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SPOTLIGHT

CONVERSATIONS

JASON W. MOORE ON THE DANGERS OF PROMETHEANISM

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A disregard for history has hindered many climate debates. In this interview, Jason emphasizes a lesson that has been repeatedly demonstrated over the last half-millennium: capitalism and imperialism, working in tandem, will always pit humans against nature. Out of this opposition surges Malthusianism, but also Prometheanism, an ideology that pushes technological possibility away from material reality. We can resist the Promethean temptation by remembering that ecology is about harmony, not management.

Climate change is no longer something that forces on the right are denying outright. They are now trying to use the struggle against climate change to advance their right-wing agendas. How do you make sense of this trend in your work? Is this something specific to our epoch, or have climate-friendly right-wing movements always been around?

My first observation is that the political distance between so-called liberal environmentalism and ecofascism has never been quite so large as we would like. Liberal environmentalism and ecofascism share many of the same elements in their cosmology. They have different politics and different political inflections – for example, the environmentalist right is much more strident on questions of borders – but let's not kid ourselves. These similarities have been part of the environmentalism of the rich, as I call this elite-driven environmentalism, not just since 1968, but since the end of the 19th century.

Indeed, when we look at many of the key documents of 1970s-era environmentalism, like the UK's *A Blueprint for Survival*, anti-immigrant sentiment is everywhere. Paul Ehrlich, who in 1968 co-authored *The*

Population Bomb with his wife, Anne, went on to write a book called *The Golden Door* in 1979; this book declared that immigrants were even more costly to “the environment” than citizens of the imperialist countries. This sensibility of blood-and-soil nationalism, which we call ecofascism, is really not all that far removed from centrist, liberal environmentalism.

In the last years, we’ve seen certain changes within the capitalist system, especially in relation to technology and finance. The rise of ESGs is one example that suggests that capitalists might be fighting against the climate crisis for the potential profits. Do you see environmentalism as a new frontier for capitalist accumulation?

Well, some capitalists always cash in on disasters, but that doesn’t make it a frontier – it’s just a cash grab. One of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism is that some groups of capitalists will be trying to cut the throats of others as the ship is going down. That’s what’s happening with the climate crisis. Though they are certainly important, I wouldn’t say the processes you indicate are driving what’s happening today. There’s a form of techno-scientific authoritarianism that has been brewing for a long time.

Back in the 1970s, the Trilateral Commission had an explicit program for planetary management. When you fuse that with the Club of Rome, you can see a fairly fanciful argument coming from European capitals. They believed that Europe, Japan, and the US would get together and form what Karl Kautsky would have called an ultra-imperialist condominium. As we know, that didn’t come to fruition. Instead there arose the American imperial neoliberal strategy to rule the world as the unipolar hegemon.

So, this longer tendency towards a techno-scientific, ultra-monopoly capitalist hegemony wants to lead capital out of capitalism and into a more managed political economy. This system would still have banks, still have proletarians, still have inequality; but it would generalize the 2008 ethos of Too Big to Fail. We’re seeing this again as the world teeters on the verge of a financial meltdown.

What do you make of the fact that in the US, conservatives are now up in arms against the likes of BlackRock, presenting them as progressive agents? Is that some kind of inter-capitalist rivalry? Or is there more to glean from the BlackRocks of the world being made out to be bogeymen?

In the US in particular, we’re seeing the exhaustion of the neoliberal model. This has been in train since 2016 with the election of Donald Trump, who runs on a rhetorical platform of working class nationalism. Of course, he does not rule from the standpoint of working class interests at all, but his record on foreign policy was unquestionably much better than either Obama’s before him or Biden’s since.

So, it’s not the old Republican Party making these arguments. They are an outlet for a libertarian, populist, nationalist current that has a deep history in

American politics, going way back into the 19th century. This is the danger of populism: it's always Janus-faced. What these arguments against BlackRock are doing is expressing the profound working class outrage at the Wall Street hedge funds and banks that have robbed this country and destroyed its infrastructure.

