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Our Capitalogenic World: Climate Crises, Class Politics, and the Civilizing Project

We all know that the news is not so great on Planet Earth. There's no question that the conditions of life will be fundamentally different in the centuries to come. And while there is much that we can do to navigate this transition – earth system scientists call it a “state shift” – there will be no return to the unusual climate stability of the past 12,000 years. Life on Earth is now definitively exiting the Holocene.¹

How we conceptualize this state shift, and how we imagine what comes next, is crucial. So too is how we imagine what *has* occurred. The political imagination and the world-historical imagination form an uncomfortable unity. Among the imperial bourgeoisie's decisive ideological victories in recent decades has been the erasure of world history from the radical imagination. A shallow historical vision characterizes today's radical climate studies literature.² Meanwhile, few climate historians have had a taste for the history of capitalism.³ The thorny and uneven relationship between bourgeois ideology and historical method in the neoliberal era has led to serious blind spots in the radical assessment of the climate crisis, its class and imperial basis, and the revolutionary praxis necessary to confront and transcend it in a just, democratic, and egalitarian fashion.

Anthropogenesis, Neoliberalism, and the “End of History”

The climate crisis is *anthropogenic*. Literally, “made by humans.” We are told this every time we read, watch, or hear climate news. We hear it almost every time we hear a scholar speak on climate change, or when we read a book or article on the climate crisis. The “anthropogenic” party line finds few dissidents, regardless of academic discipline or political sympathy. This is the ideological project of the Popular Anthropocene – distinct

¹ A.D. Barnosky et al., *Approaching a State Shift in Earth's Biosphere*, “Nature” 2012, nr 486 (7401), p. 52–58; S.L. Lewis i M.A. Maslin, *The Human Planet*, Pelican, London 2018.

² See, e.g., J. Wainwright, G. Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, Verso, London 2018.

³ See, e.g., D. Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

from, and yet enabled by, key players in the geological and earth-system sciences.⁴ Saying the climate crisis is “human-caused” is not just a language problem, but a mode of reasoning implicated in the climate crisis itself. Both are rooted in a dark history.

This legacy is the long and violent history of Civilizing Projects. If a certain kind of ethnocentrism has accompanied every great – and not-so-great – civilization, capitalism raised this to an epochal art form. It did not, as some have supposed, spring forth from a mystical “European-ness” waiting to be liberated from its feudal shackles. Indeed, neither “Europe” nor “Western Civilization” as a geohistorical force or geocultural formation existed before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.⁵ They were *inventions* of capitalist forces – comprising not only the “material” means of production but also the “means of *mental* production.” The obverse of Civilization was Nature. The uppercase indicates their status as “ruling ideas” – or what I will call *ruling abstractions*. These are fetishes in the classic Marxist sense. More than any other, this binary highlights the connection between the economic, the political, and the geocultural through the “modification ... of these natural bases ... in the course of history through the action of men.”⁶ The purpose of these ruling abstractions is no mystery: to justify and enable the profit-driven conquest, appropriation, and exploitation of humans and the rest of nature, to sustain the endless accumulation of capital. From the origins of capitalism, these ruling abstractions redefined the lives and labors of the vast majority of humans as non-work, on the specific basis of their alleged “savagery.” *This* is the violence of the Civilizing Project and its antonym, Nature.

We might think of this binary as the animating principle of capitalism’s mode of thought. For everyone who wants to say that capitalism is an “economic system” – rather than a class society – it’s worth remembering that the rich and powerful don’t rule by guns and wealth alone. They require ideologies, and these have contributed mightily to the climate crisis. Civilizing Projects, like all ideologies, do not have “lives of their own,” as reified incantations of “the West” or “settler colonialism” suggest.⁷ They are specific class projects tightly bound to capitalism’s incentive structure. From the beginning, the emergent imperial bourgeoisies “overrepresented” themselves as Human, and expelled everyone else.⁸ Their enduring ideological claims of Christianizing, Civilizing, or Developmentalist virtue

⁴ J.W. Moore, *Confronting the Popular Anthropocene*, “New Geographies” 2017, nr 9, p. 186–191. In what follows, I consider the Popular Anthropocene as an important academic cultural formation whose essential framing of the climate crisis flows from Man against Nature. This is not to deny the contributions of scholars who mobilize this framing, but only to note their complicity with it. It is, however, to point out that no intellectual production in capitalism is autonomous from its hegemonic political and ideological fields (P. Bourdieu, L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992; R.C. Lewontin, S. Rose, L.J. Kamin, *Not in Our Genes*, Pantheon, New York 1984).

⁵ T.C. Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1997.

⁶ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, International Publishers, New York 1971, p. 42, order of quotation slightly altered from the original.

⁷ J.W. Moore, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History*, “Nordica” 2022, nr 2(51), p. 123–146; B.J. Fields, *Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America*, “New Left Review” 1990, nr 1/181, p. 95–118.

⁸ S. Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom*, “CR: The New Centennial Review” 2003, nr 3(3), p. 257–337; J.W. Moore, *Power, Profit and Prometheanism, Part I: Method, Ideology and the Violence of the Civilizing Project*, “Journal of World-Systems Research” 2022, nr 21(2), p. 1–12.

rested on the essential premise that most humans are not really or not fully Human, but “savage.” Remaking a biological claim about the human species into a historical argument of causation – through which the “human enterprise” becomes a collective actor – is not innocent.⁹ It’s an ideological sleight-of-hand with deep roots in bourgeois naturalism: a procedure that biologizes, and seeks to justify, inequality between humans.

Human-caused. To say climate change is not anthropogenic but *capitalogenic* (“made by capital”) is a sin against Good Science. The uppercase is again deliberate, because Good Science is not about truth but power and profit. Long before Habermas spoke of the “scientization of politics,” Good Science served empires and capitalists in their efforts to turn webs of life into profit-making opportunities, and perhaps above all, to discredit anyone who stood in their way.¹⁰ To accept Good Science is to accept that there really is no alternative.

Radicals sneered when Fukuyama announced the “end of history” in the closing years of the Cold War.¹¹ But most on the academic left – especially in the rich countries – were already joining Fukuyama. The poststructuralist moment came to celebrate Marx and Engels’ aphorism – “all that is solid melts into air” – forgetting their dialectical insistence on historically durable structures of power, profit, and life.¹² *History* became a footnote, or worse: it was decomposed into highly stylized and misleading narratives. In the English vernacular, these are *potted histories*: superficial storybook narratives that one likely encountered in high school. These narratives seek to manufacture consent: to inculcate an acceptance of the political order as free, democratic, or otherwise virtuous. Such potted arguments are instruments of class rule. So it was that this flight from history was accompanied, and indeed enabled, by the neoliberal academy’s “retreat from class.”¹³ The flight from world history and the retreat from class were two sides of the same ideological movement.

It was a dramatic about-face. Across the “long” 1970s, the cutting edge of revolutionary theory found its animating impulse in an unprecedented efflorescence of historical materialism. Emboldened and inspired by socialist and national liberation movements, radical scholars drank deeply at the well of world history. From the fall of Rome to the rise of capitalism to the twentieth century’s great socialist revolutions, Marxists recuperated the long history of class society, capitalism’s origins, and its globalizing contradictions of class struggle.¹⁴ They did so from multiple vantage points and divergent Marxist traditions. But in all instances, historical investigation and the revolutionary critique of contemporary capitalism were tightly bound.

⁹ W. Steffen, J. Grinevald, P. Crutzen, J. McNeill, *The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspective*, “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A” 2011, nr 369, p. 842–867.

¹⁰ J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, Polity, Cambridge 1987, p. 61–80; J.W. Moore, *The Opiates of the Environmentalists?*, “Abstrakt,” listopad 2021, <https://www.abstraktdergi.net/opiates-of-the-environmentalists-anthropocene-illusions-planetary-management-the-capitalocene-alternative/> [access: 2023/01/26].

¹¹ F. Fukuyama, *The end of history?*, “National Interest” 1989, nr 16, p. 3–18.

¹² K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in: *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. G.S. Jones, Penguin, New York 2002, p. 218–233, quotation: 223; e.g. B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1993.

¹³ Moore, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History*, op. cit.; E.M. Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, Verso, London 1985.

¹⁴ P. Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, New Left Books, London 1974; I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, Academic Press, New York 1974; T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979.

