

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780520293137 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520299931 (paper); ISBN: 9780520966376 (ebook)

While much of the academic left is concerned with the particular, local, and contingent, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* is a profound and needed break offering a generalized theory and history of capitalism. The book is able to connect our understanding of capitalism based on profit and commodity exchange with the appropriation the “unpaid” work of care and living ecological systems. In an effort to popularize Jason W. Moore’s equally ambitious world ecology framework,¹ this book is brimming with fresh insight and highly readable for undergrads and more popular audiences. At its strongest points, it combines Marxist with feminist and postcolonial understandings of colonial violence, the plunder of resource frontiers and the subjugation of women and care work.

Nevertheless, I think the book flounders for two principal reasons. I will organize this review on the basis of this two-pronged critique (so those looking for a summary of the book should look to the many other reviews that have come out since its publication). First, as Patel and Moore remark near the end of the book, “We make our politics from the ideas of our times” (p.203). In this sense, by presenting the problem with capital and nature as one of *cheapness*, the book never is able to escape the neoliberal logics of “our times”. It is not only that the focus on cheapness shares family resemblances with environmental economics (and a sense that both ecological goods and pollution bads are not reflected in the “cheap” cost of commodities), but, more importantly, a critique centered on *cheapness* will likely fall on deaf ears in an age of working-class precariousness, inequality and poverty.

¹ See p.179-180 for over a full page of references to Moore’s published work including five from the year 2010. While I’m on the topic of references, I can’t help but point out this book contains the most frustrating reference style I’ve ever encountered. It has endnotes, but within the endnotes are “author date” citations. So, when encountering an endnote in the main text, one has to not only flip to the endnotes, but then flip again to the bibliography.

Second, the book is incredibly imprecise on its core object of analysis – *capitalism*.² Almost every chapter begins with a vignette focused on that prototypical private owner of the means of production, Christopher Columbus. Again and again, the empirical analysis focuses on spaces, times and relations that many Marxists would not recognize as “capitalist”. In fact, the analysis focuses less on “private capital” and more on the depravity of state power (*the villain of “our times”*). This could be fine – after all, much of the book is importantly directing our attention toward what one might call the “constitutive outside” of capital (what they sum up as “women, nature and colonies” [p.95])³ – but the lack of attention to what is classically understood as capitalism raises the question of how relevant the analysis is to overcoming capitalism itself.

Cheap Talk

The category of “cheapness” is the central organizing principle of the book (all seven chapters are titled Cheap X – nature, money, work, care, food, energy and lives). Patel and Moore are at pains to argue they are not only arguing capitalism simply needs low prices. Rather they argue, “Cheap is a strategy ... We use *cheap* to talk about the process through which capitalism transmutes these undenominated relationships of life making into circuits of production and consumption, in which these relations come to have a low price as possible” (p.22). The book shows convincingly how capitalism only monetizes very partial and narrow aspects of the world of “life making”: the price of sugar does not account for the ecology of microbes in soils, the

²The authors announce, “The relationship between the wider web of life and capitalism is the subject of this book” (p.21).

³They borrow this triad from Maria Mies (1986). To what extent is subsuming the category of “women” alongside “nature and colonies” reproducing the very masculinist logics the book seeks to disrupt? The category of “women” is disturbingly different than that of nature and colonies. More to the point, women, of course, are also deeply embedded in the “inside” of capital as workers (indeed, much of the global waged proletariat in Marx’s time and today is highly feminized).

women doing subsistence production to supplement the wages of plantation workers, or the degraded health of the workers cutting the cane. Further, the profits of the sugar capitalists ultimately depend upon the “cheapness” of these basic conditions of life.⁴ When the cost of these cheaps increases, capital goes into crisis and must seek out fresh reservoirs (or frontiers) of cheap stuff (frontiers is another central concept of the analysis – more on this below).

