**Ecological Imperialism and Capitalist Agriculture– A Literature Review**

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**INT 402 - International Political Economy**

**Introduction and Theory**

Observers, critical thinkers, and activists have long noted the connections between empire, trade, agriculture, and the environment. Perhaps the most famous critic of capitalism, Karl Marx, writing in the 1860’s, pointed out the connection between the Industrial Revolution in England, and the agricultural exploitation of its colonies, writing: “For a century and a half England has indirectly exported the soil of Ireland, without even allowing its cultivators the means of replacing the constituent of the exhausted soil.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Marx was not the first observer to discuss capitalism’s effect on agriculture; however, his emphasis on the exhaustion of the soil by capitalist agriculture led to the naming of this phenomenon by Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster: the metabolic rift. This term describes the manner in which capitalist agricultural techniques and unequal power relations between nations inevitably lead to the depletion of nutrients in the cultivated soil so that they may be transported to centers of production for the benefit of industrial workers. This relationship is both intrinsic to capitalism, which must control the flow of materials, and constitutes an ecological form of imperialism in which unequal power relations are leveraged to the benefit of the more powerful country.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Theorists needn’t delve deeply into history to find examples of the metabolic rift in practice, although many have done so. Mariko Frame provides a concise overview of the broad phases of ecological imperialism in world history through the lens of World-Systems Theory.[[3]](#footnote-3) She identifies 1492-1960’s as the era of explicit colonialism, characterized by the wholesale restructuring of “societies, economies, and indigenous relations to nature” for the purpose of efficient capital accumulation in the colonizing countries. The era spanning the 1940s-Late 1970s is characterized by increased economic nationalism and attempts by formerly colonized countries to implement protectionist economic policies. The 1980’s-Present is characterized by the core’s reaction to the previous era, resulting in a global turn toward Neoliberal development policies.[[4]](#footnote-4) Neoliberal development policies, viewed through a World-Systems lens, consist of structural adjustment regimes coercively applied to peripherical nations through debt arrangements. The primary focuses of such policies are the liberalization of international trade, the courting of foreign investment as the only means of capital accumulation in the periphery, and the unleashing of international finance to invest in and profit off of any development that does take place.[[5]](#footnote-5) All of these methods have been repeatedly observed to primarily benefit trans-national corporations and their profit-maximized global supply chains, while providing very little wealth or development to the formerly colonized nation, thus keeping the power differential between core and periphery in place.

In a major contribution to World-Systems Theory, Raj Patel and Jason Moore offer a novel framework through which to understand the connection between ecology and capitalism.[[6]](#footnote-6) They conduct a preliminary analysis of capitalism through its ability to generate cheap natural resources, cheap money, cheap labor, cheap food, cheap energy, and cheap lives. They characterize capitalism as an intricate ecological web that relies on structures that ensure the continued supply of these seven factors. In their chapter on cheap food, they repeatedly emphasize the role of cheap food in keeping the cost of labor down and in enabling the development of the large urban working class that constitutes the backbone of industrial production, writing: “Accumulated capital could continue to grow only insofar as a rising food surplus underwrote ‘cheap’ workers.”[[7]](#footnote-7) They go on to discuss the historical connections between colonialism and food systems, focusing on the Green Revolution of the 1960s-1980s, to which we shall return chronologically.

**Ecological Imperialism in the 19th Century**

Clark and Foster themselves, in their seminal article on the metabolic rift, support their framework with a historical study of “Guano Imperialism.” While capitalist agriculture ravaged European lands throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, maintaining the rate of profit in agriculture required the artificial amendment of the soil, to be accomplished through fertilization with accumulated bird and bat manure that could be found in great quantities off the western coast of South America. The lucrative nature of this supply chain, and its role in ensuring cheap food in the imperial core meant that the political status of the islands producing guano could not be ignored by core countries. Consequently, US and British government entities, transnational corporations, and financial interests became increasingly involved in lobbying imperial and local governments to create a political environment favorable to extraction. They also imported Chinese and Indian laborers to do the grueling work of extraction, tying Asia into the global fertilizer supply chains for the first time. Ultimately, these imperial machinations resulted in a proxy war in which Chile conquered two fertilizer-rich provinces from Peru and Bolivia, which it still controls today.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Political theorist and food scholar Eric Holt-Giménez also analyzes the so-called Guano Wars in his book, *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism*.[[9]](#footnote-9) He notes that the US specifically annexed a number of colonial possessions for the express purpose of guano extraction under the Guano Island Act of 1856, which remains in effect. The US Department of the Interior even maintains a website where curious parties can see which islands were seized and which ones are still colonial possessions of the US today.[[10]](#footnote-10) Holt-Giménez, following Marx and Clark and Foster, also connects colonial expansion and food systems by means of capitalism. He observes that as more and more of the English countryside, for example, was converted to capitalist agricultural methods through enclosure and other forms of violence, the resulting increase in labor productivity meant that the provision of cheap food was endangered by the rising wages of the farmers who produced it. The solution, much like the solution to industrial overproduction, was to subjugate foreign populations and maintain them in a state of underdevelopment.[[11]](#footnote-11) As such, places like British India would play a subordinate role in the world system: as consumers for industrial products from Europe and as a huge pool of cheap labor and fertile land that could keep food, and by extension labor, cheap in the imperial core.

