

AUTHORS' INTERSPERSED COMMENTS (**IN BOLD**) IN JUSTIN BZOVY REVIEW OF
Creating an Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation by Fred
Magdoff and Chris Williams

Magdoff and Williams present and defend a version of ecosocialism, or a vision of an ecological society, on the grounds that 'we need an economy designed to be at the service of humanity, regenerating and maintaining the health of the biosphere, upon which we and other species depend, an economy without the compulsion for exponential growth, able to function well while constantly evolving' (284). Their work is split into four main parts. The first two parts attempt to show that capitalism is responsible for the poor health of the biosphere, and that we are not doomed to live in a capitalist society. The latter two parts give us their vision of an ecological society, and how it would transform our agriculture, use of water and energy, and means of transportation. Though I am quite sympathetic with such a vision, there are some issues with their arguments for ecosocialism, most of which rest on how they paint capitalism as the villain. As they put it: 'We maintain that capitalism, of necessity, operates to create our global social-ecological crisis' (49). In their view, not only is capitalism, which is characterized by competition, consumerism, and greed, responsible for climate change, but it is also responsible for nearly all social inequalities. See especially their Chapter 4 *Capitalism's Effects on People*. Further, in a capitalist society the rich, powerful, and greedy are our social, as well as political, leaders. And thus, capitalism is not only destroying the planet, but it is immoral. The main issue with this book is that the style of argument is unlikely to sway those who aren't already convinced that there is something wrong with capitalism, though it may nudge those who seek greener forms of making profit off the fence. A far more direct engagement with defenders of the capitalist system would be required to sway the more critical reader. [1]

[1] Our purpose in writing the book was *not* to convince defenders of capitalism but rather to provide a framework for those who question it. For those concerned with what is happening socially and ecologically, but not seeing that these issues are all tied together and related to how the system of capitalism normally operates. It may well be that the reviewer would like to see a different book, one that tries to engage with defenders of capitalism. That was not our goal, as should have been clear from the preface, nor would we consider wasting our time writing such a book.

One problem lies in their reliance on refutation by quotation. The main problem being their use of material from Marx and Engels. Those that hold that communism, rather than capitalism, is the worse of two evils will not be swayed by quotations, and for those that are already anti-capitalist, this constitutes needless preaching to the choir. Part of the problem lies in how quotations are often presented. The style here is to make a general point, for example, that the Earth is not something we own, but something that we are a part of, and then to present a quotation from Marx

or Engels that supports the point, for example, 'As Marx wrote in *Capital*, "Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the Earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations"' (232). This mode of presentation belies a critical engagement with these texts, and unfortunately leaves the reader with the impression that they would be better off reading Marx and Engels for themselves. [1] Further, the relevance of some of their quotations even within the context of their line of argument is not always salient. For example, the quote from Engels on page 229 appears rather out of place. In that section, the authors are discussing the human capacity to communicate, and the quote from Engels pertains to our ability to discern the laws of nature. The connection is obscure at best. [2] If a revolution is ultimately required for the changes they seek, ecosocialists might try to first win over the court of public opinion. [3]

[1.] We have used quotes from Marx and Engels (as well as innumerable other people) almost exclusively to illustrate important points, not for the purpose of "refutation by quotation." We thought readers would be interested in both the deep understanding of Marx and Engels plus their distinctive ways of expressing ideas. But we also have used quotes by W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Stephen J. Gould, Rachel Carson, and so many others for the same reasons.

For example, that approach should have been clear to the reviewer in item [2], explained just below.

[2.] The relevant portion of the paragraph that the reviewer is concerned with on page 229 from *Creating an Ecological Society* reads as follows:

Humans have developed a way of living and interacting with the environment that involves, in the terminology of Canadian ecologist C. S. Holling, three unique aspects: foresight and intentionality, communication, and technology.²⁷ Human activities are generally intentional and can be thought through ahead of time, allowing the consideration of outcomes of individual actions. When results are not ecologically or socially satisfactory, alternative strategies and techniques can be used to modify activities (assuming they don't conflict with the interests of those in charge of the economy). Or as Frederick Engels wrote, "We have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn [nature's] laws and apply them correctly."²⁸

The point of this passage is obviously not "the human capacity to communicate" (as the reviewer states) but rather the intentionality of our activities and the human capacity to learn and change. Thus, the connection to the Engels quote is not "obscure" as Bzovy states, but is directly relevant to the point.

