

# Struggles for Dignity in the Web of Life

*Capital, Waste & the Violence of Cheap Nature*

Jason W. Moore<sup>1</sup>

World-Ecology Research Group, Binghamton University

When I grow up, I hope to write a book half as good as *Power Struggles*. Its narrative is elegant, engaging, accessible. Its insights will keep you thinking long after you read the last page. *Power Struggles* is that rare book: scholarly without being scholastic; intimately ethnographic without losing sight of the Big Picture; politically committed without succumbing to dogma.

In my original book endorsement, I wrote that *Power Struggles* is “indispensable reading for energy justice in the age of climate crisis.” This is true. But Jaume Franquesa has given us something far more significant than an ethnographic masterpiece of renewable energy and its brutal inequalities. His vision refused the dominant fetish *energy*, piercing its ideological veil, laying bare the contradictions of capitalist *power* in the web of life. *Power Struggles* reads as a searing indictment of capitalist power as a Promethean drive to dominate humans by dominating the rest of life (and vice versa). For Franquesa, that Prometheanism does float in the philosophical ether; it is a class project of ideological domination and cultural devaluation, one that seeks to mystify capitalism’s real movements of accumulation, inequality, and laying waste to life, labor and landscapes.<sup>2</sup>

*Power Struggles* is a fundamental contribution to a new generation of radical scholarship that grasps historical capitalism through its webs of power, profit and life. The reader will quickly find herself entranced by Franquesa’s connective narrative of everyday life, capital accumulation, class politics and state coercion. Above all, Franquesa weaves these through a scintillating ethnography “from below,” illuminating the everyday lives of rural Catalonians in their intimate relations with land, labor and life, and how those connections generate indignation and struggles for dignity. Franquesa reveals how each moment moves in

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<sup>1</sup> Preface to the Spanish translation of Jaume Franquesa, *Power Struggles: Dignity, Value, & the Renewable Energy Frontier in Spain* (Madrid: Errata Naturae, forthcoming late 2022; 2018 original, Indiana University Press). Correspondence: Jason W. Moore: [jwmoore@binghamton.edu](mailto:jwmoore@binghamton.edu).

<sup>2</sup> J.W. Moore, “Power, Profit and Prometheanism, Part I: Method, Ideology and the Violence of the Civilizing Project,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21(2), 2022), 415-426

relation to successive “Spanish” – of course we should not reify Spain – national ecological regimes. In *Power Struggles*, you will find not a whiff of the bourgeois temptation to separate reality into an abstract Nature and an abstract Society. In these stories, the mixing of human labor with the land – to lean on Raymond Williams, who figures prominently in Franquesa’s thinking – is so thorough that nowhere can we separate the two.<sup>3</sup> To do so is to pretend that the three moments of capitalist *power* – of (some) humans over other humans, of (some) humans over extra-human land and life, of ideological domination – are separated, when we know they are organically joined.

I have called this new wave of radical scholarship the world-ecology conversation.<sup>4</sup> With Franquesa, world-ecology insists that struggles for justice and dignity are the political counterpoint to the dictatorship of capital. *Dignity* and indignation are emergent “structures of feeling” – again, I lean on our friend Raymond Williams – that takes shape through capitalism’s *longue durée* alienations: of humans from each other, from the web of life, from our access to means of livelihood and (re)production, and from the necessary internal harmony of mind, body and spirit.<sup>5</sup> These four alienations form a whole, a “rich totality of many determinations.”<sup>6</sup>

To experience alienation is to inhabit modernity’s violence and devaluation of life and work and play, contradictions carried to new heights by late capitalism at the end of the Cheap Nature. To experience *indignation* is to reject the real abstractions that rule our lives – of Nature as “beyond politics,” of Development and Growth and Progress as inevitable, true and good. Far from backward looking, far from a romantic yearning for an idealized past, Franquesa shows us that indignation is the first moment of outrage against capitalism’s material and ideological violence. Here is a moment of transition pregnant with revolutionary possibility.

This is a great insight. Franquesa joins capitalist efforts to transform everyday life with the structures of feeling – indignation – that give rise to concrete struggles for socio-ecological justice: struggles for *dignity*. This opens – for these movements, and for the reader – a way of seeing the political possibilities for a future governed by the people rather than the plutocrats; for a future in which energy, work, and power are

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<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), 67-85.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Moore, *El capitalismo en la trama de la vida: ecología y acumulación del capital* (Madrid: Traficante Sueños, 2020); idem, *La trama de la vida en los umbrales del Capitaloceno* (Ciudad de México: Bajo Tierra Ediciones, 2020); Yoan Molinero Gerbeau, Gennaro Avallone & Jason W. Moore, eds., *Ecología-Mundo, Capitaloceno y Acumulación Global*, Parte 1, *Relaciones Internacionales*, 46 (2021); idem, eds., *Ecología-Mundo, Capitaloceno y Acumulación Global*, Parte 2, *Relaciones Internacionales*, 47 (2021). See several hundred books and essays in the world-ecology conversation here: <https://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/World-Ecology>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 99.

radically democratized in service to the world's working classes, paid and unpaid, human and extra-human.

