

# Imperialism, With and Without Cheap Nature: Climate History & the Demise of Westphalia

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In recent years, a consensus has developed among enlightened ruling strata and their transnational institutions: the climate crisis is an “existential threat.”<sup>2</sup> United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, US President Joe Biden, the World Economic Forum, the International Monetary Fund and other “masters of the universe” have taken to the phrase like moths to the flame. Some version of the phrase circulates widely among activists, scientists, and critical intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> It’s hardly novel. Climate emergency phraseology appeals to a longstanding, and quintessentially modern, cosmology. This is the Environmental Imaginary. Born in the bloodbath that was the rise of capitalism, it projects capitalism’s death drive onto a novel cosmology: the quasi-eternal conflict between Man and Nature. It’s with us still. We hear it whenever we encounter the language of *anthropogenic* climate change – as if the climate crisis resulted from humans behaving badly. In the self-interested scheme of Man and Nature, only Enlightened Civilizers can bring harmony and salvation. Whether through Christ, *la mission civilisatrice*, Development, or the Market, the Civilizers’ responsibility is always the same: civilize the savage, rationalize the irrational, develop the undeveloped... all so that catastrophe might be averted.<sup>4</sup>

Of course those Civilizers – planters and priests, soldiers and slavers – had brought End Times to countless peoples, starting in 1492. The New World genocides signaled the rise of capitalism as a geobiological force. Its mass graves enabled a significant carbon drawdown over the next century, as soils were left undisturbed and forests advanced. This *capitalogenic* decarbonization amplified natural forcing to produce modernity’s first climate crisis, the “long, cold seventeenth century” (c.



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*Working Papers in World-Ecology*, 3/2022, World-Ecology Research Group, Binghamton University, November 2022. A modified version of this argument appears as “Imperialistische Kriege in der Endphase der billigen Natur: Klima, Weltkrieg und Revolution,” *Das Argument*, 2023, in press.

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<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, “Fossil fuel dependence poses ‘direct existential threat’, warns UN chief,” *The Guardian* (11 Sept., 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Inter alios*, J.B Foster & B. Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Moore, “Our Capitalogenic World: Climate Crises, Class Politics & the Civilizing Project,” *Studia Poetica* (forthcoming); idem., “Power, Profit and Prometheanism, Part I,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21(2, 2022), 415-426

1550-1700).<sup>5</sup> It was an era of economic crisis, political unrest, and the first of three “Thirty Years Wars” that shaped capitalism and planetary life for the next four centuries. If the initial movements towards modern imperialism can be found in the “first” sixteenth century (c. 1450-1557), the imperialist system of states and sovereignty came of age only at Westphalia in 1648.<sup>6</sup> We’ll revisit the origins of Westphalia presently. What bears emphasizing is how a series of occlusions formed in this era, linking the Civilizing Project, the Cartesian Revolution, and worldwide primitive accumulation. These entwined ideological and intellectual developments persist in contemporary social thought, effectively separating questions of world power, world accumulation and world nature through an ensemble of ruling abstractions pivoting on Man, Nature and the Civilizing Project.<sup>7</sup>

When a new Environmental Imaginary formed after 1968, it reinvented this older cosmology.<sup>8</sup> Among its consequences has been a disabling ideological rupture. This ideological rift has allowed mainstream environmentalism to ignore, or significantly underestimate, how imperialism and class struggles are fundamental to capitalism in the web of life. This rift undermines socialist efforts to make sense of the climate crisis as driven by imperialist tensions, American unipolar ambitions, the permanent war economy, and the resurgence of territorialism as imperial strategy. To abstract the political economy of war from the political ecology of imperialism and climate change not only cedes the interpretive terrain to all manner of neo-Malthusianisms.<sup>9</sup> It courts political failure at an epochal moment.

Ideological formations are not social accidents. The bourgeois trinity of Man, Nature, and Civilization emerged with modern imperialism. Since 1968, the mass basis of the new Environmental Imaginary has been the professional-managerial class, overwhelmingly concentrated in the imperialist countries.<sup>10</sup> Except for brief interludes in the 1960s and during the anti-nuclear mobilizations of the early 1980s, the PMC has been silent on American imperialism. As the PMC’s ranks swelled in the neoliberal transition, anti-war politics withered. For the PMC, faith in catastrophism and managerialism were two sides of the same coin. The paradoxical marriage of incremental “scientific” reformism

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<sup>5</sup> E.L.R. Ladurie & V. Daux, “The climate in Burgundy and elsewhere, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 33(1, 2008), 10-24; S.L. Lewis & M.A Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519(2015), 171-80.

<sup>6</sup> M. Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester, UK: Leicester Univ. Press, 1978), 129-152.

<sup>7</sup> J.W. Moore, “How to Read Capitalism in the Web of Life,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21(1, 2022), 153-168.

<sup>8</sup> J.W. Moore, “Beyond Climate Justice,” In *The Way Out of...*, E. Degot and D. Riff, eds. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2022), 105-130.

<sup>9</sup> J.W. Moore, “Waste in the Limits to Capital,” *Emancipations* (2023, in press).

<sup>10</sup> The PMC is not a class, but rather a cultural formation, corresponding to a kind of proletarian “aristocracy” whose worldview fancies rational, meritocratic and technocratic capitalism. Its origins lay in rise of monopoly capitalism during the late nineteenth century. See P. Walker, ed. *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press), 1979.

with radical-sounding catastrophism defined the new Environmentalism. Good Science and the Apocalypse were its opiates.<sup>11</sup> Cultivated and reinvented ever since by an expansive eco-industrial complex, financed by rich countries, billionaire foundations, and affluent professional strata, and overwhelmingly staffed by PMC cadres, the new Environmentalism weaponized existential threat discourses to blunt and delegitimize socialist and anti-imperialist critiques.

Consider this. The most influential Environmentalist concept of the new millennium – the Anthropocene – has had virtually nothing to say about America’s Forever Wars. Imperialism has been excised from its Environmental Imaginary. This is no trifling matter. Coined in 2000, the Anthropocene spread like wildfire across the academic world just as the United States embarked upon the greatest orgy of military interventionism in its history. Out of some 500 American military interventions since 1798, more than one-third have occurred since 1999.<sup>12</sup> As of 2018, American special forces units were active in a stunning three-quarters of the world’s countries.<sup>13</sup> This is not only a war machine unrivaled in capitalist history, one constructed to fight on two fronts and maintain operational fitness through a first-strike nuclear war.<sup>14</sup> The Pentagon is also the world’s largest institutional emitter of greenhouse gases and consumer of fossil fuels.<sup>15</sup> Its imperial function is to reproduce American hegemony’s ecocidal business-as-usual.

The significance goes far beyond specific instances of toxification and carbonization. The chief responsibility of modern empires is to secure and defend the conditions for a *good business environment*. At its core, this involves the extra-economic appropriation of the Four Cheaps: labor-power and unpaid work, food and agricultural capacity, raw materials, and energy.<sup>16</sup> Since 1917, it’s also involved counter-revolution across Global South, out of fear that socialist and nationalist states might consume the Cheap Natures that otherwise would go to the rich countries. Sustaining and reproducing good business environments, imperialism has greased the wheels of carbonization en route to the planetary inferno. In a world where it’s easy to imagine carbonizing factories belching dirty smoke into the air, the greatest engine of climate crisis is the machinery of empire.

