

Cheap Nature is a Battleground

For an Ecosocialism in the Web of Life

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The world is given and the world is made. It is given through what appear unalterable constraints. Volcanoes erupt. The Earth wobbles on its axis. Solar radiation cycles from maxima to minima. Oceans and mountain ranges influence regional climates. Geophysics offers boundary conditions to human activity.

Yet the world is also made. Long before capitalism, civilizations terraformed the planet, organizing great agricultural systems, canals, draining marshlands, extracting minerals. Only after 1492, however, did a civilization alter the conditions of planetary life in service to specific and totalizing project: the remaking of life into profit-making opportunities for capitalists and power-grabs for empires. This was capitalism. Capitalism's fingerprints can even be found in contemporary geophysics: such is the extent of groundwater pumping that the Earth's axis has drifted by [4 cm per year from 1993-2010](#), even the Earth's wobble on its axis is subject to capital.

Capitalism was never simply an economic or social system. It was always a way to organize the relations between *most humans* and the rest of life, always in the interests of producing a "good business environment." In this light, capitalism was – and remains – a project of Cheap Nature.

Its agents were soldiers and financiers, priests and planters, merchants and miners. Unifying them all was the logic of capital, as Marx underlines: the compulsion to advance profitability and productivity. The banners under which their project advanced has changed, from Enlightenment, to Rationality, to Civilization, to Good Science, to National Greatness, to Sound Economics. The great myths of the Civilizing Project held that Progress could only be delivered to peasants and workers so long as they surrendered to the Enlightened Ones – the Christianizers, the Civilizers, the Development experts. They told the direct producers of subsistence, and therefore of all social life, that they were not, or not yet, Civilized.²

They were not, or not yet, really human; at best, they were proto-human: they were *savage, warlike, irrational* – part of Nature not yet Civilization. Every great modern empire delivered this message, each time in slightly different, but fundamentally similar, terms. From Columbus to the American President Truman in 1949, each empire promised deliverance to the "savages." But there

¹ Preface to the Japanese translation of *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2025). This essay, 5 December, 2025. Correspondence: jasonwsmoore@gmail.com.

² For one elaboration of this argument from *Seven Cheap Things*, see Jason W. Moore, "[Our Capitalogenic World: Climate Crises, Class Politics & the Civilizing Project](#)," *Studia Poetica* 11, 97-122.

was a cost. Salvation, or later Civilization and Development, could only be achieved through work. It was always the dirtiest, deadliest and most dangerous work. There is no better illustration than our account of 1513's *Requerimiento*. The *conquistadores* announced to their indigenous subjects that they could choose a life of hard work, or they could choose extinction. This was, of course, a shell game. Although theology required a choice between salvation-through-labour and extinction, capitalism required that there be no such choice.

The consequences of this extermination is written in the planet's surface too. You can index the advance of civilization in the New World through traces in the geological record. The Orbis Spike of 1610 is a measurable drop in atmospheric carbon caused by the genocide of indigenous peoples and the subsequent reforestation of their abandoned lands. This is the signature not of an Anthropocene era, but of the Capitalocene.³ It is important to use the right term. Only then is it possible to understand that this planetary transformation was unlike any other, directly related to the expansion of capitalist frontiers. Empire deployed its Promethean drive to render 'Nature' cheap. By classifying certain peoples as closer to "Nature" than "Civilization," colonial powers justified their exploitation. This thinking created the foundations for modern racism and sexism, all in service of increasing profits.⁴

The tools we offer in this book are ones that are historical, for the future. To understand Prometheanism, to be sensitive to the origins of the 'Nature'/'Society' binary, to see the cascade of crises and fixes that are produced through capitalist frontiers is to be equipped to parse this present moment. Knowing the origins of capitalism in the climate crisis, of the Covid-19 pandemic and the epidemics to come, of the cycles of conflict that turn war into money into war, offers a compass through the decay of liberalism. More important, as we offer in our discussion of cheap lives, to understand capitalism's drives and displacements is to understand the dangers of the nationalist post-democratic turn in contemporary politics, and to recognize its key figures.

To understand Columbus as a world-historical figure is to be able to identify his similarities with Elon Musk, a man similarly concerned with Cheap Nature, Care, Food, Work, Energy, Money and Lives. The old dynamics of frontiers, through which capital cycles and in which new resources are plundered to fix worker rebellions, are not just tied to a time of gold for money, trees for energy, and enslaved people for work and reproduction. Those dynamics are just relevant in an era of crypto, the colonization of Mars, and the plunder

³ Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(3), 594-630"; idem, "On Capitalogenic Climate Crisis: Unthinking Man, Nature and the Anthropocene, and Why It Matters for Planetary Justice," *Real-World Economics Review* 105, 123-134.

⁴ On Cheapness, Prometheanism, and the class-imperial dialectics of superexploitation, see Jason W. Moore, "[Power, Profit & Prometheanism, Part I: Method, Ideology and the Violence of the Civilizing Project](#)," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 28(2), 415-426; and idem, "[Power, Profit & Prometheanism, Part II: Superexploitation in the Web of Life](#)," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 29(2), 558-582.

of lithium for batteries, the coups against states defending Indigenous life, undocumented migration for care work, and vast proletarian protests in China.

Our book is not a guide for what to do, but it is certainly a guide for what to see through. The pathetic tinkering of green capitalism and Malthusian environmentalists at the edges of today's crises are ones with which we take particular issue. There is no number of Teslas that will solve the climate crisis, nor is there any fantasy of rewilding or bioreactor-based socialism that can swerve around capitalism's refashioning of the web of life. So we offer these reflections in an era of polycrisis as a warning against the sirens of green capital, and as an indication of the necessity - and the joys - of a feminist, and anti-imperialist, ecosocialism. For it is only through such a program that we can imagine the Capitalocene that we have been given, being remade.