Together with developments like Brexit, this all speaks to the crisis of neoliberal governance in the imperialist centers. Politically speaking, this governance model in the US dates back to Jimmy Carter and the Democrats in the 1970s. And it spans from right-wing social democrats – which, let's face it, describes basically all social democrats – to elements of the right and center-right. The present level of outrage and desperation is marking the end of that neoliberal order, at least in the United States.

Arguably, the backlash against asset managers could be framed in opposite terms. Couldn't the people who are attacking BlackRock for taking up progressive causes be the same people who want the old neoliberal model back? That is, people who want asset managers to be investing in what the market tells them to invest in, rather than listening to non-market signals about climate change.

I don't think these firms are actually giving up high-profit opportunities to go invest in low-profit ones. There's nothing to suggest that's happening, especially given the profound crisis of overaccumulation there is today. In 2019, \$17 trillion was sitting in zero or negative rate of return government securities. That's because there's nowhere for them to sink that capital. They're not investing in progressive causes; they're investing in profitable ones.

The other part of this story is the utter emptying out of what progressive means. It was always a terrible word. It always referred to people with neoliberal sensibilities, at least since the 1980s. It should not be confused with anything left-wing.

Unlike the Bannontist themes of anti-globalism associated with populism in the US, we think there is something to be said for technology's place in today's populist imagination. You've written about this in the context of Prometheanism, but there is also much speculation about geoengineering and developments like solar energy. What do you make of these discourses?

The Anthropocene discourse is explicitly premised on geoengineering, and explicitly favors geoengineering. The way it does this, as you and others have pointed out, is by fetishizing technology. It abstracts particular technological apparatuses from the relations of power and profit and life in the modern world. Geoengineering is a perfect example of this.

Geoengineering was, from the end of World War II, a fundamental priority of the American empire and the military-industrial complex. At first it revolved around questions of weather control, but then it was reinvented and

redeployed in all sorts of interesting ways. Geoengineering exemplifies how centrist liberalism, discourses of the Anthropocene, and mainstream environmentalism promote techno-managerial and techno-scientific fixes to the world – so that profound inequality can remain, so that business can continue as usual.

But geoengineering fixes will not rescue capitalism. First of all, because there's not yet enough of a drive to create the geoengineering fixes that it needs. The biggest one, of course, is carbon removal. There's been very, very little progress on carbon removal technology in a meaningful, scalable sense of that term.

Is there something novel about the expectations placed on technology as a *deus ex machina* for the climate crisis? Or is it just the same old talk of a technological fix, itself a euphemism for letting capitalism do its work?

In a broader context, capitalism has been good at developing technologies that serve one of four main functions, which are all interlinked: military technologies, transportation technologies, information technologies, and productive technologies.

The first kind, technologies of war-making and laying waste, have been central from the beginning. To some degree or another, all industrial revolutions grow out of military revolutions, as Priya Satia has pointed out for British industrialization, though the same pattern holds in the 16th and 17th centuries. So, killing large numbers of people is number one. The second kind are technologies for moving not just commodities, but soldiers. Being able to rapidly deploy military force around the world, from the caravels of the 16th century to Jimmy Carter's rapid deployment forces in the late 1970s, has been another key pillar of technological innovation. Then we have the third kind, which are technologies to move information around the world. The information and communications revolutions are also fundamental to capitalism. And the fourth and final kind are technologies at the point of production itself, like the rotary steam engine and Fordist assembly lines, which advance labor productivity. All of these forms of technology involve command over the web of life, in one way or another. And they all share a specific priority: to advance the rate of profit.

Now, the part about command over the web of life is important. I don't mean it in a prosaic way. Technology operates to create something I call cheap nature. It aims to reduce the costs of production in order to advance the rate of profit. But this is a process that is necessarily finite. It is non-reproducible; it gets exhausted. That is, these have been a long succession of one-off affairs. The frontiers of cheap nature no longer operate as they've historically existed. And, on top of all that, we have the enclosure of the atmospheric commons through carbonization and the resulting climate change, which is inducing another fundamental layer to the crisis of cheap nature.