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<sup>11</sup> J.W. Moore, “Opiates of the Environmentalists? Anthropocene Illusions, Planetary Management & The Capitalocene Alternative,” *Abstrakt* (November).

<sup>12</sup> Military Intervention Project, Fletcher Center for Strategic Studies, Tufts University (no date), [https://sites.tufts.edu/css/mip-research/#\\_edn4](https://sites.tufts.edu/css/mip-research/#_edn4); B. Salazar Torreon, “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2017,” *Congressional Research Service* 12 October, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> M. Toft, “The Dangerous Rise of Kinetic Diplomacy,” *War on the Rocks*, (May, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> J.B. Foster, “‘Notes on Exterminism’ for the Twenty-First-Century Ecology and Peace Movements,” *Monthly Review* 74 (1, 2022), 1-17.

<sup>15</sup> N.C. Crawford, *Pentagon fuel use, climate change, and the costs of war* (Watson Institute, Brown University, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2015).

In this light, imperialism is organized crime, a gangster operation in the web of life. When Smedley Darlington Butler, the US Marine Corps' leading operational commander in the early twentieth century, looked back on his life, he wrote this: "I feel I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three city districts. We Marines operated on three continents."<sup>17</sup> Like Al Capone, modern empires understood from the beginning that "war is a racket" and accumulated capital grows from the barrel of a gun. In July 2020, when Elon Musk quipped about Bolivia's lithium reserves, "we will coup whoever we want," Butler – and Capone – would have immediately understood.<sup>18</sup>

### WORLD WAR III, WORLD ORDER & CLIMATE-CLASS CONJUNCTURES

Imperialism is not merely about refashioning colonial ecologies in the interest of metropolitan accumulation. It also turns on Great Power conflict. Here the escalation of war moves to center stage, just as the last frontiers of Cheap Nature are exhausted, expressing and amplifying the climate crisis. Fundamental to that exhaustion is the Westphalian Order's demise. Russia's gamble that its February 2022 invasion would bring the U.S. and its client state to the bargaining table was sound, but only if the old balance-of-power arrangements were in force. They are not. Three decades of American unipolarity, its unchecked military adventurism, and its shameless regime change politics have driven the last few nails into the coffin of Westphalian multipolarity. A struggle for a new world order – and with it a new mode of production – has begun. With it comes not only capitalism's doomsday threat, but also the possibilities for socialist transition.

On the heels of a quarter-century of ceaseless American interventionism, the threat of nuclear war has reached an unprecedented high. That sobering nuclear threat assessment was rendered *before* the most recent phase of the Russia-NATO conflict in Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> Its source is the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which first wound its iconic "doomsday clock" in 1947. A month after the 2022 Doomsday Clock announcement, the long-simmering conflict between Russia and the United States exploded into open war.<sup>20</sup> World War III has begun.

Historical metaphors are tricky things. The NATO-Russia War signals a new phase of imperialist struggle specific to the end of Cheap Nature. It resembles earlier struggles – not least the twentieth-century's Thirty Years War (1618-48) that occasioned the transition from British

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<sup>17</sup> S.D. Butler, *War is a Racket* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011). R. Patel & J.W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Screenshot, Elon Musk tweet, 25 July 2020, <https://twitter.com/panoparker/status/1318157559266762752?lang=en>

<sup>19</sup> J. Mecklin, "At doom's doorstep," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (20 January, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> S.F. Cohen, *War with Russia?* (Simon and Schuster, 2018).

to American world hegemony. It is also very different. In stark contrast to previous hegemonic transitions and accumulation crises, the twenty-first century's World War unfolds in an enclosed biosphere. The epochal closure of Cheap Nature frontiers – including the enclosure of the atmospheric commons as a dumping ground for greenhouse gases – cannot be overstated.<sup>21</sup> Through these frontiers, shifting alliances between capital and empire have secured the unpaid work/energy necessary to “fix” capitalism's recurring accumulation crises and stabilize Great Power conflict.

Capitalism's Cheap Nature strategy and the Westphalian world order came of age during the long, cold seventeenth century. This was no coincidence. Both moments were intimately tied to capitalism's first great climate crisis.<sup>22</sup> Climate changes, it turns out, are closely bound to crises of world order and the modes of production in which they're embedded. This was spectacularly true for feudalism and capitalism in the Little Ice Age (c. 1300-1850), the coldest period of the last 8,000 years.<sup>23</sup> We might reflect upon three snapshots from the past seven centuries: the Anglo-French and Italian “hundred years wars” (c. 1330s-1450s); the seventeenth century's overlapping Eighty and Thirty Years Wars, stabilized through Westphalia (1648); the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, resolved only at Vienna (1815). Each moment occurred amidst dramatic cooling. Climate shifts, social revolt, and geopolitical instability formed a “rich totality of many determinations.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, correlation is not causation; nor does climate have “agency,” as some would have it. Climate and civilization are not colliding billiard balls. No indeed. Climate is not everything. But it's impossible to explain *anything* about capitalism's terminal crisis without it.<sup>25</sup>

Across the past three millennia, “unfavorable” climate shifts – simplistically, “little ice ages” in the northern hemisphere, roughly corresponding with steppe and tropical droughts – are implicated in *crises* of political power and social order.<sup>26</sup> Epochal crises signal transitions from one mode of re/production and life to another. Because civilizations form through specific climate conditions, climate changes ramify throughout social life: in agriculture above all, with migration, social revolt and war close behind. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Against the neo-Malthusian “collapse” narrative, this reading suggests how

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<sup>21</sup> J.W. Moore, “Waste and the Limits to Capital: How Capitalism Lays Waste to the Web of Life, and Why It Can't Stop,” *Emancipations* 2(1, 2022), 1-45.

<sup>22</sup> G. Parker, *Global Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> H. Wanner, C. Pfister, & R. Neukom, “The variable European Little Ice Age,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 287(2022), 107531.

<sup>24</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 99.

<sup>25</sup> J.W. Moore, “Empire, Class & The Origins Of Planetary Crisis: The Transition Debate in the Web of Life,” *Esboços* 28(2021), 740-763.

<sup>26</sup> J.L. Brooke, *Climate change and the course of global history* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014); K. Harper, *The Fate of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2017); D. Kaniewski, et al., “Environmental roots of the Late Bronze Age crisis,” *PLoS One*, 8(8), e71004.

climate crises have been bad for ruling classes. “Dark ages” for ruling classes may well be golden ages for everyone else.

In short: climate crises in world history have been moments of political possibility.

