

Capitalism in the Web of Life: an Interview with Jason W. Moore

Jason W. Moore and Kamil Ahsan September 28, 2015

Partway through *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Jason W. Moore provides the imperative for a complete theoretical reworking and synthesis of Marxist, environmental, and feminist thought by asserting: “I think many of us understand intuitively – even if our analytical frames lag behind – that capitalism is more than an “economic” system, and even more than a social system. Capitalism is a way of organizing nature.”

Kamil Ahsan spoke with Moore about his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Verso), released last month, to grapple with his new challenges to old assumptions.

Kamil Ahsan: What was the impetus for *Capitalism in the Web of Life*?

Jason W. Moore: I wanted to come up with a framework that would allow us to understand the history of the last five centuries in a way that was adequate to the crisis we face today. For the past four decades, we’ve had a “Green Arithmetic” approach to crisis. When we’ve had an economic or social crisis or any other kind of crisis, they all go into one box. Then we have an ecological crises – water or energy or the climate – that go into another box.

So for roughly the past four decades, environmentalists and other radicals have been raising the alarm about these crises but never really figured out how to put them together. Environmental thinkers have been saying one thing and then doing another – they claimed that humans are a part of nature and that everything in the modern world is about our relationship with the biosphere, but then when they got around to organizing or analyzing, it came down to “Society plus Nature,” as if the relationship was not as intimate and direct and immediate as it is.

KA: The premise of this book is that we need to break down the “Nature/Society” dualism that has prevailed in so much of Red and Green thought. Where did this idea come from, and why is it so thoroughly artificial?

JWM: The idea that humans are outside of nature has a long history. It’s a creation of the modern world. Many civilizations before capitalism had a sense that humans were distinct. But in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, this very powerful idea emerged – that is embedded in imperialist violence and dispossession of peasants and a whole series of recompositions of what it meant to be a human, particularly divisions around race and gender—that there was something, in Adam Smith’s words, called “civilized society,” which included some humans.

But most humans were still put into this category of “Nature,” which was regarded as something to be controlled and dominated and put to work – and civilized. It sounds very abstract, but the modern world was really based on this idea that some group of humans were called “Society” but most humans go into this other box called “Nature” with a capital N. That’s very powerful. That didn’t come about just because there were scientists, cartographers or colonial rulers who decided it was a good idea, but because of a far-flung process that put together markets and industry, empire and new ways of seeing the world that go along with a broad conception of the Scientific Revolution.

This idea of Nature and Society is very deeply rooted in other dualisms of the modern world: the capitalist and the worker, the West and the rest, men and women, white and black, civilization and barbarism. All of these other dualisms really find their taproots in the Nature/Society dualism.

KA: What is the importance of breaking this dualism, especially in terms of how you reconceptualize capitalism as being “co-produced,” as you say, by human and extra-human natures?

JWM: It is important to understand that capitalism is co-produced by humans and the rest of nature, especially in order to understand the unfolding crisis today. The usual way of thinking about the problems of our world today is to put social, economic and cultural crises into the rubric of “social crises” – and then we have ecological crises and that’s climate and everything else. Today, we’re increasingly realizing that we can’t talk about one without the other, but that’s actually been the reality all along.

We need to overcome this dualism so we can build our knowledge of the present crisis, a singular crisis with many expressions. Some, like financialization, look to be purely social, and others, like the potential sixth extinction of life on this planet, appear to be purely ecological. But in fact those two moments are very closely linked in all sorts of interesting ways.

Once we understand that those relations are central, we begin to see how Wall Street is a way of organizing nature. We see the unfolding of problems today – like the recent turbulence in Chinese and American stock markets – as wrapped up with bigger problems of climate and life on this planet in a way that even radical economists are not willing to acknowledge. This has an impact on our politics. We are seeing today movements – such as food justice movements – that say we need to understand this transformation and it has to do with a right to food in an ecological sense, but also a cultural and democratic sense, and these cannot be separated out.

The problem with the “Green Arithmetic” of “Society + Nature” is this weird separation of environmental justice from social justice, environmental sustainability from social sustainability, ecological imperialism from regular imperialism – even though anyone who knows the history of imperialism knows that it is always about “who are we going to value” and “what groups of society are we going to value?” Once we stop this adjectival promiscuity, we see that imperialism was always about how humans and the rest of nature were wrapped up with each other.

