

BOOK REVIEW

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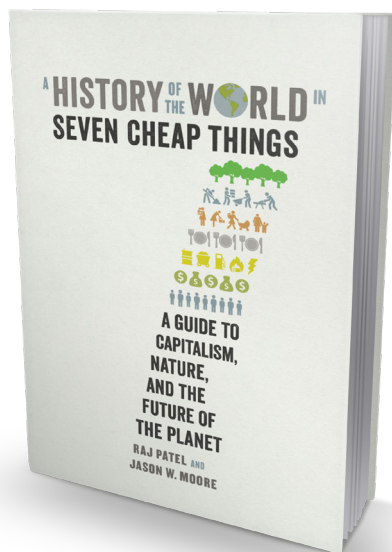
NO ESCAPE FROM CAPITALISM'S UNRELENTING LOGIC OF CONQUEST AND COMMODIFICATION

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN SEVEN CHEAP THINGS: A guide to capitalism, nature, and the future of the planet

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 2017, 328p.

A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things is extraordinary because it unapologetically links Western capitalism to the ills of the global food system, and shows how the epistemological questions regarding the choices to divide and separate nature from society, natives from colonialists, and men from women are complicit in remaking the world in the image of capitalist values. This is noteworthy for a book intended for a non-academic audience. In contrast to most consumerist critiques of the food system written in the developed world, this book incisively connects global natural destruction and the decimation of indigenous populations to the very logic of capital accumulation by arguing that extractive relationships based upon class, race, and gender are structurally connected to the global First and Third-World division, and thus define the very nature of the Capitalocene (instead of the broader formulation of the Anthropocene). There is no escape from the capitalistic exploitation of nature and culture. There is no room for good capitalism in this book. This is a bracing and necessary argument that is often never made, especially in the United States, where a variety of ameliorative propaganda about values-based capitalism is routinely peddled, even by members of the good-food movement. *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* provides a rare synthesis that theoretically connects the disparate work of critics in culture, economics, politics, and philosophy; in the end, it is an incisive political-ecological critique that accounts for both political-economy and cultural politics. This is successful grand theorization at the highest level.

The book begins by discussing cheap nature before burrowing through cheap money, cheap work, cheap care, cheap food, cheap energy, and ending with cheap lives. Cheap Nature opens with the execution of an unnamed “sorceress” of Tlaxcala, New Spain on Sunday, July 18, 1599. This anonymous woman allegedly smashed crosses and incited Chichimec Indians to rebel, but her worst crime was dreaming of a deer riding atop a horse. As a symbol of local Chichimec nature, the deer rode astride the livelihood of the colonizers. It was thus judged to be a seditious challenge to the cosmos of the Conquistador. Killed as a witch, the authors retell the story of this woman, who dreamt of a radically different ecology, as a balm against neglecting alternatives to capitalism’s “world-ecology.”



By

BY KRISHNENDU RAY¹

krishnendu.ray@nyu.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-3947-8111

¹New York University, Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, New York City, NY, United States of America

The hyphenation of “world-ecology” echoes the “World-Systems” analysis of sociologists Wallerstein (2011) and Arrighi (2010), who served as central theoretical sources for this book regarding the food-system. The food system in question is one that is world-spanning in origin. The authors argue that it is a system that can only be overthrown by an equally global and internationalist movement. Their regret is that people can easily imagine the end of the world, but not the end of capitalism. This accusation underpins the entire book.

I primarily focus on the Cheap Nature concept in order to convey the scope and depth of the authors’ work within the limits of this review. “Our Chichimec woman,” they argue “was killed by a civilized society because her natural savagery broke its rules” (p. 45). As recently as 1330, the authors note, savage meant valiant. However, this positive association faded during the fifteenth century. Not coincidentally, the terms *nature* and *society* were produced as a binary that required separation so that society’s rules could be imposed on nature and anything natural. This was in order to contain indigenous populations, inferior races, women, and nature itself. The authors argue that this classification continues today with analogous consequences. To understand the ambition and scope of Patel and Moore’s work, it is necessary to substantially quote them here:

We take for granted that some parts of the world are social and others are natural. Racialized violence, mass unemployment and incarceration, consumer cultures – these are the stuff of social problems and social injustice. Climate, biodiversity, resource depletion – these are the stuff of natural problems, of ecological crisis. But it’s not just that we think about the world in this way. It’s also that we *make* it so, acting as if the Social and the Natural were autonomous domains, as if relations of human power were somehow untouched by the web of life. In this book, we use these words – *Nature* and *Society* – in a way that’s different from their everyday use. We’re capitalizing them as a sign that they are concepts that don’t merely describe the world but help us organize it and ourselves. Scholars call concepts like these “real abstractions.” These abstractions make statements about ontology – *What is?*—and about epistemology – *How do we know what is?* Real abstractions both describe the world and make it. (p. 47)

It is noteworthy to mention that, once they are constructed, real abstractions help govern the world. This nature-culture concept is powerful because it addresses the problems of

power that social constructionists have been addressing, but without disregarding the natural or the human narcissism that is sometimes embedded in the social.

