



[Interview](#) [Environment & Health](#)

# Humans Aren't Inherently Destroying the Planet — Capitalism Is



*A new book dubs our current geological era the “Capitalocene.”* d3sign / Getty Images

By [Robert R. Raymond](#), [Truthout](#) Published November 18, 2019

One of the biggest ironies of the right-wing trope accusing socialists of wanting “free stuff” is that in reality, the entire capitalist economy would immediately collapse if it couldn’t continue to rely on free stuff. Without free or artificially cheap access to things like natural resources, care work, labor and a whole array of other elements, capitalism could not stay afloat. In fact, the only way that capitalism was ever able to even emerge was through a process of “[primitive accumulation](#)” — where things like slavery and

colonialism were utilized to extract free labor and resources.

It’s this oft-forgotten history that compelled Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore to write [History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet](#). The book unpacks our modern capitalist world by tracing the fraught history of how seven elements — nature, money, work, care, food, energy and lives — were transformed and reshaped during

<https://truthout.org/articles/humans-arent-inherently-destroying-the-planet-capitalism-is/>



the emergence of capitalism and up through to the modern day.

*Truthout* spoke with the book's co-author Raj Patel, an activist and academic, about why the authors are calling the new geological era that we're in the "Capitalocene," and how this era has led to a complete transformation of how we view some of the most important elements in our lives, and what we can do about it.

**You begin the book by introducing the concept of the "Capitalocene." Can you explain what that term means and its significance?**

**Raj Patel:** We begin the book talking about the Capitalocene as a way of intervening in discussions that are proliferating right now, particularly in the climate change debate around the Anthropocene, which is a term coined by geologists and climate scientists to describe what it is that humans have done to the planet. The reason we wanted to call it the Capitalocene — in fact my co-author Jason W. Moore coined that term in an earlier work — is to observe that to call it the Anthropocene is misleading.

The Anthropocene is a term that suggests that there's a geological era that is characterized by human activity, but it's more accurate to say that the scale of this geological era, characterized by the things that humans have laid into the fossil record — things like plastic, things like residues from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, things like chicken bone — none of those things have been caused by humans in the normal operation of going about our daily business. On the contrary, it's a particular *kind* of human society that has caused all these things — and that's capitalism.

So we call it the Capitalocene because it's not some innate quality of humans that has destroyed the planet, it's a product of how the system of capitalism operates. If we are to stop the destruction of the planet, then we need to name

the systems that cause it and observe that there are some humans who had nothing to do with it — that some humans are very importantly not to blame for what gets called the Anthropocene. Labeling them with the same term as other humans not only blames the victim in some cases, but it also obscures potential solutions to the climate crisis that aren't about exploiting nature but are about entering into a much more reasonable relationship to the web of life.

**And you argue that we are coming to the end of the Capitalocene era?**

What we point out in the book is that the climate catastrophe is such that the Capitalocene cannot persist — not in the way that it has for the past few hundred years. We don't make any prognostications about how capitalism ends, but we do note that capitalism began in a period of intense climate change and the spread of epidemic disease. We observe that capitalism has shown itself very adept at creating climate change and also through industrial agriculture creating the conditions that would be perfect incubating grounds for epidemic disease.

So we're not saying capitalism is going to end next Tuesday, but we are saying that the conditions that destroyed feudalism, the system that predated capitalism, were all about epidemic disease and climate change. Well, they seem to be on us again.

**I want to get into each of the different cheap things in more depth in a moment. But can you just briefly go over this idea of cheapness and how it relates to capitalism?**

Capitalism is a system that doesn't pay its bills — and one way of thinking about that is the idea of cheapness. That's why we've titled our book, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* — it's a way of pointing to how capitalism dodges the payments of things that it requires in order to be profitable. It's not necessarily a conscious design of the early capitalists that a system like



this would be required, but it has emerged over time that capitalism has figured out ways to defray or move around the real consequences of its uses of things like nature, work, care, lives, energy, food and money. These are all things that capitalists are trying to make a profit from, and in the process, are making disappear in the calculation of the bottom line. All of these things are very important for the perpetuation of capitalism and, unfortunately, they are also the sorts of things that are vital to recognize if we are to have a planet worth living on.

**OK, let's dive into each of the seven things. In the book you use the example of the chicken nugget, which perfectly embodies all of the seven different elements. Can you explain how the chicken nugget unpacks this idea of how nature, work, care, food, energy, money and lives have been cheapened in the Capitalocene?**

We thought that the idea of a chicken nugget was a helpful way of illustrating how the seven things come together, so in the book we make a pitch saying that the chicken nugget is the world's most capitalist object. The reason we think that is because one of the signs of the Anthropocene is chicken bones — 50 billion chickens are eaten every year. That's a lot of chicken bones, and the numbers are going up. One of the ways that any future intelligence will know that humans were on the planet will be through these chicken bones.

So we decided to deconstruct the chicken nugget. First of all, in order to have your chicken nugget, you need chicken. Specifically, you need a chicken that's been modified to the extent that it looks very unlike the red jungle fowl that was the first original chicken, because the modern broiler chicken has breasts so large it can barely walk — it's really quite unrecognizable from its original ancestor. What that demonstrates is that humans feel so separate from the rest of the web of life

that we feel able and licensed to take animals and mutate them in ways that are very much geared toward profit. That's what cheap nature means. It's both the idea that we think of the rest of the web of life as an infinite resource and an infinite trashcan, but also that we ourselves do not recognize ourselves as natural — we see ourselves as very distinct from nature.

Capitalism depends on the policing of bodies and of humans so that there are those humans whose lives are systematically cheaper than others.

