

Capitalism's Bleak Landscapes of Scarcity: A Brief Overview of Globalization, Consumerism and Environmental Degradation

This paper is concerned with the ways that the experience of scarcity is constructed in capitalist society. In this sense, it provides a corrective to the conception of scarcity at the center of neoclassical economics. For neoclassical economics material scarcity can be said to exist when there is a shortage of material resources in comparison with people's material wants. This paper does not take issue with this definition but rather with the tendency of neoclassical economics to naturalize scarcity. This naturalization follows from the neoclassical assumption of an insatiable human nature that turns scarcity into an essential, if tragic, aspect of the human condition (Robbins 1962, Frank 2003). In this view, scarcity is logically prior to society rather than a social phenomenon that is crucially shaped by the operational logic of the socio-economic system producing it. Viewing scarcity as a challenge to which socio-economic systems passively adapt to, neoclassical economics seeks to portray market capitalism as the optimal adaptation to this challenge (Robbins 1962, George and Shorey 1978, Gould and Ferguson 1980, Frank 2003).

Against the neoclassical understanding of the question of scarcity, this paper argues that the gap between people's desires for goods and services and what they actually can and do consume in a world of finite material resources is shaped by the logic of capital accumulation that drives capitalism forward. This logic helps to constitute both what people want, while also shaping the availability and distribution of the material resources that individuals and groups need to meet their needs and objectives. Rather than viewing scarcity as a primordial essence of the human condition, this paper sketches some of the forces involved in capitalism's 'landscapes of scarcity.' By landscapes of scarcity I refer to the configurations of scarcity confronting individuals and social groups who/which live and act in the vortex of capital, in a social and economic environment that is continually reshaped by the capitalist search for profit. As this search continually reshapes desires, the natural environment on which people draw and the distribution of valued material resources, it also alters the configurations or landscapes of scarcity that individuals and groups have to navigate. This chapter illustrates this point through a discussion of globalization, consumerism and the deepening ecological crisis. I argue that these three phenomena can be analyzed as important instantiations of the ways in which the logic of capital accumulation continually reshapes the landscapes of scarcity confronting people around the world today.

Globalization and Capitalism's Landscapes of Scarcity

Pointing to the dialectical nature of the capitalist socio-economic system, Michel Beaud (2001, 42) reminds us that "[f]rom its beginnings, capitalism has been national and global, competitive and monopolistic, liberal and state-connected." Beaud's assessment is also shared by world systems theorists' recognition that capital accumulation has historically taken place not just through market competition. Capitalists have always sought to secure and enhance their profitability by carving for themselves monopolistic positions capable of sheltering them from unwelcome competitive pressures. They have also benefited from state interventions that have

facilitated capital accumulation both through domestic legislation and through (often military) interventions in the world beyond the boundaries of the nation state.¹

In this respect, globalization is arguably not a recent development.² Marx and Engels (1978, 476) already recognized the link between the logic of capital and globalization in the *Communist Manifesto*:

“The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

Thus, the global economic links that capital forges lend production and consumption ‘a cosmopolitan character’.³ By advancing the means of production and communication, moreover, capital is able to reduce costs and achieve competitive advantages that allow it to “batter down all Chinese walls”, thus bringing more societies, along with their populations and territories, under its orbit. In doing so, capital “creates a world after its own image.”⁴

While the *Manifesto* provides a vivid account of the long-standing link between globalization and the logic of capital, it certainly does not settle the debate regarding the chronology of globalization. This debate is one manifestation of the fact that globalization is a

¹ See Wallerstein 1999, 25; Robbins 2005, 84; and Shannon 1996, 40-42.

² In fact, Manfred Steger (2003, 19) goes as far as to suggest that “globalization is as old as humanity itself.”

³ Marx and Engels 1978, 476.

⁴ Ibid, 477. It should be noted here that, in describing all these globalizing processes, Marx and Engels present the bourgeoisie, rather than capital, as their author. At the same time, however, they implicitly recognize that the bourgeoisie does not have a choice but to engage in these processes when he points out that market imperatives “[chase] the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.” This is a recognition of the fact that the bourgeoisie has unleashed through its actions a dynamic process that largely escapes even its own control. It is a recognition, in other words, of an alienating logic of capital that tends to subordinate humanity and all social groups and classes to its own imperatives.

‘contested concept.’⁵ The fact that globalization has only become a household term recently has led some authors to view globalization as a recent development. One popular account has, for example, presented globalization as “an international system ... that has now replaced the old Cold War system” (Friedman 2000, ix). Pointing out that, in many respects, the international economy was as economically integrated at the beginning of the twentieth century as it is today, some scholars have challenged not just the novelty of the globalization phenomenon but the very usefulness of the concept itself.⁶

Others have conceded the unevenness of economic globalization by tracing its history and underlining the extent to which it represents a political project, both the initiation and staying power of which depend on “[n]ational policies and relations among national governments” (Frieden 2006, xvii). In this view, globalization is not an irreversible development, since its sustainability depends on the policies and governance structures used to manage it. In the absence of policies and governance structures that take into consideration the legitimate concerns of those hurt by the spread of market liberalization and closer economic integration, this view warns of the possibility of serious popular backlashes that could reverse the advances of globalization. Were this to happen, supporters of this view point out, the most recent wave of globalization could come to an end in the same way that the earlier phase of economic globalization reached its limits with the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁷

While a comprehensive account of the debate on the chronology and history of globalization lies beyond the scope of this work, even a cursory overview of the history of capitalism demonstrates the links between globalization processes and the logic of capital accumulation that drives this system forward. The very emergence of industrial capitalism in England was crucially dependent on the natural resources of the New World as well as the enslavement and transplantation of millions of Africans to the Americas.⁸ Thus, the rise of industrial capitalism in England, Europe and North America was inseparable from colonialism, the brutal exploitation of people around the world, and the plundering of the natural wealth of the territories of the now impoverished global South.⁹ It was also inseparable from the extermination and dispossession of indigenous peoples around the world.¹⁰

⁵ For a discussion of the contested nature of globalization as a concept, see Steger (2003), chapter 1. In Chapter 2 of the same work the author advances his own short chronology of the globalization process.

⁶ Hirst and Thompson 1996.

⁷ For variations on this theme see Rodrik (1997), Gilpin (2000), Stiglitz (2003) and Frieden (2006).

⁸ See Pomeranz 2000.

⁹ Tucker 2002, 177 and 179-80.

