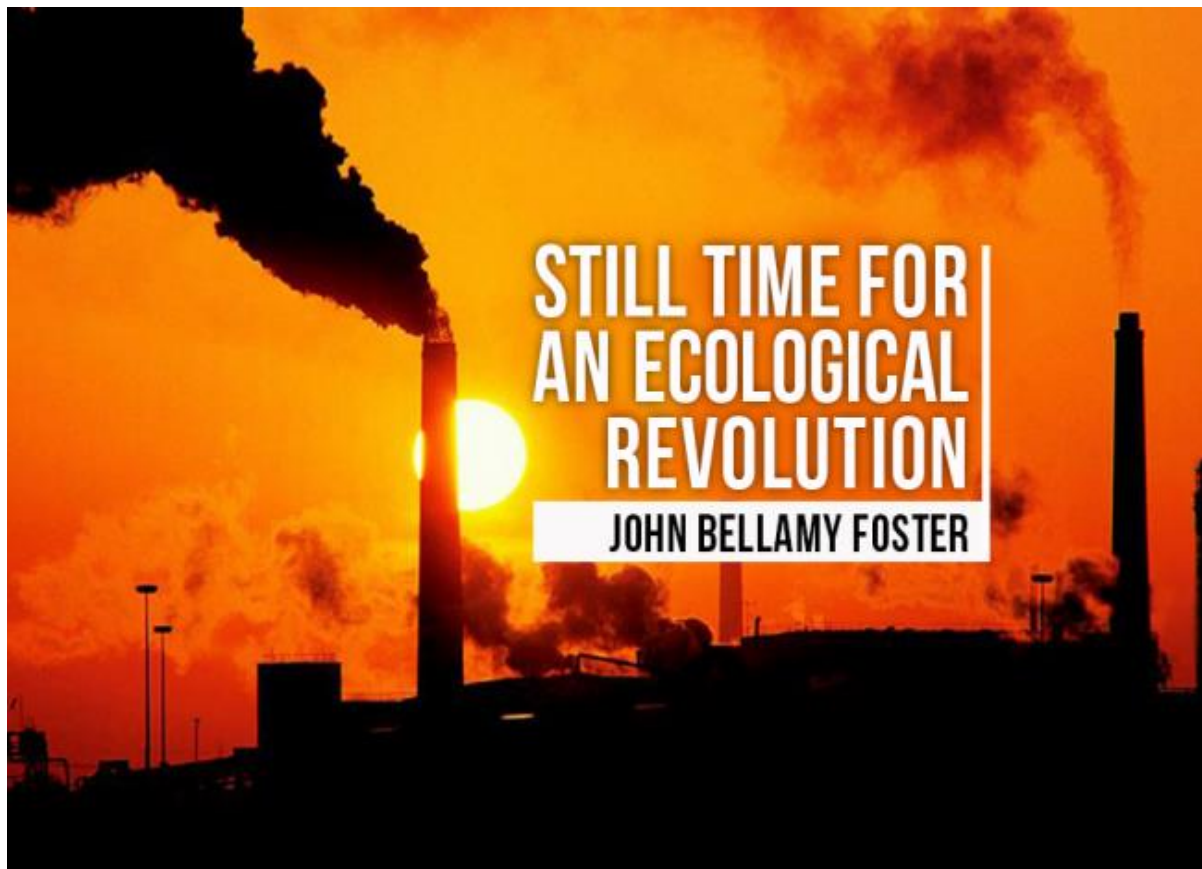


There is Still Time for an Ecological Revolution to Prevent Hot House Earth



John Bellamy Foster & Fiona Ferguson

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[Editor: This is surely one of the best expositions of the situation and of what has to be done right now. A must read!]

There is Still Time for an Ecological Revolution to Prevent Hothouse Earth:

After a summer of scorching temperatures and forest fires, John Bellamy Foster (author, environmental sociologist and editor of *Monthly Review*) was interviewed by Fiona Ferguson about the oncoming threat posed by global warming and what is being dubbed as Hothouse Earth.

FF: Recent record high temperatures might suggest the development towards climate catastrophe is already far advanced, faster than scientists and the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) predicted. Many are predicting that it may already be too late to save the situation. What is your assessment?

