

# Book Review

Baer, Hans A. 2021. *Global Capitalism and Climate Change: The Need for an Alternative System*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

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It is something of a cliché to quote Karl Marx's (1845) observation in *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*, where he wrote, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it."

A universe of ink has been spilled over the past 177 years, but philosophers have come no closer to changing the world than they did in Marx's day. The productive powers of capitalism have been exercised to the fullest, yet there is no sign that its replacement by some form of socialism or communism is any closer than in Marx's day. Hans A. Baer, the author of *Global Capitalism and Climate Change*, argues that only ecosocialism can eliminate the depredations and destruction of nature and people caused by global capitalism and climate change but, like the philosophers, provides little guidance or instruction about how this objective might be achieved. Baer is not the first to offer such solutions without a plan or program for change, and he certainly will not be the last.

According to Baer, his book "constitutes an effort to develop a critical social science of climate change ... [that explores] the systemic changes necessary to create a more social just and sustainable world system" (4). Thus, after introducing the problem of climate change and the logic—and contradictions—of the capitalist world system, Baer examines how greenhouse gas emissions can be traced to capitalism and why tinkering around the edges of its structure is insufficient to prevent climate change. He then examines the local, national, and global climate movements; argues on behalf of an ecosocialist alternative world system; and attempts to provide a road map to how we can fundamentally change the system for the better.

Why have philosophers, as well as activists, movements, politicians, entrepreneurs, and natural and social scientists (including anthropologists, of which Baer is one) failed so far to do something meaningful about climate change? Their failures are not due to lack of effort or programs or projects or conferences or markets or diktats or communiqués. Indeed, the discursive "niche" called "climate change" is so densely occupied that it is almost impossible to hear anything amid the noise (McDonald 2021).

What is lacking in all these explanations and proposals is a compelling model of how social change takes place and how actors might intervene in social structures and institutions to leverage the cracks and contradictions that are rife throughout them (before the ecosphere does the job). Sometimes—and not often for the better—social structures and institutions crumble on their own as the cracks and contradictions undermine their apparent stability and longevity. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the gradual disappearance of social smoking and landlines are examples of this phenomenon. But it is almost impossible to engineer such change or transformation with intent: as Michel Foucault's (2003) genealogy reminds us, history is a succession of zigs and zags that no one could or can foresee, even if it looks inevitable in retrospect.

In many ways, democracy is to blame for the failure to change the world: the notion that “the People” can mobilize to convince authorities and the public of the necessity for change is a direct consequence of the electoral process, by which we choose representatives who fail to legislate change (if change really does happen that way). Perhaps if we cannot elect leaders who will buck the system, massing in the streets will convince those leaders of the errors of their ways. The Color Revolutions in beleaguered Ukraine suggest otherwise, as successive presidents were driven out of office only to leave behind officials and bureaucracies trapped in Max Weber's (1930/2005, 123–124) “iron cage,” who continue to reproduce the corrupt and autocratic practices that motivated the Revolutions in the first place.

“Follow the science” has become the dictum of those who believe that good information produces good policy and action (but see Jasanoff et al. 2021) and that hard evidence will make believers out of those who are deniers. There is ample reason, by now, to think that science is no more transcendent in most people's minds than religion and that good information, whatever that might be, has no more power to alter social practices and institutions than do revolutions of any particular color. Until the philosophers better understand how existing social practices and institutions really change and how to change them, both humans and nature will be stuck with their illusions and status quos.

What does all this have to do with *Global Capitalism and Climate Change*? Baer does not provide the “critical social science of climate change” promised at the beginning of the book, at least not in the sense in which “critical” is nowadays used, nor does he offer a strategy of social transformation. Rather, he justly criticizes policies, organizations, corporations, countries, and their leaders but never closely examines the underlying power structures that buttress opposition and resistance to the change and transformation that he recommends and demands. His road map does not really tell us *how* to get from here to there, a common failing in most books about public policy issues.

This is the second edition of a book originally published in 2012, based on data from the 2000s. Much has transpired since then, although not much has happened where climate change is concerned. To be sure, there are updates

throughout the book, but much of the material in this new edition reproduces the content of the first, failing to revisit and revise that older material in response to the intervening decade. Moreover, much of Baer's reporting consists of lists of organizations' activities and participation in various venues, with little or no critical reflection of those lists or even whether the organizations in question still exist.

The book might be a good resource for those who are just encountering the problem of capitalism and climate change. But many other recent books do a better job of making the connection between the two (see, e.g., Dalby 2022; McDonald 2021; Chakrabarty 2021; Moore 2015).

## References

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