All that was pushed aside by the neoliberal revolution. That turn took many forms in the universities, and the flight from world history was pivotal to virtually all of them. Many leftwing scholars decided that, in the era of neoliberal triumph, capitalism didn't really exist after all; it was just a figment of the imagination shared by dogmatic Marxists and neoliberal ideologues alike.¹⁵ This fetishization of theory in the academy is so powerful that I find myself writing, time and again, about how the tasks of revolutionary theory are historical, or they are nothing. So far, to little effect. Even when capitalism was conceptually rehabilitated through anti-globalization struggles at the turn of the century, it returned primarily in a Polanyian incarnation.¹⁶ Here was a concept of historical capitalism stripped of a Marxist theory of exploitation – so much so that today, the radical vernacular insists upon “decolonization” without so much as a whisper of class exploitation.¹⁷

No matter that the history of capitalism yields an uncontroversial insight – one essential to our interpretation of the climate crisis. Namely, this: imperialism is the bourgeoisie's preferred mode of waging the class struggle. Scholars are not supposed to use such language in polite company. It's *political* and therefore un-Scientific. But I can find no better conceptualization of capitalism's “*real* movement... in its world-historical existence” – one that grasps its “double relation: one the one hand as natural, on the other as a social relationship.”¹⁸ This dialectical and historical relation is the class struggle in the web of life: a *political* struggle over the conditions of a “good business environment” that facilitates the merciless appropriation and exploitation of life and work, human and extra-human, paid and unpaid.¹⁹

Transition Debates in the Web of Life

Class relations – which include climate history, as Marx and Engels emphasize – are unthinkable when abstracted from world history.²⁰ To be clear, world history is not a restatement of past events and alleged prime movers such as population, industrialization, or colonialism. World history is a mode of interpretation. It foregrounds the explanation of tipping points, transitions, crises, and significant civilizational expansions in their historical-geographical specificity. Are the origins of the climate crisis found in England around 1800? Are they located in a wider web of class and imperial relations across the Atlantic world after 1492?

These are the kinds of questions posed by a world-historical materialism in the web of life.²¹ They are also, in part, the questions posed by the Anthropocene, the “Age

¹⁵ D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford 1989.

¹⁶ K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon, Boston 1957. Polanyi “expressed the point concisely by contrasting Marx's account of the role of economy in society, ‘an exploitation theorem – class war’, with his own, ‘a market theorem – no class war’” (G. Dale, *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market*, Polity, Cambridge 2010, p. 132).

¹⁷ B. Selwyn, S. Miyamura, *Class Struggle or Embedded Markets?*, “New Political Economy” 2014, nr 5(19), p. 639–661; J.W. Moore, *Power, Profit and Prometheanism*, op. cit.

¹⁸ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁹ J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Verso, London 2015.

²⁰ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 42.

²¹ Ibidem; J.W. Moore, *How to Read Capitalism in the Web of Life*, “Journal of World-Systems Research” 2022, nr 1(28), p. 153–168; J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.

of Man.”²² But where the world-ecology conversation *opens* these questions for wider scholarly and political dialogue, the Anthropocene – the *Popular Anthropocene*, to differentiate it from strictly geological debates – silences that debate.

In the 1970s, world-historical discussions like this became known as the Transition Debate.²³ For any world-historical transition – none more so than the ongoing demise of Holocene climate stability – such Transition Debates are unavoidable. The Popular Anthropocene, in this light, wants to eat its cake and have it too. It takes refuge in geological periodization whilst engaging in a promiscuous typological exercise masquerading as world history. Witness the -cene mania of the past decade, mostly ignoring urgently needed syntheses of history, contemporary politics, and biospheric change.²⁴ To paraphrase a French expression about political life: one can ignore capitalism’s world history, but you can be confident it will not ignore you.

The Transition Debate is shorthand for a long-running postwar debate over the transition to capitalism.²⁵ When the Soviet and Chinese defeat of fascist empires was followed by Afro-Asian decolonization, new questions about socialist transition and capitalist crisis appeared on the world stage. Radical intellectuals began to take the origins of capitalism seriously. The spirit of the Debate was basically this: one’s assessments of the historical-geographical origins of a crisis, and of the contemporary configuration of capitalist power and profit, are dialectically joined.²⁶ Thus, a transnational account of the capitalist origins premised on imperialism yielded different political insights than a national account of capitalist origins premised on property relations.²⁷

The Popular Anthropocene has evaded such questions in favor of potted histories that pit “Man” against “Nature.” That quasi-eternal conflict is mediated by population, technology, and sometimes, great power conflict.²⁸ But these are fragments – not evolving and mutually formative moments of an evolving dialectical whole. Far from intellectual accidents, such fragmentation flows directly from the philosophical reductionism and Civilizing Projects that initially took shape during the rise of capitalism.²⁹ When it comes to class analysis and the history of capitalism, the Popular Anthropocene – and

²² The Anthropocene literature is vast. See P.J. Crutzen, E.F. Stoermer, *The Anthropocene*, “IGBP Newsletter” 2000, nr 41, p. 17–18. For a critical assessment, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. J.W. Moore, PM Press, Oakland 2016; Maslin & Lewis, *Human Planet*, op. cit. An important exception to the ahistorical tendency is N. Klein, *This Changes Everything*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2014.

²³ J.W. Moore, *Confronting the Popular Anthropocene*, op. cit.

²⁴ F. Chwałczyk, *Around the Anthropocene in Eighty Names*, “Sustainability” 2020, nr 12(11), p. 44–58.

²⁵ *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. R.H. Hilton, New Left Books, London 1976.

²⁶ J.W. Moore, *Empire, Class & The Origins Of Planetary Crisis: The Transition Debate in the Web of Life*, “Esboços” 2021, nr 28, p. 740–763.

²⁷ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*, Academic Press, New York 1974; R. Brenner, *Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe*, “Past & Present” 1976, nr 70, p. 30–75.

²⁸ J.R. McNeill, P. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016.

²⁹ R.C. Lewontin et al., *Not in Our Genes*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *Del gran abaratamiento a la gran implosión*, “Relaciones Internacionales” 2021, nr 47, p. 11–52; R. Patel, J.W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2017.

the wider Environmentalism of the Rich in which it's embedded – has established an intellectual no-fly zone.³⁰

It should, then, come as no surprise that the two leading radical critics of the Popular Anthropocene are historical scholars. Their distinctive renderings of the Capitalocene thesis offer distinctive historical-geographical assessments of the origins of capitalism and the climate crisis. Neither believes the Capitalocene to be a geological era. On several decisive points, Andreas Malm and I agree: the climate crisis must be grasped in its historical specificity; the origins of climate crisis are found in geographically specific class struggles; and webs of life are fundamental to any politically useful conception of class politics and capitalist development.³¹

There *are* significant differences between us: over capitalism, the class struggle, the generative possibilities of the *oikeios* as a multilayered and creative pulse of life-making, the role of bourgeois ideology, and the power of the fetishes of Nature and Society. We might abbreviate the difference as follows: an *1830 thesis* (Fossil Capitalism) and a *1492 thesis* (capitalism as a world-ecology of power, profit, and life). Both arguments are more nuanced than any stylized date allows. For Malm, the class struggles in early-nineteenth-century English mill towns propelled the bourgeoisie to reconcentrate industrial production, powered by steam engines, in major cities like Manchester. Thus “fossil capital” was born, and became a weapon in the bourgeoisie’s class victory over an increasingly militant industrial proletariat.

For the 1492 thesis, Malm’s fossil capital argument is one crucial element in a longer story. It’s simply not the whole story. Significantly, the 1830 thesis *excludes* consideration of the wider historical geographies of class, capital, and empire that predate “the” Industrial Revolution. The world-ecology alternative begins from the conjuncture of climate crisis and class revolt in feudalism’s long fourteenth-century crisis. The outcome of those class struggles was a historic defeat for Western Europe’s ruling classes.³² They tried, and failed, to restore the balance of class power amid the “socio-physical conjuncture” of climate, disease, agro-ecological exhaustion, and class revolt.³³ This internalist “climate fix” strategy having failed, feudal ruling strata stumbled upon another: move aggressively into the Atlantic world and conquer the Americas, where the balance of military power ran in their favor.³⁴ Thus began primitive accumulation in its classic sense: a grand dynamic of world-class formation through which imperial

³⁰ To borrow a phrase from Matt Taibi, *America’s Intellectual No-Fly Zone*, “Scheerpost,” 20.04.2022, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/04/20/matt-taibbi-americas-intellectual-no-fly-zone/> [access: 2023/01/26]; P. Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2016.