What are the rhetorical and ideological strategies that have helped conceal the actual costs of cheap nature? What made cheap nature thinkable and so resilient in the first place?

The origins of capitalism are also the origins of something that we can call the “Civilizing Project,” which positioned its proponents in a holy trinity of conflict against “Man” and “Nature.” Civilizers were the white bourgeois, the possessors of power, the owners of capital. They – the enlightened ones – would navigate that tension between Man and Nature.

What needs to be said is that most human beings were not part of humanity; they were consigned to the realm of nature. This is very uncontroversial. We know this by how imperialists talk about those they dominated: they called them savage, lazy, unruly; they thought they needed to be schooled in civilization.

And this has been invented and reinvented across the past five centuries. Originally, it was a Christianizing project, and then it became the Civilizing Project – like the Manifest Destiny of the United States, the White Man’s Burden of colonists. After World War II, with Truman’s Point Four Program in 1949, it became developmentalism. The divide was between developed and undeveloped countries. In the era of neoliberalism, it becomes not just a weird logic of economism, which is already deeply steeped in naturalism, but also of sustainable development.

I think that what we’re seeing today – especially with the Anthropocene discourse and the eco-industrial complex; with the World Economic Forum and its cognate institutions like the Club of Rome, the Trilateral Commission, and the Bilderberg Meeting – is the recuperation of that older Man and Nature, Civilizing Project discourse. Only now it appears under the sign of a frightening, Orwellian doublespeak about nature-positive, planetary stewardship. They used to say planetary management, but they learned that’s too blunt. Now they talk about being stewards, but who are the stewards? The enlightened ones, of course. Who do we need to listen to? Well, *the science*.

Here I want to be clear, so I’m not misunderstood: we need to listen to scientists. But saying “listen to scientists” and “listen to *the science*” are two completely different ideological moves. This second move is also reflected in Covid pandemic-related biosecurity state measures, which were a dry run to see if vast populations would explicitly surrender their civil liberties because *the science* said X, Y, or Z. Anyone who makes these arguments is putting themselves out on a limb, but I think they need to be said, and they need to be seen in context.

You’ve been trying to reframe the discussion from the usual focus on the Anthropocene to a focus on the Capitalocene. Could you reflect on some of the pushback you’ve received? Do you think you’ve managed to convince

parts of the scientific community that there is something amiss with the Anthropocene framing?

The introduction of the Capitalocene is not a rival to the arguments of earth-system scientists, which try to make sense of how humans have become a geological force. Let's point out that when Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen introduced it in 2000, the Anthropocene said exactly zero that was new or innovative. Indeed, the Holocene, a late 19th-century idea, was already premised on human beings as a geological force. So we have to ask, why does the Anthropocene appear at this moment?

The answer has to be found in the sphere of ideology, in neoliberalism's successful subordination of universities to a bourgeois knowledge factory model. This appeared quite spectacularly with the realignment of the Western intelligentsia around high theory and particularity in the 1990s, but it has also fully subordinated the sciences as well.

Let's remember that geology is arguably the branch of the physical sciences most deeply subordinated to capital and empire. The relations of geology and imperialism are longstanding, stretching back well over a century. The same is true of the discipline in which I hold a PhD, geography; it's also deeply enmeshed in imperialism.

Now, on the other side, you have many so-called critical intellectuals whose refrain is always, "Well, let's not talk about capitalism," or, "It's more complicated than just that." They never end up getting back to the question of capitalism, and capitalism in the web of life. That's why the Capitalocene concept is useful: it destabilizes, or at least challenges, this Man versus Nature framework.

It's also useful because rather than a theoretical argument, it is fundamentally a set of claims about the historical origins and patterns of development behind the climate crisis, as well as the wider ensemble of planetary crises since 1492. What's unusual is that neither the critical theorists nor the Marxists have wanted to actually debate it on historical grounds.