In this respect, the immense new wealth generated by industrial capitalism was also accompanied by radical changes in the landscapes of scarcity facing people around the world. Intense as the exploitation faced by industrial workers in England and other early industrializing countries may have been, it usually paled in comparison to the exploitation faced by African slaves and colonial populations.¹¹ African slaves were, in particular, not just deprived of even the most basic freedoms, but often used for the most backbreaking labor that free wage workers were not willing to do.¹² Moreover, as the use of African laborers to pick the cotton used by the textile industry in the nineteenth century demonstrates, slave labor played a crucial role in the rise of industrial capitalism and the accumulation of capital in Europe and North America alike.¹³

In addition to increasing the amount of wealth generated and creating new landscapes of scarcity that imposed most of the burden on Western workers and (even more so) on non-Western populations, these developments expanded the reach of the capitalist mode of production. As the previous discussion indicates, this expansion was dependent as much on the use of force as it was on the impact of market competition emphasized in Marx's *Manifesto*. The integration of non-Western populations and territories into the expanding capitalist economy was therefore carried out on terms consistent with the requirements of capital accumulation in the industrial capitalist centers.¹⁴ Originating in an international division of labor that gave rise to "a racialized process of colonial 'underdevelopment'"¹⁵, capital accumulation in the industrial centers has, in the course of the last few centuries, generated an increasing gap between the global haves and the much more numerous have-nots.¹⁶ The grotesque nature of the landscapes of scarcity generated by these long-term processes is illustrated by the fact that, according to a United Nations Development Program estimate,

"it would take about \$13 billion extra annually to achieve basic health and nutrition in all developing countries. This is the same as is spent every year on perfume in Europe and the USA, less than is spent on pet food, and about one-third of what is spent on business

¹⁰ Steinberg 1989, 13-21, Robbins 2005, 267-74.

¹¹ See Wallerstein 1979, 289 and 293, Shannon 1996, 37-39 and 66.

¹² See Steinberg 1989, 27.

¹³ See Steinberg 1989, 27-29 and Aronowitz 1992, 145.

¹⁴ Hunt 2002, 348-49.

¹⁵ McMichael 2004, 12.

¹⁶ See Milanovic 2005 and Simms 2005, 83-84.

entertainment in Japan. World military expenditure in comparison was \$780 billion, sixty times as much”.¹⁷

Old-style European colonialism and imperialism came to an end after World War II, both as a result of anti-colonial independence movements in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and as a result of the restructuring of the global capitalist economy under the aegis of a new capitalist hegemonic power, the United States. Although it was not averse to using military force when its ruling political and economic elites deemed it necessary, this new hegemonic power often preferred to advance its interests by installing and supporting repressive and undemocratic regimes and dictators.¹⁸ In the course of doing so, the United States also defended the grotesquely inegalitarian landscapes of scarcity that prevailed in various parts of the world against the attempts of popular movements to redistribute the burdens of scarcity in ways more conducive to the general welfare than to the interests of local and international economic and political elites. As David Harvey (2003, 59) has pointed out, “whenever there was a conflict between democracy, on the one hand, and order and stability built upon propertied interests, on the other, the US always opted for the latter.”

At the same time, however, the implacable opposition of the United States to any progressive shifts in the landscapes of scarcity generated by twentieth-century capitalism was to some extent constrained by the realities of the Cold War. The need to contain Soviet influence around the world made the United States more tolerant towards the state-development models of Japan and the Asian ‘tigers’, thus facilitating both the rapid industrialization of these countries and the increase in the general standard of living that this industrialization entailed.¹⁹

The need to contain communism, as well as the struggles of working people in these countries, also made capitalist elites in rich industrialized countries more amenable to the expansion of social programs and the establishment of welfare states that helped to reduce the inhumanity of the landscapes of scarcity confronting most people in these countries.²⁰ These developments were bolstered by the Bretton Woods system regulating the international capitalist economy, as it emerged out of World War II. Designed to shield the economic and social policy

¹⁷ Sklair 2002, 140. Given the relatively low cost of eliminating them, the persistence and worsening of hunger and disease in developing countries appear even more obscene in the aftermath of the recent crisis, characterized as this has been by the trillions of dollars in government bailouts and loan guarantees for the very banks that contributed mightily to the eruption and magnitude of this crisis.

¹⁸ Harvey 2005, 27.

¹⁹ McMichael 2004, 80; Tabb 2001, 64.

²⁰ Aronowitz 2006, 188; Panitch and Miliband 1992, 4.

of national governments from the pressures of the world economy, even as it boosted international trade, the Bretton Woods system combined with Keynesian economic policies, state-centered industrial strategies and the expansion of the welfare state to produce unprecedented rates of economic growth.²¹ Because of this impressive economic performance the immediate post-war period has been described by some scholars as “the golden age of capitalism.”²²

This golden age had come to an end by the 1970s as the post-war boom was giving its place to economic crisis and stagnation. The rise of popular movements around the world, in combination with the intensification of capitalist competition that resulted from European reconstruction and the rise of Japan and newly industrialized countries in Asia as well as in other parts of the world, had the effect of undercutting capitalist profitability and plunging the post-war model of economic development into a state of crisis.²³ The eclipsing of this model by neoliberal regimes both restructuring national economies and integrating them into an increasingly integrated global economy was a response to this crisis of profitability. Neoliberalism thus became a ‘global hegemonic project’ that sought both to restore the power of the capitalist class and to increase its share of the economic pie.²⁴

Thanks to their control of the economic surplus produced by their workers, the functionaries of capital were able to use the resources at their disposal both to advance the neoliberal ideological project and to take advantage of the globalization-friendly policies that the success of this project helped to produce.²⁵ As neoliberal economic globalization, in the form of free trade, liberalization of the capital markets, privatization, and so on, increased the mobility of capital, it also increased its power over labor.²⁶

²¹ Steger 2003, 37-39; Rupert and Solomon 2005, 39-40; Cox 1997. For a somewhat different interpretation of the Bretton Woods system, which contrasts it to an international order more conducive to national policy autonomy that was proposed at the Bretton Woods conference by Keynes, see Newton 2004, 23-24.

²² See Marglin and Schor 1990.

²³ See Brenner 1998, Beaud 2001, 223-34; Bowles and Edwards 1993, 454-61, Hardt and Negri 2000, 262.

²⁴ Rupert and Solomon 2005, 57; Harvey 2005, Silver and Arrighi 2000, 61; Perelman 2008.

²⁵ Harvey 2005, 43-55, George 2001, 18-19.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, 296; Sklair 2002, 278; and Rupert and Solomon 2005, 41.