³¹ A. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, Verso, London 2016; J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *The Capitalocene, Part I*, “Journal of Peasant Studies” 2017, nr 3(44), p. 594–630; J.W. Moore, *The Capitalocene, Part II*, “Journal of Peasant Studies” 2018, nr 2(45), p. 237–279.

³² J.W. Moore, *The Crisis of Feudalism: An Environmental History*, “Organization & Environment” 2002, nr 3(15), p. 296–317; J.W. Moore, *Nature & the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, “Review” 2003, nr 2(26), p. 97–172; J.W. Moore, *The Modern World-System as Environmental History?*, “Theory & Society” 2003, nr 3(32), p. 307–377; J.W. Moore, *Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism*, Ph.D. thesis, Berkeley, University of California 2007.

³³ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁴ J.P. Antonacci, *Periodizing the Capitalocene as Polemocene*, “Journal of World-Systems Research” 2021, nr 2(27), p. 439–467.

bourgeoisies could mobilize Cheap Nature, including Cheap Labor, on an unprecedented scale. Within a century of 1492, that movement would subordinate Polish and Irish labor to the same bloody logic.³⁵

That logic included the invention of epoch-making fetishes – ruling abstractions – forged by Civilizing Projects. These were initially tethered to Christianity, itself radically reinvented in this era. They quickly morphed into mature expressions of European Universalism.³⁶ Out of this tumultuous era of entangled geopolitical, economic, cultural, and biological crisis emerged a specific complex of geohistorical actors: state-machineries, bankers, the Church, conquerors, and entrepreneurs. For these strata and institutions, the crisis of feudal accumulation entailed a contracting economic surplus. The move to create a “Great Frontier” of Cheap Nature – centering on the Four Cheaps of labor, food, energy, and raw materials – allowed for the expansion of the surplus, now governed by increasingly competitive *capitalist* relations of power and commerce.³⁷

The result was a new accumulation strategy: Cheap Nature. It was premised on devaluing the lives and labors of “women, nature, and colonies.”³⁸ Here was an ideological, military, and juridical strategy that enabled “vast but weak” imperialist bourgeoisies to appropriate *unpaid work* in a novel and generative way.³⁹ To call these arrangements *feudal* is to miss the very foundations of the capitalist world-ecology in unpaid work, which depended on regimes of Naturalized domination – ordained by so-called “natural law.”⁴⁰ These tendencies rapidly crystallized the world color line and capitalist patriarchy during the seventeenth century, and were central to the era’s epochal labor and landscape revolution.⁴¹

The Popular Anthropocene and the 1830 Capitalocene thesis alike have worked hard to deny early capitalism’s extraordinary environment-making revolution.⁴² The

³⁵ M. Rai, *Columbus in Ireland*, “Race & Class” 1993, nr 4(34), p. 25–34; M. Małowist, *Western Europe, Eastern Europe and World Development 13th-18th Centuries*, Brill, Leiden 2010.

³⁶ R.H. Tawney, *Religion & the Rise of Capitalism*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York 1926; I. Wallerstein, *European Universalism*, The New Press, New York 2006.

³⁷ W.P. Webb, *The Great Frontier*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1964; J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.; I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, op. cit.

³⁸ M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Zed, London 1986, p. 77.

³⁹ F. Braudel, *European Expansion & Capitalism, 1450–1650*, in: *Contemporary Civilization Staff of Columbia College, Columbia University*, ed. Chapters in Western Civilization, Columbia University Press, New York 1961, p. 245–288, quotation 260; J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ On “feudal” Latin America in relation to the Capitalocene debate, see W. Wolford, *The Plantationocene*, “Annals of the American Association of Geographers” 2021, nr 6(111), p. 1622–1639. Contrast with J.W. Moore, *The Capitalocene, Parts I and II*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *The Opiates of the Environmentalists?*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *Raumschiffe und Sklavenschiffe: Die kapitalische Weltökologie 1492–2030*, in: *Kapitalismus und Nachhaltigkeit*, ed. Sighard Neckel, Philipp Degens, Sarah Lenz, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt 2022, p. 21–38.

⁴¹ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn 2004; F. Bethencourt, *Racisms*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013.

⁴² What follows draws upon, *inter alia*, J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *Capitalocene, Part I and II*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *The Rise of Cheap Nature*, in: *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, op. cit., p. 78–115; J.W. Moore, *Madeira, Sugar, & the Conquest of Nature in the ‘First’ Sixteenth Century, Part I*, “Review” 2009, nr 4(32), p. 345–390; J.W. Moore, *Madeira, Sugar, & the Conquest of Nature in the ‘First’ Sixteenth Century, Part II*, “Review” 2010, nr 1(33),

labor and landscape transformations between 1450 and 1750 cohered the origins of capitalogenic environmental revolution, creating an eco-historical rupture as great as any since the dawn of agriculture and the rise of the first cities. Here was the dawn of a specifically capitalist Pangea.

After 1450, the scale, scope, and speed of environmental change across the Atlantic world outstripped anything seen in the halcyon days of Europe's High Middle Ages. The difference was often an order of magnitude – a tenfold difference, give or take. The *speed* of early modern transformation was distinctive, and it remains crucial to capitalogenic environment-making today. (Capital's tendency to compress turnover time and enforce recurrent waves of time-space compression is not just social, but socio-ecological.)

What feudal Europe achieved over centuries, early capitalist forces realized in just decades. Here's one illuminating contrast. In Picardy (northeastern France), it took two centuries (the twelfth and thirteenth) to clear 12,000 hectares of forest. Four centuries later, in Bahia (northeastern Brazil) at the height of the sugar boom, 12,000 hectares of forests were cleared in just one year. *That's a 200-fold increase*. Nor was this an isolated occurrence. As slave crews were hacking down the Brazilian Atlantic rainforest to secure new land and cheap fuelwood, there was a similar advance of forest clearance on the distant eastern edge of the Atlantic world. In early-seventeenth-century Poland, workers and peasants cleared forests at an equally rapid pace, transforming the country's extraordinary sylvan resources into timber, arable land for cash crops, potash for bleaching textiles, and the tar and pitch necessary to make the era's growing commercial fleets seaworthy.

The point of these examples of rapid deforestation is not – or not only – to indict capitalism for laying waste to “the” environment. (The English verb “to lay waste” – to devastate – comes into the language at this time, following the devastation of Ireland after the mid-sixteenth century.) Clearly, we *should* indict capitalism for its serial demolitions of human and extra-human life. But indicting the consequences of a system is different from a critique of the system itself.

The logic of capital accumulation rests upon a peculiar narrowing of what counts as productive.⁴³ To be productive is to participate in the money economy. Productive labor is paid; unproductive labor is unpaid, *yet socially necessary*. This is not my view, of course. It's how the *bourgeoisie* defines productive and unproductive labor.⁴⁴ *It must*

p. 1–24; J.W. Moore, *Nature and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *The Modern World-System as Environmental History?*, “Theory & Society” 2003, nr 3(32), p. 307–377; J.W. Moore, *Über die Ursprünge unserer ökologischen Krise*, “Prokla” 2016, nr 185, p. 599–619; R. Patel, J.W. Moore, *A History of the World...*, op. cit.