This is quite vexing, because in the 1970s, one of the central debates of the global left was over the history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism – because history mattered. Yet most so-called eco-Marxists, even, have refused to study how the historical origins and development of the planetary crisis are implicated in the political questions of socialism and capitalism in the web of life today.

Can you tell us more about Prometheanism in this light? It seems to be an exciting topic for people on the left who want a more hands-on approach to managing the climate crisis – an approach you're quite critical of.

The first step has to be back to this Man versus Nature conflict, which is not about humankind and nature at all, but rather an invention of early capitalism

and its Civilizing Project. This conflict was premised on the control and management of human – as well as extra-human – life and labor; it was fundamentally a managerial philosophy. Even the dualisms associated with Descartes support this managerial philosophy, as groundbreaking scholars like Harry Braverman recognized over 50 years ago.

So, it's a problem that ecomodernists, and a certain strain of eco-Marxists, take Prometheanism to be a question of abstract human domination over an abstract nature. It's very un-materialist and ahistorical. Prometheanism, in both a political and economic sense, has historically been the managerial philosophy of what we can call bourgeois naturalism.

Bourgeois naturalism is most familiar to us in the form of Malthusianism and other forms of Good Science ideology. Bourgeois naturalism says there's something called "natural law" to which we need to adjust. According to Malthus, it is nature that explains and justifies inequality, rather than capitalist enclosure and exploitation. Not coincidentally, forms of that argument recur whenever there's widespread worker and peasant revolt in the world.

This is why second-wave environmentalism emerges after 1968: the national liberation, socialist, and New Left movements of that era were the most dramatic challenges to capitalist hegemony that the world had yet seen. Environmentalism emerges with an imaginary hardwired for a particular kind of Prometheanism, which ideologically delinks and fetishizes technological possibility away from material reality. Hence the idea of technology as a *deus ex machina*. Prometheanism channels that bourgeois domination over the web of life – including webs of life with human labor – in order to advance the rate of profit.

Assuming that we are talking about a left that is fully cognizant of history, how do you imagine them engaging with technology as anything other than auxiliary to the main struggle?

There is a sound point that both ecomodernists and ecosocialists like Matt Huber make, although they exaggerate it. Any socialist effort to navigate the very real state shift in the climate will require a massive reconstruction and deployment of productive forces. For example, all the major cities that are on a coastline on this planet will have to be moved inland. That means the electrical grids and sewer systems need to be rebuilt. We will need to reimagine urban life on a massive scale. It's not wrong to point that out.

But we are at an impasse in ecosocialist debates, including the degrowth discussion, because we *aren't* fully cognizant of history. The left lacks an astute historical sensibility of how such reconstructions would be organized. And frankly, there is an unwillingness to look at the most obvious examples of such massive reconstruction: the experience of the Soviet Union and China after their peasant and worker movements' struggles against fascist

empires, where both countries were completely devastated and razed to the ground.

Now, we need to draw a balance sheet. I'm not saying we should be romantic about these examples. But these were relatively egalitarian moves to reconstruct the whole of social life and built environments. We'll need to draw on those lessons as the climate crisis deepens.

Do you see a link between the prevalent form of Prometheanism and the rise of ultra-right discourses, which want to frame the existential threat of the climate crisis in their own terms? Does the way we fetishize technology leave room for nationalism and racism, just as it perpetuates violent forms of reproductive injustice and extraction?

It's a challenging question. There's fetish upon fetish upon fetish. But we should caution against the tendency to conflate the populist so-called right and ecofascists. Are there relations between them? Yes. But there are also relations between centrist liberalism and ecofascism. That has to be kept in mind.

In the context of the United States, racism has been connected with the intensification of border policing and militarization. That was a project begun in earnest under Obama, who started building the border wall and deported more people than Trump. It's a challenging question because I don't see these dynamics being limited to right-wing populism or a move towards ecofascism.

