



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY**

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 39

Issue 1 March - Special Issue on Declining
Significance of Race, Revisited

Article 13

2012

**Review of *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About
Capitalism: A Citizen's Guide to Capitalism and the Environment.*
Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster. Reviewed by Paul Saba.**

Paul Saba
Center for Biological Diversity

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Saba, Paul (2012) "Review of *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism: A Citizen's Guide to Capitalism and the Environment.* Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster. Reviewed by Paul Saba.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3658>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol39/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY**

Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism: A Citizen's Guide to Capitalism and the Environment*. (2011). Monthly Review Press. \$13.95 (paperback).

The *scientific* consensus is clear—our planet is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis, of which global climate change, the declining quality of our air, water and land, and the accelerated pace of extinction for many other species are only the most obvious features. The scientific consensus is equally clear that human activity on a world scale is the primary engine driving the crisis.

The consensus begins to break down, however, when it comes to the critical question of what long-term policies humanity needs to adopt to overcome this crisis. Are there solutions compatible with the existing international economic and political order, or does the environmental crisis require a fundamental transformation of our relationship to nature and of the way we organize human societies? Given the stakes involved, these are questions which should be of great concern to every social scientist.

Two scholars associated with the journal *Monthly Review*, Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, offer forthright and carefully-reasoned answers to these questions in their new book, *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism*. Their conclusion, simply put, is that “environmental destruction is built into the inner nature and logic of our present system of production and distribution.” Capitalism is the problem, not the solution to the environmental crisis.

The authors point out that there are nine essential “planetary boundaries/thresholds” that ought not to be crossed if we are to maintain the earth’s climate and environment in a healthy condition: (1) climate change; (2) ocean acidification; (3) stratospheric ozone depletion; (4) the biogeochemical flow boundary (the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles); (5) global freshwater use; (6) change in land use; (7) biodiversity loss, (8) atmospheric aerosol loading; and (9) chemical pollution. They then proceed to systematically document the numerous ways that the capitalist system is incapable of operating within these boundaries, and, by its very nature, must and has crossed them.

Capitalism, they argue, is a system “based on a single motive—the perpetual accumulation of capital and hence economic growth without end.” For capitalism, the environment is not “a place with inherent boundaries within which human beings must live together with earth’s other species, but a realm to be exploited in a process of growing economic expansion.”

To those who argue that a “green capitalism” is possible, Magdoff and Foster respond: “A system that has only one goal, the maximization of profits ... and which thus seeks to transform every single thing on earth into a commodity with a price, is a system that is soulless; it can never have a soul, never be green.” Capitalism, they go on to demonstrate, offers neither technological fixes nor market-based solutions adequate to preventing a future environmental catastrophe.

The authors do not deny that there are short-term policies that can be adopted *now* to lessen the capitalist system’s negative impacts on the environment. Indeed, they suggest a detailed array of such measures, including decreasing carbon emissions, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, promoting sustainable agriculture and providing greater protections for threatened and endangered species.

But they insist, if we are to save the planet, we must ultimately replace capitalism with an alternative social system in which the aims of ecology (sustainability) and socialism (substantive equality) will be realized. This alternative will unquestionably require people in the developed countries to live at a significantly lower level of resource use than they do now. But, Magdoff and Foster suggest, although this would be a life poorer in material goods, it could be a socially and culturally richer one, through the re-establishment of vital connections between people and between people and nature.

One criticism that can be made of this book is that the authors fail to engage the politics of the current U.S. environmental movement. With existing environmental laws under determined attack in a hostile Congress and many state legislatures, and the Republican Party in total denial of the climate crisis, much of the environmental movement now finds itself on the defensive. Publicly taking an anti-capitalist position would seem to threaten to marginalize it even further.

Thinking through how environmentalists can effectively integrate anti-capitalism into their day-to-day theory and practice is an urgent necessity. While this book does not address that problem, it provides valuable tools for others to begin to do so.

Paul Saba, Center for Biological Diversity

Tara Mitchel Mielnik, *New Deal, New Landscape: The Civilian Conservation Corps & South Carolina's State Parks*. (2011). The University of South Carolina Press. \$34.95 (paperback).

At present, when our national government seems incapable of responding to the current economic crisis and when responsive, forward-thinking leadership is either absent or thwarted, it is instructive and inspiring to read accounts of New Deal programs that worked. This carefully researched book provides a detailed account of the workings of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in one state.

Mielnik investigates nearly every aspect of the CCC's purposes, origins, organization, difficulties and accomplishments. Before the Depression, South Carolina had state forest land but no state parks. Between 1933 and 1942, the CCC built 16, all of which stand today. The Corps also established fire prevention and control stations and reclaimed land through reforestation. Famously, it provided work, education, healthcare and proper nutrition to a quarter million young men and a few women at a time when they were idle and hopeless. Meager as their earnings were, they were the greater part of enrollees' families income during the worst of the Depression.

In the first chapter, the author provides compelling details about the impact of the Depression on South Carolina, a rural, segregated state where agriculture—primarily share cropping for African Americans—and textiles were the principal sources of economic activity. Both were clobbered by the Depression; many lost their jobs and those who kept them had their wages severely cut. With this as background, Mielnik discusses the various New Deal programs and their interfaces. She then provides detailed information about the administrative structure of the CCC that was positioned under the War Department but