The predictable result of these developments was an aggravation of economic inequalities and an increased ability of capitalist elites to ‘invest’ in politicians willing to implement and further the neoliberal consensus underlying capitalist globalization. While complicit in the consolidation of the neoliberal project, with all the devastating impacts that this project entailed for a majority of the population in rich and poor countries alike, political elites often found it expedient to absolve themselves of all responsibility, claiming that the constraints of already existing globalization tied their hands and left them no alternative but to adopt policies that advanced the neoliberal project even further.²⁷

One of the effects of the exhaustion of the postwar model of development was the debt crisis, which became a vehicle for the imposition of the neoliberal regime on developing countries. This imposition was exemplified by the structural adjustment programs forced upon developing countries by Bretton Woods institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which had reinvented themselves by pursuing a new mission of “displac[ing] the effects of capitalist crisis onto the world’s poor.”²⁸

Although these programs, and neoliberal globalization more generally, have usually been devastating for working people, the poor, women, and the environment in developing countries, they have increased the ability of developing countries to repay debts that were often contracted by undemocratic political rulers and corrupt local economic elites that enjoyed the support of rich countries and, especially, the United States.²⁹ Under neoliberalism, David Harvey (2005, 29) points out, it is no longer the case that “lenders take the losses that arise from bad investment decisions ... [instead,] the borrowers are forced by state and international powers to take on board the cost of debt repayment no matter what the consequences for the livelihood and well-being of the local population.”³⁰ In this respect, these structural adjustment programs dramatize the extent to which contemporary global capitalism can be viewed as a continuation of colonialism with other means.³¹ Insofar, moreover, as the exploitation of the global South can be continued even in the absence of military intervention and overtly colonial relationships, contemporary global capitalism may in fact represent not just a continuation but also a rationalization of this exploitation.³²

²⁷ Sklair 2002, 6; Panitch 2000, 374; Rodrik 1997, 79.

²⁸ Bond 2000, 133.

²⁹ See Amin 1996, Charkiewicz et al, 2001, 35; McMichael 2004, 128-29 and 133-35, Dickerson 1997, 100-101, Marchand and Runyan 2001, 144; Egan and Robidoux 2001, 83-87; Fisher 2001, 204; Ashman 2001, 235-36.

³⁰ Others have made the same point. See, for example, Pettifor 2001, 48-49.

³¹ Sachs 1996, 261-62; McMichael 2004, 292.

³² Meszaros 1995, 452, George 2001, 15.

While the shift to the neoliberal economic model shifted the prevailing landscapes of scarcity at the expense of working people and the poor, the effects of this shift were especially dramatic in developing countries. In a context where social safety nets had never been strong, the drastic cuts in education, health care and other public services that structural adjustment programs often required could not but inflict irreparable harm on these countries' social fabric. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the social destabilization that neoliberal globalization and structural adjustment programs have often brought about in developing programs has been a contributing factor to the proliferation of ethnic conflict and civil war in these countries.³³

All in all, the neoliberal project has been more successful in restoring the power of capitalist elites and in increasing inequalities than it has been in matching the economic performance achieved during the immediate post-war period.³⁴ While neoliberals and conservatives often defend growing inequalities by arguing that it is better, even for the poor, to grow the economic pie than to fight over its distribution, the fact is that “[t]he main substantive achievement of neoliberalization ... has been to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income.”³⁵

Interestingly, this redistribution from the poor and the working people to capitalist elites may have contributed to neoliberalism's unimpressive economic performance, in general, and its present crisis, in particular.³⁶ As the growth of inequalities undercuts aggregate demand and leads to low capacity utilization, the ironic result of growing inequalities may have been to undercut not just wages but also capitalist profits.³⁷ By making opportunities of profitable productive investment harder to come by, low capacity utilization and economic stagnation predictably encouraged the pursuit of profit through financial speculation.³⁸ With economic inequality having increased to levels comparable to those prior to the Great Depression³⁹, the bursting of successive financial bubbles has produced the most serious and painful economic crisis since the 1930s.

As the response to the crisis has, in the United States and elsewhere, primarily served the interests of the banks that helped to bring this crisis about, the growing inequalities underlying economic stagnation are not being addressed. Although massive government intervention in the

³³ McMichael 2004, 227-28; Stiglitz 2003, 8; Grimes 1999, 36-37; Lappe 1998, 21-23.

³⁴ Hahnel 2002, 196-97; Sackrey et al 2002, 101, Skidelsky 2008.

³⁵ Harvey 2005, 159.

³⁶ Bello 2008.

³⁷ Hahnel 2002, 241.

³⁸ Bello 2008, Wallerstein 2008, Tabb 2008a, 45-46.

³⁹ Harvey 2005, 188-89.

economy has led some to announce the death of neoliberalism⁴⁰, these interventions have been consistent with neoliberalism's regressive redistribution of wealth. In the United States, for example, the massive bailouts of banks financed by ordinary taxpayers have dominated the government's early response to the crisis and set the stage for imposing painful concessions on the part of auto workers and public employees across the country as well as for implementing painful cutbacks of public services.⁴¹ In short, the response to the crisis of neoliberalism follows the pattern of shifting "the burden ... of the ... crisis ... [onto] those at the bottom of society in both North and South", a pattern that, as Michel Beaud (2001, 271) points out, has also characterized the neoliberal response to the crisis of the post-war model of development.

All in all, the landscapes of scarcity generated by the neoliberal turn are devastating for working people in rich and low-income countries alike. While the landscapes of scarcity confronting working people in developing countries are especially grim, the advent of neoliberalism has had adverse effects even for working people in the global North. The landscapes of scarcity confronting them include stagnant wages, greater economic insecurity, deepening debt, longer and more flexible work hours and a rollback of the welfare state and public services at a time when working people are required to pay a growing share of the taxes collected by governments.⁴² Under these circumstances, increasing strain is placed on families and social problems proliferate⁴³, thus leading to an even further deterioration of the landscapes of scarcity confronting most ordinary citizens. Neoliberalism's increasing inequalities alone are a major source of social problems, contributing as they do to stress and disease, violence, racism, discrimination and intolerance towards minorities.⁴⁴

These dramatic shifts in the landscapes of scarcity prevailing across the capitalist world have not come about without social and class struggles. In fact, the rise of neoliberalism has been the product of a systematic offensive on the part of capital against working people and

⁴⁰ See, for example, Foster 2009a, 20.

⁴¹ Kotz 2008, 15; Perelman 2008. This situation is not unique to the United States, as demonstrated by Kumaran Ira's (2008) World Socialist Web Site article on the struggle over educational reform in France and the French government's attempt to cut funding for education even as it was bailing out banks to the tune of 360 billion euros.

⁴² Bourdieu 1998, 127-28, Barnet and Cavanagh 1994, 344, Beck 2000, 1-8.

⁴³ Christopherson 1991, 180, Fraad 2008, Dodson and Bravo 2005, Brady and Elms 2005, 251.

⁴⁴ Wilkinson 2005, The Harvard Working Group on New and Resurgent Diseases 1996, Daly and Farley 2003, 267-68.

against any social or environmental restrictions to the logic of capital accumulation.⁴⁵ The advance of the neoliberal agenda around the world has, however, been uneven because of the different levels of power that the working class and social movements still enjoy in different parts of the world.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the attempt to restructure national capitalisms in accordance with neoliberal precepts has been general, thus giving rise to struggles against neoliberalism in all parts of the world.⁴⁷ These struggles are becoming increasingly global, as growing economic integration inevitably leads to the realization that fighting against the global dimensions of the neoliberal project also requires the globalization of resistance to this project, as well as to the logic of capital that this project advances.