Franquesa therefore travels on a path first blazed by Marx and Engels. In turn, he blazes new dialectical trails. Although Marxists often forget, Marx's classic formula of the "general law of capitalist accumulation," through which the concentration of enormous wealth is realized by generalizing poverty, is also a theory of *misery*. The word runs like red thread through *Capital*.<sup>7</sup> In its culminating chapters, we learn how "the accumulation of misery [is] a necessary condition corresponding to the accumulation of wealth."<sup>8</sup> And while there are many people in today's violently unequal world experiencing much worse misery than Franquesa's rural Catalonians, we should not lose track of the penetrating dialectical insight. The structures of capital and the structure of feeling – of alienation in our fourfold sense – are fundamental to the political and ideological struggles for justice. The misery that *can* lead to indignation – although too often, Franquesa reminds us, there is also *resignation* – may also precipitate struggles of dignity, the dialectical antagonism of capitalism's law of value.

The *law of value*. It's an old-fashioned term. The *law* of value derives from Hegel, and is best understood as a historical movement. It is a developing antagonism that cannot be resolved under capitalism. The law of value extends and penetrates the capital relation into life, land and labor while generating the socio-ecological forces and relations that initially resist, and increasingly seek to revolutionize, the capital relation as a whole.

Marxists seldom deploy the law of value wisely, or communicate it effectively. Franquesa is not afraid to use it, however, and for good reason. The orthodox sense of the law of value focuses on the circuit of capital. It communicates how, once established, capitalism imposes the "dull *compulsion of economic relations*" on bourgeois and proletarian alike.<sup>9</sup> The capitalist advances labor productivity in the factory, plantation, and office, on pain of competitive extinction. The worker experiences that productivist drive by adjusting to – and wherever possible, struggling against – those economic compulsions. As Marx understood, the law of value is class struggle in its widest sense: a struggle not just for wages, but for collective dignity, respect, and justice. Here Franquesa forces us to wrestle with thorny problems: those associated with economic formalism, as well as those linked to its mirror image, found in so many "critical" ethnographies of global capitalism. We must grasp the law of value as limited neither to economics nor the social; as irreducibly socio-ecological and ethico-political, understood as mutually constituting moment of capital's endless accumulation. The law of value, in other words, *pivots on* but is

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<sup>7</sup> F.K. Satrio, *Living in the Ruins of the Capitalocene*, PhD dissertation (Binghamton University, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> K. Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 799.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 899.

not limited to “the dull compulsion of economic relations.” It is a structure of capital, a structure of ideological power, a structure of feeling... and the springboard of the cultural and social revolutions necessary to carry struggles of dignity to their emancipatory fruition.

All civilizations unfold through laws of value specific to their ways of organizing power, culture, and re/production. These laws shape what and who is valued, and what and who is devalued.<sup>10</sup> They are cultural priorities, political dynamics, economic logics. Feudalism, for instance, privileged a hierarchical holism. There was a “great chain of being” that symbolically arranged social life in a class structure that, for its many problems, emphasized reciprocity throughout. This dialectic of culture and class was entangled within a political economy of power and re/production. These latter favored overlapping and interpenetrating chains of sovereignty, locking in peasantries to modes of cultivation that proved increasingly vulnerable to climatic and agro-ecological contradictions. When those contradictions detonated, across the first half of the fourteenth century, so too did peasant indignation – and revolt. The outcome was not, as we know, a peasant communism of the sort that broadly prevailed across the post-Roman West a millennium earlier. It did however ensure the epochal crisis of feudalism, a centuries-long destabilization and reinvention of cultural, political, and economic life.<sup>11</sup>

Capitalism’s law of value emerged tentatively and unevenly – but decisively in the long era of climate crisis, economic volatility and political destabilization that historians have long reckoned as the “general crisis” of the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> *This* law of value radically different from earlier, tributary civilizations like feudalism or Antiquity’s great agrarian empires. Gone was the great chain of being. Gone was the notion of reciprocity. Fitting for a civilization that pursued a relentless and unprecedented mathematization, the new law of value installed a binary code at the heart of its cultural operating system. Increasingly, and decisively after the 1550s, a new Civilizing Project with a distinctive cultural logic redefined power, profit and life along starkly dualist lines. Some humans carried the torch of Enlightenment and Civilization, necessary to bring Salvation (or Civilization, or, later, Development) to “savage” and “wild” peoples, who invariably inhabited *wastelands* (lands to be enclosed, colonized, and otherwise subordinated to world accumulation) – as Franquesa

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<sup>10</sup> J.W. Moore, “The Value of Everything? Work, Capital, and Historical Natures in the Capitalist World-Ecology,” *Review* 37(3-4, 2017), 245-92.

