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Reviews

Survival Is the Question

- Reviews section -

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Critical ecology publications are finding a growing audience in the United States, as is evident in the success of Naomi Klein's book This Changes Everything. Within this field there is also an increasing interest in ecosocialist thought, of Marxist inspiration, of which the two authors reviewed here are a part.

One of the active promoters of this trend is Monthly Review and its publishing house. It is this group that has published the compelling book, Facing the Anthropocene by Ian Angus, the Canadian ecosocialist and editor of the online review Climate and Capitalism.

His book has been lauded by the general public as well as by many within the scientific community, such as Jan Zalasiewicz and Will Steffen. Among the principal proponents of this outstanding work on the Anthropocene are Marxist researchers like Mike Davis and John Bellamy Foster, and ecologists on the left like Derek Wall of the Green Party of England.

From the work of such thinkers as chemist Paul Crutzen, who won the Nobel Prize for his research on the destruction of the ozone layer, geophysicist Will Steffen and many others, the conclusion that we have entered into a new geological era that is distinct from the Holocene (the era of the past 12,000 years) is beginning to be accepted.

The term "Anthropocene" is most often used to identify this new epoch, which is characterized by the profound impact of human activity on the earth-system. Most experts agree that the Anthropocene began in the mid-20th century, when a "Great Acceleration" of destructive changes were triggered. In fact, three-quarters of all CO₂ emissions have been produced since the 1950s.

The term "Anthropos" does not mean that all humans are equally responsible for these drastic and disturbing changes – researchers have clearly shown the overwhelming responsibility of the world's richest countries, the OECD countries, in shaping these events.

We also know the consequences of these transformations, notably climate change: most temperature rise, increasing extreme climate events, elevating ocean levels, the drowning of large coastal cities, etc. These changes are not gradual or linear and can be both abrupt and disastrous.

It seems to me, however, that this part of Facing the Anthropocene is less developed. Although Angus mentions these dangers, he does not discuss in a more detailed and concrete way the threats that weigh on the survival of life on the planet.

What are the established powers doing – especially the governments of the rich countries principally responsible for the crisis? Angus cites the fierce response of James Hansen, the North American NASA climatologist, to the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, saying, "a fraud really, a fake.... It's just bullshit."

Indeed, even if all the countries present at the conference keep their promises, which is very unlikely considering that not a single sanction is expected to be fully met by the Paris agreements, we still will not be able to avoid an increase in the planet's temperature past two degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels.

Time Running Short

Although 2 degrees Celsius is the officially accepted limit to avoid an irreversible process and unbridled global warming, the true safe limit will be 1.5 Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) as even the participants of the conference have admitted. Naomi Klein's conclusion: there is already barely time to avoid a catastrophic warming, but not in the framework of capitalism's existing rules.

Ian Angus shares this diagnosis, and dedicates the second part of his book to the root of the problem: fossil capitalism. If governments and large corporations continue to throw coal into the boilers of this run-away train of development, it is not the fault of "human nature." Rather, it is an essential demand of the capitalist system itself.

This system cannot exist without growth, expansion, accumulation of profits, and consequently environmental destruction. Yet this growth, which has been founded for almost two centuries on fossil energy, concentrates more of its investments today on further expanding fossil fuel production than any other sector. This doesn't even touch on the generous subsidies provided by many governments — oil reserves alone receives more than fifty trillion dollars.

We can't count on the good will of Exxon and company to renounce this mantra. This is not to mention other branches of production — automobiles, planes, plastics, chemicals, highways, etc. — all closely associated with fossil capitalism.

The one percent who control as much wealth as the remaining 99% of humanity carry great economic and political power. This is the reason for the resounding failures of the "international conferences" on climate change, which always end, in James Hansen's words, in "bullshit."

What, then, is the alternative? Angus notes that we can no longer return to the Holocene: the Anthropocene has already begun and cannot be reversed. The climate change already underway will last thousands of years. There is an urgency to slow down the suicide race created by this system, through a mass movement that encompasses all those who are ready to join in combat against fossil capitalism and climate change.

We hope for the capacity, in the future, to replace capitalism with a unified society: ecosocialism. The April 2010 Peoples' Conference against Climate Change and in Defense of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia, which brought together tens of thousands of indigenous groups, farmers, unionists and workers, is a concrete example of this movement.

What happens to supporters of socialism? Ian Angus notes that the USSR was an ecological nightmare, particularly after Stalin eliminated the Soviet ecologists. (This section also deserves further development.)

Some socialists criticize what they call the "catastrophism" of ecologists, while others think that ecology is a diversion from the "true" struggle of the classes. While it's true that ecosocialists are not a uniform mass, they do share the conviction that an effective socialist revolution can only be ecological and vice-versa.

They also agree that we need to buy ourselves time. The fight to decelerate disaster, by obtaining partial victories, both against capitalist destruction and for an ecosocialist future, is a part of the same integrated process.

What are the chances of such a struggle? Angus soberly observes that there is no guarantee. Marxism is not a sort of determinism. Marx and Engels wrote in The Communist Manifesto that the fight of the classes can either lead to a revolutionary transformation of society or to "the common ruin of the contending classes."

In the Anthropocene, this “common ruin,” the end of human civilization, is a real possibility. The ecosocialist revolution is by no means inevitable. We will need to be capable of bridging the gap between the spontaneous rage of millions of people and the beginning of an ecosocialist transformation. The author of this admirable and stimulating book concludes (with Bertolt Brecht): “If we fight, we may lose; if we don’t fight, we have already lost.”

Green God’s Failure

Richard Smith doesn’t discuss the Anthropocene, except for one telling moment: “Nature doesn’t run Earth any more. We do...It’s time we make conscious and collective decisions.”

