ECOLOGY, CAPITAL, AND THE NATURE OF OUR TIMES: ACCUMULATION & CRISIS IN THE CAPITALIST WORLD-ECOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I elaborate the possibilities for a unified theory of historical capitalism - one thatviews the accumulation of capital and the production of nature (humans included!) as dialectically constituted. In this view, the modern world-system is a capitalist world-ecology, a world-historical matrix of human- and extra-human nature premised on endless commodification. The essay is organized in three movements. I begin by arguing for a reading of modernity’s “interdependent master processes” (Tilly) as irreducibly socio-ecological. Capitalism does not develop upon global nature so much as it emerges through the messy and contingent relations of humans with the rest of nature. Second, the paper engages Giovanni Arrighi’s handling of time, space, and accumulation in The Long Twentieth Century. I highlight Arrighi’s arguments for a “structurally variant” capitalism, and the theory of organizational revolutions, as fruitful ways to construct a theory of capitalism as world-ecology. I conclude with a theory of accumulation and its crises as world-ecological process, building out from Marx’s “general law” of underproduction. Historically, capitalism has been shaped by a dialectic of underproduction (too few inputs) and overproduction (too many commodities). Today, capitalism is poised for a re-emergence of underproduction crises, characterized by the insufficient flow of cheap food, fuel, labor, and energy to the productive circuit of capital. Far from the straightforward expression of “overshoot” and “peak everything,” the likely resurgence of underproduction crises is an expression of capitalism’s longue durée tendency to undermine its conditions of reproduction. The world-ecological limit of capital, in other words, is capital itself.

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REFBACKS

• There are currently no refbacks.
Marx and the Historical Ecology of Capital Accumulation on a World Scale: Comment on Hornborg. Marx’s analysis of capital accumulation, labor, and the natural environment permits a holistic analysis which ties together the looming crises of world capitalism today — the deepening inequality between core and periphery, the growing more. In certain times and places, capital may be more interested in exploiting the natural environment than manufacturing commodities, but this hardly necessitates a concept of dual exploitation (labor and the environment) as Hornborg recommends. If two “concepts” of exploitation are justified, why not three, or five, or ten? Such theoretical eclecticism will not do.