

## The Planetary Rift

John Bellamy Foster and Haris Golemis

**HG:** With your pathbreaking article “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1999), you challenged the then prevalent view, even among non-dogmatic Marxists, that the effects of capitalist growth on nature was not of interest to Karl Marx. Could you briefly explain your thesis?

**JBf:** In “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift,” I argued that the widespread view on the left that Marx had

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Flooding on Laboulle avenue in Tilff, Belgium (July 16, 2021). By Régine Fabri - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, [Link](#)

adopted a Promethean (extreme productivist) view of the human domination of nature—and hence had failed to perceive the natural limits to production and ecological contradictions in general, giving them at most only marginal attention—was contradicted by his theory of the metabolic rift, which played a key role in his overall analysis. Marx built on the German chemist Justus von Liebig’s notion of the robbery of nature, in which nutrients were systematically removed from the soil and shipped hundreds and even thousands of miles to the new urban centres, polluting the cities, rather than being returned to the soil. Based on this, he constructed an ecological critique of capitalism, rooted in the concept of social metabolism, standing for the human relation to nature as a whole through production. Capitalism’s disruption of this metabolism generated an “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself.” For Marx, the labour and production process constituted nothing less than the social metabolism between humanity and the universal metabolism of nature, mediating between the two. But under capitalism this had become an alienated mediation, rupturing this metabolism, which needed then to be restored under

socialism, as an eternal requirement of life itself. In these terms, Marx developed a notion of sustainability, arguing that no one, not even all the people in the world, owned the earth, but rather they needed to sustain it for “the chain of human generations” as “good heads of the household.” Socialism itself was defined in volume 3 of *Capital* as the rational regulation by the associated producers of the metabolism of nature and society, so as to conserve energy, and promote human development.

In short, Marx’s critique of political economy ushered in the most profound ecological critique ever developed, since it was dialectically connected to his overall analysis of capitalist production and constituting the basis of the creation of a higher society of the future. Later scientific ecology, including the concept of ecosystem, were to be developed on this same basis, with the concept of metabolism leading to systems ecology.

The power of Marx’s analysis in this respect and the depth of his understanding of natural science surprised me and forced me to rethink Marx’s entire body of work. How had he developed such a profound ecological critique? The answer had to lie in his materialism, which went much deeper than most Marxist theorists had perceived. This led me back to the very beginnings of Marx’s thought, starting with his doctoral thesis on Epicurus, the greatest materialist thinker in antiquity, and analysing the development of Marx’s materialist and ecological perspective from that point on, including his relation to thinkers such as Liebig and Charles Darwin. This reinterpretation of Marx’s thought resulted in my book *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, published in 2000.

**HG:** In a March 2020 interview you gave to Farooque Chowdhury, you said that David Harvey was critical of the theoretical scheme presented in your book *The Vulnerable Planet* (Monthly Review Press, 1994). Would you say that, since then, his and your analyses of contemporary capitalism have come closer?

**JBf:** Harvey is a major Marxist theorist, and his wide-ranging work is always illuminating, presented with an elegance all of its own. In the last decade or so, he has moved closer, particularly since his *The Enigma of Capital* (2011), to the Marxian economic analysis pioneered by Monthly Review, focusing on the problem of surplus capital absorption under monopoly finance. So, there are a lot of places where our analysis overlaps.

However, Harvey and I have long had major differences in how we see the planetary ecological crisis and as to the significance of Marxist theory in this respect. In the 1990s, he denied the severity of the overall environmental problem, arguing in response to my book, *The Vulnerable Planet* (1994), in his *Justice, Nature, the Geography of Difference* (1996), that with respect to the human impact on the planet, “The worst we can do is to engage in material transformations of our environment so as to make life less rather than more comfortable for own species, while recognising that what we do also does have ramifications (both positive and negative) for other living species.” In these quiescent terms, he rejected the argument in my book that biogeochemical cycles of the Earth System were being disrupted by the increasing scale of capitalist production. Instead, he strongly criticised all notions that “ecocide is imminent” due to capitalist development, claiming rather that such a view was vulnerable to right-wing criticisms that said human conditions were constantly improving.