Mike Davis provides an extremely thorough historical treatment of British ecological imperialism in India by analyzing the role of India in the British Empire and Britain’s role in causing the famines of 1876-1879. Davis argues that, while the famines, which resulted in at least 30 million deaths in India alone, are usually attributed to three consecutive monsoon failures and the resulting drought, the subcontinent actually exported food to the imperial core during these years, much like the Irish a few decades prior.[[12]](#footnote-12) Instead, Davis argues that these droughts were merely a more severe instance of a climatological phenomenon (El Nino-Southern Oscillation, or ENSO) to which the agriculture of the peoples of South and East Asia were historically well-adapted. It wasn’t until the loss of sovereignty to the British Empire and the forcible modification and absorption of traditional agricultural systems into the global capitalist food production system that 30 million deaths became a possible outcome of a particularly strong ENSO cycle.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although Davis doesn’t explicitly frame his analysis in terms of World-Systems Theory, he devoted considerable time to the global economic context within which Britain was operating during the second half of the 19th century. He concludes that, by this time, British industrial production was already becoming less profitable than similar production in the US and Germany. As such, Britain maintained a massive trade deficit with these countries. The only way to sustain this deficit was through the maintenance of large colonial possessions that ran an equally large trade deficit with Britain. The possession of a huge captive market enabled Britain to underwrite the rise of the US and Germany without collapsing its own economy.[[14]](#footnote-14) His analysis seems to confirm Patel and Moore’s notion of the centrality of cheap land and cheap labor in the production of cheap food, which underpins the growth upon which capitalism depends.

**Ecological Imperialism in the Neoliberal Era**

Ecological imperialism did not come to an end with explicitly colonial regimes, as several of the authors reviewed so far have suggested. Former colonial powers leveraged the lack of capital and infrastructure in the newly independent colonies in the decades following World War II to entice them to finance their development with debt. This debt is the tool by which the unequal power relations between core and periphery are maintained during the neoliberal era. The core used this power imbalance to obtain favorable terms of trade for agricultural commodities and free trade agreements such as NAFTA. This ensured that the countries of the periphery would remain dependent on heavily subsidized foodstuffs produced in the industrialized economies, while implementing policies to shift their own economies towards the production of exports needed in manufacture and industry in the core. Global North countries also used debt to pressure Southern governments to implements agricultural practices and policies that integrated and exposed their agrarian orders to the full force of the world market, such as the policies of the Green Revolution.

Patel and Moore discuss the Green Revolution of the 1960s-1980s in the context of Mexico. The Green Revolution was a series of agricultural policies pushed by Northern governments and NGOs whose ostensible goal was to alleviate global hunger by increasing production. Boosters of Green Revolution initiatives generally ignored (and continue to ignore) the fact that world food production, even after accounting for the exorbitant food waste rates in the Global North, greatly exceeds the world population’s needs. Rather than establish a precedent of redistributing the already sufficient global food supply to end hunger, this time period saw large scale efforts to increase production of food as the solution to hunger. Rather than ending hunger, they suggest that the more likely goal was to increase the production of grain in order to lower global grain prices. Patel and Moore argue that, regardless of the sincerity of such intentions, these neoliberal strategies served primarily to open new frontiers for Northern and Southern capitalists by destroying the existing agrarian orders in the Global South. The reforms generally subordinated the smallholding farmers by integrating them into the cheap labor-cheap food nexus of the global food system, already overflowing with massively subsidized agricultural products from the industrial North, against which no traditional farmer could profitably compete.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Green Revolution in Mexico and elsewhere consisted of a variety of practices and policies to achieve this end. These included the introduction of less nutritious but hardier genetically modified crops into geographical regeions where it made neither economic nor cultural sense for the farmers. Examples include the production of wheat in Mexico and the production of corn in India. These programs were ultimately successful in lowering global grain prices, but were catastrophic for the rural agrarian orders upon which they were imposed.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, the destruction of Mexico’s traditional agrarian order by a collaboration of US and Mexican capitalists and government agencies from the 1960s to present day under NAFTA (retooled in 20202 as USMCA) is a root cause of the massive migration from Mexico to the US that many agricultural (and other) corporations rely on for cheap (i.e. precarious) labor.[[17]](#footnote-17)