This approach appears new and exciting but actually fits nicely with the overwhelming consensus of environmental thought today: accounting for “undenominated” aspects of the environment and life-making has been the central concern of environmental economics for the last four decades. Armies of economists and policy wonks have attempted to calculate the real value of so-called “ecosystem services” underlying production and the “externalities” – unaccounted costs like pollution – private actors dump for free. Liberal policymakers agree that the central problem of ecological crisis is that, as Patel (2018) has put it in promotional interviews for the book, “Capitalism never pays its bills”. It’s not only mainstream economics, but ecological Marxism. 30 years ago, the late James O’Connor (1988) argued capital takes for granted the unmonetized “conditions of production” such as ecosystems, shared infrastructure, and the biological health of workers.⁵ Like Moore (2015a), he argued that these “costs” would eventually lead to an underproduction crisis for capital.

Patel and Moore acknowledge these overlaps – “Economists might at this point mutter ‘Externalities’” (p.21) – but don’t convincingly show (to me anyway) why their underlying critique of capital is not on the same terrain. This terrain suggests the problem with capital is one

⁴I have to admit money is the black sheep here. While all the other cheaps (nature, work, care, food, energy, lives) involve “life-making” to some degree, money does not. Perhaps money is the underlying “cheap” which makes all of them possible?

⁵See Nancy Fraser’s (2014) recent productive resurrection of these ideas and their Polanyian roots. In his new book, Andreas Malm (2018: 190, fn 34) points out Moore’s debt to O’Connor which is acknowledged in his early work, but then left out of *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Moore 2015a) and only referenced marginally in a footnote in this one.

of cheapness – unaccounted for costs and unpaid work or benefits harnessed for free. Economists suggest all sorts of valuation schemes – from taxes to emission credits – but Patel and Moore offer something much cooler-sounding (but ultimately in the same register): ecological reparations. No matter what you call it, the politics of cheapness suggests there are bills coming due and we need to find some way to pay up.

There is also a much more moralistic narrative around cheapness which blames patterns of “overconsumption” and “excess” on the part of (largely) American consumers of “cheap” food and energy. My favorite genre of this comes out of the peak oil literature which posits oil scarcity as a “wake up call” to the sedated and overconsumed masses. James Howard Kunstler (2005) asserts, “We’ve become a nation of overfed clowns and crybabies...”. Less cultish liberal darlings also locate cheapness as a key problem. Michael Pollan (2006: 243) argues, “It’s true that cheap industrial food is heavily subsidized in many ways such that its price in the supermarket does not reflect its real cost...”. As he continues, the moral dimensions become clearer: “there are many of us who could afford to spend more on food if we *chose to*” (ibid.). Finally, channeling Fox News⁶: “it isn’t only the elite who in recent years have found an extra fifty or one hundred dollars each month to spend on cell phones...” (ibid.).⁷

Why bring all this up? (This is not a review of Michael Pollan’s work.) My argument is that the politics of cheapness always points in this direction – of making stuff cost more, internalizing the externalities, capitalism paying its bills, or, more charmingly, paying the reparations. This logic of accounting for the “real costs” of cheap stuff strongly appeals to middle-class professional consumers who *feel excessive* (e.g. many academics who might, perhaps, own a house, a car, and make weekly visits to a grocery store). But, this politics of accounting for costs, and criticizing cheapness must certainly fall flat in the context of

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A15E3KbIfeo> (last accessed 22 January 2020).

⁷ Guthman (2011: 151) recounts his nuanced revision of these views in the subsequent *In Defense of Food*. But it’s even worse: “Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and that is shameful; however, those of us who can, should” (Pollan 2008: 184).

neoliberalism and economic precarity. Consider this: according to a recent study, 53 million Americans – or “44% of Americans age 18 to 64” – are stuck in “low wage” occupations: “Their median wage is \$10.22 an hour and their annual pay is \$17,950” (Pickert 2019). For this population – what a Marxist would call the working-class – centering the problem of capitalism on cheapness must sound utterly preposterous. Working-class populations need *more and cheaper stuff* including many of the seven cheap things such as food, energy, care, and money (turns out predatory payday loans and credit cards are *not* cheap and capitalism works quite well with them).