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In a debate between Harvey and me that followed in *Monthly Review* (April 1998), he declared that the 1992 “Warning to Humanity” focusing on the dangers of climate change signed by over 1,500 of the world’s scientists, including more than half of the recipients of the Nobel Prize among living scientists, were “every bit as problematic as the literature [of climate change deniers and anti-environmentalists such as Julian Simon and Greg Easterbrook] they rebut.” He insisted that a Marxist perspective should prevent us from falling for the ecological rhetoric “that we are reaching some limit, that environmental catastrophe is around the corner or that we are about to destroy planet earth.” His overall emphasis at the time was to downplay and, to a considerable extent, deny the planetary ecological emergency—on putatively Marxist grounds.

It took him several decades, but Harvey has now come to recognise the environmental problems and admit to the shortcomings of his analysis in this regard. In his *Anti-Capitalist Chronicles* (2020), he indicates that a graph from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)—the kind of graph that has been around for decades based on the Mauna Loa Observatory, but this one showing the rise in carbon concentration in the atmosphere all the way to 400 ppm (reached in 2013)—finally convinced him that climate change was as serious as the scientific consensus had long contended. The question is: Why had he taken so long to realise the full environmental dangers, despite coming from a historical-materialist perspective? In answering this, Harvey goes into a long discussion on how he had been misled by focusing too much on weaknesses of some of the environmental rhetoric on the left. In 2020, he says it was the NOAA graph showing the speed with which the Earth System had gone from 300 ppm to 400 ppm of carbon concentration in the atmosphere that “changed everything in my world view. The question of climate change went from something I thought to be manageable by normal techniques and sensible interventions to a recognition of the need for radical transformation of all our ways of thinking.”

Even with this revelation, however, his emphasis in *The Anti-Capitalist Chronicles* tends to favour ecomodernisation perspectives, whereby technology will save the day by carbon sequestration: taking the carbon out of the atmosphere and putting it in the ground. The fact that such technology does not exist at scale, and poses its own cataclysmic problems, is not considered in his analysis. There is simply no attempt to pose this problem in ecological Marxist terms as one of ruin or revolution.

**HG:** In the same interview, you say that “it has suddenly become easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world, and indeed the former would likely preclude the latter.” What do you really mean by reversing Frederic Jameson’s quote? It is true that the number of radical left intellectuals and activists who believe that capitalism is not the end of history has grown considerably. However, the ruling classes are using the pandemic to hide this truth, by presenting the virus as an external threat, and in view of the power of the mainstream media, I am afraid that the TINA (there is no alternative) narrative still prevails in the general public. I would be happy if you could convince me that I am wrong.

**JB:** You will recall that Jameson’s statement in *New Left Review* (March–April 2003) read: “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Well before I was conscious of his authorship of this statement, we commonly used that same exact phrase over and over in our discussions in the graduate program in environmental sociology at the University of Oregon, discussions and debates that included some of those who are now among the world’s leading environmental sociologists, who had come to study at Oregon, primarily in order to engage with Marxian ecology. In fact, I had used the exact same wording early in this century in talks I gave, though usually in

the question-and-answer sessions after the talk, more as a kind of riposte to get the audience to think—just as we often raised it ironically in our seminar discussions in environmental sociology.

The reason why the notion that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” was approached

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in this circumspect way in our discussions at the time was that, although capturing part of the contemporary environmental predicament—and the dystopian consciousness that was so pervasive among youth—it tended to represent a negative, even defeatist outlook, when not put into a concrete historical context. The problem is closely related to what Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay in *What We Leave Behind* (2009) were to call “the inversion of the real and the not real,” such that “the end of the world is less to be feared than the end of industrial capitalism.” If such a view were to be presented, it needed to be placed in a context of generating a revolutionary ecological consciousness, rather than signalling defeat. It was a question of countering the

dominant ideology and received views in general.

