The Social and Natural Environment of Fossil Capitalism
COMING TO TERMS WITH NATURE

Editors: Leo Panitch and Colin Leys

SOCIALIST REGISTER 2007

Published Mar 19, 2009

Elmar Altvater
Abstract

The 'westernization' of the world has led to a pattern of production and consumption which builds intensively on the nearly limitless availability of matter and energy, sophisticated technology, and the existence of natural 'sinks' in which solids, liquids and gas-emissions can be dumped. The effects on the local, national and global natural environment are mostly negative. Global transportation is responsible for the consumption of large quantities of fossil energy and thus for an increase of CO2-emissions, thus aggravating the climate crisis. Labour-intensive production processes are located where labour is cheap, and environmentally harmful processes where environmental laws and regulations are least exacting, and so least expensive.
Human societies are part of, not separate from, the natural world, and have always affected it in different ways. Some of these, such as the creation of enriched terra praetasol in the Amazon, have been largely beneficial; others, such as deforestation in Iron Age Britain, less so. Either way, their effects even before industrialisation have often been considerable. Angus shows how capitalism has created the ability to affect the world far more profoundly and far more destructively than any previous human system, and that this destructiveness is an integral, structural aspect. That climate change is capitalism’s fault is not universally acknowledged by environmentalists. 1988, ‘Capitalism, nature, socialism: a theoretical introduction’. Capitalism, nature, socialism, vol 1(1) Andreas Exner, 2014, ‘Degrowth and demonetaization: the limits of non-capitalist market economy’. Capitalism, nature, socialism, vol 25(3) Naomi Klein, 2014, This changes everything. Simon and Schuster Marxism and Materialism in studying nature John Bellamy Foster, 2009, The ecological revolution, MR Press Andreas Malm, 2016, Fossil Capital, Verso. Elmar Altvater, 2007, ‘The social and natural environment of fossil capitalism’, Socialist Register, vol 43 Sustainability within