This brief overview of the impact of globalization illustrates the extent to which capitalism's landscapes of scarcity are stamped by the exploitative nature of this system. This exploitation consists not just in the extraction of surplus labor from workers, but in the use of this surplus labor in accordance with the imperatives of capital accumulation. Because of this feature capitalism is a highly undemocratic economic system that often turns the advanced technological potential it generates to landscapes of scarcity that are more rather than less onerous and inhumane for ordinary people around the world. Thus, the latest advances in industrial and communications technology that could, in principle, drastically reduce the time people spend working to provide for the means of their subsistence have, under global capitalism, increased capital's ability to exploit workers, thus increasing inequalities and leading to the kind of brutal landscapes of scarcity described above. No one has captured this long-standing feature of capitalism than Marx (1978b, 577-78) himself, who, in his 'Speech at the Anniversary of the People's Paper', pointed out that

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay ... In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labor, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want.

Consumerism and Capitalism's Landscapes of Scarcity

The antagonism, identified by Marx, between the technological potential generated by capitalist society and capitalism's inability to place this potential at the service of humanity is as operative in the culture of consumerism built by capital as it is in the process of capitalist globalization. As Grant McCracken (1988) has pointed out the rise and consolidation of modern capitalism has been as intimately linked to the revolutionization of the social process of consumption as it has to

⁴⁵ Foster and Magdoff 2008, 17, Aronowitz 2006, 40, Budd 2001, 174-75.

⁴⁶ Harvey 2005, 13.

⁴⁷ Budd 2001; Shooter 2001, 233; Fisher 2001, 204-10; Charlton 2001.

that of production. The consumer revolution that paved the road to the rise of capitalism, only to be advanced even further by the logic of capital accumulation driving this system forward, has served over the course of the last few centuries to remove consumers' "tastes and preferences from the hold of convention and local tradition, and put them increasingly in the hands of ... the marketplace."⁴⁸ In the course of doing so, this consumer revolution has in effect reshaped culture in the image of capital, "collapsing the cultural into the economic", with advertising and marketing playing a critical mediating role in blurring the difference between these two spheres of social life.⁴⁹

The ability of advertising and marketing to perform this function has rested on the development of sophisticated techniques tapping social, cultural and historical lifeworlds for meanings that are then 'transferred' onto commodities available for sale in the market (McCracken 1988). In addition to exploiting these lifeworlds for profit, the project of defining commodities in terms of cherished cultural values, ideals and aspirations inevitably also encourages the development of a commercial culture in which a commodity-intensive life begins to appear as the embodiment of these values, ideals and aspirations.

In this context, companies increasingly turn from producers of goods to brokers of meaning, as their success increasingly comes to depend on the strength of their brand. Central to the social construction of consumers' perception of individual brands are the lavish expenditures on marketing, advertising and branding efforts. These expenditures are, in turn, financed through the profits that companies achieve by "slashing jobs", "lowering workplace standards", "lowballing their [workers] on wages and hours" and, last but not least, ferociously fighting against any attempt by their workers to form unions.⁵⁰ While helping to bring about the more adverse landscapes of scarcity neoliberal capitalism imposes on ordinary people around the world, capitalist corporations also use these landscapes to burnish their brands even further. By reducing corporate taxes, neoliberal policies have eroded the tax base used to finance public cultural institutions, such as "schools, museums and broadcasters", forcing the latter to turn for support to corporations. As the latter take advantage of such branding opportunities, culture increasingly becomes transformed "into little more than a collection of brand-extensions".⁵¹ As Benjamin Barber (2007, 180-81) points out, advertisers are keenly aware of the profits that can be reaped from the systematic colonization of culture. Declaring brands to be 'the new religion', advertisers turn to cults for "insights for the creation of brand worship".⁵² Branding then becomes the latest stage in the process, pioneered by American capitalism, of turning consumer

⁴⁸ McCracken 1988, 18.

⁴⁹ Jameson 2000, 53.

⁵⁰ Klein 2000, 190, 236 and 240.

⁵¹ Ibid, 30.

⁵² Atkin 2004, xi and 202, cited in Barber 2007, 180-81.

goods into embodiments of “a distinct and eventually dominant alternative to political and even religious visions of ... life.”⁵³

This commercialization of culture is a major contributor to the inhumanity and irrationality of capitalism’s landscapes of scarcity. To begin with, capitalism’s commercial culture contributes to the spread of materialist attitudes and values that, according to psychologists, are injurious to people’s physical and psychological well-being as well as to their general quality of life.⁵⁴ Indeed, in his study of the high costs of materialism, Tim Kasser (2002, 22) reports that

“Existing scientific research ... yields clear and consistent findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from the wealthy to the poor, from teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans. Several investigators have reported similar results using a variety of ways of measuring materialism. The studies document that strong materialistic values are associated with a pervasive undermining of people’s well-being, from low life satisfaction and happiness, to depression and anxiety, to physical problems such as headaches, and to personality disorders, narcissism, antisocial behavior.”

This fact helps to explain Richard Easterlin’s paradoxical finding that rapidly increasing levels of consumption in rich countries have not led to corresponding rises in the reported levels of life satisfaction and happiness.⁵⁵ This finding illustrates the irrationality of capitalism’s landscapes of scarcity, since it exposes capitalism’s inability to turn the unprecedented technological potential and levels of material wealth that it generates into a richer and more satisfying life even for the minority of the world’s population living in the affluent consumer societies of the global North.

In fact, capitalism’s contempt for human needs encourages people to engage in compensatory consumption behavior, whereby the pursuit of a consumerist lifestyle becomes an “inadequate [attempt] to obtain need-satisfaction.”⁵⁶ Not only does this attempt fail but, since materialism itself is a factor undermining human well-being, a vicious cycle is created that tends to perpetuate human misery. As the poverty, inequalities, insecurity and alienation that

⁵³ Cross 2000, 18. Similarly, in his account of the rise of advertising and consumer culture in the United States, Ewen (1977, 108) concludes that “[c]onsumerism was a world view, a ‘philosophy of life’.”

⁵⁴ Kasser 2002, 7, 11, 14, 22 and Kasser et al 2003, 57.

⁵⁵ See Easterlin 1996.

