

How Capital Heats the Planet: Introducing Fordulat Journal's Latest Issue on "Climate Change and Capitalism"

Tuesday 23 July 2019, by [KAPELNER Zsolt](#) (Date first published: 17 July 2019).

As temperatures rose close to 50°C in North India and water supplies were about to cease, and as a tremendous heat wave descended upon Europe, a sizeable crowd gathered on 18 June in the community centre/pub Gólya operated by a leftist cooperative in the middle of Budapest, Hungary. The occasion was the publication of the new issue of the social theory journal [Fordulat](#) ("Turn") on [Climate Change and Capitalism](#).

The journal was established in 1985 and has since been run by the College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory, a hub of Marxist and left-leaning students of social sciences that regularly publishes thematic issues on topics such as [Social Reproduction](#) or [Digital Capitalism](#). Each issue, produced in Hungarian, collects translations, book reviews and original papers on the topic in question.

Climate change and capitalism

In the journal's recent issue on climate change – as the editors at the event explained – their purpose was to move beyond the false paradigm of thinking about climate change as a collective blunder of mankind, the result of some innate short-sightedness that destined us to run into one such problem sooner or later. Instead, many of the pieces in the issue argue, climate change is the result of very specific and not at all inevitable historical developments closely tied to the unfolding of capitalism between the 16th and 18th centuries.

It is not mankind that heats the globe; it is a fossil-fuel-powered, ever-expanding capitalist economy. Capitalism, as Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg point out in their essay, began to use fossil fuels in the 19th century because of their reliability (sunlight is sometimes dim, the wind sometimes subsides, but coal can burn day and night) and flexibility (a steam engine can be set up anywhere, a watermill cannot), granting capitalists an upper hand in their struggle with largely sedentary working populations and states.

Furthermore, as Jason W. Moore and Attila Szigeti point out, capitalism, premised on unceasing growth and expansion, has always relied on the presence of cheap resources, including 'cheap nature', 'cheap reproductive labour', and the like. Capital's reign cannot expand at the rate it does, or possibly at all, unless factories are able to use the atmosphere, rivers, and soil as free garbage dumps; unless coal, oil, and other natural resources are considered buried treasure, free to any who unearth them.

It is no accident, therefore, that global capitalism produces climate change and environmental degradation in general. It flows from the very logic by which the system functions. For this reason, Moore and Szigeti argue, it is more fitting to describe the current era not as the 'anthropocene', i.e. the age in which humans left a permanent mark in the geological record, but rather the

'*capitalocene*', the age in which capital started to shape the very earth we inhabit.

The era of cheap nature, however, nears a violent end. As Moore notes, the price of many natural resources has been steadily increasing since the beginning of the century. Capital has almost run out of free nature to appropriate. The disruptive effects of climate change, increasingly unpredictable and hostile weather, the global turmoil caused by historic floods and deadly heat waves, climate migration in tremendous scales – all these will also pose major challenges to capital's ability to fuel endless growth.

A radical critique of fossil capitalism

If environmental degradation and climate change are inherently intertwined with the way in which contemporary global capitalism functions, then what should be done about it? One thing suggested by analysis included in *Fordulot* is that we should be sceptical of solutions that would employ capitalism to fix its own flaws. The commodification of greenhouse gas emissions, carbon-trading and other market-based solutions – analysed in depth in Steffen Dalsgaard's essay in the issue – may seem to allow us to save the planet and make money at the same time. But they tend not to hurt much the interests of powerful market players, often the largest emitters themselves, and they open up opportunities for '[entrepreneurs](#)' to play the system and make a quick buck without making much contribution to the common good. More importantly, however, they also fail to address the very cause of the climate crisis, i.e. the way we organize economic activity on a global scale. Hoping that greenwashed capitalism will solve the problem whose root is capitalism itself is confused at best.

What else then? 'Just abolish capitalism, then' is as simplistic as unhelpful. Clearly, some fundamental assumptions, practices, rules and institutions need to be overhauled to tackle this global problem. But which ones and how? In her essay 'Ecofeminism' Ariel Salleh suggests a radical change of perspective for an effective climate movement. Instead of trying to stop climate change by achieving technological mastery over nature while keeping up economic growth, we need to refocus on sustainability and justice, stewardship and reproduction.

To this end, we need to learn from feminist movements; analyses of reproductive labour, the exploitation of which is co-original with the exploitation of nature; indigenous movements, and the like. Szigeti further argues that the struggle against climate change cannot simply be based on a critique of economic production and social reproduction, but also needs to include a radical rethinking of science and technology – even though we can't hope for a magical techno-fix to save ourselves from the heat, we can't hope to move beyond fossil capitalism without the help of science and technology, and so we need to seriously ask the question: What would post-capitalist science look like?.

What is to be done?

