

Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book “Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis” by Chris Williams.

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Article:

Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis, by Chris Williams. Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL. 2010. 222 pp. \$14.00.

Chris Williams has written an exhaustively researched book that explores how the climate crisis is an outgrowth of our political economy. Our planet is in peril, but the solution is not technological, it is social. This book should gain the attention of many sociologists as Williams brings the problem of climate change to our doorstep, aiming to articulate the relationship between capitalism and the environment. The text moves deftly from a discussion of the science behind climate change to the social and political processes that are fueling this planetary crisis. The book draws on the most current climate change science. One of the features of this book that makes its contribution especially unique is the translation of the science of climate change to lay-person’s terms. Williams takes us through scientific, political, sociological, and philosophical terrain. Williams’ text is prescient in the sense that climate change will eventually bring us to question all areas of social life, namely capitalism, technology, and material productions.

Perhaps the greatest insight in the text is that our public “green” discourse has misunderstood climate change as a technological problem with technological solutions, and as an individual problem with individual solutions. Williams crafts the entire text around this single point: climate change is a problem that stems from our economic system. Thus, solving the problem

requires economic change. The green movement has taken a deadly wrong turn by focusing on individual responsibility and technological solutions. This brand of individualism is an extension of a neoliberal agenda, which conceals the reality that capitalism itself is the problem. Shifting the burden of responsibility from corporate polluters to individuals is a political sleight of hand that has obscured the real source of the climate crisis. Indeed, the green movement has embraced individual “sacrifice” as a solution. Williams cautions us to recognize this as neoliberal politics hijacking sustainability discourse to reduce the causes of a systemic problem to individual-level consumption. If we focus on “recycling habits”, it will only reinforce a neoliberal agenda—one of personal choice and individual responsibility. Williams does not oppose changing lifestyle consumption patterns, but reminds us that changing recycling habits will not lead to institutional change. Instead, change needs to be aimed at remapping the political economy.

At the start of the text, Williams lays out the problem of global warming. The first few chapters are a chronicle of horrors. “For the last three decades, there has been a 2.7 decrease in arctic sea ice per decade” (pp. 25)...Carbon dioxide and methane concentrations in the atmosphere are now higher than at any time in the last 650,000 years, and in the last 250 years, 1,100 billion tons of carbon dioxide have been released into the atmosphere through industrial processes, mostly because of the burning of fossil fuels. Half of these emissions occurred after the mid-1970s” (pp. 27). Indeed, Williams reminds us that rapid climate change spells grim prospects for human civilization. Williams covers an impressive breadth of climate science which establishes indisputable global warming trends. Williams is a rare kind of scholar who has a background in both climate science and social science, blending the two seamlessly throughout the text. We are now at a historical juncture where we need writers who are fluent in both the science of climate change and the complexity of social and economic relations; in this, Williams’ contribution is unique and timely.

Williams challenges the usual scapegoats for the problem of climate change, such as overpopulation. While Williams does not dismiss overpopulation as unimportant, he argues that the “population problem” is yet another diversion. The overpopulation debate often serves as a vehicle for class prejudice and blaming the poor for being poor—arguments that fit perfectly with the goals of capital. Food scarcity and environmental degradation are not caused by population growth. Instead the real cause is the capitalist system itself with its waste production, expansion, and economic development. Further, Williams articulates that the earth has not exceeded its carrying capacity for people per se, but it is “definitive that the earth is now beyond its carrying capacity for capitalist production” (pp. 50). Williams goes on to point out that countries with low or declining population rates tend to have greater per capita environmental impacts than do developing countries with increasing populations. “The richest 7 percent of the global population are responsible for 50 percent of the world’s CO₂ emissions, whereas the poorest 50 percent are responsible for a mere 7 percent” (pp. 72). Williams shows that the biggest threats to the environment are not poor people, but rich people.

After articulating the climate crisis problem as a social problem, Williams moves to solutions. The “take home message” of the second part of the text is that capital cannot solve the problem of climate change. Williams argues that corporations are interested in short-term profits, which almost always come at the cost of long-term ecological damage. Consider the goals of capital: “goods are produced for exchange, independently of whatever useful qualities they may have...what counts as a saleable commodity is not its ultimate usefulness to humanity but how much money can be made from selling it” (pp. 45). Corporations employ strategies to make consumers forget about the goals of capital. Williams cautions the reader about corporate practices of “green washing”—consumers need to be aware of how the term “green” is being co-opted. Corporations have remade themselves in projected “green” images, which are often false.

According to Williams, if capital cannot reverse this devastation, then change will require mobilization against corporations and politicians, a restructuring of a green economy, and a redeployment of our workforce in unionized jobs that rebuild a green infrastructure. Williams also dismisses hope that the state will rescue the situation. After cataloging an encyclopedic entry of failures among politicians to produce meaningful climate change legislation, Williams systematically reviews the failure of international climate conferences (Kyoto et al.) to produce climate-change treaties capable of being enforced. Williams reminds the reader that governments are compelled to support corporate efforts in order maintain a competitive national advantage. This arrangement, Williams argues, makes an international climate compromise unlikely. Finally, the most convincing piece of evidence that the state is wholly complicit in the climate crisis: “the U.S. military is the world's single biggest consumer of energy” (pp. 136).

Williams stresses that it is true (and urgently necessary) that we adopt different energy sources. Williams systematically considers each energy source (renewable and non-renewable)—their promise, problems, and failures. Williams then proceeds to explore the political struggle around each. Williams exposes false political strategies like cap and trade and the clean coal fantasy. In chapters 6 and 7, Williams engages in an analysis of Marxist thought which grounds the previous analysis in theory. This section will be particularly useful for students in sociological theory or environmental sociology courses who are exploring the links between theory and empirical reality. What is striking about this theoretical analysis is how prescient Marx and Engels were, and how relevant their work is to us today. Williams’ talent for translating dense language reveals itself in this section as well, crystallizing much of Marxist theory for a consumable read.

This tremendous, well-written, urgent and persuasive book offers the paradigm shift needed to turn the green movement toward real systemic change. The text is at once a critical engagement with economic philosophy and illuminates how popular “solutions” to climate change are misguided. The interests of capital will inevitably lead us to environmental degradation. In spite of the claims that capital can produce green technologies, Williams reiterates that the problem is social, not technological. Lasting, healing environmental change will come from adjustments to the political economy. If the prospect of systemic change rattles the reader, Williams engages the reader in broad philosophical questions such as, “what constitutes a good quality of life?”

Williams then guides the reader to reflect on the ways in which capitalism has actually compromised our quality of life, not enhanced it. Williams ultimately argues that a change to our economic system will not entail personal sacrifice, but will instead enrich our standard of living while also cutting carbon emissions.

If the reader gets to the end of the book and still harbors hopes that capitalism can become sustainable, Williams adds the final piece to his argument, which dismisses this possibility. Capitalism, Williams argues, with its need for continual expansion and short-term profit, is inherently anti-ecological. To survive, capitalism must be antagonistic to nature. But what, then, would a sustainable society look like? Williams concludes the book with a sketch of a rational, ecological, and socialist model. This chapter would provide excellent fodder for discussion among sociology students.

Williams does leave the reader with hope. A transition to non-carbon-based fuels *is* possible. But this transformation will require social change. Williams writes: “It is not viable to win ecological or climate justice without social justice. The inequality and exploitation that lie at the heart of capitalism ravages humans and the planet in the interests of a tiny minority hell-bent on reshaping the planet in the service of profit. Climate justice activists therefore need to be social justice activists in equal measure” (pp. 117).