This is the case elsewhere, too. Yes, people like Meloni are going to intensify what were already violent border police strategies. But the fact is, as the Transnational Institute has pointed out, the neoliberal border policing strategy – erecting climate border walls – is ramping up everywhere. And this is very much a product of centrist liberals.

So, when we see right-wing movements of various stripes taking advantage of centrist liberalism's rightward drift on this question, we shouldn't be surprised. The prime enemy shouldn't be the so-called ecofascists, but the centrist liberals who are creating the conditions for a Bannionist, far-right nationalism to emerge. That's not a prime mover of the dynamic; it's a symptom of the underlying process.

In places like Italy, but also France and Spain, the discourse around climate was once limited to localism and opposition to globalism. That's what parties like VOX and Lega Nord, even before Meloni, were concerned with: protecting traditional lifestyles and opposing globalist institutions like the IPCC.

But now, suddenly, there is a discourse around justice. People like Macron who want to tax petrol are stoking the Yellow Vest Movement. It's about

more than just migration and ecofascism. Forces that would normally be identified as populist are recycling their old talking points about localism and globalism, and formulating their own critique of the liberals' techno-managerialism.

Is there a need for leftist forces to offer their own critique or counter-proposition? We should not be defending Macron, but should we be defending the European Commission and Paris Agreement climate talks?

Why would we be defending the European Commission and the Paris Agreement? We have the EU policy chief, Josep Borrell, talking about how Europe is a garden – that is classic Civilizing Project rhetoric. We have Germany rearming on a massive scale, encouraged by the Greens as the country's most warmongering faction, in support of an alliance that both historically and in the present is designed to wage an offensive, first-strike nuclear war.

Not to mention the longstanding objection from the socialist left across Europe, that the EU project was undemocratic from the beginning. That's why people like Tony Benn were campaigning so aggressively against it in the 1970s. As for the Paris Agreement, if we want to pay attention to climate treaties, we should be looking at the free-trade agreements. Those are the real climate treaties.

In sum, I would say that the left has often derided these critiques of the global centralization of power as a right-wing conspiracy. I'm sorry, but it's not a conspiracy. As William I. Robinson points out, there is a transnational capitalist class. They have real institutions of power; they have real networks; and they are backstopped by the most fearsome war machine in the history of humankind.

So, the critique of globalism needs to be embraced by the left. The response should be, yes, let's respect regional autonomy, but let's do so in a thoroughly internationalist way. That's easier said than done, but it has to be at the center of our response to right-wing nationalism, which always wants to restrict labor's movement across borders and never capital's.

Where does something like the Green New Deal fit with this position? If it is critical to massively reconstruct society, as you say, why is the left struggling to politicize an industrial agenda? What do these trends bode for the planetary proletariat, as you term it?

First of all, the left is doing poorly because the working class and peasant movements have been systematically destroyed and weakened all across the world, but especially in the imperialist countries, over the past 50 years. Along with that, there was the overthrow of the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Communist Party's full acceptance of capitalist restoration from the late 1970s on. These were all parts of the systematic attack on the social

bases of working class and peasant power, which countless people have identified.

So, how do we reconstruct what's necessary to achieve this politicization? I go back to questions of work and class, though not class in a formalist way. Too much of the left's class analysis – including discourses around fossil capitalism – is formalist and Eurocentric. We need to appreciate that capitalism is, above all, a system of mobilizing wage work that is always in concert with the socially necessary unpaid work of “women, nature, and colonies,” to quote Maria Mies, the great sociologist. That is, socially necessary labor time depends on socially necessary unpaid work. That's a historic contribution of geocultures of domination – of sexism and racism, especially – and how they have fit together with class dynamics in the web of life.

This is why imperialism, together with the specifically capitalist Prometheanism I write about, are central. It's out of Prometheanism and bourgeois naturalism that we get racism and sexism as ways of organizing humans. This speaks to ecofascism, too, because they buy the nature–society dualism; they have a racist and sexist view of it, but they accept that basic framework of mainstream environmentalism. It's the same way empires saw the world, as Man versus Nature.