This was such an important part of our overall discussions on the environment that, when I became aware that the phrase had been introduced in print by Jameson, who had prefaced it with “Someone said,” I thought it had emerged somehow from our own discussions. Now, however, I think we picked it up from him indirectly, probably from Cade Jameson, Fredric Jameson’s son, who is himself a great environmental sociologist, now teaching in Hawai’i, and who was part of our program at the University of Oregon. It may be Cade, knowing his father’s work, who inserted this phrase early on into our discussions. I am not sure.

The point, though, is not that the consciousness of capitalism’s role in the destruction of the planet as a safe home for humanity is wanting; rather, the point is to change this. In reversing the famous Jameson quote, and indicating that “it has suddenly become easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world,” I was pointing to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic, coming on top of climate change, was threatening the ideological hegemony of the system, demonstrating that our ecological-epidemiological crises were products of capitalism itself. The illusion of the emperor’s clothes had vanished and suddenly the emperor was revealed as naked. The United States, at the center of capitalism, has now experienced over half a million deaths from COVID-19, which everyone knows have to do with the privatisation of public health, not to mention the circuits of capital, as historical-materialist epidemiologists like Rob Wallace explain. For many, this allows them to see that what is constantly projected as the end of the world is indeed properly seen as the question of ending capitalism. You are right, of course, that in presenting the virus as an external threat to the system, the ruling ideology was attempting to steer the population away from such critical conclusions.

You ask me about the views that prevail in the general public, given the constant outflow of propaganda on TINA under capitalism. I think that is the wrong way to think about

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it. A snapshot of public opinion tells one very little, given that the material conditions of humanity—the very conditions of life on Earth—are changing more rapidly than at any time in human history. People are

like volcanoes and will erupt when the molten rock rises to the surface. If one starts simply with ideas, from an idealistic perspective, it looks like capitalism is supreme and will remain forever so. But the Catholic Church got Galileo Galilei to disavow his science, and yet, as legend has it, he touched the ground and said, “It still moves.” TINA is correct, but in a different way than Margaret Thatcher believed. There is no alternative to a society of substantive equality and environmental sustainability, that is, socialism—if humanity is to survive.

**HG:** How do you evaluate the work of Murray Bookchin, a non-Marxist thinker, who has also tried to bring the ecological issue into the public debate? Indeed, we see radical leftists and anarchists fighting together in the streets of many cities in the world against the policies of governments that destroy the environment and increase class, race, and gender inequalities. In view of such an “alliance,” do you think that a theoretical and programmatic dialogue between different anticapitalist traditions is desirable and possible?

**JB:** I have always thought a great deal of Bookchin’s work in ecology, though it was seldom directly influential on my own thinking. I was first introduced in the early 1970s at the Evergreen State College to his Post-Scarcity Anarchism, which, however, left little impression. But his 1962 *Our Synthetic Environment* (written under the pseudonym Lewis Herber), which came out the same year as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, was pathbreaking. One of my favourite books

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by him is *The Limits of the City*. Another is *The Ecology of Freedom*. He could be very polemical and was a strong critic of Marxism on ecology. But he was careful in doing so to criticise Marxism and not Marx himself, for whom he always retained great respect. I cite Bookchin at various points in my work, though not extensively. When I was on the editorial board of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* in the early years, there was a stream of harsh criticisms of Bookchin and one edited

collection opposed to his analysis that came out of the journal. I declined to be part of it. Instead, not soon after, when I was co-editor of *Organization and Environment*, we published a very favourable assessment of Bookchin’s ecology by Steven Best. *Monthly Review* has always been open to Bookchin’s ecological analysis. Brian Tokar, who is perhaps the most important figure in Bookchin’s social ecology tradition, has written for *Monthly Review Press*. In fact, *Monthly Review* as an independent socialist magazine has always been open to anarchist views, particularly where they overlap with Marxism, as part of the conversation. Our whole orientation from the beginning has been to unite various anticapitalist traditions. Of course, there are differences, but there is plenty of room for commonality. The role of anarchists in fighting neofascism; in the racial solidarity protests in the United States; and in the ecological movement has been very great. Forging coalitions in this respect is necessary in the common cause.

