

Capitalism and Nature □ A really inconvenient truth

Written by Allen Todd
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Eight years before the first Earth Day in 1970, Rachel Carson was one of the earliest researchers and writers to warn about the growing threats to the natural world in the 20th. C Specifically, she focused on the dangers inherent in the use of organophosphate pesticides by large-scale agri-businesses. As a result of her studies, she concluded that:

"The balance of nature is not the same today as in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise, and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored any more than the law of gravity can be defied with impunity by a [person] perched on the edge of a cliff. The balance of nature is not a status quo; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment. [Humans], too, [are] part of this balance."

Since she wrote her ground-breaking book in 1962, it has become frighteningly clear that the ecological problem is now this century's greatest problem, and that the world now faces an existential planetary crisis. In particular, it has become increasingly clear to many that capitalism is ecologically dysfunctional and inherently destructive of biodiversity. However, Rachel Carson was by no means the first to comment on the negative impacts on the natural world which accompanied the growth of industrial capitalism.



For instance, John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett (*Marx and the Earth*) have done much work to show that both Marx and Engels were aware of this as early as the second half of the 19th. C. Their work has established that ecological concerns were central to Marx's critique of capitalism, based on his understanding that humankind was a part of nature, which led him to develop an ecological world view.

In particular, Marx saw capitalism's commodification of nature leading, in practical terms, to the growing degradation of nature, thus creating a dangerous metabolic rift or separation between humans and the natural world. The historian and environmentalist, Andreas Malm (*The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*), saw Marx's concept of the metabolic rift as being one line of inquiry into environmental problems that:

"has outshone all others in creativity and productivity."

Marx was also keenly aware of the importance of sustainability; and the need to think of future generations who would have to live in the world left to them:

"Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations,"

As Foster and Burkett point out, Marx's insight concerning ecological crises meant he understood that:

"The intensifying ecological problem of capitalist society could be traced to the rift in the metabolism between human beings and nature (that is, the alienation of nature) that formed the very basis of capitalism's existence as a system, made worse by accumulation, i.e. capitalism's own expansion."

Both Marx and Engels understood that serious ecological problems could arise from the relationships between human economic production and the natural world, and that it was important to solve such

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contradictions by ensuring that human production remained in harmony with nature. This was because, ultimately, humans depended on the natural world, of which they were merely a part. Failure to do so, Engels warned, would result in serious problems:

"Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature - but that we, belong to nature, and exist in its midst."

A later Marxist who was also fully aware of the importance of the relationship between humans and the natural world was Nikolai Bukharin who believed that the ultimate basis of materialism lay in ecology, because human beings were both the product of nature and, at the same time, a part of it. As John Bellamy Foster (*Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*) points out,

"Bukharin built his analysis [of the relationship between humans and nature] on Marx's concept of the metabolic interaction between nature and society."

Thus we can learn useful lessons from Marx and Engels (who were not the out-and-out Promethean productionists as is often alleged), and others who would now be seen as early ecosocialists, on how to deal with the current problems besetting the natural world. In particular, it is important to realise that capitalism because of its global scope has the ability to continue accumulating profits despite the damage it causes to nature in specific and scattered locations. As Paul Burkett (*Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*) has noted:

"It is becoming more obvious in recent years that the natural conditions of human life (not to speak of other species of life) are increasingly threatened even as indeed, precisely because capital continues to accumulate."

One important aspect to grasp concerning the issue of the metabolic rift and the ecological crises is that unlimited and continuous production and consumption is just not ecologically sustainable. Writing on this aspect in 2005, Sheila Malone (*Ecosocialism or barbarism*) emphasised that:

"Capitalism operates on the basis that the earth's resources are there for limitless exploitation, and that market forces will always find a (benign) solution to a crisis."

A society and economy that meets the true needs of both humans and nature will value different commodities: such as greater leisure time. Amongst others to point this out was Ernest Mandel (*Power and Money*):

"Today we have become aware, with much delay, that dangers to the earth's non-renewable resources, and to the natural environment of human civilization and human life, also entail that the consumption of material goods and services cannot grow in an unlimited way."

Ian Angus (*Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*) is one of many who has warned that the worsening negative impacts of capitalism could, if unchecked, very rapidly lead to the Anthropocene being the shortest of all epochs:

"Capitalism has driven the Earth System to a crisis point in the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. If business as usual continues, the first full century of the Anthropocene will be marked by rapid deterioration of our physical, social, and economic environment."

All this should make it clear that for an economy to be ecologically sustainable, it needs to heal the metabolic rift by re-establishing a respectful metabolism with nature and, in particular, by accepting the need to protect and conserve the land for present and future generations.

This is particularly relevant to the current forms of capitalist

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agricultural production which treats the natural world only as part of the productive process itself. Whilst no agricultural production can fail to have some impacts on nature, those of global capitalism's highly-industrialised agriculture are so negative because, instead of growing food for use, it grows it mainly for profit.

