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Violence Against Our Environment

Tuesday, 10 December 2013 16:08 *By* [*Chris Williams*](http://www.truth-out.org/author/itemlist/user/49073)*,* [*The Socialist*](http://www.thesocialist.us/violence-against-our-environment/) *| Opinion*

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Both the words “environment” and “violence” have so many meanings, that they require some definition of how they can be of use in the context of a struggle for social justice. Regarding the word violence, according to Merriam Webster, one definition is “the use of brute strength to cause harm to a person or property”; a definition that doesn’t seem to have an immediately obvious connection to ecological issues associated with climate change, loss of biodiversity and various forms of pollution.

An increasing number of environmental activists, myself included, regard the word “environment” with some suspicion, generally preferring the term “ecological.” The reasoning behind the change in emphasis is because using the word “environment” posits the idea that nature is something that surrounds humans, but at the same time, something that we are fundamentally outside of, and separate from. The separation of nature from humans is the ideological position underlying capitalist orthodoxy; namely that the biosphere is a subset of the economy, rather than the other way around. Capitalists can freely take “natural resources” from outside of the economy as inputs, and dump waste from the production process back into the environment as outputs. Mainstream economic theory then pronounces that the ramifications of such an outlook will have only limited impact on the planet as a whole, and, thereby, economic accumulation and growth can continue indefinitely.

“Ecological,” on the other hand, embeds humans back within the external world as a natural component of it, the same as any other organism. The use of tools such as microscopes, or Magnetic Resonance Imaging devices, can then be seen not simply as humans investigating nature in order to understand it, but that we are concurrently investigating ourselves, because tools are merely mechanical extensions of our bodily senses. No doubt, Marx would very much approve of such an attention to the hidden social meaning of words, particularly with regard, in this example, to his very important concept of “metabolic rift”: the devastating and unnatural split or break between humans and nature, forced on us by capitalist social relations.

Given these issues, and the importance of words to explain and communicate thought, how should those of us engaged in a struggle against capitalist environmental violence, conceive of that fight? If we are to argue that the social, economic and political system known as capitalism is the root cause of environmental violence, what are we arguing it is responsible for?

Interestingly enough, but, perhaps unsurprisingly given the prevalence of overt violence in our world, the dictionary gives almost 50 related words for “violence”. These begin with words such as “coercion”, “compulsion”, “constraint”, go on to “barbarity”, “brutality”, “damage” and continue with “onslaught”, “tumult” and “upheaval.”

Putting these words into a human context and joining them up with the word “environment” now starts to make significant sense. It is no longer possible to restrict violence to an act that is immediate and causes direct and obvious harm, whether that is in the most commonly thought of cases of warfare, police brutality, or state-sponsored torture such as waterboarding, or racist, sexist or homophobic language and bigotry.

Capitalist environmental violence rests on the dual exploitation of humans and nature, which were regarded by Marx as the twin sources of all wealth. Exploitation of the natural world, driven forward by the never-ending hunt for profits, is merely the flip side of the exploitation of humans, put to work to turn the source of sustenance into money. Viewed this way, socialists fighting for social justice and a different world cannot avoid integrating a fight for ecological justice, as the two are inseparable components of the same fight.

In this broadened understanding of violence, capitalism is an intensely violent system, as it depends on the systematic coercion of workers who are daily faced with the choice of working for “a living” or starvation and homelessness; their life choices for education, health and human fulfillment are hugely constrained by the unyielding ferocity of class exploitation and racism. Billions of people’s lives are stunted and foreshortened by the daily violence meted out to them via the dictates of a system that prioritizes profit above all else. In Volume I of Capital, Marx’s words resonate as much in our day as his:

“In its blind unrestrainable passion, its werewolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is supplied to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment of the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential.”

But for Marx, the violent treatment of humans by capitalist social relations, in shortening and hamstringing their lives through overwork, poor housing, inadequate food and pollution, was directly analogous to capitalist farming practices:

“Capital cares nothing for the length of labour-power. All that concerns it is simply and solely the maximum of labour-power that can be rendered fluent in a working-day. It attains this end by shortening the extent of the [worker’s] life, as a greedy farmer snatches increased produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.”

One can only have nutritious food, health care, or decent housing located in an unpolluted neighborhood, if one has the money to pay for those things. Lack of access to these necessities by some, where others have access, makes the violence explicit. Furthermore, there is the violence of institutionalized racism, and a culture saturated with sexism that turns women’s bodies into objects, doubly exploits them through unpaid domestic labor, and in the United States, refuses to allow women control over their own reproductive organs.

There is the associated psychological violence done to humans against our own sociality, whereby we are forced to live, in Marx’s emotive phrase, in “dot-like isolation,” as the primacy of the individual over the collective is sanctified. Few have written of the social alienation and environmental degradation suffered by working people with greater effect than Frederick Engels, in his classic study, The Condition of the Working Class in England.

Engels highlights the contradiction engendered by capitalism, between bringing millions of people together in giant urban conglomerations, which, rather than fostering collective solidarity and companionship, instead produce its opposite — an unfeeling and solitary individuality that corrupts the human spirit:

“After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realises for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others.”