[3] I think that what the reviewer may be looking for is a book aimed at a wider audience, perhaps something like the books Naomi Klein writes. Those certainly serve a purpose of reaching a broader audience. But our book was written especially for people who are already very concerned with the seemingly intractable ecological and social issues facing us. They might have a feeling that something is very wrong with the way things are headed, maybe even be activists involved in one of the many struggles, but lacking a framework for understanding why these issues (problems, crises) are occurring in the way they are and what might be a way out.

Oddly, we do not see any engagement with those that present sophisticated defenses of the free market, for example, John Rawls and Robert Nozick go unmentioned, as do a litany of others. Instead we see modern political leaders figuring as the main defenders of capitalism. **[1]** Though there is sophistication to Magdoff and Williams' critique of capitalism, and even given the fact that it's worthwhile to engage with more popular defenses of capitalism, this omission verges on committing a straw man argument. For example, one of the main arguments for capitalism they tackle in Chapter 6, *Does "Human Nature" Prevent System Change?*, is based on the claim that humans are hardwired for capitalism, which has been voiced, in their examples, by Margaret Thatcher and Nancy Pelosi, among others. The idea here is that we are, to some degree, stuck with a capitalist system. Magdoff and Williams' attack on this argument involves the unnecessarily strong claim that '[t]here is no such thing as a hard-and-fast human nature' (194). **[2]** Part of their argument for that claim involves pointing to the fact that capitalism hasn't always been around. Capitalism, they suggest, has been around for 500 years, but industrial capitalism for 250 years (184). But if that's the case, then how can capitalism be responsible for the sorts of social inequalities that predate it? Oppression surely pre-exists capitalism, yet Chapter 4 details how capitalism oppresses. **[3]** First, arguing that we are not hardwired for capitalism would suffice to make their point without seemingly contradicting the connections they want to draw between capitalism and oppression. **[4]** Second, despite the fact that they attack popular defenses of capitalism, Magdoff and Williams fail to engage adequately with popular arguments *against* communism or socialism, such as pointing to the demise of communist states like the U.S.S.R.. **[5]** However, they do note that a problem with such communist states lies in the nature of their top-down bureaucratic planning (290). But this problem doesn't receive much attention, though they do favour bottom-up planning. Again, the point I'm making is that these styles of argument are not going to win many converts, but perhaps proselytizing is not the goal of this book.**[6]**

[1] We are not interested in engaging with "sophisticated" defenders of the capitalist system.

[2] It's not clear what the problem is here. While Bzovy maintains that we make an "unnecessarily strong claim" (whatever that means) regarding

humans not being hardwired for capitalism, he presents no evidence whatsoever to back that up that statement. When people say that our “human nature” is a perfect fit with capitalism, they are referring to a particular *subset* of the wide range of human characteristics/traits/behavior— such as greed, individualism, and competitiveness. While these are clearly part of the human experience, and are essential for capitalism to function (and are encouraged and rewarded in capitalist societies), there is no such subset that is dominant in all human societies. I’m not sure why the reviewer didn’t get the point that certain behavioral traits tend to dominate in capitalism because they are so essential for making the system function. Just as another subset of characteristics/traits/behavior were dominant in hunting-gathering societies—such as the cooperativeness, sharing, and reciprocity, empathy, equality between men and women — was essential for those societies to continue. If the reviewer disagrees with this, then why doesn’t he present evidence that there IS “as a hard-and-fast human nature”? The statement of ours is not an “unnecessarily strong claim” but rather a reflection of reality.