I think then we can practically start to make new alliances with different parts of the world’s social movements that are disconnected – between peasant movements and workers’ movements, between women’s movements and the movement for racial justice. There is a common root. The reason why putting together what I call a “singular metabolism” of humans in the web of life is so crucial – it allows us to start making connections between social moments and ecological moments.

KA: In direct opposition to the Nature/Society binary, you pose a new synthesis, the “oikos.” What is that and how does that take us to a deeper analysis of capitalism?

JWM: At the core of radical thought is something that violates our emphasis on history and relations between humans and the web of life. What happened is this core idea of Nature as outside of human relations as pristine, as nature without a history. That leads to this sense of Nature is there and we need to protect it because if we don't, the apocalypse is coming. It gets part of what's going on correct, but it does what radicals have otherwise always been good at: naming the system wrong.

Radicals talk about the interaction between humans and the rest of the nature, but don't name the relation of life-making that produces both environment and species. Humanity evolves through a series of environment-making activities that transforms not only landscapes but also human biology. For instance, the harnessing of fire allowed human ancestors to develop smaller digestive systems and treat fire as a sort of external stomach.

One of the big ideas in this book is that Nature in general has many patterns that are relatively constant—the Earth rotating in an orbital pattern around the Sun—but Nature is also historical.

With the *oikos*, we are talking about a relation of life-making, and we are naming this relation that gives rise to multiple ecosystems that include humans. Humans are always making their environments and in the process, making their relationships with each other and their own biology. The structures of power and production, and crucially of reproduction, are part of that story of how we go about making landscapes and environments, and how those environments are making us. However, our vocabulary and concepts are hard-wired in this dualism. We need to crack this dualism and offer some new concepts.

KA: Very early on in the book, you cite Marx's observation that industrialization was turning "blood into capital." You go on to talk about this terrifying transformation of the work of all forms of nature into value. What forms of Nature has capitalism historically appropriated and what is capitalism's trend with previously unexploited natures?

JWM: Capitalism is a weird system, because it's not really anthropocentric in the way that Greens usually talk about. It's anthropocentric in a narrow way which is that humans work within the commodity system, which is based on exploitation: the worker works four hours to cover his or her own wages and then another 4-10 hours for the capitalist. That's one dimension that Marx focused on. But he was aware of a wider set of dimensions.

Capitalism treats one part of humanity as social – the part of humanity that is within the cash nexus and is reproduced within the cash nexus. But – and this is the counter-intuitive part – capitalism is also an island of commodity production and exchange within much larger oceans of appropriations of unpaid work/energy. Every work process of say, a worker in Shenzhen, China, or in Detroit 70 years ago in an auto plant, depends on appropriating the unpaid work/energy of the rest of nature. Capitalism is, above all, a magnificent and destructive system of "the appropriation of women, nature and colonies," to use Maria Mies' great phrase.

The problem of capitalism today is that the opportunities of appropriating work for free – from forests, oceans, climate, soils and human beings – are dramatically contracting. Meanwhile, the mass of capital floating around the world looking for something to invest

in is getting bigger and bigger. The view of capitalism in this book speaks to something that is dynamic about the present situation and will feed into an increasingly unstable situation in the next decade or two. We have this huge mass of capital looking to be invested and a massive contraction of opportunities to get work for free. This means that capitalism has to start paying its own costs of doing business, which means that opportunities for investing capital are shrinking. There's all this money that nobody has any idea what to do with.

What happened in the radical critique is two parallel lines. One, the world is coming to an end, which is the planetary apocalypse view of John Bellamy Foster. Then there's the other view of capitalism, that it has an underconsumption or an inequality problem. But each of these two arguments is incomplete without the other, and they need to be put together. And when you bring together the ecological into the theory of economic crisis or the analysis of social inequality, the terms of understanding economic boom and bust and inequality begin to change, and vice versa. Part of that is that the core issues of social inequality, along class, race, and gender lines, have everything to do with how capitalism works in the web of life.

KA: Let's turn to the labor process, the cornerstone of capitalist exploitation in classical Marxist thought. You argue that Marx felt that it's not just wage labor but the unpaid work and energies of both humans, especially women, and extra-human natures that has been central to capitalism. And you also note that we live in a world where increasingly, we seem to pit wages and jobs *against* the climate, which is a false dichotomy. How do we begin to move away from this binary you're trying to break?

