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# On the Shaping of Nature by Capitalism and its Consequences--James O'Connor's examination of the class politics of Monterey Bay

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***Abstract:*** *Three approaches to examining the ecological history and cultural landscape of Monterey Bay in Nature's Reason --A Study in Ecological Marxism by James O'Connor break down the defense of the dualism of geopolitics and identity politics; reveal the anomalies in Monterey Bay's regional history and political thought; uncover the nature and capital logic; talks about the shaping of nature by capitalism and its consequences; and calls for a deep reform of the mode of knowledge production that looks not only to the past but also to the future and reconstructs the politics of class. At the same time, we are warned against the infiltration of capitalist logic into nature and the dangers of "depoliticization".*

***Keywords:*** *Monterey Bay; Class politics; Capitalism*

## The Changing Natural and Cultural Landscape of the Monterey Bay Area

The Monterey Bay area is located on the border between the northern and southern parts of the state of California. Northern Santa Cruz County includes the floodplain of the Santa Lorenzo River, six to seven marine slopes, a number of direct marine channels on the northern coast, many small canyons. To the south-east there are some alluvial plains which, a century and a half ago, were covered by swamps and lakes, giving them excellent conditions for agricultural development. On the southern side of the Monterey Peninsula, there are some very large seaside dunes, where sights such as restored brick buildings and fishermen's wharves survive and attract many visitors to reminisce about the past. Among other things, Santa Cruz, an American town at the top of Monterey Bay, whose relative isolation kept it "far from those areas that the first European settlers from New Spain called the natural north-south route of the California Mission and the sanctuary of Spanish imperialism, while for two centuries it had been a place where those trying to escape the degenerate world of the city, the old world, and the impoverished world of Asia, in pursuit of a new life." (James, 2003) On the other hand, for American and German capitalism in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Santa Cruz's 'unique' geographical position facilitated the exploitation of its rich resources - to a certain extent out of the public eye and out of the constraints of the state. As a result, the topography of the area in the early years maintained a more isolated position and posed a certain obstacle to the overall development of the site.

It was not until a German immigrant, Friedrich Sheehan, with his great talent for business and greed for money, built the first railway linking Santa Cruz to Wattersonville that the "fortunes" of the area were changed forever. At that time, despite the lack of natural harbours in the area, the abundance of natural resources such as water power, forests, limestone and concrete materials (gravel and sand) was notable. The timber and concrete industries that flourished in the area between the 1870s and the First World War were therefore built on these resources. In time, what was once an uncrowded place became a "hot potato" in the eyes of others. In addition to this, before the railway was built, the only way to get from the Santa Cruz Mountains to São Jos was by a difficult land route or by relying on marine vessels to transport goods, when one of the main marketplaces was located at an intersection of the Socur Road, the Old-São Jos Road and the Waffle Road in the town of Socur. Surprisingly, today's glory does not allow one to imagine the prosperity of the past, as it is now inhabited by manual workers and small retailers, and the area is flooded in the event of a flood in the Sokol River.

At the same time, the culture of the Monterey Bay area is changing. In the past, the region has a rich cultural history: The local people who lived in the Monterey Bay area used to carve out many trade routes, make tools from local stones, draw water from mountain springs and had a very profound impact on the local ecological landscape, so they formed the first type of culture or cultural grouping in the area. The second type belongs to the Spanish missionary culture, whose religious forces played an important normative role in the natural landscape of this period. Typical examples are the savage trampling of the natural grasslands of the area by the thousands of cattle they introduced and the introduction of seasonal lawns in Europe. Then there is the culture of Mexican and Californian images of men and women, the ranching culture introduced to the Monterey Bay region by New Spain, the American culture of imitating Gothic churches, Decaux art and Mission office buildings, the American culture of north-facing architecture in New England, the Chinese culture of marginal work using marginal resources, the Croatian culture of growing fruit trees and crops, the French culture of wine making, the Sicilian culture of team fishing, the Japanese culture of gardening and seafood, the Filipino, Portuguese and Norwegian culture of resistance. The culture of Irish people looking for shortcuts to money, the French culture of wine making, the Sicilian culture of team fishing, the Japanese culture of gardening and seafood, the culture of resistance in the Philippines and Mexico, the whaling culture in New England, Portugal and Norway. All these people from all over the world have, to a certain extent, integrated their way of working with the local environment, that is to say, they have transplanted their cultures to the Monterey Bay area and have made their own ethnic imprint on the natural landscape. Today, standardized techniques and chemically grown strawberries have replaced the technological superiority of the region's Chinese and Japanese in growing berries; mechanized quarrying and high-tech furnace burning processes have replaced the European families descended from those famous for their lime production techniques; traditional logging techniques have given way to sawmills; and while in the 1990s workers on farms and orchards called themselves "American", no one race now has a monopoly on the production of organic vegetables with low capital investment .....