**HG:** Ever since the 1960s, *Monthly Review* has been well known for its interest in developments in the Global South, or the “third world” in the language of the period. My view is that, as editor of the magazine, you keep with this very useful, internationalist tradition. In this framework, can you tell us the differences between the effects of catastrophe capitalism in the Global South as compared to the Global North?

**JB:** *Monthly Review* has always focused on imperialism, especially in terms of the relations of the Global North to the Global South, as the key to the critique of the capitalist world system. In terms of “catastrophe capitalism,” I think our

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most important contributions in the last couple of years have included the article on “Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” written by myself, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, and the work that we have done on COVID-19 in relation to Rob Wallace, especially his books *Big Farms Make Big Flu* and *Dead Epidemiologists* and his article with others on “COVID-19 and the Circuits of Capital,” as well as the article that Intan Suwandi and I did on “COVID-19

In “Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” we developed an argument that departs from most traditions on the left, in that it takes physical geography seriously as the climate catastrophe demands. Thus, we explained how low-latitude countries, essentially the Global South, are affected most, as a result of Earth System dynamics, by climate change, independently of the fact that they are already economically exploited by the nations of the Global North. Moreover, the effects of climate change on such factors as the elimination of glaciers (or water towers); desertification; the flooding of islands and other low-lying areas; the eradication of tropical forests and coral reefs; the extinction of species; and the creation of hundreds of millions, even as much as a billion, climate refugees expected this century—are all being factored into the global imperial strategy of the United States and other nations in the Global North. We, therefore, desperately need a theory of imperialism in the Anthropocene that would take all of this into account.

In the work of Wallace and other theorists of what is known as Structural One Health (a historical-materialist approach to epidemiology), the emergence of COVID-19 and other zoonoses are seen as connected to the circuits of capital and the extension of agribusiness into ecosystems and wilderness areas. This work provides a rich understanding of the relation of global commodification to global contagions. Moreover, the same analysis points to the consequences of the privatisation of public health under neoliberalism and the effects on the spread of disease, especially among the poor, pointing to the contemporary significance of Frederick Engels’s notion of “social murder.”

**HG:** As the United States is one of the two world superpowers, its government’s economic policies play a crucial role in the climate crisis. Would you say that the Donald Trump administration has left its footprint on the development of catastrophe capitalism and, if so, how? Do you believe that Joe Biden might follow a different path?

**JBF:** The Trump administration accelerated catastrophe capitalism in a number of ways. As detailed in our article

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“Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” it expedited the expenditure of trillions of dollars on the building of fossil fuel pipelines and fracking in North America in order not only to expand fossil fuel production, but also to entrench fossil fuel production so that it could not be displaced. It pulled out of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and removed environmental protections wherever it could, both nationally and internationally. Meanwhile, it started a

New Cold War directed at China. This included putting a tariff on Chinese solar panels imported to the United States.

Politically, the Trump phenomenon had its basis in the development of a neofascist political movement/political formation based in the white lower-middle class, with its nationalist, racist, misogynist ideologies and its hatred of both the greater part of the working-class majority (the most diverse section of the population) and of the upper-middle class professionals. In essence, monopoly capital has drawn on the rearguard of the capitalist system, as C. Wright Mills called it, to stabilise itself during a period of declining U.S. hegemony, increasing class polarisation, and the rise of a significant socialist movement.

The Trump administration, backed by the Federal Reserve, poured trillions into the coffers of corporations and the rich in tax reductions followed by aid in response to the pandemic. The result is that U.S. billionaires are running off with the store. While the economy has had negative growth, Jeff Bezos saw his wealth increase by \$74 billion and Elon Musk by some \$76 billion year-to-date [December 2020]. All of this has been supported by increasing U.S. federal deficits. The financial system has been expanding at a record pace during the pandemic. All of this means a bubblier economy, which will burst in the end.

