

Ashley Dawson

“Environment,” *Social Text* 100 (Fall 2009).

As we enter the 30th year of *Social Text*, the United States, and with it the rest of the world, is weathering an unprecedented emergency brought on by three intertwined factors: a credit-fueled financial crisis, radically erratic energy prices linked to a speculative bubble brought on by the immanent peaking of oil supplies, and an accelerating climate crisis. If the unfolding climate crisis means that we *should* make a transition to a zero-carbon economy with the greatest possible dispatch, the coming energy crisis will *constrain* us to transform our behavior over the next decade as fuel supplies become tighter and hence more expensive. The lineaments of this change remain an open site of political conflict, although the terms of current debates are not really all that new. In fact, some of the key analyses of environmental issues in *Social Text* over the last several decades have not lost their bite and should help orient us in these harrowing times.

Today’s triple crisis resembles in many ways the conditions and contradictions apparent during the years when *Social Text* was founded. From the establishment of Earth Day in 1970, to the publication of the clarion call *The Limits to Growth* two years later, to the meltdown of Three Mile Island at decade’s end, this was a period marked by a sense of environmental emergency and, in some quarters, sweeping apocalypticism. The turn to neo-liberal economics as a solution to the crisis of accumulation that characterized the era played out equally damagingly in the rollback of environmental regulations and in a savage new round of enclosure of the global environmental commons during the following decades. As markets were deregulated and progressive environmental regulation was pruned or simply disregarded, commodification of the environment proceeded apace in forms as varied as genetic bio-prospecting among indigenous peoples, the patenting of unique seed varieties developed over millennia through the care of peasant farming communities, and the dividing up of rights to access that

most precious of natural resources, water. What new forms of critical knowledge and agency have emerged in this age of neo-liberal environmental enclosure?

Social Text contributors such as Yrjö Haila, David Harvey, Lassi Heininen, Cindy Katz, and Andrew Ross have tended to approach the serried environmental crises of the last decades by emphasizing the mutual constitution of social forms and the natural environment. Human history must be theorized, these and other contributors have suggested, using a dialectical lens that captures the constant interplay and friction between ecological and social relations. This insight builds on Marx's assertion that "the history of nature and the history of men [sic] are mutually conditioned" because "by acting on the external world and changing it, [we] at the same time change [our] own nature."¹ If the environment furnishes particular societies with a specific set of obstacles and possibilities, in other words, this original natural realm is reshaped and transformed into a second nature through human agency. This second nature then constitutes the matrix for further iterations of the dialectical dance of nature and culture.

Such an emphasis on the dialectical gestation of environmental history offers a radical critique of the dualist traditions inherited from the European Enlightenment, which posit nature as a physical entity separate from and external to human society. *Social Text* contributors have consistently highlighted the conditions under which this reified form of nature is produced, underlining the social embedding of environmental science and the parallels between hubristic attempts to dominate the natural world and Enlightenment models of thought that posit society as a governable whole. A hallmark of *Social Text's* theorization of the environment could therefore be said to be critical inquiry into the modes through which biopower has shaped both society and the natural environment over the last several decades.

One of the initial issues that journal contributor David Harvey grappled with derives from endemic clashes between the labor and environmental movements over the last several decades.² Desperate fights against corporate retrenching during the neoliberal era by workers underlined a difficult truth during these years: radical movements born under oppressive conditions may at times cling to those very conditions. In the face of militant working class struggles to keep auto plants or coal mines open, for example, how, Harvey asked, were activists and theorists to adjudicate conflicting spatial and temporal scales of political engagement? What constitutes a privileged claim to knowledge in such thorny conjunctures? With initiatives such as the Apollo Project putting the US labor movement squarely in the environmentalist camp today, there is less bad blood between reds and greens now than in the past. Nonetheless, the insights that emerged from these debates remain generative: an emphasis on the search for fresh combinations of old and new “militant particularisms,” to use Harvey’s phrase, a refusal of theoretical and political closure, and an insistence on the many ways that people are embedded in nature.