What are the reasons for the changes in the natural and cultural landscape of the Monterey Bay area? And what are the consequences of these changes? It is easy to see that this dramatic shift has, in fact, attracted the attention of many specialist scholars, including James O'Connor, who have attempted to study the region and

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who have taken their own views on it. However, O'Connor questions the views and attitudes of some of the experts and scholars who are supposedly trying to protect the ecology of Monterey Bay, who are either "too afraid" to immerse themselves in geopolitical and identity politics apologetics, suppressing and avoiding the truth, or who are so afraid of saying the word "exploitation" that they deliberately shift their focus to other areas such as race, gender and social philanthropy, or who simply don't care and don't understand the real reasons for the ecological changes that are taking place here as long as they don't touch their interests. Of course, the experts and conservationists who are genuinely committed to protecting the nature and ecology of the area deserve recognition, but this does not address the root causes of ecological change in the Monterey Bay region. In doing so, O'Connor examines the class politics of the Monterey Bay region, identifies the real 'culprits' of natural and cultural change in the area, reveals the anomalies in the region's history and political thinking, explains the consequences of reshaping nature, and suggests new ways of thinking about the future of Monterey Bay.

## A Class-political Examination of Natural Landscape Change

### Environmental and Cultural Determinism in the Interpretation of Natural Landscape Change

In the case of the study of the Monterey Bay area, there is no getting around the controversy over environmental determinism and cultural determinism. As O'Connor says: "The appeal to both is linked to certain political views - green eco-regionalism and a fantasy political view of multiculturalism." (James, 2003) He therefore also wanted to be involved in order to better pursue new ideas for the future development of this area.

Environmental determinists believe that nature is what makes culture. The unique topography and ecology of the Monterey Bay area gives it a sense of "isolation", which makes it a place of desire for those who wish to escape from their current lives. For almost a century, the local tourism industry has also relied on this notion of escape from reality, which continues to this day. It is also said that during the Spanish colonisation, the isolation of the area led to a relatively greater degree of autonomy than elsewhere. At this point, it really does seem to be a case of simply saying that 'nature makes culture'. On the other hand, cultural determinists argue that it is culture that makes nature. It is well known that the Monterey Bay area has a concentration of immigrants, each ethnic or racial group representing a different culture, and that this variety of cultural forms has somehow influenced the natural landscape of the area. In terms of cultural history, it is these ethnic or racial groups that have created the environmental and social history of the Monterey Bay region. Thus, both geopolitics and identity politics are exploring fundamental economic and social change in their own ways.

Yet, if the logic of the two is followed, why do the environment and culture change afterwards? In fact, a closer look at any natural landscape or a study of an ecosystem reveals that any small change in nature and culture involves not just a single aspect, but a trinity of culture, labour and nature. That is to say, culture itself cannot provide anyone with the means of subsistence without a particular form of culture being transplanted into a factory and transformed into productivity. Likewise, human labour cannot be transformed into

productive forces unless they are applied to natural resources. That is, in the production dimension, labour binds the two mentioned above together and makes them produce the material means of production that human beings need. From this perspective, both the environmental and cultural determinism of the dualism are broken down and have no explanatory power. And the impact of labour on nature and culture can also be categorised into two types, which O'Connor further analyses: "one is labour to maintain basic survival, such as the labour that the Oroonians, who have lived in a privileged natural environment for thousands of years, have had to perform in order to survive; the other is "alienated" labour that has been manipulated by capitalism "The other is 'alienated' labour, such as that of the capitalist Nordics, who use many hardwoods, lime and other local resources to produce explosives. In the former case the labour is integrated into tribal culture, in the latter case it is integrated into the most basic modes of thinking and culture of Western capitalism, and this labour is turned into a virtual 'commodity' with a set price - a 'wage ". They each transform the natural world in their own way." (James, 2003) However, it is worth noting that the former is now slowly becoming history and the latter is gradually taking over.