Unfortunately, not much help in any of this can be expected from the Biden administration, which represents a neoliberal politics, different from that of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton only to the extent that the situation is now considerably more desperate. The current administration seems destined to attempt to expand its reach to elements of the non-Trumpist right, as the Democrats and Republicans continue to fight to gain the support of the lower-middle class section of the electorate. In terms of the forward movement of society, we will see very little. In fact, Biden promised Wall Street that nothing would change if he were elected. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that 83 percent of the top thirty members of the Biden team have close connections to the billionaire-plutocratic class (see the article by Laurence Shoup in the May 2021 issue of Monthly Review). In short, the Biden administration has no interest in rocking the boat.

Part of this has to do with the already destabilised state of the system, resulting from the over-accumulation and financial

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crisis of capital, for which the ruling class and its political representatives have no answers. The current "solution" is in the direction of the greater repression of the population via an enhanced surveillance capitalism, the promotion of the carceral state, continuing privatisation of public schools, a New Cold War with China, and so on. Biden is openly opposed to the Green New Deal (his proposed \$2 trillion of spending in this area is only one-twentieth of that proposed by the Green Party's Green New Deal, and one-eighth of what was proposed by Bernie Sanders), to Medicare for All, and to nearly every other needed progressive program. The

result is likely to be a neoliberal disaster leading to a restoration of the neofascist wing. The left's only choice is to find a way to break the current undemocratic rules of the game.

**HG:** The new virus originated in China, both the second world superpower and the world's biggest polluter. Can we expect that China's ruling Communist Party will have learned the lessons of the pandemic, and change its policies in the future?

**JBf:** To say China is the world's biggest polluter is true in one respect and misleading in others. China, it is true, is the

*It is true that China is the biggest carbon emitter. But it is way below the US and the other wealthy countries in its carbon emissions per capita.... in terms of historic emissions, the bulk has come from Europe and North America... and a very large share of China's emissions is associated with production for multinational corporations in the core of the capitalist system.*

biggest carbon emitter. But it is way below the United States and the other wealthy countries in its carbon emissions per capita. Moreover, in terms of the carbon that has accumulated in the environment as a result of historic emissions (the really important figure), the bulk has come from Europe and North America. Finally, a very large share of China's emissions is associated with production for multinational corporations in the core of the capitalist system, which import this production to their own countries.

Essentially, production that would have occurred in the capitalist core is now happening in the periphery, but still for the capitalist core. It makes sense to see the bulk of such

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emissions as associated with the core countries. The United States has a trade deficit with China. China supplies produced goods and the United States asks them to hold dollars in return.

The fact that the COVID-19 virus originated in China has less to do with China itself than with the circuits of capital globally and the destruction of ecosystems and wilderness areas, with zoonotic spillovers. No doubt China will institute and is instituting new regulations, for example, in relation to wet markets. But this is not the core of the problem.

In terms of overall ecological responses, China, while an epicentre of ecological destruction, is also an epicentre of ecomodernism and environmental reform. It has made "ecological civilisation" an official goal, unlike countries in the

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West. How we understand this is important. There are indications that China under its current leadership is taking decisive environmental steps (although hardly the ecological revolution that is needed). China is now the world leader in clean energy technology. I just read a very interesting book by Barbara Finamore, published by Polity,

entitled *Will China Save the Planet?* (2018). We have plenty of reason to be sceptical. Yet, given all that China is actually doing in terms of seriously addressing its ecological crisis and that of the world, the question remains. As a post-revolutionary state, with a quite different social construction from that of the mature monopoly capitalist economies of the West, China, with all of its contradictions, may still have a hidden potential to move in the direction of its official goal of an "ecological civilisation." My view is that this depends ultimately, as elsewhere, on the spread of a genuine ecological revolution emerging from the ground up. That this is at least possible in China is suggested by its current rural reform movement.

**HG:** The pandemic has not only considerably reduced U.S.-China trade, but it has also intensified the struggle between the two countries for global hegemony. Could this lead to broader geopolitical changes, and do you think that it could also signal the beginning of the end of globalisation?



