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**COMING TO TERMS
WITH NATURE**

Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS
with Barbara Harriss-White, Elmar Altvater and Greg Albo

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PREFACE

This, the 43rd volume of the *Socialist Register*, has been one of the most challenging to put together, even though – or because – it deals with what may well prove to be the most important issue facing socialists in our life-time. This is not just a matter of the complex science and technology involved in understanding the looming environmental crisis, or the variety of problems involved. Over the past dozen or so years the *Register* has published some twenty essays pertaining to the environment, several of which have been widely cited. But when we decided to devote a whole volume exclusively to ‘coming to terms with nature’ the greatest challenge we faced was that the absence of a strong eco-socialist left is reflected in a corresponding lack of coherence in eco-socialist theory. We see this volume as contributing to the development of a better eco-socialist understanding of contemporary capitalism, and the kind of politics that could lead to an ecologically sustainable as well as a democratic socialism.

Marx and Engels, and some of their socialist contemporaries and successors, paid some attention to the damage done by capitalism to the environment, and Marx in particular was far ahead of his time in understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between society and nature. But until very recently these issues have not been a main focus of socialist thought, or practice; productivism often trumped other concerns – and by no means only on the part of Soviet or Chinese managers. Socialist theory and analysis have been primarily concerned with understanding the logic of capitalism and its successive forms of existence, the relations of class power which are indispensable to it, and ways of resisting and replacing it with something better. The idea that environmental problems might be so severe as to potentially threaten the continuation of anything that might be considered tolerable human life has been entertained, but usually only as a fairly remote, if frightening, possibility. It has rarely been treated as something potentially imminent, needing to be considered as a matter of urgency, nor has a legacy of irreversible ecological damage bequeathed to future generations been seriously ‘factored in’ to our thinking about the problems that any future socialist society will have to cope with.

But the speed of development of globalized capitalism, epitomised by the dramatic acceleration of climate change, makes it imperative for socialists to deal seriously with these issues now. It is true that scientists differ over the rate at which carbon dioxide emissions are leading to global warming. Some think that a 'tipping point' has already been passed at which a vicious circle of effects will from now on speed up climate change beyond anything that even drastic measures to reduce carbon emissions can ameliorate. Others think that the rate of change will be slower, although still faster than any measures like the Kyoto Protocol, or any technological breakthrough yet envisaged, can significantly affect. But even this more optimistic view implies potentially devastating consequences for hundreds of millions of people due to rising sea levels, changes in deepwater ocean flows, the loss of meltwaters from high mountain ranges, and droughts and floods affecting food production throughout much of the world. And while climate change is the most general environmental effect of capitalist growth, it is far from the only one: the world is scarred by increasingly severe regional disasters due to the overuse of water, trees and soil; epidemics caused by fast-mutating viruses and antibiotic-resistant bacteria, resulting especially from factory-farming; the concentration of toxins in the food chain – the list is endless. The effects of all this are multiplied by the relentless urban concentration of the world's population, more and more of it into desperately impoverished and dangerous slums. Our opening essay presents vivid images that capture a broad sample of all this from Haiti to China to the Arctic.

The search for technological breakthroughs, primarily driven by concerns about 'peak oil' in relation to capitalism's dependence on fossil fuels – a dependence which Elmar Altvater argues here is in any case inescapable – encounters the problem of the further consumption of non-renewable resources. Hydrogen as a fuel takes non-hydrogen energy to produce – and so does equipment to trap solar energy and convert it to electricity. The same applies to technological fixes such as the scheme recently proposed by the Livermore Laboratory in California to reduce global warming by deflecting sunlight from the earth – 55,000 mirrors in space, each bigger than Manhattan – which would consume vast amounts of non-renewable energy and materials, and would undoubtedly also have vast unintended consequences. As it is, current rates of growth on a world scale and the ecological degradation this causes are generating new levels of conflict over access to fuel, water and other resources, including wars which are already having appalling human consequences.