Would a critique of cheapness inspire the working-class masses toward an anti-capitalist politics? Doubtful. Worse, the politics of cheapness also reactivates the well-trodden populist right-wing narrative that “liberal” environmental politics is simply a scheme to make your life cost more.⁸

This problem is illustrated well with perhaps the central example Patel and Moore use to convey their argument about cheap things: the chicken nugget. In the opening pages of the book and in online videos and promotional pieces in *The Nation* and *The Guardian* (Patel 2017; Patel and Moore 2018), the cheap chicken nugget encapsulates all seven cheaps (the cheap propane for factory farmed chickens, the exploited workers, the cheap care work those workers require, and the loss of life of humans and nonhumans dealing with the wastes of these systems). This is a powerful example to be sure (and unlike Pollan, they highlight the super-exploited cheap labor that underlies “cheap” industrial food). But, it raises a question: *who* eats chicken nuggets? In another register, *who* disdains a diet based on chicken nuggets and other fast food?

As Julie Guthman (2011) shows so well, the politics of “progressive” condescension toward “cheap food” flatly ignores the structural constraints of poor working-class life. Indeed, in a life based on alienating and low-paid work, the chicken nugget is perhaps a small moment of

⁸ Something I argue in Chapter 5 of my book, *Lifblood* (Huber 2013).

industrially engineered (and tasty?) pleasure.⁹ Yet, for the audience of this book these nuggets obviously lack nutrition and represent the worst of capitalist commodified culture (I would wager the large majority of readers of the book will not have consumed such a nugget any time recently). The question is, will this politics against the very cheap stuff so central to poor/working-class life allow a viable politics beyond capitalism? More to the point, how shall we understand capitalism itself so as to overcome it?

Was Christopher Columbus a Capitalist?

To build an effective anti-capitalist politics, we need an understanding of the historical specificity of capitalism itself. In terms, of the “who”, “when” and “what” of capitalism, this book is imprecise. Nearly every chapter begins with a vignette focused on how Christopher Columbus plundered the cheaps in his colonization of Hispaniola – subjugating the men as slaves (cheap work), the women for cheap care, and the soil and water systems for cheap sugar and fuel. Yet, who was Columbus? His journeys were largely financed by monarchical vestiges of the feudal order. His goal was not to produce commodities for a market (and profit), as much as wealth and luxuries for himself, kings, queens, and the rest of this feudal elite. He was not a private capitalist competing with other producers of gold or spices or whatever. He was an agent of precapitalist state power.

This raises the question of the “who” of capitalism. Classical Marxists might focus on capitalists and wage laborers – and the book has a great section on the “temporal ecology of wage labor” (p.95-101). Patel and Moore want us to look beyond capital-labor relations. This book draws nicely on feminist and postcolonial approaches that force us to pay attention to the

⁹ In a similar register, Barbara Ehrenreich recently explained something that would also horrify the professional middle-class: working-class people – in the restaurant business, for example – rely on cigarettes to stay sane: “When you smoke, that’s a working-class moment of self-care” (quoted in Chotiner 2018). This is not to say we should all smoke cigarettes and eat chicken nuggets, but centering our critiques on such goods is a dubious strategy for building mass solidarity.

women, slaves, ecologies, and others outside the capital-labor nexus who are central to the reproduction of capitalism. Yet, this book lacks much attention to *capitalists*. It is striking to read on p. 209 that “corporations owe debts too” because the book lacks much attention to corporations as such.

In fact, the book shows an oversized attention on *state power* as the key institution facilitating cheap natures. There is an entire chapter on “cheap money” but it only pays marginal attention to banks and private finance. The chapter mostly focuses on the role of finance in the making of state power, military expansion and imperialism (in a pre-modern period that is quite different from the “finance capital” of our time or even Lenin’s time). It is not as if these are unimportant, but if “Wall Street is a way of organizing nature” (p.67) we need to learn more about Wall Street and the way private money capitalists shape nature-society relations.

