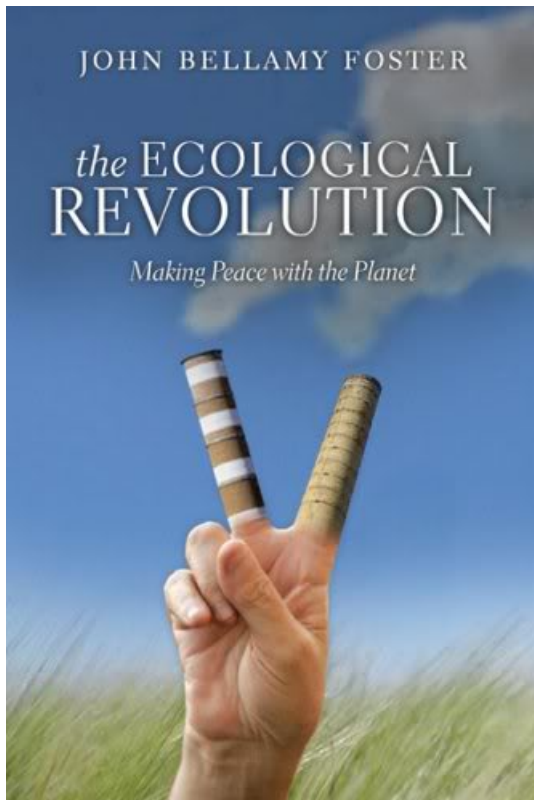


Ecological Revolution for Our Time by Simon Butler

John Bellamy Foster. [*The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet*](#) . New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009. 328 pp.



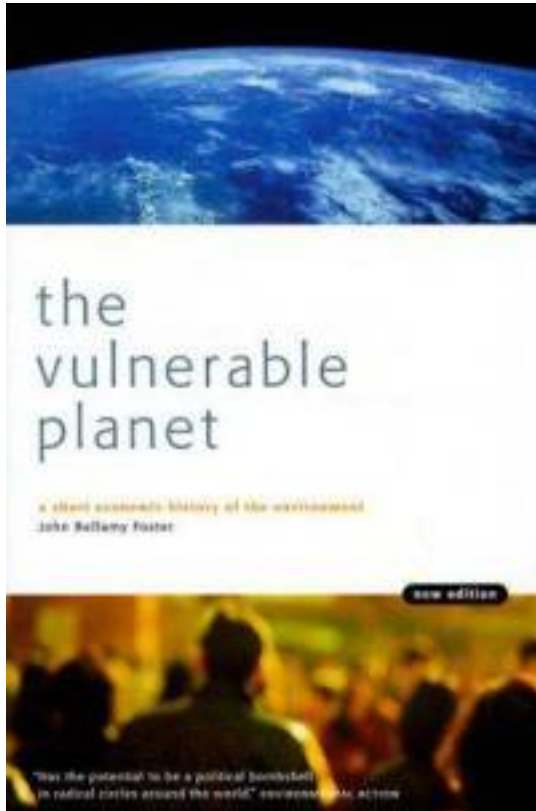
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels famously urged the world's workers to unite because they had a world to win, and nothing to lose but their chains. Today, the reality of climate change and worsening environmental breakdowns globally adds a further vital dimension to this vision of human liberation. We still have a world to win -- but we also have a world to lose.

The ecological crisis is not simply the result of poor planning or bad decisions. Nor is it an unforeseeable accident. It's the inevitable outcome of an unjust economic and social system that puts business profits before all else -- even as it undermines the natural basis of life itself.

With his previous books, such as [*Marx's Ecology*](#) and [*The Vulnerable Planet*](#) , and as the editor of the US-based Marxist journal *Monthly Review* , John Bellamy Foster has established a well-earned reputation as one of the world's most

persuasive voices arguing for fundamental social change to tackle the looming ecological catastrophe.

His new book, *The Ecological Revolution*, could not have been published at a more timely moment. It argues a solution to the ecological crisis "is now either revolutionary or it is false."



Foster draws on the warnings from leading environmentalists such as **Bill McKibben**, [James Hansen](#) and **Lester Brown** among others.