## Regional Anomalies in Historical and Political Thought

The problem is that the vast majority of people in the Monterey Bay area (and also the experts and scholars who work on the natural ecology of the area) either deliberately avoid or suppress such topics, or are unaware of the reasons for such changes and the profound effects and serious dangers they bring to the nature and people of the area, and have very little knowledge of the politics of nature. That is, there are serious anomalies in the regional history and political thought of Monterey Bay. Today, capital manipulation is becoming more and more rampant: the headquarters of the international conglomerates in London actually determine the fate of the canning plants in the Pajaro Valley; regional or national financial institutions have subsumed local banks; even the universities in California have reorganised themselves in order to export their "human capital" more effectively for the benefit of the national economy, all of which is very clear. Paradoxically, scholars who promote dualism are repressive and cynical of a political science based on socio-economic class. And, similarly, cultural determinists become more aggressive in promoting their views when capital takes industrial technology and the division of labour out of old cultural forms, as do environmental determinists. And as the laws of capital's operation increasingly manipulate culture, labour and nature to the point of distortion, class politics is finding it more difficult than ever to find an audience. Scholars of the two political sciences have only been silent about this, and have increasingly "covered their ears" by limiting their theoretical horizons to "nature" and "culture", failing to They have failed to examine what they are looking for, i.e. "real development". There is also a fear among local progressives of offending greenies or cultural pluralists by saying the word 'exploitation' in order to gain the support of these two groups at the polls. And the so-called political leaders, who have long been aware of the economic, social and ecological restructuring of the region by global capital, are afraid to talk about class politics. The result is a growing nostalgia among dualists for the study of nature and culture, and a deliberate neglect of labour issues by progressive political scholars who focus on issues such as land use, race and gender. For example, some of the most dualistic greenists are keen to plan for the future development of the region: they are positioning it as an 'eco-region' and want to construct a 'new' way of life based on its unique topographical and hydrological infrastructure, which is not far from what they have concluded was the way of life of the indigenous people 10,000 years ago. This way of life is not far removed from what they conclude was the way of life of the indigenous people

10,000 years ago, and one of these "vocal" greenies, who is about as familiar with the area as a Palaeolithic man, is beginning to plan for it. None of them can give a clear idea of what exactly constitutes an 'eco-region', nor can they answer the question of whether an area that has been diverted or radically altered many times is an 'eco-region'.

So who really profited from this repression and evasion? The answer is the bourgeoisie, for they are "the main force in the management of the various natural and cultural organisations, racial assemblies and related historical conservation, museum exhibitions." (James, 2003) The bad news is that this anomalous situation is not only found among dualists and those who are progressive. Capital and labour, and what impact they have on the ecology and culture of the region, are also rarely given serious thought in the political dimension by historians, designers of regional plans, activists and policy makers. Indeed, it is possible to write an economic history of marine life in Monterey Bay by looking at the transformative effects of the different stages of capitalist development on the marine biota, and the way in which the various species were transformed by a 'law of motion' similar to the law of capital accumulation. Even so, those who advocate for a new Monterey Bay Conservation Area every now and then keep their mouths shut about such natural history content. And then there are the managers in charge of the region's bay conservation efforts, who are not concerned about and do not want to know about the real economics of the region's existence unless the problem has spilled over into their coffers or prevented them from using the bay to make money for profit. This includes the caretakers of the Elkhorn Marshes. Even the conservationists who mumble about protecting the ecology of the bay will turn a blind eye and keep quiet if it doesn't touch their interests, let alone expect them to learn about the natural politics of the Monterey Bay area. The fact that the ecology of the Monterey Bay area has been altered for a long time is indisputable. The real "killers" are still at large and their "greed" will not deter them, and if this is not taken seriously, only greater manipulation and transformation of the natural landscape of Monterey Bay will await.