JBF: I think the projections of the IPCC and climate scientists generally have been reasonably accurate so far, based on an October 2017 report on this from *Carbon Brief*. Where a sense of the models not being accurate no doubt enters in is not so much in terms of their predictions with respect to warming itself, but rather in the inability of models to predict the severity of the resulting extreme weather events and the inability to gauge the development of positive feedbacks. Not only are we constantly being shocked by the increasing extremity of the weather, but we are facing new information all that time about the perils of the main climate feedbacks, which threaten to accelerate the whole problem outside our control – positive feedbacks such as the melting of the arctic sea ice, the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet, the disruption of the thermohaline circulation, the drying out of the Amazon rainforest, etc.

The situation is very grave. At the present rate of emissions, we will break the carbon budget in eighteen years. To avoid doing so (i.e., in order to not emit the trillionth metric ton of carbon, to stay clear of 450 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and to prevent an increase in global average temperature by 2° C) while reaching zero net carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 – required if we are to stabilize carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere – it is necessary to reduce carbon dioxide emissions beginning in 2020 by around 6 percent a year globally while sucking another 150 gigatons of carbon from the atmosphere by means of improved forestry and agroecology practices. Carbon dioxide emissions in the rich countries, where emission reductions are more feasible, would have to decrease by double digit levels annually. Needless to say, we would also have to contain other greenhouse gas emissions such as methane and nitrous oxide.

None of this, however, is beyond our reach. We have ample means of making such cuts in emissions, while improving the lives of most people and protecting the environment. But this cannot be achieved without a sharp departure from business as usual, which means going against the logic of

capital, and particularly the fossil-fuel complex. It would require an ecological and social revolution. Those who pronounce that it is already “too late” are thus not referring to whether the change is humanly possible at this point—it definitely is. Rather, they are acceding to the prevailing logic of capital and the attendant political structure, as defining the limits of what is feasible. This a kind of defeatism enforced by the system, relying on what C. Wright Mills called crackpot realism, in that it allows the very forces that have generated the planetary crisis to determine how to react to that crisis with the inevitable disastrous results for humanity as a whole.

Arguably, the stance on climate change introduced by the Trump administration is not so much a failure to acknowledge global warming, but rather a concerted attempt to destroy any path to mitigation by closing off any remaining hope of meeting the global carbon budget. It is a sort of burn the ships behind you strategy from the standpoint of the system. All of this is in line with capitalist imperatives. Wall Street stocks have reached new heights. I have been arguing for about a quarter-century, since I wrote *The Vulnerable Planet*(1994), that that the system of capital accumulation is incapable of addressing the climate problem, and nothing in all that time has presented any convincing counter evidence, while time is rapidly running out. What this means is that we have to create another path, one necessarily arising within but leading away from the present regime of accumulation.

An article published this month in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* entitled “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene,” by Will Steffan, et. al, representing some of the leading Earth-system scientists (including some of those associated with both the planetary boundaries concept and the Anthropocene Working Group) argues that the 2° C boundary is crucially important because there is now ample reason to expect that if we reach (or cross) that guardrail we will have arrived at a point of irreversibility—meaning that we can no longer get back to anything approximating Holocene conditions (e.g. 350 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere). Instead we will be faced with cascading tipping points resulting from climate feedbacks that will likely push us the climate onto the “Hothouse Earth” pathway, irrevocably leading to a rise in global average temperature of 3-4° C this century and even higher after that. The challenge facing us, then, is to stabilize the climate, relatively speaking. Even under the best conditions, however, we are likely to see a planet warmer this century than any time in the last 800,000 years.

The authors of the National Academy of Science article on Hothouse Earth believe that it is still possible to stabilize the climate but only through a massive global effort. Geoengineering options are considered but for the most part disregarded as far too dangerous, ultimately compounding the climate change problem without solving it. Instead, they insist that “incremental linear changes to the present socioeconomic system are not enough to stabilize the Earth System. Widespread, rapid, and fundamental transformations will likely be required to reduce the risk of crossing the threshold and locking in the Hothouse Earth pathway.”

