

Capitalocene

Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, Verso, London and New York, 2015. 316 pp., £60.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 1 78168 901 1 hb., 978 1 78168 902 8 pb.

Jason Moore is a key figure in the World-Ecology Research Network, an international grouping of scholars and activists committed to making nature central to the study of historical change, and to an understanding of capitalism as at the heart of all such change over the last half-millennium. For world ecologists, the planet is a crucible of historical transformation of both human and non-human elements, with capitalism manifesting a specific and highly resilient – but now crisis-ridden – example of that: a continually shifting dialectical unity of accumulation, power and appropriation within ‘the web of life’ (i.e. the totality of nature, human and non-human). Capitalism, in short, is neither an economic nor a social system, but an ‘organization of nature’ within the biosphere.

The methodology can be seen, therefore, as an ecologically weighted response to Marx’s insight into capitalism as but one *form* of wealth production. It also represents a renewal and extension of dialectical materialism to allow it more adequately to register the specific formations of ‘capitalism in nature’ and ‘nature in capitalism’, both in the past and currently. Indeed, Moore’s project in this particular volume is to provide such a history from the mid-fifteenth century through to present times, and to provide it in a way that takes proper account of the input and agency of both humans and non-human forces without succumbing to the ‘Cartesian’ Nature–Society dualism that he claims has hitherto bedevilled even the best-intentioned Green critiques. Counter to any view of the metabolism of human and extra-human natures as an exchange between quasi-independent objects, capitalism is constantly creating its own matrix of relations – its own *oikeia*, as Moore terms it – through its changing modes of ‘bundling’ together human and extra-human nature. Within this schema, rather than viewing Nature as something progressively destroyed by human activity or posing a limit to its future ambitions that will end in cataclysm, one should understand ‘limits’ as co-produced by human activity within a capitalist organization of humanity–nature relations. Hence for Moore it would be more apt to

speak of a Capitalocene era rather than accept the reductive account that he sees encouraged by current ideologies of the Anthropocene. The latter’s elevation of the *Anthropos* as a collective author, he argues, mistakenly endorses a concept of scarcity abstracted from capital, class and empire, a neo-Malthusian view of population, and a technical-fix approach to historical change.

But if capitalism is a specific form of production, it is one reliant on certain constants, the main one being the imperative of accumulation, and the main means to that being the provision of what Moore refers to as the ‘Four Cheaps’ (of food, energy, labour-power and raw materials) through capitalist ‘appropriation’ (i.e. plunder) of non-human nature and *unpaid* human labour. Capitalism, in essence, is a system of unpaid externalities, in which only waged labour is valued. Had it had to pay for the bounty of nature or any of its debts to the labour of animals, slaves, the reproductive and domestic work of women, and so on, it could never have existed. ‘The great secret and the great accomplishment of capitalism’, claims Moore, ‘has been to not pay its bills.’ Historical capitalism, moreover, has been able to resolve its recurrent crises until now *only* because of its continued success in ripping off what it should have been paying for, only because it has always managed to extend its zone of appropriation faster than its zone of exploitation – to overcome exhausted means or ‘natural limits’ to further capitalization, by engineering, with the help of science, technology and conducive cultural-symbolic forces, ever new means of restoring cut-price supplies of food, energy, labour and materials. Cartesian talk of Nature’s wreaking revenge on Humanity at some indefinite point in the future overlooks the often spectacular ways in which capitalism has overcome its socio-economic obstacles to growth. Particularly impressive in this respect has been its capacity to harness new knowledges in the service of economic expansion – as, for example, in the critical use made of cartography in the seventeenth century, or of time measurement, and other quantifying systems. Extensive historical illustration

of all these devices and accumulation strategies is provided in the various sections of Moore's book covering the colonizations of capitalism over the centuries, the territories thereby opened up for fresh labour exploitation, and the frontiers marked out for acquisition of pivotal resources at key historical moments (sugar, corn, silver, iron, oil, etc.).

But if apocalyptic formulation of nature's limits is mistaken, Moore does also accept that capitalism may well now be running into the buffers, or, in other words, running out of the sources of the Four Cheaps, and into a situation in which overcapitalization is left with too few means of investment and further accumulation. The problem here, he suggests, is a *longue durée* tendency for the rate of accumulation to decline as the mass of capitalized nature rises. In the process, accumulation becomes more wasteful due to increased energy inefficiency and the toxicity of its by-products; the contradiction between the time of capitalism (always seeking to short-cut that of environmental renewal) and the time of natural reproduction is made more acute; the eco-surplus declines, and capital has nowhere else to go other than recurrent waves of financialization. The key question, then, to which Moore continually returns without any clear answer, is whether the crisis of our times is epochal or developmental; whether, against the odds, new sources of accumulation will be located, or whether the combination of physical depletion, climate change, stymied investment opportunities and new anti-systemic movements now indicate a terminal decline.