But Patel and Moore were hardly the first to observe that the stated goal and the actual effect of Green Revolution initiatives did not align. Peter Rosset, writing in 2000, arrives at similar conclusions in his article “Lessons from the Green Revolution.” He argues that, although neoliberal agricultural policies like the Green Revolution succeeded in increasing grain production, the data show that there has been no corresponding decrease in hunger levels. This is because slightly lower grain prices do not change the fact that the poor in the global South often can’t afford even the now-abundantly available grain. That is to say, hunger is a social problem of distribution rather than a technical problem of production. Furthermore, most of the costs of the Green Revolution were borne by the same farmers and the same cheap nature that made such accumulation possible to begin with. Material and policy changes required by Green Revolution initiatives, such as new industrial-scale irrigation systems, government subsidies, and new credit arrangements, have further impoverished smallholders and enriched large, industrial capitalist farms that pass the costs of production on to the environment. Rosset, writing nearly two decades before Patel and Moore, identified the relationship between cheap nature, cheap food, and cheap labor by arguing that Green Revolution policy changes served primarily to ensure industrial profits by keeping food exports cheap and wages lower worldwide.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Whether or not Green Revolution policies achieved their goal of uplifting farmers by ensuring their livelihood or reducing hunger seems not to be a matter of discussion amongst liberal NGOs and commentators, who continue to rely on dubious metrics to assess development and growth. For example, Rosset notes that liberal economists failed to notice that their statistics for world hunger, which show an overall decrease between 1970 and 1990, include the (over 50%) hunger reduction achieved by China’s socialist land reforms, against which neoliberal agricultural reforms like the Green Revolution were juxtaposed. With China removed from the statistics and only countries that actually participated in Green Revolution initiatives included, the number of hungry people worldwide increased by 11%, from 536 to 597 million between 1970 and 1990, despite a 9% increase in the quantity of food produced.[[19]](#footnote-19) This suggests, at best, no relationship between production levels and access to food as long as production remains greater than need.

Rosset, along with Patel and Moore, implicitly questions the motivation of neoliberal agricultural reforms such as the Green Revolution initiatives by arguing that a simple statistical analysis combined with some historical context reveals major conceptual flaws in all neoliberal development projects. Their reading suggests the insincerity of the stated goals, and many scholars have argued that these policies represent a new strategy of accumulation rather than a sincere attempt to alleviate suffering.[[20]](#footnote-20) Building on their work, scholars have attempted to historicize the neoliberal strategies of the Global North to understand who benefits from them. Utsa Patnaik describes the interdependence of Southern and Northers economies in the postwar World-System thus: “Developing countries were perfectly capable of feeding their own populations in the past and this remains true today, but they are continuously pressurized and obliged to devote an increasing part of their land and resources to feeding advanced country populations the goods their own cold countries cannot ever produce.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This lack of “food sovereignty” is a crucial aspect of the power dynamic between the core and the periphery. It is central to understanding who is truly benefitting from policies like the introduction of GMO crops and export-oriented monoculture. Philip McMichaels, a seminal figure in the study of modern food systems, keenly observed the shift in agricultural production in the Global South during the 1990s. He builds on a detailed analysis of the various global value chains involved in agriculture, emphasizing the shift among Global South countries from national agricultural systems that produced food more directly for its use-value in local markets to an international orientation in which agriculture was geared toward commodity food production for exchange-values on the international market.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Readers would be forgiven for seeing many parallels between the colonial 19th Century and the supposedly post-colonial 20th Century described by Rosset, McMichael, Patel, and Moore. In his 2021 book *A People’s Green New Deal*, Max Ajl dispenses with this distinction, writing that “colonialism itself is not over. It endures de jure in a plethora of settler-states, and its afterlives haunt the periphery.”[[23]](#footnote-23) He details the ways in which nations that achieved nominal independence in the decades following the Second World War were re-subordinated economically to their former colonial masters through debt arrangements. This resulted in a “sovereignty deficit” that characterizes current North-South relationships. This deficit enables the core to outsource production and its ecological externalities to the countries least able to cope with the effects.[[24]](#footnote-24) Ajl follows the analysis of Holt-Giménez and Patel and Moore in his account of the existing power disparities resulting from ecological imperialism in the Neoliberal era. He historicizes these phenomena by suggesting that Northern wealth accumulation was accomplished at the expense of people and nature in the South. Since ecological imperialism and the use of fossil fuels enabled the development of the Global North along a path that is now foreclosed to the Global South, a just international system should include reparations flowing from North to South in order to support their sustainable development and mitigate the ongoing suffering of the people due to the aftereffects of ecological imperialism.[[25]](#footnote-25) While the Global South remains perpetually indebted to the Global North and subjected to international institutions that discipline states for straying from the economic policies that most benefit the Global North, no less bold of a strategy for justice will generate the kind of ecological healing required to mitigate ecosystem collapse.