The Roman West’s crisis, for instance, was tightly bound first to Eurasian drought and then to the Dark Ages Cold Period in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>27</sup> The Eurasian world order that cohered during the last centuries of the Roman Climate Optimum (c. 300 BCE-300 CE) involved delicately arranged relations between Rome, rival agrarian empires like Persia, and “barbarian” social formations from the Rhine to the Pontic Steppe and beyond. That world order showed signs of exhaustion by the later fourth century. Changing climate was one element in the complex weave of transcontinental migrations, “civil wars” between ruling fractions, agrarian stagnation, and social revolt. As ruling class hegemony over the countryside crumbled, peasantries across western and central Europe reconstructed socio-ecological life. They occupied the villas and re-established village life. In contrast to Roman monocultures, peasants diversified livelihood strategies, combining polyculture, gathering, and pastoralism to deliver better health for the vast majority. Peasants lived simpler... and better. Women and men lived together more equally. Fertility adjusted. Peasant hegemony in the Dark Ages Cold Period brought a golden age for re/producing classes. Only for the old ruling classes was it a “dark age.”<sup>28</sup>

World-historical parallels are no less tricky than our metaphors. It is easy to make too much of them. In an era when we often hear how it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, however, our story of the post-Roman golden age under peasant hegemony should give us pause. Such climate transitions have entailed hardship for the vast majority over the short run. Wars and violence proliferate – as they have over the past two decades.<sup>29</sup> We should not take this lightly. But life under class rule is never easy, and those hardships were joined to crises of class rule and the socio-ecological relations of exploitation they entailed.

It’s worth noting that ruling class metabolisms are famously “sticky.” Predator classes generally refuse to adjust economic interests and belief systems inherited from previous climate eras. Climate “adaptation,” historically, has been spearheaded from below, favoring resistance and revolt. Thus the striking connections between climate downturns and social revolt in the premodern world (from late Antiquity’s *bagaudae* to Wat Tyler in 1381) and the history of capitalism, from the Levellers to

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<sup>27</sup> M. McCormick, et al. “Climate change during and after the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 43(2), 2012), 169-220.

<sup>28</sup> F. Cheyette, “The Origins of European Villages and the First European Expansion,” *Journal of Economic History* 37(1), 1977), 182-206; C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> C. Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos* (New York: Nation Books, 2011).

the Atlantic Revolutions.<sup>30</sup> The outcome of today's climate-class conjuncture, including the Westphalian Order's uneven and explosive contradictions, is uncertain. We can rest assured, however, that – so long as we avoid nuclear war – our future is pregnant with world-historical possibility.

## WORLD ORDER, CHEAP NATURES & THE GREAT FRONTIER

Unfolding before our eyes is the crisis of the capitalist international order that first crystallized in the long cold seventeenth century. Geopolitically, the century culminated in the 1648 Treaties of Osnabrück and Münster: the Peace of Westphalia.<sup>31</sup> Formally, the Treaty settled the Thirty Years War that ravaged the Germanies for three decades. It codified the “balance of power” within the imperialist system of states. Unofficially, it marked the triumph of Dutch world hegemony, and the end of projects that aimed at converting capitalism into an imperium on the model of Cesar Augustus, or at least Charlemagne. The Westphalian Settlement terminated medieval notions of a higher authority – moral or imperial – governing sovereign states; encouraged shifting balance-of-power alliances among the Great Powers; established the principle that “civilians were not party to the quarrels between sovereigns”; and, perhaps most tellingly, privileged relatively free trade under mercantilist norms after decades of economic warfare.<sup>32</sup>

The ensuing development of state-machineries within a vast but weak interstate system was a pillar of the seventeenth century maturing of capitalist power, profit and life.<sup>33</sup> The next century saw agricultural,

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<sup>30</sup> Parker, *Global Crisis*; B.J. Silver & E. Slater, “The social origins of world hegemonies,” in G. Arrighi & B.J. Silver, eds., *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 151-216; E.A. Thompson, “Peasant revolts in late Roman Gaul and Spain,” *Past & Present* 2(1952), 11-23; R.H. Hilton, *Bond men made free* (New York: Routledge, 2004); P. Linebaugh & M. Rediker, *The many-headed hydra* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> *Inter alios*, P. Wilkinson, *International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007). A dissenting view is B. Teschke, *The Myth of 1648* (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> G. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010), 44ff.; D. Held, *Democracy and the Global Order* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Jason W. Moore, “Nature and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2003, 97-172; idem, “The Modern World-System as Environmental History? Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism,” *Theory & Society*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2003, 307-377; idem, *Ecology and the rise of capitalism*, PhD dissertation (Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, 2007); idem, “Madeira, Sugar and the Conquest Of Nature in the ‘First ’Sixteenth Century, Part I: From ‘Island Of Timber ’to Sugar Revolution, 1420-1506.” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2009, 345-90; idem, “Amsterdam is standing on Norway,” Part I: The alchemy of capital, empire, and nature in the diaspora of silver, 1545-1648,” *The Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, 33-68; idem, “Amsterdam is standing on Norway,” Part II: The global North Atlantic

military and financial revolutions, rapid proletarianization, the flowering of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the world color line, a new gendered regime of superexploitation, and the Cartesian ‘Scientific’ Revolution. All played a part in prying open new frontiers of unpaid work/energy, setting the stage for “the” Industrial Revolution.<sup>34</sup>

That was the beginning of modern world order. *This* is the end. World War III is a new phase of imperialist struggle, specific to the end of Cheap Nature. The “socio-physical conjuncture” is decisive.<sup>35</sup> For all previous Great Power conflicts, geopolitical order was built atop the windfall profits of the Great Frontier.<sup>36</sup>

The frontier concept synthesizes two conceptual moments: the drawing of borders and the organizing of a battle front. In relation to Cheap Nature, it has a precise meaning. Frontiers of Cheap Nature are those which promise to resolve the systemwide overaccumulation of capital – that is, the tendency to accumulate capital beyond the possibilities for its profitable reinvestment. Thus, every hegemonic power – the Dutch, the British, the Americans – reinvented geopolitical strategies of domination that allowed it to realize two ambitions simultaneously. One was to secure Cheap Natures on terms that were uniquely favorable to its “national” bourgeoisie. The second was to secure sufficiently vast and Cheap Natures for the imperialist system of states, thereby ensuring a critical increment of hegemony as “world leadership.”<sup>37</sup>

Capitalism’s essential dynamism was forged – and reinvented – through the marriage of capitalization and a specific form of technical advance. Both were enabled through the militarized appropriation of unpaid work/energy, wrested from “women, nature and colonies.”<sup>38</sup> To paraphrase Marx, socially necessary labor-time stands on the pedestal of unpaid work, human and extra-human. This is the dialectic of productivity and plunder, where modern *plunder* signals an ongoing

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in the ecological revolution of the long seventeenth century,” *The Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2010, 188-227; idem, “Madeira, Sugar and the Conquest Of Nature in the ‘First’ Sixteenth Century, Part II: From Local Crisis to Commodity Frontier, 1506-1530.” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, 1-24; idem, “‘This Lofty Mountain of Silver could Conquer the Whole World’: Potosí in the World-Ecological Revolution of the Long Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of Philosophical Economics*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, 58-103.