A. Engels, this produces feelings and a mode of living that is profoundly alienating of all that is good about humans:

“The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.”

Of course, there is the more overt and immediate violence of the state against people trying to protect their land from environmental degradation and ensuing displacement and poverty associated with fossil fuel extraction. From the Ogoni people in Nigeria fighting Shell, to indigenous people poisoned by Chevron in the forests of Ecuador, the paramilitary arm of the state serves corporate priorities the world over.

In North America, this was brutally demonstrated in September, as members of the indigenous Elsipogtog Mi’kmaq First Nation, alongside local residents, blockaded a road in New Brunswick, Canada. They were trying to prevent fracking exploration and were assaulted and tear gassed for their protest by paramilitary police.

The group, which had never been asked about whether they wanted their land used in this way, had blocked the road to stop shale gas exploration by SWN Resources Canada, a subsidiary of the Houston-based Southwestern Energy Co. As Susan Levi-Peters, the former chief of the nearby Elsipogtog indigenous group, told reporters, “The RCMP is coming in here with their tear gas – they even had dogs on us…They were acting like we’re standing there with weapons, while we are standing there, as women, with drums and eagle feathers.

There are myriad ways in which environmental violence plays out, especially when it is compounded by climate change. So, for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, lack of tree-cover from ongoing deforestation, means even when rain comes, it runs off the land and carries fertile topsoil with it. As a result, women and girls, who are responsible for over 70 percent of water collection, have to travel further and further to obtain it. The UN estimates that women in Sub-Saharan Africa spend 200 million hours per day collecting water for food and farming purposes, or 40 billion hours annually.

In 1992, Lawrence Summers, who was at the time chief economist of the World Bank, later to become Bill Clinton’s Treasury Secretary, president of Harvard, and most recently one of Obama’s key economic advisors in his first cabinet, wrote in an internal World Bank memorandum published by The Economist:

“Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs?” By way of answering his own question, he gives three reasons. Here’s the first:

“(1) The measurement of the costs of health-impairing pollution depends on the forgone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.”

The fact that a major establishment actor is able to advocate and rationalize the dumping of toxic waste on poor communities is a perfect illustration of the inhumanity of the thought process behind capitalist decision-making.

As I have argued, we need a much broader definition of violence than is allowed for by limiting its meaning to a physical and immediate brutal act of aggression, and one that includes an environmental dimension. Violence can happen over extended periods of time. Exploited workers in unhealthy conditions and poor communities exposed to toxins gradually succumb to a worsening quality of life, through a compendium of often intersecting long-term ailments. Due to financial restrictions on health care (itself a violent act), they often can’t treat these illnesses by going to the doctor, seeking another job, or relocating to a different neighborhood.

A broadened definition of violence is exactly what Rob Nixon, Rachel Carson Professor of English at the University of Madison, argues is required in his book, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor:

“By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting in sensational visibility.”

That is to say, the unplanned, shorter and shorter time frames upon which capitalism operates, clash with the longer and longer term effects of the actions taken on those shorter time scales. Human induced climate change is arguably the primary and perfect example of just such a contradiction between the short-term priorities of capitalism to make profit from continuing to burn fossil fuels, and the longer term implications for future generations of humans, and planetary life in general, due to the now well-known side-effect of increased concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide. One could reasonably debate whether climate change, or the irradiation of the atmosphere from atomic tests and the need to deal with nuclear waste from nuclear power plants — waste that remains toxic and deadly for hundreds of thousands of years — is a more disruptive and long-term negative impact of capitalist social relations.

In the more immediate sense, while we currently produce enough food to feed everyone on the planet, over one billion people suffer starvation and hunger. In discussing why people starve in England, when food was in fact abundant, Engels posed the question of who should be blamed for the extreme violence of death by starvation: “The English working-men call this ‘social murder’, and accuse our whole society of perpetrating this crime perpetually. Are they wrong?”

In answering Engels’ question, one must blame the system for the long-term “social murder” of our planet, and the daily degradation and violence of life under capitalism. Given the critical state of the biosphere and an exploitative and constantly-growing economic model based on profit and fossil fuels for energy, which is bringing about global climate change, Rosa Luxemburg’s assertion, that we face the choice of barbarism or socialism, rings true now more than ever.

If we accept that premise, to return to where I began, one cannot be a social justice activist without equally being an ecological justice activist; and link arms with all those fighting racist environmental violence the world over.

Ultimately, all of this can only be solved by the self-emancipation of humanity and putting in place a system that prioritizes long-term human and planetary health; real, bottom-up democracy based on cooperation; and production for human needs at its center. We need a system of cooperative and meaningful production, whereby the goal of society is social equity and ecological sustainability, and where environmental violence, in all its manifestations, is a thing of the past. To bring this about will require a social and ecological revolution. While we organize and fight for that future, we must simultaneously work to bring about the small victories, necessary to make people’s immediate lives better and less polluted under capitalism, organize, and gain confidence for the larger, longer-term, and more profound and revolutionary battles to come.