⁵⁶ Geronimo 1988, 66.

capitalism's landscapes of scarcity inevitably produce stand in the way of the satisfaction of people's needs, materialism is strengthened, thus further undermining human welfare.⁵⁷

Capitalism, moreover, is not just indifferent to the havoc that it causes. It in fact turns this havoc into an engine of further capital accumulation, as advertisers and marketers use the latest scientific and psychological research to boost sales by instrumentalizing and taking advantage of people's emotions, insecurities and vulnerabilities.⁵⁸ As many of these anxieties are rooted in the capitalist system itself, advertising has in the past served to channel people's dissatisfaction with the conditions of life (including consumerism) that this system produces into increased consumption that helps to reproduce the system with all its frustrating flaws.⁵⁹

One flaw of contemporary capitalist societies that advertising has in the past sought to capitalize on is the absence of economic democracy, with all the insecurity that this absence imposes on the majority of men and women living in these societies. In his discussion of the advertising practices used to sell commodities in the 1920s, Ewen (1977, 156) points out, for example, that "[m]en were encouraged to buy according to the categories of job security, much as women were encouraged to buy in order to secure home security for themselves." And later in the same work Ewen (1977, 177-78) adds that "[j]ust as men were encouraged to cultivate their appearance to impress the boss, for women the imperative of beauty was directly linked to the question of job security—their *survival*, in fact, depended upon their ability to keep a husband, ads continually reminded women—or more precisely, the wage that he brought home".

In this example the inhumanity and totalizing drive of the logic of capital appear in all their glory. On the one hand, capitalism's negation of economic democracy makes it possible for capital to retain the economic surplus produced by the workers it exploits. On the other hand, the retained surplus is then used to fan the economic insecurity that people inevitably feel in an economically undemocratic society and to turn this insecurity into an engine of consumption designed to reproduce capitalism and the undemocratic logic of capital that drives it forward.

This subordination of consumers to the imperatives of capital has led some scholars to the conclusion that the social process of consumption is as much a site of capitalist exploitation as the process of production itself. Goran Ahrne (1988), for example, argues that capitalist exploitation involves more than the extraction of surplus labor from workers. Capitalist exploitation, Ahrne (1988, 63) suggests, can also take the form of increases in material standards of living that workers receive with indifference "due to a saturation in the kinds of needs that may be satisfied through consumption." Workers would be better off with shorter working hours rather than increased levels of consumption, but such a scenario runs against "the interest of

⁵⁷ Kasser 2002, 27-30.

⁵⁸ Kasser et al 2003, 56; Cross 2000, 34; Barber 2007, 177, Levine et al 2003, Kilbourne 2003, 252.

⁵⁹ Ewen 1977, 64-65.

capital accumulation”.⁶⁰ This process, the description of which anticipates Schor’s (1991) identification of a work-and-spend cycle in the United States, is one of exploitation because

“when people do have to work they also spend their money, but this does not imply that this spending or consumption has any value at all. It may be a kind of exploitation, where people have to consume their own surplus labor. It is a strange kind of oppression. People do not really suffer, but still in the long run it is an exploitation of people’s time to live.”⁶¹

George Ritzer (2005, 51), on the other hand, argues that the growing significance of consumption in twentieth-century capitalist societies has foregrounded the exploitation of consumers as against that of workers. According to Ritzer (2005, 50), the exploitation of consumers is based on capital’s control over the ‘means of consumption’, just as the exploitation of workers is based on capital’s control of the means of production. By means of consumption Ritzer means the sites at which consumers can purchase commodities. Referring to them as ‘cathedrals of consumption’, Ritzer describes how such sites as malls, casinos, entertainment parks, and so on, have been spending lavishly to create spectacles that will lure consumers and encourage them “to spend ever-increasing amounts of time and money on consumption.”⁶² In this respect, these new means of consumption represent capital’s interest in controlling consumers’ choices. “Consumers can be said to be exploited by the new means of consumption by being led to buy more than they need, to pay higher prices than need be, and to spend more than they should.”⁶³

Despite the differences between Ahrne’s and Ritzer’s conceptions of the exploitative nature of consumption, both theorists seem to recognize that the subordination of the social process of consumption to the imperatives of capital accumulation gives rise to consumption patterns that do more to advance capital’s search for profit than to serve the needs of consumers. At the same time, however, neither theorist provides a satisfying explanation of the relationship between the exploitative nature of the capitalist process of production and that of the capitalist process of consumption.

To begin with, Ritzer ignores the implications of the fact that, as the Marxist tradition has long emphasized, “worker and consumer, capitalism and consumer culture, wage-labor and commodity consumption are born at the same moment: separation from the means of production entails both the sale of labor as a commodity and the buying of commodities to reproduce labor (the worker’s needs are met by buying consumer goods through the market.”⁶⁴ This means that capital’s relationship to consumers is intimately connected to its relationship to the workers, so

⁶⁰ Ahrne (1988, 59).

⁶¹ Ibid, 62.

⁶² Ritzer 2005, x and 7.

⁶³ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁴ Slater 1997, 180.

that one cannot reach an adequate understanding of the social process of consumption without relating it to that of production.

On the one hand, the building of the spectacular cathedrals of consumption that Ritzer describes has been financed by the surplus labor extracted from workers and thus presupposes the presence of exploitation in the realm of production. On the other hand, however, capital has a history of pursuing the intensification of exploitation in the sphere of production too far, thus undercutting demand for its products and giving rise to economic crises. The closest that Ritzer comes to acknowledging the significance of this contradiction is when he acknowledges the dependence of the economic landscape he is describing on the extension of credit.⁶⁵ Even there, however, he does not consider the possibility that the expansion of credit that for a long time permitted the building of ever more spectacular cathedrals of consumption may have been, at least partly, the result of an attempt by the American working class to keep up with the American creed of ever-increasing consumption even in the face of stagnant real wages and slowly increasing family incomes.⁶⁶

Thus, Ritzer's attempt to supplement Marx's analysis of exploitation within the sphere of production with an analysis of the exploitation taking place within the social process of consumption ironically proves less dialectical than Marx's keener recognition of the contradictions traversing and fuelling capitalist economies. One of the results of Ritzer's failure to integrate these contradictions into his analysis is the surprisingly rosy conclusion that "[t]he new means of consumption have, in general, succeeded in making consumption not only more fun but also more democratic."⁶⁷ The fact that, as Ritzer's book was being published in 2005, inequalities were rising to levels last seen before the Great Depression of the 1930s does not just refute the claim that consumption has become more democratic. It has also contributed to a massive economic crisis that has started to shatter Ritzer's magnificent cathedrals of consumption into pieces.⁶⁸

The contradictory development of the capitalist economy does not make consumption as enjoyable as Ritzer seems to think. In fact, the psychological literature on the conditions for enjoyable experience suggests that both shopping and consumption-intensive leisure activities tend to be less enjoyable than less consumption-intensive activities.⁶⁹ Thus, even in 'good'

⁶⁵ Ritzer 2005, 136.

⁶⁶ See Wolff 2008 and 2009, and Mishel et al 2005.