JWM: I went to the core of Marxist thinking to tease out a new interpretation that is consistent with how Marx thought about it. Value is one of the most boring things that any Marxist can talk about – to utter the words “the law of value” certainly makes my eyes glaze over. But all civilizations have a way of valuing life. That's not unique to capitalism. What capitalism does is say that well, labor productivity within the cash nexus is what counts and then we'll devalue the work of women, nature, and colonies. This turns inside-out the usual Marxist argument. There is a kind of law of value in capitalism that is a law of “cheap nature” or a law of devaluing the work of humans along with the rest of nature in order.

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest while this kind of politics was unfolding. On one side you had conservationists who, rightly so, wanted to protect old-growth forests. And on the other side, you had the bourgeoisie but also labor unions which said, well, we need jobs.

This is changing. It's becoming clear, even for many big businesses, that climate change is going to fundamentally alter the conditions of making a profit. We can see this around food. The modern world is built on cheap food, which you can get if you have a very regular climate, lots of soil, cheap labor – then you can grow calories for relatively cheap. But we see the food sovereignty movement emerging which says there aren't any jobs anyway, and there's no way to get nature to work for free any more than it already is, because now we're seeing all the bills coming due of treating the global atmosphere as a dumping ground for pollution.

We also see the situation in California, for instance, where the drought has become so severe—the worst in 1200 years, we're told—that the center of North American cash crop

agriculture might just disappear over the next few decades. So in a lot of ways, the acceleration of historical change is making that “jobs vs. environment” discourse obsolete.

KA: You talk a great deal about capitalism’s *modus operandi* being the appropriation of socially necessary unpaid work, and Green and Red thought has generally tended to ignore that. What are some examples?

JWM: The first thing we need to be aware of is that the most powerful organizing myth of Green thought and environmental activism over the past four decades has been the Industrial Revolution—this is the argument of the “Anthropocene” today, which says that everything bad about environmental change goes back to England around 1800 with the steam engine and coal. That’s not really true, but that idea is ingrained in how we learn about the modern world and especially how we think about environmental crisis.

In fact, the rise of capitalism can be seen most clearly in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries in the ways that landscapes and humans on those landscapes were transformed. There was a revolution in environment-making that was unprecedented in scale, speed, and scope between 1450 and 1750.

The most dramatic expression of this was the conquest of the Americas, which was far more than merely military conquest and genocide, although that was a big part of it. The New World became a proving ground for industrial capitalism in every sense. The origins can be seen in sugar plantations. A close second was silver mining in Potosi, in Bolivia today, in Spain, Mexico today. There were very large production operations, lots of machinery, money flowing in, workers who were regimented by time and by task – and it was all premised on appropriating the work of nature for free or very low cost and turning it into something that could be bought and sold.

That destroyed soils and the mountainous zones of the Andes, for instance, which were completely denuded of trees, causing terrible soil erosion. But it was also devastating for the humans involved. In the viceroyalty of Peru in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Castilians, the Spaniards, for example, had a special word for indigenous people which was “*naturales*.” These workers and indigenous people were considered part of nature.

The same sort of dialogue went on around African slavery. The African slave trade was a conjoined reality with the sugar plantations, which tells us something important – not only were New World soils appropriated and exhausted and forests cleared, but also African slaves were treated not as humans or part of society, but as part of nature. The work of Africans was appropriated, and the work of soils and forests was appropriated. It was on this basis that a new relationship with nature started to emerge, and it had to do with the economy.

Every time new empires went out, the Portuguese to the New World and the Indian Ocean, the Dutch, the Spaniards, the first thing they did was start to collect all the natures they could find, including the humans, and to code them and rationalize them. Finally there were extraordinary processes of mobilizing unpaid work in service of commodity production and exchange. The first thing any capitalist wanted, or any colonial power wanted, was to put down a little bit of money, and get a lot of useful energy back, in the form of silver, sugar, and then later tobacco and then cotton with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. It was the same process that every act of technological breakthrough

– the steam engine or before that, innovations in ship-building – was premised on: getting new ways of nature to work for free or a low cost on a mass scale. It's the same thing in the past century with oil.

