



May 2022

## Theorizing Deep Change

### Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

Annie James

From an anti-capitalist perspective, "convivial conservation"—as [articulated](#) by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher—provides a refreshing and thorough perspective on the problems plaguing the many forms of conservation prevalent today.<sup>1</sup> It seems impossible to argue against its key propositions: an alternative conservation practice must break away from capitalism and must reject a separation of nature and society. Many agree that the historical specificity of capitalist relations has led us to this moment of multiple crises (ecological and social) and that these relations rely upon and intensify the separation of humans and other-than-human natures. We see similar theorizations offered when discussing other issues e.g., global warming and the depletion of fisheries.<sup>2</sup>

#### **On Breaking away from Capitalism?**

If capitalism is at its heart an ideological project whose tentacles move in capricious ways, where do we start with cutting off ties? There are, of course, localized resistances (including in my own country India) that David Harvey terms "militant particularisms," but we are evidently far away from a national or global articulation of anti-capitalism (or post-capitalism) that can acquire the critical mass needed to reach transformative tipping points.<sup>3</sup> And importantly, who (first) breaks away from capitalism? For some communities living in conservation/biodiversity hotspots, markets and privatization are no longer a remote prospect but a reality around the corner that some resist, others desire. In the capitalist core, radical scholars are asking for degrowth and convivialism—ideas that challenge what the "over-developed" West has defined as a "good life," premised on acquiring more material wealth while offshoring its waste and exploitative labor

processes to the other side.<sup>4</sup> Is there sufficient political momentum in the Global North for these earnest programs of radical economic change to take off—in time and in socially just ways?

In the context of conservation, Ashley Dawson argues a good starting point would be to ask the Global North to pay its due for its historical and continued overuse of the world's forests, oceans, and atmosphere—a climate and biodiversity debt. Advocating an idea also entertained by Büscher and Fletcher, Dawson says “a universal income guaranteed for the inhabitants of these [biodiversity] hotspots would create a genuine counterweight to the attractions of poaching, and would entitle indigenous and forest-dwelling peoples who make these zones of rich biodiversity their homes with the economic and political power to push their governments to implement significant conservation measures.”<sup>5</sup> This makes much practical sense, but it is not an easy sell. So far, even the \$100 billion climate finance promised in 2009 to developing countries at Copenhagen hasn't materialized—a continued point of contention between these country blocs.<sup>6</sup> Such failings reduce joint agreements such as the one recently moderated by the UNFCCC in Glasgow to hollow rhetoric. Instead, we see newer alliances to financialize more nature/biodiversity, turning it into capital—arguably harkening back to the devil who tempted us all the way here in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

### **On Nature and Society – Same But Different?**

All of this debate on whether to break from capitalism or embrace it in the “Anthropocene” comes down to perceptions of who we really are. No, we are not separate from nature. Here the neoprotectionist perspective falls somewhat flat. The idea of protecting nature from humans (or nature from itself if humans are part of nature, as they must surely be) seems absurd. But is it really so—especially when increasingly (many) humans are alienated from themselves and from the impact they have on the rest of nature? The argument that protected areas should “exclude or strictly regulate humans with traditions bent upon the appropriation, exploitation, and aggressive management of nature” hence seems irrefutable. Unfortunately, despite best intentions, the track record of from whom nature is protected is discouraging. Often, it is communities who have traditionally lived in areas considered worthy of protection (e.g., tropical forests, mangroves etc.) that are evicted and displaced. Ironically, it is the worldviews such communities hold and the ways-of-being they embody that have kept many such areas

ecologically intact and biodiverse.<sup>8</sup> The question of who is kept separate thus looms large in conservation.

### **The Theoretical Point OR the Point of Theory**

For academically "mainstreaming" conservation's connection to capitalism and its reinforcement of nature and society dualism, convivial conservation deserves credit. However, what this proposal means for a coherent anti-capitalist movement and for addressing the extinction crisis requires further unpacking. How can such theories provide practical inspiration (and advice) to communities in the Global South struggling against the dispossession of their lands and to social movements in the North demanding climate justice and climate action? The value of any theory (especially in times of crisis) lies in the action it inspires. In that spirit, I hope that theoretical projects of the kind discussed here can do the following:

(1) Translate into supporting not just the territorial and rights claims of forest-dependent and indigenous communities but also their worldviews. In that sense, theory must directly speak to and promote these worldviews and the agency sustaining these worlds.

(2) Offer concrete tools for a social and ecological revolution that many seem to talk about, but that has long been in the waiting. Do we then need the collective weight of the academic left to support direct action and sabotage against extractivist and polluting infrastructures/entities?<sup>9</sup>

Finally, even if it appears somewhat unrelated, I hope that theoretical projects in conviviality and eco-socialism prompt the academic and the researcher-activist world to take a hard look inwards and to re-evaluate the neoliberal practices we support as a community in academia and beyond, the power-(im)balances that benefit our voices over that of others, and the privileged spaces we occupy at the intersection of research and policy (and how we utilize those). It is no longer possible to consider the struggles against extinction or climate denialism as separate from the one we need to undertake in our everyday acts. It is in that sense that theory becomes truly radical because it goes to the root of where all change must begin. Ourselves.

## Endnotes

1. Here I include an elaboration of the concept in their book *Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2020).
2. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2020); Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).
3. See David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); George Monbiot, "After the Failure of Cop26, There's Only One Last Hope for Our Survival," *Guardian*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/14/cop26-last-hope-survival-climate-civil-disobedience>.
4. Giorgos Kallis, "In Defence of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 70 (2011): 873–880, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.12.007>; Convivialist International, "The Second Convivialist Manifesto: Towards a Post-Neoliberal World," *Civic Sociology* 1, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.12721>.
5. Quote is from Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 91; Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, "Conservation Basic Income: A Non-Market Mechanism to Support Convivial Conservation," *Biological Conservation* 244 (2020).
6. Jocelyn Timperley, "The Broken \$100-Billion Promise of Climate Finance—and How to Fix It?" *Nature*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02846-3>.
7. John Bellamy Foster, "Nature as a Mode of Accumulation: Capitalism and the Financialization of the Earth," *Monthly Review* 73, no. 10 (March 2022), [https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-073-10-2022-03\\_1](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-073-10-2022-03_1).
8. ICCA Consortium, *Territories of Life: 2021 Report* (ICCA Consortium, 2021), <https://report.territoriesoflife.org/>.
9. Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (New York: Verso, 2021).

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## About the Author



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Cite as Annie James, "Theorizing Deep Change," contribution to GTI Forum "Conservation at the Crossroads," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/conservation-james>.

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