Similarly, the last chapter on “Cheap Lives” would have been a great opportunity to examine how private for-profit production subjects labor and communities to early death (from workers killed in industrial accidents to communities poisoned through local toxic pollution). Yet, the entire chapter focuses on scientific racism, colonial power and the ways in which states and nationalist ideology categorize some “lives” as cheaper than others. This is all valuable insight, but to understand a *capitalist ecology* we would need more focus on the actual actors profiting most from the cheapening of life. Too often the analysis simply blames a “system” we call capitalism without focusing much on the hidden actors – the CEOs and boards of directors – who own, control, and benefit from the system.

Beyond the “who” there is also the “when” of capitalism. You would find few Marxists who would claim “capitalism” was the dominant mode of production in 1492 (despite the book’s historical claim that there exist “five centuries of capitalism” [p.38]). Although Patel and Moore cite the work of Robert Brenner approvingly (p.59), they fail to acknowledge (or reckon with) the Brenner debate which largely refutes the conflation of mercantile colonialism with capitalism. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) argues, the origins of capitalism – characterized by

competition, labor-saving innovation, and *market dependence* for capitalists and workers alike – developed in the English countryside well after 1492. While acknowledging early forms of capitalism exist, Marx (1990: 876) himself claimed capitalism first took on its “classic form” in England. Wainwright and Mann’s (2018: 99) recent book offers this offhand remark: “...the first capitalist society, England, only became fully capitalist in the last half of the eighteenth century”. I realize these claims are contested – and one could disagree with Brenner and Meiksins Wood – but the book could have benefited from a larger justification for why they see mercantile colonial regimes as quintessentially capitalist.

It’s not just the Columbus vignettes, but the large bulk of the historical analysis focuses on pre-industrial colonial domination (there is more talk of slavery than “free” proletarians who survive via commodity relations). It seems Patel and Moore want us to understand the roots of our ecological crisis in these forms of domination – and they warn against those of us who might “conflate capitalism with the Industrial Revolution” (p.163) – but they seem allergic to a focus on history post-1800. We can certainly see the roots of our ecological crisis in the domination of the sugar plantation, but we also need to understand the industrial ecologies of fossil fuel, machinery, steel, chemicals, cement that make the modern world today. On this front, Patel and Moore present a confusing understanding of industrialization in claiming it started in “the long sixteenth century” (roughly 1450-1600) with the expansion of heat-process industries like glassmaking and brewing, which “consumed prodigious amounts of energy” (p.170). Yet, what made the industrial revolution in England revolutionary was not simply using “prodigious amounts” of fossil fuel for heat – China was doing this in the first millennium – but harnessing fossil fuel to generate mechanical energy as a replacement for muscle-power. As Andreas Malm (2016) argues, this is where we see the emergence of “the fossil economy” and with it “the roots of global warming”. In fact, it was the first steam engines that were deployed to pump water out of mines and thus expand access to the coal seams. Without mechanical energy, there would have only been one kind of coal available in the world – expensive coal. Cheap energy (and

nature) as a whole depended upon labor productivity gains made possible by machinery and the various earth-moving machineries that enabled large-scale industrial production of minerals. Although the fossil fuel transition is given treatment in the “Cheap Energy” chapter, these revolutions affected all the other cheaps in profound ways.

The focus on this preindustrial period allows Patel and Moore to claim the “roots” of capitalism’s ecology are less about dramatic socio-material transformations, and more changes in how we think. They claim capitalism’s ecology is rooted in “...a significant intellectual state shift...a conceptual split between Nature and Society” (p.24). As Malm (2018: 188) points out this is a frustratingly idealist definition of capitalist nature-society relations: “It tends...to locate the roots of social and environmental ills in the sphere of conceptions”. Like so much environmental critique, this argument points the blame toward Descartes (p.51-54) rather than the owners of capital who benefit from an ideology of an externalized nature exploitable for profit. This argument suggests the roots of our crisis lay in changes in thinking rather than the massive changes in property relations and the productive forces.