McKibben has said we have now entered the "[Oh Shit](#)" era of global warming -- it's already too late to stop the harsh impacts of climate change entirely. NASA scientist Hansen has said the rapid pace of climate change amounts to a "planetary emergency."

In his 2008 book [Plan B 3.0](#), Brown said: "We are crossing natural thresholds that we cannot see and violating deadlines that we do not recognize. Nature is the time keeper, but we cannot

see the clock. . . . We are in a race between tipping points in the earth's natural systems and those in the world's political systems. Which will tip first?"

The Ecological Revolution is a call for urgent action and an intervention into the debates about the kind of action needed to win this "race."

The dwindling band of climate change deniers aside, general awareness of the extent of environmental decay is more widespread than ever -- even among the world's elites. The upshot is that two distinct visions of ecological revolution have emerged.

The first tries to paint business as usual economics green. The second, following Che Guevara's maxim, holds it must be a genuine eco-social revolution or it's a make-believe revolution.

"The conflict between these two opposing approaches to ecological revolution," writes Foster, "can now be considered the central problem facing environmental social science today."

The Economics of Exterminism

The dominant view says the a new "green industrial revolution" can unleash the technological changes to allow sustainable capitalist development and end environmental destruction. In its typical variations, the driving force of sustainable change is not the goal of preserving life, improving society, or allowing for the full development of human potential, but the profit motive.

It assumes new market opportunities will arise on the back of ecological innovations, spurring on further developments. Apart from an explosion in clean technology, virtually nothing else in the structure of society is expected to change.

Foster looks at the work of some of the most well-known promoters of a green industrial revolution such as the US economist [William Nordhaus](#) , British economist **Nicholas Stern** (author of the [Stern Review](#) on the economics of climate change) and the conservative *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. The Australian government's main advisor on the economics of climate change, Ross Garnaut, also fits into this broad category.

All assume that economic growth, the expansion of markets, and the unlimited accumulation of capital can continue. Paul Hawkin, Amory Lovins, and Hunter Lovins, the author's of the 1999 book [Natural Capitalism](#) , even say outright hostility to ecological outcomes is no barrier, as long as money can be made. They say: "Because there are practical ways to mitigate climatic concerns and save money than such measures cost, it almost doesn't matter whether you believe that climate change is a problem or not. These steps should be taken because they make money."

Yet at the same time, this vision of a green capitalist industrial revolution also rules out ecological measures that don't return a profit in the short term. The framework is to sustain capitalist economic growth, rather than the planet's damaged ecosystem. As a result, Stern and Nordhaus, for example, have argued against strong greenhouse gas emissions cuts based on climate science because it would be "economically unsupportable."

As a way to deal with the planetary emergency, such market-based responses are absurd, irrational, dangerous, self-defeating, and destined to fail. They have also been warmly welcomed by the world's capitalist governments and provide much of the basis of false responses to climate change such as carbon trading and "clean coal."

John Bellamy Foster aptly sums up the capitalist economics of a market-based green industrial revolution as "the economics of exterminism." He advances an alternative approach that puts ecological concerns above capital accumulation. We need "a more radical, eco-social revolution, which draws on alternative technologies where necessary, but emphasizes the need to transform the human relation to nature and the constitution of society at its roots."

The goal of such a revolution must be "to return to a more organic, sustainable social-ecological relations [requiring] a civilizational shift based on a revolution in culture, as well as economy and society."

He argues that a key point of difference between ecological revolution and a green industrial revolution is the involvement and mobilisation of ordinary people in the process of change.

Green industrial revolution is conceived . . . as a top-down attempt at a technological shift. . . . The goal of the vested interests is to keep social change in relation to the environmental challenge contained within the limits acceptable to the system, even at the risk of endangering the entire planet. . . .

In contrast, a genuine ecological revolution . . . would be associated with a wider social, not merely industrial, revolution, emanating from the great mass of the people.

Many environmentalists who recognize the need to break from business-as-usual responses to global warming still hesitate to draw this more radical conclusion. Changing the whole system seems too big a task.