Acknowledging the need for a change in perspective is one thing. Translating it into political action is quite another. What should be done and who should do it? On the face of it, the most radical answer is given by Andreas Malm's Climate-Leninist call-to-arms in his essay 'Revolutionary Strategy in a Warming World'. According to him, it is high time for the populations most threatened by climate change, i.e. fossil capitalism, to revive the spirit of 1917 and launch a global revolutionary movement against those in power, to demand a complete and immediate stop to fossil fuel extraction, deforestation, to rechannel resources towards renewable energy, etc.

Despite his forceful rhetoric and vigorous use of Lenin-quotes, Malm is quickly forced to realize that the political context of climate change and the October Revolution are worlds apart. There is no Winter Palace of global capital to storm for the most vulnerable people in South-Sudan, Bangladesh

or Burkina Faso – and he acknowledges this. Faced with this problem, he quickly reverts to Naomi Klein’s broad climate populism – instead of an outright Lenin-style revolution, we should simply strive towards connecting all social movements whose goals are bound to climate change in one way or another, thus creating the ‘broadest possible alliance’ for tackling this issue. We should also not forget putting pressure on governments and political parties, he adds.

Although I am a great admirer of Malm’s work (both his [Fossil Capital](#) and [The Progress of this Storm](#) are of immense value for any radical critique of capitalism and climate change), his suggestion in this particular essay seems to boil down to ‘let’s do anything and everything necessary to solve this problem’ which, we have to admit, is not as much a revolutionary strategy as a reaffirmation of common sense.

How should this common sense conviction be specified, then, in the light of the critiques presented above? Some look to bottom-up initiatives to take the lead. Philip McMichael, for example, examines the history of peasant movements and global agricultural movements such as Via Campesina. He argues that these movements, with their emphasis on locality, sustainability, food sovereignty and the like, prefigure institutional arrangements and values for a post-growth or even de-growth future as well as political strategies to fight for these goals.

Such initiatives that focus on locality may prove to be of great importance as the climate crisis likely worsens in the future. As Ágnes Gagyí shows in her review of Rebecca Solnit’s book [A Paradise Built in Hell](#), local communities are capable of incredible feats of altruism and solidarity in the face of catastrophes, as evidenced by the actions of locals after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. For this reason, organizing these local communities and trusting them not only to mitigate the worst effects of the coming climate catastrophe but also to uphold new practices and ways of living together, premised on solidarity in a warming world, may play a key role in a radical climate strategy.

Others, however, look not to bottom-up solutions and local communities so much as to the state. Emma Piercy, Rachel Granger, and Chris Goodier present a thorough analysis of Cuban state policy after the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, which disrupted the country’s energy and food supply. They argue that by radical reforming agriculture, energy production and urban policy the state was able to meet the challenges of energy and food shortage – a challenge many more countries are likely to face as the climate crisis worsens.

What is our role?

In this short review I couldn’t possibly cover all the very interesting topics brought up in this journal issue. It has a fascinating essay by Annamária Hódosy on climate change in cinema, a paper by Zsuzsa Gille on climate change and state socialism, and many more. All in all, I believe it is a great contribution to this urgent, but often sadly neglected debate in our region. Even if you can’t read Hungarian, this issue can point you to a lot of important sources originally in English (I include a list of these below).

I am grateful for the authors, translators and editors who worked on this issue, who put immense energy into raising these topical questions in an intellectual and political environment where pursuing social science of any kind, let alone that which is critical, radical, and left-leaning is getting harder by the hour. Still, I would like to offer some constructive criticism as a conclusion to this review. I believe that more emphasis in this issue could have been placed on the role of the semi-periphery of the global capitalist world system, e.g. Central and Eastern Europe, in producing climate change and the struggle against it. After all, that’s the place where this journal issue is most likely to be read.

Much social theory and empirical work on climate change remains highly abstract: discussing global trends or advocating for a global alliance among the wretched of the earth. It is often hard to see what role, if any, a citizen of a small CEE country, like Hungary, can play in all this. The *Fordulat* issue is not entirely void of this perspective. But I believe an original and valuable contribution could have been a deeper exploration of the possibilities of challenging fossil capitalism from the periphery.

This critical note notwithstanding, this issue is an important contribution to the social theoretic as well as political debate on climate change, capitalism, and how we may organize and mobilize to move toward a more just, sustainable, and, perhaps most importantly, habitable planet while we still have time.

List of essays from the issue available in English:

- Andreas Malm, Alf Hornborg, [The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative](#)
- Jason W. Moore, [The End of Cheap Nature. Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about “The” Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism](#)
- Steffen Dalsgaard, [The commensurability of carbon: Making value and money of climate change](#)
- Ariel Salleh, [Ecofeminsm](#)
- Philip McMichael, [Peasants Make Their Own History, But Not Just as They Please . . .](#)
- Andreas Malm, [Revolutionary Strategy in a Warming World](#)
- Emma Piercy, Rachel Granger, Chris I. Goodier, [Planning for peak oil: learning from Cuba’s ‘special period’](#)

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