



Review of *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature and the Future of the Planet* by Raj Patel and Jason Moore.
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The goal of this book, as its title indicates, is to provide a guide to capitalism and its history through the lens of seven “cheap” things that are key to how the modern capitalist world was made. This guide is necessary, according to the authors, because an intellectual shift is imperative if humanity is to address what they call the “state shift” in the biosphere that climate change represents. Sadly, however, the authors note that the ecology that produced this state of affairs has also produced humans who “are ill-equipped to receive the news of this state shift,” even to the point that “it’s easier for most people to imagine the end of the planet than to imagine the end of capitalism” (2). Thus, the cultural hegemony that makes such destruction seem normal or inevitable must be challenged.

The style and organization of the book are intended to move the discussion about how the current situation came to be and what can be done out of the academy, engaging a wider audience. The authors see it as “a contribution to an ongoing conversation about the fate of this planet” (xiii), but one that will disrupt and challenge “age-old verities”—hence, the catchy title reminiscent of myriads of simplistic self-help books and other popular guides to living that are sprinkled through best seller lists. Chapters are kept relatively short. Along with an introductory overview, there is a



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chapter for each of the seven cheap things: Nature, Money, Work, Care, Food, Energy, and Lives, followed by a very brief conclusion. The book totals a mere 212 pages of text. The use of historical vignettes and details, however, is grounded in extensive scholarship and references detailed in endnotes, in some cases totalling well over 100 for a single chapter. The 72 pages of notes and references are testimony to the breadth of research.

The basic premise of the book rests on several concepts, a number of which have appeared in co-author Jason Moore's earlier work. World ecology is introduced as a way "to think through human history in the web of life" and to "see how humans make environments and environments make humans through the long sweep of history" (38). The period since the 1400s is characterized as a Capitalocene rather than an Anthropocene in terms of its impact on the planet and what the authors call the "web of life." Understanding the nature of this system means understanding capitalism "not just as an economic system but as a way of organizing relations between humans and the rest of nature" (3). Concepts and binaries such as Nature and Society, they argue, which emerged in sixteenth century Europe, both obscure reality and their own violent, colonial and capitalist origins. Cheapness is a set of strategies by which the relationship between capitalism and the web of life is managed to deal with myriad crises, principally by mobilizing various forms of work and then providing as little compensation for it as possible. Key to cheapening is the role of frontiers, or "encounter zones" between capital and all forms of nature, including human life. They are also sites where:

Power is exercised—and not just economic power. Through frontiers states and empires use violence, culture and knowledge to mobilize natures at low costs. It's this cheapening that makes frontiers so central to modern history and that makes possible capitalism's expansive markets (19).

Their ideas about the seven cheap things are often conveyed through the clever use of examples, such as Chicken McNuggets which embody a system of industrial scale production and consumption of chickens, reliant on cheap energy and cheap poultry workers.

Following the world-systems approach of Wallerstein and others, they focus on the long 16th century beginning with the decline of feudalism, emphasizing interlinkages between climate change, agriculture and disease. Using the island of Madiera in the 1400s and the development of sugar cane production, they show in the introduction how the seven things were cheapened, addressing the role of Genoese bankers, deforestation, and the access of slaves and workers to cheap food as factors implicated in the production of sugar. The emergence of sugarcane

plantations as a method of production is likened to early factories. This history is interwoven with current examples and data on everything from unpaid “women’s work,” to the role of sugar in diets and related diseases.

The seven chapters follow a similar pattern, each beginning with a historic vignette of the long 16th century, in one case a rebellious, indigenous woman, accused and executed by the Spanish for being a witch, and in other chapters, excerpts from the diaries of Christopher Columbus—himself, as they aptly demonstrate, a major strategist of cheap things.

The chapter on Nature outlines the emergence of ideas about the nature-society binary, which turns nature’s activity into a set of things that laws and science could dominate and enclose. There was, as they note in a number of chapters, organized human resistance to these changes, whether in the form of urban and rural peasant riots in the mid -1500s, or from indigenous peoples and slaves on the frontiers. Each time, capitalism had to respond and adjust to this resistance as part of an “engine of change in the capitalist ecology” (29).

The chapter on Money outlines the origins of cheap (i.e. low interest) money which is a “secure denomination of exchange that can be relied upon to facilitate commerce, controlled in a way that meets the needs of the ruling bloc at the time” (68). It ranges through the history of silver mines and bank lending to monarchs, to finance wars in the 15th century, to Wall Street and Goldman Sachs today in an effort to better understand contemporary finance capitalism. The chapter on Work includes a fascinating discussion of how some humans and their labor are categorized as part of society and some as part of nature, especially in the frontier. Within the dominant ideas of Christianity, a moral justification had to be found for the exploitation and enslavement of non-Muslim human beings who were without sin and merely ignorant of Christ. The papacy proved useful in providing the permissions and justifications that assisted both the development of “modern slavery” and the destruction of indigenous peoples by rendering them lower in the human hierarchy, as savages, i.e. outside society. However, Christian conquerors had a duty to ensure that indigenous groups under their rule could, through their acceptance of Christ, and their unpaid labor, move up that hierarchy over generations. The chapter overlaps with the seventh one on cheap Lives, both of which provide an understanding of how the jurisprudence of “misery and race” developed.

