

Jason W. Moore. 2015. *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital*. London: Verso Press, 336p. ISBN: 9781781689028. US \$29.95 (paperback) [Introduction](#)

Reviewed by Eric H. Thomas. Email: [ehthomas "at" live.unc.edu](mailto:ehthomas@live.unc.edu)

Jason W. Moore's book, *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital* presents an ambitious and expansive argument designed to transform how we think about capitalism in the world. There has been a resurgence of Marxist ecology in the last several decades and scholars debating Marx's position on the relationship between nature and capitalism will find ample material for further discussion in Moore's book.

Moore opens his text by describing the double movement of capitalism through nature and nature through capitalism, which he terms a "double internality." "The capacity to make history", he writes, "turns on specific configurations of human and extra-human actors" (p. 37). For Moore, these configurations reveal the Cartesian dualism that separates "nature" from "society" to be nothing more than a convenient fiction obscuring how contemporary capitalism actually works. As an alternative, Moore asserts that capitalism depends on the continuous production of what he terms the "four cheaps": cheap food, energy, labor, and raw materials. Thus, he contends, the exploitation of labor and the appropriation of uncommodified natures necessarily go hand in hand (p. 68), an argument that will be familiar to those who have read Saskia Sassen (2014) and David Harvey (2003). Yet the author's assertion that the appropriation of "cheap natures" diffuses distinct surpluses across the entire system connects nicely with recent work on coal and oil by Timothy Mitchell (2009)—after all, these are two "cheap natures" with extremely expensive social consequences.

Moore's treatment of frontiers may be of particular interest for scholars working in remote and rural spaces. These, he argues may be external *or* internal to circuits of capital. External frontiers, he argues, represent the resource-rich boundaries of capitalist production where uncommodified natures yield short-term profits (p. 157). Internal frontiers, on the other hand, are sites where greater profits may be extracted from existing circuits by eliminating "inefficiencies" and restructuring production to further exploit unpaid labor. Moore warns that the exhaustion of both kinds of frontiers is already on the horizon, representing what he terms an "epochal crisis" for capitalism—and for the planet. Moore provides "a modest catalogue of early capitalism's transformations of land and labor" (p. 182) giving brief accounts of land reclamation projects in the Netherlands, the colonization of Madeira, the establishment of sugar plantations in the British West Indies, and the extraction of silver from Spanish Peru, among countless others. All of these examples provide the basis for what the author terms "a new law of value" in which nature was conceptualized as external and new configurations of exploitation and appropriation emerged, all in the service of capital (p. 191).

Late in the book, Moore poses a provocative question that goes to the heart of recent debates among scientists and educators concerned with the arrival of the so-called Anthropocene: "does the urgency to communicate the realities of biospheric change override the need for an adequate historical interpretation of the problem?" (p. 169). This far into *Capitalism and the web of life* the reader will surely recognize that Moore believes it does not, and that he sets out to provide just such a historical interpretation. Yet this highlights a problem with the book's structure. It reads like a series of essays that make connecting, and at times overlapping arguments using a dizzying number of terms, some of which seem to refer to the same concepts. In this regard, readers may be forgiven for wondering if they have already read certain passages in earlier chapters as they progress through the book.

Despite his use of what he calls his "world-ecology" approach, Moore's provocative take overlooks some recent work by ecological anthropologists, political geographers, and feminist scholars—work that reveals the degree to which capitalist development, particularly in rural areas, is patchy, halting, and diverse (Li 2011; Tsing 2015). Perhaps with the term "world-ecology" Moore is connecting his work to scholarship on "world-systems", another important body of literature that often overlooks the diversity and complexity of contemporary forms of capitalism in service of a grand, unifying theory. Greater attention to contemporary sites where capitalism and nature are co-produced might help with this problem. While Moore seems to have an infinite number of historical examples that highlight how capitalism shapes and is shaped by the availability of cheap nature, he poses comparatively few questions about how 21st Century flows of people

and commodities promote or limit capitalist expansion. This comes as a surprise, given Moore's earlier work, and readers may be disappointed by his failure to adequately acknowledge the diversity of practices associated with contemporary capitalism as well as the ways that challenges to capital's unending search for the "four cheaps" result in its being redirected and altered, even as it expands. Recent studies in anthropology, geography, and environmental science have shown how different responses to environmental and socioeconomic change are crucial factors impacting the resilience or transformation of social-ecological systems. As has been well documented, in many cases, individuals act strategically, using paid labor and migration (both topics ostensibly of interest to Moore) as means to gain influence within their communities. Furthermore, the author's focus on the exhaustion of frontiers after uncommodified natures are drawn into capitalist circuits overlooks the fact that these are dynamic spaces where local non-capitalist practices often play a significant role in the maintenance of endemic species.

Though Moore's construction of a sweeping historical narrative in service of a grand theory may put some readers off, political ecologists and others currently conducting more ethnographic or localised fieldwork are in a unique position to put such theories to the test. Furthermore, the author's descriptions of what he views as critical historical moments that illustrate the inseparability of nature and capitalism provide his readers with countless jumping-off points for further exploration and debate. Few books published today have such a broad scope or are as forceful in their claims, and *Capitalism in the web of life* is certain to spark productive conversations in upper-level political ecology and critical development seminars, as well as among faculty working in a range of disciplines.

References

- Harvey, D. 2003. Accumulation by dispossession. In Harvey, D. [*The new imperialism*](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 137-182.
- Li, T.M. 2011. *Land's end: capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mitchell, T. 2009. Carbon democracy. *Economy and Society* 38(3): 399-432.
- Sassen, S. 2014. *Expulsions: brutality and complexity in the global economy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tsing, A. 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Eric H. Thomas is a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA.