



## The Ecological Rift

*John Bellamy Foster , Brett Clark , Richard York*

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Humanity in the twenty-first century is facing what might be described as its ultimate environmental catastrophe: the destruction of the climate that has nurtured human civilization and with it the basis of life on earth as we know it. All ecosystems on the planet are now in decline. Enormous rifts have been driven through the delicate fabric of the biosphere. The economy and the earth are headed for a fateful collision--if we don't alter course.

In **The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth** environmental sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York offer a radical assessment of both the problem and the solution. They argue that the source of our ecological crisis lies in the paradox of wealth in capitalist society, which expands individual riches at the expense of public wealth, including the wealth of nature. In the process, a huge ecological rift is driven between human beings and nature, undermining the conditions of sustainable existence: a rift in the metabolic relation between humanity and nature that is irreparable within capitalist society, since integral to its very laws of motion.

Critically examining the sanguine arguments of mainstream economists and technologists, Foster, Clark, and York insist instead that fundamental changes in social relations must occur if the ecological (and social) problems presently facing us are to be transcended. Their analysis relies on the development of a deep dialectical naturalism concerned with issues of ecology and evolution and their interaction with the economy. Importantly, they offer reasons for revolutionary hope in moving beyond the regime of capital and toward a society of sustainable human development.

## The Ecological Rift Details

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# From Reader Review *The Ecological Rift* for online ebook

## **Yanick Punter says**

Interesting overview of thought. I did not find the part with dialectics profound or really necessary. The solutions put forward in the book, I feel fall short. And I do not know any good solutions to the issues at hand in any way.

I would still recommend this book however.

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## **Lucindamanning says**

Powerful and cogent analysis of our current climate change and environmental dilemmas, i.e. our ongoing ecological breakdown between humanity and nature and the impossibility of solving this coming planetary catastrophe within the historically rapacious global capitalist system.

As the authors write, "Ironically, most analyses of the environmental problem today are concerned less with saving the planet or life or humanity than saving capitalism--the system at the root of our environmental problems." They quote Derrick Jensen, "When most people in this culture ask, 'How can we stop global warming?' that's not really what they are asking. They're asking, 'How can we stop global warming without significantly changing this lifestyle [or death style, as some call it] that is causing global warming in the first place?' The answer is that you can't. It's a stupid, absurd, and insane question."

As Annie Leonard, author and host, *The Story of Stuff* says: "This book is desperately needed, because it ends any illusion that we can solve our pressing environmental crises within the same system that created them. With tweaking the system--using incremental market-based strategies--off the table, we can put our efforts into genuine, lasting solutions."

And this review comment by Derrick Jensen, author, *Endgame* and *The Culture of Make Believe*: "This important book treats industrial capitalism as the globally destructive force that it is, and powerfully points the way toward, as the authors put it, 'universal revolts against imperialism, the destruction of the planet, and the treadmill of accumulation.' We need these revolts if we are to survive. This book is a crucial part of that struggle."

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## **Adam says**

Some notes: I've been skimming or skipping some of the chapters that seem like jargon-heavy, name-dropping intra-disciplinary quibbling (*Dialectics of Nature* and *Marxist Ecology*, *Sociology of Ecology*, etc). Perhaps those chapters are in some way different from the rest of the book, but I'm not interested or qualified to give them a fair shake at this point.

I was really excited when I found this book at the London Review Bookshop. I had heard Naomi Klein accolade JB Foster's works before, and noted that this book has accolades on the covers from Klein, Jensen, and Annie Leonard, which to me makes this an unusually star-studded book jacket. I was even considering applying to U of Oregon to study with the dude, before even reading the book. Some of the reason I was so excited: there are essays in this book that treat soil erosion from a Marxist perspective, and that just seemed too good to be true.

Maybe it was. There are a lot of things I really enjoy about this book. Like the only other work of env. sociology I've read, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*, Foster, Clark, and York come up with a ton of great imagery and pithy names for the socio-ecological phenomena they describe - the Metabolic Rift, the Treadmill of Accumulation, the Midas Effect, etc. There are also just a few tremendously enlightening concepts - the Jevons Paradox and the Paperless Office Paradox not least among them. These concepts illustrate precisely why capitalism (or industrial civilization itself, potentially) will not become sustainable through so-called "dematerialization" - eco-friendly substitutes and efficiency improvements.

