

PATEL, R. & MOORE, J.W.

A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet

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A História do Mundo em Sete Coisas Baratas: Um guia sobre o Capitalismo, a Natureza e o futuro do Planeta.

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In “*A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*” Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore combine their expertise in a highly fruitful manner to deliver a concise history of how capitalism is systematically failing to sustain human and environmental services that are key for social well-being and sustainability. Cheap is here understood in a twofold sense: “One is a price moment: to reduce the costs of working for capital, directly and indirectly. Another is ethico-political: to cheapen in the English-language sense of the word, to treat as unworthy of dignity and respect” (Moore 2017, 600).

In separate chapters, the authors examine seven elements we are currently failing to consistently sustain as a society: nature, money, work, care, food, energy, and lives. As a start, to illustrate how an extreme craving for profits deteriorates nature, the book gives a detailed historical examination of Madeira’s sugar industry and its effect on clearing the island’s forests. The price paid to have a widely available currency in the form of silver and gold is shown through a short description of the human and environmental costs of colonial mining. The book continues by providing an overview of the massive suffering involved in making cheap work available during colonialism and the decades that followed by focusing on the Atlantic slave trade and the exploitation of the native population of the Americas. A second chapter is destined to narrate the injustices involved in a crucial type of work that is still underrecognized and almost uncompensated: care work. The effect of cheap food on both human health, animal suffering and environmental degradation is described in a separate chapter as a direct consequence of the demand for cheap labour. An additional chapter is dedicated to show the massive effects a strong demand for cheap energy has on the environment, as we can currently witness with climate change, by providing examples of deforestation, coal extraction and our fossil fuel dependency. The final chapter argues that capitalism establishes strong financial incentives to treat some lives as less valuable, or in harsher cases, even as dispensable.

The book invites the reader to think about other areas where capitalism is failing to properly compensate services. Although not a nearly similar dimension of suffering is involved, we may ponder if “knowledge” is in many instances becoming an eight cheap thing in today’s knowledge economy. For instance, biopiracy remains a major issue – indigenous peoples and smallholders are still rarely acknowledged for their intellectual contributions. We are only now slowly gaining an understanding, particularly through feminist approaches to history and philosophy of science and studies on decolonization, of the long history of failing to recognize female and non-European intellectual contributors. Currently, we are relying on a massive number of graduate students and early career researchers for intellectual work that is hardly being remunerated, or were people are even paying while contributing to scientific advancement. The situation of adjunct faculty in many countries is so precarious, that the case of western United States was even subject of a newspaper documentary on homelessness

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titled "Outside in America" (Gee 2017). Many knowledge-intensive production systems are themselves disappearing at a higher proportion than new ones appear, particularly those working with tacit knowledge, as we can see in the large uptake of industrial farming methods at the cost of agroecological systems, and the loss of craftsmanship to the benefit of mass production and disposable products. Apart from the distress involved, it is difficult to fully grasp the loss of opportunities in expanding and improving our global pool of knowledge that are involved in such a devaluation of intellectual contributors and contributions.

Patel and Moore succeeded in writing a book that can be read from different perspectives. Although the book clearly emphasises the need for a major system change, it still provides valuable information of the extensiveness of elements affected by our current production systems for those who want to save capitalism, by establishing strong institutions and stricter regulations, particularly to internalize negative externalities. From a bioethics perspective, the book offers an extensive overview of the public health and environmental costs of our current social organization and the price whole population segments have to pay in terms of physical and mental well-being, exposure to hazards, and sometimes even their lives. It also illustrates with historical examples the effects of unsustainable production systems on the environment and the price they inflict on present and future generations.

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