

# The Only Force That Can Combat Imperialism Today Is a Worldwide Struggle of Workers

Written by John Bellamy Foster

Monday, 25 April 2016 01:30 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 July 2018 03:13

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John Bellamy Foster

Interviewed by Mohsen Abdelmoumen -

## Mohsen Abdelmoumen: Can we consider you a modern Marxist?



[John Bellamy Foster](#) : What is meant by "modern" nowadays is always a complex topic, but setting that aside I would answer Yes, in the concrete sense that I am engaged in the development of historical materialism in the present and see my analysis as part of a broad revolutionary intellectual heritage and scientific tradition going back to Marx. I am particularly concerned with the reunification of Marxism in theory and practice, transcending the Cold War divisions, which split apart Marxism as well, and building on the classical historical materialist tradition. Central to this reunification is the challenge represented by the ecological crisis -- along with the political-economic crisis of our time, and the new fissures opening up in contemporary imperialism. The left has to be open to new strategies for the development of socialism reflecting the changing conditions of the present as history. Western Marxism needs to free itself from Eurocentrism and put imperialism at the center of its analysis.

## Is Marx an ecologist?

He certainly deserves to be considered one. In 2000 I published a book called [Marx's Ecology](#). The original working title was *Marx and Ecology* but as a result of my research it was clear that nothing but the more affirmative form of the title would do. Although the term "ecology" was introduced by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, the year

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before the publication of volume 1 of Marx's

*Capital*

, it did not receive much attention until the very end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

[Marx](#)

, influenced by his friend, the communist physician Roland Daniels, as well as the prominent chemist Justus von Liebig, adopted the concept of

[metabolism](#)

(

*Stoffwechsel*

). Based on the revolution in physics, associated with the development of thermodynamics, Daniels in his manuscript

*Mikrokosmos*

, which Marx read, extended the concept of metabolism to explain the interdependencies between plants and animals. Influenced by this, and later by the work of Liebig, Marx introduced the concept of

["social metabolism"](#)

to define the labor process, which he described as the metabolism between human beings and nature. The social metabolism, in his conception, was part of what he called the larger "universal metabolism of nature."

Under the alienated conditions of capitalist commodity production, Marx argued, a metabolic "rift" developed in the human relation to the earth (the social metabolism), which he illustrated in terms of the loss of soil nutrients, which were shipped to the city in the form of food and fiber under an increasingly industrialized system of agriculture. Marx argued that capitalism thus tended to disrupt the eternal, nature-imposed conditions of production itself. This demanded the "restoration" of the metabolism between humanity and nature, which could only be achieved through the rational regulation of the metabolism between nature and society by the associated producers. Marx thus saw ecological crisis as what he called an ["unconscious socialist tendency."](#)

He went on to provide what was perhaps the most radical conception of sustainability of his time, or perhaps anytime, arguing that human beings do not own the earth, that not even all the people on the earth own the earth, that they were merely responsible for maintaining and improving it for future generations as good heads of the household.

Marx's ecological understanding grew out of his earliest works, including his [doctoral dissertation on the Epicurean philosophy of nature](#)

. He followed developments in natural science quite broadly throughout his lifetime, connecting these to his critique of political economy. As

[Kohei Saito](#)

has shown, Marx's ecological notebooks, written during his last two decades, demonstrate that he was more and more concerned with ecological contradictions in the context of what has

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come to be known as his theory of

[metabolic rift](#)

. For example, Marx took detailed notes on the

[shifts in isotherms and their relation to species extinction](#)

-- a crucial issue today in the context of climate change.

Marx's approach to metabolism anticipated much of modern ecology. Ecology in the modern sense only really took off with the development of the ecosystem concept, which was modeled on the basis of the concept of metabolism. We now speak of the earth metabolism in ways that are closely related to Marx's approach. In the social sciences Marx's concept of social metabolism and his concept of the metabolic rift have become crucial to our understanding of the ecological problem. Indeed, Marx's theory of metabolic rift coupled with what is known today as his [ecological value-form analysis](#) (building on the dual conceptions of use value and exchange value) -- both of which were integrated within his overall

[critique of political economy](#)

-- provides us with the only truly comprehensive social-ecological critique of capitalism available to us today.