## The Penetration of Capitalist Logic into Nature

For that reason, O'Connor cautions here, "If we look at the Monterey Bay area landscape as an insignificant thing, then we may be obscuring that explosive subject matter that is politically relevant." (James, 2003) The politics of class cannot be ignored. For the logic of capitalism has "silently" infiltrated local nature and reshaped the natural and cultural landscape of the region, leaving indelible traces of its artificiality. The University of California, Santa Cruz, for example, was once known as the "University of the Redwoods". But since the control of fire has replaced the management of fire, the redwood forest has become a manipulable object, so that it no longer grows like a park of sorts. The name of the university could be changed to "the redwood forest in the university"; The Nissen Marques National Forest in Aptos (between Santa Cruz and the Pajaro Valley). The Marques family donated this land to the National Park on the condition that the forest would be returned to its natural state. However, if one looks closely at the lower watershed of the Aptos River, an extensive belt of trees and plants planted by the railway company and others can be found along the banks of the river within the boundaries of the forest park; Rancho Livugio, on the western border of Santa Cruz, is being planned as a "green zone" and it is home to many animals: horned owls, hawks in general, various sea birds, deer and other animals living together, some feeding on other animals and others on the

rubbish discarded by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The so-called green belts appear to be home to animals, but in reality, the political economy, political sociology and social psychology of the natural world are not being addressed, such as why animals feed on the waste of the inhabitants, how the inhabitants of the neighbourhood use nature as a hiding place, and the relationship between the survival of animals in the ecosystem and local housing, population and land values.

And the consequences of the shaping of nature by the logic of capitalism - the destruction of the unity that existed between nature, culture and labour - have also been ignored. The early Protestant settlers of northern Europe banded together to raze the native redwood forests for profit or to control the outside environment. But it would have been impossible to cut down all the redwood forests in this area without a growing demand for timber to build cities and towns to accommodate the settlers. That is to say, it would not be easy to cut down so many mahogany forests if not driven by profit and capital. But the reality is that the organic link between culture, labour and nature has gradually become history, the mahogany forest no longer symbolises "otherness" but has been reconstructed according to the logic of capitalism, and the culture of commercial farming is gradually replacing the subsistence farmer and his strong sense of individualism; In the past, the land was constructed according to different cultures and specific patterns of work, and cultures had to adapt to the changes in nature itself, and a perfect match between nature and culture was rare. Just as "the Spaniards had never had so many prime ranches before they came to America, the immigrants who came from areas suffering from drought and dust storms had to master some of the local climatic patterns of the canyons and hills they inhabited." (James, 2003) That is, the newcomers had to learn to adapt their past ways of life to the local natural environment. This also means that culture and nature cannot function independently of each other, constructing their own logic, but that they change and are changed in various interconnected ways through the technology and hard work brought by the immigrants. Today, both traditional ways of life and familiar natural landscapes are being subordinated to the logic of capital. The globalisation of markets, finance and production processes is eroding traditional cultures and pristine local environments, and a distinctly 'capitalist' nature and culture is being produced and exploited in the drive for profit. And, as O'Connor sees in the development of the commodification of nature and property relations in the Monterey Bay area, capitalism has a 'continuous behaviour' dynamic: in early New England, bears were commercially hunted for food and shelter to sustain the basic survival of the settlers in the mountain diaspora. Today, bears are almost invisible, replaced by sea otters sold as souvenirs to tourists; in the past, home buyers bought houses according to their needs, today houses are built according to the demands of investors; before the first railway was built in the Monterey Bay area, there was more or less unity between culture and nature, but after it was built, with the massive capitalisation of logging and lime production industries, the migration of the highly capitalised sugar beet cane industry, the beginning of the mechanisation of the sardine processing industry, and the replacement of the former communal and self-sufficient wealth by capitalised wealth, this unity began to disintegrate. The old forms of close association between culture and labour have been replaced by the market and standardised modes of technological demand, financing, and labour management. Those technologies that existed from cultural forms and techniques such as distinct races or nations have been abstracted from capitalism. Even natural systems have been transformed into an object of use, and there are countless commodities that no longer have a "first natural form", such as frost-free tomatoes or frozen hard cauliflower. In this way, as O'Connor puts it, "the unique spatio-temporal unity of capitalism detaches production from its original cultural and natural forms." (James, 2003) That is, in today's capitalist activity,

