

Book Review

The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth,

by John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. \$17.95 U.S.; paper. ISBN: 978-1-58367-218-1. Pages: 544.

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In *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (2000), John Bellamy Foster offered a dynamic and in-depth interrogation of the ecological strands of Karl Marx's thought, exploring a number of Marx's critiques of capitalist agriculture and linking his neglected ideas to the modern-day ecological movement. In *Ecology Against Capitalism* (2002), Foster problematized the relationship between contemporary American environmentalism and the needs and preferences of the labour movement, and offered critical insights into the environment's relationship with the economic world, citing critical contemporary examples of the environmental costs associated with the capitalist industrial footprint. His innovative and up-to-date approach placed politicized ecological questions into direct focus, to ask, how might we incorporate the earth into the balance sheet?

Building upon past theoretical approaches and contributions, in *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (2010), Foster, Clark and York offer a radical and comprehensive critique of the planetary environmental crisis as exacerbated by industrial capitalism. Situated within the subfield of environmental sociology, the authors posit arguments which depart from a distinctly Marxist foundation. Their central target is industrial capitalism and its derivative effects, namely, the unsustainable social habits of consumer forces associated with capitalist production, and the unprecedented levels of ecological destruction associated with accumulative capitalism. Foster, Clark and York highlight the alienating tendencies of capitalism, as well as the irreversible changes wrought upon our ecosystem and biosphere from capitalist activities.

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By re-inserting ecological thought into analyses of the human economy, this highly-needed and readable work comprised of scientific arguments and synthetic approaches underscores planetary assaults resulting from the human-industrial footprint and bemoans an apparent lack of concern within social science disciplines towards environmental questions at a time when the planet has approached a red alert status.

Situated within a critical anti-capitalist tradition, the authors point to an abandonment of a critique of capital in existing ecologically-minded social science approaches. They consider the question of “green capitalism,” or capitalism’s potential or ostensible ability to modernize and adapt along ecologically sustainable lines, in a critical light. Additionally, they question the deceptive phenomenon of “corporate green-washing.”

The work emphasizes accelerated transformations in the global environment, where ecosystem degradation and human-induced climate change is linked intimately to the expansion of industrial capitalism. The authors argue that the recovery of the environment may not be ameliorated solely through faith in capitalism’s ability to adapt or modernize according to green demands. While this remains a problematic viewpoint, given the fact of capitalism’s current position as the dominant economic system governing human economic interrelations across much of the globe, the Marxist critique offered by *The Ecological Rift* nevertheless remains indispensable. One of the book’s central strengths is its questioning of the premise of unlimited economic growth from an ecology-centered perspective, in which capital is depicted as an “unstoppable” as well as “crushing” force upon nature.

The Ecological Rift successfully bridges a diversity of academic fields including economics, ecology, and environmental/Marxist sociology, taking its readership into the realm of a yet-to-be established field, that of political ecology. Its authors highlight irreversible ecological transformations such as ocean warming and the degradation of coral reef systems, and place a good deal of emphasis upon scientific proofs for the existence of climate change. Highlights of the work include one imaginative chapter entitled “Capitalism in Wonderland” which illustrates how environmental deterioration has stemmed from human mediations with the natural world and has been propelled by the demands of the capitalist marketplace. Here, our capitalist wonderland is framed by Foster, Clark and York as a thoroughly artificial and alienating human landscape and construct. *The Ecological Rift* has global and international implications, and yet it would likely appeal only to an environmentalist-inclined readership. The work requires attention from ecological and

economic schools alike, as its efforts to bridge fields represents a widening of boundaries in the name of ecological urgency.

Significantly, the authors engage with the concept of metabolic rift, defined loosely as the way in which the capitalist system has radically separated natural production from sites consumption, particularly at a global scale and across imperial divides. Capitalism has radically separated humanity from nature, and through "metabolic rift analysis" the authors seek to comprehend environmental catastrophe in terms of the capitalist order of things. Critically entertaining the question of capitalism's ability to modernize and adapt according to the demands of sustainability, *The Ecological Rift* retains skepticism towards the destructive effects of individualist accumulation and prefers socialism as a route towards sustainability. Critically, the work stresses the need for a renewed interrogation into the dynamic relationship between nature and capitalism. It is primarily concerned with an interrogation of capitalism as an anti-ecological force, yet remains wholly devoid of any analysis of capitalism's relationship with gender, avoiding any discussion of capitalism's continued place as male-oriented, rationalized economic regime which exploits and intersects with the natural world in profoundly powerful ways.

Still, the work offers a number of solutions deserving of consideration. Offering a dialogue which incorporates the natural sciences with the social sciences, *The Ecological Rift* is profoundly multi-disciplinary and one of the strengths of the book is its sense of urgency. The authors claim that we are living in an age of unprecedented ecological destruction and only radical ecological approaches may offer sustainable pathways for environmental regeneration. The author's discussion of "Imperialism and Ecological Metabolism" probes the concept of imperialist extraction as it intersected with agricultural production and consumption in metropolitan England, exploring the nineteenth century Peruvian guano trade to Europe from a metabolic standpoint and citing the trade as an example of capitalist exploitation and structural dependency. Marx's humanism, "naturalism" and concept of labour as a metabolic mediation of nature are given due attention. While highly dependent upon Marx's "ecological" mind, without emphasizing contributions from more contemporary ecological thinkers, Foster, Clark and York reinforce their call for social scientists to interrogate capitalism as it intersects with the natural world. Also significantly, the work charts disciplinary transformations and recent theoretical developments in the ecological sciences which have contributed to the genealogy of the sub-discipline of environmental sociology.