There are, however, many obstacles standing in the way of meaningful change to the regime of ecological imperialism. The legal frameworks of international commerce, created by Global North countries, are geared towards ensuring that international capital is able to undermine the political sovereignty of governments that accept foreign direct investment. Manuel Pérez-Rocha identifies the power imbalances within the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) system, to which states must agree in order to receive the benefits promised by free trade and international commerce agreements. The ISDS system refers lawsuits brought by corporations against governments directly to one of a number of international arbitration bodies made up of powerful corporate lawyers housed in places like the World Bank. This allows the investing corporations to sue governments that reduce the value of the corporations’ investments by enforcing policies, such as environmental or labor protections, without entering the court system of the host nation. Readers will likely find it unsurprising that nearly all of the suits handled by the ISDS are brought by Northern fossil fuel and mining corporations against former colonies in the Global South, often after their cases in the national courts of the host nation were adjudicated unfavorably for them. Pérez-Rocha supports his argument with detailed numerical figures, showing the staggering scale of lawsuits levied against governments in the Global South, which sometimes represent a significant portion of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus, his argument supports the notion that ecological imperialism remains alive and well despite its recent adoption of an institutional façade.

Dependence on food imports is another characteristic of the Global South’s position in the World-System of ecological imperialism. Marco Fama and Alessandra Corrado note that most Global South countries are dependent on imported food from the industrialized agricultural systems of the Global North, espeically wheat and other grains from the United States. At the end of the Second World War, they explain, the US established a policy of heavily subsidizing grain production and directing the excess product for export to the periphery (or purchasing it directly through food aid programs) at prices which undercut local commodity grain production in most parts of the world. They argue that the dependence of much of the Global South on US grain exports serves three purposes in the logic of capital. It ensured a productive outlet for the massive surplus produced by US farms following World War II, encouraged friendly relations from the governments of non-aligned nations during the Cold War, and it allowed for the cost of food, and therefore labor, and therefore manufacture, in the periphery to remain cheap, foreshadowing the export-driven economies of the Neoliberal era.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Samir Amin centers imperialism in his analysis of the world food system on the occasion of the centennial of the October Revolution of 1917.[[28]](#footnote-28) He argues that “food sovereignty,” rather than “food security” can be the only goal for nations seeking to break out of the neocolonial relationship. He observes that most third world countries, despite large percentages of the population engaged in agriculture, have been encouraged to produce export commodities and import the basic manufactured foodstuffs that support the population. This relationship has been labelled “food security” by Western governments and NGOs in order to mystify the relationship it describes. Thus, most non-industrialized countries are unable to feed themselves and rely on producers in the Global North to feed their populations.[[29]](#footnote-29) The concerns that Amin raises about this arrangement echo those of Max Ajl regarding sovereignty in general, since the inability to provide food for ones own population means the governments of subordinated nations cannot meaningfully resist Western influence without risking the starvation of their population and an immediate loss of legitimacy.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, commentators willing to honestly assess the effectiveness of capitalist agriculture have been calling attention to its violent and exploitative roots in domination for centuries. The advent of capitalist accumulation and the resulting need for capital to access cheap nature and cheap food was a primary factor in the emergence of European colonialism in the 15th century. The relationship between cheap food and cheap labor has been well understood by both capital and its critics for most of modern history, as has the utility of conquest and domination in achieving those ends. Many excellent scholars have toiled to connect this theoretical understanding to concrete facts in the historical record, and many have found a useful tool in the concepts of ecological imperialism and World-Systems Theory. In doing so, they have created a literature that lays bare the inner working of a global food system that is often (intentionally) mystified by governments, NGOs, and political commentators in corporate media. They also provide a corrective to well-meaning charities and activists who still believe that ending hunger is a matter of increasing production. Ultimately, it is only through a correct understanding of the origin and nature of capitalist agriculture and ecological imperialism that we can imagine and construct a more equitable and just agrarian order in both the imperial core and the periphery.