**JBf:** A New Cold War is being launched by Washington against Beijing, explicitly aimed at bringing down the Chinese Communist Party, and then resubordinating China to the world imperial system, in a replay of the demolition of the

*A New Cold War is being launched by Washington aimed at bringing down the Chinese Communist Party, and then resubordinating China to the world imperial system, in a replay of the demolition of the Soviet Union.... China is responding by creating the largest trade bloc in the world... I don't think this will signal the end of globalisation, which has its basis in global labour arbitrage, whereby multinational corporations mainly centred in the Global North locate the industrial production, as measured by employment, primarily in the Global South.*

Soviet Union. All of this is spelled out by the U.S. State Department and in foreign policy circles and is being supported by the U.S. capitalist class and multinational corporations, which realise that a China Century, replacing the American Century, is not in their interests. The Trump-initiated trade war and military buildup directed at China (and indeed both China and Russia) is now entrenched and is continuing in the Biden administration. U.S. allies, like Australia, are being asked to sacrifice their own trade interests to the New Cold War pact. This is meant to be a major geopolitical shift. China is responding in its own way by furthering its Belt and Road Initiative and creating with the 2020 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership the

largest trade bloc in the world.

I don't think this will signal the end of globalisation, which has its basis in global labour arbitrage, whereby multinational corporations mainly centred in the Global North locate the industrial production as measured by employment primarily in the Global South. The object is to exploit low unit labour costs, providing large profit margins (or rates of surplus value) for these corporations. But we are seeing a geopolitical shift in the growth of global blocs within this. U.S. multinational corporations are pulling out of China to some extent and relocating in other low unit labour cost countries such as India and Mexico.

**HG:** In February, at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Italian radical philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote

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that the lockdowns and other government measures against the virus are intended to permanently establish a "state of exception" and make this appear to be normal. He was also worried by people accepting the restrictions of their freedoms almost with no complaint. However, we later saw people protesting violently in the streets against the lockdowns and refusing to comply with instructions even to

wear face masks and keep social distancing. Do you agree with Agamben, and how do you explain these reactions to government measures? Is their reaction progressive or reactionary?

**JBf:** It is hard to answer this since international situations vary so much. In the United States, we saw with racial solidarity protests in May and June 2020 the biggest mass protests in the country since the U.S. Civil War, with working-class whites and youth on a scale never seen before crossing the color line to join protest/revolt against the public police lynchings of Black people. But this was also a response to the pandemic, the lockdowns, and the laying off of millions of people. In many places, it took the form of a revolt against capital showing that there is a suppressed anger at the base of society. Of course, the neofascist, white supremacist movement based in the lower-middle class also was in evidence, but they lacked the numbers and power of those revolting against the system. For the neofascists, their main advantage is

their ability to pull out their guns and even to fire them in some cases, with the support of the police. The Trump administration did everything it could to promote these “militias” and back them up with its own paramilitary forces. This is the situation in the United States. It is lessened somewhat on the surface with the coming into office of the Biden administration. But the contradictions remain.

**HG:** To combat the virus, governments all over the world have resorted to, or are seriously contemplating, unprecedented state-interventionist measures (supplementary direct payments to people who cannot go to work due to the lockdowns, nationalisation of private hospitals and health care providers in Spain, nationalisation of railways in Wales, etc.), which conflict with free-market ideology. Could this lead to a change in the capitalist paradigm similar to what happened with the New Deal in the United States following the 1929 crisis and the implementation of Keynesian policies in Europe after the Second World War?

**JB:** One would hope so, but I am sceptical. It is strange to me that Europeans are looking to the U.S. New Deal, which was not nearly as radical as many historic changes that developed in Europe in the same period. The First New Deal, during Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first term in office, was to a considerable extent a form of conservative corporatism. The New Deal only radicalised, and we are only talking here of about four years, in the Second New Deal, beginning in 1935, due to the Great Revolt from Below with the formation of industrial unionism, which involved pitched battles all across the country. It was not a top-down development. Roosevelt merely saw a chance to get at the head of this movement and contain it, to save capitalism. The New Deal did not increase overall government spending on public works in the United States, since the federal increases in spending in this area merely compensated for the drop in government spending at the state and local levels. In 1937–38, there was a recession within the depression decade. All sorts of radical things were proposed in 1938 but nothing really happened. In 1939, the war orders from Europe began,