<sup>11</sup> J.W. Moore, “[La naturaleza y la transición del feudalismo al capitalismo](#),” *La trama de la vida en los umbrales del Capitaloceno* (Ciudad de México: Bajo Tierra Ediciones, 2020), 41-114; R. Patel and J.W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> J.W. Moore, [Empire, Class & The Origins Of Planetary Crisis: The Transition Debate in the Web of Life](#), *Esboços: histories in global contexts* 28 (2021), 740-763; idem, “Del gran abaratamiento a la gran implosión: Clase, clima y la Gran Frontera,” *Relaciones Internacionales*, 47 (2021), 11-52.

underscores. Such wastelands, in the new bourgeois cosmology, cried out for capitalist Improvement.<sup>13</sup> Not only indigenous and African, not only Celtic and Slavic, this redefinition of most humans under the sign of Nature also extended to virtually all women and peasants, all to ensure that capital and empires could secure the conditions of profitability necessary to advance the rate of profit and extend the reach imperial power.

Capitalism's law of value contains an economic logic that is indeed central. But most of what makes that economic logic "work" – in its ruthlessly devaluing and devastating logic – is found outside the circuit of capital. Franquesa shows how capital's logic unfolds through a double robbery: through territorial enclosure, dispossession and the violence of bourgeois property; and through violent alienations that rob the direct re/producers not only of their lives, land, and wellbeing, but of their dignity. It is precisely for this reason that I find such resonance between Franquesa's approach and my reckoning of Cheap Nature as capitalism's fundamental strategy, one that turns in differential but equal measure on geocultural devaluation and economic valorization. Cheap Nature not only forcefully reduced the prices that capital must pay for the Four Cheaps (labor, food, energy, and raw materials). Such cost reduction depends upon, and flows through, the geocultural devaluation of "women, nature and colonies."<sup>14</sup>

From 1492, Civilizing Projects have turned on a Nature that includes most humans. That *Nature* is a ruling abstraction at the core of manifold Christianizing, Civilizing, and Developmentalist Projects. It expresses the bourgeois-imperial naturalism – often under the sign of natural law – that has informed counterinsurgency and counter-revolution since Thomas Malthus and indeed even earlier. Nature is the conceptual raw material that makes the ideological hammers of racialized, gendered, and colonial superexploitation. That superexploitation is not a clash of civilizations but a class struggle. It's a strategy that seeks to increase the rate of exploitation (of surplus value) not only through socio-technical restructuring, but also by increasing the rate of appropriation: *the extraction of the unpaid work*, human and extra-human. In the same breath, those Civilizing Projects have been continually challenged, upended, and even temporarily reversed by unruly, messy, and contentious webs of life, including modernity's great liberation struggles, working class movements, and socialist revolutions.

Such Projects are underwritten by capitalism's peculiar – and peculiarly destructive – approach to *waste*. The lives and labor of the proletariat, biotariat, and femitariat are rendered waste (as commons),

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<sup>13</sup> J.W. Moore, "Wasting Away: How Capitalism Lays Waste to the Web of Life, and Why It Can't Stop," Working Paper, World-Ecology Research Collective, Binghamton University (2022), <https://jasonwmoore.com/academicpapers/>.

<sup>14</sup> M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed, 1986), 77,

to be rationally “enclosed” by the Enlightened Civilizers and put to work; and they are subsequently rendered waste as “disposable” workers.<sup>15</sup> Happily – or least, *hopefully* – such disposable workers do not disappear; they are not consigned to the dustbin of history. They are *indignant*. Cheap Nature’s double logic of valorization and devaluation increasingly finds its revolutionary pivot in the struggle for dignity and mode of re/production that values the life and labor of all the Earth’s creatures. *Power Struggles* is a mighty contribution to those revolutionary possibilities at an epochal turning point in human – and more-than-human – affairs.

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<sup>15</sup> J.W. Moore, “[El hombre, la naturaleza y el ambientalismo de los ricos. Antropoceno, Capitaloceno y el proletariado planetario.](#)” In *Pensar la ciencia de otro modo*, Francisco F. Herrera Daniel Lew Nerliny Carucí, eds. (Caracas: Ministerio del Poder Popular para Ciencia y Tecnología [Mincyt]), 55-82