KA: What is your critique of the Anthropocene and how do you feel it glosses over real historical analysis of capitalism?

JWM: We need to distinguish between two uses of the term. One is the Anthropocene as a cultural conversation, the kind of conversation with friends over dinner or at the watercooler. In this sense the Anthropocene has the virtue of posing an important question: how do humans fit within the web of life? But the Anthropocene cannot answer that question, because the very terms of the concept are dualistic, as in the famous article "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" That isn't a great question if you believe humans are a part of nature.

The Anthropocene argument in its dominant form, on the other hand, is an absurd historical model. It says more or less that everything starts in England in 1800 with steam engines and coal. There are all sorts of historical problems with that, which we talked about. Long before the steam engine, there was an order of magnitude increase in capitalism's ability to transform the environment, in terms of scale, speed and scope.

I'm very concerned that the Anthropocene plays this old bourgeois trick which says the problems created by capitalists are the responsibility of all of humanity. That is a deeply racist, Eurocentric, and patriarchal view that presents a series of very real problems as the responsibility of humanity as a whole. On a deep philosophical level, we are all the same in the eyes of the Anthropocene. In a historical sense, that is some of the worst conceptual violence you can impose. It would be like saying race doesn't matter in America today – anybody who said that would be laughed off the stage. But part of getting away with the Anthropocene idea is the Nature/Society dualism.

KA: Is capitalism today, in the final analysis, in developmental crisis? What prognostication does this new historical analysis give us?

JWM: Everything depends on how you think of capitalism. If you have a standard definition of capitalism committed to endless economic growth and maximizing profitability, you can say a lot of things about capitalism's ability to survive. But if you say capitalism is dependent upon appropriating the unpaid work of humans and the rest of nature... then you start to have a different view of limits.

The core question of political economy is: how do great booms of capitalist investment and accumulation occur in the modern world, and what are the limits to them?

Even if climate change weren't happening, these limits would be profound. Capitalists have always found their way out of crisis, something radicals and conservatives agree on. Both say the same thing because they are both nature-blind. Capitalism is above all a system of cheap nature, consisting of the four cheaps: labor power, energy, food, raw materials. Capitalism restores the cheapness of those natures by finding new parts of nature that have not been commodified or brought into the cash nexus. In the 19th century, that was South Asia and East Asia. Over the past 30 years, neoliberalism brought in China, India, the Soviet Union, and Brazil.

Then we have climate change. That feeds back in a way that slows whatever “cheap natures” are left. Climate change is the largest single vector of rising costs of business as usual. It will undermine the basis of capitalism’s whole relationship with nature by radically undermining the cheap nature strategy that it was based on.

KA: You mention that environmental and social movements are slowly coming to the realization that the Nature/Society binary is false, possibly because of the real threats on both Nature and Society and capitalism, particularly with large-scale extractive drilling projects that are encroaching on a Nature of which humans are a part.

JWM: I think some movements are seeing Nature and Society as inextricably linked. I think the next step is to move into the heartland of questions of race, gender, and inequality to point out that these issues are intimately about how Nature and Society get imagined in the modern world. If you ask a simple question, like why do some human lives matter more than other – so we think about Black Lives Matter – or why do some genocides matter more than others, you start to see that there are very powerful presumptions of Nature and Society that go in there.

I think movements around the tar sands or the Keystone XL pipeline present the kind of social movement organizing that fits very well with the arguments of this book. Movements for justice cannot be placated anymore through a new distribution of reward, in part because capitalism doesn’t have the surplus that it used to have. You see these conversations especially around energy, fracking, oil, and extractive projects in Latin America. And of course, in Latin America, many indigenous groups never believed in this dualism to begin with. They were always ahead.

But there are still too many on the Left, especially in North America, who view Nature as out there, as a variable, or a context, which will be a complete political dead end. We need to bring Nature into capitalism, and understand capitalism in Nature.

Jason W. Moore is assistant professor of sociology at Binghamton University, and coordinator of the World-Ecology Research Network. He writes frequently on the history of capitalism in Europe, Latin America, and the United States, from the long sixteenth century to the neoliberal era. Presently, he is completing *Ecology and the rise of capitalism*, an environmental history of the rise of capitalism, for the University of California Press.

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