If the Green New Deal follows the path of developmentalism after World War II, it will be another Promethean effort to refashion the world's social ecology in the interests of imperial power and capital accumulation. So, right now is a moment where we need to understand that capitalism thrives through an exploitative regime – that is, through the proletariat – which itself depends on a regime of appropriating the unpaid work of the web of life as a whole (the biotariat), and feminized unpaid work (the femitariat). We should understand the politics of the present conjuncture by seeing how paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive work, fit together in the web of life at every turn.

Another topic you've written about is “climate doomism.” Some parts of the left tend to catastrophize the data coming from the IPCC, presenting it as proof that capitalism is going to win and the planet will collapse. What to make of this? Are they internalizing some religious need for salvation?

In the Anglo-American world, there has been a love affair with the apocalypse going back to the 18th century – for as long as the British and American empires have been bringing the end of the world to so many peoples. Climate doomism is a necessary ideological consequence of seeing the world in dualist frameworks. There is literally no political escape from Man and Nature. There can be a scientific and technological fix, as advocates of the Anthropocene illuminate, but that's not a democratic politics; that would not be sustainability premised on socialism and equality and justice.

So, we need to refuse the temptations of the climate emergency. Existential threat discourses always favor authoritarian measures. They encourage us to impose forms of austerity informed by science and technology as the only means of being delivered from the climate crisis. It's not yet in motion, but I think what's brewing in the Euro-American imagination – and maybe in the Japanese imagination, too – is some form of green austerity that would be administered by invoking the specter of climate doom, and deployed through a hypertrophied bio-surveillance security apparatus.

One of the critiques of IPCC focuses on its models, which are based on science produced in the Global North, and thus exclude perspectives coming from the Global South. Is there a way to fight back with alternative knowledge regimes? Where do you look for inspiration?

A key source is the post-World War II era, when we had the high tide of labor, socialist, and national liberation movements, as well as important experiments in international cooperation. Most spectacularly, of course, was the emergence of dependency theory in the halls of the UN Commission for Trade and Development, among other South–South linkages that articulated alternative economic models and interpretations.

Everybody forgets about this, but a few years after *The Limits to Growth* was published in 1972, there was a Latin American response published by the Bariloche Foundation. The English translation is *Catastrophe or New Society?*. It did suggest the need for the fundamental redistribution of wealth and power. We can also productively look at food sovereignty and agroecology, which has been an international South–South and South–North movement. The problem is that the world university system is implicated in the climate-industrial complex. There is already a struggle for liberated knowledge within the global knowledge factory, but we need to build those bonds of solidarity. Not simply or primarily between intellectuals, although that's part of it, but also between internationalist movements for peasants and workers all around the world. That's what it will take to nurture and find ways to develop a genuinely emancipatory knowledge. The knowledge that helped to create the climate crisis is not going to help us address the climate crisis in any liberatory and sustainable way.

What role would China play in this process, if any? How do you broadly see the role of China in solving the climate problem?

I think the greatest threat to humanity is not climate, but great power war. I see the war in Ukraine as a climate war. I've argued that this is the beginning of a new Thirty Years' War at the end of cheap nature. Although I'm not a Belt and Road fan, China appears eminently more reasonable about these questions of life and death, and war and peace, than the Washington–Davos–Berlin axis.

So, a lot depends on the internal contradictions of Chinese capitalism in this era, and to what degree the CCP is really prepared to address the climate

crisis. I think that they're getting ready for sea level rise. One could learn quite a bit from the Chinese about planning for the middle-run, at least. But preparing for sea level rise is not the same as doing something meaningful about the climate crisis.

The hope for climate justice will come from workers and peasants and the planetary proletariat: not only paid workers but unpaid workers, human and extra-human. Otherwise, we will have political movements for socialism that continue to treat the web of life as something to be managed and dominated, rather than as a comrade-in-arms.

Interviewed by Evgeny Morozov and Ekaitz Cancela
Edited by Marc Shkurovich

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<https://jasonwmoore.com/>

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