

Book Review

The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth

by John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. \$17.95 U.S., paper. ISBN-13: 978-1-58367-218-1. Pages 1-544.

The Politics of Climate Change

second edition, by Anthony Giddens. Cambridge, London: Polity Press, 2011. \$ 21.95 CDN., paper. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5515-4. Pages: 1-256

Reviewed by Samantha Wilson¹

The maintenance of an earth system in which humanity can safely exist hangs in a delicate balance. Recent evidence suggests that society has exceeded the regenerative capacity of the planet by 30 percent (Foster, Clark and York, p.18). What's more, if we continue down this path we risk irreversible environmental damage which stands to threaten humanity and the biodiversity of future generations. Despite increasing precariousness of our social and natural environments, governments in advanced capitalist countries have yet to implement policies which adequately address the climate crisis. The Harper Conservatives' cancellation of the Kyoto Protocol is just one example of this. This raises a few important questions: what policies can adequately address the severity of the climate crisis? What is required to bring about a more egalitarian and sustainable society? In this review I will compare and contrast two recent contributions that address the above questions: *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* by John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York, and *The Politics of Climate Change* by Anthony Giddens. For reasons that will be explored, I contend that the arguments made by Foster et al., provide not only a stronger analysis of the climate crisis but proposes stronger remedies for rectifying ongoing ecological degradation.

At the core of *The Ecological Rift* is an analysis of the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between capitalism and the environment. The authors explore "various *radical ecologies* that challenge the *treadmill of*

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capitalist accumulation, with the object of generating a new relation to the earth” (Foster, Clark and York, p.8). Foster et al., argue that humanity has become alienated from its natural environment. Drawing on Marx’s ecology, they argue that the separation of one’s inorganic from organic nature poses a serious threat to both the basis of life and society as a whole. Foster, Clark and York make the case that, despite the severity of the environmental crisis, mainstream social science has become all the more removed from radical, even critical approaches that might offer substantive alternatives. Rather, in their view, much environmental social science is premised on what they refer to as ‘ecological modernization’. This approach champions technological fixes and market-based solutions as providing a way out of the crisis, rather than addressing the structural and systemic roots of capitalism – that is to say, unequal forces and relations of production. Foster et al., stress that the ecological and social crises humanity faces are one and the same. In their view, a solution to the ecological rift will necessarily require an anti-capitalist project: one that transcends “a society based in class, inequality, and acquisition without end” (Foster, Clark and York, p.47).

Foster, Clark and York argue that cut-throat competition and the quest for capital valorization necessarily exploits the natural environment resulting in the undermining of the world’s ecosystems. They counter orthodox economists which contend that market-based mechanisms, including complex financial instruments and potentially catastrophic technological fixes (e.g. nuclear power) will result in a more sustainable capitalism. Rather, the authors explore various paradoxes which lie at the root of capitalist development. They illustrate this, for example, by way of a discussion of the Jevons Paradox. It was William Stanley Jevons’ contention that increased efficiency in coal use would not - as had been assumed - lead to decreased demand “because improvement in efficiency led to further economic expansion” (Foster, Clark and York, p.171). This is, of course, contradictory to the assertions of ecological modernists who champion sustainable technologies as the key to dealing with the climate crisis. And this is where the work of Foster et al. contrasts most sharply with that of Giddens.

Rather than challenge the structural and institutional shortcomings of capitalism, Giddens’ so-called “realist” approach contends that we must work within the capitalist system and established institutions in hopes of alleviating climate change. In his view the primary agent of change must be the state, which would provide the legal parameters and institutional configurations through which technological advancements

and market outcomes could be based. A key theme throughout Giddens' work is the centrality of the state in mitigating climate change. Giddens argues that the state must "act to counter business interests which seek to block climate change initiatives" (Giddens, p.93). He proposes that the state and capital work together to promote more sustainable development. In my view, however, such a contention is not only idealistic but naïve. Not only does this fail to recognize the role of the state in capitalist societies as the superintendent of capitalism but incorrectly assumes that the state's role is to act as the neutral guarantor of the public good.² Rather, the primary role of capitalist states is to facilitate capital accumulation and to legitimize unequal class relations. Thus it is difficult to envision how states might *counter* business interests rather than extend and deepen them, often at the expense of both the public good and environment. Moreover, *The Politics of Climate Change* suffers from what are irreconcilable contradictions. If it is true, as Giddens argues referring to the Keynesian era, that "...centralized planning of the economy, supposed to overcome the irrationalities of capitalism, proved quite unable to cope with the complexities of a developed economic system" (Giddens, p.95), how is such a view reconciled with his state-centric solution to the climate crisis? Like Giddens' confused understanding of the role of the state in capitalist societies, far from challenging the vested power of capital and the anti-democratic institutions through which they prowl the world looking for profit making opportunities, the prescribed solutions fall far short of what is actually needed.

Not only is a return to a pristine era of so-called state regulations on capital not possible but the era of neoliberalism has worked to thoroughly embed market compulsions into the overall architecture of society. Indeed, throughout his analysis, Giddens reveals himself to be a great apologist for the capitalist system seeking to justify a market-oriented approach to climate change rather than challenge it. Giddens (p.213) contends that the only solution to the climate crisis lies in further economic growth on a large scale. But unlike Foster et al., he does not envision economic development of an alternative kind, one where the means of production are held in common and ecological sustainability are placed front and centre. It is this apparent contradiction – that between capitalist development and environmental degradation – that is missing throughout *The Politics of Climate Change*. In line with Foster et

2 For an expansion of this argument see the important study by Panitch, L. and S. Gindin. (2012). *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. London: Verso.

al., only a radical, socialist-inspired alternative to the climate crisis may offer a way out of the crisis that is capitalism.

In sum, Giddens' *The Politics of Climate Change* falls disappointingly in line with what Foster et al., earlier referred to as the school of 'ecological modernization'. Meaningful social change will not derive from technological fixes or a cult-like belief in the infallibility of market mechanisms. Giddens ignores this reality, while Foster, Clark and York attempt to uncover the cause of the climate crisis: capitalism. The continuation of business as usual represents a significant threat to the livelihood of future generations. As such, an alternative anti-capitalist project is of the utmost necessity. This is undoubtedly a great challenge, but it is certainly feasible as the daily struggles of countless millions around the world can attest to.