On the broadest level, the “what” of capitalism, seems to mean one thing: plunder. If we have humans ravaging labor, nature, to make wealth for an elite, we have capitalism. But, this characterizes the entire “Neolithic” period since the agricultural revolution – under this definition the Roman Empire is capitalist (indeed, Gunder Frank and Gills [1993] claimed the “world system” was 5,000 years old and insisted capitalism was a meaningless concept).

The equation of capitalism with plunder is operationalized through the key concept of “frontiers”. Capitalism expands to new frontiers where it can tap into reservoirs of cheap labor, nature and all the rest. Once again, however, their definition of modern capitalist “frontiers” is quite flimsy:

Early modern colonialism used frontiers in an entirely new way. Always before, rising population density in the heartlands had led to the expansion of settlement, followed by

commerce. This pattern turned inside out in the two centuries after 1492. Frontiers were to become the organizing principle of metropolitan wealth. (p.14)

This almost makes it seem as if pre-capitalist frontiers were purely biological affairs akin to ant colonies – human populations expand and need more territory to do so. Yet, precapitalist empires were also organized on the principle of “metropolitan wealth” extracting a surplus via an exploited periphery (or frontier). From early “city states” to Rome itself, the centering of elite wealth in cities based on an expansive exploitation of frontiers is not exclusively capitalist. Perhaps this is just semantics, but it was Marx’s (and historical materialism’s) project to understand what is *specific* about capitalism. Capitalism is not only about “plunder” but a very new (and strange) system where the majority of us rely on the market for their reproduction (Wood 2002). A society of generalized commodity production guided by M-C-M’ – the society Marx attempts to explain in *Capital* – is what differentiates capitalist from precapitalist modes of plunder.

Conclusion

This problem leads us back to the challenge of overcoming the neoliberal logics of “our times”. I would argue neoliberalism itself is most concerned with purging forms of *arbitrary power* from the market – monopoly, discrimination, and, yes, theft or unearned plunder (what Moore calls “unpaid work/energy” [Moore 2015a]). While the right concerns itself with state power intervening in a free market, the left seems obsessed with “unfair” theft, dispossession and discrimination. Additionally, if there are costs the market cannot see, then our task is to make the bills come due or “internalize the externalities”. The heart of the neoliberal project is a determination the market can indeed be purified of its imperfections. Yet, a Marxist critique refuses this from the outset: it argues market relations are always already based on exploitation

and plunder even if they appear free and fair exchanges. A transformative ecological politics will need to see the plunder within supposedly “equal” commodity relations themselves.

The heart of Moore’s project seems to set aside “exploitation” and “market relations” as old hat and not relevant to the “unpaid” work/energy and care outside the market whose plunder is the real source of capitalism’s ecology. This posture, however, gives us a dualism of Moore’s (and Patel’s) own making – with profit/exploitation/markets on the one side and the unpaid work of “women/nature/colonies” on the other.¹⁰ Yet, an anti-capitalist ecological politics will need to see the ecology in commodity relations and traditional labor exploitation as well. In other words, overcoming this dualism requires us to see the ecology within the market – that is, to offer an ecological politics that not only seeks to save nature – or those people perceived as “close” to it – from the ravages of the market, but also a credible vision of how a new ecological society can be built out of the sociality inherent in the market itself. Not a politics simply outside or against the market, but a politics built out of the market society most of us inhabit.

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¹⁰ This is from Moore (2015b: 6) directly: “I take paid work (capitalization) to be the domain of the capital-labor conflict over shares of value. This is the question of exploitation. I take unpaid work to be a struggle over the forms and relations of capital to unmonetized social reproduction (e.g. ‘domestic labor’) and to the ‘work of nature’.”



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