[3] We make it clear that there were social and environmental problems in pre-capitalist societies. In fact, in the same chapter on “human nature” that the reviewer discusses (chapter 6), starting on p. 182, we explore the development of classes that began with the rise of many agricultural societies and the exploitation of people and the beginning of inequality between men and women. But there are unique aspects to capitalism that maintain or deepen the specific manifestations of our present social and ecological problems. And in many cases the way capitalism normally functions actually creates the problems. Capitalism has unique ways of oppressing women, people of color, immigrants, and people who work for wages. How to explain the development of capitalism without colonialism and slavery and “modern” imperialism? This bloody legacy is directly attributable to the system of capital. How is the condition of African Americans in the US understood without the legacy of capitalism’s slavery (so critical to the growth and development of the system), Jim Crow, endemic racism and official discrimination that goes on to this day? And while there were environmental problems occurring in ancient times (such as soil erosion), how can it not be relevant that capitalism is a system that a) has to grow forever on a finite planet and is in crisis when growth slows and b) has no way to take into account anything other than potential profits? If the reviewer thinks that there are different explanations for the social and ecological crises facing humanity and the environment, and the explosion of environmental catastrophes since the Second World War, why doesn’t he present them? (We discuss and refute many of the common explanations.)

[4] This sentence makes no sense: “First, arguing that we are not hardwired for capitalism would suffice to make their point without seemingly contradicting the connections they want to draw between capitalism and

oppression.” That we are not hardwired for capitalism is a separate issue from the forms of oppression.

[5] It’s true that we only briefly deal with “popular arguments *against* communism.” We did so because we spell out our ideas as to what an ecological (or ecosocialist) society might be like (in Chapter 11), and it is clearly different from what happened in the “really existing” communist states. Thus, we felt a more lengthy discussion of what went wrong in the USSR etc. was not needed.

[6] Proselytizing to ardent defenders of capitalism was *definitely not* the purpose of the book nor are we interested in writing such a book.

The most striking portion of the book, Chapter 11 *Living in an Ecological Society*, focuses on painting a picture of an ecosocialist society and how it differs from the capitalist society of the last few hundred years. Their society is democratic, has a planned economy, and is worker and community controlled. However, here too there are many claims that might strike an unsympathetic reader as implausible. For example, the claim that travelling with others will be a delight to be savoured in such a society (266). [1] Or the claim that there will be no need for bosses or managers (297). [2] Such claims sound more like advertisements than arguments for the revolution. Without an argument these claims are difficult to evaluate at best. There are also claims about their vision of society that are a bit scary, for example, the claim that ‘[a] huge portion of the population currently work in jobs in the wealthy countries of the North that would not be needed in an ecologically-minded society’ (295). Though there certainly are problems with the job markets in such countries, convincing the people that live there, especially those that enjoy what big cities have to offer, that they would be happier fishing and farming is going to be a tough sell. [3] Again, this reads more like an advertisement for those unhappy in their work. Given the picture of society they are presenting, more needs to be said about how ecosocialists might overcome past problems with collective and state-run farms.

[1] The point was that when people are no longer rushed and overly concerned with their individual condition as they are in capitalist societies, it will be possible to “enjoy the ride” of life in many different ways.

[2] Does the reviewer really believe that there should be permanent bosses in workplaces? What we suggest—and is the reason for the lengthy quote on p. 297 from neither Marx nor Engels, but from farmer and cooperative member Omar Garcia—is that there should be a rotation of responsibilities in all workplaces, something very different from a “boss”. While this might “might strike an unsympathetic reader as implausible,” as the reviewer suggests, we still think that it will be a critical part of living in a future socialist society. It’s not that there won’t be managers of some sort. Just not permanent ones and

not ones rewarded better or differently to other working people with the untrammelled authority bosses enjoy under capitalism.

[3] The reviewer takes issue with us pointing out that there are many jobs that will not be needed in a rationally organized society. However, in a rationally organized and run society there is no need for employment in the huge sales effort (of which the advertising sector is but one part), the insurance sector, the financial sector, standing armies (and bases spread throughout the world, in fact, the entire military-industrial complex), the huge government bureaucracy (not just national), the prison-industrial complex, the production of all sorts of useless and socially harmful products (such as pesticides and many other chemicals), the overproduction and pushing of products that might be useful but are harmful when in widespread use (such as antibiotics) and on and on. That we can produce the essentials for a good life with many fewer hours of work may scare the reviewer but it doesn't scare our readers. In fact, it's a source of inspiration! After all, it implies that people can work fewer hours in a future society organized along the lines we suggest. And with the projected pace of automation (robotization and computer algorithms), many even currently "productive" workers will no longer be needed to work as long to provide the goods and services for everyone to live a full life and reach their full potential. If this happens in a system of equality and under social control, what's there to be afraid of? That we'd have to work fewer hours? [It should be noted, as we do, that there is still a lot of work that is not being done in capitalist countries that will be needed to supply decent housing, schooling, health care, recreational possibilities, better public transportation, food, environmental remediation, etc.]