Smith’s book is much more than a critique of “green capitalism,” as the title suggests. It comprises a collection of essays in an order that is a little improvised and somewhat repetitive, but on the whole the text is admirable in its coherence and rigor.

One could begin with this diagnosis: in May 2013 the observatory Mauna Loa in Hawaii found that the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere exceeded 400 ppm. The last time that levels were this high, the average global temperature was 3-4C warmer than today, the Arctic was iceless, and sea levels were 40 meters higher. The places that we now call New York City, London, Shanghai were all under the sea.

Climatologists constantly issue warnings: if we do not stop greenhouse gas emissions soon, we will inevitably reach uncontrollable and irreversible global warming, which will result in the collapse of our civilization and the possible extinction of our species.

Yet, what’s happening? Business as usual. Not only have we failed to reduce emissions in recent years, but they are continuing to increase and each year break the previous records. We continue to extract fossil energy, and are willing to go far to find more, from the depths of the ocean to the oil sands. In short, the dominant spirit can be best summarized with King Louis XV of France’s remark: “After me, comes the flood.”

Who is to blame? Like Ian Angus, Richard Smith clearly names a culprit: the capitalist system with its insatiable and irrepressible need to “develop.” This growth is not simply a mania, a fad, or an ideology. Instead, it is the rational expression of the demands of capitalist reproduction.

“Grow or die” is the law of survival in the jungle of the cutthroat capitalist market. Without overconsumption, there is no growth, and without growth there is massive unemployment, crisis and ultimately ruin.

Even an economist as “dissident” as Paul Krugman ultimately resigns himself to consumerism. He writes, “There is a strong element of rat race in America’s consumer-led boom, but those rats racing in their cages are what keep the wheels of commerce turning.”

This is all simply the logic of the system – from the failure of the international conferences, to “green capitalism,” to the exchange of CO₂ emission rights, to ecological taxes, etc, etc. As the orthodox, neo-liberal economist Milton Friedman approvingly expressed, “Corporations are in business to make money, not to save the world.”

Richard Smith’s conclusion: if we want to save the world, we must dismantle corporate power over the economy. “Either we save capitalism or we save ourselves. We can’t save both.” Capitalism is a runaway train, which strips the

continents entirely of their forests, devours the ocean's flora and fauna, disturbs the climate, and is advancing rapidly towards ecological catastrophe, and, consequently, ruin.

Hence Smith's criticism of the delusions of economists and environmentalists who support "green capitalism." There are many in the United States but also in France — worshippers of this "god that failed." Hence the need to reject the rules of the market and of private property.

What to do? The solution does not exist within the structure of the market or in technological advancement. We must drastically reduce, in a rather short period of time, the use of fossil energy, not only for the production of electricity, but also in transportation, heating, industry, production-oriented agriculture, etc.

And as Exxon, British Petroleum, General Motors, etc. have no desire to commit economic suicide — and none of the capitalist governments intends to force them — society has to take control of the means of production and distribution, and reorganize the productive system entirely. This can be done by guaranteeing decent employment to all workers whose businesses are destined to either disappear or reduce drastically.

It is not enough to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy. Production and consumption must be substantially reduced (or "de-growth"). According to Richard Smith, three-quarters of the goods produced today are unnecessary, harmful, or suffer from programmed obsolescence.

If, instead of manufacturing products for profit, manufacturing worked to satisfy human needs, then we could produce useful, durable, repairable, adaptable products that could be used for decades — like my own 1962 VW, which is still running.

Smith adds: "Priority could be given to the social and ecological needs that today are neglected or sabotaged, such as health, education, habitat (set to ecological norms), and healthy and organic food. We could work fewer hours and have longer vacations."

But this implies a radical break with the capitalist system, which would involve depriving private owners of economic control and opting instead to plan democratically. In other words, ecosocialism. Planning committees could be elected at the local, regional, national, continental, and sooner or later, international levels.

Additionally, major decisions could be made by the population itself: Car or public transportation? Ban nuclear energy or use it? And so forth. It is a question of replacing the "invisible hand" of the market — which can only perpetuate business as usual — with the visible hand of society's democratic decisions.

Such democratic planning is the very antithesis of the sad bureaucratic caricature that was "central planning" under the now-extinct USSR. It was perfectly authoritarian, if not totalitarian. But this is the project of another civilization, an ecosocialist civilization.

Getting There

Richard Smith's point is perfectly coherent. The only remark I would make is the absence of mediation. How can we move from the suicidal train of capitalist civilization to an ecosocialist society? This question merits further examination.

The starting point here can only be current mobilizations against this system, which Naomi Klein refers to as Blockadia.

These struggles include the commitment of Canadian Native People and environmentalists against the mining of tar sands, the fight in the USA (blocking the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines, for instance), those in France who combat shale gas (provisionally victorious), those in the indigenous communities of Latin America who fight against oil and mining multinational companies, etc.

All of these struggles – local, regional or national – are essential in several aspects: a) they slow the race towards ruin; b) they reveal the value of collective struggle; c) they foster anti-systemic (anti-capitalist) consciousness.

Fortunately, in the last paragraph of his book, Richard Smith takes interest in the concrete dimension of the struggle for ecosocialism by welcoming the rise, throughout the world, of struggles against the destruction of nature, against dams, pollution, overdevelopment, chemical and thermal power plants, predatory extraction of resources, the imposition of GMOs, the privatization of communal land, water and public services, capitalist unemployment and precariousness.

Today, we have a growing wave of global “awakening” – almost a massive global upheaval. This insurrection is still in its infancy, and its future is unsure, but its radical democratic instincts are, Smith believes, the last and best hope for humanity.

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