Destruction of the natural world

One of those to have made clear how capitalist agriculture is environmentally irrational and unsustainable is Fred Magdoff. In a 2015 article: [monthlyreview.org](https://monthlyreview.org/2015/03/01/a-rational-agriculture-is-incompatible-with-capitalism/)

He focused on a range of negative impacts concerning agriculture in the U.S. but many of his comments about capitalist agriculture's impacts on ecosystems are applicable globally:

"There is loss of biodiversity as native plant species are eradicated to grow the crops desired for sale in the market. The loss of habitat for diverse species means that there is also a loss of natural control mechanisms. All of the common decisions and practices in the agricultural system [are rational] only from the very narrow perspective of trying to make profits within a capitalist system."

Of the many negative impacts of global capitalist agriculture (apart from its high emissions of greenhouse gases), one of the most dramatic is related to land use, deforestation and biodiversity/species loss which is particularly marked in the Amazonian rainforest. This acts as the lungs of the planet, and is an essential part of Earth's ecological equilibrium. In the last 50 years or so, one third of the world's woodland has been destroyed. As pointed out by Ian Angus:

"Most of the land now being converted to agriculture was formerly tropical forest, so tropical forest loss continues to accelerate. This is a huge factor in the current ecological crises: Brazil's tropical rain forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, cut down or burnt to create short-term grazing land for cattle to produce quick profits for big landowners."

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Much of the destruction of such important natural habitats is connected to the global meat and dairy industries. These need, at the very least, to be drastically reduced, if we are to create sustainable agro-ecosystems that work for people instead of for corporate profits.

Just how much biodiversity loss has been taking place because of capitalist agriculture as well as global warming was shown by Elizabeth Kolbert. In her book, *The Sixth Extinction: A Unnatural History*, she wrote about what is known as the Sixth Extinction, and to background extinction rates. The normal background extinction rate of mammal species is 0.25 per-million species-years. As she points out:

"This means that, since there are about fifty-five hundred mammal species wandering around today, at the background extinction rate you'd expect once again, very roughly one species to disappear every seven hundred years."

However, the current rate of species loss shows the earth is undergoing its Sixth Mass Extinction the first to be driven specifically by human activities. Because of the combination of global warming, one group of scientists in 2004 estimated that, by 2050, anything from 13% to 32% of all species could be lost with an average of 24% of all species heading towards extinction. Whilst different studies have produced varying figures, the general consensus is that the species extinction rate is the highest in 65 million years with an extinction rate 1000 times greater than the natural background extinction rate.

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[!\[\]\(2bdfe261b986065ee0ac76460d6528c9_img.jpg\)Although several aspects of the 2004 study have been criticised, it is important to bear in mind that this study mainly focused on the impact of climate change. Once physical destruction, or fragmentation, of natural habitats is also factored in, the picture becomes much more dire. This is because whilst global warming compels some species to migrate, the destruction of natural habitats and the creation of various barriers \(such as roads and clear-cuts\) means migration becomes much more difficult or even impossible.](https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sixth-Extinction.jpg)

These threats and others associated with capitalist agriculture, such as the heavy use of pesticides are becoming increasingly destructive. This is particularly so because of the irrational demands of the meat and dairy industries, which dominate agricultural land use.

Various studies have shown that, by shifting massively away from meat and dairy production, the world could adequately feed a population much larger than the present 7+ billion. The meat and dairy industries are extremely inefficient when it comes to producing proteins for human consumption: 100 kilos of plant protein is needed to produce 9 kilos of beef protein or 31 kilos of milk protein. Or, to put it another way, 10 hectares of land can produce:

- meat to feed 2 people
- maize to feed 10 people
- wheat/grain to feed 24 people
- soya to feed 61 people

Currently, over 50% of all crops grown is fed to farmed animals. The big agri-businesses require roughly 70% of the world's land, as grazing for animals and for growing crops for feed. To ensure enough productive land is available, huge areas of forests are being felled all over the world—sometimes illegally—on an industrial scale. By far the biggest culprit in this is cattle farming, which is the main cause of deforestation across the globe. In particular, it is increasingly responsible for the destruction of what remains of the Amazon rainforest.

Globally, forests are still being lost at a rate of 7.3 million hectares per year—mostly for cattle ranching and the growing of fodder crops. Currently, about 70% of the cleared Amazon rainforest is used for the grazing of cattle. Just 1 hamburger made from Costa Rican beef results in the destruction of:

- 1 large tree
- 50 saplings
- almost 30 different species of seedlings
- hundreds of species of insects, mosses, fungi and micro-organisms

All this is confirmed by Alan Thornett (*Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism*), in one of the most recent and most informative overviews of the many negative impacts of capitalism on the natural world. As regards capitalist agriculture, the current global levels of meat production and consumption are completely unsustainable. Apart from the huge numbers of land animals slaughtered every year for human consumption—around 70 billion—the meat industry is hugely inefficient when it comes to feeding the world's human population, as these animals:

"consume vast quantities of corn, maize, and soy that could otherwise be eaten, far more effectively, by the human population including the planet's billions of hungry people. The cattle sector of Brazilian Amazon agriculture, driven by the international beef and leather trades, has been responsible for about 80 per cent of all deforestation in the region, or roughly 14 per cent of the world's total annual deforestation. It is the world's largest single driver of deforestation."