**The capitalist system has failed. □ In your opinion, what are the consequences?**

[Eric Hobsbawm](#)'s magisterial history of the short twentieth century was called [The Age of Extremes](#)

What many people don't realize is that one of these extremes was monopoly capitalism (today this is taking the form of

[monopoly-finance capital](#)

, more commonly referred to in terms of its ideology of

[neoliberalism](#)

). From an early age my work has focused on three dimensions of the structural crisis of monopoly capital: imperialism, the crisis of accumulation, and the ecological emergency, which together represent the failure of capitalism. No one can say what the consequences of this structural crisis will be. As

[Georg Lukács](#)

wrote, "[t]he . . . heterogeneity of natural [and social] beings means that every activity is continuously affected by accidents."

What we do know is that under "business as usual" (to adopt the term used by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)

to refer to our present structural reality) the world is in the midst of a

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## Great Climacteric

that can either lead to cascading catastrophes or to a new sustainable order -- and that the more positive outcomes require a movement toward socialism. Right now, without such a shift, the outcomes are primarily negative.

### Imperialistically

, we are seeing the emergence of a more polarized global order, only partly disguised by the shift of actual production increasingly to the global South (with monopolies of capital, technology, finance, trade, and military power concentrated in the global North). Militarism, military intervention, war, and the use of force in the widest sense are

### now extremely difficult to track

, since continual, occurring on a day-to-day basis, and crossing all boundaries.

### Economically

,  
at the center of the world economy  
monopolization, stagnation, and financialization  
dominate, with the global working class suffering from the kind of  
precariousness that Marx associated with the industrial reserve army of labor

. Ruling over all of this and consolidating it is a kind of  
surveillance capitalism

, which is the means of domestic control under monopoly-finance capital.

### Ecologically

, the  
crossing of planetary boundaries

, most notably  
climate change

, points to the almost inevitable collapse of human civilization under business as usual. To speak of the failure of the system when it displays such deep contradictions is an understatement.

Fortunately, in the Marxian conception, history moves by way of contradictions, and we always have to wait for the other shoe to drop. In the Great Climacteric of the present that can only mean -- if humanity is to retain its forward movement -- an acceleration of history such that humanity enters a new phase of ecological revolution.

**If Marx is inescapable, is studying John Bellamy Foster as a modern Marxist inescapable?**

Marxism as a philosophy of praxis is inescapable, since it sums up the revolutionary potential for human emancipation and sustainable human development. I could hardly say that my own

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work is inescapable, except insofar as it partakes of and stands for this larger, developing whole. An historic advantage of Marxian social science is that it is more collective and less individualistic than liberal social science -- more in the mode of natural science in that respect. It is not so tied to [possessive individualism](#) in the bourgeois context, which makes a commodity even of thought. Genuine Marxist thinkers see themselves as engaged in a collective project -- not only in the sense in which thinkers as varied as

[J.D. Bernal](#)

and

[Robert Merton](#)

said that science by its very nature is

*communistic*

(meaning knowledge is shared), but also in the sense of an abiding collectivist commitment to the oppressed. The aim is to promote a unified critical vision of the present as history. In these terms, the work of any given individual is much less important than what is generated by the whole (which of course encompasses all sorts of debates and self-criticism). That does not mean that individual contributions are ignored, but the key is the collective building on each other's work to consolidate a new critical praxis. I see my own work as a part of this collective struggle to develop a constructive synthesis, a doorway to praxis, stretching back to Marx (and even further back to Epicurus) and forward into the twenty-first century. Much of what I have written on ecology, for instance, has been concerned with Marx's theory of metabolic rift. This, I insist, is Marx's own conception, not mine. It arose as an integral part of his whole critique of political economy and has to be seen in that way. It is a concept, however, that we need to develop and apply dynamically in the context of the [challenges and burdens of our time](#)

. Likewise, I have worked at understanding the

[long history](#)

of the

[development](#)

of

[Marxian ecology](#)

, which has been all too often ignored.