<sup>34</sup> J.W. Moore, “Über die Ursprünge unserer ökologischen Krise,” *Prokla* 46(2016), 599-619; idem, “The Capitalocene, Part I,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(3, 2017), 594-630.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase is I. Wallerstein’s, *The Modern World-System I* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 35.

<sup>36</sup> W.P. Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964).

<sup>37</sup> J.W. Moore, “Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Our Times,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 17(1, 2011), 108-147.

<sup>38</sup> M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed, 1986), 77; J.P. Antonacci, “Periodizing the Capitalocene as Polemocene,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 27(2, 2021), 439-467; J.W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part II,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(2), 237-279.



extra-economic dynamic of appropriation in service to productivism and profit.<sup>39</sup>

World accumulation, enabled by productivity and plunder, is enabled and secured by geopolitical means. As Luxemburg underscores, the circuit of expanded reproduction is enabled by modern states, using “force as a permanent weapon.”<sup>40</sup> That permanent weapon cuts both ways, illuminating the two axes of modern imperialism: the relation between inter-imperialist rivalry and the subordination of new peoples and places. Great wars have been preceded by the stagnation of the Four Cheaps: labor, food, energy, and raw materials. As the Four Cheaps turned dear, re/production costs rise and profitability declines. Modern empires are a counteracting force. Great wars pivoted on establishing new and expanded flows of Cheap Nature – expanding the Great Frontier – and ensuring privileged access by the eventual victor in struggles for world leadership. Whenever Great Powers found their access to strategic Cheap Natures limited, ferocious and protracted wars ensued.

The Great Frontier has been, in other words, the Westphalian System’s safety-valve. Great waves of geographical expansion, militarized at every turn, enabled the imperialist states to realize new and expanded sources and supplies of the Four Cheaps. Dramatically enlarging the actual and latent reserve armies of labor and places, these movements simultaneously and successively reduced capital’s re/production costs and resolved (for a time) the surplus capital problem. In so doing, they underwrote the restoration and expanded reproduction of capital accumulation. Hence, every great industrialization found its logical and historical precondition in a new imperialism. Such imperialisms worked for capital through various mechanisms but always with one overriding pursuit: appropriating new, expanded and *cheaper* flows of unpaid work/energy in new geophysical and biological frontiers.

Such frontiers no longer exist – not as agrarian, resource, or labor frontiers, and especially not as *waste* frontiers.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the exhaustion of waste frontiers – crystallized in the enclosure of the atmospheric commons and the resulting climate crisis – may prove decisive.<sup>42</sup> (Not least because the climate crisis undermines the agricultural revolution model that has enabled capital accumulation since 1492.) There is every reason to suspect that the non-linearity of the climate crisis applies with equal force to the non-linear character of change in capitalism’s ecologies of accumulation, power, and re/production.

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<sup>39</sup> J.W. Moore, “The end of the road? Agricultural revolutions in the capitalist world-ecology, 1450–2010,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10(3, 2010), 389-413.

<sup>40</sup> R. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 351.

<sup>41</sup> J.W. Moore, “The End of Cheap Nature, or, How I learned to Stop Worrying about ‘the’ Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism,” in *Structures of the World Political Economy and the Future of Global Conflict and Cooperation*, C. Suter & C. Chase-Dunn, eds. (Berlin: LIT, 2014), 285-314

<sup>42</sup> Moore, “Waste in the Limits to Capital.”

The agricultural contradiction joins the biosphere’s “state shift” with capitalist crisis.<sup>43</sup> For earth-system scientists, state shifts are characterized by abrupt, rapid, and irreversible changes in an ecological process or ecosystem. The “end of the road” for agricultural revolution – closely bound to the Ukraine War and very high commodity food prices – is a salient expression of an epochal inversion.<sup>44</sup> Capitalism can no longer “fix” world accumulation by “putting nature to work.”<sup>45</sup> The biotariat, those extra-human natures coerced into unpaid work for capital, is in open revolt. This biotarian revolt – what I’ve called negative-value – drives capitalism towards a self-destructive relation of productivity and plunder. The non-linear activation of biotarian resistance replaces cost-cutting and externalization with cost-maximization and profit-squeeze.<sup>46</sup> Already, the climate crisis has suppressed seven years of agricultural productivity advance – and to this suppression we can add superweeds and the sputtering productivism of petro-farming in general.<sup>47</sup>

This is no growth plateau. It’s a Great Implosion, the moment when capitalism’s Prometheism can no longer deliver Cheap Natures; the moment when the biotariat revolts against the disciplines of science, capital, and empire; the moment when inter-imperialist struggles, deprived of their capacity to generate a new golden age through new frontiers, enter their most pathological phase. The Great Implosion is that interregnum when all manner of “morbid symptoms” appear.<sup>48</sup>

Historically, we’ve glimpsed these morbid symptoms when industrialization runs ahead of the Cheap Nature regime. The late nineteenth century transition to monopoly capitalism is a good example. The accelerated concentration and centralization of capital – felt most strongly in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany – combined a new industrialization with a new imperialism. The new industrialization, pivoting on auto manufacturing, petro-chemicals, and electrical industries, offered a textbook case of Marx’s “general law... of underproduction,” whereby fixed capital formation outpaces the systemic capacity for delivering circulating capital (energy and raw

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<sup>43</sup> A.D. Barnosky, et al., “Approaching a State Shift in Earth’s Biosphere,” *Nature* 486 (7401, 2012), 52-58

<sup>44</sup> Moore, “End of the Road?”

<sup>45</sup> J.W. Moore, “Putting Nature to Work,” in O. Arndt & C. Wee, eds., *Supramarket* (Gothenburg: Irene Books, 2015), 69-117.

<sup>46</sup> S. Collis, “Notes Towards a Manifesto of the Biotariat,” in H.L. Staples & A. King, eds., *Big Energy Poets* (Buffalo: BlazeVOX, 2017), 25-28; J.W. Moore, “El hombre, la naturaleza y el ambientalismo de los ricos,” in *Pensar la ciencia de otro modo*, F.F. Herrera, D. Lew, & N. Caruci, eds. (Caracas: Mincyt, 2022), 55-82; idem, “Das Planetare Proletariat im Planetaren Inferno,” *LfB: Literaturforum im Brecht-Haus* 7(2021), 4-11; idem, “Wasting Away”; idem, “End of the Road?”

<sup>47</sup> Ariel Ortiz-Bobea, et al., “Anthropogenic climate change has slowed global agricultural productivity growth,” *Nature Climate Change* 11(4, 2021), 306-312.

<sup>48</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276.

materials).<sup>49</sup> The organic composition of capital rose and the rate of profit fell.

