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How Capitalism Puts a Price on Everything

Your first reaction to a book titled A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things that consists of 312 pages is to wonder if it is the first in a series of volumes since a single volume hardly seems capable of packing in everything from Ancient Egypt to the 2007 financial crisis. Yet, oddly enough, it does an excellent job by using a singular perspective, namely how “cheapness” has become the sine qua non for class society’s dubious advances over millennia.

Co-authors Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore are exponents of what they call world-ecology. While I am not familiar with Patel’s work, I have been reading Moore ever since he was a graduate student and posting to the World Systems Network, a defunct mailing list that was home to scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank. World systems theory always made a lot of sense to me since it was premised on the idea that Europe was responsible for what Frank called the development of underdevelopment in Asia, Africa and Latin America. What Moore contributed to this theory was the ecological dimension. Colonialism involved massive changes to nature that were universally destructive even though they helped to make cheap commodities available to the colonizers.

As a paradigm of the co-dependency between ecological despoliation and the capitalist production of cheap commodities, Patel and Moore refer to the extraordinary history of the island of Madeira throughout the book. Known mostly today as a fortified wine that originated there, it was also a place where sugar was first produced at the expense of everything else on the island—including human beings and nature.

Madeira was a small island off the northern coast of Africa that in the 15th century became the first specimen of the kind of ruin now present on a global scale that the UN called attention to this year. In 1455, a traveler from Venice wrote that “there was not a foot of ground that was not covered by great trees.” (Madeira means “wood” in Portuguese). By 1530, the island had become entirely deforested. Initially, the trees provided the lumber for Portuguese ships with the denuded forest being turned into wheat fields that provided cheap food for the mother country. But the real engine of capitalist growth was in sugarcane production.

In the 1460s and 70s, wheat farmers on Madeira now began to grow sugar exclusively. Like the palm oil plantations in Indonesia and the Midwest’s soybean monoculture, forests were a hindrance to the production of cash crops. What started in Madeira soon spread to the New World, with islands like Jamaica and Barbados providing the sugar that became part of the triangle of early capitalism: sugar, rum and slavery.

Besides cutting down all the trees, the sugar barons on Madeira also rerouted the island’s rivers to supply irrigation to sugarcane fields, with African slaves providing the cheap labor needed to break through rock faces for irrigation channels. The trees that remained on the island



were to be cut down to provide the fuel needed for the ovens that boiled and distilled sugarcane into molasses and sugar.

Once Madeira was turned into an ecological wasteland, the profiteers moved westward into the Caribbean and Brazil. As the authors point out, “capitalism didn’t leave Madeira—it reinvented itself.” They sum up the outcome: “Europe’s wealthy ate the sugar, and sugar at the island.”

As for the seven cheap things mentioned in the title, they consist of the raw material of class society from time immemorial: nature, money, work, care, food, energy and lives. A major asset of “A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things” is being able to show the connection between the ancient world and our world today in terms of how cheap things are produced and why. Suffice it to say that capitalism is based on the inexorable drive to cheapen everything. Food needs to be cheap in order to keep a factory worker alive, just as energy in the form of gasoline needs to be cheap to keep him or her mobile enough to get to work on time. When the price of energy overshoots a tolerable threshold, you get the Yellow Vests in France or the Caracazo uprising in Venezuela when gasoline prices rose by 100 percent over the weekend of February 25-26 in 1989. The capitalist class does not really care if producing sufficient quantities of gasoline will hasten the arrival of drought, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods that can kill millions. It can barely figure out how to manage its affairs until the end of 2020 so don’t expect them to be thinking about 2090, let alone the next three billion years on Earth until the sun burns itself out.

In some ways, the authors are simply returning to the kind of analysis Frederick Engels put forward in “The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” that was intended to be part of a larger work titled “The Dialectics of Nature” that was never finished, unfortunately. Reading Engels now reminds us of how prescient he was:

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons.