**As you know, imperialism strikes everywhere, spreads chaos and establishes its order. Must we resist this system by a worldwide resistance or can we just be content with a local resistance?**

The answer I think is obvious, or should be to all those on the left not falling prey to postmodernist despondency and confusion. Even in the nineteenth century Marx argued that the only way of promoting the struggle was through the creation of an International. Today, as

[István Mészáros](#)

has argued, and as

[Hugo Chávez](#)

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was prepared to argue on a world stage, we need a

[New International](#)

. The only force that can combat imperialism today is a worldwide struggle of workers (what I like to call an emerging

["environmental proletariat,"](#)

reflecting the extended material struggles of our time) through which human solidarity is globalized. In my book

[Naked Imperialism](#)

I argued that the present,

["potentially most dangerous phase of imperialism"](#)

(as Mészáros calls it) was brought into being by the demise of the Soviet Union, which allowed the United States as the sole remaining superpower -- though relying also on NATO -- to initiate regime change in parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, northern Africa, parts of Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Thus began what the

[Council of Foreign Relations](#)

in the United States (the main think tank of U.S. imperialism) has called a

["New Thirty Years' War."](#)

Any mere standing back and letting this happen without resistance -- for example under the delusion that this is simply

["anti-terrorism"](#)

or

["humanitarian intervention"](#)

-- is to sign over the world to the global forces of destruction. Local struggles against imperialism will always occur; the global struggle means that the world's people as a whole must link to these local struggles and come to the aid of them, creating an unbreakable chain. Fortunately, again, there are contradictions, in the economic, political, and ecological realms, that are driving people together. Today's imperialist intervention might even be seen as a desperate effort by the powers that be to prevent the emergence a more unified global revolt, by seeking to drive a wedge in between.

**What is your opinion on the very low level of debate of current U.S. elections? □ And how do you explain Clinton maintains her candidacy while the FBI investigates her and her incompetence the Benghazi case is revealed?**

A low level of debate in the U.S. elections is of course nothing new. It has been going on for decades. The United States, as [Paul Baran](#) and [Paul Sweezy](#) noted in [Monopoly Capital](#) in 1966, is

["democratic in form and plutocratic in content"](#)

-- although one might say that today it is increasingly plutocratic in form as well as plutocratic in content. In contemporary U.S. elections this has reached a heightened form with all sorts of talk of unaccounted "dark money" (that is unaccounted campaign financing from billionaires, cento-millionaires, and corporations) permeating every aspect of the electoral process.

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Still, the debate in the United States is now widening in some ways in [response](#) to long-term [stagnation](#)

and growing

[working-class precariousness](#)

.  
[Bernie Sanders](#)

is receiving millions of votes in the primary elections by advocating a social democratic strategy -- a possible turning point in the United States not seen since the

[Great Depression](#)

and the

[New Deal](#)

, reflecting the depth of the overall

[crisis](#)

. Equally portentous is Donald Trump's support, which is coming mainly from a kind of fascistic combination of outright racism and jingoism and political corporatism aimed at appeals to white working-class voters on the right. What makes him unique is not his open racism and anti-immigrant stance, which he shares with all the Republican candidates, but rather his opposition to free trade agreements, his commitment to universal national health insurance, his promise to support Social Security, etc. (economic positions antithetical to the Republican Party and Wall Street and traditionally associated with the more trade union-oriented segment of the Democratic Party). Despite the deplorable character of the exchanges (witness the Republican candidates' aspersions on national television on how well-endowed they were sexually) this is objectively an opening up of the debate in the United States -- at least at the level of the primary elections. The surprise in the election at this stage is the rage, rebellion, and revolt among lower-income voters who normally have no say and who are alarmed by the nature of the system -- but who are themselves divided between left and right.

As for Hillary Clinton, the investigations into Benghazi and other scandals will not come to anything. She was serving the imperialist cause. Consequently, any attacks on her from the top will be blunted by that fact -- however much her Republican critics, for their own political ends, may seek to criticize her for incompetence and cover-ups. The imperial order takes care of its own. Her aggressiveness in military interventions as U.S. secretary of state, where she embraced the military aspect probably more than any previous holder of that office, is seen as her strongest card. She frequently makes it clear that she is symbolically running for commander-in-chief even more than for president, and suggests that she is the best possible military leader for the country. She is, indeed, the most openly hawkish of all the candidates at this point.