While the Great Depression (c. 1873-96) cannot be subjected to any neat and tidy monocausal explanation, the relation between technical change, the centralization of capital into new “giant firms,” and a new imperialism cannot be doubted.<sup>50</sup> Nor can the quantitative and qualitative drive for more, and newer, Cheap Natures. Non-fuel commodity prices for the western European core had moved sharply upwards since the 1820s; by 1860 the commodity price index had nearly quadrupled.<sup>51</sup> It would momentarily collapse following Britain’s May 1866 financial crisis – driven by excessive speculation on tight cotton markets. Commodity prices revived quickly, and climbed upwards until the early 1880s. Even as the general price level fell after 1873, successive inflationary movements – “underproduction” in Marx’s sense – manifested in strategic raw materials sectors, including cotton, indigo, rubber, palm oil, copper, nickel, lead, tin, jute, and sisal.<sup>52</sup>

Before 1914, commodity prices soared again.<sup>53</sup> No wonder that both Lenin and Luxemburg foregrounded the relation between a “new” industrialization and a “new” imperialism, one whose socio-ecological moment was constitutive of capitalism’s monopoly phase. “The more capitalism... develop[s],” Lenin observed, “the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt, the more intense the competition and the hunt for sources of raw materials... the more desperate the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.” As planetary life was enclosed, the more forcefully the “international capitalist associations... exert every effort to deprive their rivals of all opportunity of competing, to buy up, for example, ironfields, oilfields”; meanwhile finance capital coheres nationalist blocs that aim for colonial expansion, favoring wars that pursue the “*redivision* of the world.”<sup>54</sup>

For Luxemburg, the second industrial revolution’s qualitative resource demands required a new imperialism to secure those raw materials available only, or largely, beyond North Atlantic capitalism’s “temperate zone.”<sup>55</sup> While capitalism from the beginning developed through an imperial relation with the tropics, the planetary interdependence of resource flows required by monopoly capitalism marked a new historical phase. Amplifying Marx’s underproduction thesis and

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<sup>49</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 110-121; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

<sup>50</sup> P. Baran & P.M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*.

<sup>51</sup> J.A. Ocampo & M. Parra-Lancourt, “The terms of trade for commodities since the mid-19th century,” *Revista de Historia Económica* 28(1, 2010), 11-43.

<sup>52</sup> D.S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969); J.W. Moore, “Transcending the Metabolic Rift,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(1, 2011), 1-46.

<sup>53</sup> J.A. Ocampo & M.A. Parra, “The terms of trade for commodities in the twentieth century,” *CEPAL Review* 79(2003), 7-35.

<sup>54</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism* (Sydney: Resistance Books), 87, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 338.

anticipating Lenin's wars of redivision, Luxemburg insisted that, with the rise of monopoly capitalism,

Cheap elements of constant capital are essential to the individual capitalist who strives to increase his rate of profit. In addition, the very condition of continuous improvements in labour productivity as the most important method of increasing the rate of surplus value, *is unrestricted utilisation of all substances and facilities afforded by nature and soil*. To tolerate any restriction in this respect would be contrary to the very essence of capital, its whole mode of existence... The process of accumulation... requires inevitably free access to ever new areas of raw materials.<sup>56</sup>

Precisely which Great Power would control this "access to ever new areas of raw materials" was at stake in 1914, and for the Thirty Years War that followed. One treads lightly in this interpretation. There's no need for resource determinism. But we underestimate the imperialist dependency on Cheap Nature – and its relationship to geopolitical tensions – at our peril. Let's underline a salient world-historical fact. Since Westphalia, each world hegemonic power and the world orders they created depended upon gaining "an unprecedented command over the world's human and natural resources."<sup>57</sup> That command rested upon hegemony over Cheap Nature frontiers, which afforded a crucial degree of control over rivals' access to Cheap Nature. This is what the Dutch achieved in the seventeenth century, controlling strategic flows of timber, naval stores, copper, and iron. It's what the American Empire achieved after World War II, controlling the planetary oil spigot and with that control, hegemony over western Europe and Japan.

There were always Great Powers limited in their access to Cheap Nature. This was France after the Seven Years War, Prussia-Germany after defeating the French in 1871, the Japanese and Ottoman Empires at the turn of the nineteenth century. As these examples suggest, world war and access to Cheap Nature were tightly connected. Whenever a Great Powers found itself with second-rank access to the Four Cheaps, devastating wars often followed.

The Second World War revealed the logic – and horrific consequences – of these conjunctures. Just as Marx grasped the tendency for industrialization to run ahead of raw material supplies in relation to the rate of profit, Lenin and Luxemburg saw that national industrialization could be throttled by rival empires' control over Cheap Natures. In this situation, a national bourgeoisie would face a situation in which its rapid industrialization would become a treadmill. Rival Powers could deploy their "command" over Cheap Natures to impose imperialist rents and secure meaningful shares of new surplus value

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<sup>56</sup> Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 338.

<sup>57</sup> Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 223.

realized through “national” industrialization. This is just what Germany experienced in relation to British imperialism before World War I.<sup>58</sup> (The Americans, in contrast, enjoyed precisely what Germany did not: abundant Cheap Natures and therefore considerable autonomy from British hegemony.)

While some Powers might be persuaded to accept a role as junior partner, this did not always work. Germany and Japan *after* World War II agreed to such a role only after military defeat and occupation. *Before* the War, things were quite different. Germany and Japan were unwilling to accept those constraints. Their respective national bourgeoisies experienced the capitalist world order as a zero-sum conflict, one which threatened, over the near-to-middle run, the degradation of their political and economic position. Access to adequate supplies of Cheap Nature – quantitatively and qualitatively (e.g., oil) – entailed war with other Great Powers.<sup>59</sup> Faced with such constraints, the temptation to pursue a *territorialist* rather than *capitalist* logic of power has been considerable.<sup>60</sup> Territorialist logics of power come to the fore when a Great Power is “boxed out” of access to extant Cheap Nature frontiers, and also when these states lack access to a specific strategic resource – as in early modern wars over the West Indies and their potentially lucrative sugar islands, or again with oil, consider the First World War’s oil-deficient Central Powers and the Second War’s oil-deficient Axis.

The implications are momentous. What characterized the logic of imperialist war for *some* Powers in previous eras today defines the conditions of possibility and constraint for the *whole* world order: “*Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*: The name is changed, but the tale is told of you!”<sup>61</sup> This once-regional experience of zero-sum conjunctures now characterizes not *some* – but the whole – of the imperialist system of states. In the Ukraine War, it is not merely Russia pursuing a territorialist logic, but the United States.

## IMPERIALISM IN THE WEB OF LIFE

**M**odes of production are *modes of life*.<sup>62</sup> Imperialism is a socio-ecological metabolism. Its metabolic arrangements are, at once and unevenly, producers and products of webs of life, but always facing webs of life independent of human relations. Volcanoes erupt, the Earth wobbles on its axis, the Sun’s energy ebbs and flows regardless of the mode of production. Nevertheless, different

<sup>58</sup> Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 62-63.

<sup>59</sup> A. Toprani, *Oil And Grand Strategy: Great Britain & Germany, 1918-1941*, PhD dissertation, Department of History, Georgetown University (2012); A. Tooze, *Wages of Destruction* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 34ff.

<sup>61</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 378.