What's going to be an even tougher sell for those on the other side of the fence is their claim that '[i]n order to replace capitalism with an ecological society we need a revolution' (305). [1] This is the focus of their final chapter, *Revolution: Creating an Ecological Society*. By revolution they mean '[t]he total rearrangement of social power and its reconstitution on the basis of substantive equality' (309). Here they discuss the 'why' and the 'how' of an ecosocialist revolution: which activist movements they see themselves as aligning with, how to build momentum, unify, and further international struggle. In a sense, this chapter reads like a call to arms. Here would have been an excellent place to engage with Marx and Engels' account of the sort of revolution required to overthrow the capitalist system. [2] Another place would be their Chapter 11, which reads far more like a description of a utopian future than what we see in *The Communist Manifesto*. [3] Here at least they do recognize a criticism coming from the conservative right, the contention that 'all revolutions end in tyranny' (320). The response here is that the sort of revolution they are presenting is more of a continuous struggle or process (328). Again, more needs to be said about how ecosocialists might overcome past problems with similar revolutions. Simply redefining the term is not going to convince those that aren't already convinced that such drastic measures need be taken. [4] This will

lead only to confusion and talking past each other when ecosocialists do engage defenders of the free market.

[1] Yes, it's certainly going to be a "hard sell" to convince a majority of people that revolutionary change is needed. But that's what is necessary in order to transition to a society of substantive equality that operates in ecologically sound ways. And revolutionary change is far more frequent than the defenders of capitalism and their ideologues would have us believe. How else can the enormous needed changes be made in power relations and in the approach to the economy and society? What is the alternative?

[2] Given our intended audience and the nature of our book, we see nothing to be gained by "engag[ing] with Marx and Engels' account of the sort of revolution required to overthrow the capitalist system." We have incorporated into the discussion our thoughts about the problems that have occurred with previous attempts to transition from capitalism to socialism.

[3] and [4] If the goal is to create a society of substantive equality and an economy and society functioning in harmony with the rest of the biosphere as well as healthy natural flows and cycles, then a strikingly different system is absolutely necessary. The purpose of chapter 11 ("Living in an Ecological Society") is to think through what would actually be needed for such a society—utopian or not—to exist and thrive. We explain that we are not laying out a blueprint, but rather presenting our ideas of how such a society might operate in hopes that a wider discussion might take place on this question.

We are not redefining any terms. In our thoughts about what a future society might need to be like and how to get there from the current situation, we have (as mentioned above) incorporated our understanding of the lessons from previous revolutionary attempts.

Despite these minor issues, which are more to do with how their vision is framed than anything else, there is much food for thought in Magdoff and Williams' work.

[1] This is evidenced by their attention to detail, especially their reliance on empirical data and contemporary ecology and climate science. See especially the third chapter *Capitalism versus the Biosphere*. There are also thoughtful discussions of many of the contemporary movements they seek to align themselves with, such as Black Lives Matter and the Occupy Movement. But here perhaps it may be better for the reader to examine the details themselves before getting caught up in the ideological struggle. For with some careful thought, one can accept most of the changes they are suggesting, while rejecting their attacks on capitalism. [2]

This paragraph may be at the heart of the problem with the review.

[1] It is more than strange for Bzovy, after taking most of his space to make all sorts of criticisms, then refers to them as “minor issues.”

[2] Clearly Bzovy is quite comfortable with capitalism and does not like to see it attacked. He does not see the world’s social and ecological problems related to the system. We clearly did not convince him otherwise or perhaps, he was not open to being convinced in the first place, regardless of the strength of argument and evidence. But as we pointed out above, uncritical strong defenders of the system are not our audience. We are aiming to reach people very concerned with the social and ecological crises, especially those activists engaged in the various struggles but lacking an overall framework to understand why these crises were occurring and how the various struggles for social justice and ecological sanity are interrelated. We also are aiming at an audience that is open to critiques of capitalism, as so many young activists today are.