The shrinking timeframe we have left to prevent runaway climate change has led some activists to try to separate climate change from social change. The idea is that we can fix the environment first and then, as long as we succeed, move on to broader social goals.

In many ways, this strategy reflects a mistaken hope that the world's elites will ultimately decide to change course as the evidence of ecological distress becomes undeniable and the climate movement grows.

In contrast, Foster argues that if we are to make peace with the planet we have to take political and economic power away from the privileged minority who now hold it. Otherwise, they will lead us all to oblivion in a vain attempt to preserve their system. Sustainable development is only viable if we open the road to sustainable human development as well.

"A revolutionary turn in human affairs may seem improbable," he says. "But the continuation of the present capitalist system for any length of time will prove impossible -- if human civilisation and the web of life as we know it are to be sustained."

Ecological Imperialism

Leaving aside the ecological crisis, capitalism condemns millions to extreme poverty, starvation, and inequality. The money spent on the military by the world's capitalist governments, for example, would be more than enough to secure adequate food, shelter, clean water, and basic health and education for all.

The latest *Forbes* magazine "rich list" said there were 793 billionaires worldwide with a combined wealth of more than US\$4 trillion. Meanwhile, the World Bank estimated in 2005 that more than half the world's population lived on less than \$2 a day. The world's malnourished topped 1 billion for the first time in 2009 even though the two largest total cereal yields occurred in 2008 and 2009.

The cause and extent of environmental breakdowns worldwide cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of how a system of global inequality drives and worsens the problems.

Foster describes modern capitalism as a system of "ecological imperialism."

At the planetary level, ecological imperialism has resulted in the appropriation of the global commons (i.e. the atmosphere and the oceans) and the carbon absorption capacity of the biosphere, primarily to the benefit of a relatively small number of countries at the center of the capitalist world economy.

He predicts that, as the ecological crisis mounts and natural resources become more scarce, the system will become even more barbarous. The relentless drive to increase profits is

incompatible with humane, people-centered responses.

Already, "the end of easy oil" is driving what Foster calls a new energy imperialism.

The new energy imperialism of the United States is already leading to expanding wars, which could become truly global, as Washington attempts to safeguard the existing capitalist economy and stave off its own hegemonic decline. . . [Oil] consumption [is] built into the structure of the present world capitalist economy. The immediate response of the system to the end of easy oil has been, therefore, to turn to . . . a strategy of maximum extraction by any means possible.

The US-led invasion and occupation of oil-rich Iraq is one horrendous outcome of this response. The British medical journal [The Lancet](#) estimated that more than 1 million Iraqis have died since the 2003 invasion.

Foster examines how the US government is already drawing up plans for a "military response" to the ecological crisis. The administration of US President George Bush was notorious for its climate change denialism. Yet behind the scenes the US military was taking it very seriously. In a 2003 report the [Pentagon](#) said global warming was accelerating and urged it be "elevated beyond a scientific debate to a US national security concern."

Rather than act to cut greenhouse gas emissions urgently and preserve life, US imperialism is preparing to "safeguard Fortress America at all costs," Foster warns.

Along with the stark prospect of new wars and invasions, imperialism's response to climate change has been to try to push more of the costs of climate change onto the global South. Without drastic change, the poorest countries, who are least responsible for carbon pollution, will face the worst consequences of climate change.

This analysis is important for environmental movements in the developed world. The politics of the movement against climate change must be anti-imperialist, anti-war, and demand the repayment of the ecological debt to the Third World if it is to succeed.

Any attempt to impose the main burden for global warming on underdeveloped countries in accordance with past imperialist policies, will inevitably fail. To the extent that the United States and other advanced capitalist nations promote such a strategy, they will only push the world into a state of barbarism, while catastrophically undermining the human relation to the biosphere.

Marxism and Ecology

In the landmark work *Marx's Ecology* Foster explored Marx's often neglected contributions to ecological thought. *The Ecological Revolution* includes several chapters that further build on an understanding of Marx as one of the most perceptive environmental thinkers of the 19th century. Marx's insights are of lasting significance today.

Far from ignoring ecological questions, celebrating unbridled economic growth, or uncritically embracing a belief in inevitable scientific progress, Marx warned that production for profit had devastating consequences for humankind and the natural world. In his works he commented frequently on the connections between capitalism and the major ecological problems of his day.