<sup>62</sup> K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); J.W. Moore, “Metabolic Rift or Metabolic Shift?” *Theory & Society* 46(4, 2017), 285-318.

modes of production respond very differently to the pulse of lifemaking. It's a banal but necessary observation. A geophysical event or shift that would doom one civilization might be merely a nuisance for another. In these very different responses a universe of political difference – in interpretation but above all for socialist strategy – turns.

World War III's underlying tensions resemble those behind the twentieth century's – and the seventeenth century's – Thirty Years War. But only up to a point. On the one hand, today's crisis marks a new phase in the intensification of inter-imperialist conflict – above all cultivating manifold contradictions between American unipolar ambitions and Chinese and Russian multipolar visions. These tensions have been brewing since the overthrow of the Soviet Union and the dramatic militarization of U.S. Middle East policy in 1991. Both developments centered on two of the world's three most significant oil-producing regions.

On the other hand, the War expresses a world-historical shift in the conditions of planetary life. For the United States, it marks a new phase in its unipolar ambitions. It is a quantity/quality transformation. Essentially, the project aims to convert the capitalist world-ecology into a new imperium that would subordinate capital accumulation to political imperatives. This would be a *tributary*, not capitalist, civilization.<sup>63</sup> (It's worth underlining that capitalism did not invent markets, banking, proletarianization, or commodity production – all were constitutive features of tributary formations.) Remember that Marx's "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!" finds its necessary reproductive conditions in the appropriation – and subsequent exhaustion – of the "original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker."<sup>64</sup> In the neoliberal era, the rapid centralization of capital coupled with the rapid exhaustion of capital's socio-ecological conditions favored strategies of *political accumulation*. These strategies use political and military force to structure profit-making opportunities.<sup>65</sup> As such, it's hardly novel.

In contrast to previous imperialisms, however, the most recent wave of militarized accumulation cannot renew the conditions of capitalism's business-as-usual. The political-military tendency becomes exceedingly one-sided. Force becomes a permanent weapon in a new, and epochal, set of socio-ecological circumstances.

Hence American militarization (now joined by other Powers) has accelerated apace with the relative exhaustion of Cheap Natures – not least those linked to the climate crisis – and the resulting drag on the expansion of world surplus value. As Cheap Natures were exhausted

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<sup>63</sup> The clearest exposition is S. Amin, "The Ancient World-Systems versus the Modern Capitalist World-System," *Review* 14(3, 1991), 349-385.

<sup>64</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 742, 638.

<sup>65</sup> The phrase is commonly associated with R. Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of Capitalism," *Past & Present* 97(1982), 16-113. My conceptualization draws on J.M. Lonsdale, "The Politics of Conquest: the British in Western Kenya, 1894-19081," *Historical Journal* 20(4, 1977), 841-870.

across the past five decades, American strategies of political accumulation surged. Hence the steady drift towards unipolar strategy. Its project – unlikely to be realized given the balance of geopolitical forces and simmering contradictions between the Washington and Davos/Brussels camps – seeks a tributary resolution to capitalist crisis. We might think of it as a world-historical project that seeks to generalize the “too big to fail” logic of government bailouts for monopoly capital popularized during the Great Recession (2008-11). Even as – and especially because – American ultra-imperialism is unlikely to succeed, we must explain it. Desperation mounts as the Empire’s hold is broken. As the end of Cheap Nature entwines with global warming’s destabilization of world agriculture, the temptation to find a military resolution to capitalism’s epochal crisis is extraordinary. For the planet’s leading military-industrial complex, it’s nothing short of irresistible.

Like the Westphalian moment, ours is an era of extraordinary climate change – albeit today’s is significantly more volatile. As I’ve suggested, unfavorable climate changes and geopolitical volatility have gone hand-in-hand over the *longue durée* of class society. It is impossible to overstate the significance of seventeenth-century climate change, one whose severity was even greater than that experienced by feudal civilization at the dawn of the Little Ice Age. That early capitalism survived, and feudalism did not, had everything to do with distinctive forms of imperialism and its *technics* of power, profit, and life. In brief, the Little Ice Age’s “climate forcing” activated socio-ecological contradictions that could not be resolved within feudalism. Only specifically-capitalist forces of productivity and plunder enabled western Europe’s ruling strata to advance towards the tropics and realize a *climate fix*, at once re-establishing the conditions for trans-Atlantic bourgeois rule and the conditions of renewed accumulation. This was the plantation revolution.<sup>66</sup>

By the time Lenin and Luxemburg were writing, a momentous shift had occurred beyond the subordination of the planet to formal colonialism. The rise of fossil capital, imperial-scientific capacities to reshape global nature, and American agro-industrialization, culminating in monopoly capitalism, led to a new phase of *capitalogenic* climate history. “By 1900,” Brooke observes, one can detect “a slight but discernible impact on atmospheric greenhouse gases... forcing alterations in global climate.”<sup>67</sup> The drive towards yet another Thirty Years War (1914-45) amplified this capitalogenic tendency, setting the stage for the Great Acceleration.<sup>68</sup> It was reinforced by postwar international settlements (including decolonization) that ensured every state would

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<sup>66</sup> Moore, “Empire, Class & The Origins Of Planetary Crisis.”

<sup>67</sup> Brooke, *Climate change and the course of global history*, 482-84ff.

<sup>68</sup> J.R. McNeill & P. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

be locked into a treadmill of fossil fuel development and dollar hegemony.

This was of course American hegemony. Limiting the Westphalian-Wilsonian promise of national autonomy was central to the American Developmentalist Project.<sup>69</sup> It aimed to advance the productive forces across the decolonizing world while ensuring that Third World class and state formation would facilitate accumulation in the imperialist centers. Agricultural modernization was fundamental, and supervised by techno-scientific elites. This was the Green Revolution. It reshaped world power, accumulation, and life by globalizing the agricultural model developed in the U.S. during the 1930s. Transplanted to India during the 1960s as a major front in the Cold War, the Green Revolution was generously backed by American Foundations, U.S. financial support, and technical expertise. Its productive accomplishments were considerable (if short-lived), realized at the costs of widening social inequality and environmental devastation. Crucially, it was a decisive moment in world capitalist agriculture's transition to a carbon-intensive mode. In turn, it enabled the dispossessions and Cheap Food that facilitated the Global South's rapid industrialization.<sup>70</sup>

The Green Revolution was a geopolitical event in the web of life.<sup>71</sup> This was hardly unusual. Agricultural revolutions had been tightly joined to imperial power and world order since the long sixteenth century. The Dutch, the English, and the Americans launched agricultural revolutions, the logical and historical prelude to superpower status. Each ramped up productivity and drove down the food bill for the laboring classes that made commercial and industrial expansions possible. An imperial moment was always in play. The Dutch quickly farmed out wheat and rye production to the Baltic by the late sixteenth century; the English rapidly converted Ireland into an agricultural export platform after 1541, a century later extending the strategy to the West Indies; the United States built its first agricultural revolution through a continental empire won by conquest, geopolitical deal-making, and an aggressively developmentalist state.<sup>72</sup>

But the Cold War phase of this "long" Green Revolution was a turning point. Until the 1950s, no hegemonic power depended upon an agricultural revolution to demonstrate the "general interest" to the Global South.<sup>73</sup> That changed with postwar decolonization. Postwar Developmentalism under American leadership globalized the

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<sup>69</sup> P. McMichael, "Globalization: Myths and Realities," *Rural Sociology* 61(1, 1996), 25-55.