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and the New Deal and the Great Depression ended, with the Second World War. There were some important results, particularly social security legislation. But overall, the New Deal did little in transforming the system. It merely stands out in relation to the period of entrenched ruling class power that followed. U.S. civilian government spending on consumption and investment as a percentage of GDP did not increase in the decades after the Second World War, but has remained pretty much on the level of 1939. To change this in the United States

would require a New Great Revolt from Below. Some of the nationalisation occurring in Europe could have a positive effect, but unless it is part of a movement toward socialism, it will be the usual nationalisation for capital, buying them out when they are losing money, and reprivatising once these markets are profitable again.

**HG:** It seems that even a section of mainstream politicians in the United States and Europe support a Green New Deal, a name that directly refers to Roosevelt’s 1933 New Deal. Do you see this as a victory of the ecosocialist movement or an initiative to promote green capitalism?

**JB:** It is difficult to say what the Green New Deal represents because there are so many versions of it, all of which are rejected of course by the Biden administration. (Obama, incidentally, officially included a corporatist Green New Deal in his first presidential race and then dropped it as soon as he was elected.) The Green New Deal with a “just transition”

*The Green New Deal with a “just transition” proposed by Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders could be described as a People’s Green New Deal and would be important if it inspired a genuine ecological revolution... the mainstream political support for real change in this sense is largely illusory, unless there is some push from below powerful enough to challenge capital. This, however, requires real organisation, and there is little to point to in that respect.*

proposed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders could be described as a People’s Green New Deal and would be important if it inspired a genuine ecological revolution, forcing ever greater efforts. But this is not in the cards now without a massive movement from below, which briefly looked possible when the climate movement was on fire, but now has abated in 2020, due largely to the pandemic. Some versions of the Green New Deal are so feeble from the start as to be meaningless. And with Biden now in office, anything

resembling an actual Green New Deal is off the agenda for the Democratic Party. In general, U.S. politicians will sign up for things that sound good if the polls point to a lot of public support, and if it is so nebulous as to not constitute a recognisable threat to business. So, the mainstream political support for real change in this sense is largely illusory, unless there is some push from below powerful enough to challenge capital. This, however, requires real organisation, and there is little to point to in that respect.

**HG:** The inability of capitalist states to fight the pandemic, largely due to the underfunded and understaffed health systems—together with the fact that vulnerability is closely tied to class, race, and gender—and the concomitant economic crisis have created hope among some radical leftists that an increasing number of people in the world might envision a non-capitalist alternative. Do you think that this hope is realistic?

**JB:** The question of whether hope is realistic always sounds strange to me. The question is whether hope is necessary.

*We shouldn’t be trying to predict the future so much as to engage in the necessary struggles, recognising that the world’s population now has its back to the wall.... If it is impossible to save the world, humanity, and most of the world’s known species, then the struggle must become that much fiercer, the impossible has to be made possible.*

We shouldn’t be trying to predict the future so much as to engage in the necessary struggles, recognising that the world’s population now has its back to the wall. I think this is what scares the ruling classes. They know a struggle is inevitable and they know they could lose. Marxists have long argued for freedom as necessity. At no time has this stance been more realistic than today, since the reality of our world is one of catastrophe capitalism. If it is

impossible to save the world, humanity, and most of the world’s known species, then the struggle must become that much fiercer, the impossible has to be made possible.

**HG:** In a discussion you had with Michael Yates, published in the April 19, 2020, online edition of Janata Weekly, you say that the way we can confront catastrophe capitalism is “the building of a vast, unstoppable socialist (or ecosocialist) movement.” This is a normative general statement, which however does not specify in what way the various national movements can achieve their anticapitalist goals: through revolution, or through the Poulantzian “democratic road” to socialism? What is your view?