The second key thing is work, because chickens don't turn themselves into nuggets by magic — they need workers to be involved in their production. In the United States, for instance, working on the chicken production line is dangerous and underpaid work. In fact, in some cases, prison labor is used and sometimes workers are even assigned to work on chicken production lines as part of therapy and rehabilitation from their addiction to opioids — so that labor is free for the executives who hire them. And that labor is also dangerous — rates of amputation and other kinds of occupational injury are much higher than average in chicken slaughtering. And who is it that has to pick up the bill? It's not the insurance industry, because usually broken workers are cast aside. Instead, it's the work of communities to pick up that tab and to care for broken bodies. Of course, care work is usually coded as women's work — work that is absolutely essential for society to survive, but that is often desperately underpaid, if it's paid at all.

There's another irony here that the making of a chicken nugget is itself a way of making cheap food available to workers. Cheap food is sort of a Faustian bargain that's struck, particularly here in the United States, where wages are low but workers have cheap food as a corollary so that they don't get too angry and take to the streets. An important feature of employment in the



United States is that wages have been kept low in part because energy prices have been kept low — cheap fuel is important for the chicken industry to be able to heat the hen houses and make sure that the machinery of turning soy into chicken and then into nuggets is kept well-oiled and is fueled relatively cheaply.

Another feature of the fast food industry is that in the United States, every independently owned KFC or fast food outlet is eligible for a Small Business Administration loan. Part of the broader thrust and ambition of capitalism to find cheap money, to find interest rates that are very low, to find money that can be loaned at rates that you or I couldn't possibly get, but that businesses can because they've built a system that entitles them to having cheap money at low interest rates.

And then finally capitalism depends on the policing of bodies and of humans so that there are those humans whose lives are systematically cheaper than others. You'll find those humans disproportionately represented in the chicken industry because if you look at who's doing the work, it's disproportionately people of color and women. You can look at how society is structured in terms of its laws, in terms of who can unionize and the protections for domestic work and protections for sexual assault. Women and people of color are systematically less protected by the law. So in all these respects, the nugget is the most capitalist object because it benefits at every step of its production from these seven elements that have been rendered into cheap things.

**Early in the book, you suggest that it's often easier for people to imagine the end of the world than it is for them to imagine the end of capitalism. Why do you think this is?**

We borrowed that line from the Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson, and part of the logic behind that statement is that quite a lot of capitalist effort has gone into crushing our imaginations for creating

utopias and alternatives to capitalism. You can understand what happened in the 1930s around the world, for example, as a series of experiments that investigated what happened when capitalism failed. You saw the Russians with communism and socialism, you saw anarchists in the U.S. and in Europe building communities. You also saw fascism spread through Europe and Asia. And in the United States, you saw the New Deal era taking hold. We can understand the era since then as a long process of revenge by capitalists to make sure the New Deal never happens again, because everything that made it possible, to imagine a world after capitalism — in terms of worker power, in terms of strike activity, in terms of a powerful state administering to the needs of its citizens as articulated by citizen power — all of that has been taken away, so by the 1970s, it was much less possible for people to imagine the end of capitalism. You had people like Francis Fukuyama talking about “the end of history,” for example — an idea that could never have been seriously entertained. It's a mark of how capitalism, particularly in the 1990s, was so triumphant that it was impossible to imagine anything else.

So it's this history that explains why it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. But the good news is that as capitalism collapses in a range of countries, while we are of course seeing the rise of fascism, it is also heartening to see increasing amounts of talk in the United States around things like the Green New Deal, for instance. People are imagining a new way of being in America that is not about the triumph of capitalism but is about an alternative to it — and I'm given some hope by that.

**Speaking of hope, what kinds of political movements do you see arising that are challenging the many crises that have been brought about by capitalism?**



The reason we wrote the book is because in this moment we are seeing a rise in the recognition of the intersectionality of struggles — and we hoped we'd be able to contribute to it. In fact, what we were hoping for *Seven Cheap Things* is that it would lay bare some of the ways that struggles have *always* been intersectional.

Just to give you an example from here in Texas: In 1883, we had the Great Cowboy Strike, which was an underappreciated strike in the history of labor. One of the important things about the Cowboy Strike was not only that cowboys — who were grossly exploited and underpaid seasonal workers — wanted higher wages, but that they also wanted higher wages for the cooks [on cattle ranches]. They understood that care work and productive labor shouldn't be held apart, and that work is work is work — whether it's cooking or whether it's ranching.

Quite a lot of capitalist effort has gone into crushing our imaginations for creating utopias and alternatives to capitalism.

So if you look at the history of a range of different struggles, past and present, you can always see that a struggle for work is usually a struggle around the environment, which is also a struggle around race, which is also a struggle around gender, for instance. All of these are struggles at intersectional moments, and what's

exciting about the way that the environmental or the union movement or the climate justice movement are moving is precisely that they're recognizing the long histories of injustice that have preceded the crisis of capitalism. They also recognize that the way to win is not by following an individual cheap thing, but to see that the system which has rendered these things separate — whether it's care or labor or the environment — that system has torn us apart and sought to divide these struggles intentionally.

So the way to reclaim power is by recognizing — as, for example, the international peasant movement Via Campesina does — that a struggle for food sovereignty and against cheap food is also a struggle against patriarchy, against racism and against colonialism. That, I think, is a great source of hope, because not only do you grow your numbers by recognizing that there are many more people involved in the struggle than you initially thought, but you become much more theoretically and practically sophisticated in appreciating how it is that capitalism works, how it seeks to divide, and how victory may yet be won in this long, long struggle for a better planet.