The two core ecological concepts in Marx's writings are the "treadmill of production" and the "metabolic rift."

The treadmill of production refers to capitalism's core impulse to expand production without regard to natural limits to growth set by the biosphere. This impulse makes the process of capital accumulation inherently unsustainable and anti-ecological.

Were the entire world to consume as much as the average Australian, we would need the resources of five planet Earths. Were the entire world to live like a North American then seven planets would be required.

The advanced capitalist economies are so unsustainable because production is locked into this

capitalist treadmill of never-ending expansion and growth for growth's sake. This is a key element in the ecosocialist explanation of the ecological crisis.

The metabolic rift refers to Marx's theory that capitalist production necessarily creates a sharp break in the relationship -- the metabolism -- between nature and human society. Marx used the concept of metabolism to describe the complex and co-dependent union between humanity and the environment.

In Marx's time the rift was most apparent in the biggest ecological crisis of the 19th century: the depletion of soil fertility by large-scale capitalist agriculture. On this basis he drew wider conclusions about how capitalist agriculture deprived both the soil and the workers of nourishment and sustenance.

In *Capital* Volume 3, [Marx](#) wrote:

Large landed property reduces the agricultural population to an ever decreasing minimum and confronts it with an ever growing industrial population crammed together in large towns; in this way it produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself. The result of this is a squandering of the vitality of the soil, which is carried by trade far beyond the bounds of a single country.

He concluded:

Large scale industry and industrially pursued large-scale agriculture, have the same effect . . . since the industrial system applied to agriculture also [weakens] the workers there, while industry and trade for their part provide agriculture with the means of exhausting the soil.

In *Capital* Volume 1, [Marx](#) passed a scathing assessment of the "progress" of capitalist-based agricultural methods:

All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. . . . Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of wealth -- the soil and the worker.

Foster argues Marx used the concept of the metabolic rift more broadly than just agriculture. Capitalist production for profit progressively alienates human society from all spheres of nature -- even though a stable relationship with nature is essential for human existence.

The task of healing the rift and building a truly sustainable society was a central goal in Marx's vision of a democratic socialist future.

In *Capital* [Marx](#) said:

Freedom . . . can only consist in this, that socialised [humans], the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their own collective control rather than being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.

Unlike mainstream economic approaches, Marxists hold that private ownership of natural resources is the major barrier to dealing with environmental problems. In the third volume of *Capital*

, [Marx](#) even compared the relationship between nature and humanity under capitalism to slavery.

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular

individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations.

Marx's co-thinker [Frederick Engels](#) said capitalism was incapable of a sustainable relationship with the natural world because "in relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominately concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result."

One Revolution

The entire thrust of *The Ecological Revolution* is that "the transition to socialism and the transition to an ecological society are one."

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez has advanced what he calls an "elementary triangle of socialism" to explain the goals of 21st century socialism. These are: 1) social ownership, 2) social production organized by workers, and 3) the satisfaction of communal needs.

Foster says an "elementary triangle of ecology" must also lie at the root of this revolutionary outlook. He summarizes these as: 1) social use, not private ownership, of nature, 2) democratic and rational regulation of the metabolism between nature and human beings, and 3) the satisfaction of communal needs -- of present and future generations.

"The goal," Foster says, "must be the creation of sustainable communities geared to the development of human needs and powers, removed from the all-consuming drive to accumulate wealth."

He underscores the responsibility that lies with movements for social and ecological justice in the advanced capitalist countries, such as Australia and US, to make a revolutionary transition to a just and sustainable society in time:

It is only through fundamental change at the center of the system, from which the pressures on the planet principally emanate, that there is any genuine possibility of avoiding ultimate ecological destruction.

The Ecological Revolution is an extremely valuable and important contribution towards this essential task.

Simon Butler is a Sydney-based climate activist. He is a member of the [Democratic Socialist Perspective](#), a Marxist organization affiliated to the [Socialist Alliance](#) of Australia. This review was first published by [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) on 11 August 2009.