**JB:** I don’t think that revolution and a democratic road to socialism are necessarily contradictory. Nicos Poulantzas wrote numerous important works on the state but they were a product of the Eurocommunist period, and quickly receded. I, personally, prefer the analysis of Ralph Miliband, since he started with the harsher reality of the failure of the

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British Labour Party as a socialist party, as depicted in his Parliamentary Socialism. Since he was responding to a major defeat, he saw the problem of the capitalist state as a greater challenge and therefore raised harder questions. We need a more critical theory of the state than Marxist theory provided in the 1960s and '70s, which was removed in many ways from the question of revolution—so much so that the Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio once declared there was no real Marxist theory of the state. It is necessary to turn back to the classical tradition of the withering away of the state associated with Marx and V. I. Lenin, and powerfully revived by István Mészáros in his *Beyond Leviathan*, which will be published by

Monthly Review Press in the beginning of 2022. The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, despite the fact that it has been deeply scarred by the international siege warfare imposed on it by the United States, has things to tell us about how to promote a revolutionary strategy aimed at twenty-first-century socialism, based on Hugo Chávez's notion of the communal state. But, of course, the conditions in every country are different. There is no universal model.

**HG:** Thank you very much for your time. Before we end, could you say a few words about your latest book, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Economy*?

**JB:** *The Return of Nature* was written to carry forward the story told in *Marx's Ecology*, covering the period from the death of Darwin and Marx in 1882 and 1883, respectively. *Marx's Ecology* ends with the death of Darwin and Marx. *The Return of Nature* begins with their funerals. It explores the interrelations between socialism and ecology in the century that followed, providing concrete research into ecology as it developed in relation to socialism and materialism. Of course, the developments went in all directions and the story becomes quite complex, especially if given historical depth so that we can comprehend the context in which the various figures emerged. Basically, the thesis is that socialists (some of them social democratic, some of them Marxist, but all deeply engaged with each other) generated ecology as a critical form of thought.

In arguing this, I follow an analysis that is not only historical but also genealogical. One genealogical line can be seen in terms of those influenced by Marx's ecological ideas directly, including figures like E. Ray Lankester and William Morris, and those who they in turn influenced, such as Arthur George Tansley, H. G. Wells, and Julian Huxley. The other

*The book also challenges the Western left to recognise that a materialist conception of history is meaningless without a materialist conception of nature—plus the role of dialectics as necessarily related to both.*

genealogical line derives more from Engels's ecological thought and especially his dialectics of nature, which are the focus of Part Two of the book. This leads to the dialectical and ecological contributions of such important scientists as J. B. S. Haldane, Joseph Needham, J. D. Bernal, and Hyman Levy. Some thinkers, such as Christopher Caudwell, Lancelot Hogben, and Jack Lindsay

can be said to be products of both lines of development. All of these thinkers were involved not only in the development of ecology, but also in the debates on race, gender, class, and the making of socialism in their time. Nearly all of them contributed to materialist dialectics. The direct influence on the ecology movement in the 1960s and '70s in the United States and Britain is quite evident, leading to discussions in the epilogue of the work of figures such as Rachel Carson,

Barry Commoner, Virginia Brodine, Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Stephen Jay Gould, Steven Rose, Hilary Rose, and E. P. Thompson. We thus get a much wider picture of why ecology is such a critical, and indeed revolutionary, doctrine.

The book also challenges the Western left to recognise that a materialist conception of history is meaningless without a materialist conception of nature—plus the role of dialectics as necessarily related to both. In this way, the long detour of Western Marxism away from the natural-material world is transcended, a necessary task in the deeper ecological and social revolution required in our times.

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- ❖ **About the authors:** **John Bellamy Foster** is the editor of Monthly Review and a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. **Haris Golemis** is a Greek economist who worked at the Research Department of the Bank of Greece, was scientific advisor to the Federation of Greek Bank Employees, consultant to the United Nations Center on Transnational Corporations, and director of the Nicos Poulantzas Institute from 1999 to 2017. He is now a member of the editorial committee of the Greek newspaper Epoch, scientific and strategic advisor to the board of transform! europe, and co-editor of the transform! europe Yearbook.
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