenets of capitalism. What are your thoughts on this theory?

JBF: Carbon trading and green capitalist consumption strategies have proven practically useless in addressing climate change, but do, as you note, generate another value-creating market, geared to accumulation. Such markets take on a speculative character, which tends towards financial bubbles. This is analogous to how we address the environment in the sense that we operate in a kind of ecological bubble that is stretched to the limit and is bound to burst.

The issue of the steady-state economy you raise is important. It is clear that unending exponential economic growth in a limited planetary environment, as required by the accumulation of capital (barring the fairy tale of the decoupling of capital accumulation from the increased throughput of energy and materials) is what leading ecological economist Herman Daly has rightly called an "Impossibility Theorem." Here we have to face the reality of natural limits from the standpoint of science and realism. The basic problem is that the scale of the global economy is such that it now rivals the basic biogeochemical cycles of the planet, and intrudes on those cycles in such a way that critical natural thresholds are crossed and qualitative changes occur (including dynamic feedbacks), threatening the stability of the Earth System from the standpoint of the human species, and innumerable other species. One essential response then is to move away from a mode of production that is predicated on "grow or die," as in the capitalist system. That of course does not mean there cannot continue to be improvement and development and

even growth in a wider, more natural sense. What needs to be avoided is what under capitalism is defined as economic growth, which is synonymous with the net accumulation of capital.

A steady-state economy means zero net capital formation. It is consistent with advances in productivity and qualitative change, and with a society of sustainable human development—that is, Marx's conception of future socialist society. It is incompatible, however, with the system of capital accumulation, or a capitalist class (since no one could get a larger share of the pie, i.e. profits on capital, without decreasing that of others). The goal then has to be to focus on qualitative improvements in human conditions, redistribution, reciprocity, etc.

This is not meant to suggest that the world could not ecologically sustain limited economic growth in certain areas. For example, reforestation could well promote growth while restoring the environment. But capitalism's unrestrained creative destruction of the earth as a whole and its exponential drive to ever increased accumulation and conspicuous consumption are not compatible with the constraints imposed by ecological sustainability, particularly in the more challenging environment of the Anthropocene.

To be sure, in addressing the issue of growth, within a limited planetary environment, we also need to recognize that the poorest countries still require quantitative growth as well as qualitative development. This would not, however, necessitate that they reach the current *retrogressive* stage of the bloated, waste-based imperial economies.

JE: If transnational corporations act globally in a world where political power is still largely confined to nation states or regional bloc-entities, which institutions should we call upon to regulate them?

JBF: In *Monthly Review* we don't normally use the term transnational corporation, but rather multinational corporation. According to the original distinction a multinational corporation was defined as a corporation located in one country but operating in many. In contrast, a transnational corporation was defined as a corporation located in no particular country and operating across many. Today it is popular, especially in Europe, to use the term transnational corporation for all situations, and even to refer to a transnational capitalist class and a transnational state. The problem with this is that it downplays the extent to which such monopolistic firms with a global reach are still tied to particular states or political regions. This leads to viewing them as all-powerful, free-floating entities, beyond state power, on

the one hand, while downplaying their imperialist role (seeing them as abstract mechanisms of transnationalization), on the other.

The truth is that these giant corporations, while they may have partly transcended their origins, remain for the most part distinct national creations controlled largely by corporate boards, investors, and legal norms in particular states, and attached to the militaries and military alliances of those states—the significance of which cannot be underrated. While there is some transnationalization of ownership and control it is not dominant. ExxonMobil and Amazon are U.S. corporations. Volkswagen is a German corporation. BP is a British corporation. Although the BRICS states now have their own multinationals, most of the large corporations are still concentrated in the rich nations at the center of the world economy. Their power is largely a product of political-economic structures generated by those states and their capitalist interests. They are then subject to control.

If we wanted to look at the corporations who dominate water privatization globally, supposing we wanted to regulate that, we would be looking primarily at the corporations of just a few countries—France, the United States, and the United Kingdom—who together account for the eight largest firms in this area. These are not broadly transnational corporations and they are not beyond state control. Rather they depend on the support of their respective states. If regulation of such corporations is difficult in the states concerned, it is because of the triple alliance of the capitalist class, corporations, and the state in a larger imperialist project, not simply due to the power of such "transnational" corporations vis a vis the state. All of which is to say that at the bottom it is problem of class power more than state power.

JE: I guess the argument is that neoliberal globalization has created an open world market that is not matched by any political structure. So any corporation that faces regulation in their country of origin can just pick up and leave for one that offers more beneficial terms.