<sup>70</sup> R. Patel, "The Long Green Revolution," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(1, 2013), 1-63; G. Arrighi, B.J. Silver, & B.D. Brewer, "Industrial convergence, globalization, and the persistence of the North-South divide," *Studies In Comparative International Development* 38(1, 2003), 3-31; Eric B. Ross, *The Malthus Factor* (London: Zed Books, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> J.H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Moore, "End of the Road?"

<sup>73</sup> Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*.



Westphalian system. Like bourgeois democracy with its dangerous promise that the people might rule, Westphalia's promise of sovereignty might easily spin out of control. As postcolonial states hoisted new flags, they looked to the American experience – an exceptional form of “autocentric” development. Under the influence of Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay, nineteenth-century American economic policy pursued a vigorously protectionist – and *independent* – developmentalist trajectory.<sup>74</sup> Scholars later called this an instance of “semi-peripheral” developmentalism. It was hardly revolutionary. It *did* involve keeping at arms length the world's superpowers. As decolonization accelerated, however, the U.S. could not tolerate any developmentalism that emulated the American experience.

This was the real threat posed by state socialist projects: *independent* nationalist development. The socialist character of the Soviet Union has been fiercely debated, celebrated, and demonized since 1917, when Russia's participation in World War I precipitated a revolutionary crisis. Whatever we make of those debates, among the Soviet Union's accomplishments was its successful resistance to Western imperialism. Its achievement was to defend national sovereignty against counter-revolution in the Civil War period, fascist invasion two decades later, and postwar American nuclear hegemony with its first-strike fantasies.<sup>75</sup> In so doing, it opened political space – not without contradictions! – for postwar developmentalism across the Third World that was not only nationalist but “non-aligned.”<sup>76</sup> Communist victory in China, which brought its share of conflicts with the Soviets, amplified the possibility that Westphalia's promises would get out of hand.

#### ULTRA-HEGEMONY AT THE END OF CHEAP NATURE: FROM WARS OF REDIVISION TO WARS OF TRANSITION

**T**hanks to the American military build-up of the 1980s, its support of Third World fascism and then structural adjustment, followed by capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, the Westphalian and Developmentalist contradictions of the long 1970s did not get out of hand. As we know, the exhaustion of the postwar capitalist order did not lead to world war. This was in part because the Soviet Union's access to Cheap Nature was not constrained as German and Japanese imperialism had been a half-century earlier; in part because class struggle in the US *had* constrained American capacity to wage large-scale land wars, as GIs mutinied, students shut down the universities, and workers struck. Nor did it lead to “one world” government. Elements of one world-ism were, however,

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<sup>74</sup> C. Parenti, *Radical Hamilton* (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>75</sup> M. Davis, “Nuclear imperialism and extended deterrence,” in *New Left Review*, ed., *Exterminism and Cold War* (London: Verso, 1982), 35-64; R.C. Aldridge, *First strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

<sup>76</sup> V. Prashad, *The Darker Nations* (New York: New Press, 2007).

incorporated into iterations of American unipolarity by the early 1990s, reinforced by the unprecedented transnational integration of capital and the spectacular wave of military interventionism since 1999.<sup>77</sup>

What followed the long 1970s was neoliberalism, grasped as an era of capitalism. Distinctive among all phases of world capitalism, it did not launch a new scientific-technological revolution: either in labor or agricultural productivity. The non-appearance of a new productivity revolution is fundamental to understanding ultra-hegemony and inter-imperialist conflict in the present conjuncture. As the growth of world surplus value stagnates – including necessarily the opportunities for the real investment of capital – old contradictions move to the fore, and new contradictions materialize. The end of Cheap Nature is upon us.<sup>78</sup>

Its first signs appeared in the mid-1970s, underscored by the 1974-75 recession. Here we see the first moves toward an American unipolar vision. This marked the reinvention of American imperialism as a kind of “ultra-hegemony.”<sup>79</sup> It would not supersede, but only suppress, inter-imperialist rivalry, but in a novel fashion that contrasts sharply with Britain’s world leadership in the nineteenth century. American ultra-hegemony came to rest upon militarization and multilateral processes that guaranteed its hegemony over Cheap (or Cheap-enough) food, resource, and energy flows. This is the essence of *planetary management* in world politics: the effective domination over, and supply of, Cheap Natures. Thus the centrality of the White House-Wall Street-IMF regime reviving accumulation for the richest countries, officially stabilized with the restoration of cheap oil prices in 1982 and the revival of G-7 profitability after 1983. Food, mineral, and energy prices began to fall in the mid-1970s and continued well into the 1990s.<sup>80</sup> Here was the “general interest” established by American ultra-hegemony.

Today, those conditions for a general interest no longer obtain. The geographical conditions for the survival of capitalism – the conditions of Cheap Nature – are now exhausted. Successive “Thirty Years Wars” – culminating in the settlements of 1648, 1815 and 1945 – followed great imperialist “scrambles” for Cheap Nature new commodity regimes in the colonies. One rightly anticipates the breakdown of the Westphalian system – what remains of it, at any rate – in the unfolding climate crisis.

Westphalia’s animating conditions were twofold. One was the long cold seventeenth century. Dramatically unfavorable climate conditions destabilize international regimes. To be sure, we are dealing with climate *determinations* – not determinisms. The Great Frontier was a

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<sup>77</sup> See especially William I. Robinson’s groundbreaking thesis on Global Capitalism, *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); idem, *Can Global Capitalism Endure?* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2022).

<sup>78</sup> J.W. Moore, “Del gran abaratamiento a la gran implosión: Clase, clima y la Gran Frontera,” *Relaciones Internacionales*, 47(2021), 11-52.

<sup>79</sup> P.J. Taylor, “The last of the hegemons: British impasse, American impasse, world impasse,” *Southeastern Geographer* 33(1, 1993), 1-22.

<sup>80</sup> Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

second condition, through modern imperialism enabling productivity and plunder across the Americas, greasing the wheels of world accumulation and undercutting peasant and worker radicalism unleashed by the feudal crisis. Those superpowers able to realize “an unprecedented command over the world’s *human and natural* resources” – that is, the Cheap Natures that could be appropriated on capitalism’s frontiers – would triumph in the successive Thirty Years Wars (1648, 1815, 1945) and become world hegemon.