**In one of your books, you talk about ecology as being an anti-capitalist stream, while we note that various ecological parties are part of the capitalist system and are integrated**

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**into it. □ Don't you think that ecology as a political movement was absorbed by capitalism? □ Isn't capitalism quite simply against life?**

The title of my book [Ecology Against Capitalism](#), to which you refer to here, was inspired by the title of Ellen Meiksins Wood's book [Democracy Against Capitalism](#)

. The issue of whether ecological politics has been integrated into capitalism is much the same as the issue of whether democracy has been integrated into capitalism. Capitalism and liberalism (i.e. the political philosophy of possessive individualism) have been historically opposed to democracy, that is the politics of the *demos*

, i.e. of the poor, the working population. Eventually, however, systems of representative government, liberal democracy, and so-called "economic democracy" or "polyarchy" were developed that were fundamentally undemocratic, designed to legitimate systems of power under capitalism by taming democracy. The truth is that democracy in any genuine sense is diametrically opposed to capitalism.

The same general logic applies to the system's so-called integration of ecology. Although there has been some integration of green parties, representing ecological modernization, this is restricted simply to those very limited forms of environmental action that the system can support and that do not conflict with capital accumulation and the amassing of wealth by the top as the driving force of society. Genuine ecology is forced to confront [Capitalism's War on the Earth](#) (the subtitle of [The Ecological Rift](#)

written by me with

[Brett Clark](#)

and

[Richard York](#)

). Today all the ecosystems on the planet are threatened along with the earth itself as a safe place for humanity. And it is the regime of the accumulation of capital -- placing profits before people and the planet -- that drives this.

**You offer to humanity many opportunities in your many rich writings. □ Your description of capitalism is very modernist, particularly concerning the digital era and the technological revolution. □ What prevents reflections of valuable intellectuals like you from being heard, while capitalism has failed? □ Why are you systematically blocked?**

The "Why" that you ask here is not very difficult to answer in broad terms. No

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class-hierarchical order willingly commits suicide. So it has to find a way of promoting ideas that reinforce its own existence while marginalizing all others. "The ruling ideas of society," Marx and Engels wrote in [The German Ideology](#), "are the ideas of the ruling class." The reason they gave: the class that controls "the material means of production" also controls the main "intellectual means of production." Capitalism is a system of power, complete with a supporting ideology, and institutions of control at every level. It is not a system that readily allows alternative views into the major media, and when it does it generally determines the parameters. Although radical ideas may have a marginal role in higher education (in which the relatively privileged get some exposure to alternative ideas) it is generally in a way that is unfavorable to radicalism. Often left academics operate on a level so abstract and convoluted, so removed from any conceivable praxis, as to support the status quo by default. Public intellectuals on the left are more dangerous, but they are mostly kept out of the mainline media, even if their ideas circulated widely in other ways. Such organs of the establishment as the *New York Times*

rarely cover a first-rate, uncompromising dissident like

[Noam Chomsky](#)

, despite his extraordinary influence globally. Nor does he seek out such attention. He refuses to play the game enforced by the status quo.

It is not that intellectuals on the left could not have their voices heard in a muffled way in the mass media. But the price of admission is often rightly deemed too high to pay. For a socialist it means downplaying important aspects of the truth, to the point that one's message is most often obscured even if it is heard by many more people. There are a few individuals who manage to [cross "a river of fire"](#) ( [William Morris](#)'s term) into socialism while still somehow retaining access to the corporate media. But usually their access remains extremely limited, in comparison to conservative, conformist thinkers of equal weight, and they have to be more careful about overstepping certain proscribed limits. The sound-bite structure of the dominant media is inhospitable to ideas that do not rest on the current ideology, and therefore raise complex and challenging questions, which requires of course providing a whole different history and analysis on the spot.

Left, and particularly Marxian, ideas are often treated in the United States as officially invisible, not in the sense that they are not present and are not known and even studied, but rather in the sense that they are considered illegitimate, outside the accepted parameters of civil discourse.

Because of this it is deemed perfectly acceptable according to the hegemonic rules of the game to treat ideas developed on the left as non-existent, even as they are being directly appropriated for establishment purposes -- unacknowledged and stripped of much of their original radical content. For example, emeritus Harvard Business School professor [Shoshana Zuboff](#)

has made a big splash recently by coming out with the notion of "surveillance capitalism."