JBF: That is true to some extent, but corporations don't just pick up and leave for the most part, nor is the world made up of free-floating corporations. Rather it is a world of global oligopolies/monopolies that depend on their relations to one or at most a few states, in terms of property, assets, legal and political institutions, within a world hierarchy of nations. Neoliberalism actually has fostered the growth of corporate concentration on a global scale, with the home countries being the centers in which the wealth in financial terms is amassed (where the profits are repatriated), with the respective state

apparatuses typically falling in line. The fact that production is often done abroad is significant, particularly for jobs, and even for GDP, but what is most important is where the surplus (value) generated ends up, particularly financial markets since all asset accumulation today is essentially financial.

It would be a mistake to see neoliberal globalization as something that is permanent and independent of states. Such extreme capitalist globalization, which was touted as inevitable and irreversible, much the way that Francis Fukuyama touted "the end of history," is now under full-scale attack everywhere we look, partly as a result of the economic stagnation in the rich countries. It is under assault from some of the very states, notably the United States, that formerly put it into place, as witnessed by the Trump administration. We are now seeing the resumption of trade and currency wars, and this would not be possible if capital and corporations were not divided into interests geographically. There is a fascinating analysis of this phenomenon in a July 24, 2018 paper for the Political Economy Research Institute by economist Thomas Palley, entitled "Globalization Checkmated?"

In this complex situation of growing trade and currency wars and attacks on neoliberal globalization, the traditional imperial state/blocs have a number of advantages, which they are seeking to exploit, in that they:

(1) dominate world financial centers and the amassing of financial assets; (2) have command of world currency markets; (3) are the main beneficiaries of the global labor arbitrage (the system of extreme exploitation based on production in areas of the global South with the lowest unit labor costs—leading to the siphoning off of much of the economic surplus from South to North); (3) constitute the main centers of global consumption and hence "markets"; (4) are technological leaders in most critical industries; and (5) have military hegemony directly or through alliances, as in the United States itself and NATO, which today is leading to constant imperial warfare. Corporations in the historic imperialist countries have more and more moved the platforms for manufacturing and labor-intensive production in general to the global South (where possible), which generally promotes job growth in the South and weakens employment growth in the North. But the profits from these operations feed the financial dominance of the global North and the production carried out is geared to the consumer markets of the North. Accumulation in a sense has been severed globally, with more and more production in the global South but the wealth accumulation and consumption still centered in the North.

China and the BRICS in general have begun to challenge this all along the way, which is what has caused the Trump administration to shift to an aggressive geoeconomic strategy with respect to China in particular, but so far, the imperialist structure of the world economy remains largely intact. Declining U.S. hegemony, however, suggests that this is likely to change. At present, China's economy is growing at a rate that results in a doubling of its size every ten years. The U.S. economy is lucky at present to double in size every thirty-five years, and EU GDP is growing even more slowly.

What we know for certain is that the imperial corporations depend on the imperial states, and vice versa. It is this that is creating the basis for renewed nationalism at present, which is fed by certain powerful corporations and ruling class interests in the global North who see their position slipping along with the economies and states on which they depend. The notion that the imperial states, individually or as a group, are incapable of regulating their corporations because of neoliberal globalization ignores the fact that neoliberal globalization was the product of these very same imperial states. When conditions change there is an attempt to change the rules. Indeed, the whole economic world order is now in flux in a period of severe crisis of capitalism-imperialism. All of this suggests that a different worldwide political-economic hegemony could lead to very different results.

JE: This summer has seen record temperatures in the northern hemisphere with droughts and forest-fires as a result. In a country like Sweden people quite like to be able to enjoy Mediterranean-style weather for once, but at the same time there is a widespread feeling that something is deeply wrong. Yet the political apathy in the face of impending disaster seems to grow each year. Why is it that the worse the crisis gets, the less it is discussed as a shared political problem?

JBF: I appreciate your comments here. I live in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and our problems too are those of drought and forest fires. The air quality in the summer now due to forest fires all around is at times worse than that of the most polluted cities in the world.

