

Socialism or barbarism: Can the world afford capitalism any longer?

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Introduction

We in this country remember April 1916 as a time of no mean significance; indeed the first few months of this year have been consumed with debates over the legacy of the 1916 Easter Rising and the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. While it is understandable, given that this is the ninetieth anniversary of the Rising, that we should be consumed with our own parochial history, it is also worth remembering that April 1916 witnessed the publication of another significant document, indeed arguably one of far greater significance in the grand scheme of things. Published in the aftermath of the implosion of the Second International and in the midst of the bloody carnage of the First Imperialist World War, Rosa Luxemburg's "Junius" pamphlet confronted its readers with the stark choice, for want of a better term, between socialism and the advancement of the human race, or barbarism and the steady slide into oblivion.¹

In the ninety years since the publication of her pamphlet the need to positively respond to the challenge Luxemburg presented has become even more urgent. In our own time we see many of the advances of human history crumbling before our very eyes; we see the revival of human slavery, both in the exploitation of migrant workers and in the annual trafficking of tens of thousands of women for exploitation in the so-called "sex industry"; we see it in the degeneration of popular culture into the inane worship of celebrity and the encouragement of obsessive consumerism; in the re-emergence of "creationism" on the curricula of schools in the most "advanced" countries of world; and in the degeneration of shared social life, which reduces the majority of humanity to little more than subjects of "the market," as opposed to citizens of a democracy or any positive form of society.

Tackling each of these tendencies, among many others, will be central in the construction of a more humane, egalitarian and sustainable society. However, I want to focus here on another of the cancerous offspring of capitalist "development," one which may, quite literally, pre-empt any efforts at overcoming the other problems mentioned above before we have the chance to address them. I am referring to the environmental degradation wrought by capitalism, which may very well bring down the theatre before we have had the opportunity to play out the great drama of our time.

The environmental costs of capitalism

The expansion of capital, i.e. persistently increasing the wealth of economic elites, is the *raison d'être* of the capitalist system of social relations. In the rapacious pursuit of this end capitalism has, over the last hundred years, wrought immense environmental degradation on the global commons. The environmental costs of capitalist expansion are evident in a wide variety of areas, including "global warming, destruction of the ozone layer, removal of tropical forests, elimination of coral reefs, overfishing, extinction of species, loss of genetic diversity, the increasing toxicity of our environment and our food, desertification, shrinking water supplies, lack of clean water, and radioactive contamination,"² to name but a few. For present purposes I propose to focus on the first problem highlighted in this depressing litany

and use it as a microcosm for understanding the more general relationship of capitalism to nature.

“Global warming” refers to the observed increases in the average temperature of the Earth’s atmosphere and oceans over recent decades. The most authoritative scientific opinion on the subject, the 2001 Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), found that the average global temperature had risen by 0.6°C over the last one hundred years. Furthermore, the report noted that most of the warming observed was as a result of human activities, specifically the increase in greenhouse gases (such as carbon dioxide and methane) released into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels, land clearing, and other such activities. The report went on to predict that average global temperatures may increase by between 1.4 and 5.6°C over the next hundred years. Such increases, should they be realised, would have significant adverse effects on the wider biosphere, resulting in rising sea levels, changes in weather patterns, and increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, heat waves and hurricanes, among other things.³ If current trends in relation to the emission of greenhouse gases continue unabated, “global warming could potentially spiral out of control, threatening the survival of human beings.”⁴

The obvious and rational way of avoiding such future crises is to reduce the levels of greenhouse gas emissions so as to mitigate the adverse effects that such gases have on the global biosphere. The problem in this regard is that the modern capitalist economy is inextricably bound up with the consumption of fossil fuels (and hence the production of greenhouse gasses) and therefore cannot countenance placing constraints on the highly profitable global dependence on fossil fuels.⁵ Indeed, the very modest attempt at reducing global carbon emissions that is (or was) the Kyoto Protocol regime has been scuppered, on the one hand by the world’s leading polluter and global hegemon, the United States, opting out of it and on the other by the inclusion of a mechanism which allows for the trading of emission permits, thus facilitating the subversion of the goal of emission reduction.

No solution through capitalism

It may be thought that the mere fact that capitalist expansion up to the present has resulted in global warming, among other things, is no reason to assume that we must make a clean break with the system in order to address and overcome this problem. This view, however, fails to take account of the internal logic of the capitalist system and the structural constraints which it places on any social impulses for reform. I want to mention here a few of the reasons why capitalism is incapable of rebottling the genie of environmental degradation which it has conjured.

First and foremost in this regard is capital’s inherent drive towards self-expansion, or more tangibly the incessant pursuit by global economic elites of ever greater and faster (that is, returned in a shorter time-frame) profits. As Foster notes, “high demand for fossil fuels is . . . encouraged by the high profits to be obtained from [it], including capital to structure the energy economy around fossil fuels.”⁶ In this light the biggest obstacles and opposition to more fuel-efficient automobiles comes from the “whole automobile-petroleum complex, i.e. the most powerful corporations in the world.”⁷ Thus, given the ceaseless pursuit of profit by economic elites (the expansion of capital), and the fact that capital accumulation in modern capitalism is inextricably bound up with the exploitation of fossil fuels, to say nothing of its exploitation of the rest of the environment, the Fabian fallacy that capitalism can mend its ways if only directed towards the “right” policies is unsustainable.