Such uncertainties about future directions are understandable, and do not in any sense detract from what is otherwise an impressively confident, well-informed and generally persuasive analysis of capitalism as ecological regime. Not only does Moore provide an exceptionally powerful sense of the dystopian impact of capitalism – of how regrettable it is, in so many ways, that this has provided the *oikeia* that has won out for so long against any other organization of ourselves and nature – he also reveals a compelling dialectical grasp not just of *how* it might have to come to an end, but *why* it would be deplorable even if there were no limits to its continuing. 'I have long thought', he writes at one point, 'that the most pessimistic view is one that hopes for the survival of modernity in something like its present form' – a sentiment with which I fully concur but whose hedonist implications are seldom addressed.

That said, there is no disputing the heterodoxy of his critique of capitalism, and there are times where

his case for that would have been better served by less repetition of its main themes and more engagement with possible lines of objection. There are also a number of points on which I, for one, would have valued a more probing and, in some cases, more qualified exposition. Although Moore acknowledges the role of a Red-Green approach to global capitalism in making it impossible to ignore the status of 'nature' in social theory, he nonetheless charges it with continuing in the earlier 'Cartesian' frame of thinking on humanity-nature relations, and thus with failing to synthesize environmental change with the history of capitalism. But while the 'Cartesian' charge might be applicable to some aspects of Green argument, it seems question-begging in the case of those who, on Moore's own account, readily agree to the ongoing interaction of the natural and social and thus to the historicity of environmental making within capitalist relations. Since Moore himself is constantly invoking the binary distinctions between 'nature' and 'society', the 'human' and the 'extra-human', in order to press the case for their dialectical imbrication, one wants to ask how he himself would ultimately discriminate between his own reliance on binary ideas and the 'Cartesian' misuse of them. For example, when he tells us that 'nature' can be neither saved nor destroyed, only 'transformed', one wants to say: yes, but that applies to nature as causal powers and processes rather than 'nature-in-society', whose formations are being constantly eliminated. Or, again, there are times when dualism is preserving distinctions of importance to historical materialism. For example, the reference to 'social relations' in Red-Green thinking is not intended to deny the role of nature in human activity, but to preserve the distinction between the labour process within capitalism and its purely material form (which, as a combination of labour, tools and resources, can be carried out under differing forms of social relations). Moore's tendency to view all discrimination between natural and social inputs as subverting dialectical historical understanding seems at risk at times of conflating generalities common to all epochs and modes of production with aspects particular to capitalism.

This bears on a further controversial aspect of his argument, namely his resistance to what he calls the 'Two Century Model' (the view that capitalism begins around 1800 as opposed to his own view that dates its origins to the mid-fifteenth century). Moore makes out a good case for the early dating in his history of colonial appropriation and commodification, but it is an account that is unusually silent on what was

for Marx the central role in specifically capitalist relations of waged labour and thus extraction of surplus-value. It must also, in consequence, disregard Marx's conceptualization of 'capitalism proper' as only established when primarily reliant on extraction of relative rather than absolute surplus-value. In defence of his own position (although the point is historical rather than conceptual), Moore disputes any rigid distinction in the actual contribution made by relative and absolute exploitation, and argues that the focus on nineteenth-century capitalism overlooks the equally dramatic increase in labour productivity



since 1450. He also suggests that the disposition to see 'real' capitalism as emerging only after 1800 turns on a reluctance to look at how capital, science and empire conspired to appropriate nature and unpaid work/human energy in service to surplus-value production. And it is, of course, this attention to the unpaid inputs into capitalist exploitation that lies at the centre of his reworking of historical materialism. But, again, compelling as this emphasis is in many ways, especially in respect of non-human nature's contribution, there seems a curious reluctance to recognize that, on Marx's account, the main earner's wage is set at a level to cover the unpaid labour within the family household. As is also made clear in Marx's discriminations between slave, feudal and capitalist exploitation in *Wages, Price and Profit*, even in the absence of exchange relations, slaves and serfs have to be fed, clothed and housed, however minimally, in order that they may present for work the next day, and this will be a cost of production. Viewed in this light, it is perhaps a little misleading to speak of only waged labour being valued (as opposed to having price or exchange-value). All labour power on Marx's account, whether paid or unpaid, incorporates the value of the socially necessary labour time of its own reproduction. None of this, of course, gainsays the general truth of Moore's argument that capitalism continues to benefit hugely from the reproductive

and domestic labour of (mainly) women in the home, and other residual uncommodified contributions, which would be much more costly if acquired on the market. However, it is probably worth pointing out that it has also hugely benefited in recent decades in its metropolitan centres from the marketing of compensatory goods and services (fast food, fast transport, online shopping, spas and stress-relieving therapies, quick-fix holiday breaks, etc.), all of which profit from the pressures of an increasingly time-scarce, work-centred economy. For while it is true that such capitalization of everyday life contributes

to rising costs of production, it is also true that capitalism profits immensely from the sale of goods that would otherwise have been supplied by individuals themselves.