⁴³ The following draws upon, *inter alia*, Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ In his searing indictment of this peculiar narrowing of “productive” labor, Wallerstein shows how, from the rise of capitalism, the “social distinction between productive and unproductive work *began to be imposed* on the working classes. *De facto*, productive work came to be defined as money-earning work, and non-productive work as work that, albeit very necessary, was merely ‘subsistence’ activity and therefore was said to produce no ‘surplus’ which anyone else could possibly appropriate. This work was either totally non-commodified or involved petty (but then truly petty) commodity production. The differentiation between kinds of work was anchored by creating specific [gendered] roles attached to them. Productive (wage) labour became the task primarily of the adult male/father and secondarily of other (younger) adult males in the household. Non-productive (subsistence) labour became the task primarily of the adult female/mother and secondarily of other females, plus the children and the elderly. Productive labour was done outside the household in the ‘work place’. Non-productive labour

define it in this fashion; otherwise, capitalists would have to pay for all the necessary work it designates as “unproductive.” This would be the end of capitalism, for if the bourgeoisie had to pay – for example – for the unpaid reproductive work of the femiariat, capital accumulation would be impossible.⁴⁵

With these clarifications in mind, capitalism’s *labor* productivity is entirely different from the premodern logic of surplus accumulation. For all its diversity, this logic was premised on *land* productivity, which included human work but was relatively indifferent to modest fluctuations in labor productivity. Under feudalism, for instance, what mattered was how much wheat or rye could be harvested and milled, not – as under capitalism – how much wheat or rye could be produced *per average worker-year* (or hour). This meant, all things being equal, a tendency towards agricultural involution: labor input increased to counteract soil exhaustion, with increasingly limited effect. This was in fact the norm under feudalism and other agrarian civilizations, except for those centered on wet rice systems. For European cereal agriculture, medieval socio-ecological contradiction of the “declining rate of feudal levy” encouraged a rising population – in the heartlands and into new settlement frontiers, as in East Elbian Europe – so that more labor could be poured into agrarian production.⁴⁶

That changes with the transition to capitalism. The new law of value, organizing regimes of abstract social labor, required a historically novel form of alienation.⁴⁷ Labor productivity as the determinant of surplus value came to dominate. This too assumed diverse forms, but the English yeoman, the Polish serf, the Brazilian planter and slave, all felt its gravitational pull.⁴⁸ *Labor productivity* was redefined narrowly, and therefore hid from economic calculation all those forms of life and labor that provided useful work, *but were culturally and juridically excluded from the cash nexus*. That exclusion is at the heart of the invention and reinvention of the ruling abstractions: Nature and Civilization. *Nature* was therefore not confined to “land” and “land productivity” but signified the totality of *unpaid work* necessary to capitalism’s law of value. Most *actually* productive labor in capitalism was excluded from capitalist “labor productivity”: above all, the unpaid work of “women, nature, and colonies.” So-called “women’s work” was redefined as non-work. Plantation labor – slavery – was redefined as a “school for civilization.”⁴⁹ Breaking with the ruling binary allows us to see how every great wave

was done inside the household,” I. Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism, with Capitalist Civilization*, Verso, London, p. 24 (emphasis added).

This discussion is distinct from – although not necessarily opposed to – the Marxist dialogue over “productive” and “unproductive” labor. That complex, and sometimes esoteric, debate turns on production of surplus value as such, distinct from, say, labor-power deployed in the realization process (e.g., sales). My interpretive priority is different from – but (once again) not opposed to – Marx’s famous discussions in *Capital* II. The bourgeois view of the difference between “productive” and “unproductive” labor – embedded in its ruling abstractions of Civilization and Savagery – not only conceals, but enables, its regime of socially necessary unpaid work. Thus Wallerstein’s biting sarcasm on the bourgeois abstractions of “productive” and “unproductive” work.

⁴⁵ S. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, PM Press, Oakland 2012.

⁴⁶ G. Bois, *Against the neo-Malthusian orthodoxy*, “Past & Present” 1978, nr 79, p. 60–69.

⁴⁷ J.W. Moore, *The Value of Everything?*, “Review” 2017, nr 3–4(37), p. 245–292.

⁴⁸ See esp. J.W. Moore, *Amsterdam, Part II*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ R. Patel, J.W. Moore, *A History of the World*, op. cit.; S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p. 92.

of proletarianization in the web of life depends on the unpaid work of humans (a femitariat) and the unpaid work of planetary life as a whole (the biotariat).⁵⁰ Marx's socially necessary labor-time rests upon socially necessary unpaid work.

This alienation is not only the real basis of capital accumulation; it requires and sustains the ruling abstractions of Civilization and Nature. Capitalist civilization's tendency to favor profit-making, saving and investment (capital accumulation), and new geographical conquests entailed a reinvention and abstraction of the web of life. As we are learning, this ruling abstraction was a capricious – and capacious – conceptualization of Nature with an uppercase N. It facilitated botanical imperialism and bioprospecting alongside the modern slave trade's *anthropo*-prospecting. The reinvention linked closely to the abstraction. Its major bias was instrumental; its overarching priority, the deployment of Nature as a praxis of world accumulation and global power.⁵¹ Of all the geocultural inventions that poured forth in the two centuries after 1492, none was more epochal than Nature, a cultural and institutional machine of power and profit-making. The capitalogenic deforestations that rolled across the planet after 1550 were not just about destruction.⁵² They were about putting Nature to work as cheaply as possible.⁵³

By the middle of the eighteenth century, this epochal environment-making revolution was largely exhausted. The profit-driven genocides and ecocides of the New World enabled silver mining and sugar planting – two of the era's greatest engines of capital accumulation. These engines began to sputter in fits and starts between the 1650s and the end of the eighteenth century. Slaves, peasants, and workers resisted; soils were exhausted and eroded; forests were cleared. Early capitalism's socio-ecological contradictions deepened; resistance to agrarian capitalism, from Russia to Haiti to Peru, intensified. It was the era of “dual revolutions”: the democratic and the industrial.⁵⁴

A heavy dose of romanticism goes along with many Marxist – and Environmentalist – views on the Industrial Revolution. One story says that modern labor relations begin with the steam engine and what Marx calls “large-scale industry.” I find this story difficult to square with my reading of world labor history, which is also a history of capitalism's ecologies of power, accumulation, and nature. On the one hand, the rationalization of the capitalist labor process didn't begin in England but on the sugar plantations of the Atlantic world.⁵⁵ If we want to find the original factories, we need look no further than the “factories in the field” of early modern sugar plantations.

On the other hand, this transition didn't occur on an epochal scale until the *end* of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Marx grasped the essence of the historical tendency towards the “real” domination of labor by capital in mass production. And though in *Capital* he writes

⁵⁰ J.W. Moore, *El hombre, la naturaleza y el ambientalismo de los ricos*, in: *Pensar la ciencia de otro modo*, ed. F.F. Herrera, D. Lew, N. Caruci, Mincyt, Caracas 2022, p. 55–82; J.W. Moore, *Das Planetare Proletariat im Planetaren Inferno*, “LFB: Literaturforum im Brecht-Haus” 2021, nr 6, p. 4–11.

⁵¹ J.W. Moore, *World Accumulation and Planetary Life, or, Why Capitalism Will Not Survive Until the “Last Tree is Cut,”* “IPPR Progressive Review” 2017, nr 3(24), p. 176–204.

⁵² M. Williams, *Deforesting the Earth*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003.

⁵³ J.W. Moore, *Putting Nature to Work*, in: *Supramarkt*, ed. O. Arndt, C. Wee, Irene Books, Gothenburg 2015, p. 69–117.

⁵⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, World Publishing Co., Cleveland 1962.

⁵⁵ S.W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, Penguin, New York 1985.

⁵⁶ H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1974.

as if it was an accomplished fact, it wasn't. The "real subsumption" of labor by capital matured later, during the "second" industrial revolution and its mass production systems in the automobile, electrical, and petrochemical industries.⁵⁷ From the vantage point of planetary life, the steam engine's epoch-making contribution hardly lies with textile production on a tiny island in the North Atlantic. Instead, it lies with the revolutionizing of the means of transportation – the transition to steamships and the railroadization of the planet, constituting the decisive infrastructure of capitalism's militarized accumulation strategy.⁵⁸ British-led industrialization revolutionized the dynamics and strategies of Cheap Nature – labor above all – established after 1492. *It did not invent them.*

This reorients our usual narrative of industrialization, capitalism, and the not-so-anthropogenic drivers of today's climate crisis. It opens fresh questions about the dialectical relations – and class struggles – of peasants, slaves, and sailors against capitalism's double register of Cheap Nature: its economic violence and its ruthless geocultural domination.⁵⁹ Perhaps most significantly, it connects historically the genesis of the capitalogenic trinity of the climate class divide, climate apartheid, and climate patriarchy as the *driver* of today's planetary crisis, not its environmentally determined *consequence*.