FF: The fossil fuel industries – oil, gas and coal – play a central role in the global capitalist economy. Do you think there is any realistic possibility of persuading or pressuring the world’s governments to move away from fossil fuels?

JBF: Let’s look at the history for a moment. We first became aware of accelerated global warming in the early 1960s (the first warning emanated from climatologists in the Soviet Union). A presidential commission on the subject was initiated in Washington in the mid-1960s under Lyndon Johnson. It became a world issue with James Hansen’s testimony before Congress and the formation of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in the late 1980s. This was followed by the Kyoto Protocol in the early 1990s. But nothing really has happened materially since to alleviate the danger, despite various agreements, all the way up to the 2015 Paris Agreement. We have seen no real reductions in carbon emissions, which, to the contrary, have continued to rise. No country in the world that is a major emitter of fossil fuels has cut carbon emissions at anywhere near the level required.

This has mainly to do with the nature and logic of capitalism. The ruling power in a capitalist society is the capitalist class, and its modes of accumulation via the giant monopolistic corporations, and financial markets, all of which exist in the private sector. Theoretically, the state is relatively autonomous of the capitalist class. But, in practice, the state, particularly at the center of the system, is largely dominated and delimited by capital. The state under monopoly capitalism, as Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy argued more than half a century ago, is “democratic in form and plutocratic in content.” Faced with climate change, capitalist states have adopted one or two stances: (1) denying it altogether (as in Trump’s Washington), or (2) instituting very limited and ineffective mechanisms – aimed at not upsetting markets – purportedly directed at carbon dioxide emissions reductions and the development of energy alternatives. These measures, which include carbon market, alternative energy subsidies, and the like, are invariably insufficient to address the problem, at most gaining a bit of extra time.

Although it is true that the state in a capitalist society can at times institute quite significant reforms, anything that threatens the capital accumulation process itself is quickly aborted.

All of this is a rather long-winded way of saying that there is no possibility that the world's governments as presently constituted will move away from fossil fuels—*unless* of course the logic of capital is challenged throughout the society, threatening the state and the dominance of the powers that be in quite fundamental ways. It is possible that China might do something in the way of a fairly radical version of ecological modernization outside the capitalist norm. However, their priority too is high economic growth at all costs. China's fossil fuel use thus continues to expand despite strenuous efforts to reduce the amount of carbon emissions per unit of output and to decrease dependence on coal.

Larry Elliott, the Guardian's talented economic editor just wrote an article on August 16, entitled "Capitalism Can Crack Climate Change," in which he claimed, with no understanding of the real problem, that it was merely a matter of a carbon tax and finding the right technological innovations—exactly "what," he declared, "capitalism is all about." This, though, is little more than an ideological claim, lacking any real substance, based on Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction, introduced in his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* to defend monopoly pricing and profits. The only surprising element in Elliott's defense of capitalism with respect to climate change is his supposition that "a Chinese model of managed and directed capitalism might be more appropriate than the Anglo-Saxon model." But to claim that the economic model of present-day China will save the world from climate change (and provide a justification for capitalism as well) at the very time that China's growth in emissions is increasing at the fastest pace in seven years is obviously filled with contradictions and ironies.

The only thing that could alter this dire situation, all over the world, is the rise of *another power* in society. We need not millions but hundreds of millions of people, necessarily predominantly working class, in the street day in and day out. There has to be a shift in tactics towards active noncooperation. Mere mass demonstrations, as important as they are, will no longer do the job in this situation. Given the threat to capital accumulation that a serious climate change movement represents such protests are simply downplayed by the corporate media. Hence, rather than focusing on getting media attention, or concentrating on direct appeals to the government the strategic orientation of the movement has to be one of noncooperation with the political-economic

hegemony. What is needed is an independent, revolutionary groundswell aimed at the reconstitution of production and consumption in the society, at least to the degree necessary to prevent society from reaching the point of no return with respect to climate change—though the ultimate aims would need to go beyond that. It will have to be internationalist, which means anti-imperialist in character, since global unity of the oppressed—encompassing the many forms of oppression is the *sine qua non* of the movement.