The environmental conflicts into which *Social Text* intervened were not always so politically and ethically ambiguous. In addition to discussing red-green conflicts, commentators like Cindy Katz also anatomized the impact of hegemonic projects of environmental transformation such as the Green Revolution.³ The imposition of intensive agriculture in so-called developing countries had cascading effects that ruptured established social relations. As Katz documents through her discussion of a Sudanese village, in the course of the Green Revolution, agriculture for export was imposed by central governments, mixed cultivation was wiped out, commodification of previously free goods accelerated, households were dislocated, local populations were proletarianized, and exposure to toxic levels of pesticide became widespread. The transformation of the landscape and of agricultural practices catalyzed by the Green Revolution therefore should be seen as part of a broader pattern of accumulation by dispossession that has characterized the neoliberal era. The growth of the

paradigmatic environmental form of the 21st century, the slum-choked mega-city (discussed in *Social Text* issues 81 and 95), needs to be historicized in relation to this sanguinary transformation of the global countryside over the last several decades.⁴

Social Text contributor Andrew Ross also intervened early in another environmental issue with global ramifications: climate change.⁵ The polarized debates about climate change that unfolded during the 1990s were but the latest installment, Ross reminded us, in the agonistic social construction of the climate in the modern world. What was new, however, was the global purview conjured up by such debates, a shift that was part of a broader articulation of transnational forms of subjectivity and governance. Just as was true of the forms of “free trade” codified during the 1990s through agreements such as NAFTA, Ross argued, the global consciousness conjured up by representations of climate change often obscured and even exacerbated dramatic forms of inequality. The moral panic over global warming as it was articulated in the global North thus tended to shift the burden of climate remediation onto humanity as a whole and thereby to elide questions of race, class, and historical and geographical culpability. In addition, what once was an almost exclusively regional discourse about shifting climate regimes had now become an issue of global management that offered an uncanny parallel with the discourse of global economic management. A corporate logic of costs and benefits clearly organizes both sectors, as the expanding regime of pollution emission rights demonstrates.

Linked to this analysis of discourses of environmental crisis has been inquiry into the forms of governance to which human populations are subjected under the rubric of biopolitics and parallel dispositions of power within the realm of the environment. This turn to what Arun Agrawal calls “environmentality” entails the creation of new social institutions and new technologies of governance that help produce particular forms of subjectivity rather than simply repressing politically margin groups.⁶ According to Yrjö Haila and Lassi Heininen, however, one of the most prominent trends in

recent decades is the increasing representation of ecological crises as a security problem to be addressed by the military.⁷ For fellow travelers of the security establishment such as Thomas Homer-Dixon and Robert Kaplan, shortages of land, water, or raw materials resulting from increasing population lead inevitably to violence within and between states, and even to the wholesale collapse of the current state-based order.⁸ For Haila and Heininen, security almost always gets defined in these discourses as the health of the nation-state rather than the well being of its citizens. The result, they argue, is to cede authority to deal with environmental crises to closed, secretive, and hierarchical organizations such as the military, which are of course themselves one of the major causes of our present environmental crisis. The combination of new modes of securitization with novel forms of discipline has made issues of environmental sustainability an increasingly central node of politics in the 21st century.

We are surrounded today by images of eco-apocalypse. From academic tones such as Jared Diamond's *Collapse* to dystopian films like *Children of Men*, texts that limn the coming environmental holocaust are legion.⁹ Such works are perhaps salutary admonitory responses to the official know-nothingism and galloping enclosure that has prevailed during the life of *Social Text*. We should not, however, allow the apocalyptic tenor of such works and of public discourse in general to choke off the resources of hope implicit in the insight, central to the work of the journal and its contributors, that we make our own nature.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 173.
- ² David Harvey, "Militant Particularism and Global Ambition: The Conceptual Politics of Place, Space, and Environment in the Work of Raymond Williams," *Social Text* 42 (Spring 1995): 69-98.
- ³ Cindy Katz, "An Agricultural Project Comes To Town: Consequences of an Encounter in Sudan," *Social Text* 28 (1991): 31-38.
- ⁴ Ashley Dawson and Brent Hayes Edwards, "Introduction: Global Cities of the South," *Social Text* 81 (Winter 2004): 1-7; Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker, "Introduction: Urban Margins," *Social Text* 95 (Summer 2008): 1-12.
- ⁵ Andrew Ross, "Is Global Culture Warming Up?" *Social Text* 28 (1991): 3-30; Andrew Ross, "The Work of Nature in the Age of Electronic Emission," *Social Text* 18 (Winter 1987-1988): 116-128.
- ⁶ Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- ⁷ Yrjö Haila and Lassi Heininen, "Ecology: A New Discipline for Disciplining?," *Social Text* 42 (Spring 1995): 153-171.
- ⁸ See, for example, Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Robert Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 2001).
- ⁹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).