⁶⁷ Ritzer 2005, 194.

⁶⁸ For example, a Reuters article in April 2009 was reporting that "General Growth Properties Inc..., the second largest U.S. mall owner, ... filed for bankruptcy ..., making it one of the biggest real estate bankruptcies in U.S. history." See Jonas and Chasan (2009).

⁶⁹ Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 99 and Csikszentmihalyi 2003, 101-103.

economic times, the expansion of the cathedrals of consumption does more to fuel materialism, with all the negative effects mentioned above, than to promote human enjoyment. Far from providing people with innocuous and democratic fun, the cathedrals of consumption form part of a toxic cultural environment in which, according to a Stanford University report, “‘up to 8 percent of Americans, 23.6 million people, suffer from compulsive shopping disorder,’ an affliction associated with ‘out-of-control spending’ that ‘rips apart relationships and plunges consumers into overwhelming debt and bankruptcy.’”⁷⁰

Ahrne’s discussion of exploitation in consumption is not as problem-ridden as Ritzer’s. In arguing that the dominant pattern of consumption, characterized by long hours of work and rising standards of living, does not reflect the desires of workers but the interests of capital, Ahrne clearly rejects the notion that capitalist patterns of consumption are ‘democratic’. At the same time, however, Ahrne’s contention that people are exploited because ‘they have to consume their own surplus labor’ obscures the issue.

In fact, the very idea of people consuming their own surplus labor is in contradiction with the Marxist perspective that Ahrne (1988, 62) identifies with. For Marxists this idea is a logical impossibility, since surplus labor by definition refers to that portion of the worker’s labor that exceeds the labor necessary to provide for the worker’s socially determined consumption requirements. The implication of Ahrne’s point regarding capitalism’s patterns of consumption is that people are exploited not because they are forced to consume their surplus labor but because exploitation involves more than the extraction of surplus labor.

The idea that shorter work hours, rather than increased consumption, would improve people’s well-being is widely shared by scholars⁷¹ and is one of the contributing factors to capitalism’s inability to translate its unprecedented technological potential into a richer, more satisfying life for the general population. The idea that these shorter work hours are not forthcoming, at least in part, because of capital’s resistance to such a move is also generally recognized.⁷² These facts are intimately connected to capitalist exploitation because capital’s ability to impose a pattern of consumption that serves its interests but not those of the general population is rooted in the economic and political power that capital derives from its control over society’s productive resources and its economic surplus.

This means that capital can be said to exploit workers in two ways. The first way is the one discussed by traditional Marxism and consists in the extraction of surplus labor. The second way has to do with the fact that, whatever the rate of surplus labor in a given economy may be, capital also exploits workers by using its structural power to impose on society that particular pattern of consumption consistent with that rate of surplus labor which is also most consistent with capital accumulation. In this sense, exploitation has a qualitative as well as a quantitative

⁷⁰ See Barber 2007, 239. Barber is quoting here from a *Chicago Tribune* article by Gregory Karp.

⁷¹ See, for example, Schor 1991 and Frank 1999.

⁷² Schor 1991, Basso 2003, Cross 1988, 11; Hinrichs 1991, 36-38.

dimension. It is not simply a matter of how the economic pie is sliced but also of what its ingredients are.

Capitalism's regular labor productivity increases always raise the question of how this productivity gain will be allocated.⁷³ This gain could be channeled into increased standards of living, shorter hours, a mixture of both, or simply be appropriated by capital. The first three scenarios would not necessarily imply an increase in the quantitative measure of exploitation. If wage increases or reductions of the workday kept up with the rate of productivity increases, the ratio between surplus and necessary labor would remain unchanged. This ratio is not, however, the only thing that matters to capital and workers. If shorter hours would do more to advance the well-being of workers, but this option is denied them because of the structural power of capital, the adverse effect of this denial is as real for workers as the effects of capital's ability to extort surplus labor from them. Thus, capitalist exploitation does not just involve giving workers only a share of the economic pie they produce. It also involves the choice of patterns of consumption that make the share allotted to workers less satisfying to them than it would be if these patterns were democratically determined rather than dictated by the logic of capital.

All in all, capital encourages long work hours both through its historic resistance to any shortening of the work day and through the culture of consumerism that is being financed by the economic surplus extracted from workers.⁷⁴ In this sense, the role of consumer culture in the

⁷³ Juliet Schor (1991, 2) has used the term 'productivity dividend' to describe this possibility of choosing between taking productivity gains either in the form of more free time or in the form of money.

⁷⁴ There is both a demand-side and a supply-side rationale to capital's preference for longer work hours coupled with higher levels of consumption. The supply-side rationale stems from capital's attempt to control workers in the workplace by paying them wages that afford workers an 'employment rent'. This employment rent increases discipline by making workers value their job more but also gives them an incentive to work longer hours (Schor 1991). The demand-side rationale has to do with capitalists' fears of overproduction, which have historically led them to devise new ways of boosting consumption (Hunnicuttt 1988, 42). As Don Slater (1997, 18) has pointed out, "much evidence exists – from many different sectors of the population and many different periods up to the present – that a major struggle for and within capitalism focused on cajoling people not to stop working and enjoy free time independent of commodity consumption

qualitative dimension of capitalist exploitation to some extent parallels the role of capital in its quantitative dimension. As Marxists have long pointed out, the latter dimension of capitalist exploitation turns the economic surplus that workers are forced to produce into capital, an external and alienating reality that grows at their expense, reproduces their subordinate position, and perpetuates their exploitation by making their continued survival conditional on their willingness to accept capital's appropriation of their surplus product. Similarly, consumer culture is also a product of capital's transformation of the surplus product it extracts from workers into an alienating, if seductive, reality that turns against workers and contributes to their exploitation. Just as capital, in the form of labor-saving technologies and technologies designed to maximize capital's extraction of surplus labor, often gives rise to adverse landscapes of scarcity based on the increase of the quantitative dimension of exploitation, consumer culture contributes to the qualitative dimension of capitalist exploitation by preventing workers from achieving maximum satisfaction even from the limited slice of the economic pie that the prevailing rate of quantitative exploitation prescribes for them.

The second, qualitative, dimension of exploitation is not only based on capital's use against consumers of the surplus labor it extracts from workers. It is as often based on the exploitation of cultures in ways that harm the very communities that have produced them. Velman Lapoint and Priscilla Hambrick-Dixon (2003) have, for example, discussed the 'dress-related challenges' confronting black youth as a result of our society's consumer culture. As consumer culture grows through the exploitation of black youth culture, black youth, oppressed minorities and poor people, more generally, find themselves unable to afford the commodities that marketing techniques turn into embodiments of 'coolness'⁷⁵. Our society's racism, moreover, means that, trying to buy the coveted commodities despite their poverty often stigmatizes at least as much as not having these commodities at all. As Lapoint and Hambrick-Dixon (2003, 243-44) explain,

"Black youth are placed at risk ... given materialistic messages that use their cultural expressions and Black models and celebrities in marketing dress. Potential risks to many Black youth are further compounded by conditions of poverty that engulf their lives. ... Moreover, they face a double bind, in which, by purchasing the very dress products that ensure that they are 'cool', they end up being targeted by other youth in thefts, as well as by the police, media reports, and marketers seeking future profits."