The political problem you raise is crucial. You might be interested in the book *Living in Denial* by Karie Marie Norgaard, a former student and now colleague of mine in the department of sociology at the University of Oregon, which addresses exactly the dilemma you are describing in terms of Norway. Climate change raises the issue of capitalism. Faced with this there is a tendency in wide sectors to deny or reject the whole problem. As Naomi Klein powerfully expressed it in her argument "The Right is Right" in *This*

Changes Everything, the political right is convinced that in order to defend capitalism it is necessary to reject climate politics, which means rejecting the science itself. But it is not just the right that is the problem here. Much of the liberal-left too, particularly the upper-middle class, when faced with the choice of climate change and the needed changes in the whole mode of production, chooses to reject the problem but in a different way, via the notion that technology and the market will save the day with a little help from affirmative government.

I am impressed by a little book by the psychologist Robert Jay Lifton entitled *The Climate Swerve*. Lifton adopts the concept of the swerve (representing the swerve of the atom from a mechanistic trajectory and standing for freedom of action) from ancient Epicurean philosophy and combines this with Erik Erikson's notion of the formation of a "universal" or "species-wide" identity. It is only this swerve in our consciousness (and our practice) in relation to other human beings, Lifton contends, that will save us. His argument is that in recent decades "climate rejecters" (he says that they are not so much deniers as rejecters because they do know of the impending catastrophes) and nuclearists have pushed us in the direction of total destruction or exterminism, while what is necessary to counter this is a broader notion of universal humanity, including the recognition that the human species itself is in danger. (Much of Lifton's argument, though he does not himself draw this connection, is in fact related to Marx's discussion of species being and his own ties to Epicurean materialism. It was Marx, after all, who in the history of modern philosophy was to first to place emphasis on the significance of the Epicurean swerve.)

JE: It is hard to think of anything that fills the individual human being with such hopelessness as climate change. The common response seems to be to individualize the guilt and channel it through "responsible" toothless consumer behavior. Yet, as you say, few people seem prepared to accept a substantially reduced standard of living. At the same time people in the global South see a higher standard of living as a historical right, given the suffering they have endured during 500 years of colonial and neocolonial domination from the West. How can these interests be reconciled with the need to drastically change our way of living?

JBF: With respect to consumer behavior, this is, I believe, the wrong way to think about the matter, since we have to take account of the role of ideology first. What you call the "common response," is a view entrapped within the dominant ideology and its commodity fetishism. My experience is that the

notion of consumer sovereignty or consumer society is the most powerful ideological trope of our times. The current capitalist system is not primarily geared to promoting the needs of consumers by any rational standard. GDP, or national income, does not measure human welfare but simply the "value added" in the commodity market. Even then not all of that commodity value goes to what we are accustomed to call consumers as opposed to investors (which excludes the fact that most consumers are workers from the standpoint of production). The strategic element in the economy, what determines economic growth, is the accumulation of capital, which is in the hands of a relatively miniscule part of the population who take most of the spoils. Consumption is governed by the Galbraithian "dependence effect," which says that what and how we consume is largely determined by those who control production.

From this perspective the idea that all environmental damage is caused by consumerism, and consequently is the responsibility mainly of ordinary individuals is nonsense. In the United States well in excess of a trillion dollars is spent each year on marketing, trying to get consumers to buy things they neither want nor need. Most marketing promises them that this or that good to purchase on the market will result in qualitative improvements in buyers' lives, offering the things that they most desire—community, love, recognition, human solidarity, security—but which the commodity market can never provide. Life is more and more impoverished in a world in which we are taught to fetishize things, which turn into the chains that hold us.

We have long known that monopoly capitalism relies on waste of all kinds to keep the accumulation system going. Such a society depends, as William Morris said, on useless labor producing useless goods. In the rich capitalist societies, where productivity has increased by two-three percent or more for centuries, one can nonetheless find the most abysmal poverty, justified by racism, sexism, and every other form of oppression. Inequality, unemployment, and widespread impoverishment of multitudes exist just to keep the accumulation process going. In such a system there is plenty of room to improve peoples' lives qualitatively while protecting the environment. The gross irrationality of our economic and social system is a measure of what we could do to improve the lives of people and the environment.

There is no doubt that the economies of the global South need to develop and that this should be a human priority. This should not however be confused with the need to go against the logic of monopoly capital in the rich countries, where, waste (including wasted lives), precariousness, and inequality are

mere grist for accumulation mill. With respect to the poor countries of the global South, in most cases the ecological footprint per capita of these societies is so much below that of the global North that their economic development is not an issue where climate change is concerned. It is not people in Bangladesh or Mali or Haiti trying to get enough to eat who generated our planetary ecological emergency. Rather imperialism, including today's extreme exploitation of the periphery, is at the core of the division of humanity that has created the ecological rift in the first place. In terms of ecological footprints, we need a system of contraction and convergence: contraction in ecological footprints in the global North and convergence toward a sustainable ecological footprint globally, which means that there would still be room for development in the poor countries of the global South. This kind of development need not follow the unsustainable and destructive paths pioneered by the rich, imperialist countries. The ecological problem is not simply a matter of scale or quantitative impacts, but rather of the organization of production itself and how best to fulfill human needs.