For both the 1830 and 1492 Capitalocene theses, the interpretive emphasis pivots on world history. When, where, and how do we understand the decisive inflection point, from which the capitalogenic climate crisis emerged? How, where, and when do we see subsequent turning points in the history of capitalism and climate? Malm and I agree. These are the decisive questions of the Capitalocene as a new Transition Debate in the web of life. We insist that what matters is the class struggle through which formed new civilizational "rules of reproduction" that compelled and enabled the endless accumulation of capital.⁶⁰

The Environmentalism of the Rich, Or, Why the Popular Anthropocene Is Part of the Problem

The Popular Anthropocene has studiously avoided these questions.⁶¹ As we have begun to see, there are *two* Anthropocenes. One is the Geological Anthropocene. This is the scholarly conversation about planetary history, centering on so-called "golden spikes" in the geological record. The other, the Popular Anthropocene, is a conversation over the historical causes of – and the proposed institutional, market, and technical solutions to – our deepening climate crisis. The line between the two Anthropocenes is fuzzy and porous. This is not accidental. Rather, it concerns how scholarly and media gatekeepers

⁵⁷ J.W. Moore, *Remaking Work, Remaking Space*, "Antipode" 2002, nr 2(34), p. 176–204.

⁵⁸ D.R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981; J.W. Moore, *Waste in the Limits to Capital: How Capitalism Lays Waste to the Web of Life, and Why It Can't Stop*, "Emancipations" 2022, nr 1(2), p. 1–45.

⁵⁹ For early capitalism, see E.D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1981; P. Linebaugh, M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Beacon, Boston 2000.

⁶⁰ R.P. Brenner, *The Low Countries in the Transition to Capitalism*, "Journal of Agrarian Change" 2001, nr 2(1), p. 169–241, quotation: 174.

⁶¹ J.W. Moore, *Anthropocenes & the Capitalocene Alternative*, "Azimuth" 2017, nr 5, p. 71–80; J.W. Moore, *The Capitalocene, Part II*, op. cit.

license “natural scientists” to speak freely about matters of policy and world history. The powers-that-be can sleep easily at night knowing that leading climate scientists will rarely upset the ideological apple cart and identify the capitalist class and *capitalogenic* climate crisis as the core of the problem.

None of this is new. The 1968 birth of the Environmentalism of the Rich was in part a creation of a mass media apparatus desperate to manufacture consent at a moment of profound legitimation crisis.⁶² One could scarcely pick up a newspaper or magazine in the year before the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970) without reading about “the” environmental crisis. When Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, he was greeted with fawning media coverage – in stark contrast to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* six years earlier.⁶³ Carson had attacked herbicide and pesticide manufacturers; Ehrlich demonized poor Indians allegedly unable or unwilling to limit their fertility. Carson’s science led her audience to identify *corporations* as a political problem; Ehrlich’s populationism identified the Third World as the problem.

Just as *The Population Bomb* appeared, Garrett Hardin published “The Tragedy of the Commons.”⁶⁴ It’s the most influential Environmentalist article ever published. Hardin, a biologist, was also a well-known eugenicist. His worldview resonated deeply with Malthus’s thinking two centuries earlier. The danger, he wrote in 1969, was that “poor women” might “outbreed the rich.” If “poverty is even in part genetically caused (*as it surely must be*) ... class discrimination in the availability of ... birth control must have a dysgenic effect.”⁶⁵ Published in *Science*, the world’s leading scientific journal along with *Nature*, “The Tragedy of the Commons” purported to explain the environmental crisis by recourse to an avaricious and anti-social human nature. In 1968 – Wallerstein called it a “world revolution”⁶⁶ – the subtext was clear: The selfish and irrational savages of the Third World must be subdued, their appetite checked by imperial *coercion*: a word that appears *thirteen* times in a five-page article! It’s worth underlining an undisputed fact: Hardin knew nothing about actually existing commons. Such arrangements are amongst human history’s elemental socio-ecological relations – and even at the time, they were well known in the story of England’s early modern enclosure movements. His historical ignorance did not, however, prevent the editors of *Science* from publishing the article, or countless other scholars from reproducing its statements as ontological fact. Here is the violence of Good Science as ideology: it enables the most ideologically charged premises of human nature to present themselves as “natural laws.”

So it is with leading earth-system scientists today. Many are happy to dispense their wisdom on the geohistorical drivers of the climate crisis: population, technology, urbanization, and so on. When figures like Johan Rockström tell us that “bankers and executives” are necessary to solve the climate crisis, virtually everyone in the mass media, and nearly all academics, are happy to give them a pass.⁶⁷ (No matter that Rockström

⁶² T.R. Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2012.

⁶³ R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1962.

⁶⁴ G. Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, “Science” 1968, nr 162, p. 1243–1248.

⁶⁵ Quoted in T.R. Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, op. cit., p. 154, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ I. Wallerstein, *The Agonies of Liberalism*, “New Left Review” 1994, nr 1/204, p. 3–17.

⁶⁷ J. Watts, *Johan Rockström: ‘We need bankers as well as activists... we have 10 years to cut emissions by half’*, “The Guardian,” 29.05.2021.

is the Chief Scientist for Conservation International, a billionaire-funded NGO deeply complicit in corporate greenwashing and the financialization of nature.⁶⁸) This reminds us of the flexible boundary between the Geological and Popular Anthropocenes – and that this flexibility is neither innocent nor accidental. Ruling strata favor the Popular because it does not question the relations of power, re/production, and thought that created the climate crisis. The Anthropocene reduces these relations to technological, technocratic, and market-oriented fixes. Here, the Popular Anthropocene is revealed as an “anti-politics machine.”⁶⁹ Like most Environmentalism, it converts political questions of inequality and injustice into technical and scientific problems to be “solved” and “managed.”⁷⁰

To appreciate the Popular Anthropocene’s flight from world history, let us consider one of its iconic representations: Felix Müller’s widely circulated figure that accompanies the planetary boundaries argument of Rockström and his colleagues (Figure 1).⁷¹ It makes a strong point. The boundaries of major earth-system processes are now being crossed. Extremely serious, non-linear shifts beckon. What’s causing this epochal transgression of planetary boundaries? For Rockström and virtually all earth-system scientists, there’s a simple answer: Humanity. The “human enterprise” – what a deliciously neoliberal phrase! – is drawing the curtain on the Holocene.⁷² If that phrase, *human enterprise*, sounds familiar, it’s for good reason. It comes from the authors of the twentieth century’s definitive Malthusian screed, *The Population Bomb*.⁷³ And just when does this human enterprise start to cause serious trouble for the biosphere? The “logical” and “reasonable” beginning is 1800⁷⁴ – even though the major uptick in atmospheric carbonization doesn’t appear until the later nineteenth century, during the “second” industrial revolution, and the origins of modern fossil fuel extraction go back to the early *sixteenth* century!

Two aspects of Müller’s image stand out. One is the assumption that planetary crisis is the creation of the *Anthropos*: the human enterprise. In this scheme of things, the climate and biodiversity crises have *anthropogenic* causes. The planetary boundaries image does not invoke change over time, but it is associated with another assumption that does. This is the claim that the origins of planetary crisis are found in the century after 1800, commonly narrated as “the” Industrial Revolution. The formula is simple, comfortable, and therefore tempting: coal plus steam power equals global warming.

These two assumptions – turning on anthropogenic change and the 1800 boundary line – have been pivotal to a half-century of Green Thought.⁷⁵ They contribute mightily to a hegemonic imaginary of planetary crisis as the doing of all members of the human

⁶⁸ T. Levitt, *Conservation International ‘agreed to greenwash arms company’*, “The Ecologist”, 11.05.2011, <https://theecologist.org/2011/may/11/conservation-international-agreed-greenwash-arms-company> [access: 2023/01/26]; J. Hari, *The Wrong Kind of Green*, “The Nation”, 22.03.2010.

⁶⁹ J. Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990.

⁷⁰ J.W. Moore, *Opiates of the Environmentalists?*, op. cit.

⁷¹ J. Rockström et al., *Planetary Boundaries*, “Ecology and Society” 2009, nr 2 (14).

⁷² W. Steffen et al., *The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspective*, op. cit.

⁷³ P.R. Ehrlich [and A.H. Ehrlich, uncredited], *The Population Bomb*, Ballantine, New York 1968); P.R. Ehrlich, A.H. Ehrlich, *The Environmental Dimensions of National Security*, in: *Global Problems and Common Security*, ed. J. Rotblat, V.I. Goldanskii, Springer, Berlin 1989, p. 180–190.