Given the mounting biodiversity crisis that the UN has warned about recently, it is vitally important for eco-socialists to grasp the totality of social and economic contradictions

that confront us today. In Engels's day, there was little sense of the consequences of unfettered capitalist production. Climate change was in the making but scientists lacked the tools, especially computers, to predict what greenhouse gases might do to the planet in the long run. Nor was there any concern about uncontrolled hunting and fishing that could threaten the extinction of animals at the top of the food chain necessary for the survival of life beneath them. Perhaps Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" was a subconscious treatise on such irrational conduct by the top predator: homo sapiens.

In addition to Madeira, Christopher Columbus also serves as a leitmotif throughout the book reminding us of the consequences of producing cheap things. Quoting from his journals and tellingly from the accounts of his colonizing expeditions, the authors summon up a monster who symbolizes the predatory character of capitalist production. They write:

At the core of these novel solutions was global conquest, not just by guns but also by making new frontiers, at once cultural and geographical. Life and land between money and markets became ways to treat and fix crises across the span of capitalism's ecology. At the heart of this relation with nature lay profit, and its poster child is Christopher Columbus. Columbus, who crops up in every chapter as an early practitioner of each of the strategies of cheap things, came to the Caribbean with not just the conqueror's gaze but an appraiser's eye—one sharpened in Portuguese colonial adventures off the shores of North Africa. He launched a colonization of nature as pecuniary as it was peculiar. European empires, beginning with the Spanish and the Portuguese, obsessively collected and ordered Natural objects—including "savage" human bodies—always with an eye on enhanced wealth and power. Columbus's cataloging of nature to evaluate (put a price on) it was an early sign that he understood what Nature had become under early modern capitalism.

"A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things" is not only essential for understanding how capitalism puts a price on everything but a pleasure to read as well. Despite their considerable scholarly credentials (there are 56 pages of references), they write in a breezy and often witty style. For eco-socialists trying to reach a broader audience, this book should be read as a style guide.

While this is meant much more of an attempt to have a conversation with the authors than a criticism, I do want to conclude with some observations about the book's conclusion.

While I would never want to put the authors in the same category as eco-modernists, their take on ecological limits differs from my own.

On the question of cheap nature, they warn against what amounts to a kind of neo-Malthusianism that presents in the form of ecological footprints, carrying capacity, etc. They write, “Overpopulation is, in other words, defined by a calculation of carrying capacity. To take these carrying capacities for granted is to blame future environmental destruction on the poor and working classes in the Global North and Global South as they struggle for some sort of parity with those who program the footprint calculator. Such Malthusian thinking makes despair inevitable, and inevitably racist.”

While this is certainly true if it is a reference to, for example, the Sierra Club’s support for immigration controls in the early 2000s, it does not confront the very real problem addressed by degrowth advocates like Jason Hickel whose article “Is it possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries?” is written from a Marxist perspective rather than the inside-the-beltway world of corporate-backed environmentalism. Hickel is also the author of a book titled The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions that certainly could not be mistaken for malign neglect of the poor.

Hickel’s point is that even under the best of circumstances, in which the target is meeting the basic needs of countries using sustainable energy sources and development standards that would meet with the approval of Food First, there is simply a brick wall that will be hit before such goals are met.

Using data from a variety of well-established research institutions, he states:

Adopting a higher poverty line makes it more difficult to end poverty while remaining within planetary boundaries. At the US\$7.40 line, Belarus is the most promising, with minimal social shortfall (a score of 0.98) excluding qualitative indicators, but its average biophysical score is 1.64. Of the nations that achieve all non-qualitative social thresholds, the most biophysically efficient is Oman, which has an average biophysical score of 2.66. In other words, given the existing best-case relationship between resource use and income, achieving a good life for all with an income threshold of US\$7.40 per day would require that poor nations overshoot planetary boundaries by at least 64% to 166%.

There are solutions to such problems but they cannot be achieved under capitalism. Before the environmental crisis reached the proportions it has reached today, it was

customary for Marxists to say that when the profit motive is eliminated, the world could enjoy abundance that has never been available to the ordinary citizen. The implication was that everybody on earth could live as a GM employee did in 1955. Perhaps our best hope today is to be able to survive past the 21st century. If that requires using public transportation, living in apartment buildings rather than split-level homes like in “Father Knows Best”, and maybe even becoming vegans, I’d support that kind of socialism especially if the alternative is every last lion and tiger dying off, with homo sapiens next in line.

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