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modernity, commodified forms of nature and culture, break the link between specific cultures and nature and between specific forms of division of labour and technology. Even if, in contrast, a large number of conservationists and their organisations have emerged, the culture and nature they seek to protect "are for the most part outside the dominant mode of production, the division of labour and the type of goods produced by today's society." (James, 2003) In other words, most of it is not to be exploited by capitalism. For this reason, O'Connor repeatedly stresses the need to take into account the political dimension of the ecology of the Monterey Bay area, based on the reshaping of nature by capitalism and the consequences of the break in the organic chain of culture, nature and labour.

## New Ideas for Development in the Monterey Bay area

Finally, O'Connor offers his insights into the future of the Monterey Bay area and its possibilities. He begins by explaining the importance and need for a class politics: "Between the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of material goods, where the traditional dualist perspective has largely lost its explanatory power, and the emergence of a reshaped natural landscape and culture that may be linked to issues of unemployment, low wages, homelessness, and social corruption, there is a class politics that can explain issues of regional context as well as political identity. And this overarching account of the ecological and social history of Monterey Bay and the political debates and fundamental political configurations that are being played out in the area today is undoubtedly linked to a wide range of disciplines and fields, including economics, political science, ecology, etc." (James, 2003) According to O'Connor, "This description is equally imperative for a healthy yet sustainable reconfiguration of cultural life, productive activity, and ecological revival." (James, 2003) Happily, many local heritage workers and some amateur historians who focus on historical facts have provided the raw material needed for such an account. "They are committed to unlocking the secrets of the area, deconstructing the myths and reconstructing its past in a way that is more equitable and just and meaningful to building the area." (James, 2003) O'Connor then urged that while it is important to understand the past, the key point is also to change the future. For in fact, there are very few experts and scholars who are concerned with or ask the question, "What should nature be like in our society?" (James, 2003) O'Connor argues that "a normative question about such a thing can actually presuppose many other questions: including what will labour be like and for what will workers work? What should society's property relations and rights look like?" (James, 2003) and these questions are indeed difficult to answer. O'Connor further analyses: 'Firstly, labour works for private or state property that carries with it the question of democratisation, or even a question of conformity to the public will at a minimum; secondly, the means of grasping the environmental, social and political possibilities and the nature of the cultural, material or economic, natural productions that accompany this no one can No one has. No specialist who has buried himself in the study of social, natural and economic history can know the content of the ecological history of the region, so they avoid the question of the difficulties arising from the interaction of certain natural, aesthetic and cognitive aspects arising from an interwoven specialized history; finally, it is also a question of capitalism itself, by which people are separated from the means of production, from the objects of production and from their surroundings, and which, in the name of the free market and competition, has taken over the world. naturalisation of the social and economic world in the name of the free market and competition. Wage labour becomes a labour that is unconcerned with the distinction between soil and water between fields. It is a deliberate disregard for the different forms of interaction between socio-economic existence and second

nature." (James, 2003) Related to this is the problem that remains in our educational system, including our higher education institutions. That is, there is a considerable lack of cross-cutting scientific and artistic studies, and the specialisation of knowledge has undoubtedly done serious damage to our thinking. Therefore, without a profound reform of our mode of knowledge production, "what labour should become can only be happily answered by capital." (James, 2003) And this, at the same time, is the answer to the second question, for in very important but distinct dimensions, both are constructed by wage labour and capital. In conclusion, O'Connor concludes, "Now is a good time to reconstruct the politics of class and the way it fits in with geopolitics and the politics of identity, but a construction that looks not just at interpreting the past but, more importantly, at the future and the politics of the future." (James, 2003)