However,

*Monthly Review*

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had

[a whole issue entitled "Surveillance Capitalism"](#)

and a powerful analysis of the phenomenon, with world-class contributors and a deep theoretical-historical perspective, published in print and posed online in July 2014 -- four months before Zuboff wrote her first article on the subject and nine months before her article was published. The lead article for that issue of

*Monthly Review*

, written by me and Robert W. McChesney, was itself entitled

["Surveillance Capitalism."](#)

Nevertheless, she did not acknowledge

*Monthly Review*

nor has she done so more recently -- in

[her March 2016 article in the  
\*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung\*](#)

, she referred simply to "what I call surveillance capitalism."

Consider as well the issue of [secular stagnation](#) that has become so big of late. Its reincarnation is credited to Larry Summers, long associated with Harvard economics. Summers and the various other liberal economists within the mainstream involved in the promotion of the idea, which was associated with Alvin Hansen at Harvard, pretend that no one has discussed it for more than half a century. But this is disingenuous. In

[Monthly Review](#)

there have been

[some 500 articles published on the tendency to stagnation](#)

, with emphasis on the role of monopoly power and the development of financialization as a response -- precisely the ideas that are now being picked up, though in a scattered and generally superficial way, in the current stagnation discussion. Marxian, post-Keynesian, and institutionalist economists, all of whom are to the left of the neoclassical mainstream, have been writing about the stagnation issue for decades. Many ideas developed with great sophistication on the left are being duplicated in the mainstream discussion with no acknowledgement whatsoever. In this connection it should be noted that

[Harry Magdoff](#)

and

[Paul Sweezy](#)

published their

[Stagnation and the Financial Explosion](#)

three decades ago in 1987.

Take another example: Paul Crutzen is widely credited with having developed the hot, new concept of the Anthropocene in 2000. Certainly, the concept gained from his prestige. Yet, few seem to know -- and Crutzen himself is not inclined to point out -- that the term "Anthropocene" first appeared in English in the early 1970s in [a prominent article on "The](#)

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["Anthropogenic System" in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia](#)

;and that it goes back to the geologist

[Aleksei Pavlov](#)

in the early 1920s in the

[Soviet Union](#)

, who used it to refer to a new epoch in which human beings have become the leading geological force in the biosphere. Pavlov was working closely at the time with

[Vladimir Vernadsky](#)

, who developed the modern concept of the biosphere.

The examples could go on and on. The problem is not that left ideas are not powerful and are not heard, but that minus a truly powerful movement from below (which has to include a commitment to defend its own paradigms) we cannot control the use and misuse of our ideas within the power structure, which presents itself as the sole legitimate voice of public opinion. (Weber famously stated that the state is defined by its monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Today's media is defined in a parallel way by its monopoly of the legitimate use of ideas.) In this context, defending the intellectual legacy of historical materialism is a vital part of the advancement of praxis. This means that to a certain extent we must build our own media and forums for analysis, our own cultural institutions, our own centers of scientific inquiry, as a basis for our own movement -- a kind of dual structure of intellectual power. Indeed, this exists to some extent today -- a global *Samizdat* of the left, though lacking the resources and the prestige borne of power of the corporate media. The Internet has helped. In the United States there are publications like

[unch](#)

[Monthly Review](#), [Counterp](#)

, and

[cobin](#)

[Ja](#)

. Internationally, there is a vast left communication network tied to global movements. The current development of Marxian analysis exists to a large extent in these interstices.

If the left tries to exist simply on the visible, i.e. accepted, margins of "public opinion" managed and controlled by the prevailing power structure, it will lose its analysis and its voice and ensure its own defeat. [Marx](#) ended his [preface to Capital](#) with an [insistence on socialists charting their own separate critical-scientific course](#)

, with the aim of developing a real revolutionary *movement*.

This required breaking free, as he indicated, from an alienated "public opinion" as projected by the system. He closed with a paraphrase of a line from

[Dante's](#)

[Divine Comedy](#)

, "Follow me, and let the people talk": "Follow your own course, and let people talk." That in the last analysis is the only rational intellectual strategy for the left. We need to build (and

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defend) our own analysis and our own movement for the struggle ahead.

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Mohsen Abdelmoumen is an independent Algerian journalist, who has worked for Algerian newspapers such as *La Nouvelle République* and *AlgériePatriotique*. He started his career in an Algerian newspaper founded in 1938:

*Alger Républicain*

. Follow him on Twitter

[@MohsenAlmohade](https://twitter.com/MohsenAlmohade)

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