FF: *A few years ago, the general consensus was that anthropogenic climate change was now widely accepted, except for isolated deniers on the fringe of politics. What is your assessment of the reassertion of climate change denial, particularly around the Trump presidency. Why now, given how evident climate chaos has become?*

JBF: In my view, straight out climate denial is not really the issue. As Naomi Klein argued in her 2014 book *This Changes Everything: "The Right Is Right."* The political right, Klein points out, is very clear that to fight climate change you have to fight capitalism, and that is the source of their objections to all efforts to mitigate climate change. Given a choice between capitalism and the planet they choose the former. It has very little to do with the rejection of climate change as a reality. I'm not sure how much even people in the primarily lower-middle class, white demographic that constitutes Trump's chief supporters actually buy into the climate denial line, though of course some do, particularly in fundamentalist religious circles. However, it is more like a badge than a belief. A lot of what stands for straight out denialism is really a kind of political trope. The Trump administration's approach to truth is like professional wrestling or reality television. It is presented as the truth and adopted as such, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, almost in an act of defiance. It represents a kind of destruction of reason, and in that lies its propagandistic power. Like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* people are so enraged that they are willing to "vomit up reason." Of course, all of this is heavily promoted by capital with massive amounts of money going into keeping this irrational propaganda campaign afloat.

The real issue, from my standpoint, is not so much the straight-out climate deniers as the open acquiescence of political liberals (or the so-called liberal-left), the well-meaning Larry Elliotts, who adopt the position that the whole thing can be solved by the market and technology with a little bit of help from the state. This is a different form of denial. The willful delusions here are in some ways more dangerous than that of the straight-out climate deniers, since they are subtler and infect those who ostensibly are on the side of change. The impression arises that something is being done, say, under Obama, while the actions taken are in fact grossly insufficient. It is the liberal

head in the sand approach, which claims that we can solve climate change incrementally as if we had all the time in the world and without changing society, that Klein was really most concerned with targeting in her book. It is for this reason that we have to refer constantly to the need for System Change Not Climate Change, the name of the important ecosocialist movement in the United States.

FF: *Some argue that because Climate Change will eventually impact upon the economy and profit rates, capitalism may be forced to take ecologically corrective measures. Do you think this is possible or is capitalism inherently ecologically destructive?*

JBF: The ecosocialist and Marxian economist James O'Connor, founder of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, famously argued in this way with respect to environmental costs in his second contradiction of capitalism theory. Others such as Marxian ecological economist Paul Burkett and myself have insisted that this is entirely wrong. There is no automatic feedback mechanism in the system that translates ecological costs into economic costs to which capitalism will automatically respond. Capitalism as K. William Kapp used to argue is a system of "unpaid costs." It externalizes most ecological costs onto society and onto the earth where they have no direct effect on its bottom line. The system can thus grow economically while it destroys its surroundings and the ecological conditions of human existence. By the time this becomes a problem for the system itself the game will be over for the planet as a safe place for humanity.

There is no doubt, then, that capitalism is inherently ecologically destructive. We have the proof all around us. It is built into the inner logic of the system. Our best hope is to push against this logic producing in the short run a transitional society in which people and the planet come before profit. But that means that we will already be on the way to a new society of sustainable human development. This is at the core of the movement toward socialism in the Anthropocene.

FF: *What do you see as the best way to build mass anti-capitalist ecological consciousness and a mass anti-capitalist movement against climate change?*

JBF: In 1979, the great English Marxian historian E.P. Thompson read an article in the *Guardian* that Britain was going to install cruise missiles as part of the nuclear weapons-deterrence buildup at that time, which quickly metamorphosed into the Strategic Defense Initiative (better known as Star Wars) under Reagan. Thompson had been a leading figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the

protests against above ground hydrogen bomb tests. CND emerged as product of the New Left but ended up aligning itself with the Labour Party and with NATO. Faced with a new deadly nuclear expansion in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Thompson decided not to stick with the CND but to create a new movement, European Nuclear Disarmament (END) that would be non-aligned and autonomous, linking the movements in Europe and forging ties with similar non-aligned movements in Eastern Europe. This, then, emerged as a powerful grassroots struggle rallying millions across Europe. The END strategy, marked by Thompson's *Protest and Survive* (which Monthly Review Press published in the United States) also had enormous influence in the United States where a massive Nuclear Freeze Movement emerged, a groundswell that had the support of 72 percent of the U.S. population and that was outside the normal political structure.

