


Introduction

Capitalism and the Environment

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Capitalism is the dominant global form of political economy. From business-as-usual resource extraction in the Global South to the full-scale takeover of the United Nations 2012 conference on Sustainable Development in Rio, Brazil by corporations advocating the so-called green economy, capitalism is also one of the two dominant modes of thinking about, experiencing, and apprehending the natural world. The other dominant mode is environmentalism. There are many varieties of environmentalism, but the dominant mode we refer to is “mainstream environmentalism.” It is represented by powerful nongovernmental organizations and is characterized by its closeness to power, and its comfort with that position. This form of environmentalism is a well-meaning, bolstered by science, view of the world that sees the past as a glorious unbroken landscape of biological diversity. It continuously works to separate people and nature, at the same time as its rhetoric and intent is to unite them. It achieves that separation physically, through protected areas; conceptually, by seeking to value nature and by converting it to decidedly concepts such as money; and ideologically, through massive media campaigns that focus on blaming individuals for global environmental destruction.

Contemporary capitalism and contemporary environmentalism came of age at the same time. The extensive global decolonization movements in the 1960s and early 1970s altered the ease by which capitalists and corporations could access new sites for natural resources, land, and labor; the three key ingredients for keeping capitalism growing. This, coupled with the oil crisis, and the realization that access to cheap and easy oil—the commodity that drives capitalist expansion—could no longer be taken for granted, ushered in the age of flexible, highly mobile capital that we have today. The next decade gave rise to corporations that were lean and seeking deregulated environments from which to draw resources. If they could not have open and free access to natural resources, land, and labor through collusion with colonial oppressors, they would seek to influence new, and old, nation-states, to deregulate access to everything.

The global environmental movement, while having roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth century preservationist writings of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir and conservationist writings of Gifford Pinchot, also came to maturity in the 1960s and early 1970s. *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, *The Limits to Growth* was published in 1972, and that same year the crew of the Apollo 17 spaceship took the first clear picture of an illuminated earth from space. Also in 1972, the United Nations held its first conference on the environment, bringing together governments from both the so-called “developed” world and the newly decolonized states. These events ushered in the decade when the United States and other global powers passed environmental legislation at an unprecedented scale (e.g., the clean water act, the endangered species act, and the clean air act in the United States).



The early environmental movement was one that directly challenged its age mate—capitalism—with critiques of the corporate and state-driven disasters from Bikini Atoll to Three Mile Island, as well as with serious public education campaigns around pesticide use, acid rain, environmental racism, and the overconsumption of oil, gas, and electricity in the Global North. But in the 1980s, environmentalism took a step back from a posture of radical critiques of corporations, states, capitalism, and the collusion between the three, and began to focus its energy on the poor people living in highly biologically diverse places that seemed to be on the edge of capitalism.

Environmentalism went south, so to speak, and inserted itself into the power struggles over environmental governance in the recently decolonized nations. While there, it got snugly in bed with its old enemy, corporate capitalism. Because environmental organizations wanted to usurp the power of state regulatory agencies, based on their assumption that they knew better how to conserve biological diversity than did peoples in the Third World, and because corporations wanted deregulation so that they could continue to find cheaper and cheaper access to land, labor, and natural resources, they made perfect partners.

We live in a world where almost nobody with real international power challenges corporations, their actions, or the logic of contemporary capitalism. Mainstream environmentalists have in some cases, for example in places where gold mining or hydroelectric dam construction have destroyed important ecosystems, taken a back seat to corporate power in exchange for state promises to conserve other so-called “valuable” areas. In other cases, they have brought corporate leaders directly onto the boards of directors of their organizations and have taken gigantic grants from corporations, always arguing that the money in no way makes them less effective or unethically accountable to corporations. It is rare today to see a large-scale and powerful environmental organization challenge corporations or their logics. Indeed, the environment has become just another vehicle for capitalist accumulation and, mostly, it feels that there is nobody there to stop this.

The six papers in this edition of *Environment and Society: Advances in Research*, attempt to clearly describe the contemporary relationship between capitalism and the environment by reviewing five distinct and important literatures in the social sciences.

In “Dollars Making Sense: Understanding Nature in Capitalism,” James G. Carrier steps away, slightly, from the standard review-style article we publish in *Environment and Society* in order to analyze the connection between capitalist enterprises and people’s understandings of things that happen in and happen to what they perceive as “the environment.” Carrier works through how commercial pressures make certain activities, specifically those intended to alleviate hunger and those intended to conserve the environment, present problems and humans’ surroundings in particular kinds of ways. He then shows how these representations are simplified in ways that are meant to encourage certain forms of thought and action.

Two of the articles attend to questions about neoliberalization and the environment. In “Neoliberalism and the Production of Environmental Knowledge,” Rebecca Lave works through the literature on environmental appropriation, commercialization, and privatization in order to connect these processes to environmental science. Drawing on a wide interdisciplinary range of work, she carefully shows how neoliberalism—as a philosophy and as a set of policies—affects knowledge production both inside and outside the academy. In “Fisheries Privatization: Capitalist Logics and the Remaking of Fishery Systems,” Courtney Carothers and Catherine Chambers connect multiple processes of commoditization with the social and material production of the human-marine relationship. Specifically they work through the literature on privatization to show how the marine world comes to be envisioned and acted upon by both businesses and conservation-related actors.

The next two articles address tourism as a vision and practices that bring together the ecological and economic realms for both capitalists and activists. In “Contradictions in Tourism: The Promises and Pitfalls of Ecotourism as a Manifold Capitalist Fix,” Robert Fletcher and Katja Neves examine the relationship between ecotourism ventures and capitalist ideology, practice, and structure. In particular, they explore the role of ecotourism in attempts to solve some of the central contradictions in capitalist accumulation. Drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary literature they argue that ecotourism, when advocated as a development fix for poor people living in highly biologically diverse places, can be seen as an endorsement of particular forms of “fix” to these inherent problems and contradictions. In “From a Blind Spot to a Nexus: Building on Existing Trends in Knowledge Production to Study the Co-presence of Ecotourism and Extraction,” Veronica Davidov shows how ecotourism and multiple forms of research extraction not only exist in the same places at the same times but also how they coexist in what she calls a “nexus.” With this, she asks why this coexistence, and in some cases a reliance on the same social and ecological histories, has been underanalyzed in the social sciences and how we might work to understand this phenomena both methodologically and theoretically.

Finally, Yda Schreuder’s article, “Unintended Consequences: Climate Change Policy in a Globalizing World,” connects capital, climate, and policy. Schreuder examines the effects of the cap-and-trade system in the European Union as one example of the unintended consequences of capitalist responses to environmental problems.