## Reconstructing Class Politics Should Not Be Limited to the Monterey Bay Area

It is clear from O'Connor's examination of the class politics of nature in the Monterey Bay area that, despite the thought-provoking reshaping of nature in the area by capitalism and the consequences, the people of the area, including most of those in other parts of the world where ecology also suffers from the manipulation of the laws of capital's operation, are still not awake, or even aware of the politics of nature and ecology at all, as long as it does not affect their interests, and are not They are not aware of the changes in ecology. But this "willful ignorance" cannot last long, because the accumulation of capital does not stop at its "footsteps". The "good ecology" that we see now, reshaped by capital, is merely a "stop-gap" measure to continue to accumulate, and the unity between nature, culture and labour will be increasingly broken down or even distorted, and workers will become more and more separated from the means of labour. This, in turn, is in line with the general rule of capitalist development. As Marx pointed out in Capital: "Capital relations presuppose a separation between the labourer and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of labour. Once capitalist production has taken hold, it not only maintains this separation, but is producing it on an ever-expanding scale. This is the secret of the primitive accumulation of capital." (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009)

But we cannot leave nature. In his Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844, Marx wrote: "In practice, the universality of man is being expressed in the transformation of the whole of nature - first as man's immediate means of living, and secondly as the material, object and instrument of his vital activity - into -into the inorganic body of man. Man lives off nature. This means that nature is the, human body with which man must be in constant interaction in order not to die." (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009) That is, if capitalism constantly separates human labour from nature, it is tantamount to taking the fate of humanity into their hands, because nature, on which people depend, is taken away from them. Immediately afterwards, they will transform or even remake what they have. And one thing is certain: such transformation is endless. For they always want to make nature more "productive", i.e. to maximise profit. And in the process, they do not really think about how nature is being persecuted, let alone how the people living there are being affected. Thus, if all the local people were to become completely separated from nature, the exploited would not be able to smell a breath of fresh air or drink a sip of pure water, even if they were to wag their tails and beg for mercy. It is therefore particularly important to prevent and resist the forced appropriation and reshaping of nature by capital, the root cause of the ecological crisis being the capitalist system.

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Capital by its very nature is productive capital. The production of surplus value and the making of profits are their immediate aims. That is, for capitalism to survive it must maintain primitive accumulation, which is based on the exploitation of natural resources. This, of course, will eventually be countered by nature. The successive natural limitations that have emerged have had a countervailing effect on capital, forcing it to undertake 'ecological reforms' within the limits of capital, and this has led to the emergence of ecological, green capitalism. But in essence, such reforms are not outside the framework of the capitalist system, but are aimed at consolidating and developing it. Therefore, although they have in some ways improved the ecology, they cannot fundamentally solve the ecological crisis. (Cai, 2018). A typical example is the town of Ryken in the Monterey Bay region, situated in the valley of the St. Lawrence River. Once a centre of lime production, the town is now a complex "ecological community" in a state of overlap, but the traces of abandonment after human activity are evident. The seven old lime kilns that were considered dangerous here were asked to be removed, but the park managers simply covered them up and, ironically, they are now located underneath the car park used by travellers eager to get 'back to nature'. The so-called "ecological reform" is nothing more than a cosmetic fakery.

It is worth noting that the anomalies that occur in the regional history and political thought of the Monterey Bay area also occur in other parts of the globe. And it is precisely this anomaly that holds the promise of transformation. As O'Connor cites in his article, "A horticulturalist who does not graft a vine that grows bad fruit is an indication that something is wrong. Similarly, a good psychiatrist who finds a difference between the way a patient speaks and the way he speaks can decide that there is something wrong with the patient. And these problems are, indeed, a red flag that leads to distress." (James, 2003) However, when judged from a two-sided perspective, this danger sign also presents an opportunity to give rise to transformation. That is, "a shift towards a new vine, a healthy family, or a sustainable and equitable society." (James, 2003) Therefore, it is also crucial for us to seize the moment of transformation. By looking at the ecological history and cultural landscape of the Monterey Bay area, O'Connor clearly reveals the ways in which capitalism has shaped nature in the area and the serious consequences it has had. It is also a call for us to take the politics of nature seriously and not to be blinded by capitalism's superficial approach to "ecology" and to miss the dangers of "depoliticisation". It also calls for a deeper reform of the mode of knowledge production, a reconstitution of class politics, and a chance for transformation.

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