Another characteristic of capitalism which makes it highly unlikely that we can overcome the environmental problems engendered by it is that the capitalist social order is inherently

authoritarian. To say this is not to discount the significant qualitative distinctions which exist between different forms of government (fascism, liberal democracy etc.). Notwithstanding this, it is still fair to characterise capitalism as authoritarian in the sense that it concentrates economic power, hence real power, in the hands of numerically insignificant segments of society, in turn rendering the vast bulk of humanity subject to the whims of minorities. The low-level democracy of the West, the illusion of majority rule concealing the uninterrupted service of ruling-class interests, is an inadequate counter to this concentration of economic power. The consequence of this is that the real decisions of significance, about whether or not greenhouse emissions are to be reduced, for example, are taken by and in the interest of economic elites, regardless of the needs of the vast bulk of humanity.

Finally in this regard, and related to the authoritarian character of capitalism, the role of the state has to be considered. In the idealised form the state is the neutral arbiter of conflicts within a given society, the manifestation of the popular will and servant of the national interest. In this light the environmental policies necessary to combat global warming, for example, can be imposed on economic actors by the state, in which case the election of the “right” government, or a series of such governments, can result in the taming of the beast and beginning of a solution to the ecological crisis facing us. However, we on the left have long since shattered this establishment canard and have insisted from the beginning that the “executive of the modern state,” where the real power in the state resides, “is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” Hence the belief that government will serve the common good by limiting the options open to a given state’s economic elites is a gross inversion of reality, and the complete opposite is quite often the case.⁸

The solution in a radical departure

The solution lies in removing the power for directing the economic life of the world from the hands of tyrannous minorities and placing it under the democratic control of the vast majority of humanity. In this sense, then, the solution to our pressing environmental problems lies in transcending the current social system. If the current “metabolic rift” stems from the insatiable and rapacious character of constantly expanding capital, then the solution lies in the suppression of capital, and the suppression of capital can only be achieved, in Comrade Charlie’s words, through the expropriation of the expropriators. As Marx himself was aware, only a society of “associated producers” can “govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way,” in a way that respects and sustains the natural biosphere and in consequence makes possible the sustainability of human civilisation.

Socialism stands, if nothing else, for the suppression of capital and the expansion and deepening of democracy. Socialism implies a break with the greedy, exploitative, dehumanising and destructive short-term logic of capitalism; it envisages a society in which the social, cultural, political and economic life of the community is conducted in the interest of all its members. In this sense it is the very antithesis of a social order geared towards the ceaseless pursuit of profit, expansion, and the logic of the bottom line. If, at the very least, we are to stave off the dire consequences of the ecological whirlwind generated by reckless capitalist expansion, let alone move towards ameliorating its effects on the biosphere, we need to begin organising our world around different logics: around the principles of equality, solidarity, democracy and sustainability.

This proposition may seem unobjectionable, nay even desirable, but at the same time it may also appear as so much untested utopian hot air. Nothing could be further from the truth. In our own time we have seen the differing consequences of nature confronting a society run on the logic of capitalism and one run on the logic of socialism. Similar hurricanes to those

which battered New Orleans last year (exposing the Third World beneath the neon veneer of the most advanced society on earth and leaving thousands of America's poorest citizens dead, homeless and displaced) periodically touch down on the shore of a little island in the Caribbean called Cuba. When an especially powerful hurricane, Ivan, hit Cuba in 2004 the government managed to move 1½ million people to safety, and not a single person died. What is the difference? One country runs on the logic of the market,⁹ while the other is organised around a "humane, just [and] participatory" system of social relations.¹⁰

Conclusion

In our age, "TINA" reigns supreme.¹¹ We labour under what one commentator has referred to as the "dictatorship of no alternatives,"¹² in which the world we inhabit is presented as the only possible one open to us. Given the environmental destruction wrought by capitalist expansion, the threat that this poses to the continued existence of human civilisation and the inability of capitalism to address these problems, such a dispensation, taken at face value, is most troubling. However, we are not here today to acquiesce in established orthodoxies; rather we are here to remember the life and ideas of man who was the antithesis of the TINA mentality.

James Connolly's life and struggles represented the ceaseless pursuit of an alternative to the tyranny of capitalism in his time, and it is in drawing on the legacy of his life that we must confront the anarchy and destructiveness of capitalism in our own time, and further rise to the challenge posed to us by Luxemburg. This is the immense task we are faced with today: the need to effect a break with the destructive logic of capitalism and inaugurate a new local, national and global order founded on the principles of democratic control of every facet of life by the popular classes. In the light of this, then, it is apt to sum up by paraphrasing Connolly himself and noting that our task, most modest indeed, is to reclaim the earth.

Notes

1. See Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 369.
2. John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* (Monthly Review Press, 2002), p. 12.
3. For a useful and accessible summary on this topic see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_warming.
4. Brett Clark and Richard York, "Carbon metabolism: Global capitalism, climate change and the biospheric rift," *Theory and Society*, 34 (2005), p. 416.
5. In this regard it is worth noting that six of the world's top ten industrial corporations are involved primarily in the production of oil, gasoline, and motor vehicles. See Michael Parenti, "Why the corporate rich oppose environmentalism", available at www.stateofnature.org/corporateRich.html.
6. Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism*, p. 19.
7. Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism*, p. 38.
8. Support for this proposition, were it needed, can be found in the US government's decision to fund research into a number of bizarre technologies, with a view to sidestepping the issue of greenhouse emissions, rather than tackling it head on and adversely affecting the interests of that country's economic elites. Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism*, p. 20–21.
9. See Michael Parenti, "How the free market killed New Orleans," 3 September 2005, available at www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2005-09/03parenti.cfm.
10. Richard Levins, "Cuba's example," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 16 (4) (2005), p. 6.

11. TINA: the prevalent orthodoxy that “there is no alternative” to the present social order.

12. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *What Should the Left Propose?* (Verso, 2005).