Our authors have exposed current and past neoliberal development schemes as primarily designed to reconfigure agrarian capital accumulation in response to the increasing scarcity of cheap nature.[[30]](#footnote-30) If the new development schemes of “green growth” offer more of the same, as they suggest, then it will be up to critical scholars of agriculture and political economy to theorize meaningful alternatives. Max Ajl perhaps comes closest to achieving this, but many of our authors do not even attempt to imagine what a more just and sustainable political economy might look like. Some, such as Amin and Rosset offer passing suggestions about democracy, governance, and agroecological farming techniques.[[31]](#footnote-31) This lack is undoubtedly as closely related to the many structural barriers within academia and the publishing industry as it is to the difficulty of imagining a non-capitalist agricultural system. It also follows from the involuntary complicity of many people who are in a position to publish research in the “imperial mode of living.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Even so, the gravity of the task calls for redoubled efforts on the part of all people interested in the continued existence of complex human societies.

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1. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 860 fn. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 3-4 (2009): 311, 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mariko L. Frame, “Ecological Imperialism: A World-Systems Approach,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 81, no. 3 (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 518-521. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 521- 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 139-141, quote on 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Clark and Foster, “Ecological Imperialism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eric Holt-Giménez, *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism: Understanding the Political Economy of What We Eat*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Acquisition Process of Insular Areas,” U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Insular Affairs. https://www.doi.gov/oia/islands/acquisitionprocess (accessed September 30, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Holt-Giménez, *Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism*, 32-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. (London: Verso, 2017), 6-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 295-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 314-319. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Patel and Moore, 150-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Peter Rosset, “Lessons from the Green Revolution.” *Tikkun* 15 no. 2 (2000): 52-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example, Marco Fama and Alessandra Corrado, “¿’Seguridad alimentaria’ y ‘desarrollo sostenible’ como profecías de un nuevo régimen agroalimentario en la ecología-mundo?” *Relaciones Internacionales* 47 (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Utsa Patnaik, “The Origins and Continuation of First World Import Dependence on Developing Countries for Agricultural Products.” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 4 no. 1 (2015): 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Philip McMichael, “Global Restructuring: Some Lines of Inquiry,” in *The Global Restructuring of Agro-Food Systems*, ed. Philip McMichael (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Max Ajl, *A People’s Green New Deal*. (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 149-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ajl also echoes Davis in emphasizing the role of direct military action in ecological imperialism, providing figures that place the US Department of Defense as the 49th largest producer of pollution when counted as a sovereign nation, to say nothing of its role in undermining the sovereignty of other nations. Ibid., 150, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Manuel Pérez-Rocha, *Missing from Climate Talks: Corporate Powers to Sue Governments over Extractives Policy*. October 29, 2021. <https://inequality.org/research/missing-from-the-climate-talks-corporate-powers-to-sue-governments-over-extractives-policies/> (Accessed September 30, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Fama and Corrado, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Samir Amin, “The Agrarian Question a Century after October 1917: Capitalist Agricultures and Agriculture in Capitalism.” *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 6 no. 2 (2017), 149-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 156-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Fama and Corrado, 78-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Amin, 158-159; Rosset. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, “Crisis and Continuity of Capitalist Society-Nature Relationships: The Imperial Mode of Living and the Limits to Environmental Governance,” in *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 4 (August 2013), 696-701. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)