

Introduction to the Special Issue Climate Change and Capitalism

Review of Radical Political Economics
2026, Vol. 58(2) 213–216
© 2026 Union for Radical
Political Economics
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/04866134261438848
rrpe.sagepub.com



David Barkin¹ 

In 2024, the Editorial Board of the *Review of Radical Political Economics* opened a call for this special issue as we thought that the gravity of the environmental crisis merits serious consideration by our members. We were seeking a range of critical political economic perspectives on the relationship between capitalism and the environment. As we said at the time, climate change poses an existential threat to the flourishing of all life on earth. We were particularly interested in receiving manuscripts from the Global South. As is evident in the package we are delivering to our readers, we are not disappointed. The essays collected in this special issue confirm our initial concern that there is no agreement about the root causes or the best approaches to mitigate the foreseeable environmental destruction. Yet, the essays clearly reflect the very serious imbalances in the operation of the global economy that are disproportionately wreaking havoc on the poorest countries in the world. They also offer international examples of alternative ways people's lived experiences are coping with and addressing climate crises. The issue also includes two contributions to *RRPE*'s ongoing series, What “Radical” Means in the 21st Century, reflecting on what it means to be a Radical (with a capital “R”!), both by guest editors of this special issue who directly address their own responses to the present environmental crisis. The special issue ends with a book review on the global garment industry.

Ceyhun Elgin's contribution offers the reader a transversal examination of a variety of experiences on different continents that contribute to ameliorating environmental problems. He contrasts these positive examples with instances where the application of mainstream policy instruments accentuated problems and caused social and economic damage to the affected communities. The positive examples in forest resource governance, water basin organization, and waste management are testimony to his identification of the importance of strong local institutions, respect for the commons and for care of all members of the community, strong financial management, and local forms of sufficiency. He also cites examples of the importance of new productive approaches that improve on traditional knowledge, as is the case of agroecology. Each of the groups is involved in creating its own mechanisms to stem the devastation wreaked by the spread of the capitalist organization of extraction and production with its concomitant generation of exploitative social relations.

Danish Khan and Han Cheng's analysis of a rural society in Pakistan examines the interplay between neoliberal forces, which view marketized activities as a route to successful environmental management, and a traditional community, which is defending its agroecological system via a

¹Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana - Unidad Xochimilco, Mexico

Date received: March 19, 2026

Date accepted: March 19, 2026

Corresponding Author:

David Barkin, Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana - Unidad Xochimilco, Ciudad de Mexico, 04960, Mexico.

Email: barkin@correo.xoc.uam.mx

different route for sustainable climate governance to promote balanced social and productive activities. This conflict between small-scale producers and market-oriented purveyors of tourist activities highlights a fundamental difference between groups who consider themselves one with nature and those who treat the natural surroundings as a resource to be organized for commercial gain. The article delves deeper into this discrepancy, revealing how the former vision is a product of a historical and localized socio-institutional milieu upon which the very well-being of the inhabitants depends on their ability to care for their surroundings and the nonhuman beings that inhabit them. In this sense, therefore, we become aware that a conflict over approaches to environmental management is, in reality, a profound version of class conflict, not among the protagonists of the capitalist organization of production but between the “native” social groups who have developed a balanced coexistence with their territory over generations and the modern administrators concerned with generating income from reserves and tourist sites by removing people from their traditional abodes. In the process, they create poverty and reduce basic food production and biodiversity in the region.

Sachin Peddada’s article focuses on the global energy sector. After a brief historical introduction, he traces the origins of current conflicts to the structural changes in the control of petroleum with the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the 1970s and the reaction of the United States to intensify its own production while also expanding into the new technologies involving hydraulic fracturing to extract new sources of oil and gas. These practices contrast dramatically to developments in the Global South, led by industrial transformations and important innovations in China that harnessed a broad transition to clean energy that is contributing to cost reductions and significantly restructuring the world economy. This apparently technological decision was particularly important in promoting the “developmental state” worldwide as a counterweight to the neoliberal economic order. His analysis also points out that this “renewable transition” involved much more than a change in technique—it is a “world systemic rupture” in which China’s role “catalyzed periphery agency” presenting the “possibility of resource sovereignty. . . [to generate] the value flows central to planetary survival.” As a side note, we might point out that the decisions of the current administration in the United States in the productive as well as the geopolitical spheres only serve to reinforce the arguments offered in this contribution.

The analysis of the environmental impact of Argentina’s international trade flows offers an insightful perspective on the effects of unequal exchange. By contrasting the flows of goods between the country’s partners in Europe and its neighbors in South America as well as with China, Germán Zamorano and Kaio Vital da Costa examine the differences in greenhouse emissions, natural resources extraction, and value added with each of these trading groups. Argentina bears significant environmental costs in its exports to “core” countries while receiving limited environmental compensation in return. The authors show that the importing region enjoys considerable environmental (emissions avoidance) and economic benefits in the transactions. In contrast, its exchanges with neighboring countries and China reflect a more equilibrated relationship in terms of environmental impacts.