⁷⁴ W. Steffen et al., *The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspective*, op. cit., p. 842.

⁷⁵ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

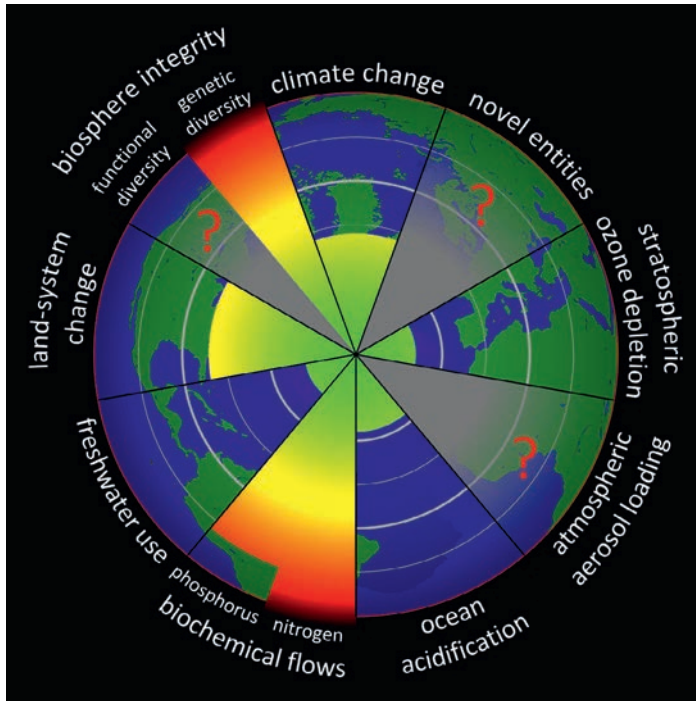


Figure 1

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3f/Planetary_Boundaries_2015.svg.

species. And they sustain a historical imagination that presents modernity's long history of global inequality and violence as secondary to securing "our common future."⁷⁶

These assumptions and their ideological basis are frequently explained away. Here's a recent headline in *The Conversation*: "The term 'Anthropocene' isn't perfect – but it shows us the scale of the environmental crisis we've caused."⁷⁷ Replete with references to colonialism and historical transitions, such formulas endorse the imperial-bourgeois vision of planetary crisis. Gone from such accounts is the history of capitalism and its class dynamics. *Colonialism* is – like globalization two decades ago – cleansed of its class character. So too with extractivism, climate apartheid, speciesism, and other environmental bads: they are all generally deployed as academic detergents to wipe our thinking clean from the muck of class analysis.⁷⁸

This Environmentalist language often sounds radical. In practice, it amounts to little more than professional-managerial-class virtue signaling.⁷⁹ Such class-denialist conceptions of historical process are but a stone's throw away from the

⁷⁶ G.H. Brundtland, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987.

⁷⁷ P. Sutoris, *The term 'Anthropocene' isn't perfect – but it shows us the scale of the environmental crisis we've caused*, "The Conversation," 20.10.2021.

⁷⁸ J.W. Moore, *Power, Profit and Prometheanism*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene & the Flight from World History*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ C.M. Liu, *The Virtue Hoarders*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2021.

Environmentalism of the Rich and its Malthusian vista, transforming the class dynamics of inequality into anodyne “distributional” questions of the rich and powerful.⁸⁰ (In what follows, I will abbreviate *this* Environmentalism with an emphatically uppercase “E.” The counter-tendency is expressed by working class and anti-imperialist environmentalism, often shorthanded as environmental justice.) Such arguments typically redefine the Capitalocene thesis in economic terms – ignoring how Malm and I, our differences notwithstanding, offer *critiques* of economic reductionism! Simply put, the climate crisis is not merely about distributional consequences; it is about class power in the biosphere.

It is extremely dubious to claim that the Popular Anthropocene raises awareness. (So does advertising the latest electric car!) The Environmentalism of the Rich has been telling us that we are living in End Times since 1968.⁸¹ If there was a high tide of environmental awareness before the present, it was in the early 1970s.⁸² The outcome was hardly an ecological revolution. Instead, everywhere in the imperialist countries, Environmentalism readily made its peace with neoliberalism; testimony to the Environmental Imaginary’s Janus-faced character.⁸³ The crucial question is the *character of the awareness* and its willingness to break with capitalism’s business as usual. Figures as diverse as Audre Lorde and Albert Einstein underline the essential idea: the ideas and tools of the ruling class will not solve the problems they have created.

The Environmentalism of the Rich and its Popular Anthropocene shapes popular consciousness in ways that are consonant with techno-scientific authoritarianism.⁸⁴ Eco-catastrophism is altogether compatible with Green authoritarianism – a point argued since Environmentalism’s origins in 1968, and already a reality across the Global South.⁸⁵ *This* Environmentalism imagines the biosphere – and even regional environments – as somehow outside relations of power, re/production, and inequality. It excises questions of financialization, of homelessness, of precariousness, of hunger, of poverty, of climate apartheid, climate patriarchy and the climate class divide. In short, it presents a political imaginary of planetary crisis that designates questions of democracy as unnecessary.

Consider something like the Sixth Extinction.⁸⁶ This is usually discussed as the “biodiversity crisis.” What is rarely pointed out in these discussions is that the Sixth Extinction isn’t anything like the five previous extinctions on Planet Earth. It’s not the work of an asteroid. It’s not the work of bad technology or inefficient markets or the “imperial mode of living.”⁸⁷ It’s the work of capital. It is a *capitalogenic* process – co-produced through modernity’s relations of capital, power, and nature. It is not

⁸⁰ J.S. Dryzek, J. Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

⁸¹ J.W. Moore, *Beyond Climate Justice*, in: *The Way Out of the Climate Crisis*, Walther König Press, Vienna 2022.

⁸² T.R. Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, op. cit.

⁸³ M. Dowie, *Losing Ground*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1996.

⁸⁴ J.W. Moore, *Opiates of the Environmentalists?*, op. cit.

⁸⁵ S. Lilley, D. McNally, E. Yuen, J. Davis, *Catastrophism*, PM Press, Oakland 2012; G. Hardin, *Tragedy of the Commons*, op. cit.; D. Brockington, *Fortress Conservation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2002.

⁸⁶ A. Dawson, *Extinction*, OR Books, New York 2016.

⁸⁷ U. Brand, M. Wissen, *The imperial mode of living*, Verso, London 2021.

anthropogenic – even if figures like Ehrlich continue to insist that it’s all driven by human overpopulation.⁸⁸

Overpopulation. That must be a bitter pill to swallow for descendants of the fifty million Native Americans who died in the aftermath of 1492 – a slaving-induced movement of genocide that contributed to capitalism’s first great climate crisis in the “long, cold seventeenth century.”⁸⁹ To underline the point: it was not a disembodied European colonialism that propelled these killing fields; it was an emergent capitalist order hungry for Cheap Labor. The ideology of *Cheapness* was manifest from the start, expressed in the Prometheanism of the Civilizing Project and its redefinition of indigenous, Celtic, African, female, Slavic, and other populations as “savage.”⁹⁰

The Popular Anthropocene’s cosmology is built on a simple opposition: Man versus Nature. The conflict, we are told, can be navigated by Enlightened Civilizers endowed with the scientific expertise and institutional-coercive power to enforce something euphemistically called “earth-system governance.”⁹¹ This binary frame is the common sense of planetary crisis today: *humans* are now threatening to cause planetary breakdown. Such claims might sound innocent enough; they are anything but. The mainstream discussion of *anthropogenic* climate change short-circuits the conversation we need if we want to envision a politics of planetary sustainability that is also a politics of planetary justice.

Let’s walk through the three big questions of today’s planetary crisis. Who and what caused this? When and where did this begin? And how did we get here? This might sound banal, but how we answer these questions decides our politics. The Environmentalism of the Rich, as it coalesced after 1968, delivered a straightforward message: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” The cartoonist Walt Kelly’s iconic 1970 Earth Day poster crystallized that sensibility (see Figure 2). That same year, Richard Nixon sounded a strongly environmentalist theme in his second State of the Union Address: “Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions. It has become a common cause of all the people of this country.”⁹²

When I say that the Anthropocene is an anti-politics machine, that’s hardly new – as Nixon’s 1970 speech suggests. Before the Anthropocene, there was Spaceship Earth: old wine, new bottle.⁹³ Both speak to a quintessentially modern cosmology of Man vs. Nature, a conflict that can be “realistically” managed with the appropriate technology and rational governance. That cosmology has nourished Environmentalism’s

⁸⁸ G. Ceballos et al., *Accelerated modern human-induced species losses*, “Science Advances” 2015, nr 1(5), e1400253.