Nonetheless, it is important to try to avoid an anxiety-driven ecological catastrophism, parallel to the kind of crisis-driven economic catastrophism

that announces the inevitable demise of capitalism. A more complex understanding of the role and nature of crises and contradictions is required. OPEC's Sheik Yamani had a point when he said 'the Stone Age didn't end because we ran out of stones'. Without at all sharing such complacency, we need to recognize the dynamism and innovativeness generated by capitalist competition and accumulation – 'value in motion' – that could yet allow capitalism to 'prevail' (as one of our essays puts it). Indeed capital is already feeding on 'the environmental crisis', from carbon trading under Kyoto, to the garbage industry's 'green commerce', to the way corporate agriculture privileges biotechnological solutions over existing food cultures or land reform. All this is dissected in essays in this volume, as is the commodification of more and more areas of nature and social life – everything from water to our own DNA, and even the process of policy making itself. This means that if capitalism 'prevails' it will be more and more authoritarian, because people will resist the kind of inequality that will be generated, threatening as it will their access to the basic requirements of life.

Capitalists and politicians everywhere now rhetorically endorse calls for global cooperation to reduce the threat to the biosphere. But the best general measure of capitalist behaviour is how financial markets fall when slower – let alone reduced – growth rates are contemplated. And the best general predictor of government action is the interests of capital, both national and global, and the way electoral politics are grounded in growth-based consumerism. In the foreseeable future there will not be a genuine global policy to halt global warming; and as more and more states are tending to be reconstructed on the American neoliberal model they are progressively losing their capacity to plan effectively for a rational policy even at the national level, as our essay by Barbara Harriss-White and Elinor Harriss on renewable energy in the UK makes painfully clear.

The protection of society at large has only ever been secured by pressure from popular mass movements operating on nation states. The contemporary environmental movement, impressive as it is, lacks many of the sources of strength that class movements previously had, which were key to the achievement of many environmental advances in the past, especially in the provision of municipal hygiene and infrastructure. There has always been a working class and socialist environmentalism, long predating the current environmental justice movement. Part of the ecological task today is, as it was in the past, to secure clean water, transportation, sanitation and housing, although the task is now compounded by a formidable new range of issues – climate change, fossil fuels, new pollutants. But these too have distributional and class aspects, for the most part blithely ignored by the current turn of much of the

ecological movement, especially in the North, to 'market ecology'.

The challenge to be overcome in this respect was one of our concerns in planning this volume. It was put very clearly by one of our corresponding editors, Hidayat (Gerard) Greenfield, writing from the frontlines of the environmentalists' and workers' struggles in Indonesia:

We often seem to be caught between a 'corporate control/greed' paradigm on the part of mainstream NGOs and social movement and community organisations, and 'nothing new' on much of the radical Left. The first sees ecological destruction as the consequence of the irresponsible behaviour of big, greedy corporations. There is often little systemic understanding of this corporate behaviour, and solutions tend to rely on specific kinds of regulation, accountability, corporate social responsibility, etc., ignoring the compulsion of the market and the powerful force of commodification. Nonetheless, these approaches have generated very important campaigns against major corporations (e.g. Union Carbide/Bhopal, Monsanto/GMOs, Freeport/mining destruction, Dow Chemical/Agent Orange, etc.) and often involve sustained community mobilisation and action. The 'nothing new' approach treats ecological destruction as integral to capitalism – but saying 'it's capitalism; it's the system' not only fails to mobilise people, but may in fact discourage them – leaving them feeling overwhelmed, confronting the entire system: everything. When we try to fight everything, we end up fighting nothing. There also seems to be a smugness, an arrogance, about an answer that says: it's capitalism, stupid! The response – in terms of organised class struggle – is left unexplored, or is lost in slogans. And the flipside of this is to describe every environmental protest as an expression of anti-capitalist (now anti-globalization or anti-imperialist) resistance – with everyone laying claim to these local protests against ecological destruction as if they were part of their own movement. And here again we are left to wonder what precisely is the contribution of the socialist Left.

Our hope is that this volume will contribute to overcoming this problem, at least by insisting that the preservation of the ecosphere must become an integral part of the socialist project, by treating the issues involved in sufficient depth to challenge readers to decide what they think about them, and incorporate them into their analysis of contemporary events. The left, fighting for the improvement of the standard of living of the world's masses and

for emancipation, must also fight for a new relation of humankind to nature, developing in the process a new democratic and participatory environmental politics, in sharp contrast to those contemporary environmentalists who have embraced ‘market ‘solutions’. Without pretending to do anything as ambitious as outlining an alternative agenda, we have tried to present different socialist perspectives that reflect contested and even opposing positions. And we want to point to the need to deal with immediate questions of practice posed by the vast range of environmental conflicts around the world today.