Nature is a way of organizing and cheapening life. It is a way of lumping and splitting a continuum (i.e., humans, animals, plants, and other living things) into poles that can be separately governed by those with money and power. Patel and Moore argue that capitalism could not have emerged without the cheapening of nature and the domination of anything natural, including forests, plains, rivers, Native Americans, and women. Capitalism is a world-ecology of power with boundaries between black and white, nature and culture, and male and female. Yet hope exists in the challenges of social movements to bridge those binaries, as we see with gender, sexuality, and species-based identity today. What is radical about this range is that the authors pose that neither class, race, gender, sexuality, nor nature are more important than one another.

Humans have repeatedly considered themselves different from the rest of nature, but what was forged by capitalism and its handmaiden (fashioned by epigones of Western Philosophy such as Rene Descartes [1596-1660]) is the fastness of that separation. The authors assert that Descartes learned much of his philosophical reasoning from studying the Mexican philosopher Antonio Rubio (1548-1615). This mischief, in stretching the limits of what is “Mexican,” allows Patel and Moore to do two things. First, they invert the site of philosophy from the metropole to the periphery. Second, they position the margin as the focus of the capitalist story (traditionally told as transformations at the center). The usual arguments involve creating markets and honoring contracts, ideologies of free labor, Protestant ethic, democracy, and states with limited power, none of which are at capitalism’s origin. What lies at its source is expansion into nature and domination over natural things and peoples.

The authors compellingly join money capital and territorial power to command life, work, and resources. There is no money without authority; there is no authority without monetary dependence. This authority is primarily able to make war and police recalcitrant subjects. Here Patel and Moore connect New World silver and Genoese banking to modern military construction (the singular advantage of the modern West) based on economic financialization. Thus, bankers need governments despite the fractious marriage between money and territorialism. “If cheap work, food, energy, and raw materials are the necessary conditions for capitalist booms, cheap credit makes them all possible” (p. 68). Here, their work is dependent on the conceptions of Braudel (1992) and Arrighi (2010).

The chapter on Cheap Care shows that the origin of the modern household lies in European capitalist ecological changes. Based on Clark's *The Working Lives of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1993), the authors show the shift in the economic geography of care and production. Women's work on the commons included fuel gathering, gleaning, and providing social insurance that was often based on religious, personal, and social kin-work. However, these arrangements were incompatible with agricultural innovations like the plough, enclosed holdings, monocultures, and private property arrangements that disinherited and immiserated women. Cheap waged labor, on which industrialization was built, needed care work to transform into unpaid work, which was overwhelmingly assigned to women. The expansion of care work (estimated to grow by 70% in the US by 2020 [p. 134]) is dependent on caregivers moving, historically as slaves, servants, and wet nurses, and today as health care professionals, nannies, and pregnancy surrogates. "The global household has always done the work that makes possible the global factory and the global farm" (p. 134). The authors conclude that a world in which care is valued requires a post-capitalist environment.

The chapter on Cheap Food shows how such food makes cheap labor possible. Capitalism uses Cheap Energy to cheapen other factors of production. It begins with deforestation (i.e., wood harvesting), followed by wind and peat (mastered by the 16th century Dutch), then coal (UK) and oil (USA). They predict that, without 21st century cheap nature frontiers to externalize development costs, social movements will arise that will be difficult to contain.

Conquering and cheapening global life requires mapping. Hence, much attention is paid to cartography and other forms of knowing the world in modern European knowledge systems. Domination cannot be separated from knowledge. The authors argue that early modern materialism was designed to interpret the world and control it. This is an homage to Marx. The book concludes by demanding recognition of capitalistic binaries and a call for reparation, redistribution, reimagination, and

recreation. This last concept involves celebrating the joys of idleness and good work, thus inferring the concept of alienation in Marx's *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (2011).

Here, critics will target the book as having Marxist blinders. The authors mostly ignore the record of state socialism in devastating the natural and indigenous worlds. If capitalism came from violent conquest, can socialist history be separated from it? They subsume state-socialism with capitalist world-ecology, but the argument needs elaboration beyond two claims, as follows: "For Stalin (as for the Americans), nature was 'an object to be manipulated... [and] an enemy to be subjugated'" and Mao's assault on the four scourges of fleas, flies, rats, and sparrows that contributed to the Great Chinese Famine of 1959-61 (p. 107-108). This raises a question that fundamentally haunts the book. That is, are capitalism and territorialism always congruent and never contradictory? What about the rich literature, including aspects of world-systems analysis that argue that capitalism could not have emerged within a world-empire? *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* must be matched by an equally incisive critique of the environmental and methodological consequences of state-socialism. However, that critique is not urgent, in my view, given the irrelevance of state-socialism as a real contemporary alternative. In contrast, capitalism rules, so the target of this book is aptly chosen.

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