⁸⁹ *Beyond Germs*, ed. C.M. Cameron, P. Kelton, A.C. Swedlund, University of Arizona Press, Tucson 2015; E.L.R. Ladurie, V. Daux, *The climate in Burgundy and elsewhere, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century*, “Interdisciplinary Science Reviews” 2008, nr 1(33), p. 10–24; S.L. Lewis, M.A Maslin, *Defining the Anthropocene*, “Nature” 2015, nr 519, p. 171–180.

⁹⁰ C. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, Zed, London 1983, p. 186–187.

⁹¹ J.S. Dryzek, J. Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, op. cit.

⁹² R. Nixon, *Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union*, 22.01.1970, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-2> [access: 2023/01/26].

⁹³ R.B. Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1969.



Figure 2

Source: <http://www.planetwaves.net/pogo.web.jpg>.

philosophical and historical premises: “we’re all in this together,” and “we created the environmental crisis together.”

Like any hegemonic mythology, that cosmology blends truth and illusion. The insistence that we are all connected through webs of life – “On Spaceship Earth ... everybody is a member of the crew” – has a kernel of truth.⁹⁴ But the reality is very different, and no one seriously disputes it. Spaceship Earth has a command structure. Most of us are packed into steerage, and following orders.⁹⁵ If a metaphorical Spaceship Earth evokes a fanciful sci-fi space communism, the actual Earth in recent history resembles a Slaveship, not the starship Human Enterprise.⁹⁶

No doubt Environmentalism’s popular appeal owes much to the specifically capitalist forms of alienation that humans experience – from their work, and from their sense of connection to the rest of life. Environmentalism serves up a lot of comforting language about oneness, reconnection, and healing. But soothing language without revolutionary strategy in an era of climate crisis is not a good thing. *We should not be comfortable* – but neither should we be terrified. Needed is disconcerting language and unconventional thinking that strikes at the heart of capitalism’s fetichisms: Humanity, Civilization, and Nature above all. The Popular Anthropocene’s claim that the

⁹⁴ M. McLuhan, *At the moment of Sputnik the planet became a global theater in which there are no spectators but only actors*, “Journal of Communication” 1974, nr 1(24), p. 48–58.

⁹⁵ To paraphrase my co-author Raj Patel in *A History of the World...*, op. cit.

⁹⁶ J.W. Moore, *Slaveship Earth & the World-Historical Imagination in the Age of Climate Crisis*, “PEWS News,” Summer 2018, p. 1–4.

mythical entity, Humanity, is now “overwhelming the great forces of nature” is hardly a value-neutral statement.⁹⁷ Spreading blame for the trajectory of Slaveship Earth is tantamount to blaming slaves and immigrant workers for imperialism.

Saying Humanity has caused planetary crisis is a bit like saying Humanity is responsible for the New World genocide after 1492 – or that Humanity is responsible for the modern slave trade, world wars, or neoliberalism’s Washington Consensus of finance-driven dispossession. Anyone uttering the phrase “anthropogenic genocide” would be laughed out of the room! Because of course specific *relations* – of empire, capital, and class – created these disasters. Calling the planetary crisis anthropogenic is a non-explanation.

This is worse than a failure of interpretation. Humanity, Civilization, and Nature are not merely words floating in the ether. They are *ruling abstractions*, reinvented since 1492. The geocultural boundary between Humanity and Nature was central to the New World genocides, to the African slave trade, to modern patriarchy, which defined the rise of capitalism and its Civilizing Project. Indigenous Peoples, Africans, and women – all were cast out of Civilization and into a very different realm, Nature.⁹⁸ Their lives were rendered expendable, and their labor became cheap, on the reasoned grounds that they were not – or not fully, or not yet – Human.

The question of who is – and who is not – Human is therefore at the core of the climate crisis. It’s fundamental to how modern power is structured and legitimated. This is not merely a question of language – although language *is* important. It’s a question of civilizational praxis in which dominant “material” forces are dialectically bound to “ruling intellectual forces.”⁹⁹ At the core of that praxis is a knowledge factory that frames reality as a series of binary and hierarchical oppositions: Humanity/Nature, Man/Woman, White/Not-White, Europe/America, and so forth.¹⁰⁰

These ruling intellectual forces are real abstractions that not only *reflect* material relations, but are the necessary symbolic moment *of* these material relations. When I say that the language of Humanity/Nature has been saturated with profound violence, I don’t just mean symbolic violence. I mean the blood and violence of capitalist development, of colonialism, of domination and exploitation. For good reason, then, the policing of the Humanity/Nature line – through violence, markets, and culture – has been a recurrent feature of capitalist development, from Columbus to the present. And this policing – and sometimes the line itself – has been fiercely contested all along. When movements for justice on questions of sexuality, gender, and race self-identify as *civil* or *human* rights struggles, they register this world-historical boundary between Civilization and Nature. In one way or another, class struggles and boundary struggles are always tightly linked.¹⁰¹

This explains why the language of the Popular Anthropocene is so dangerous. Its premise is a strict divide between Humanity and Nature, a binary code at the heart

⁹⁷ W. Steffen, P.J. Crutzen, J.R. McNeill, *The Anthropocene*, “AMBIO” 2007, nr 8(36), p. 614–621.

⁹⁸ G. Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, Polity, Cambridge 2017.

⁹⁹ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p. 64.

¹⁰⁰ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1993.

¹⁰¹ R. Patel, J.W. Moore, *A History of the World...*, op. cit.; N. Fraser, *Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode*, “New Left Review” 2014, nr II/86, p. 55–72.

of the modern exercise of power, production, and profit. The Anthropocene – and the Environmentalism of the Rich – embodies the very system of thought that has created the planetary crisis. It is a unique form of magical thinking to believe that the system of thought, power, and production that created the crisis will solve it.

By Way of Conclusion: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Communist Horizon

The Popular Anthropocene has unintentionally returned the world-historical questions of the Transition Debate – the origins of planetary crisis, but also the transition from capitalism to a civilization more or less democratic, just, and sustainable – to the center of political and scholarly conversations. Let us recall the simple, unbreakable connection with which we began: one’s political imagination of what is possible depends on one’s historical assessment of what has happened. The Popular Anthropocene raises questions that it cannot answer. It’s not that historians can’t use the Anthropocene to narrate their histories; it’s that the Anthropocene is an ideological construct that emerges out of the most violent and exploitative dimensions of those histories.

The virtue of an older Marxist tradition was to foreground the specificity of capitalism’s contradictions in modern class relations and the dynamics of capital accumulation. Environmental history was essentially a footnote. Worse still, the Marxist Transition Debate rarely considers climate change in the rise of capitalism.¹⁰² Green Thought, in contrast, emphasized the significance of environmental history alongside social and economic history, but largely ignored the contradictions of capital and class. At the core of the world-ecology conversation is the argument that these two traditions – and not only these – have assembled the elements of a new synthesis.¹⁰³

To pursue such a synthesis, one has to let go of certain idealized concepts of how capital accumulation works, what class struggle looks like, and even what “environmental change” means. You have to give up your sacred objects, without abandoning enduring insights.¹⁰⁴

A revolutionary politics of climate justice – one that puts its faith in the world’s working classes, human and extra-human, paid and unpaid – must reimagine our questions of power, accumulation, and re/production in and through webs of life. Such a transformation necessarily involves letting go of the colonizers’ ontology of the world, the divide between Civilization and Savagery, and the Popular Anthropocene’s Man versus Nature model.

The alternative is not an undifferentiated monism; one that robs social life of its historical and geographical specificity. My alternative, *world-ecology*, begins with the mosaic of human history and experience as patterned – but also evolving and punctuated – configurations of life, land, and labor. Any understanding of human social relations that does not begin with connective, and frequently asymmetrical, relations with and within webs of life is fragmentary. This sounds like high theory. It’s anything but. Simply reflect on the most elemental dimensions of social life and social history:

¹⁰² J.W. Moore, *Empire, Class & The Origins Of Planetary Crisis*, op. cit.