Marta Vallvé’s examination of the Marxist concept of metabolic rift opens an important discussion of what is the precise relationship that is to be analyzed. She poses the question of what is the “break” or “rift” that is best characterized in this discussion. Attributing increasing social conflicts to socio-metabolic changes is less constructive, she argues, than examining the deepening problem of the heightening inability of the capitalist process to organize production to satisfy human needs. By examining the material origins of socio-ecological conflicts, she proposes to identify both the natural and social origins of metabolic rifts, adding a historical dimension to the analysis that focuses on the dynamics of capitalist accumulation.

The accusation of “imperialist” to mainstream economics should come as no surprise to any reader of this journal. Christiane Heisse takes on the task of adding substance to the charge by

examining how “integrated assessment models” (IAMs) have been designed to systematically incorporate new areas of analysis into the discipline’s scope without the precision and rigor that practitioners demand for the accepted subjects of analysis. Her contribution critically examines the work in the field of climate change, and most poignantly questions the work of the leading practitioners in the area: William Nordhaus and Nicholas Stern. She traces the development of macroeconomic models that calculate the impact of climate changes on gross domestic product, following how they blithely incorporate atmospheric warming into a neoclassical general equilibrium framework. Her text offers an elegant and accessible rundown of the process that should leave no reader in doubt of the peculiar way the profession has evolved, giving awards to the most ingenious practitioners whose erudite contributions provide clear explanations that only obfuscate rather than advance our understanding of humanity’s current predicaments. Her verdict about the evolution of the (orthodox) economics profession is that it excludes considerations of power, race, gender, class, and other systemic inequalities and thereby precludes identifying radical (i.e., effective) solutions to climate solutions.

The last article in this thematic collection is a critical review of the debate about Ludwig von Mises’s critique of central planning. In essence, Mises argued that the “socialist” alternative does not have a “performance criteria” comparable to the rate of profit that is the yardstick in capitalism. Larry Busk jumps into this arena, offering a simple but elegant response: Socialism must be evaluated on the basis of its contribution to sustainability as a criterion. While carefully explaining the need for an informed participatory democratic planning model, in the end he insists on the primacy of a program of “rapid decarbonization and planetary boundary keeping.”

These contributions are complemented by two reflections in *RRPE*’s ongoing series on What “Radical” Means in the 21st Century. Writing from Mexico, David Barkin emphasizes the importance of communal organizations committed to ensuring an adequate quality of life with no member of the community being left behind, while also attending to the imperative of defending their territories by preventing extractive industries or capitalist inroads. Barkin points out that Marx, in the last years of his life, offered poignant analyses of the revolutionary potential of these groups. Barkin’s experience with the international consortium “Territories of Life” (a global movement for natural resource management by Indigenous peoples and local communities) provides real examples of the way in which thousands of indigenous and rural communities are managing to achieve these goals, summarized in the literature as “Buen Vivir” (good life), without compromising on the deterioration of their lands.

In the second What “Radical” Means in the 21st Century reflection, Sirisha Naidu starts by remembering Greta Thunberg’s 2021 opening remarks at a youth event prior to a Conference of the Parties meeting in Glasgow, which sets the tone for Naidu’s comments. Naidu’s scathing condemnation of the varieties of the Green New Deal, a productivist notion of economy and society that dominates the mainstream literature and international meetings, highlights its effect on a world that would impoverish the masses of working people and informal sectors. Her proposal, drawing on feminist radical political economy, focuses on global working people, including subsistence, nonwaged, and reproductive labors, emphasizing life over profit-making. Her real examples include giving “Land Back” (a loose international movement for land restitution for Indigenous peoples) in settler colonies worldwide (including in the United States), while learning from the proposals of a People’s Green New Deal, and heeding the clarion call of the Adivasi tribal movement (in India) for the “democratic control of water, forest, land.”

The last contribution to this special issue is a review by Amanda Page-Hoongrajok of a book that deserves to be widely circulated among progressive scholars. *Unraveled: The Life and Death of a Garment* carefully traces how the “fashion industry’s relentless pursuit of consumption contributes to socioeconomic inequality and environmental destruction.” The analysis concludes that the “thesis is so convincing because of the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data.”

Page-Hoongrajok's contribution poses the question that all readers of the *RRPE* must grapple with: Is the problem the garment industry or capitalism itself?

It is clear that the present organization of the global economy offers little reprieve for humanity to confront the challenges of the environment and climate crises. The contributions to this special issue highlight the unwillingness and inability of the dominant political and economic forces and frameworks to face up to these challenges. They also offer international examples of local, community-focused, sustainable, caring alternatives, that are drawn from the lived experiences of peoples presently involved in effective processes to maintain their integrity while organizing to defend their territories and improve their quality of life—peoples creating new worlds that humanity so desperately requires if we are to constructively face the challenges of the current socioeconomic, political, and environmental crises.

On behalf of the Climate Change and Capitalism special issue collective:

Ron Baiman, *Benedictine University, Chicago, USA*

David Barkin, *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico*

Jacob Blumenfeld, *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany*

Kirstin Munro, *New School for Social Research, New York, USA*

Sirisha Naidu, *University of Missouri-Kansas City, USA*

Bob Williams, *Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA*

ORCID iD

David Barkin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5365-7733>

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.