Similar to previous unfavorable climate shifts, today’s geopolitics are in flux. A new hegemon will not emerge on the old pattern, for the sound reason that the old conditions no longer obtain. One parallel to the present crisis may be the breakdown of Pax Romanica after the fourth century, marked by the survival of imperial formations in comparatively climate-stable zones alongside the proliferation of marcher states and city-states. This was not a terrible outcome, as we’ve seen. The “dark ages” for Rome’s ruling classes were a “golden age” for peasants, who flourished in a world where landlords’ power and (some) tax-collecting states collapsed.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. In contrast to the Westphalian Order’s climate-class origins, our socio-physical conjuncture is more favorable to the re/producing classes. The agrarian and slave rebellions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could do no more than burn the lords’ manors and curb the worst excesses of a violent and predatory system. For all their courage, such rebellions were *restorationist*, invoking a “traditional” past. The world-historical tide turned during the Little Ice Age’s last great cold snap (c. 1783-1820), when the semi-proletarian forces, from Haiti to France to Ireland, seized upon and radicalized the era’s bourgeois-democratic slogans. Socialism was not on the agenda, but its ascent was visible on the horizon.<sup>81</sup> The extraordinary proletarianizations of the past century – and the history of nationalist and socialist revolutions – have placed on the world-historical agenda the possibility of a different world order, and a different world-ecology.

We do not need to – and should not – wax romantic about this history. But neither should we dismiss it, as so many activists and intellectuals have done.<sup>82</sup> Geopolitical volatility is no friend of social stability. American unipolarity has not resolved capitalism’s contradictions – Lenin’s “weak links” – but only moved them around. Their financial and biophysical conditions are increasingly unstable. In contrast to the most recent Thirty Years War that brought socialist revolutions to a quarter of humankind, today’s instability unsettles a heavily proletarianized world with the capacity – so far more latent than activated – for

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<sup>81</sup> E.D. Genovese, *From rebellion to revolution: Afro-American slave revolts in the making of the modern world* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979); D. McNally, *Against the Market* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>82</sup> J.W. Moore, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History,” *Nordia* 51(2), 123-146

internationalist solidarity. It is worth nothing that every major hegemonic crisis has activated widening peasant and proletarian power, characterized by widening forms of internationalism.<sup>83</sup>

The Ukraine War reflects and reinforces the exhaustion of Cheap Natures. Earlier Thirty Years Wars (1618-48, 1792-1815, 1914-45) were entwined with successive developmental crises of Cheap Nature that could be resolved through new imperialisms, new rounds of commodification and appropriation. This option no longer exists. The dialectic of capitalist and territorialist logics of world power and profit depended on frontiers of Cheap labor, food, energy and raw materials. Not only are those frontiers enclosed and exhausted, but the climate crisis brings an epochal inversion: from webs of life as a source of productivity-advancing and cost-reducing work, to the web of life's revolt against the disciplines of capital, signalling a kind of biotarian "general strike" that imposes rising costs and faltering productivity on capitalism's ecologies. This is the Great Implosion. The Westphalian Order will not survive it.

What comes next? This is unknowable. It is a matter of the worldwide class struggle in the web of life, and its outcome will be decided by that struggle. For those who would embrace a socialist alternative to the tributary-imperial paths of the China-Russia and Washington-Davos condominiums, let us not despair. Historical clarity may deliver some measure of guidance.

Crucial to socialist strategy in the present conjuncture is to recall, and act upon, two great historical lessons about revolutionary possibilities. One concerns how the twentieth century's great wars favored the proletarian forces and destabilized ruling classes. The first and second World Wars concluded with, and were followed by, socialist revolutions. In the imperialist countries, emboldened working classes imposed definite limits on capital accumulation. For the American war on Vietnam, the contradictions of the welfare-warfare state created favorable terrain for anti-war, labor, and civil rights movements. Within occupied Vietnam, American soldiers effected a quiet general strike, crippling operational capacity through a mutiny in slow motion. For the Portuguese – in a parallel that might warrant further reflection – its forever wars in the colonies radicalized an increasingly working-class officer corps and brought down a fascist empire. None of this suggests a telos, only a tendency. It favors the revolutionary forces. Unlike 1945, there are no Cheap Nature frontiers to allow for the meaningful co-optation of vastly-expanded working classes. We can expect to see capital favor the "stick" over the "carrot" as permanent stagnation sets in. Nor can capital count on the professionals as they once did. Apace with the centralization of capital, PMC strata have been recurrently downsized and forced to reckon with their proletarian reality. Capital can no longer afford to entice them – as in the 1970s and '80s – with modest wage gains against the wage repression

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<sup>83</sup> Silver & Slater, "The social origins of world hegemonies."

imposed on the rest of the proletariat. At the end of Cheap Nature, labor aristocrats are discovering their McMansions to be Potemkin villages, not so different after all from the cottagers next door.

Meanwhile, the climate crisis makes capitalism's five-century business-as-usual model unworkable. As terrestrial, marine and atmospheric frontiers are enclosed and exhausted, so too are the conditions that have enabled the endless accumulation of capital. This is new and not new at the same time. On the one hand, unfavorable climate transitions – from the Bronze Age crisis to the crisis of the Roman West to capitalism's long, cold seventeenth century – accompany geopolitical and social crisis. They are socio-physical conjunctures, not destiny; they are moments of political possibility. It is not peasants and workers, but the predatory rulers, who are ill-equipped to adjust to a changing climate. On the other hand, late capitalism's vicious cycle of war, dispossession, and carbonization introduces a specific wrinkle to the world-historical pattern. The Ukraine War, as we have seen, is not only a product of the end of Cheap Nature, but amplifies capitalogenic climate change over the short-run. Germany has already ramped up coal-fired electricity generation, simply the tip of a rapidly-melting iceberg.<sup>84</sup> Already, rising energy prices and wider inflationary tendencies have sparked street protests, and labor unrest, from Prague to Paris.

The price of food may be even more explosive. The world food system, as Raj Patel underscores, was already in crisis well before February 2022. The “rise in prices and hunger triggered by the war will cause a wave of rebellions, just as food price spikes have in the past: as with the 2010 demonstrations that inaugurated the Arab Spring, the 2007-8 wave of food protests from Haiti to Italy, and the 1980s and '90s International Monetary Fund (IMF) riots. The only difference is that this time, it will be worse.”<sup>85</sup> Whether or not such food rebellions will feed revolutionary *politics* – as they did in the French and Russian Revolutions – is uncertain.<sup>86</sup> More certain is that the drive to war at the end of Cheap Nature destabilizes whatever remains of the Westphalian Order. The Doomsday Clock may be ticking, but it can be stopped. As the climate warms, capitalism's death knell tolls. Perhaps this moment is the end of *their* world – the One Percent's world – and the beginning of *ours*. The exhaustion of one civilization signals epochal possibility: of a dark age for the predator classes, and a golden age for the associated producers and reproducers in the web of life.

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<sup>84</sup> R. Schmitz, “Amid an energy crisis, Germany turns to the world's dirtiest fossil fuel,” *National Public Radio* (27 September, 2022).

<sup>85</sup> R. Patel, “Our Global Food System Was Already in Crisis. Russia's War Will Make It Worse,” *Boston Review* (4 May, 2022).

<sup>86</sup> Patel and Moore, *Seven Cheap Things*.