The idea that we cannot act on climate change because we are afraid of having to sacrifice too much reminds me of how Rex Tillerson when he was CEO of Exxon asked the assembled stockholders (in a view that rivals Marie Antoinette's "Let Them Eat Cake" in its absolute cluelessness and crassness): "What good is it to save the planet if humanity suffers?"

JE: From a decolonial perspective, capitalism's expropriatory relationship to nature is intimately intertwined with colonialism and seen as a logical product of Western civilization in general. In parts of the global South there are concepts based on non-Western thought, such as Pachamama or *Buen Vivir* in South America, according to which nature is an integrated part of a larger "cosmic" system where the earth is treated as a totality and not merely as a resource for extraction. Is there anything ecosocialists in the West can learn from these currents of thought?

JBF: It is certainly true that "ecosocialists in the West" have much to learn from indigenous traditions and non-Western cultures in general and there are currently many efforts to do so. At the same time, we should not see ecosocialism as simply a Western conception but as a view that from the beginning has been characterized by cultural cross-fertilization. To just give a few examples of this ecosocialist-indigenous cross-fertilization, in our 2011 book *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism* Fred Magdoff and I published as an appendix to our book the "Peoples' Agreement" of the World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change,

Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 2010—precisely because the "Peoples' Agreement" incorporated many of these essential values emanating from indigenous traditions with respect to humanity and the earth. In his new book *Red-Green Revolution* Victor Wallis emphasizes the leading role of indigenous struggles within the ecosocialist movement. Naomi Klein has a chapter in her *This Changes Everything* that is mainly devoted the resistance of indigenous communities to extreme extractivism. Everywhere, from the alliance of Vancouver ecosocialists with First Nations fighting the Kinder-Morgan Transmountain pipeline, to the attempts of ecosocialists in Ecuador and Venezuela to draw on indigenous values, to the international peasants movement Via Campesina and the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, we see a fundamental coming together in this respect.

The term the "West" has today come to stand in the eyes of much of the world for Western imperialism, and is thus subject to critique on both economic and cultural terms. To challenge the historical legacy of Western expropriation of the earth is to challenge colonialism, including settler colonialism, and a centuries-long history of racist imperialism, out of which capitalism as a world system arose. Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, saw today's struggles as embodying a kind of negative dialectic, necessarily reaching into the colonial/decolonial past, out of which a new "Third Nature" would arise.

Historical materialism, going back to Marx and Engels, has, I believe, a special role to play in this respect. Classical Marxism is unique in the degree to which it emphasizes the development of property forms, or forms of the appropriation of nature, within all societies and all modes of production. It argues that early communal forms of property were often superior socially and culturally in terms of equality, reciprocity, the relationship to the earth, and the unalienated development of humanity—when compared to so-called civilization or class society. (This is not to deny of course that these early societies were less advanced in the development of the material forces of production.) Marxism has thus always looked to traditional, more communal and collectivist societies and cultures as historical resources and sources of inspiration in the historical transcendence of class society. In this respect, we need to learn from *vernacular revolutionary traditions*, which reach back to discover the historical patterns of resistance and the values underlying the struggles of various peoples. Ecosocialism in particular requires this unearthing of the past in order to revolutionize the present.

But in rediscovering the more holistic and communal values of indigenous and peasant communities, it is important also to understand that in the history of the West itself, if we reach back far enough, we can discover long buried ecological values, comparable to the indigenous *Buen Vivir*. Even in the West ghosts of a more collective past still haunt the acquisitive society of the present. It was after all the ancient Greek materialist Epicurus, who taught that the earth is our friend and that warned that "nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is too little." Here too, within the historical and cultural traditions of Europe, we can find inspiration for today's anti-capitalist, ecosocialist struggles—a common ground from which we can build a more sustainable future.

JE: Where is hope?

JBF: Struggle.

Cover photo: Above Karbole, where fires have burned since the weekend, smoke blotted out the sun. Photo credit: "Sweden battles wildfires from Arctic Circle to Baltic Sea," BBC, July 18, 2018.

Source:

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