¹⁰³ J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ J.W. Moore, *How to Read Capitalism in the Web of Life*, op. cit.

the foods we farm and cook; the shelter and built environments we make; the tools and machines we fashion, and the products that come from them; the ways we couple and care for each other. At every point, we are dealing with relations between human and extra-human natures; every “human” relation is already a socio-ecological relationship. It’s physical. It’s cultural. It’s productive and reproductive. The Cartesian Revolution dichotomized these – in thought and practice. The Marxist Revolution in thought unifies them within a “rich totality of many determinations”: an “organic whole” of life and power.¹⁰⁵

Needed is a historical conception of work that goes beyond the wage worker and beyond the Man vs. Nature binary. The majority of work that sustains capitalism is unpaid. That unpaid work is delivered by “women, nature, and colonies” – and justified by ruling binaries.¹⁰⁶ These are functionally necessary to capitalism’s law of value. Reinforcing the point, Mies’s comrade Claudia von Werlhof extended the argument: Nature is everything for which the bourgeoisie does not want to pay.¹⁰⁷ Those divides of paid and unpaid work, Civilization and Nature, are directly implicated in the capitalogenic trinity: the climate class divide, climate apartheid, and climate patriarchy.¹⁰⁸

I don’t believe Marx came down from the Mountain with *Das Kapital* etched onto stone tablets. I do think he gets a lot right, especially when he writes about work, metabolism, and class. Marx is always reminding us that human work is part of nature, never flattened, always distinctive. In the *Grundrisse*, he calls labor a “specifically harnessed natural force”: a point that speaks directly to how human sociality is co-produced in and through the web of life.¹⁰⁹ In *Capital*, Marx offers a powerful account. In a famous passage, opening the chapter on the labor process, Marx argues for a work-centered triple transformation.¹¹⁰ Through work, humans remake themselves (“internal nature”). They transform the relations between human beings (“social” relations). And they transform extra-human webs of life (“environmental” relations). These form a dialectical unity. If we take Marx seriously, this unravels our conventional understanding of power and re/production, in which “nature” is typically relegated to context or passive matter. Instead, Marx offers a conception of metabolism that is grounded in the *labor process*, which is to say, Marx opens the dialectical imagination to thinking about metabolism as a class struggle.¹¹¹

Such a dialectical strategy asks us to think about work and the geographies of life in co-productive and world-historical ways. It also asks us to think about how our modes of argument challenge – and sometimes conform to – capitalism as a mode of thought. If Marx’s contribution was to grasp dialectics not as abstract philosophy but

¹⁰⁵ K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, Vintage, New York 1973, p. 99.

¹⁰⁶ M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ C. von Werlhof, *On the concept of nature and society in capitalism*, in: M. Mies, V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, C. von Werlhof, *Women: the last colony*, Zed, London 1988.

¹⁰⁸ J.W. Moore, *El hombre, la naturaleza y el ambientalismo de los ricos*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *Das Planetare Proletariat im Planetaren Inferno*, op. cit.; J.W. Moore, *The Capitalocene & Planetary Justice*, “Maize” 2019, nr 6, p. 49–54.

¹⁰⁹ K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit. p. 612.

¹¹⁰ K. Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p. 283.

¹¹¹ J.W. Moore, *Transcending the Metabolic Rift*, “Journal of Peasant Studies” 2011, nr 1(38), p. 1–46; J.W. Moore, *Metabolic Rift or Metabolic Shift?*, “Theory & Society” 2017, nr 4(46), p. 285–318.

as an active materialism that joins theory and practice, the intellectual and ideological questions are tightly joined.

Capitalism has thrived because it puts humans and the rest of nature to work on the Cheap. Today, that Cheap Nature logic faces increasingly serious contradictions. Consider, for instance, how for nearly four decades, climate change has been suppressing the yield of the world's major cereal crops (rice, wheat, maize, soy).¹¹² Consider also that the "classic" challengers to capitalist rule in production – workers and peasants – have not gone away, as labor unrest mounts in China and global food justice movements like Via Campesina confront the corporate food regime. Whether or not climate justice movements will succeed, and become a "climate insurgency," will turn on their capacity to elaborate a new ontological politics that defies and disrupts the capitalist mode of thought and its ideological frames. Such insurgencies will need to name the system. They will need to insist that the agents of capitalogenic climate crisis have names and addresses – and so do their factories, feedlots, and financial assets. Such a revolutionary vista will seek to join the connections and contradictions of life, work, and land in ways that build upon, and also move beyond, twentieth-century revolutionary projects.¹¹³ Only then can we hope to euthanize the Capitalocene and its post-capitalist specter of Green Authoritarianism, and reorient proletariat, femitariat, and biotariat towards the communist horizon.¹¹⁴

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¹¹² J.W. Moore, *Global Capitalism in the Great Implosion*, in: W.I. Robinson, *Can Global Capitalism Endure?*, Clarity Press, Atlanta 2022, p. ix–xxiv; J.W. Moore, *Del gran abaratamiento a la gran implosión*, op. cit.

¹¹³ J. Brecher, *Against Doom*, PM Press, Oakland 2017; J.W. Moore, *Cheap Food & Bad Climate*, "Critical Historical Studies" 2015, nr 1(2), p. 1–42.

¹¹⁴ J. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, Verso, London 2012; Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker*, Verso, London 2021; J.W. Moore, *Opiates of the Environmentalists?*, op. cit.

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Abstract

We live in times of *anthropogenic* climate crisis. Or do we? This essay shows how "humanity" is a thoroughly modern fetish forged in the bloodbath of militarized accumulation and conquest after 1492. To say that the *Anthropos* drives the climate crisis implicates a historical actor that does not exist. But the reality is different. *Humanity* does nothing. *Specific groups* of humans make history – empires, classes, religious institutions, armies, and financiers. This essay reveals the Anthropocene as more than lousy history – although the flight from world history is crucial.

It argues that today's Anthropocene is one pillar of the Environmentalism of the Rich. It is rooted historically in the Civilizing Project, and, more recently, in post-1970 "Spaceship Earth" environmentalism. Both Environmentalism and its recent Anthropocene craze have sought to do one thing above all: deflect blame from capitalism as the prime mover of the climate crisis. From the beginning, Environmentalism avoided "naming the system." Only by identifying the climate crisis as *capitalogenic* – "made by humans" – can we begin to forge an effective socialist politics of climate justice.

Nasz kapitałogeniczny świat. Kryzysy klimatyczne, polityka klasowa i projekt ucywilizowania

Streszczenie

Żyjemy w czasach antropogenicznego kryzysu klimatycznego. Ale czy na pewno? Szkic pokazuje, jak w krwawej łaźni zmilitaryzowanej akumulacji i podboju po 1492 r. ukształtował się na wskroś nowoczesny fetysz „ludzkości”. Twierdzenie, że to Antropos napędza kryzys klimatyczny, implikuje aktora historycznego, który nie istnieje. Rzeczywistość jest odmienna: ludzkość nie robi niczego. Historię tworzą określone grupy ludzi – imperia, klasy, instytucje religijne, armie, finansjści. Artykuł określa antropocen jako coś więcej niż kiepską historię – choć ucieczka od historii światowej ma tu kluczowe znaczenie. Dowodzi, że dzisiejszy antropocen jest jednym z filarów ekologizmu bogatych. Jego korzenie historyczne tkwią w projekcie ucywilizowania oraz w niedawnym, powstałym po 1970 r. ekologizmie „statku kosmicznego Ziemia”. Zarówno Ekologizm, jak i współczesna moda na antropocen dążą przede wszystkim do jednego: zrzucenia winy z kapitalizmu jako głównego sprawcy kryzysu ekologicznego. Od samego początku Ekologizm unikał „nazywania systemu po imieniu”. Tylko określenie kryzysu klimatycznego jako „kapitałogenicznego” – „spowodowanego przez kapitał” – pozwoli nam stworzyć skuteczną socjalistyczną politykę sprawiedliwości klimatycznej.

Keywords: World-Ecology, Capitalism, Imperialism, Capitalocene, Anthropocene

Słowa kluczowe: ekologia-świat, kapitalizm, imperializm, kapitałocen, antropocen

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