As well as being a key factor in the absorption of CO₂ (and thus helping to slow down global warming), rain forests contain the largest reservoirs of biodiversity. Yet now, around 60% of global biodiversity loss is directly due to capitalist agriculture. This is of particular relevance to the current COVID-19

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pandemic.

Ultimately, infinite economic growth is incompatible with the increasingly fragile ecosystems on what is a finite planet. Thus a more ecologically-sustainable society, more in tune with the natural environment, would make decisions to repair, as quickly as possible, the enormous environmental damage already inflicted on the natural world by global capitalism. For instance, in order to preserve the Earth's ecological equilibrium, certain branches of production—such as the meat and dairy industries, industrial-scale fishing, and the destructive logging of tropical rain forests—should be discontinued or, at the least, drastically reduced.

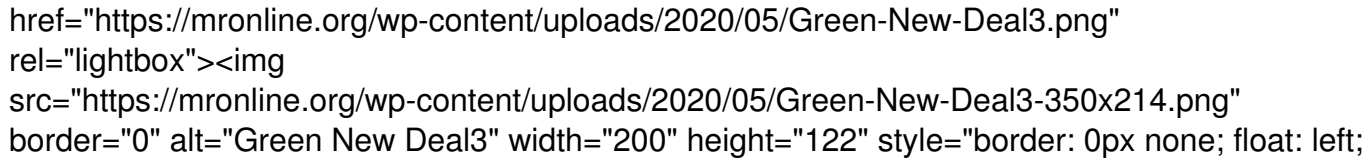
Additionally, such a society would reduce or even abolish certain products, whilst subsidising and expanding those that could be produced in harmony with ecosystems and the non-human species living on this planet. It would also seek to move to greater local production for local consumption—something that the global pandemic lock-downs is currently enforcing—in order to enhance food security and further reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The creation of sustainable agro-ecosystems would go a long way to help achieve this.

As regards food production, there is a pressing need to eliminate the polluting industrial meat and dairy agri-businesses. Fortunately, there is already a rapidly-growing trend—especially, but not exclusively, amongst young people—to adopt vegan or vegetarian diets. Whilst separate life-style actions taken by individuals will not, on their own, bring about the rapid significant changes needed to protect the natural world, such moves should nonetheless be warmly welcomed and encouraged. This is a development which shows the emergence of a more humane and respectful approach to nature. As Gandhi is reputed to have said:

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world. Or, to put it another way: Nothing changes if nobody changes."

In the end, though, as Ian Angus says, the only way to avoid a catastrophic convergence of multiple Earth System failures (of which global capitalist agriculture is one crucial element) is to use

"methods that are anathema to capitalism. Profit must be removed from consideration; all changes must be made as part of a democratically created and legally binding global plan that governs both the conversion to renewables and the rapid elimination of industries and activities, such as factory farming, that only produce what John Ruskin called illth, the opposite of wealth."



However, whilst any prospects of a green capitalism are rapidly evaporating, it is nonetheless important to push for some immediate reforms. In part, this is because we desperately need to win time and mitigate the harms currently being done by the system. In addition:

"The struggle for ecosocial reforms can be the vehicle for dynamic change, a transition between minimal demands and the maximal program, provided one rejects the pressure and arguments of the ruling interests for competitiveness and modernization in the name of the rules of the market."

Another useful action will be to get behind campaigns that chip away at the ability of corporations to continue their attacks on the natural world—for instance, the various fossil-fuel divestment campaigns waged by groups like 350.org. In addition, as well as winning some immediate reforms, it will also be necessary to block any policies or actions by corporations or the government that will make the situation even worse.

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Hence the need to oppose any attempts to re-start fracking, once the lock-down has ended. With time so short, we need to slow or reverse capitalism's ecologically-suicidal activities.

Ultimately, however, there will be no radical transformations of the kind now desperately needed without a radical ecosocialist programme being embraced by a sufficient mass of people.

As Naomi Klein (*This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*) has said:

"only mass social movements can save us now. Because we know where the current system, left unchecked, is headed [the only hope is that] some countervailing power will emerge to block the road, and simultaneously clear some alternate pathways to destinations that are safer. If that happens, well, it changes everything."

The rise of Corbynism has shown the potential for inspiring huge enthusiasm for radical change. Extinction Rebellion, too, has shown what can be achieved in a very short time. XR wasn't even launched until October 2018 to build a new mass social movement.

However, to create a really powerful and effective movement, that will promote what E. P. Thompson called the human ecological imperative, it will be necessary to draw in a large proportion of the working classes. This could be done by XR becoming more political about the System Change it so rightly calls for: an explicit endorsement of a radical ecosocialist programme of reforms would be a really big positive step towards this. We now have very little time left in which to halt capitalism's increasingly destructive course.

Although things look bad right now, it is important to try to follow Antonio Gramsci's advice:

"Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

Essentially, if we don't fight, we and the Earth will lose. Perhaps, to get some serious momentum behind such developments and to give us the vision we so badly need of a better and more sustainable world we should ask Ken Loach to make a 2020 version of his brilliantly-effective documentary film, *The Spirit of 45* (2013).

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