Issues of individual consumption, however, figure little in Moore's account – where it is capitalism as relentless mechanism of accumulation that commands attention rather than capitalism as means to consumption (however socially divi-

sive and environmentally destructive its methods). Indeed, at times the hypostatizing of the system (its 'arrogance', its 'desires', its 'choices'...) combined with the relative abstraction from people either in their role as consumers or in their electoral support for the system, can give the impression it is only as workers that they figure in the survival and reproduction of capital. Moore certainly recognizes that ultimately it is humans who are on the receiving end of whatever capitalism delivers in the way of consumption and lifestyle. 'At some level', he writes, 'all life rebels against the value/monoculture nexus of modernity, from farm to factory. No one, no being, wants to do the same thing, all day, every day.' He also acknowledges that this is not just a matter of class struggle, but also a struggle over the grip of commodification, 'a contest between contending visions of life and work', and rightly suggests that the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century is not so much about insufficient food or oil, but about fundamentally new ways of ordering the relations between humans and the rest of nature. But little is said in the way of expansion on these points, no insights are offered on the alternative vision, and in the end the only forms of resistance that Moore does specify are those of class struggle in the heartlands of industrial production (which has scarcely been the vehicle of protest over consumerism or abuse of nature), and what he

calls 'the revolt of extra-human nature in modern agriculture' – in other words the 'battle with weeds' and super pests.

So while Moore frequently speculates in optimistic vein about the possibly quite imminent end of capitalism, he has much less to say on the formation that might supersede it. If this is due to lack of cultural vision, then it sits rather ill with his charge that other Green thinkers have neglected the cultural-symbolic and radically underestimated the role of ideas in historical change. If, on the other hand, this reflects a reluctance to confront the realities of

popular support for (as well as disaffection with) the market and consumer culture, then it is evasive of precisely the complexities of our times that Marxism now needs more readily to address. It would be a pity if the innovative argument on ecology that is now being developed within historical materialism, and of which this book, and world-ecology more generally, are excellent examples, proves unwilling to extend its insights onto capitalism as outdated economic form in order to provide an equally luminous, de-naturalizing assault on capitalism's anachronistic conceptions of human prosperity and well-being.

Kate Soper

A fixed position

J.M. Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2015. 408 pp., £35.00 hb., 978 0 22626 632 9.

It would be easy to characterize J.M. Bernstein's new work of moral philosophy as a negative ethics; that is, as a work that attempts to delineate an ethics constructed around what ought not to be. Although oddly absent from the book, Adorno's spirit hovers over it as you would expect from an eminent Adorno scholar like Bernstein. One thinks particularly of Adorno's thought of the physical moment of suffering that inaugurates critique, the moment when 'Woe speaks: Go', as Adorno refers to it in *Negative Dialectics*. However, Bernstein's book is far more than a statement of the 'false state of things'; rather, it is a transcendental critique of morality. True, Bernstein begins with a consideration of particular paradigmatic instances of moral injury; namely torture and rape. However, these paradigms open up the necessary normative basis for ethical life that is previously taken for granted for humans to coexist. A consideration of what 'ought not to be' reveals the pre-reflective, tacit, core constitutive components of ethical life. It is only through a phenomenology of devastated lives that the conditions for normal ethical existence can be illuminated.

It is with such a phenomenology of devastation that the argument of the book begins. Bernstein's chapter on Cesare Beccaria's text *On Crimes and Punishments* is an excavation of how the notion of torture and its abolition served as the founding legal achievement of a nascent Enlightenment. Modern moral philosophy emerges for the first time with the

bodily individuation that occurs following Beccaria's focus on torture as the ultimate wrong. However, this early achievement that founds an emphasis on the inviolability of the human body is also the beginning of a process where the body is forgotten in Western moral philosophy after Beccaria. Beccaria's success is such that a conception of autonomy is constructed that disregards and discounts this early emphasis on bodily pain, what Bernstein terms 'the trembling recognition that the body can suffer devastation'.

What must a human being be for her to experience devastation? This is the founding question of moral philosophy for Bernstein and it begins with a phenomenology of devastation, particularly through an analysis of Jean Amèry's famous account of being tortured. The devastation of torture is primarily ethical because it is intersubjective; a relation that is constructed purely on the denial of all intersubjective foundations for true relationality. In torture, the body is fixed as a pure form of negative involuntary sentience through incessant and repeated pain. The body is reduced to an instrument of another person and turned against itself. Amèry writes that despite the constant refusal of help the expectation of aid naturally arises when we are in pain, even within the torture scenario. With the 'first blow' some core trust in the world is lost and can never be regained. The torture victim is fixed to a position of existential helplessness in the nightmare of a relation that is constructed upon the denial of any ethical