Not all the chapters are equally engaging and convincing. The chapter on Care, for example, focuses largely on what we might call the social reproduction of labor through the oppression of women and the unpaid work of care. The chapter meanders, however, through the ideas of Locke to a rumination on a painting by Gainsborough of a prominent estate owner and his wife. Though the painting is seen by the authors as a “tableau of capitalist world ecology,” for the reader, this discussion is largely a distraction from the book’s main arguments. Other chapters, such as that on

Food, do an excellent job of outlining the development of commercial, and later industrial-scale, cheap food, especially meat, and its close link to cheap energy and, through low food prices in urban areas, to cheap work. It is here that the challenge of the current climate crisis will come home to roost. As they note, it will destroy the current food system, and the resulting end of cheap food will be a major threat for capitalism.

Cheap Energy provides a history of fuel from peat bogs to oil, and outlines the link between energy and labor productivity, cheap food, and cheap work. The end of oil and the fossil fuel era does not, according to the authors, signal the end of the cheap energy regime. From corporate finance's involvement in alternatives and carbon offsets, to hydro-electric dams and lithium batteries, the authors argue that cheap energy requires state intervention and violence, and is deeply rooted in the idea of cheap energy as a national imperative.

The final cheap thing, Lives, is discussed in chapter seven, where the role of the state is linked to overcoming and limiting, through its coercion and social control, resistance of people who fought back as their lives were cheapened. As the authors note "this cat and mouse game of resistance, strategy and counter-strategy has been the history of capitalism's ecology" (180). Thus capitalism and the modern state have shaped and re-shaped each other. It is only at this point that they discuss coercion and consent, and the role of hegemony, particularly through the idea of nation. This leads into a fascinating discussion of the role of states and other authorities in "policing blood" and the myriad categories of humans which the Spanish refine in the Americas, and which builds the basis for more modern versions of scientific racism. They argue however, that even with the achievement of national independence, new states are still imbedded in a capitalist ecology, and the trajectory of nationalism towards emancipatory democracy remains uncertain, especially in the present period with its angst around increasing economic insecurity.

For many readers, the least satisfying section of the book may well be its very brief concluding chapter which, at a mere six pages, provides a cursory review of signs of change and hope, embodied in a number of counterhegemonic movements of resistance, including those of indigenous peoples and peasant farmers. The authors are more critical of environmental approaches to the problem that use concepts such as the earth's carrying capacity, or measurements of the ecological footprints of groups, which, they argue, blames "future environmental destruction on the poor and working classes in the Global South and North as they struggle for some sort of parity with those who program the footprint calculator" (203).

What then is the alternative? Patel and Moore acknowledge that there is no single response to capitalism's challenges or a single recipe for transformation. Rather, they offer a set of broad approaches that form a "reparative ecology," which actively remembers how capitalism's ecology came to be and provides a path to learn to act differently within the web of life. These five "R's"—

recognition, reparation, redistribution, reimagination and recreation—offer a way to think, they argue, “beyond a world of cheap things” (212). Given their convincing argument about capitalism’s strategies and ability to adjust and compensate, what might be the basis of this optimism? Even in the area of food, where we have seen the emergence of movements at local and transnational levels challenging the agro-industrial cheap food regime with influential concepts like food sovereignty, the ability of corporate capital to coopt resistance is an ever-present feature of capitalism, as Lawrence Busch (2018) notes. Two aspects of the current period, however, may provide a potential for system transformation: one is the scale and severity of the threat that climate change poses, and the second is that capitalism is running out of frontiers, which have historically been crucial to the cheapening process.

The book’s co-author Raj Patel, proved very adept at publicly expounding his ideas to broader audiences in his previous two books, *Stuffed and Starved* and *The Value of Nothing*; this is evidenced by his popular and engaging university lectures, presentations, and appearances on mainstream and social media. While this book does not provide a neat solution to the challenge of capitalism, it has in its writing and, hopefully in further efforts to communicate and promote its ideas, brought the conversation to a wider audience, thus contributing to counterhegemonic efforts. While the reader may not agree with all the analyses and claims in this book, its sweeping historical scope, engaging examples, and accessible style make it a useful contribution broadening people’s understanding of capitalism and the destruction it has brought to the web of life.

References

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