The qualitative dimension of exploitation also helps to explain what Robert Lane (2000) has described as 'the loss of happiness in market democracies'. Pointing to dramatic increases in "major depression and dysphoria ... in economically advanced countries, with the incidence highest among younger age cohorts"⁷⁶ as well as to the fact, mentioned earlier, that reported levels of subjective well-being have failed to rise with average standards of living, Lane

once their needs are satisfied, but rather to want more so that they will continue working in order to buy commodities."

⁷⁵ Twitchell 2000, 285.

⁷⁶ Lane 2000, 33.

concludes that the problem lies with the fact that capitalism encourages people to focus on the pursuit of money rather than the quality of their relationships with other people.

Since it is the quality of social relationships rather than money that, as Lane points out, is more closely related to reported levels of subjective well-being, it is not surprising that capitalism has become an obstacle to a richer and more satisfying life even for the minority of the world's population living in the affluent global North. To begin with, the inequalities that capitalism inevitably generates undercut social solidarity and the quality of people's social relationships.⁷⁷ On the other hand, capital's resistance to any reduction in the work-day, as well as its encouragement of long hours through the consumerist culture it continues to build, leave people with less time for family and friends as well as for participation in civic life.⁷⁸ Last but not least, long hours of work underresource people for leisure. People who are exhausted after a long day of work are more likely to engage in undemanding activities, such as watching TV, which cannot provide the more substantial enjoyment that, psychologists tell us, can be derived from leisure activities that require the acquisition and development of skills.⁷⁹ All in all, just as capitalist globalization gives rise to landscapes of scarcity of great human suffering and material deprivation, especially in the global South, capitalism's consumer culture gives rise to irrational landscapes of scarcity in which our society's unprecedented technological potential is not used to enrich human life but to accumulate capital.

Environmental Degradation and Capitalism's Landscapes of Scarcity

The discussion in this chapter has so far sketched some of the numerous and complex effects of capitalist globalization and consumerism on the landscapes of scarcity confronting people around the world. To these effects has to be added the contribution of capitalist globalization and consumerism to the degradation of the natural conditions on which all life depends.

One of the effects of capitalism's long-standing tendency to extend its geographical reach to every corner of the planet has been the disappearance of many ecologically sustainable cultures and ways of life in the non-Western world. The onslaught of colonialism and uneven global capitalist 'development' has often eradicated the conditions of existence of such ecologically sustainable ways of life, replacing them instead with such ecologically unsustainable practices as the remaking of agriculture into a transformation of "fossil energy into food."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Wilkinson 2005, 33-56.

⁷⁸ Kasser 2002 61-62; Frank 1999, 53; Schor 1991, 15; Beem 2005, 222.

⁷⁹ Csikszentmihalyi 2003, 95 and 97; Lane 2000, 308; Schor 1991, 161; Basso 2003, 20, 95 and 110; Scitovsky 1992.

⁸⁰ Alier 1987, 37-38.

Frances Moore Lappe, Joseph Collins and Peter Rosset (1998, 42-44) have, for example, described how colonialism and the integration of Africa into the global economy replaced ecologically sustainable farming and pastoralist ways of life with monocultures oriented towards the needs of the colonial powers. As these monocultures in effect mined the land, they ruined the soil, required the expansion of these unsustainable practices to “even more vulnerable lands”⁸¹, and displaced pastoralists “to more fragile, arid lands”⁸². Thus, Africa’s integration into the global capitalist economy has, among its other devastating impacts, contributed to the desertification of African land, while also impoverishing the remaining pastoralists seeking to survive despite the mounting pressures that global capitalism has placed upon them.

Capitalist globalization and the uneven nature of economic development that it entails have also contributed to environmental destruction through the economic, financial and debt crises that they tend to generate. These crises often force developing countries to slash spending on environmental protection and to put pressure on their environment by stepping up the extraction of natural resources so that they can earn foreign currency and repay their debts.⁸³ Given the negative environmental effects of such crises, environmental destruction cannot but be aggravated by the fact that the liberalization of capital markets, which is imposed by rich countries and the international financial organizations they control on developing countries around the world, tends to make financial crises deeper and more frequent.⁸⁴

The role of new communications technologies and the media in the ongoing process of cultural globalization also contributes to the globalization of consumerism.⁸⁵ By projecting an idealized view of life in the affluent societies of the global North, transnational media corporations spread consumerist aspirations to all corners of the world. This is a disturbing development given the widely recognized ecological unsustainability of the resource-intensive lifestyles prevailing in the affluent societies of the global North.⁸⁶ In a world where “the material scale of human activity exceeds the sustainable carrying capacity of the earth”⁸⁷, it is

⁸¹ Lappe et al 1998, 42.

⁸² Ibid, 43.

⁸³ Schaeffer 1999, 200-201, Charkiewicz et al 2001, 190-91, Sachs 1999, 143.

⁸⁴ For the connection between globalization and the depth and frequency of financial crises, see Stiglitz 2003, 15. According to Walden Bello (2008), there have been “about 100 financial crises since capital markets were deregulated and liberalized in the 1980s.”

⁸⁵ Sklair 2002, 166 and 171, Waters 2001, 203, Barnet and Cavanagh 1994, 15-16.

⁸⁶ See Costanza et al 1997, 7; Sarkar 1999, 155; and Brown 2001.

⁸⁷ Costanza et al 1997, 3

clear that, beyond undermining human well-being, the continuing spread of consumerism that global capitalism promotes is also a great threat to the ecological integrity of the planet.