Which of these conflicts should socialists take up as strategic priorities? With what currents within the environmental justice movement should socialists be allied? Can such alliances avoid the kind of eco-populism that, as our essay on Africa shows, fails to recognize that under the pressures of capitalist competition petty commodity production can be as environmentally degrading as large-scale production? And should it not also be recognized that just as the traditional socialist commitment to industrialization and growth can now be seen to have been problematic, so is the eco-populist nostalgia for imagined pre-capitalist forms? And more specific questions arise. What alternatives are there for energy production and/or conservation that make social sense even within capitalism? Should we adopt an uncritical approach to the current dramatic trajectory of economic growth in China, despite what one of the essays in this volume demonstrates to be its devastating ecological effects? If not, how do we propose that living standards should be raised in lower-income countries? Should socialists not only call for a massive redistribution of the world’s wealth but also make clear that this must entail a reduction of consumption in the North? What vision do we have of alternative ways of living for working-class people, beyond pointing to their alienation and frustration within the vicious circle of ‘producing more, selling more, consuming more’?

Answers to these questions need to speak to the near future, and will only come through developing the new environmental politics we have called for, as taken up by the three concluding essays in the volume. Not the least important point they make is that answers to these questions will also have to be compatible with a socialist strategy for a post-capitalist world. This must include the indispensability of planning for any ecologically viable socialist society. It is time to reclaim planning from the failed practices of authoritarian communism, as well from the giant corporations (and state financial agencies) that in fact rely on extensive planning to manage neoliberal capitalism. It is also time, as Greg Albo’s critical survey of current conceptions of eco-localism shows, to think hard about the kinds of local, national and global institutions – and the kinds of linkages among them – that will be re-

quired to make democratic planning possible, and to grapple with the many difficulties that democratic planning will always involve.

The question remains, how to get there. The 'red-green' alliances that were so widely discussed and proffered as a new opening for the left in the 1980s were largely still-born, despite this being a political moment when the conceptual project of eco-socialism was gaining ground. Some of the reasons for this may be found in the failure, in both democratic and eco-socialist terms, of the most important of the Green parties, the German Greens, which affords some crucial lessons in eco-socialist movement and party-building, as argued here by a former Green Party member of the European Parliament. The anti-globalization movement has seemed, in recent years, to provide the space to re-ignite an eco-socialist vision. But here all the difficulties of creating effective and democratic agencies of political mobilization, education and transformation are still to be solved.

We are very grateful to Barbara Harriss-White, Elmar Altvater and Greg Albo for their assistance in planning and editing this volume, and especially to Barbara Harriss-White who first pressed upon us the importance of the *Register* coming to terms with nature, and who organized a workshop at Oxford in February 2006 which allowed many of the contributors to this volume to meet and discuss their draft essays and the issues involved. This exemplifies the important role that our contributing and corresponding editors play in the production of the *Register*, and we are happy that one of our authors in this volume, Henry Bernstein, has agreed to join their number. We are grateful to all our authors for the effort they have put into writing their essays for this volume, while noting as usual that neither they nor we necessarily agree with everything in it. We want to thank Alan Zuege for his continuing role as the *Register's* outstanding editorial assistant; and we also owe thanks, as usual, to Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg at the Merlin Press. Finally, we want especially to thank Frederick Peters for overseeing the launching of our new website, <http://www.socialistregister.com>, including the archive of *Register* essays it contains, going all the way back to 1964.

In producing a volume devoted to coming to terms with nature we have continued to be astonished that so many mainstream environmentalists manage to separate the treatment of ecology from the analysis of the current political field of social forces, as if markets and technocracy can solve ecological problems without reference to politics and democracy. On the contrary, in grappling with ecological dilemmas, we have tried to relate them to the themes that have preoccupied the *Register* in recent years, above all neoliberalism and imperialism. No one around the world who shares these preoccupations can fail to want to honour a debt of gratitude to the work of Harry

Magdoff, who passed away at the beginning of 2006. Harry, whose first contribution to the *Register* appeared in its second volume in 1965, sustained a close and important relationship between it and the *Monthly Review* over the ensuing four decades, and played a leading part in fostering environmentalism, as one of MR's central concerns. We will miss him greatly.

LP

CL

June 2006