The strength of the grassroots anti-nuclear thrust of the 1980s was that it did not seek just to set up *vertical* lines with governments in the manner of organized pressure groups and lobbyists, but rather sought to grow *horizontally* across the societies. It was internationalist in orientation and in Thompson's view a development on the Popular Front against fascism of the 1930s. It thus represented the formation, though short lived, of a kind of popular power which was universalist in its aims—thus a threat to the system. No doubt the effect of END and the Nuclear Freeze Movement in the denuclearization of the period can be exaggerated. Much had to do with the rise of Gorbachev. Still, I think this constitutes the general model of the kind of movement we need at the moment, what might be called a Climate Change Freeze Movement—though in other ways System Change Not Climate Change is a much better designation. Nevertheless, climate change cannot be approached in single-issue terms, as was the 1980s movement to back away from the nuclear brink, but demands action on a far more comprehensive scale, through the self-mobilization of the mass of the population.

Whatever form it takes, I don't doubt that massive struggles will develop (indeed, are developing), first and foremost in the global South, where the worst effects are being felt—but also through the development of an eventual landslide in the global North as well. Still, we need to be mindful of the fact that climate change is characterized by tipping points and the consequences do not develop in linear fashion. The worry is that by the time the catastrophic conditions are felt on a wide enough scale, and by the time people mobilize, the situation may be immeasurably worse, with much of it out of our control. That is of course our greatest fear. It should impress upon

us, though, the need to act, and as part of acting, we have to extend our critical understanding to others.

FF: Here in Ireland, People Before Profit TD Brid Smith has a Parliamentary Bill to ban all new fossil fuel extraction in Ireland and Irish Waters and it is attracting significant support. Do you think this kind of small scale local/national initiative is helpful in raising awareness and building the movement? Are there other initiatives you could suggest?

JBF: I have been watching these developments in Ireland and I think people all around the world have been too. It is immensely important. We recently put up a story about it on MR Online, Monthly Review's website. The Irish initiative represents a clear attempt break with the logic of capital accumulation and the fossil fuel economy and an urgent call to the entire world. If the Irish people have the courage to follow this through it will galvanize the struggles throughout the world, and spark similar attempts elsewhere. Even if this battle is lost, the struggle itself is immeasurably important.

The closest analogue to this in the United States is the Our Children's Trust lawsuit that has now been cleared for trial. It started in Eugene, Oregon where I live. Some of the principal people involved in the suit are friends and acquaintances. James Hansen is the main scientific authority named in the case. It has now been cleared for trial in the United States. It could well emerge as the trial of the century. The Our Children's Trust case employs the doctrine of public trust, based on an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, arguing that the government has a legal obligation to protect the population, particularly children and youth, representing future generations, from the damaging effects of climate change through climate change mitigation. It is a test to see if the courts will act. The government and the fossil fuel companies are the defendants in the suit. I see the Our Children's Trust suit like the parliamentary bill on fossil fuel extraction in Ireland, as offering hope, because they challenge the system in fundamental ways, and represent radical, grassroots initiatives. Another legal struggle in the United States is shaping up centered on the valve turners, a number of individuals who turned off the valves on oil pipelines, and who are being defended on the basis of the necessity defense: that they had no choice but to act given the dire emergency and the prospect of human harm.

All of this is comes from a small number of courageous people, some them children, taking strategic actions on behalf of us all. But what would happen if we collectively stood up in similar ways, throwing wrenches in the system,

demanding fundamental change for the sake of humanity as a whole, creating alternatives that begin at the local level and become progressively more global, and not in small numbers, but in our millions? It is more than merely a question of marching of course, though that is necessary. We need to create movements that take action, forcing a social, ecological, and Cultural Revolution.

Countless people around the world are already involved in various ways in this struggle. There is still time for the necessary ecological revolution, our only real alternative to prevent Hothouse Earth.

Source:



ecosocialistsvancouver.org/article/there-still-time-ecological-revolution-prevent-hot-house-earth-john-bellamy-foster