However, I also found a lot of things to take issue with about this book. Rather than a book in its own right (which it very definitely sells itself as), *The Ecological Rift* is more of a collection of modified essays that had been written for other things in the past. Which might have been a fine choice, except that the essays were not sufficiently modified to make them make any sense as a book. Many concepts are introduced as though the reader were entirely unfamiliar with them in chapter after chapter, making for a lot of redundant, simplistic explanation and a relative paucity of in-depth exploration of any concepts.

This seems to be a problem to some extent endemic in sociology. The authors are enamored with theory and find it acceptable to write at length about theory without demonstrating their theories with any substantial case studies. This is rather annoying to me. For this reason, I've avoided the most explicitly theoretical sections. The passages about Marx in particular often seem to stand uncomfortably in Marx's shadow rather than on his shoulders.

Potentially for the same reason, Foster et al's arguments also become dangerously thin and shallow at times. When they are critiquing a position they disagree with (which is often), they often simply mock their opponents, writing as though the arguments they were critiquing were patently absurd to their readers, so much so that they didn't even need to point out how so. This was tolerable when he was dealing with mainstream economists (yes, saying that a 50% loss in agricultural production would be anything but catastrophic is absurd), but using the same approach on people like Paul Hawken, James Lovelock, and deep ecologists (he refrains from naming Derrick Jensen) made me lose a substantial amount of respect for the authors. I may or may not agree with Foster et al's critique of positions like Hawken's, but it's kind of hard for me to say, since their critique is not well-developed. And to me, as a deep ecologist, his shallow "critique" of that system of thought seemed to caricature it grossly.

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## **Paul Rack says**

Wow, really important. This book is a Marxist perspective on ecological crises, showing how it all comes down to capitalism's mania for profit at any cost. The "rift" in the title is Marx's observation that because of industrialization, Britain's agricultural land was becoming depleted of nutrients. (People were kicked off the land to work in factories. Vegetables were being sent to the cities and reduced to waste that became

pollution. Normally that waste would replenish the soil. With the soil being depleted, industrialists had to find supplies of Nitrogen elsewhere in the world and basically steal it. Thus a rift in the natural cycle by which the land is replenished.) The authors also point out another 19th century theory that shows how advances in the efficiency of coal-burning furnaces didn't save any coal at all. They actually cause more coal to be used. (Like the way WalMart claims to be going "green" by saving energy in their stores... which savings they invest in building more stores so even more energy is used than before.) Capitalism is built on the false notion that the earth and its resources are a "free gift" and in principle inexhaustible. Therefore, these costs don't ever make it into the equation. Plus, current capitalism dismisses the surplus theory of value, and reduces all use value to exchange value, thus further blinding itself to the true costs of doing business. There are some parts of tough-going through the details of theory. But on the whole the book is readable and informative. The conclusion is that without a revolution we are toast. They depend on exploited workers in the Third World for this. My read on this is... we are toast.

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### **Senor says**

Despite my frustration with the repetitive nature of this book (collection of essays) I learned a fair amount and (unfortunately?) was left feeling even more pessimistic about the possibility of having a remotely soft landing. Hey, this book was written in 2010 and I I couldn't help reflecting on the lack of progress we have to show for the past 6 years. A country and world divided by fear, the false hope and soon to be disillusioned mass of Sanders supporters as the US faces a choice between two evils, the hottest years on record for the past decade+, etc... Yeah, not a lot to be optimistic about, in fact we're worse off with basically "time's up" on the clock.

Still, back to this book, there are excellent insights regarding Marx's dialectical views along with legitimate & powerful strategies to free the world of capitalism and it's destructive consequences - OK, maybe not so legitimate given how likely the they will be peacefully adopted.

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### **Nick Mather says**

This book is sure to have many foes as it argues for a socialist response to our current environmental crisis. There is no question that our capitalist system is responsible for the degradation of the environment so we need an economic solution to ecological disaster. The main point this book makes is we cannot rely on the same system that got us into this situation to get us out.

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### **Yonatan says**

Dense read, but absolutely worth it! While book is not just focused on climate change, you can get gist of it via his article here: <https://monthlyreview.org/2012/12/01/...>

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### **Rui says**

This book gives me a reason to prefer economics over ecology. The authors called up big names, attached

big institutions to them, and then mocked them with Trump words. The books flow one name to another name. Endless names and titles. Instead, they could've given a great deal of evidence, solid analysis, or even real-life stories. Disappointed.

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