Beyond such negative ecological effects, the attempt of developing countries to duplicate the resource-intensive lifestyles of the consumerist global North is likely to strain the resources of a world that is no longer “living within its ecological means.”⁸⁸ The likelihood of conflict and ‘resource wars’ will continue to increase as the bid of developing countries to increase their access to and use of the planet’s resources will put into question the disproportionate use of resources by the affluent countries of the global North.⁸⁹ In this context, capitalism’s inability to translate its great productive potential into a richer, more satisfying life for all human beings is only matched by capitalism’s misuse of this potential in ways that pose grave threats to humanity and the planet. As nuclear weapons and problems such as global warming illustrate the tendency of capitalist dynamism to increase the destructive as well as productive capacities of humanity, the quest for economic democracy is as much a bid to prevent an unbearably dystopian future as it is a project to achieve a better future that is more consistent with the ecological integrity of the planet and a richer, more fulfilling life for all human beings.⁹⁰

The problem of climate change provides one illustration of how capitalism’s ecological destructiveness affects the landscapes of scarcity confronting people around the world. On the one hand, the wealth and consumerist lifestyles of the global North have only been made possible by the abundant use of fossil fuel-based energy.⁹¹ On the other hand, the resulting accumulation of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is leading to climate change with serious risks for people around the world.⁹² Such risks include coastal flooding, which could turn tens of millions of people around the world into environmental refugees. Rising temperatures will contribute to the spread of diseases, such as malaria. In fact, UN-sponsored research already suggests that “global warming was responsible for 150,000 extra deaths in the year 2000.”⁹³ As dry areas become even drier, people in areas, such as Africa, are more likely to experience hunger, while drought is likely to “[push] people to drink from ever more unsafe

⁸⁸ Barber 2007, 148-49.

⁸⁹For the serious environmental risks and potential for global conflict that capitalism’s ecological unsustainability implies, see Dixon 1993, Klare 2001, Foster 2009.

⁹⁰ For capitalism’s tendency to increase humanity’s destructive as well as productive powers, see Enzensberger 1996 and Meszaros 1995.

⁹¹Altvater 2006. According to Paul and Anne Ehrlich (1991, 8), the average American consumes about 50 times the energy consumed by the average Bangladeshi.

⁹² See Grimes 1999, Simms 2005, and Sachs et al 1998.

⁹³ Simms 2005, 67.

water sources.” As warmer temperature contributes to storms and extreme weather phenomena, “the mortality figures could become truly staggering as well as the cost of repair.”⁹⁴

Most of the burden of these adverse changes is likely to be borne by the poorest people in the world, the people, in other words, least responsible for the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.⁹⁵ The fact that the high levels of output and consumption in the affluent countries of the global North are based on the disproportionate burden that these countries place on the planet’s ecological sinks has led some scholars to suggest that the global North owes an ecological debt to the global South.⁹⁶ Just the part of the debt that relates to the North’s disproportionately high carbon emissions has been estimated to be \$13 trillion per year.⁹⁷

The problem of global warming exemplifies capital’s long-standing practice of externalizing environmental costs on society at large.⁹⁸ This practice is a major obstacle to addressing both global warming and the ecological crisis more generally. As far as the question of addressing global warming is concerned no serious progress has been made. Even the Kyoto accord that was vehemently and successfully resisted by economic and political elites in the United States was too weak to address the scale of the problem.⁹⁹ In fact, carbon emissions in the early 2000s were rising faster than even the predictions of “the most fossil-fuel intensive of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change emissions scenarios developed in the late 1990s.”¹⁰⁰ This is taking place in a context where the planet “is changing faster than even pessimists expected” and is poised to reach a tipping point with respect to greenhouse emissions that could trigger catastrophic results.¹⁰¹

The climate crisis is, however, only the most dramatic case of capital’s ability to resist a meaningful response to urgent environmental problems. Capital derives this ability from its access to the economic surplus produced by workers and from its use of this surplus to externalize environmental costs on society and future generations. Indeed, this ability to externalize costs and receive subsidies for environmentally destructive economic activities is

⁹⁴ Grimes 1999, 31.

⁹⁵ Longfellow 2006, 4; Brunnengraber 2006, 217-18, Sachs et al 1998, 72-73.

⁹⁶ See Simms 2005, Alier 2006, 285.

⁹⁷ Foster and Clark 2004, 195-96.

⁹⁸ Many scholars have noted this tendency. For examples, see Wallerstein 1999, 4; Alier 2006, 282 and O’Connor 1998, 272-73.

⁹⁹ Longfellow 2006, 2-3, Foster 2002, 19-20.

¹⁰⁰ Foster Nov 2008, 5.

¹⁰¹ Krugman 2009a and 2009b, Foster March 2009, Clark and York 2008, 13; Wallis 2008, 25.

based on the use of corporate profits to lobby politicians, make campaign contributions and launch public relations campaigns aimed both at defining environmental problems and their causes and at greenwashing their own image. This ability is also enhanced by the influence over the media that corporate interests enjoy thanks to their channeling of a significant portion of the economic surplus into advertising.¹⁰²

In this respect, capital's externalization of environmental costs is one more way the undemocratic nature of the capitalist economic system encourages the aggravation of the landscapes of scarcity confronting present and future generations alike. Although environmental movements often struggle against the ecological havoc wrought by capital, the undemocratic nature of the capitalist economic system makes it much harder for such struggles to succeed. As Eva Charkiewicz et al (2001, 60) point out, "[c]ivic organizations cannot match the funds which corporations provide for promotional activities."

Moreover, capital's ability to externalize costs on society and future generations is strengthened by the very adversity of the landscapes of scarcity that it generates. The poverty, unemployment, and misery that the undemocratic nature of the capitalist system delivers for large segments of the population even in the affluent societies of the global North makes people vulnerable to 'environmental job blackmail'.¹⁰³ The desperate need for jobs puts pressure on communities and even labor unions to support environmentally harmful industries and oppose environmental regulations that are thought to "lead to job loss."¹⁰⁴ This problem is especially acute, for example, for minority communities in the United States, which suffer from both limited economic opportunity and increased exposure to environmental risk.¹⁰⁵

In this context, it becomes easier for capital to exploit potential divisions between environmentalists and low-income communities, just as it exploits racial, ethnic, gender and other divisions between workers. The very companies responsible for the environmental job blackmail of low-income communities adopt a populist posture that accuses environmental movements of an elitist disregard of "the needs of 'workers and the poor'".¹⁰⁶ Commenting on these challenges, Robert Bullard (1994, 261) has argued that

"the mainstream environmental movement has not sufficiently addressed the fact that social inequality and imbalances of social power are at the heart of environmental degradation, resource depletion, pollution, and even overpopulation. The environmental crisis can simply not be solved effectively without social justice."

¹⁰² Charkiewicz et al 2001, 60; Rogers 2006; Wallis 2008, 27-28.

¹⁰³ Bullard 1994, 260.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 261.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Schnaiberg 2005, 712.

A project for economic democracy based on the recognition of the connection between the undemocratic logic of capital and the adverse landscapes of scarcity that people around the world are faced with can address the challenge outlined by Bullard. Indeed, the defining characteristic of economic democracy is a challenge of all the economic, racial, gender and other social inequalities that prevent the economic goals and priorities of society from being democratically determined rather than being dictated by the imperatives of capital accumulation. As it also demonstrates the connections between capital's undemocratic economic power and the human misery and ecological degradation characterizing capitalism's landscapes of scarcity, the conception of economic democracy proposed in this work can help bring together the popular movements that capital has always sought to divide.

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