

## **CONFERENCE REPORTS**

### **Ecology, Imperialism and the Contradictions of Capitalism York University, Toronto, Canada, July 2005**

*The founding of CNS seventeen years ago coincided with the rise of “sustainable development” as the key response of dominant institutions to rising ecological degradation and radical ecological challenge. Almost two decades later, ecological degradation continues to deepen and broaden, while even modest proposals for ecological reform (“ecological modernization” and “sustainable development”) have suffered numerous setbacks at the hands of market fundamentalism, new forms of imperialism, and racialized moral panics about terror-induced insecurity. As a result, radical left ecology movements now form an important basis of contemporary movements against capitalism and war. Politicizing a dizzying array of issues from the privatization of water services, the erosion of global food security, and rampant urban sprawl to the very commodification of life through genetic engineering and biopiracy, these movements have pointed to the grossly unsustainable and unjust character of the contemporary world order.*

*“Capitalism, Imperialism, and the Production of Nature” was organized to take stock of the state-of-the-art in recent debates on the root causes of worldwide ecological degradation and the realities and possibilities of radical response. **Michael Goldman** has our report.*

This was the ultimate anti-conference experience, a brilliant and refreshing break from the mundane world of conferencing. First, everyone seemed to be enjoying the event, the debates, and each other’s company; second, sessions were thoroughly engaging, full of rigorous scholarship, lively debate, and unabashed politics. And third, though billed as an anniversary celebrating the longevity of this journal, the conference broke into a *festschrift* for one of the great political thinkers on imperialism and ecology, CNS founder James O’Connor. The conference reflected his distinct intellectual, political, and social genius. It became a homecoming, or reunion, of sorts for a “virtual” community of scholar-activists who knew each other more through words and political movements than by face, and who came from far-flung places to engage in O’Connor’s work.

The conference was held in the middle of a York University Summer School on International Political Economy and Ecology, and organized as such, was able to invite for participation the four international scholars/activists teaching in the School—Joan Martinez-Alier (Barcelona, Spain), Alex Demirovic (Frankfurt, Germany), Ariel Salleh (Sydney, Australia), and Joel Kovel (New York, USA)—as well as their charged-up students.

The first conference plenary was packed with people from different parts of the world, many of whom are editors, contributors, and fellow travelers of the journal. We were treated to a superb and timely opening panel debate in which some of the world’s leading political economists grappled with the question “Capitalism: dynamic or doomed?” which provoked an energetic discussion that continued in later sessions.

Next, Maria Mies, one of the world’s leading scholars on capitalism and patriarchy, gave the keynote address—a powerful analysis of the recent contradictions of global capital as enacted through war, including, of course, Bush’s war. Mies took us precisely to the place

we needed to be: A thorough critique of the disastrous moment in which we currently live and an animated explanation of where we should be going, analytically and politically.

At the concurrent panels, some overlapping themes emerged, although they were discussed in surprisingly different ways. For example, the topic of oil was mixed with questions of U.S. imperialism and war; with global warming and the politics of science; automobile culture and the transformation of urban space; and oil, patriarchy, and social protest. A number of papers touched upon another politicized natural resource, water, and were presented within varied contexts of privatization and international finance institutions, translocal political struggles and counterhegemonic moments, and extreme resource depletion and public health epidemics. Panels were overflowing with theoretical heterodoxy, presenting original explorations into feminism and patriarchy, critical theory and the idea of social-nature, Marxist inquiry and James O'Connor's *oeuvre* on ecosocialism, ecological crisis, and the conditions of production.

Despite the conference's large size, geographic representation, and interdisciplinarity, panels were equally devoted to questions of theory, interpretation, and praxis. Papers reflecting empirical research grounded in a specific site, commodity, or set of relations were nonetheless engaged in questions of translocal and theoretical significance. Theoretical debates spoke directly to the political crises of the day, and papers immersed in the crisis taught us all much on how we should do our public scholarship.

Here is a glimpse into the range of the papers presented: Patrick Bond (Durban, South Africa) explored the question of divergent tactics and analyses in the social movements challenging the privatization of "global public goods," from atmospheric space and global warming, to public water supplies, their depletion, and subsequent health problems. Bond then identified points in these struggles "where militant particularist approaches can achieve not only convergence but synthesis and greater impact." Noel Castree (Manchester, England) surveyed a range of literature on the political economy of nature in an effort to "identify points of commonality and difference" in their analyses of environmental change in capitalist societies and the diminishing returns of many of these perspectives. Castree then provided a "more unified, precise and qualified critique of the state of environmental destruction." Kavita Philip (Irvine, USA) offered "reflections on doing environmental histories of the Global South" so that we "might shape the study of nature, culture, capital and empire" more powerfully.

Unlike most conferences where people are as eager to leave as they are to arrive, this was the conference that no one wanted to leave. An animated discussion led by Maria Mies on the subsistence perspective continued for several hours after the conference was formally concluded. Earlier at one evening get-together, talk focused on how to stretch out and expand the conversation, and it was suggested we have another conference in Durban, South Africa alongside the International Sociological Association's world congress in July 2006.

As James O'Connor suggested in his book *Natural Causes*, Hegel's Owl of Minerva does not only fly at dusk, too late to react to the world's activities; it seems to be ready to fly at daybreak. The crises engendered by U.S. imperialism seem to have unpredictably stimulated significant political transformations, not just gloom and resignation. Look, for example, to the dramatic changes sweeping through Latin America (in Uruguay, Bolivia,

Venezuela, Argentina, and Ecuador). In more humble sites, such as this anniversary conference for *CNS*, we observed an unanticipated flowering of ideas and hope. This creative energy should invigorate the journal and activists' work for a long time to come.